

“BLESSED AND HIGHLY FAVORED”:
THE THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL

Nathan Ivan Walton
Charlottesville, VA

Master of Divinity, Duke Divinity School, 2012
Bachelor of Arts, University of Virginia, 2009

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“Blessed and Highly Favored”: *The Theological Anthropology of the Prosperity Gospel*

ABSTRACT

In this dissertation I examine Prosperity Gospel Pentecostalism, also known as the Word of Faith movement, which is the fastest growing Christian movement in the world. I argue that the theological anthropology of the Prosperity Gospel devalues the poor and physically impaired. Specifically, the Prosperity Gospel promotes a form of Christian individualism that affirms self-sufficiency as an anthropological ideal in ways that undermine a more socially responsible ecclesiology. Promises of personal financial gain are preferred without adequate attention to the various systemic barriers to socioeconomic equality, and approaches to healing quite often lack a framework for affirming the integrity of those with ongoing sicknesses or disabilities. While the Prosperity Gospel promotes self-sufficiency in the areas of wealth and health, this dissertation identifies the implications that this form of individualism has for those who remain financially and physically dependent. In response, this dissertation affirms interdependence as a more ethically responsible value than independence and self-sufficiency.

The methodology of this dissertation draws from both qualitative research approaches and theological frameworks. First, I ground my description of the Prosperity Gospel within ethnographic fieldwork among two Prosperity Gospel megachurch communities in a large southern city.¹ After conducting in-depth interviews, content analyses of sermons, and participant-observation research, I then bring my findings into conversation with the theological writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King, Jr. By drawing from these sociological

¹ I am using the language of a “large southern city” to protect anonymity.

and theological resources, I tease out the theological anthropology that is articulated in the distinctive speech and enacted in the practices of this influential and quickly expanding movement. In response, this dissertation then offers a more theologically robust and ethically responsible vision of Christian identity and practice that has implications for both academic discourse and the church.

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation explores the theology of Prosperity Gospel Pentecostalism, the fastest growing Christian movement in the world. Since the 1950s, the Prosperity Gospel, also known as Word of Faith theology, has been popularized through church services, televangelism, published writings, and social media.² Its theology claims that God desires for all believers to live in financial abundance and robust physical health and its proponents teach that poverty and sickness are both spiritual curses that have been defeated by Christ's sacrificial death. As a result, authentic Christian faith and practice is marked by health and wealth. Believers gain access to the benefits of Christ's work by placing their faith in the divine promises – as they construe it – of wealth and healing and by verbally affirming that faith through a practice called “positive confession.”

Faith and positive confession, from which we get the phrase “word of faith,” are the most important Prosperity Gospel practices. Adherents believe that faith is not simply a form of mental assent, but is a creative force that operates on behalf of believers by compelling God to act. Yet faith alone does not guarantee prosperity because it must be actualized by words. As Prosperity Gospel Pastor Joel Osteen states, “Every day declare that your dreams are coming to pass. It's not enough to just believe it. Nothing happens until you speak.”³ Faith as a creative force is actualized by these types of verbal affirmations, also known as “positive confession”. Positive confession can take the form of repeating things that an individual is hoping for, such as “God is making me wealthy” or “I am healed in Jesus' name.” Positive confession can also take the form of repeating key scriptural proof texts such as “For I know the plans I have for you,”

² Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, “Spirit and Power: A 10-Country Survey of Pentecostals” last modified October 2006. <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2006/10/pentecostals-08.pdf>

³ Joel Osteen, “Say So,” Sermon Video, August 25, 2013. Houston, TX: Lakewood Church, accessed May 7, 2014. <http://www.itbn.org/index/detail/lib/programs/sublib/Joel+Osteen/ec/ZvdHJ4ZDrQfe6gptl4JYhuAqbReuDMYI>.

declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”⁴ Adherents are encouraged to practice positive confessions on a regular basis, but it is also a corporate practice that is routinely incorporated into formal liturgy through recited creeds that focus on health and wealth.

Although faith and positive confession are the primary methods for pursuing personal prosperity, health and wealth are the primary contents of that prosperity. According to the Prosperity Gospel, sickness is a spiritual condition that was addressed and overcome through Christ’s atonement. Isaiah 53 in the Hebrew Bible, which is typically interpreted by Christians as a messianic prophecy, is a key scriptural proof text for the Prosperity Gospel’s assurance of healing for adherents. The key phrase “by his wounds we are healed” occurs in Isaiah 53:5. Now that healing is available, the believer can “name and claim” this benefit through faith and positive confession. Prosperity Gospel ministers usually address the lack of healing through one of three ways. They either fault the victim for having a lack of faith, they raise concerns about whether the believer has a sufficiently holy lifestyle, or they encourage the adherent to simply be patient. Regardless, the underlying assumptions are that God desires health for the believer, that health is available, and that the formula of faith and positive confession will inevitably work when applied correctly.

In addition to health and healing, personal wealth is the second important object of faith and positive confession. Prosperity Gospel proponents argue that God desires for all believers to be wealthy, often citing scriptural proof texts such as “a sinner’s wealth is stored up for the righteous” or that Christ “became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.”⁵ This theology claims that now that believers are a part of God’s family they should enjoy the

⁴ Jeremiah 29:11 (KJV).

⁵ Cf. Prov 13:22; 2 Cor 8:9.

best luxuries that life has to offer. In other words, the status of a believer ensures not only that God desires to bestow financial prosperity but that it is an *inheritance* that they can claim as children of God. Together, health and wealth are spiritual realities that Christians can bring into concrete manifestation through faith and positive confession. Today the Prosperity Gospel flourishes in Protestant (and increasingly in Roman Catholic) churches, especially among the poor in the United States and the Global South, promoting a vision of the good life that valorizes wealth and health.⁶

Yet the Prosperity Gospel fosters a theological anthropology that warrants scholarly attention and critical analysis. Specifically, the Prosperity Gospel promotes a form of Christian individualism that affirms self-sufficiency as an anthropological ideal in ways that undermine any socially responsible ecclesiology. Promises of personal financial gain are preferred without adequate attention to the various systemic barriers to socioeconomic equality, and approaches to healing quite often lack a framework for affirming the spiritual integrity of the sick or disabled. This dissertation argues that the theological anthropology of the Prosperity Gospel devalues the poor and physically impaired. In developing my argument, I tease out the theological anthropology that is articulated in the distinctive speech and enacted in the practices of this influential and quickly expanding movement, and I will offer a more theologically robust and ethically responsible vision of Christian discipleship and practice.

⁶ Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, “Religion in Latin America: Widespread Change in a Historical Catholic Region” last modified November 2014. <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/11/13/chapter-4-pentecostalism/>

OVERVIEW OF DISSERTATION

I. Chapter One

In the first chapter I provide a brief history of the Prosperity Gospel movement in the United States, followed by a review of relevant scholarship. Most scholarly attention to the Prosperity Gospel has focused on historical and cultural sources, and thus lacks attention to its theological contours. Thus, I offer in chapter one a brief history of the Prosperity Gospel that frames the American cultural and historical explanations of the Prosperity Gospel within a theological account. Most recent scholarship has demonstrated that the Prosperity Gospel draws adherents into the cultural narrative of the American Dream. This cultural narrative is an overarching story by which individuals are able to understand themselves to be on a journey toward upward socioeconomic mobility through a form of individualism that affirms self-reliance and self-sufficiency.

Providing an account of the relationship between the Prosperity Gospel and notions of American Dream accomplishes two goals. First, it helps outline the specific nature of Prosperity Gospel individualism. As sociologist Robin Williams Jr. has indicated, factors such as industrialization, urbanization, and increased mobility have weakened social bonds between local groups and family units in America since the Civil War.⁷ These shifts have often resulted in conceptions of the self as abstract agents – consumers foremost – whose ties to others are determined primarily by a utilitarian calculus. I argue that the Prosperity Gospel trades on such notions of American success and promotes a form of individualism that compromises a conception of human mutuality – Martin Luther King’s “single garment of destiny” – by making self-sufficiency an ideal in the areas of wealth and health.

⁷ Robin M. Williams, Jr., *American Society: A Sociological Interpretation*, (New York, NY: Alfred Knopf, 1960).

Second, providing an account of the relationship between the Prosperity Gospel and the American Dream as well as scholarship concerning this relationship further illumines gaps in contemporary scholarship. While examinations of this movement by scholars such as historian Kate Bowler, sociologist Milmon Harrison, and sociologist Tony Lin offer helpful accounts of the appeal and effects of the Prosperity Gospel, none of these has sufficiently plumbed the theological sources and implications of the movement. As a historian, Bowler attempts to offer an objective and primarily descriptive account, whereas Harrison and Lin each examines the sociological work that the Prosperity Gospel performs without providing an alternative theological or ecclesiological vision.

The first chapter demonstrates that a constructive theological response is not only lacking in scholarship, but necessary. Since the rise of liberation theologies in the 1960s and 1970s, an increasing number of theologians have affirmed theology's responsibility to address the material conditions of the poor.⁸ A large percentage of Prosperity Gospel adherents are poor and an account of this movement will illumine the appeal, effects, and social function of Christian theology among such populations.⁹ Furthermore, this chapter grounds the necessity for a critical and constructive theological response to the Prosperity Gospel within the need to identify and provide an alternative to forms of Christian individualism that undermine social responsibility.

⁸ Thomas Floyd and Anthony Pinn, eds. *Liberation Theologies in the United States*, (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2010).

⁹ Scott Schieman and Jong Jung. "'Practical Divine Influence': Socioeconomic Status and Belief in the Prosperity Gospel" in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 51, no. 4 (December 2012): 746.

II. Chapter Two

In the second chapter I describe my theoretical framework and ethnographic approach. I begin by describing how “lived theology” shapes the goals and strategies of this project. By utilizing a methodology that brings the reflections and concrete practices of local communities into conversation with contemporary scholarship, this project is also a work of “lived theology.” I begin chapter two with an account of lived theology as a practices as well as a brief summary of how lived theology shapes the presuppositions and strategies of this dissertation.

I then turn to my ethnographic approach. In order to ground my conclusions in qualitative research, I conducted ethnographic work at two churches in a large southern city: Prosperity Church and Shalom Ministries. I have employ pseudonyms for these churches as well as their members to protect their anonymity. Prosperity Church is a predominantly African American church with a black pastor, whereas Shalom Ministries is a multiethnic church with a white pastor. Prosperity Church’s pastor is heavily influenced by a well-known southern Prosperity Gospel preacher, whereas Shalom Ministries’ pastor was trained at Rhema Bible Training College, arguably the most influential theological school in the shaping of Prosperity Gospel preaching in America.

In this chapter, I began by describing the rise of ethnography within the social sciences and its more recent impact on theology. Following a general description of the role of ethnography in theology more broadly, I then address its role in this dissertation. This project involves two case studies, and in chapter two I briefly profile each community’s history, demographics, polity, and aesthetics in order to lay the foundation for “thick descriptions” in

subsequent chapters.¹⁰ Although each church promotes the Prosperity Gospel, Prosperity Church primarily focuses on financial gain and Shalom Ministries places more emphasis on divine healing. Their demographic and liturgical differences help to foster analytic generalizability and reliable conclusions by revealing how a similar message of prosperity is expressed in different contexts and among different types of people. As I outline the specifics of how I conducted my research, I describe my approach to participant observation, in-depth interviewing, content analyses, and data coding. I then close this chapter by outlining how I utilized the software program “NVivo 10” to help organize my findings, which is a qualitative research program that enables scholars to record and code field notes and to easily compare data from multiple case studies.

I spent significant time within these congregations in order to understand their communal dynamics more fully. Field notes from church services and interactions with adherents help reveal how Prosperity Gospel liturgies and practices function. As a work of lived theology, this dissertation aims to bring the narrated lives, perspectives, practices, and voices of faith communities into critical and constructive dialogue with theological analysis. Within these churches my sources include in-depth interviews, participant-observation notes from church meetings, content analyses of sermons, and other miscellaneous documents such as newsletters, pamphlets, and church curriculum. I then complement this research with broader engagement with published conventional scholarly resources about the Prosperity Gospel as well as primary documents by church leaders within the movement. My qualitative research privileges the

¹⁰ For Clifford Geertz a thick description is both “interpretive” in that it goes beyond a mere analysis of facts, and “microscopic” in that it engages a manageable sample size of data. See Geertz’ “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture” in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 1973.

voices of adherents in order to foster a more accurate account of how they experience and practice their faith, but brings their perspectives into conversation with critical scholarly analysis.

III. Chapter Three

In chapter three I explore how Prosperity Gospel adherents understand and pursue wealth and health. An analysis of church documents, sermons, liturgy, polity, and aesthetics illumines how the Prosperity Gospel gains rhetorical traction. In addition, in-depth interviews with clergy and laity will reveal how adherents understand the Prosperity Gospel and how it has shaped their lives. I then develop a thick description of the theological and sociological work that the Prosperity Gospel performs with regards to the acquisition of wealth and health.

While providing an account of how adherents understand and pursue financial gain, I also engage the Prosperity Gospel's response to poverty more specifically. Since its message portrays poverty as a spiritual curse, it claims that adherents have power over the social structures that perpetuate poverty through faith and piety. As African American Pastor Leroy Thompson claims, "if you're black, for example, a lack of prosperity doesn't have anything to do with your being black. So don't tell me, "Oh, we've been held back so long." *Nobody* can hold you back when you're walking in God's Word and you're obeying Him!"¹¹ Prosperity Gospel preachers generally consider addressing structural barriers to wealth equality unessential because adherents can pull themselves up by their own spiritual bootstraps. Since this logic presupposes an ethic of self-reliance, adherents are believed to be responsible for their inability to prosper financially. Such individuals tend to be regarded as deficient in faith or lacking in piety. The Prosperity Gospel claims that Christians who do not prosper financially cannot experience the fullness of the Christian life.

¹¹ Leroy Thompson Sr., *Money Cometh!: To the Body of Christ!* (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Harrison House, 1999) 40.

This perspective has harmful implications for Christian faith and practice; it devalues the poor insofar as it elevates the wealthy individual as the ideal believer, the individual most favored by God and the paragon of genuine humanness. Thus, the Prosperity Gospel trades on a theological anthropology that assigns intrinsic dignity on the basis of material success and contradicts historical Christian understandings of the *imago dei*. The Prosperity Gospel further valorizes financial self-sufficiency while neglecting a vision for a more equal distribution of wealth in society. As a result, this message discourages critical analysis of and strategic responses to oppressive social structures and promotes individual success in free-market capitalism as the criterion of proper relation to God and validation of personal piety. In this chapter I argue that this perspective on wealth is severely impaired by a particular form of individualism, not only in how it views systemic barriers to wealth but insofar as it fails to sufficiently relate the personal pursuit of wealth to the common good.

After engaging wealth and poverty, I draw from my ethnographic research to explore how adherents of the Prosperity Gospel understand the roles of physical health and healing. This chapter argues that the Prosperity Gospel devalues those with physical problems, such as sickness or physical disabilities, in how it valorizes the fully functional body. Since sickness is understood as fundamentally spiritual, a healthy body validates one's piety before God. Such an ideal has implications for those with sickness as well as physical handicaps insofar as this theology lacks a framework for the integrity of their identities. This perspective venerates physical self-sufficiency as a spiritual ideal, but without providing an adequate account of communal interdependence amidst ongoing physical suffering. These concerns reveal how self-sufficiency as an anthropological ideal creates a theological and ecclesiological problem. In this

chapter I will identify this problem as a particular form of Christian individualism, without valorizing sickness or disability as such.

IV. Chapter Four

In chapter four I provide an alternative theological anthropology to Prosperity Gospel individualism. This chapter critiques the Prosperity Gospel's ideal of self-sufficiency concerning health and wealth and instead argues for a more theologically robust and ethically responsible conception of human interdependence. While the Prosperity Gospel valorizes both personal financial gain and physical self-sufficiency, this chapter sets forth an alternative theological anthropology that affirms the integrity of those who remain poor, sick, or physically disabled.

This constructive response primarily draws from the work of twentieth century German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Particularly in his lectures on Genesis 1-3, *Creation and Fall*, and his collected essays in *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer argues that freedom, as the content of the *imago dei*, is always a relational "freedom for" God and neighbor. He opposes the view that freedom is an autonomous capacity for self-determination and self-sufficiency. Rather, human beings must exercise their freedom through "responsible action" in service to each other. This perspective does not invalidate the pursuits of health and wealth as such, but helps to situate these exercises of freedom within a broader framework of interdependence and sociopolitical responsibility. In contrast to the separatist sensibility within the Prosperity Gospel that generally excludes sociopolitical activism, Bonhoeffer claims that the Christian exercises ethical responsibility toward the world in light of the unity of the church and world in Christ. This ecclesiology encourages Christians to respond to the material conditions of injustice and systemic barriers to more equal wealth distribution. Furthermore, Bonhoeffer's critique of principle-based ethics reveals how the Prosperity Gospel might expand its account of physical health. He claims that

the ethical task involves discerning the will of God within concrete situations rather than relying on ethical presuppositions about the nature of the good. While theological assumptions about the assurance of healing often result in the denigration of the physically sick, a more expansive and nuanced theological anthropology could affirm the integrity of such persons. Yet this shift requires a reconsideration of presumptions about the divine will. Bonhoeffer provides a useful framework for such a reconsideration.

V. Chapter Five

In chapter five I argue that much of the rhetorical force of the Prosperity Gospel stems from a particular communal narrative that is grounded in scriptural exegesis. This communal narrative of health and wealth primarily draws from the biblical stories of Abraham, Israel, and Jesus Christ, identifying Prosperity Gospel communities as inheritors of the financial “blessing of Abraham,” the material benefits of the “Promised Land,” and the physical healing provided by Christ’s suffering. Possession of the Promised Land becomes the dominant communal narrative moment, encouraging believers to view themselves as already possessing financial and physical prosperity, even if this spiritual reality has not yet manifested tangibly. Ultimately the task of believers is to claim the benefits of the Promised Land that God has already given to them personally.

This chapter places Prosperity Gospel exegesis of the biblical account of the Promised Land into conversation with Martin Luther King Jr.’s exegesis in order to present an alternative communal narrative. King’s exegesis and rhetoric spring from a rich interpretive tradition within the African American church. For King, the Promised Land was an important emancipatory trope, but the dominant narrative moment and motif for him was the Exodus. In sermons such as “Death of Evil upon the Seashore” and “Birth of a New Nation” as well as speeches such as

“Facing the Challenge of a New Age,” King uses the Exodus to draw hearers into a communal narrative of the transition toward freedom and “beloved community.” In this chapter I draw from these reflections to identify and respond to the particularities of Prosperity Gospel communal identity.

King’s communal narrative, as I use the phrase, offers a more ethically responsible alternative to the Prosperity Gospel for several reasons. First, attention to the Exodus affords King a hermeneutical and homiletical dynamism that is able to express the hope of the Promised Land without sacrificing an adequate interpretive framework for poverty, suffering, and unrealized expectations for the “beloved community.” In his writings, King captures this tension by pointing to the Israel’s journeys through the Red Sea and the wilderness as two narrative analogues for contemporary obstacles in the ongoing struggle for freedom and equality. In contrast to the Prosperity Gospel, King suggests that the Promised Land is not a present reality.

Second, King provides a compelling alternative communal narrative because his conception of the community is at once more expansive than the communal identity of Prosperity Gospel churches and also more attentive to the realities of social existence. Prosperity Gospel rhetoric promotes a separatist sensibility that assumes a sharp distinction between the church and the world. In contrast, King draws an analogy between enslaved Israel and other communities in world history that have suffered under colonialism and other forms of systemic oppression. King promotes a communal narrative that suggests that Christian identity is not a prerequisite for identification with Israel in scripture. What is at stake in the difference between the Prosperity Gospel and King’s communal narrative is both the scope of God’s redemptive action and the content of the church’s social responsibility. If God is bringing Israel out of social bondage, but this “Israel” includes all who are oppressed regardless of religious affiliation, then the church’s

participation in the *missio dei* makes extra-ecclesial sociopolitical engagement necessary. This perspective identifies both the church and the oppressed outside of the church as Israel, but without conflating the church with nonbelievers. Furthermore, this perspective renders working on behalf of those who are poor or physically sick crucial for promoting the “beloved community.” It assumes that God desires prosperity for all those who suffer or are marginalized and that the church is tasked with pursuing this goal.

Constructively, I then propose several ways that Prosperity Gospel churches could promote a more ethically responsible communal narrative that is grounded both in historic Christian conviction and in the most enduring insights of African American Christianity as exemplified in the Civil Rights Movement. First, Prosperity Gospel leaders and practitioners could more frequently incorporate Biblical texts that acknowledge the inevitability of suffering, the role of redemptive suffering, and the biblical injunctions to care for the marginalized of society. This rhetorical shift could help shape a theological framework for recognizing how suffering is not incompatible with divine and human faithfulness but rather is often an expression of such faithfulness, and this shift could also mitigate the frequent conceptual chasm between the church and the world. Second, Prosperity Gospel leaders and practitioners usually recite memorized confessions during church services that affirm God’s blessings of wealth and health. This deeply formative ritual may further provide an important liturgical opportunity to affirm the faithfulness of both God and believers amidst suffering as well as the broader sociopolitical responsibility of the church. Third, music exerts a profound influence on Prosperity Gospel communities through messages of financial success and healing. A lyrical reconsideration of how to engage such issues could be a significant step toward reshaping communal sensibilities around both Christian and non-Christian suffering in the world. Such liturgical changes would

promote a communal narrative that renders more ethically responsible church practices necessary.

Beyond church liturgy I also identify external practices as additional ways to embody King's sensibilities. In particular, I point to both systemic approaches to poverty as well as an embrace of public health practices as ways for Prosperity Gospel communities to reflect an outlook more consistent with King's vision. These types of ecclesiological shifts, both liturgical and beyond Sunday worship, affirm the inseparability of Christian practice and extra-ecclesial sociopolitical engagement. Appropriating the theologies of both Bonhoeffer and King, such an emphasis offers a corrective to the anthropological ideal of self-sufficiency, but does so on a communal scale in which the church is now understood to be interdependent with and responsible toward the world.

CHAPTER ONE

THE BIRTH OF THE WORD OF FAITH MOVEMENT

I. Introduction

This chapter traces the theological sources of Word of Faith Pentecostalism, also known as the Prosperity Gospel, followed by a literature review of relevant scholarship. The first half of this chapter examines the various religious groups that would ultimately shape Prosperity Gospel understandings of health and wealth, including New Thought, the Faith Cure Movement, and Pentecostalism. It also identifies key figures in each of these movements. The second half of this chapter then analyzes recent scholarship that engages the Prosperity Gospel. Together a theological history of the Word of Faith Movement alongside a review of contemporary scholarship reveal the influences and impact of this movement, as well as its tendency to promote an individualistic theological anthropology.

II. New Thought

The story of the Prosperity Gospel begins with New Thought, which arose as a metaphysical movement in New England during the mid-19th century. New Thought had several sources for its philosophical outlook. It drew from Platonic idealism, affirming ideas such as the priority of spiritual realities over material realities, evil as a privation, and the superiority of the soul over matter. This account of the world became crucial as adherents began to distinguish spiritual knowledge from sense knowledge. Spiritual knowledge referred to spiritual truths that were thought to trump the knowledge one gained from their physical senses. New Thought was also shaped by Transcendentalism as both traditions shared assumptions about the unity between God and humanity. For New Thought, human beings comprised a divine brotherhood in a divine

universe. Ralph Waldo Emerson's understanding of how the mind and body were connected was seen by New Thought advocates as a helpful framework for their own understanding of physical healing.¹² New Thought also viewed the world as being characterized by abundance. More specifically, it held that there are spiritual resources that are available to each individual person and that anyone can access these resources through the powers of the mind. Initially, New Thought proponents spoke of these resources primarily in terms of physical healing. Sickness was viewed as fundamentally mental, and evil was understood as a privation, lacking reality. Eventually this logic would be applied to financial gain as well.¹³

New Thought also shared certain beliefs with its more popular contemporary, Christian Science, such as the assumption that thought and prayer were tools for healing. Yet there were also key features that distinguished New Thought from Christian Science. First, New Thought was much less authoritarian. More specifically, the authorities in Christian Science were primarily Mary Baker Eddy's writings and Scripture, while New Thought considered there to be a wider array of resources for understanding the world, including other religions. The New Thought logic was that "Mind" is not a system, therefore doctrine cannot be completely systematized and demarcated.¹⁴ This difference in codification also occurred on an organizational level, as New Thought organizations struggled to stay united whereas Christian Science adherents had a stronger sense of identity. In terms of the relationship between thought and the world, New Thought regarded thought as playing a *creative* role in the world, whereas the language of Christian Science advocates focused on the mind's role in *realizing* truths. New Thought also had a more positive view of medicine than Christian Science and placed a greater

¹² Charles Braden, *Spirits in Rebellion: The Rise and Development of New Thought* (Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist University Press, 1970), 36.

¹³ New Thought proponent Charles Fillmore's *Prosperity* (1949) provides one example of this shift.

¹⁴ Charles Braden, *Spirits in Rebellion: The Rise and Development of New Thought*, 13.

emphasis on humanity's union with the divine. Lastly, although New Thought and Christian Science both had Platonic outlooks on the world, only New Thought proponents consistently refrained from ever denying the material world's existence.

One cannot provide an account of New Thought without exploring the key figures that helped to make it a phenomenon in New England and beyond. Phineas Quimby, often considered the founder of New Thought, rose to prominence as a healer in Maine during the mid-1800s.¹⁵ Quimby's methods initially involved hypnotism, but eventually he shifted towards an emphasis on mental suggestion.¹⁶ He understood disease as a spiritual rather than physical reality, and he taught his patients that they could overcome their ailments mentally. Quimby's lasting influence was a result of both what he practiced and the key figures who succeeded him.

If Quimby was New Thought's original leader, Warren Felt Evans was its most important early writer.¹⁷ Evans had been one of Quimby's patients, and in works such as *The Mental Cure* he echoed Quimby's convictions that an individual could confidently rely on the power that their mind had over their physical condition. Evans believed that healing was possible for anyone who had the desire for it, had faith in the healer, and had love. He was not opposed to medicine, but felt that medicine was only effective if and when it had a spiritual essence supplying its power.

Evans' Methodist background led him to incorporate Christian ideas into his account of New Thought. In *The Divine Law of Cure*, he described his views as Christian pantheism, affirming the New Thought emphasis on the unity between spirit and matter. He also viewed his focus on the mental state of individuals as reminiscent of Jesus' approach to healing in the New

¹⁵ Charles Braden, *Spirits in Rebellion: The Rise and Development of New Thought*, 47.

¹⁶ Charles Braden, *Spirits in Rebellion: The Rise and Development of New Thought*, 48.

¹⁷ Charles Braden, *Spirits in Rebellion: The Rise and Development of New Thought*, 96.

Testament. Evan's ability to draw connections between Quimby's ideas and Christianity assumed a theological continuity and also further facilitated New Thought's broader appeal.

If Warren Felt Evans was New Thought's chief early writer around the turn of the 20th century, Horatio Dresser was a worthy successor to this role. Dresser worked as a mental healer in Boston and was crucial for the development of New Thought for several reasons. First, he was able to systematize New Thought beliefs effectively in his writings. Second, Dresser published *The Quimby Manuscripts* which made Quimby's work accessible to a wider audience. Lastly, he wrote a history of New Thought, which helped to provide a clear picture of how New Thought had developed into its early 20th century form. As New Thought history and beliefs become increasingly codified, this process aided in its propagation and philosophical consistency.

Charles Fillmore, a contemporary of Dresser, was significant because he helped to found what would become the most popular New Thought group, "Unity." Unity was based out of Kansas and it was popularized primarily through Fillmore's writings. Within key texts such as *Prosperity*, Fillmore argued that the universe was characterized by abundance and placed a strong emphasis on the role of spiritual laws. He claimed that "There is a kingdom of abundance of all things and it may be found by those who seek it and are willing to comply with its laws."¹⁸ Fillmore's works also portrayed God as a benevolent father who is interested in supplying the needs of God's people. To this end, he claimed that God had established specific laws of thought and speech that adherents could use to access the abundance that is a spiritual reality and material possibility. Fillmore was also significant because he primarily focused on wealth rather than health as the content of the universe's abundance. He claimed that "Every home can be

¹⁸ Charles Fillmore, *Prosperity* (Kansas City, MO: Unity School of Christianity, 1949), 16.

prosperous, and there should be no poverty-stricken homes, for they are caused only by inharmony, fear, negative thinking and speaking.”¹⁹

Ralph Waldo Trine was another very important figure for the development of New Thought and a contemporary of Fillmore. Similar to Fillmore, Trine emphasized the role of spiritual laws, claiming that

When we recognize the fact that a man carries his success or his failure with him, and that it does not depend upon outside conditions, we will come into the possession of powers that will quickly change outside conditions into agencies that make for success. When we come into this higher realization and bring our lives into complete harmony with the higher laws, we will then be able so to focus and direct the awakened interior forces, that they will go out and return laden with that for which they are sent.²⁰

Trine’s outlook presupposed American notions of self-reliance, emphasizing the individual’s ability to bring about their own prosperity. Yet this deterministic capacity was a matter of relying on metaphysical laws. These claims found their clearest expression in Trine’s 1897 text, *In Tune with the Infinite*, which sold over 1.5 million copies and helped him to become the most widely read New Thought author to date.

Today there are ongoing debates about how New Thought beliefs shifted between the late 19th century and the mid-20th century. Demographically, there is clearly a shift from New Thought being primarily comprised of middle-class reform-minded women during the 19th century, to a much more eclectic group of adherents during the 20th century that included poorer northern adherents to the Black Spiritualist tradition. There is also debate over thematic shifts.

¹⁹ Charles Fillmore, *Prosperity*, 104.

²⁰ Ralph Waldo Trine, *In Tune with the Infinite: Fullness of Peace, Power, and Plenty* (Radford, VA: Wilder Publications, 2008), 89.

Some scholars argue that the primary shift was from a focus on health during the 19th century to a focus on wealth during the 20th century. Scholars such as Beryl Satter would disagree, however, claiming that the shift is not primarily from health to wealth, but from the rejection of desire to the affirmation of desire.²¹ This perspective may provide a clue as to why New Thought found such a welcoming home in the American cultural context, and why it continues to appeal to people today, albeit in a variety of forms. New Thought's success likely also stems from how New Thought struck a chord with the growing American therapeutic culture, as well as its ability to tap into basic human desires for provision. In current scholarship there is also ongoing debate about how New Thought relates to American economics. More specifically, some argue that New Thought literature is paradigmatic of consumer capitalism, encouraging spending and accumulation in light of philosophical presuppositions about how the universe is fundamentally characterized by abundance. In any case, these issues remind us that the efficacy of New Thought was in many ways a product of its ability to tap into broader cultural sensibilities as well as the resources of other theological traditions.

New Thought rose to international prominence during the late-19th and early 20th centuries. Groups such as the International New Thought Alliance, Unity, and the International Divine Science would emerge with a message of positive thinking and the immanence of the Divine. By the 1920s, there were over 300 New Thought Centers in America alone.²² Most of these centers were established in urban centers in the Northeast, especially among middle to upper class white women.²³ New Thought groups affirmed a fundamental unity between God and humanity and the notion that human thought played a causative role in the realities of the

²¹ See Beryl Satter. *Each Mind a Kingdom: American Women, Sexual Purity, and the New Thought Movement, 1875-1920*. (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press), 1999.

²² Beryl Satter, *Each Mind a Kingdom*, 6.

²³ Beryl Satter, *Each Mind a Kingdom*.

material world. As historian Kate Bowler notes: “People shaped their own worlds by their thinking, just as God had created the world using thought. Positive thoughts yielded positive circumstances, and negative thoughts yielded negative situations.”²⁴ New Thought offered a philosophical idealism that affirmed the unity of God and humanity and the unity of the spiritual and material worlds, while suggesting that the power of the mind was the key to manifesting spiritual realities.

There are several other potential reasons for why New Thought found such a welcoming home within American culture. First, New Thought’s success was also indebted to its commitment to doctrinal fluidity. Those within the movement sought to be non-sectarian and they affirmed progressive revelation. Since it assumed that “Mind” was not a system, a doctrinal fluidity enabled New Thought to accommodate a variety of perspectives and afforded broader appeal, particularly within a culture that valued religious liberty. While tapping into basic human desires for provision, New Thought also struck a chord with America’s growing therapeutic culture. The success of New Thought was largely a byproduct of such cultural adaptability.

III. Faith Cure

As an emphasis on healing continued to shape late 19th century American spirituality, a key question within American Christianity became, “If, indeed, we might be fully restored spiritually to the full image of God, to what extent might physical restoration also be expected, since disease is ultimately to be traced to the sin of Adam?”²⁵ Theologian Donald Dayton

²⁴ Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 31.

²⁵ Donald W. Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987) 119.

argues that “the rise of the healing doctrines was largely a radicalization of the perfectionist push of the Holiness teachings.”²⁶ Since Holiness doctrine asserted that the “second work” of entire sanctification eradicated inbred sin, it seemed plausible to many 19th century Christians that *if* sickness has its origin in sin and is fundamentally a spiritual issue, then entire sanctification should have implications for the health of sanctified Christians. The healing movements of the 19th century were part of a gradual theological shift that began to establish a closer and closer link between sin and sickness.

In addition to “Mind Cure” movements such as New Thought and Christian Science, the Faith Cure movement was crucial for the development of late nineteenth and early twentieth century approaches to healing. The story of the Faith Cure movement begins in the latter half of the 19th century, with the peak of its influence occurring during the 1880s. Its key assumption was that faith and prayer were the keys to physical healing and it flourished among urban centers in the Northeast alongside groups such as New Thought. Theologically, it was shaped by the Holiness movement as well as the Higher Christian Life movement. As ideas of “entire sanctification” within Wesleyan Perfectionism became more popular, this notion of complete holiness raised the question of how spirituality affects physical wholeness.

Faith Cure advocates claimed that healing was available for all believers as a result of the work of Christ and the believer’s sanctification, yet this movement was also reactionary. First, it resisted the lingering post-Reformation impulse to endure suffering patiently under the assumption that God was primarily using this suffering to foster holiness and glorify God.²⁷ In contrast, the Faith Cure movement provided an alternative to these assumptions by suggesting

²⁶ Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism*, 136.

²⁷ Heather Curtis, *Faith in the Great Physician: Suffering and Divine Healing in American Culture, 1860-1900* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 52.

that sickness was in defiance of God's perfect will. Second, the Faith Cure movement responded to insufficient medical care. In the decades leading up to the 1880s, medical science was not very advanced, hospitals were not widespread, and the "vast majority of sick people were cared for at home by either family or hired help."²⁸ Furthermore, a growing emphasis on divine healing was often accompanied by skepticism toward medicine.²⁹ What becomes clear from studying the Faith Cure movement, and subsequent healing movements, is that they were in constant dialogue with other theological and cultural forces.

Arguably the most important figure for the Faith Cure movement was a healer from Boston, Massachusetts named Charles Cullis. Cullis was influenced by the Holiness movement as well as by key scriptures such as James 5:14-15 that emphasized divine healing. Figures within the Holiness movement and Cullis' interpretations of scripture helped to shape Cullis' interest in healing practices such as intercessory prayer, laying on of hands, and anointing with oil. Cullis' methods were also inspired by George Müller, who was known for starting orphanages in Europe. Cullis founded orphanages as well as healing homes for those suffering from illnesses such as tuberculosis, especially during the 1860s.

Soon many people began taking notice of Cullis' work. Two of Cullis' most important disciples were A.J. Gordon and A.B. Simpson. A.J. Gordon wrote the seminal text of the Faith Cure movement, *Ministry of Healing*, popularizing the notion that physical healing was afforded to Christian believers through the atonement of Christ. In other words, Christ's redemptive suffering not only overcame the powers of spiritual sin, but physical sickness. A.B. Simpson, the founder of the Christian Missionary Alliance, argued that Christ's resurrection provides a

²⁸ Nancy A. Hardesty, *Faith Cure: Divine Healing in the Holiness and Pentecostal Movements* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003) 58.

²⁹ Heather Curtis, *Faith in the Great Physician*, 72.

theological ground for physical healing as well. He suggested that while the atonement was crucial in overcoming both sin and physical sickness, the resurrection makes it possible for believers to share in the new life that Christ provides. Carrie Judd Montgomery's *The Prayer of Faith* was also influential in how it provided a biblical basis for faith healing. As the theology of healing within the Faith Cure movement took firm root within the American religious milieu, a movement of healing homes continued to gain momentum. Figures such as Simpson, Montgomery, Elizabeth Baxter, and others continued the model that Cullis had promoted.³⁰ Healing homes became a staple of the Faith Cure movement, often involving healing services with intercessory prayer, laying on of hands, anointing with oil, and bible study.

IV. Higher Christian Life

Many of those involved in the Faith Cure movement also found homes in another late 19th century movement called "Higher Christian Life." The Higher Life movement developed out of the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition and primarily emphasized the Christian life after conversion. As Dale Simmons notes, "At its most basic level, the Higher Life movement was wedded to the belief that conversion was not the goal, but the beginning of Christian experience."³¹ For those within the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition, sanctification was a "second work" of grace and the means for eradicating the sinful nature. Higher Life advocates shared this concern for the sanctified life, but they placed more focus on the Holy Spirit's role in empowering the believer for service.³² Their rhetoric prioritized consecration over internal perfectionism. The Higher

³⁰ Nancy Hardesty, *Faith Cure*, 57.

³¹ Dale H. Simmons, *E.W. Kenyon and the Postbellum Pursuit of Peace, Power and Plenty* (Lanham, Maryland & London: Scarecrow Press, 1997), xiv.

³² "Keswick Higher Life Movement" in *International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, ed. Stanley Burgess (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), 518.

Christian Life movement was very important for America's late-19th century religious milieu, and it would also serve an important role in the history of the Prosperity Gospel.

There was certainly much overlap between the sensibilities of Higher Life advocates and those within the Faith-Cure movement as well as overlap between their adherents. Both movements shared the basic assumption that internal piety naturally lended itself to external effects and practical empowerment. This assumption led adherents of both movements to emphasize the implications that personal holiness had for physical healing. During the Gilded Age of late 19th century America, many Christians married American notions of personal optimism and self-determination to a theological framework that rendered physical healing a self-evident expectation.

Burgeoning within the American context, there was also much common ground between New Thought and the Higher Christian Life movement. Advocates of both movements encouraged adherents to realize the benefits and privileges of their relationships with the divine.³³ They shared the view that certain things could be "claimed" through faith. Yet there were subtle but significant differences. In New Thought, faith was based on universal principles, whereas in the Higher Christian Life, faith was based on scriptural promises.³⁴ The Higher Life movement also continued to value the role of supplication in prayer. Supplication was primarily replaced by verbally claiming God's promises when it was assumed that a particular request was the will of God. Another important distinction is that within the Higher Life movement the God being petitioned was personal, rather than an impersonal force or principle as in New Thought. The impact of American culture as well as movements such as Higher Christian Life, Faith Cure,

³³ Dale Simmons, *E. W. Kenyon*, 158.

³⁴ Dale Simmons, *E. W. Kenyon*, 157.

and New Thought would each deeply shape the theological architect of the modern Prosperity Gospel movement, E.W. Kenyon.

V. Essek W. Kenyon

Essek William Kenyon was an evangelist from New York who lived from 1867 to 1948. Kenyon was not raised in a deeply religious family, but he began to develop an interest in Christianity after attending a revival at the age of seventeen. He became more involved in church ministry, received an exhorter's license from the Methodist Episcopal Church, and began pastoring at the age of nineteen.³⁵ Nonetheless, as time progressed his commitment to ministry leadership became tenuous and at one point he even declared himself an agnostic.³⁶ Kenyon eventually decided to pursue an acting career and in 1892 he entered the dramatic studies program at Emerson School of Oratory in Boston. Many speculate that it was during his stay at Emerson that Kenyon was exposed to metaphysical teachings, such as New Thought, though this is a point of disagreement among scholars.³⁷ Regardless, Kenyon attended Emerson for only one year, but was likely exposed to New Thought as a result of Boston's religious milieu as well as New Thought proponent Ralph Waldo Trine's presence on the Emerson faculty.

After his time at Emerson, Kenyon married Evva Spurling, recommitted to the church, and became a licensed Freewill Baptist minister in January of 1894.³⁸ Kenyon spent time pastoring a few churches during subsequent years and hosting Bible studies in his home. Then in 1898 he founded Bethel Bible Institute in Spencer, Massachusetts with the help of John and Susan Marble, who donated their farm and buildings to him. This institute satisfied Kenyon's

³⁵ Joe McIntyre, *E.W. Kenyon and His Message of Faith* (Orlando, Florida: Creation House, 1997) 3.

³⁶ McIntyre, *E.W. Kenyon*, 3.

³⁷ See D.R. McConnell's *A Different Gospel* (1995), chapter 3.

³⁸ Dale Simmons, *E.W. Kenyon*, 14.

passion for training future ministers and “the school’s raison d’être was to take even those who lacked a grammar school education and to have them fill pulpits within two years.”³⁹

During Kenyon’s tenure as superintendent from 1900 to 1923, Bethel never charged tuition and its teachers did not receive a salary. Instead, Bethel was supported by love offerings and Kenyon’s evangelistic work. Even Bethel’s newsletter, the *Bethel Trumpet*, was distributed free of charge. Kenyon was heavily influenced by the aforementioned George Müller, who worked to establish orphanages in Bristol, England. Müller advocated leading what he called a “life of trust,” emphasizing the importance of depending on God for financial support, rather than asking for donations. Kenyon took this idea very seriously and he had strong convictions that Bethel should not charge tuition. Nevertheless, as time progressed Bethel began struggling financially and eventually the board of directors began to disagree with Kenyon’s conviction to just trust God to provide the financial resources they needed. Eventually they decided to go a different direction regarding tuition and Kenyon resigned from his position.

During his time at Bethel, Kenyon pastored several different churches and also published his first book, *The Father and His Family*, which would be the most systematic of his works. In 1914 his wife Evva died and he soon married Alice Whitney.⁴⁰ After resigning from his position as superintendent in 1923, Kenyon moved to Oakland, where he lived until 1925. At that point he relocated to Los Angeles, founded a church, and eventually pastored a few others. He would continue promoting his ministry by publishing many more books and launching a four-page newsletter entitled the *Kenyon Herald*. Kenyon’s ministry was at its height. He held evangelistic meetings in cities across the West Coast and was well-known. He also developed

³⁹ Dale Simmons, *E. W. Kenyon*, 30.

⁴⁰ Dale Simmons, *E. W. Kenyon*, 38.

relationships with many popular Pentecostal preachers and was even invited by well-known preacher Aimee Semple McPherson to speak at Angeles Temple several times.⁴¹

Unfortunately, Kenyon's reputation would later be tarnished in the fall of 1930, as his wife Alice unexpectedly filed for divorce and claimed that he had been unfaithful. These accusations undermined Kenyon's ministry in the eyes of many of his supporters. As a result, in 1931 Kenyon moved to Seattle, Washington, where he would live until his death in 1948. While in Seattle, Kenyon began ministering as he had in California. He began pastoring again, he launched a radio broadcast called *Kenyon's Church of the Air*, founded the Seattle Bible Institute and published many more books. He also started *Kenyon's Herald of Life*, a popular newsletter.⁴² Kenyon's reputation would rebound and circulation for his newsletter eventually surpassed 20 thousand.⁴³ Through his national radio ministry and magazine, writing books, pastoring several churches and by founding two Bible Institutes, Kenyon's beliefs reached a wide audience.

In assessing Kenyon's theological sources, it is important to note that after Kenyon stopped attending Emerson in Boston and rededicated his life to Jesus Christ, he became antagonistic towards metaphysical movements such as New Thought and Christian Science. He viewed them as a threat to the Christian faith. Yet although he rejected these groups, there were aspects of his theology that have clear parallels with common metaphysical teachings and New Thought in particular. Although Kenyon rejected the 19th century metaphysical groups that he encountered, he did not think all of their teachings were incompatible with orthodox Christianity.

⁴¹ D.R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel*, (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995) 32.

⁴² Dale Simmons, *E.W. Kenyon*, 44.

⁴³ McConnell, *A Different Gospel*, 32.

In addition to how the community at Emerson College and the spiritual climate in Boston influenced Kenyon, he was also heavily influenced by figures within the Higher Christian Life and Faith-Cure movements. For example, Kenyon embraced many of Charles Cullis' teachings regarding healing. Cullis was also a key influence for A.J. Gordon, who pastored in Boston during Kenyon's time there. Kenyon was drawn to Gordon's ministry and it was in Gordon's church that Kenyon rededicated his life to Jesus. Due to Cullis' influence Gordon made healing a key part of his ministry. Gordon's influential text, *The Ministry of Healing*, helped to spread this new emphasis and Gordon is actually the most quoted author in Kenyon's writings.

In order to understand Kenyon's mature thought, one must begin with his view of the Fall of Adam. Kenyon believed that in the Garden of Eden God gave Adam authority over the universe, but that when Adam sinned, this authority was transferred over to the Devil. Kenyon argued that this authority was "Time-limited."⁴⁴ For Kenyon, Adam's act was a sin of high treason, but because of the legal transference of authority to Satan, even God had to honor this shift. In addition to affecting humanity's ability to have dominion over the universe, Adam's sin also had an ontological effect on humanity. According to Kenyon, since Adam was created with a spirit and without the ability to die, he was in the same "class" as God.⁴⁵ Yet the Fall radically changed human nature because Satan's nature was imparted as the image of God was erased.⁴⁶

The Fall placed God in a situation where He had to find a way to counter the authority that the Devil had assumed, regenerate humanity, and reconcile it to Himself. Kenyon states that

⁴⁴ E.W. Kenyon, *The Father and His Family* (Lynnwood, Washington: Kenyon's Gospel Publishing Society, 1993) 39.

⁴⁵ E.W. Kenyon, *New Creation Realities* (Lynnwood, Washington: Kenyon's Gospel Publishing Society, 2000) 158.

⁴⁶ Kenyon, *The Father and His Family*, 141, 111.

If Satan did not have legal dominion, why is it that God, who is Almighty, did not put him out of business and drive him off the earth into his eternal prison-house? But God could not do it – Consequently there has come into being that marvelous legal document, The Plan of Redemption.⁴⁷

For Kenyon, this Plan of Redemption is that God would send Christ as an incarnate human, who would then suffer and die to redeem humanity and strip the Devil of his cosmic power. For this plan to succeed, Christ had to come to earth with a particular ontology. Kenyon took very seriously the Apostle Paul's claim that Christ was the second Adam, and recapitulation plays a key role in Kenyon's thought. For Kenyon,

Jesus had a body like Adam's before he sinned. It was a perfect, human body, not Mortal, nor Immortal. It was a body that could not die until sin had taken possession of His spirit. In other words, Jesus had to die spiritually before He could die physically. If Jesus' body had been like yours and mine, then He was not Deity, He was not a Substitute, and He did not die for our sins.⁴⁸

Kenyon argued that Christ does not become an adequate sacrifice by identifying with post-lapsarian humanity, but rather by coming as the pre-lapsarian Adam. This afforded Christ an opportunity to right the wrongs of Adam and made Christ capable of suffering to redeem humanity. Kenyon believed that Christ's sacrificial suffering was twofold. Christ died physically and spiritually, just as Adam.

Kenyon's belief that Christ died spiritually is based on two things. First, he believed that Scripture's account of Christ's "cry of dereliction" marked the moment when Christ not only bore the sins of humanity, but became sin. He draws primarily from 2 Corinthians 5:21, which

⁴⁷ Kenyon, *The Father and His Family*, 58.

⁴⁸ E.W. Kenyon, *Identification* (Lynnwood, Washington: Kenyon's Gospel Publishing Society, 1995) 16.

states that Christ became sin.⁴⁹ The second reason Kenyon believed that Christ died spiritually is because if spiritual death was the punishment for Adam's sin, Christ had to die spiritually in order to fulfill this penalty. Kenyon states that "We know that the Physical Death of Jesus would not satisfy the claims of Justice; so it was necessary that He become identified with our union with the devil, that He actually die spiritually and become a partaker of Spiritual Death."⁵⁰ So at this point, Christ not only bore the sins of humanity, but his nature was radically changed, such that Christ participated in the nature of Satan.

What makes Kenyon's view of Christ's spiritual death even more unique is that he thought that the crucifixion marked only the beginning of Christ's redemptive suffering. This is opposed to the predominant view of the church, which usually has taken Christ's cry on the cross "it is finished" as the sign that his redemptive suffering had ended. Instead, Kenyon argued that during the three days that Christ was dead, He descended into Hell and suffered. Kenyon viewed Christ's descent into Hell as an indispensable part of Christ's atonement for humanity because if Hell was the ultimate penalty for humanity's sin, Christ had to endure the punishment of Hell that humanity would have experienced.⁵¹ What also makes Kenyon's view unique is that for him, Christ did not enter Hell triumphantly proclaiming victory, but instead suffered until the legal penalty of human sin was paid.⁵² After three days of suffering, Christ was legally permitted to reclaim authority and dominion from the Devil.⁵³ Kenyon's description of Christ suffering at the hands of demonic powers and being subject to immutable legal stipulations is instantly

⁴⁹ Kenyon, *The Father and His Family*, 125.

⁵⁰ Kenyon, *The Father and His Family*, 137.

⁵¹ Kenyon, *The Father and His Family*, 135.

⁵² E.W. Kenyon, *What Happened from the Cross to the Throne* (Lynnwood, Washington: Kenyon's Gospel Publishing Society, 1998) 47.

⁵³ Kenyon, *The Father and His Family*, 134.

replaced by a description of Him as a conquering warrior, taking authority over the forces of the Devil and reclaiming authority over the cosmos.

For Kenyon, the redemption that Christ accomplishes by dying on the cross and suffering in Hell has a “legal” side and a “vital” side.⁵⁴ The legal side refers to Christ’s past redemptive work on the cross and in Hell and the identification with the divine that this identification affords believers. The vital side of redemption refers to the Holy Spirit’s sanctifying work in the believer. Kenyon took seriously the Apostle Paul’s claim that those in Christ are new creatures and that conversion causes a radical change in the nature of the believer.⁵⁵ The old sinful nature is completely replaced by a new divine nature.⁵⁶ This is fundamental to Kenyon’s thought because now that the divine nature has been imparted into Christians, there is a deep identification and unity with God. The old nature has to be removed because the divine and satanic nature cannot coexist in one person.⁵⁷

The Christian is then brought into identification with God and is “as much an Incarnation as was Jesus of Nazareth.”⁵⁸ Just as Christ was the second Adam ontologically, regenerated humans return to Adam’s pre-lapsarian state. Kenyon’s understanding of the vital side of redemption acknowledges the progressive character of sanctification, but his concept of identification minimizes it. As a result, conversion brings about a radically new and divine nature within believers and sanctification becomes an epistemological rather than ontological process. The Christian does not grow in their level of sanctity and holiness, but rather, progresses in the awareness of their new identity.

⁵⁴ E.W. Kenyon, *What Happened from the Cross to the Throne*, 179.

⁵⁵ 2 Cor. 5:17.

⁵⁶ Kenyon, *The Father and His Family*, 153.

⁵⁷ Kenyon, *The Father and His Family*, 158.

⁵⁸ Kenyon, *The Father and His Family*, 100.

This identification with God is crucial because it serves as the foundation for certain legal rights. It secures the Christian's right to have certain things and the power to perform certain acts, but these benefits are completely based on one's unity with God. Kenyon states, "I have God's ability because I have God's nature. I have the same great, mighty Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead dwelling in me."⁵⁹ For Kenyon the Christian life is fundamentally about becoming aware of one's identification with God and exercising this newfound legal authority.

One of the primary agents in utilizing this authority is faith. According to Kenyon there are two types of faith: faith that is based on sense knowledge and faith that is based on revelation knowledge. Faith based on sense knowledge is limited to what the senses can convey, whereas revelation faith is not based on senses at all, but rather on the Scriptures. Faith based on revelation knowledge takes precedence over faith in the senses, so the Christian should believe the words of Scripture even when it appears that what Scripture says contradicts what their senses convey. Kenyon believed that the faith of the believer finds its basis in God Himself. He states that "We know that God is a faith God, and that He brought the universe into being by the Word of Faith."⁶⁰ God exercised faith in creating the world and this creative aspect of faith is now available to the believer. Yet just as God "spoke" the world into existence, the believer has the legal power to actualize their faith through words.

Kenyon was able to blend New Thought influence with his Christian heritage. On the one hand, the legal language he often employed, and his underlying metaphysic was based on a New Thought cosmological framework. Yet he also relied on scriptural proof texts to support his claims. For example, Kenyon would argue for the creative power of words, but then he

⁵⁹ E.W. Kenyon, *Jesus the Healer* (Lynnwood, Washington: Kenyon's Gospel Publishing Society, 2004) 8.

⁶⁰ E.W. Kenyon, *The Two Kinds of Knowledge* (Lynnwood, Washington: Kenyon's Gospel Publishing Society, 2004) 17.

would supplement these claims with particular scriptures such as how God creates the world through speech in Genesis, or Romans 4:17 where the Apostle Paul mentions God “calling those things that be not as though they were” (KJV). Kenyon could reconcile the New Thought idea of human words having creative power with the biblical idea of God’s words having creative power through his particular conception of the believer’s legal identification with the divine. He differs from New Thought in that only believers are individuations of the divine, but he is similar in how close this identification runs. This identification means that words of faith possess creative ability that is unlocked by verbal confession. The believer’s confession must be based on revelation knowledge because that form of knowledge takes priority over sense knowledge. For Kenyon, when there seems to be a discrepancy between the two types of knowledges, “Holding fast to one’s confession when the senses contradict shows that one has become established in the Word.”⁶¹

The faith that accompanies one’s confession is not about hopeful expectation, but the present realization of its object. Kenyon claims that hope is actually an “enemy” of faith because it is focused on the future.⁶² So the claims and promises of Scripture are to be understood as present realities and when one places faith in them and actualizes the creative power of faith through words, positive results are certain. Using words to actualize faith is crucial because “Faith never rises above its confession.”⁶³

These confessions are supposed to be grounded in Scripture and the promises of Scripture in particular. Since Scripture is the basis for revelation knowledge, the believer can be assured that its claims are trustworthy. This assumption has implications for prayer, because one does

⁶¹ Kenyon, *Jesus the Healer*, 20.

⁶² E.W. Kenyon, *The Two Kinds of Faith* (Lynnwood, Washington: Kenyon’s Gospel Publishing Society, 1998) 32.

⁶³ Kenyon, *Two Kinds of Faith*, 65.

not have to ask for things that are already privileges of the believer, but rather, the believer should consider them already granted. Confession is the mechanism for actualizing this reality. Thus, “Faith’s confession is always a joyful confession. It confesses that we have the money before it has arrived. It confesses perfect healing while the pain is still in the body.”⁶⁴ Furthermore, confessions can have two consequences because “By your confession, you have plenty, or you lack. By your confession, you are weak, or you are strong. You are what you confess with your lips, and what you believe in your heart.”⁶⁵ Positive confessions have positive results and negative confessions have negative results.

Kenyon believed that confession was crucial for the believer to understand and he thought it had particular relevance for the believer’s physical health. He argued that sickness was essentially a spiritual issue because it was a result of the Fall of Adam. Thus, there is clear link between sin and sickness. “Sin and sickness comes from the same source. Satan is the author of both.”⁶⁶ Kenyon also claimed that the believer has a legal right to health because of their union with Christ. Sin was defeated on the cross and the sin nature within the believer has been replaced, which means that there is no reason why the believer should have to endure sickness and disease. Health begins with realizing this truth. Kenyon asserts, “We find that as soon as we can bring perfect assurance that the disease was laid on Christ, and the mind comes to agree with the spirit, healing is inevitable.”⁶⁷ Therefore, healing is not fundamentally ontological issue, but epistemological. It is the legal right of the believer that they can demand.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ E.W. Kenyon, *The Hidden Man* (Lynnwood, Washington: Kenyon’s Gospel Publishing Society, 1998) 134.

⁶⁵ Kenyon, *What Happened from the Cross to the Throne*, 160.

⁶⁶ Kenyon, *Jesus the Healer*, 14.

⁶⁷ Kenyon, *The Two Kinds of Knowledge*, 34.

⁶⁸ Kenyon, *The Father and His Family*, 196.

Kenyon was a deeply eclectic thinker. He drew heavily from New Thought's emphasis on the causal relationship between the spiritual world and the material world. Echoing the Platonic sensibilities of thinkers such as Phineas Quimby and Warren Felt Evans, he claimed that the spiritual world was superior to and determinative for the physical world. Furthermore, Kenyon's ideas reflected the beliefs of figures such as Ralph Waldo Trine and Charles Fillmore through his emphasis on spiritual laws. Kenyon agreed that there were immutable laws that governed the universe and were useful for accessing various benefits, including healing. Yet Kenyon evidenced specifically Christian emphases with his concern for fidelity to scripture, convictions regarding Christ's redemptive work, and a conception of God as a benevolent father.

Kenyon's theology drank from many wells. He studied a variety of views and spent time in Baptist, Pentecostal, and even Unitarian circles, while denying certain beliefs within all three. His theology resembles aspects of metaphysical groups such as New Thought, even while he explicitly denounced some of their views. The Higher Christian Life and Faith Cure movements were yet additional ingredients in Kenyon's theological casserole. Kenyon took what he thought was valuable from the perspectives that he encountered and he believed that the theology he presented was something new, unique and valuable to the church. Kenyon's ideas would find a whole new level of popularity once they were embraced by a segment of those within the Pentecostal movement. So it is to the Pentecostal movement that we must now turn.

VI. Pentecostalism

As the twentieth century began, the Faith Cure movement would decline due to increased fundamentalist cessationism that denied the present continuation of spiritual gifts, as well as the impulse for members of the holiness movement to distance themselves from what could be

perceived as Pentecostal extremism.⁶⁹ As the Faith Cure movement subsided, in 1906 a new movement rekindled the fire of divine healing. Leading up to the events of the Azusa Street Revival, Charles Fox Parham began teaching on pneumatology, first in Topeka, Kansas, but later in Houston. One of his students was an African American named William J. Seymour, who was not allowed in Parham's classes because of his race but would eavesdrop just beyond the classroom door. Parham promoted "glossolalia" or speaking in tongues, which was a practice Seymour found particularly striking. Upon learning about this practice and witnessing it, Seymour eventually moved to Los Angeles and began to preach on the work of the Holy Spirit generally, and speaking in tongues specifically. He led a worship gathering that would eventually develop into the Azusa Street revival, the birthplace of Pentecostalism.

The Azusa Street revival, which occurred from 1906 to 1909, was marked by several defining features. First, there was ecstatic and expressive worship. Participants emphasized emotionally experiencing God and bodily responses to God's presence were common, including clapping, dancing, and being overcome by the Holy Spirit through "slayings." These practices reflected a new *ordo salutis* as spirit baptism became a key aspect of the believer's experience. Pentecostals argued that conversion was not only followed by sanctification as a second work of grace, but that sanctification was then followed by a third experience: spirit baptism with the evidence of speaking in tongues. Adherents pointed to passages in the Book of Acts that highlighted individuals receiving salvation and the Holy Spirit with the visible evidence of speaking in tongues. Early Pentecostals viewed themselves as returning to the lost practices and beliefs of the apostolic church. Other ways that they saw themselves as returning to the practices of the church were through racial equality. For Seymour, this was the defining evidence that this

⁶⁹ Donald Dayton, "The Rise of the Evangelical Healing Movement in Nineteenth Century America," *Pneuma*: 4:1, Spring (1982): 17.

movement was God-ordained, and it was complemented by relative gender equality in leadership roles as well. Furthermore, adherents had a premillennial outlook, assuming that God was going to soon usher in the eschaton, which made their work all the more urgent.

Spiritual gifts took on a whole new level of significance with the Pentecostal Movement, not only in terms of tongues, but the gift of healing. Pentecostals believed that healing was available for any believer. Yet there were a few features that distinguished this outlook from their Faith Cure predecessor. First, through an emphasis on the “gift” of healing, Pentecostals elevated the role of the healer in ways that the Faith Cure movement resisted. Second, Pentecostals typically had a less positive view of medicine. This was in part a byproduct of certain sensibilities concerning spiritual warfare. While members within the Faith Cure movement often saw sickness as a spiritual issue, they did not emphasize the present role of the demonic in the same way as early Pentecostals. As a result, Pentecostals resisted medicine because they viewed the real culprit as demonic. Another reason for this resistance was socioeconomic, as many early Pentecostals were not wealthy enough to afford adequate medicine. Lastly, while the Faith Cure movement centered in the urban northeast, the Pentecostal movement began on the West Coast and spread primarily in the South and Midwest.

Eventually, the Azusa Street Revival began to wane, following in the footsteps of the Faith Cure movement. Fundamentalist cessationism dealt the enthusiasm for divine healing a blow, as did growing confidence in medical advances. More broadly, the declining fervor at Azusa stemmed from bad media publicity as well as decreasing income once the newsletter *Apostolic Faith* was taken by former Azusa leader Clara Lum from California to Oregon.

After the Azusa Street Revival the next broad healing movement would occur during the postwar years, roughly spanning 1947-1958. The revivals of this period were characterized by

the expectation of miracles, and healing functioned as the paradigmatic example of God's power and presence.⁷⁰ Pentecostal ministers and other sympathizers began to form independent evangelistic associations and there was a rise in revivals and healings that hearkened back to the first and second Great Awakenings. While the 1920s and 1930s witnessed the rise of several healing revivalists such as F.F. Bosworth and Aimee Semple McPherson, the years following World War II saw a larger scale movement that would lay the foundations for the Charismatic Movement of the 1960s and 1970s as well as the modern Prosperity Gospel Movement.

VII. Kenneth Hagin

The most important figure for the development of the Prosperity Gospel movement during these postwar years was Kenneth Erwin Hagin, a Pentecostal evangelist from Texas. Hagin was born on August 20, 1917 in McKinney, Texas.⁷¹ He was born prematurely and weighed less than three pounds. The doctors even thought that he was dead. Miraculously, Hagin survived, but was born with a deformed heart, which would affect him for much of his childhood and adolescence. His father left his family when he was six years old and when he was nine he moved into his grandparents' house because his mother was ill.⁷² At the age of 15 his condition worsened and eventually, Hagin was bedfast for sixteen months between 1933 and 1934.⁷³ He even claims that "One of the doctors said I was bordering on total paralysis."⁷⁴ But it was during this time that Hagin had an experience that would change his life.

⁷⁰ David Edwin Harrell Jr., *All Things are Possible: The Healing and Charismatic Revivals in Modern America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1975) 6.

⁷¹ Kenneth E. Hagin, et al., *Kenneth E. Hagin's 50 Years in the Ministry* (Tulsa, Oklahoma: RHEMA Bible Church, 1984) 9.

⁷² Kenneth Hagin, *Kenneth E. Hagin's 50 Years*, 10.

⁷³ Robert M. Bowman Jr., *The Word-Faith Controversy* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2001) 92.

⁷⁴ Kenneth Hagin, *Kenneth E. Hagin's 50 Years*, 11.

While Hagin was in bed and at one of his weakest moments, he claims to have died and that his spirit descended into Hell. According to Hagin, a creature took him by the arm to escort him into Hell, but before entering the gate a voice cried out, and though he could not understand what was said, the place shook and he was spared from having to enter. Then he returned to his physical body. He claims that this happened three times.⁷⁵ On the one hand, this was a very traumatic experience for Hagin. Yet in hindsight, he was thankful for it, claiming that “Through my experience, God brought me to a knowledge of salvation.”⁷⁶ It was during this time that he gave his heart to the Lord.⁷⁷ His conversion was in 1933 and according to him his heart complications completely stopped in 1934. This experience also fostered an interest in the implications of Christian faith for physical healing. Mark 11:23-23 played a large role in how he understood his entire ordeal because these verses encouraged him to have an unwavering faith that he would be healed. In hindsight he remarks, “When you pray, *believe* that you *receive* healing and you will *have* healing. That’s the revelation I received years ago as I lay bedfast and almost totally paralyzed on the bed of sickness. But I discovered that Mark 11:24 belongs to me!”⁷⁸ This unwavering belief in divine healing would manifest itself in his ministry for the rest of his life.

Although Hagin would eventually become a Pentecostal evangelist, as a youth he had spent most of his time in Baptist circles.⁷⁹ He started preaching in the 1930s, joined the Assemblies of God, and pastored several Assemblies of God churches during the 1940s⁸⁰ In 1949 Hagin decided to become an itinerant evangelist.⁸¹ Hagin’s experience of healing as a

⁷⁵ Kenneth Hagin, *Kenneth E. Hagin’s 50 Years*, 14.

⁷⁶ Kenneth Hagin, *Kenneth E. Hagin’s 50 Years*, 15.

⁷⁷ Kenneth Hagin, *Kenneth E. Hagin’s 50 Years*, 12.

⁷⁸ Kenneth E. Hagin, *God’s Word on Divine Healing* (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Faith Library Publishing, 1998) 27.

⁷⁹ Robert M. Bowman Jr., *The Word-Faith Controversy*, 92.

⁸⁰ Robert M. Bowman Jr., *The Word-Faith Controversy*, 93.

⁸¹ Kenneth Hagin, *Kenneth E. Hagin’s 50 Years*, 52.

child, his connection to Pentecostalism and his proximity to healing revivals in the South greatly shaped his own interest in divine healing. Yet the greatest influence on Hagin's theological framework were the writings of E.W. Kenyon.

Hagin served as the bridge between E.W. Kenyon and Pentecostalism, and this theological blend between Kenyon and Pentecostalism gave birth to the Word of Faith movement.⁸² From Kenyon, Hagin began to adopt ideas concerning divine healing, the distinction between revelation and sense knowledge, the believer's identification with the divine nature, and the powers of positive speech. This idea of positive speech, now known as a "word of faith" became a defining feature of Hagin's ministry. Hagin claims to have begun reading Kenyon's works by 1950, which would become formative for his theology and the development of the Word of Faith movement.⁸³ His reliance on Kenyon has also been the source of debate as a few scholars have shown that Hagin plagiarized many portions of Kenyon's works verbatim.⁸⁴

Interestingly, a key difference between Hagin and Kenyon was that Kenyon did not emphasize financial blessing during his ministry. He was shaped by the ministry of George Müller who had a variety of orphanages and emphasized what he called "a life of trust." As a result, Kenyon did not make financial wealth a dominant theme in his works and preaching. Yet Hagin claims to have received a revelation concerning prosperity in 1950.⁸⁵ Hagin argued that in 1950 the Lord revealed to him that the same principles of faith that he believed could be applied to divine healing were applicable for material prosperity, stating that "He gave me the understanding of how faith for finances works and told me to claim what I needed."⁸⁶ According

⁸² Kenyon spent some time preaching in Pentecostal circles but he was never a Pentecostal. He came close by beginning the process of becoming licensed in the Assemblies of God Church, but he never completed it. See Simmons, 41.

⁸³ Kenneth E. Hagin, *The Name of Jesus* (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Faith Library Publishing, 2007) ix.

⁸⁴ This is extensively documented in chapter one of D.R. McConnell's critique, *A Different Gospel* (1995).

⁸⁵ Kenneth Hagin, *Kenneth E. Hagin's 50 Years*, 48.

⁸⁶ Kenneth E. Hagin, *Biblical Keys to Financial Prosperity* (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Faith Library Publishing, 1995) 75.

to Hagin, “The Lord said to me, ‘Don’t pray about money like you have been. Whatever you need, claim it in Jesus’ Name. And then you say, ‘Satan, take your hands off my money.’ And then say, ‘God, ministering spirits, and cause the money to come.’”⁸⁷

Hagin’s ministry helped to place E.W. Kenyon’s stamp on conceptions of both health and wealth within Pentecostalism. On the one hand, Hagin’s emphasis on wealth coalesced with a postwar economic boom that was accompanied by Pentecostals increasingly experiencing economic success.⁸⁸ On the other hand, Hagin’s ministry caught the momentum of postwar healing revivalism. Hagin would follow the patterns of evangelists such as Oral Roberts, preaching around the country as well as harnessing the tools of radio and television media. Although the postwar healing revivals eventually declined in the U.S., his ministry continued to grow. What distinguished Hagin’s approach to healing was that he saw healing as a right that the believer could claim as a result of spiritual laws tied to Christ’s atonement. Hagin was also distinctive by how he applied Kenyon’s understanding of spiritual laws to personal financial gain specifically. The believer’s legal spiritual rights included financial prosperity and these rights could and should be claimed through faith and verbal “positive” confession. During the mid-1950s other evangelists within postwar healing revivalism began to emphasize both health *and* wealth as well.⁸⁹

Through Hagin’s evangelistic work, his ministry reached new heights. Hagin eventually relocated his ministry to Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1966 and started a tape ministry and his first radio program.⁹⁰ He also began publishing his magazine *The Word of Faith* in 1968.⁹¹ In 1974 he

⁸⁷ Kenneth Hagin, *Biblical Keys to Financial Prosperity*, 58.

⁸⁸ Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, 51.

⁸⁹ Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, 46.

⁹⁰ Kenneth Hagin, *Kenneth E. Hagin’s 50 Years*, 68.

⁹¹ Kenneth Hagin, *Kenneth E. Hagin’s 50 Years*, 68.

started RHEMA Bible Training Center, which continues to produce ministers within the movement.⁹² Hagin would emerge as the leader of this movement, “complete with a church association, ministerial training schools, publishing houses, and radio and television broadcasts.”⁹³ Many popular figures within the movement, such as Kenneth Copeland, view him as a prophet as well as spiritual mentor. Hagin’s influence cannot be overstated and he is most responsible for contemporary Word of Faith theology because of how he incorporated the theology of Kenyon into Pentecostalism. His RHEMA Bible Training Center quickly helped to develop a new generation of ministers to propagate his brand of Pentecostalism. To date, RHEMA has over 40 thousand alumni,⁹⁴ and Hagin’s Word of Faith message has marked the ministries of influential preachers such as Fred Price, Creflo Dollar, Joyce Meyer, and Kenneth Copeland.

VIII. Oral Roberts

During the healing revivals of the postwar years as well as the subsequent charismatic movement, the other figure most effective at shaping sensibilities regarding health and wealth among Pentecostals was Granville Oral Roberts. Roberts was an evangelical minister who spent time in the Pentecostal Holiness denomination as well as the United Methodist Church. He helped to start the Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association, which organized large tent revival meetings throughout America. On the one hand, Roberts’ message was popularized through his preaching and his magazine, *Healing Waters*, which eventually became *Abundant Life*. Yet Roberts also launched a tape ministry, a radio ministry, and a television program that became the most watch syndicated religious program for thirty years. As a result, he was a paradigmatic

⁹² Kenneth Hagin, *Kenneth E. Hagin’s 50 Years*, 74.

⁹³ Robert M. Bowman Jr., *The Word-Faith Controversy*, 94.

⁹⁴ See <http://www.rhema.org/alumni/>

figure for the rise of televangelism. His legacy also involves helping to establish Oral Roberts University in 1963 in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Together, Oral Roberts University and Hagin's Rhema Bible Training Center would solidify Tulsa as the educational center of the Word of Faith movement.

One of Roberts' theological contributions, particularly for the development of Word of Faith Pentecostalism, was his emphasis on "seed-faith." According to Roberts, one of the ways to receive benefits from God was through financial donations or "sowing seeds" in faith that God would bless the giver financially in return. In a popular book called *The Miracle of Seed-Faith* (1970), Roberts drew from scriptural passages such as Luke 6:38 to argue that the key to a financial harvest was through donations. This idea had a large impact on Word of Faith rhetoric and practice, as it presented an effective fundraising method with an accompanying theological rationale. As others began to adopt this emphasis, the notion of sowing financial seeds also became tied to healing as televangelists solicited these financial "seeds" by sending items such as prayer cloths, miracle oil, or other blessed merchandise in return. Such items reflected a longstanding material devotional culture within classical Pentecostalism,⁹⁵ now manifesting in service of specifically financial and health goals. An increasing emphasis on sowing financial seeds only rendered the connection between wealth and healing more commonplace.

IX. Black Spiritualism

While the Word of Faith movement can trace its lineage from the New Thought ideas of E.W. Kenyon to the Pentecostalism of Kenneth Hagin and Oral Roberts, it was by no means the only theological tradition that promoted a message of prosperity. The variety of prosperity messages was especially evident among black religious communities prior to the postwar

⁹⁵ Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, 59.

revivals from which the Word of Faith movement arose. Prior to the black Great Migration, blacks in the South had developed forms of spirituality such as Hoodoo that were derived from West African religious traditions. Then as the black Great Migration developed and more African Americans moved to northern urban centers, a Black Spiritualist tradition emerged. Black Spiritualism denotes a theological tradition that blended various groups, including black Pentecostalism, New Thought, Voodoo, Hoodoo, and Christian Science.⁹⁶ Black ministers such as Father Divine, Sweet Daddy Grace, and Father Hurley saw the power of positive thinking, thaumaturgic rituals, and the pursuit of wealth as vehicles for social progress. Black Spiritualist leaders “encouraged their followers to be self-determinant, to think positively, and to perform specific prayers and rituals for the attainment of their desires.”⁹⁷ In many ways, Black Spiritualism was a message of uplift that responded to the social obstacles that blacks faced in America.

Partially due to sensibilities already present within many black communities, metaphysical groups such as New Thought made significant inroads among blacks in the North. Perhaps the most significant black preacher to blend New Thought with Pentecostal and Black Spiritualist traditions during the Great Migration was Reverend Frederick J. Eikerenkoetter, also known as “Reverend Ike.” Rev. Ike was a minister from South Carolina who rose to fame in New York City during the 1960s and 1970s. He had a concern for divine healing that was shaped by postwar revivalism, and by the late 1960s his sermons were almost entirely about prosperity.⁹⁸ Ike was known for saying that the lack of money was the root of all evil. His

⁹⁶ Jonathan L. Walton, *Watch This!: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009) 67.

⁹⁷ Darnise Martin, *Beyond Christianity: African Americans in a New Thought Church* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2005) 41.

⁹⁸ David Harrell, Jr. *All Things are Possible*, 234.

ministry was significant not only because of his message, but because he capitalized on the power of mass media. By the mid-1970s, he would “broadcast 350 times each week on radio and was carried weekly on 30 television stations in 18 states.”⁹⁹ In addition, Ike embodied an aesthetic of wealth through expensive suits, jewelry, and luxury Rolls Royce cars. Thanks to Rev. Ike, as well as lesser known female ministers Johnnie Colemon and Barbara King, the Word of Faith Movement had theological predecessors among African Americans. Furthermore, when black Word of Faith ministers such as Fred Price, Leroy Thompson, and Creflo Dollar began appealing to black audiences, their messages struck a chord that was already familiar to many of their listeners.

X. The Charismatic Movement

As the postwar healing revivals began to decline in frequency and fervor, the 1960s and 1970s witnessed the rise of what we now call the Charismatic Movement. The Charismatic Movement was a trend in which institutionalized non-Pentecostal churches increasingly begin incorporating Pentecostal sensibilities and practices. Those who assimilated Pentecostal features found various aspects appealing. As historian David Harrell Jr. notes, “Some ministers emphasized healing, others demonology, or speaking in tongues, or prosperity, or prophecy.”¹⁰⁰ There were also changes within Pentecostals as postwar prosperity helped many Pentecostals to move out of the lower socioeconomic classes. This shift had several effects, including decreased aversion to the secular world as well as an increase in larger and more attractive worship facilities. Over time, the theological and aesthetic distance between some Pentecostal churches and non-Pentecostal churches decreased. A new religious demographic of Charismatics adopted

⁹⁹ David Harrell, Jr. *All Things are Possible*, 234.

¹⁰⁰ David Harrell, Jr. *All Things are Possible*, 137.

aspects of Pentecostal worship such as spiritual gifts, but without the same level of emphasis on speaking in tongues specifically. Similarly, they emphasized the presence of the Holy Spirit, but with less focus than Pentecostals on the sacred-secular divide.

Much of the Charismatic Movement's success was due to media publicity. The successes of postwar Pentecostal and independent evangelists garnered national attention through large scale camp revival meetings, which greatly increased the visibility of Pentecostal emphases. Those within the growing charismatic movement also increasingly utilized mass media, including radio broadcasts, music, magazines, and television. Although televised religious broadcasting was dominated by mainline Protestant denominations during the 1950s, there was a shift in the following decade.¹⁰¹ By the end of the 1950s the FCC instituted a new policy mandating selling television airtime to any religious institution willing to pay the fee. Soon conservative religious programming, and especially Pentecostal, evangelical, and fundamentalist expressions, began taking up increasing percentages of broadcast time. Their share of the religious broadcasting market "soared between 1959 and 1977, moving from 53% of all religious programming to 92%.¹⁰² Religious radio broadcasting was similarly dominated by liberal mainline groups such as the National Council of Churches until the 1940s. Yet by 1944 more conservative groups such as the National Association of Evangelicals for United Action (now the NAE) and the National Religious Broadcasters (NRB) would effectively lobby for an increased radio presence for conservative and evangelical voices.¹⁰³ Increasing opportunities for

¹⁰¹ Bobby C. Alexander, *Televangelism Reconsidered: Ritual in the Search for Human Community*, (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1994), 57.

¹⁰² Bobby Alexander, *Televangelism Reconsidered*, 59.

¹⁰³ Bob Lochte, *Christian Radio: The Growth of a Mainstream Broadcasting Force*, (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland & Company Inc., Publishers, 2006), 38-39.

evangelical visibility in mass media during the 1950s and 1960s would further buoy the growth of the Charismatic movement specifically.

During the 1960s and 1970s, conservative Christian groups increasingly purchased independent television stations and eventually established new networks such as Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN)¹⁰⁴ and Paul and Jan Crouch's Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN). By the end of the 1970s, American religious broadcasting in particular would become a one billion dollar industry¹⁰⁵ with charismatic preachers dominating most of televangelism. Additionally, by 1975 the influential magazine *Charisma and Christian Life* would launch and begin to help "foster a sophisticated and respectable image for the charismatic movement as it made the transition from outsider to insider status in popular American culture."¹⁰⁶ On the wings of these media successes the Charismatic Movement would rise to new heights. Through the Charismatic Movement, Pentecostal emphases became more prevalent within the media as well as acceptable to non-Pentecostal audiences.

Partially due to effective mass media, Protestant sympathizers as well as those taking part in the Catholic Charismatic Renewal became increasingly open to aspects of the Pentecostal message. Its embrace of Pentecostal emphases on evangelism and the accessibility of God's Spirit for all believers fueled an openness to both church planting and indigenous leadership. The Charismatic Movement soon had become a global phenomenon, priming the pump for millions of sympathizers to embrace a message of health and financial prosperity. The significance of the Charismatic Movement for the spread of the Word of Faith message cannot

¹⁰⁴ Televangelism also became an increasingly global phenomenon as CBN's audience grew from 10 million to over 110 million estimated viewers. See Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (2013), 75.

¹⁰⁵ Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, 75.

¹⁰⁶ Scott Billingsley, *It's a New Day: Race and Gender in the Modern Charismatic Movement*, (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2008), 7.

be overstated. Although not all Charismatics were Word of Faith adherents, during the following decades the demographic overlap between these two groups would grow as they mutually drank from the same Pentecostal well.

XI. The Modern Prosperity Gospel

Although the Charismatic Movement helped to open doors for the Prosperity Gospel's growth, the latter movement nonetheless had a life of its own. During the 1980s and 1990s, the Prosperity Gospel became more distinctive as televangelism provided a national platform for Prosperity evangelists as well as Prosperity megachurch pastors. A new array of figures would promote the movement with compelling and fresh faces. Whereas Kenneth Hagin and Oral Roberts enabled the Prosperity Gospel to mark the postwar healing revivals and subsequent Charismatic Movement, soon a new generation of ministers began garnering national attention.

Jim Bakker and his wife Tammy Faye Bakker are important for understanding the Prosperity Gospel during the 1980s. In 1983 the Bakkers launched the Praise the Lord (PTL) television studio. Through telecasts such as the "PTL Club" or "The Jim and Tammy Show" the Bakkers targeted Pentecostals and Charismatics with a message of personal encouragement and support. Yet perhaps the most memorable feature of the Bakkers' efforts was their fundraising telethons. They often encouraged listeners to make monetary pledges over the phone in exchange for specific types of PTL Partner memberships.¹⁰⁷ This method proved increasingly profitable as viewers exchanged donations for membership perks such as one of Jim Bakker's books, timeshares, or promises of intercessory prayer. The telethon would become a mainstay of televangelism marrying piety and profits not only in the practices of religious broadcasting, but in the sensibilities of religious audiences.

¹⁰⁷ Bobby Alexander, *Televangelism Reconsidered*, 145.

In addition to their fundraising efforts, the Bakkers impacted the public image of Prosperity preaching during the 1980s in specific ways. On the one hand, they received high salaries and embraced a lavish lifestyle of expensive items, embodying an aesthetic of the wealth their listeners often desired.¹⁰⁸ On the other hand, they undermined the public image of the Prosperity Gospel as they mismanaged ministry funds and Jim Bakker engaged in extramarital sexual misconduct. Jim Bakker was eventually convicted of fraud for overselling time-shares that could not be accommodated, and he was defrocked by the Assemblies of God denomination. The Bakker controversy, alongside the sexual misconduct of popular televangelist Jimmy Swaggart, marred the image of televangelism during the 1980s. As historian Kate Bowler notes, “At the close of the 1980s, the American televangelist seemed like an unredeemable figure. Audiences dropped from 15.1 million in 1986 to under 10 million.”¹⁰⁹¹¹⁰

Even amidst these setbacks, televangelism would continue to fuel the spread of the Prosperity Gospel. While white Word of Faith preachers such as Kenneth Copeland and Charles Capps served as capable successors to Kenneth Hagin’s mantle, African American pastor Frederick K.C. Price was a uniquely valuable liaison between the Word of Faith Movement and black churches in particular. Price was deeply steeped in the Word of Faith world, eventually holding honorary degrees from both RHEMA Bible Training College and Oral Roberts University. By 1983 his burgeoning congregation moved into the “FaithDome” in South-Central Los Angeles with seating upwards of 10,000. Once this nine-million-dollar facility began housing Price’s church, Crenshaw Christian Center, this church’s place was solidified as the

¹⁰⁸Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, 108.

¹⁰⁹ Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, 109.

¹¹⁰ Bowler notes other possible contributing factors, including increased competition between evangelists in an increasingly oversaturated media marketplace that also led to growing airtime costs, see Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, 110.

largest Protestant church in Southern California.¹¹¹ With additional televangelistic exposure through Price's *Ever Increasing Faith Ministries* (EIFM) broadcasts, Price would catapult to the forefront of the Prosperity Gospel Movement. To date, EIFM can be seen on over 130 television stations and is accessible in all 50 states as well as 6 additional countries.¹¹² Although black audiences had a long history of embracing prosperity rhetoric through figures such as Reverend "Ike" and the broader Black Spiritualism tradition, Fred Price provided a younger and fresh face.

It is worth noting that although Price's relationship to the Prosperity Gospel is longstanding, his relationship to Kenneth Hagin is not without controversy. Hagin had served as a mentor for Price in Price's early ministry, but there was a break in their relationship following Kenneth Hagin Jr.'s remarks that Hagin Jr. disapproved of white Christians marrying minorities. Price grew increasingly frustrated by Hagin Sr.'s unwillingness to reprimand his son and eventually announced to his congregation that he was breaking ties with him.¹¹³ Price would soon channel his frustrations through a yearlong sermon series on racism and the church with an accompanying 3-volume set of books, entitled *Race, Religion, and Racism*. Yet his more complicated relationship to the Word of Faith movement slowly compromised his ability to remain at the forefront of the movement. As Jonathan Walton notes, "Price, despite his previous status in the Faith community, received less television time for a while on major networks like TBN and was harshly criticized by many of his former white allies and benefactors."¹¹⁴ This decline in popularity would pave the way for a new and temporarily less controversial African American voice.

¹¹¹John Dart. "Pastor Frederick Price's 'FaithDome': Largest Church in Nation Set to Open Doors in L.A." in *Los Angeles Times*, last modified September 9, 1989. <http://articles.latimes.com/1989-09-09/news/mn-15561fred-price>

¹¹² <http://www.faithdome.org/leaders/apostle-price-bio/>

¹¹³ John Dart. "Issue of Racism Breaks Ties That Bound Two Churches" in *Los Angeles Times*, last modified March 28, 1998. <http://articles.latimes.com/1998/mar/28/local/me-33511>

¹¹⁴ Walton, Jonathan L. *Watch This!: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism*, 148.

By the late 1980s another African American preacher would arise and offer a younger face for black audiences, as well as the broader Prosperity Gospel movement. Shaped by the mentorship of Kenneth Copeland and the legacy of Oral Roberts, Creflo Dollar's brand of the Prosperity Gospel would take his Atlanta small group from eight attendees in the mid-1980s to a megachurch empire by the mid-1990s. By 1995 his congregation, World Changers Church International (WCCI), occupied an 18 million dollar "World Dome," and to date its membership has ballooned to over 20 thousand.¹¹⁵ Additionally, Dollar's television ministry *Changing Your World* was soon appearing on over 200 television stations,¹¹⁶ leading to massive financial gains. Dollar embraced these new heights of success as well as an accompanying aesthetic, including two Rolls Royce luxury vehicles, a 17,000 square foot mansion, and a private jet.

While Dollar's ministry continued the profitable marriage of ministry and entrepreneurial success, his experiences also echoed the refrain of televangelists becoming embroiled in controversy. Later in his ministry career Dollar would face a number of issues, including almost going to jail in 2000 for refusing a deposition when Evander Holyfield made a three million dollar donation to his church prior to Holyfield's divorce proceedings; a brief 2012 arrest for allegedly choking his 15-year old daughter; and public outcry after he plead for donations towards a new 65-million dollar private jet in 2015. In spite of these controversies, Dollar's empire has weathered these legal and public relations storms to maintain a strong foothold in the Prosperity Gospel tradition and broader evangelical world.

One of the reasons for the Prosperity Gospel's appeal is its inclusivity, concerning both race and gender. The Pentecostal emphasis on the accessibility of God's Holy Spirit and

¹¹⁵ Debra J. Mumford, "Rich and Equal in the Eyes of Almighty God!: Creflo Dollar and the Gospel of Racial Reconciliation" in *Pneuma*, 33, (2011), 220.

¹¹⁶ Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, 136.

empowerment for ministry provided a theological framework for black ministers such as Fred Price and Creflo Dollar to assert equal authority among Christian audiences. Echoing the Apostle Peter's words on Pentecost that "Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy",¹¹⁷ female voices would continue to take on increasingly focal roles for the Prosperity Gospel. Figures such as Joyce Meyer and Paula White would provide examples of how woman would mark the impact and public image of the broader movement.

Although Joyce Meyer began ministering in St. Louis, Missouri during the 1970s, she did not achieve national renown until the early 1990s. By the late 1980s she had already established a radio ministry and began publishing books, but in the early 1990s she began publishing books with the Harrison House, a popular publisher in evangelical circles, she began preaching at larger conferences, and she gained increased television exposure.¹¹⁸ By the following decade her television show, *Enjoying Everyday Life* could be seen in over 140 countries and helped to sell over 6 million of Meyer's books. Steeped in the Word of Faith tradition, Meyer blended a belief in God's desire to grant believers prosperity with an emphasis on emotional healing. As she drew from her own rise from a history of childhood trauma to healing and entrepreneurial success, Meyer effectively connected with an audience longing for a similar path from hardship to hope.

Similar to many of her male counterparts, Meyer's rhetoric of prosperity was accompanied by visible signs of tangible blessings. Yet a multimillion dollar home, a corporate jet, and reports of a \$23,000 toilet¹¹⁹ seat would eventually draw the ire of those outside of the

¹¹⁷ Acts 2:18, NIV.

¹¹⁸ Scott Billingsley, *It's a New Day*, 82.

¹¹⁹ See Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, 136.

Prosperity movement. For example, the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* criticized her lavish lifestyle and there were attempts by groups such as MinistryWatch to convince the “Internal Revenue Service to investigate Meyer’s ministry for possible tax code violations.”¹²⁰ Meyer responded to these concerns by taking a reduced salary and increasing the financial transparency of Joyce Meyer Ministries.¹²¹ In spite of these public relations setbacks, Joyce Meyer Ministries remains an immensely popular figure for the Prosperity Gospel movement around the world. At this point the association between televangelists and lavish living was solidified in ways that would continue to mitigate the degree to which such lifestyles could undermine the public image of figures like Meyer.

Alongside Meyer’s rise to fame, another white woman would rise to the front of the Prosperity Gospel movement, but with particular appeal to black audiences. While Meyer’s Lutheran background likely informed her more teaching-oriented homiletical approach, White’s sermons were more physically demonstrative, including a speaking cadence reminiscent of the African American preaching tradition, and louder preaching during moments of high emotion. White’s sermons began captivating audiences during the 1990s as she co-planted South Tampa Christian Center with her husband, Pastor Randy White. Eventually her preaching caught the attention of black megachurch pastor T.D. Jakes, and he would give her a national platform through his *Woman Thou Art Loosed* and *Mega Fest* conferences. White’s expressive style alongside Jakes’ endorsement soon made White a household name within the Prosperity Gospel community, and among black audiences in particular. In 2001, White would launch a weekly television program, *Paula White Today*, on Black Entertainment Television (BET). This program would eventually air on other major networks, providing White with global reach and

¹²⁰ Scott Billingsley, *It’s a New Day*, 83.

¹²¹ Scott Billingsley, *It’s a New Day*, 83.

visibility. Her church would continue growing, and after changing church locations for the third time, in 1997 the Whites would settle in Tampa, Florida, and rebrand as Without Walls International Church. Eventually this church would grow to over 15,000 members,¹²² solidifying Paula White's status as a significant figure within the Prosperity Gospel movement.

Amidst their ministerial success, the Whites still encountered obstacles along the way. On the one hand, their multimillion dollar mansion and luxury vehicles led the *Tampa Tribune* to lodge harsh criticisms in 2002. Yet Paula and Randy encountered an even bigger issue when they began having marital difficulties. Through a series of events, including their divorce in 2007, Paula White would leave Without Walls International Church in 2011 and accept a position as Senior Pastor of New Destiny Christian Center in Apopka, Florida. New Destiny was a predominantly black church and it had a position opening because its previous pastor, Zachary Tims, unexpectedly died after a drug overdose. Although New Destiny is a smaller congregation, White's television and conference presence has maintained her stature within the Prosperity Gospel movement. She also now chairs the evangelical advisory council for the Trump Administration.

Joyce Meyer and especially Paula White evidence how female prosperity preachers found appeal across racial lines, but much of their resonance with audiences was due to their sermonic vulnerability. According to sociologist Marla Frederick, "With their messages of tragedy and triumph White and Meyer, like other white evangelists, have garnered the support and dedication of both black and white followers."¹²³ Both Meyer and White have had histories of economic struggle and sexual abuse, but they have embraced these realities as opportunities

¹²² Scott Billingsley, *It's a New Day*, 88.

¹²³ Marla F. Frederick, *Colored Television: American Religion Gone Global*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 94.

to point their audiences towards the possibility of emotional healing. Countless numbers of their listeners have undoubtedly found encouragement and hope in their transparent testimonies. At the same time, their rhetoric further married the desire for emotional healing with biblical promises of financial success.

Figures such as Frederick Price, Creflo Dollar, Joyce Meyer, and Paula White have been instrumental in promoting the Prosperity Gospel as a global phenomenon since the late 1980s. Yet none of these figures have reached the level of notoriety gained by megachurch pastor Joel Osteen, who now pastors the largest congregation in the United States, Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas. Osteen rose to prominence after succeeding his father, Pastor John Osteen. Under Joel Osteen's tenure Lakewood rapidly grew from 5,000 members to almost 30,000.¹²⁴ To date it remains the largest congregation in America, drawing an average of over 40,000 attendees per week.

Osteen's success stems from a variety of factors. First, he more effectively harnessed the powers of media and marketing than his father. Eventually Lakewood services would be broadcast on multiple stations in over 100 countries and Osteen would also write books that tops the New York Times Bestseller list with millions of sales. Second, he more effectively tapped into America's longstanding therapeutic culture. Osteen uniquely married more seeker-friendly and less confrontational rhetoric with a message of pious optimism. While generally avoiding topics such as sin or hell, he almost exclusively turned towards emphasizing positive thinking and viewing life with a "glass half full" mentality. Osteen often encourages his listeners with statements like, "Every day declare that your dreams are coming to pass"¹²⁵ and that "All

¹²⁴ <https://www.joelosteen.com/Pages/AboutJoel.aspx>

¹²⁵ Joel Osteen, "Say So," Sermon Video, August 25, 2013. Houston, TX: Lakewood Church, accessed May 7, 2014. <http://www.itbn.org/index/detail/lib/programs/sublib/Joel+Osteen/ec/ZvdHJ4ZDrQfe6gptl4JYhuAqbReuDMYI>.

through the day, meditate on these thoughts – overflow, abundance, God takes pleasure in prospering me.”¹²⁶ Echoing the positive thinking approach of Norman Vincent Peale, Osteen’s rhetoric not only gave millions of listeners a message of hope, but a conception of their own agency in actualizing that hope through an optimistic outlook and positive speech. Osteen would continuously blur the lines between homiletics and motivational speaking. Third, Osteen’s rhetoric was complemented by a very approachable image. Resisting sophisticated theological language and ‘Christianese,’ frequently sharing stage time and visibility with his wife, Victoria, and often employing sermon illustrations that drew from his own family, Osteen presented himself as a down to earth and relatable family man. Audiences increasingly gravitated toward Osteen’s depiction of the Christian life, finding encouragement in a nonjudgmental message of God’s desire for their personal success and the accompany aesthetic of that success that the Osteen family embodied. Lastly, Osteen has largely managed to avoid experiencing major scandals that would compromise his ministry or public image.¹²⁷ While controversies and scandals have become refrains in the narratives of televangelists, Osteen’s relatively clean moral track record has only buttressed his status as America’s “Smiling Preacher.”¹²⁸

XII. Literature Review

As the Word of Faith movement burgeoned into the broader Prosperity Gospel and gained global momentum, it began to draw responses from others within Christianity. Although

¹²⁶ Joel Osteen, “Have an Abundant Mentality,” Sermon Video, January 5, 2014. Houston, TX: Lakewood Church, accessed May 6, 2014.

<http://www.itbn.org/index/detail/lib/programs/sublib/Joel+Osteen/ec/ZvdHJ4ZDrQfe6gptl4JYhuAqbReuDMYI>.

¹²⁷ Although there was criticism about Lakewood Church delaying opening their doors to Houston residents during widespread flooding in 2017, Osteen’s ministry weathered the proverbial media storm and remains successful and sizeable.

¹²⁸ Lois Romano, “The Smiling Preacher Builds on Large Following” in *Washington Post*, last modified January 30, 2005. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A47023-2005Jan29.html>

it would take decades for a number of academic treatments of this movement to emerge, several popular accounts arose that were intended for Christian audiences. Many of these responses were polemic in tone, often depicting the Word of Faith movement as a Trojan horse infecting Christianity. As one author put it, “American Christianity is rapidly being infected by an insidious disease, the so called wealth and health Gospel.”¹²⁹ From the late 1970s through the 1990s, this polemic tone dominated popular critiques of the Word of Faith movement.

The most significant response during these years was D.R. McConnell’s *A Different Gospel* (1988). While some authors during the 1970s and 1980s had sought to link Word of Faith theology with divine healing movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries,¹³⁰ McConnell claimed that the influence of New Thought through E.W. Kenyon proved that “The gospel of the Faith movement is, in fact, a cultic infiltration of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements.”¹³¹ McConnell cites the differences between Kenyon’s theology and the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition as well as Kenyon’s decision to never become a Pentecostal as evidence that Kenyon’s theological indebtedness was cultic. Yet in addition to the question of origin, he argues that Word of Faith theology remains cultic in its contemporary claims about the nature of God and the Christian identity. Nonetheless, McConnell fails to acknowledge the theological overlaps between the divine healing movements of the late 19th century and groups such as New Thought.

McConnell’s work is important for two key reasons. First, McConnell helps to clarify the historical lineage of the Word of Faith Movement by demonstrating Hagin’s indebtedness to

¹²⁹ Gordon D. Fee, *The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels* (Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College Publishing, 1985) 7.

¹³⁰ See Bruce Barron, *The Health and Wealth Gospel*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987).

¹³¹ D.R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel*, 16.

Kenyon.¹³² Second, McConnell's argument functioned as one side of an emerging debate about how indebted the Word of Faith movement was to metaphysical groups beyond Christianity. The key question among popular critics was "Is the Word of Faith movement fundamentally cultic in both origins and claims?"¹³³

In 2001, Robert Bowman Jr. wrote *The Word-Faith Controversy: Understanding the Health and Wealth Gospel*, which offered a more moderate position than McConnell. He argued that "the metaphysical cults, while exerting significant influence on the thought of E.W. Kenyon, were not the primary religious context of his teaching."¹³⁴ Instead, Bowman acknowledges the influence of late 19th and early 20th century Holiness, Faith Cure, and Pentecostal movements on Kenyon's formation. The significance of this affirmation is that it suggests that in assessing the movement one should not throw out the baby with the bathwater, and especially not as a result of a genetic fallacy. Two years later, the Evangelical Alliance Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals published *Faith, Health and Prosperity*, as an additional response. It echoed Bowman's more nuanced position that the Word of Faith Movement had a diverse theological heritage. This text also suggested that it's worth considering that the Word of Faith Movement often takes evangelical convictions to extreme conclusions, such as a radical faithfulness in God, the priority of scripture, and a hopeful outlook on life. This reality buttresses the point that a reasonable evaluation of this movement requires greater evenhandedness than McConnell's original thesis.

¹³² McConnell attempts to prove that Hagin plagiarized Kenyon's writings.

¹³³ Other authors that discussed this were *From the Pinnacle of the Temple* by Charles Farah Jr. (1979); *The Born Again Jesus of the Word-Faith Teaching (new edition)* Christian Response to Gnostic Charismatic Heresies by Judith Matta (1984); and *Beyond Seduction: A Return to Biblical Christianity* by Dave Hunt (1987)

¹³⁴ Robert M. Bowman Jr., *The Word-Faith Controversy*, 57.

In *Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion* (2005), sociologist Milmon Harrison provides an account of the Word of Faith movement among African American Christians, drawing from ethnographic work among parishioners of a church in Sacramento, California. Harrison complements his participant observation with in-depth interviews with 20 participants, intending to privilege the voices of laypersons. Harrison had also previously spent time as a member of this movement, which only buttresses the reliability of his claims.

Harrison's conclusions are byproducts of his approach. He remarks, "my intention was not to write an exposé of the movement, its doctrine, or its members or leaders."¹³⁵ As a result, his goal is primarily descriptive as he attempts to provide a constructive inquiry while avoiding both apologetics and polemics. He identifies three characteristics of the Word of Faith message: "the principle of knowing who you are in Christ; the practice of positive confession (and positive mental attitude); and a worldview that emphasizes material prosperity and physical health as the divine right of every Christian."¹³⁶ Yet he also suggests that within African American churches specifically, the Word of Faith movement's claims both echo the attentiveness to material plight common within black churches throughout American history, while deviating in its prescriptions for *how* that plight should be addressed.

Contrary to the frequent assumption that Word of Faith adherents are passive and gullible recipients of the prosperity message, Milmon demonstrates that members often filter and can even resist the directives of church leadership and church expectations. Adherents find ways to negotiate such claims and expectations alongside their own perspectives. Some examples

¹³⁵ Milmon Harrison, *Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005) viii.

¹³⁶ Milmon Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 8.

include only agreeing with some of the pastor's messages, venting to others when in disagreement with a sermon or practice, taking breaks from service in specific church ministries, or taking a break from church altogether. Through these methods the attendee asserts their own autonomy. This reality is important because it further clarifies the potential obstacles to pastoral rhetoric and communal expectations. Yet it also provides a corrective to popular assumptions that overestimate the rhetorical power of Word of Faith pastors while undervaluing the agency of their followers.

Theologian Stephanie Mitchem's *Name it and Claim it?: Prosperity Preaching in the Black Church* (2007) also explores how the Prosperity Gospel intersects with black religiosity. Mitchem draws from participant observation and conversations with laity during visits to five black congregations within the broader Prosperity Gospel movement. She suggests that the Prosperity Gospel often resonates with black adherents because it taps into a spiritual longing for justice that has characterized black communities throughout American history. This spiritual longing responds to the systemic inequalities that black Americans have historically faced, giving rise to a religiously shaped hope for social justice in general and economic justice specifically. The Prosperity Gospel is able to answer this longing for economic improvement with a message promising financial abundance and uplift.

A second helpful contribution of Mitchem's work is that she distinguishes three historical strands of the message of prosperity within black church communities. The first of these strands includes early twentieth century preachers such as Father Divine and Sweet Daddy Grace. The second strand refers to Word of Faith ministers such as Leroy Thompson, Creflo Dollar, and Frederick Price, who each were shaped by the ministry of Kenneth Hagin. The third strand denotes the influence of metaphysical groups such as Unity and Science of Mind. Unity and

Science of Mind are New Thought groups that helped to shape black ministers such as Johnnie Colemon, Barbara King, and Rev. “Ike.” Mitchem’s threefold delineation is instructive because it acknowledges the theological and historical variety within the broader Prosperity Gospel Movement. Furthermore, a recognition of this variety helps to foster more nuanced theological analysis of the movement in her concluding chapter.

Sociologist Tony Lin’s work echoes Harrison and Mitchem’s interests in the Prosperity Gospel among minority groups. Lin’s dissertation, *The Best of Both Worlds: How Word of Faith Pentecostalism teaches Latino Immigrants to become Americans* (2010)¹³⁷ probes the relationship between the Prosperity Gospel and immigrant Latino communities in the United States. He conducts ethnographic work among first generation Latinos in two congregations – a church in Virginia and a church in California. Lin’s work is significant not only because it engages the Prosperity Gospel among Latinos, but because it raises the broader question of how the Prosperity Gospel and American culture interrelate. His key claim is that as individuals pursue God within the Prosperity Gospel framework, they are also pursuing the American Dream. A synonymy becomes apparent between American ideals of upward social mobility, self-reliance, and individualism on the one hand, and the Prosperity Gospel’s narrative of success on the other hand. Lin argues that it is not the promise of financial gain, but the Prosperity Gospel’s ability to help immigrants make sense of their lives that fosters its appeal. Yet the content of this vision, Lin claims, is specifically American.

Historian Kate Bowler would also insightfully probe the impact of American culture on the Prosperity Gospel. In *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (2013) she provides the first full length historical treatment of the movement in America. Drawing from

¹³⁷ Tony Lin, “The Best of Both Worlds: How Word of Faith Pentecostalism teaches Latino Immigrants to become Americans,” (doctoral dissertation, University of Virginia, 2010).

historical research as well as ethnographic work in a church in Durham, North Carolina, Bowler claims that the Prosperity Gospel is characterized by four key themes: faith, wealth, health, and victory. A key contribution of Bowler's work is that she distinguishes between what she calls a "hard" prosperity message and a "soft" prosperity message. She claims that hard prosperity was the dominant form of the prosperity gospel in America prior to the 1990s, emphasizing that faith operates according to immutable spiritual laws. In contrast, she suggests that a growing number of prosperity preachers subsequently emerged who shifted from the rigid logic of cause and effect toward a "softer" therapeutic message of positive thinking. Bowler's distinction is helpful because it both illumines the diversity within the Prosperity Gospel movement while historically situating such diversity.

Yet Bowler's work is also significant because it further examines how American culture, in particular, shaped the Prosperity Gospel's key assumptions and claims. She effectively demonstrates how ideas of American exceptionalism, divine entitlement, self-reliance, human optimism, and a therapeutic ethos collectively placed a cultural stamp on Prosperity Gospel theology. Furthermore, she narrates how this coalescence rendered a cultural imprint on the Prosperity Gospel that would then validate the social structures that buttressed that culture. In her words, "The prosperity movement did not simply give Americans a gospel worthy of a nation of self-made men. It affirmed the basic economic structures on which individual enterprise stood."¹³⁸ Thus, the theological validation of the American Dream cannot be completely separated from the capitalistic framework that this Dream renders intelligible.

The edited volume *Pentecostalism and Prosperity: The Socio-Economics of the Global Charismatic Movement* (2012) addresses this broader question about theology and economy

¹³⁸ Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, 226.

within a global context. The essays in this volume provide helpful snapshots of how the Prosperity Gospel takes shape in various local communities, demonstrating the movement's capacity for adaptability while dispelling the notion that there is only *one* Prosperity Gospel. The three major sections of this book offer taxonomies of the Prosperity Gospel, case studies of its relationship to economic development in various cities, and responses to these developments, respectively. A major claim of the work is that any assessment of the Prosperity Gospel movement must acknowledge that it is not monolithic. Not only does it take shape in a variety of ways globally, but the sources of its appeal and its effects can vary from region to region.

Pentecostalism and Prosperity is important for the key questions it raises and the conversations it sparks, even more than the preliminary answers it provides. Its contributors ask whether the Prosperity Gospel promotes capitalism and entrepreneurship, they raise questions about the sources of its appeal, and they interrogate its social effects. The most important caveat to these reflections, however, is that they acknowledge that the answers to such questions greatly depends on the context of the community to which the questions are asked. For example, the appeal or effects of the Prosperity Gospel among practitioners in South Africa will likely differ to some extent from those in Chile. Nonetheless, there is a general consensus among the volume's contributors that the Prosperity Gospel connects with capitalism, not only historically, but in some of its deepest assumptions about the way the world works. As a result, it has the theological capacity to promote what some have called a new "Protestant work ethic," sanctifying industriousness and entrepreneurial pursuits. This connection does not necessarily mean that all practitioners experience economic success. Yet this capacity for encouraging economic success, and capitalistic success in particular, persists globally even though the precise effects of this connection differ from context to context.

In addition to these book-length treatments of the Prosperity Gospel, the article “Practical Divine Influence: Socioeconomic Status and Belief in the Prosperity Gospel” (2012) is an important contribution to the field. Drawing from a 2006 Pew Forum survey of Pentecostals, sociologists Scott Schieman and Jong Hyun Jung examine how socioeconomic factors such as education and income impact the appeal of the Prosperity Gospel. Their data provides evidence that individuals with higher levels of education as well as individuals with higher incomes are both less likely to embrace the Prosperity Gospel.¹³⁹ In addition to this negative correlation, when isolating the Prosperity Gospel accounts of wealth and health, “education has a stronger negative association with the wealth gospel; by contrast, income has a stronger negative association with the health gospel.”¹⁴⁰ Schieman and Jung suspect that this difference stems from the message of wealth being consistent with how “Education is often associated with individual efforts toward status attainment...” whereas “for health outcomes, income is a resource that provides people with access to healthier lifestyles and better quality of care.”¹⁴¹ As a result, education and income may each mitigate the need and appeal of messages that promise wealth and health, respectively. Further, the findings of Schieman and Jung lend credence to the common assumption that the majority of Prosperity Gospel adherents globally are of lower socioeconomic status.¹⁴²

As the Prosperity Gospel began gaining more academic attention, there have been a few shifts in how scholars have evaluated and engaged this movement. On the one hand, scholars have begun interrogating the relationship between the Prosperity Gospel and American culture.

¹³⁹ Scott Schieman and Jong Jung, “Practical Divine Influence,” 749.

¹⁴⁰ Scott Schieman and Jong Jung, “Practical Divine Influence,” 751.

¹⁴¹ Scott Schieman and Jong Jung, “Practical Divine Influence,” 752.

¹⁴² A 2011 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life survey suggests that Pentecostals are generally less affluent than most denominations, citing that no more than 20% of Pentecostals make more than \$75,000 per year. See David Leonhardt, “Is Your Religion Your Financial Destiny?” in *New York Times*, last modified May 11, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/15/magazine/is-your-religion-your-financial-destiny.html>

While sociologist Tony Lin argues that the Prosperity Gospel is really a theological expression of the American Dream, scholars such as historian Kate Bowler and social ethicist Jonathan Walton each note how the Prosperity Gospel embraces and promotes American cultural tropes of individualism and self-reliance. Collectively, these reflections raise questions about the ways that the Prosperity Gospel might be conceived of as a uniquely American phenomenon and cultural export.

Conversations about the impact of American culture on the Prosperity Gospel also shape growing discussions about the Prosperity Gospel's relationship to capitalism. Several thinkers have noted that Prosperity Gospel preachers generally take an uncritical stance towards capitalist structures that might compromise a more equal distribution of wealth. Theologically, the Prosperity Gospel assumes that spiritual laws are sufficient for transcending social barriers that might inhibit socioeconomic mobility. In other words, faith, verbal affirmations, and financial donations or are enough to overcome economic inequality for an individual. Furthermore, capitalistic success is seen as divine validation of one's piety. These tendencies within the Prosperity Gospel raise particular theological, social, and ethical questions regarding whether this movement has the theological resources to critique oppressive aspects of economic systems adequately. This reality does not mean that the Prosperity Gospel does not *have* a response to systemic injustice. Instead, this response is pedagogical rather than political. In other words, the social responsibility of adherents is to prioritize teaching others about the sufficiency of spiritual laws and piety rather than prioritizing the critique of systemic structures.

A related debate about capitalism concern whether the Prosperity Gospel is best understood as a new Protestant ethic that encourages hard work, or whether its emphasis on the sufficiency of piety for economic success encourages complacency. In his essay,

“Pentecostalism – Protestant Ethic or Cargo Cult?” sociologist Peter Berger, helpfully outlines this ongoing debate. He shows how on the one hand, some scholars argue that the Prosperity Gospel is a new Protestant Ethic, encouraging adherents to not only expect socioeconomic success but to pursue it with increased vigor and industriousness. On the other hand, some scholars claim that the Prosperity Gospel’s emphases of expectancy, divine rights, and legality encourage complacency. Berger prefers a moderate position, affirming that both perspectives have validity and supporting evidence. He claims that this partially results from the sheer number of those within the movement, which makes diverse effects inevitable. Nonetheless, his conclusions also suggest that the theology itself also bears some responsibility for these diverging effects.

As scholars have begun turning to the Prosperity Gospel as a legitimate object of academic inquiry, theologians have taken a backseat to this discussion. Failing to render a theological response to the fastest growing segment of Christianity in the world inevitably leaves aspects of the Prosperity Gospel unexplored that theology is particularly suited to engage. Theologians not only would offer a unique lens for perceiving the nature of the Prosperity Gospel; they possess unique capacities to respond to the Prosperity Gospel on its own terms. In other words, if it is true that much of the Prosperity Gospel’s persuasiveness stems from its theological vision, rather than merely resulting from human desires for wealth and health, a theological examination of this movement is essential. Such an examination would illumine the theological contours of the movement, but also lay the foundation for a constructive theological response that moves broader theological discussion forward. While the insights of sociologists and historians have been invaluable for current understandings of the Prosperity Gospel, those who have engaged this movement tend to resist offering normative perspectives. Although their

descriptive analyses are very useful, there remains a need for a more direct theological response that is both critical and constructive.

In particular, one area that has not received sustained attention among theologians is the theological anthropology of the Prosperity Gospel movement. More specifically, both the ideas of financial success and perfect physical health function as means by which the individual believer achieves a certain degree of self-sufficiency. Yet elevating financial wealth and perfect bodily health as anthropological ideals presents problematic implications for both the poor and for those with continuing physical impairments. In other words, if health and wealth are the marks of a full Christian life, are the poor, terminally ill, and disabled unable to fully experience God's favor?

In this dissertation, I argue that the Prosperity Gospel affirms self-sufficiency as an anthropological ideal in ways that compromise the integrity of the poor, terminally ill, and physically disabled. In response to this form of individualism that valorizes self-sufficiency, I then offer an alternative theological anthropology that prioritizes interdependence. Concerning health, such a response will reveal how physical impairments present the church, not with a hierarchy of presumed value, but with an opportunity for mutual growth and service. In the case of wealth, an alternative framework will valorize a redistribution of resources that promotes the common good rather than prioritizing personal financial gain. Through these responses this dissertation will move theological discussion forward in a way that validates the integrity of disadvantaged groups without valorizing their weaknesses. Furthermore, it will illumine how theology and church practices can more responsibly engage socially marginalized groups.

CHAPTER TWO

LIVED THEOLOGY & THEOLOGICAL ETHNOGRAPHY

I. Introduction

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework and methodology that undergirds this dissertation. The first half of this chapter articulates how this project is shaped by a commitment to lived theology as a method for bringing faith practitioners into conversation with critical theological analysis. In addition, I draw from narrative theology to examine how the narrative structure of Christian discourse provides a key impetus for the practice of lived theology. I then turn to ethnography as a significant tool for theological reflection, exploring the rise of ethnography within the social sciences as well as within academic theology. Following this discussion, the latter half of this chapter focuses on two case studies, highlighting the specifics of how I conducted field work among two megachurch communities. I employ pseudonyms for these churches as well as their members to protect their anonymity. I then outline my ethnographic method, including my approach to participant observation, in-depth interviews, content analysis of sermons, and data coding. Employing a multi-modal ethnographic approach, this chapter describes what I deem the methodological preconditions for a thick description of two churches in a large southern city, Shalom Ministries and Prosperity Church.

II. Lived Theology as Method

As a work of lived theology, this project brings the concrete experiences of faith practitioners into critical and constructive conversation with theological analysis, but an interest in relating the church to academic theology is by no means novel. Throughout church history, from Saint Augustine to Friedrich Schleiermacher, from Karl Barth to James Cone, theologians have long affirmed the relevance of practicing faith communities for theological discourse. A less common contemporary practice, however, is to render specific communities as explicit objects of theological study through “thick descriptions,” and to integrate the voices of members of these communities into theological writing more extensively through qualitative research tools such as ethnography. This project models lived theology as an enterprise invested in mining resources that lay at the intersection of theological analysis and concrete lives and practices.

Lived theology as an academic discipline is in part a statement about the appropriate sources for doing theology. By grounding theological inquiry within the tangible lives of individuals and practicing communities, lived theology resists allowing abstract investigation to set the terms for theological discourse completely. Instead it recognizes the intellectual hubris in predetermining the scope of theological questions and trajectories. Concrete “faith-formed lives” then function as “essential building blocks of theological knowledge,” while also illuminating how theology manifests in the world.¹⁴³ This approach can then render insights that are instructive for more exclusively theoretical discourse as well.

In addition to how lived theology can inform broader academic discourse, it can also express a moral gesture. As John Kiess notes, “Attending to lived theologies is not about gaining new knowledge; it is about responding to a claim for recognition. It is about acknowledgment.

¹⁴³ Charles Marsh, *Lived Theology: New Perspectives on Method, Style, and Pedagogy*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 6.

A failure to acknowledge, a failure to hear the voice of lived theology in places of dislocation is, to borrow the words of Das, not a failure of the intellect; it is a failure of the spirit.”¹⁴⁴ Kiess suggests that lived theology can be a dignifying method, affirming the worthiness of oppressed communities, in particular, as objects of study (in nonexploitative or paternalistic ways). Lived theology can then give voice to such communities by acknowledging their own voices as already present and valuable.

Lived theology bears resemblance to other academic approaches, but it is also methodologically distinct. On the one hand, lived theology echoes approaches common to the social sciences insofar as it recognizes the importance of a more inductive method that is grounded in empirically based tools such as qualitative research. Narrated lives then become sites for beginning theoretical reflection as proper subjects rather than as distant objects of inquiry. Yet lived theology differs from dominant branches within the social sciences insofar as it also prioritizes a specifically theological lens. This priority is not exclusive, but lived theology is primarily interested in how the realities of lived experience relate to specifically theological concerns. It embodies a move from fact to theological norm in a way that takes both fact and theological norm seriously.¹⁴⁵ A specifically theological lens also further distinguishes lived theology from other academic examples of lived religion, which typically have more diverse and variable religious concerns.

Lived theology is also distinct from other branches of theology. As Charles Marsh states, “No more or less demanding than philosophical or systematic theology, lived theology is more

¹⁴⁴ John Kiess, “Descending into the Ordinary: Lived Theology, War, and the Moral Agency of Civilians,” in *Lived Theology: New Perspectives on Method, Style, and Pedagogy*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 148.

¹⁴⁵ Ted Smith makes a similar point; see Ted Smith, “Eschatological Memories of Everyday Life,” in *Lived Theology: New Perspectives on Method, Style, and Pedagogy*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 31

curious, transgressing disciplinary boundaries as a matter of course, examining circumstance, context, and motivation and, like journalism and history, digging for the truth.”¹⁴⁶ Lived theology embraces interdisciplinarity, viewing other disciplinary resources as investigative assets. This sensibility is informed by a recognition that the narrative quality of lived experience resists tidy theoretical compartmentalization. As a result, the interdisciplinary impulse of lived theology becomes a way to model a methodology that adequately recognizes the integrated nature of lived experience. This approach positions lived theology to consider narrative modes of reflection and practices, including biography, testimonials, observed rituals, or oral history, in which other branches of theology are often less interested.

It is also important to distinguish lived theology from narrative theology. As a discipline, narrative theology has sought to refute the assumption that philosophical and theological claims can function detached from the traditions and narrative realities that formed them. The inherent narrative quality of these claims complicates ambitions toward universality and instead reveals the subjective inception of such claims. Lived theology and narrative theology share a concern for narrative, but they differ in their aims as well as how they pursue these aims. Narrative theology is in part a postliberal reaction to post-Enlightenment ways of thinking that prioritize universality, whereas lived theology is more concerned with addressing both abstraction and insufficient disciplinary permeability within academic theology. Put positively, narrative theology seeks to affirm the roles of tradition and community in philosophical and theological claims, whereas lived theology seeks to affirm the value and necessity of lived experience in how theological inquiry is conducted. This difference in primary concerns shapes how both lived theology and narrative theology engage in theological reflection. As Charles Marsh remarks,

¹⁴⁶ Charles Marsh, *Lived Theology*, 7.

narrative theology embraced a “preference for discourses about narrativity over actual life narratives.”¹⁴⁷ Here Marsh identifies a trend among narrative theologians, which is in part a reflection of their specific theoretical concerns. Notwithstanding the question of whether this difference is also a deficiency, lived theology paves an alternative road that allows concrete lives to shape discourse more explicitly.

The distinctions between narrative theology and lived theology do not make them fundamentally incompatible. Instead, they can be mutually informing as lived theology pushes narrative theology to take empirical research more seriously, and narrative theology provides an additional conceptual framework for lived theology’s necessity. More specifically, lived theology renders narrated experiences and narrative genres central, whereas the resources of narrative theology help articulate precisely why that centrality is conceptually necessary. Lived theology affirms the necessity of a narrational approach to theological reflection both because theology is social in its inception and because “theological ideas aspire in their inner logic toward social expression.”¹⁴⁸ Thus, lived theology names the dialectic between theology and lived experience as not only functional but ontological. Since experience can function as a starting point for theology, theology can arise from experience in new and unexpected ways. Narrative theology complements this claim by articulating how the relationship between experience and theology is also conceptually necessary from the opposite direction. While lived theology reveals how analysis of lived experiences push us toward theological claims, narrative theology reveals how theological claims push us to probe the traditions and communities these claims embody.

¹⁴⁷ Charles Marsh, *Lived Theology*, 12.

¹⁴⁸ Charles Marsh, *Lived Theology*, 7.

This project offers an account of the Prosperity Gospel that is grounded in the lived theology and experiences of contemporary adherents. The approach of this dissertation stems from three assumptions of lived theology as a practice. First, it presupposes that the communal life of faith communities is theologically generative. Although often implicit, the religious and quotidian lives of practitioners often speak in a theological register. Second, it affirms that tools more common in the social sciences, such as tools of qualitative research, can be helpful for theological analysis. Such tools further enable the theologian to access the empirical fabric of lived theology. Third, this project claims that critical theological analysis can bring the beliefs and practices of faith communities to life in unique ways. Empirical description is not an end within itself; rather, theological analysis must then be brought to bear on such description in ways that can be instructive for broader faith, practice, and discourse.

III. The Narrative Structure of Christian Discourse

This claim about the usefulness of using theological analysis to illumine faith communities and practices also reflects a core conviction in narrative theology; namely, that Christian discourse has an inherent narrative structure that lends itself to this type of critical analysis. Stanley Hauerwas aptly captures this logic. Hauerwas asserts, “there is not one story of God in scripture and tradition, but many. The very variety of the stories of God requires theological and moral reflection if we are to be able to understand the meaning and significance of these stories in relation to one another.”¹⁴⁹ Consequently, the ethical task of the Christian community involves negotiating these various stories in pursuit of truth. The implications of God’s involvement with humanity do not derive from moral absolutes as if there were a single

¹⁴⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, “The Church in a Divided World: The Interpretive Power of the Christian Story,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 8, no. 1 (1980): 62.

story *behind* the biblical stories of God's relationship with humanity. Rather, the narrative structures of scripture, Christian theology, and Christian ethics reveal that they are inherently dialogical.

While the Prosperity Gospel offers a particular way to understand the Christian story, Hauerwas claims that "the very character of the stories of God requires a people who must constantly be willing to have their understanding of the story challenged by how and what others have discovered to be required of them in their attempt to live faithfully to that tradition."¹⁵⁰ Hauerwas suggests that Christian communities must continually reexamine how faithfully they testify to the Christian story for at least two reasons. First, scripture has *several* stories. The diversity of the gospels, for example, suggests that the meaning of Jesus' life is neither singular nor self-interpreting. Rather, faithfully appropriating the implications of Christ's life, as well as scripture in general, requires communities of ongoing discernment and dialogue. This *process* of theological discernment evidences the narrative structure of Christian discourse. Second, although doctrines and propositions can appear abstract and universal, they nonetheless derive their intelligibility from particular narratives. Hauerwas cites the Decalogue as an example, suggest that it is unintelligible apart from the history of God's covenant with Israel.¹⁵¹ Similarly, universal beliefs about the relationship between the atonement and financial wealth are embedded within a communal narrative of financial prosperity and the contingency of this narrative context undermines its theological givenness.

Hauerwas' suggestion that a Christian community's appropriation of the Christian story should always be subject to critique raises questions about the criteria for such critique.

¹⁵⁰ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 58.

¹⁵¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 23.

Hauerwas generally offers a pragmatic test for the validity and truthfulness of competing narratives.¹⁵² He states that “Just as scientific theories are partially judged by the fruitfulness of the activities they generate, so narratives can and should be judged by the richness of moral character and activity they generate.”¹⁵³ A couple things are at stake for Hauerwas. First, he wants to avoid a relativism that would affirm the truthfulness of all stories. Second, he wants to avoid any form of foundationalism that would offer an evaluative principle that assumes its own detachment from a narrative and social context. He claims that “There is no story of stories, i.e., an account that is literal and that thus provides a criterion to say which stories are true or false. All we can do is compare stories to see what they ask of us and the world which we inhabit.”¹⁵⁴ Although scholars debate the adequacy of this pragmatic approach, it could provide a helpful hermeneutic for theological discourse within Prosperity Gospel communities by challenging the specific claims that operate as universal principles within their communal narrative.

Rather than encouraging doctrinal relativism, Hauerwas contextualizes universal claims by describing their necessary relationship to specific stories and calling Christian believers to evaluate how these specific stories shape communities. He asserts that “the test of the truthfulness of any story does not reside in its conforming to or embodying a prior universal norm, but rather in how we and others find their lives illuminated and compelled by the accuracy and truthfulness of its particular vision.”¹⁵⁵ Universal claims to truth originate and are embedded within particular narratives, and the contingency of these narrative contexts makes them capable

¹⁵² The closest Hauerwas comes to providing criteria occurs in *Truthfulness and Tragedy*; see Stanley Hauerwas, *Truthfulness and Tragedy; Further Investigations in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 35. Yet even on this point he does not attempt to provide criteria that are objective and narrative independent (cf. *Scripture and Ethics: Twentieth-Century Portraits*, 248).

¹⁵³ Stanley Hauerwas, “The Church in a Divided World: The Interpretive Power of the Christian Story,” 62.

¹⁵⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, *Truthfulness and Tragedy; Further Investigations in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 58.

¹⁵⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, “Character, Narrative, and Growth in the Christian Life,” in *The Hauerwas Reader*, Eds. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 250.

of receiving productive interrogation. This interrogation will not always undermine any particular truth claim, but it *is* the prerequisite for a claim's continuing validity.

The usefulness and necessity of bringing different understandings of the Christian story into productive dialogue informs the interlocutors this project draws from to engage the Prosperity Gospel. The narrative structure of Christian discourse lends itself to critical analysis that is internal to the Christian tradition. By incorporating specifically Christian thinkers, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King Jr., this project aims to engage the Prosperity Gospel on its own terms. Further, by comparing two churches with the Prosperity Gospel tradition, rather than introducing a church from another denomination, this project demonstrates that the Prosperity Gospel also has the theological capacity for internal critique. These methodological decisions model the dialogical nature of theological reflection in response to the narrative structure of Christian discourse.

IV. The Rise of Ethnography

Today, ethnography continues to take on a larger role in the academic study of communities, but this was not always the case. Prior to the 1920s, the role of ethnography differed much from how it operates in the contemporary academy. There was less respect for ethnography as a research method primarily because there was a sharper distinction between ethnographers and anthropologists, and ethnographers often lacked deep facility with native cultures and languages.¹⁵⁶ Ethnographers also tended to have fairly short stays among native populations and were viewed as much less authoritative analysts of native communities than missionaries or other longer-term travelers (e.g. of more than two years).¹⁵⁷ Yet during the early

¹⁵⁶ Clifford, James. "On Ethnographic Authority," *Representations*: 2, Spring (1983), 124.

¹⁵⁷ Clifford, James. "On Ethnographic Authority," 124.

20th century several shifts allowed ethnography to take on a more prominent and respected role within the academy.

Ethnography as an academic method of investigation began rising to prominence in the early 20th century, particularly among anthropologists. This development involved several shifts. First, ethnographers began to employ the tools of social scientific research. A more empirical approach helped to garner greater respect within the academy. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the role of the fieldworker as “participant-observer” became standard. While ethnographers during the 19th century often functioned as outsiders to the native community, ethnographers during the 20th century began to embed themselves within native communities and became involved more frequently in communal practices. Figures such as Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski, and E.E. Evans-Pritchard were trailblazers in engaging other cultures in a sustained way.¹⁵⁸ In particular, Malinowski viewed immersion as a means toward objectivity, rather than as a hindrance to it. He suggested that through becoming immersed within the life and practices of a community one could become more capable of rendering accurate accounts of that community’s dynamics and culture. This approach contrasted other frequent scholarly reservations about immersion that assumed it would inevitably compromise the possibility for reliable analysis. Although many early anthropologists, generally white westerners, failed to fully acknowledge their positioning and colonial gaze,¹⁵⁹ their work helped establish ethnography as a viable practice in the social sciences.

¹⁵⁸ Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, eds., *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, (New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 9.

¹⁵⁹ Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, eds., *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, 11; also see Gary A. Olson and Elizabeth Hirsh, eds., *Women Writing Culture*, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995).

Another development among early 20th century ethnographers was that they began to narrow their investigative scopes. For example, rather than studying an entire culture of a particular group, they began to focus on specific institutions within that culture. This more specific focus allowed ethnographers to maintain fieldwork projects of under three years, yet still gain substantial findings. A smaller scope was also made possible because ethnographers began to borrow theoretical frameworks from other disciplines, which then allowed them to draw larger conclusions based on narrower but deeper research. This approach helped to embody what Clifford Geertz would eventually call a “thick description.” For Geertz a thick description involves at least two qualities. First, thick description is *interpretive*. In this way, it is not simply about presenting facts, but about interpreting those facts. Second, he claims that thick description is *microscopic*, suggesting that such description focuses on a manageable subject of interest. As ethnographers drew from Geertz, subsequent shifts within ethnography during the early 20th century enabled them to present more reliable and focused findings.

Paul Stoller notes that as ethnography developed during the 20th century the format of ethnographic works changed from a schematic of introduction → data presentation → conclusions to a more narrative structure that further acknowledged the presence and experiences of the ethnographic participant-observer.¹⁶⁰ While ethnographers recognized the significance of their own subjectivity, their internal responses were often kept at a distance from the text. Instead, “The subjectivity of the author is separated from the objective referent of the text,” and “States of serious confusion, violent feelings or acts, censorship, important failures, changes of course, and excessive pleasures are excluded from the published account.”¹⁶¹ By the 1960,

¹⁶⁰ Paul Stoller, “Ethnography/Memoir/Imagination/Story” in *Anthropology and Humanism*, 32, no. 2 (2011): 180.

¹⁶¹ James Clifford, “Introduction: Partial Truths,” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1986), 13.

ethnographers more frequently would affirm not only that their positioning had an impact on the experiences they recorded, but they more readily stated how the experiences impacted them as observers.¹⁶²

The latter decades of the 20th century marks a shift because of the intentional translation of academic self-awareness into ethnographic reflections. As Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen remark, “a hallmark of both ethnographic and critical theory beginning in the 1970s is the radical explorations of the historical and social processes involved in the construction of knowledge.”¹⁶³ Academic self-awareness fostered a greater intellectual honesty that surrendered the impossible quest for completely detached objectivity. Further, it affirmed that the inevitable subjectivity of the researcher and the impact of that subjectivity on ethnography did not completely strip ethnography of its academic usefulness. Subjectivity was no longer an inevitable threat to validity.

By the 1980s and 1990s, Robert Wuthnow notes another shift in ethnography in terms of an increased reliance on discourse.¹⁶⁴ More specifically, in-depth interviews became a more common practice for ethnographers. A key result was that the ethnographic goal became less about “repeatability” and more about “analytic generalizability” through “saturation.” In other words, instead of trying to ensure that if a subsequent ethnographer conducted similar research they would have the exact same result (i.e. repeatability), the goal became to spend enough time (i.e. saturation) within a community and with people to the point that the fieldworker could reasonably predict (i.e. generalize) certain behaviors and responses. This generalizability could then foster reliable conclusions.

¹⁶² James Clifford, “Introduction: Partial Truths,” in *Writing Culture*, 14.

¹⁶³ Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, eds., *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, 12.

¹⁶⁴ Robert J. Wuthnow, “Taking Talk Seriously: Religious Discourse as Social Practice” in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 50, no. 1 (2011): 4.

After ethnography gained a foothold in the social sciences more broadly, its merits would become more apparent to theologians. Yet as Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen note, “it is necessary to situate the rise of ethnography as a means for doing theology and ethics within the larger rise of the study of culture as a major grounding discourse for theology.”¹⁶⁵ A more sustained turn to culture and cultural immersion raised new disciplinary possibilities for theology. Theologians, such as Mary Fulkerson, began prioritizing physical cultural engagement in theological writing. On the one hand, shifts in the broader humanities constituted an external factor in theology’s own development. On the other hand, there are also impetuses internal to theology. As Mary Fulkerson states, “a theological rationale for ethnographic work is the incarnational nature of Christianity.”¹⁶⁶ Fulkerson describes this incarnational significance as how the immanence of God pushes theology to probe the complexities of creation. In light of these sensibilities, this dissertation assumes that taking the incarnational nature of Christianity seriously requires that for a theologian to explore properly theological questions to their fullest extent, that the theologian must enter into creation’s complexities both theoretically *and* physically. Ethnography is not a prerequisite for important theological work, but it does open up unique depths of investigative possibilities.

These investigative possibilities are important because of the normative aims of theology. It is too simplistic to bifurcate ethnography as descriptive and theology as normative. Rather, the normative potential of theology derives much of its strength from its ability to accurately describe reality. Thus, in addition to the incarnational nature of Christian theology, ethnography aligns with the internal logics of Christian theology’s normative ambitions. It is also worth

¹⁶⁵ Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, eds., *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, 45.

¹⁶⁶ Mary McClintock Fulkerson, “Ethnography in Theology: A Work in Process,” in *Lived Theology: New Perspectives on Method, Style, and Pedagogy*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 118.

noting that the line between description and normative prescription is often blurry. Ethnographic description is often suggestive of specific values, even if only implicitly. Exegetical theology provides numerous examples of this phenomenon as descriptive passages in scripture often function normatively within the Christian tradition.¹⁶⁷ These issues are important for the work of theological ethnography because they reveal two key insights. First, the relationship between description and prescription in theology has never been a relationship of mutual exclusivity. Second, in addition to serving as an investigative tool for theologians, ethnography can also function *as* theology.¹⁶⁸ This dissertation suggests that theological ethnography embraces the fluid relationship between the descriptive and the normative as an opportunity for a uniquely authentic mode of inquiry. This authenticity stems from the space ethnographic writing gives to the subjects of study as they tell their own stories. By bringing these authentic descriptions into conversation with critical and more explicitly normative theological analysis, without *substituting* the descriptive for the (explicitly) normative or vice versa, this project seeks to reflect lived theology's disciplinary sensibilities.

So, what is at stake in theology's willingness to engage contemporary practicing communities more directly and consistently? First, engaging the lives of those who not only do theology but *live* theology, creates opportunities to understand theology anew while rendering more accurate depictions of how theology manifests in the real world. Second, it provides an even greater impetus for theology to engage the voices of the marginalized. As the gravitational center of Christianity continues to shift toward the Global South, theology must engage such contexts in order to maintain quotidian and global relevance. Third, examining practicing

¹⁶⁷ See Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Publishing, 2000).

¹⁶⁸ Cf. Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, eds., *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*.

communities will force theology to become more adept at the act of translation. This translation involves privileging the voices of practitioners in order to accurately convey their ways of life to a wider audience, but translation also involves rendering a theological product which the practitioners can actually engage. Too often the inaccessibility of theology is the norm rather than the exception. This tendency hinders theology from tangibly addressing social issues to which theology as a discipline is uniquely equipped to speak. As a result, both the theological guild and its would-be nonacademic readers miss an opportunity for mutual edification. This project aims to mitigate the ongoing conversational chasm between the academy and faith practitioners.

V. Prosperity Church

This project's first case study is Prosperity Church. Prosperity Church has existed for well over 100 years. Yet it was not until the 1990s that this church would begin embracing and reflecting the broader Prosperity Gospel tradition. That transition begins with the arrival of its current leader, Pastor Fulton Jones. By the 1990s Prosperity Church had become a member of a mainline black denomination, and Jones received an appointment as their pastor in the mid-1990s. Under the leadership of Jones, Prosperity Church would initially shift their membership from their mainline denomination to a different evangelical group. Later they would shift their membership a final time to become nondenominational and deepen their association with other churches that reflected the Prosperity Gospel. Key catalysts in these shifts were the influence of Jones' mentors, two pastors steeped in the Prosperity Gospel tradition. In my interview with Jones, he remarked that he considered the more famous of these two pastors his primary "spiritual father." As his ministry progressed, Jones would continue building relationships with those within the Prosperity Gospel movement, he increasingly invited Prosperity preachers to

speak during Prosperity Church services and conferences, and his own preaching increasingly reflected the Prosperity Gospel tradition. Over time Prosperity Church became more firmly implanted within the Prosperity Gospel movement.

Although Prosperity Church had less than 30 members when Jones became pastor, within a few years it had grown to well over a thousand. This growth led to multiple location changes, as Jones often rented space at local schools to offer multiple services. By the early 2000s, Prosperity Church achieved greater stability by successfully raising enough money to purchase over 50 acres in their city. After an extensive building campaign, they would begin worshipping in a million dollar, 60 thousand square foot facility. Soon their membership would balloon to over 5,000 people.¹⁶⁹

The theology and practices of Prosperity Church reflect a blend of evangelical, Pentecostal, and Prosperity Gospel convictions. Beliefs in the infallibility of scripture, the doctrine of the Trinity, Christ's sacrificial death, and salvation through personal faith reflect its evangelical sensibilities. In addition, an emphasis on spirit baptism with the evidence of speaking in tongues and the significance of spiritual warfare clearly reflects classical Pentecostal influence. Alongside these traditions, the Prosperity Gospel is perhaps the most clearly apparent aspect of Prosperity Church culture, directly shaping the content of most sermons, overall liturgy, and the public image of the church.

The Prosperity Gospel also shapes the concrete practices of Prosperity Church's core ministries. In particular, there is a series of courses focused on financial empowerment. This curriculum offers resume assistance and job market guidance for attendees. Prosperity Church

¹⁶⁹ Frank Green, "Chesterfield couple plead guilty in Ponzi scheme" in *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, last modified June 11, 2009. http://www.richmond.com/news/chesterfield-couple-plead-guilty-in-ponzi-scheme/article_578cc68d-299b-5406-b7f0-a572cbffb8ee.html

also hosts other programs that are not directly related to financial prosperity. These programs include a substance abuse ministry, a mentoring program for middle and high school boys, and various support groups for girls and women. Prosperity Church is also active in the community, especially in terms of providing volunteers for service work. This work has even garnered state-wide governmental recognition because of the large amount of active Prosperity Church community volunteers.

Prosperity Church is an important site for this ethnography for several key reasons. First, it is immersed in Prosperity Gospel culture liturgically, aesthetically, and structurally. From the pastor's luxury vehicles to sermonic assurances of financial excess for church members, financial wealth is the dominant theme of this church. Second, Prosperity Church provides an example of how the Prosperity Gospel functions in an almost completely African American context. Third, alongside Shalom Ministries, my second case study, Prosperity Church helps to illustrate the spectrum of Prosperity Gospel churches. These features position Prosperity Church to reveal the theological and social contours of the Prosperity Gospel movement.

VI. Shalom Ministries

The second site for my ethnographic work is Shalom Ministries. Shalom Ministries is also in a large southern city and was founded by Pastor Absalom Smith. He launched Shalom Ministries in the 1980s after graduating from Rhema Bible Training College. Through his ministerial training at Rhema College, Smith was steeped in the Word of Faith tradition and would give this expression of Christianity an even greater footprint in his city. Over the next three decades, Shalom Ministries would grow from a small group of attendees to over 5 thousand weekly attendees.

Shalom Ministries had humble beginnings as a group of less than twenty people met in an old warehouse. This small community began to experience consistent growth and soon they gained the financial stability to bring Pastor Smith onto full-time staff. Echoing their Word of Faith forbears, Shalom Ministries' early popularity was buttressed by Smith's savvy use of media. In its first few years Shalom Ministries launched a bookstore as well as a television ministry. As Shalom Ministries' publicity grew, they changed locations multiple times to accommodate this new growth. This numerical increase was accompanied by expanding ministries, including a nursery, Food Pantry, and satellite ministry. By the 1990s they had moved to what would be their permanent location, although renovations and new construction would not end until over a decade later. By the mid-2000s they would have a thriving television ministry that would reach viewers around the nation.

Although nondenominational, many of Shalom Ministries' central tenets align well with most evangelical churches. From the doctrine of the Trinity, to salvation by faith, to the authority of scripture, Shalom Ministries shares the sensibilities of most conservative Protestant churches. In addition, beliefs such as Spirit Baptism situate Shalom Ministries more firmly within the Pentecostal tradition, while an emphasis on divine healing and prosperity reflect its Prosperity Gospel influences.

The various ministry structures at Shalom Ministries help to reveal its values as a church. Shalom Ministries holds worship services several times a week, including multiple Sunday services and a Wednesday evening service. Shalom Ministries is also active beyond the structures of weekly worship services, with several other ministries that focus more on social issues. These programs include support groups for those experiencing struggles ranging from chemical dependency to relational codependency. They also offer an additional program for

school tutoring and mentoring. There is also an emphasis on nursery home visitation and providing resources for individuals returning from incarceration. Beyond local initiatives, there is an annual church mission trip overseas with a focus on evangelism. Reflecting their Word of Faith roots, Shalom Ministries also emphasizes education. It launched a private school for children, followed by a ministry training institute for adults. In addition, a 10-session membership course orients new attendees to the values and beliefs of the church, including classes on divine healing and financial prosperity.

Shalom Ministries is an important site for this study because it is firmly situated within the Prosperity Gospel tradition, but it also helpfully complicates a problematic assumption about the Prosperity Gospel. Popular caricatures of the Prosperity Gospel suggest that all Prosperity churches allow an emphasis on money to dominate their rhetoric and practices. In contrast, Shalom Ministries resists this simplistic reduction. This ministry takes frequent efforts to affirm the importance of financial prosperity, but situates that concern within a much more holistic conception of Christian flourishing. Its belief statement foreshadows the tone of its membership class on prosperity as well as its liturgical rhetoric, by describing prosperity as applicable to all areas of life, including mental, spiritual, physical, financial, and social health. Shalom Ministries also provides a helpful contrast with Prosperity Church because it has a multiethnic congregation with a white pastor, and because it places a greater emphasis on physical health, the second major focus of Prosperity Gospel theology. In addition, a comparison between these churches reveals how the Prosperity Gospel has the theological diversity and capacity for internal critique.

VII. Ethnographic Positioning

As I began field research it was important for me to reckon with my own positioning as an observer. As a thirty-year-old black male, a pastor, and an academic researcher, each of these

identities played a role in my ability to gain access to the lives and insights of parishioners. This impact inevitably created obstacles as well as advantages to my research as I sought to cultivate trust and rapport with church members. On the one hand, I noticed that my racial identity helped me to connect with racial minorities, whereas my pastoral role helped me to gain rapport with parishioners and especially with laity. I also sought to mitigate any positional obstacles to my research by assuming a specific posture. For example, in my conversations with church leaders and laity I presented myself less as an academic investigator and more as a pastoral inquirer. I was open about my academic positioning, but in conversations I also emphasized the pastoral impetus for my project and the usefulness of this ethnography for my own clerical duties. This posture was generally disarming for those with whom I engaged.

Assuming an inquiring and open posture was also useful for how I engaged in inductive research. I experienced how, as an ethnographer “learns through interactions with individuals in the setting to look at activities, events, and issues in new ways, she might adjust her prior views and reorient herself vis-à-vis others.”¹⁷⁰ For example, in my study of Prosperity Church and Shalom Ministries, I learned to appreciate the formative roles of power dynamics and liturgical rituals as much as the power of pastoral rhetoric, whereas I had initially assumed rhetoric played the biggest role in how adherents experienced and responded to Prosperity theology. Investigative humility, openness, and assuming a learning posture, fostered greater access to parishioners but also opened new avenues for inquiry.

In my initial contact with these two churches my goal was to develop rapport with those within these communities. There are several ways that I sought to cultivate rapport.¹⁷¹ First, I

¹⁷⁰ Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 91.

¹⁷¹ Here I am drawing from part I of John and Lyn Lofland, *Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis*, (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1995).

leaned on my positioning as a pastor. In these evangelical settings the pastoral office helped to garner trust among those with whom I interacted. Second, I relied on connections I made in these churches. For example, since a Prosperity Church elder played a role in organizing most of my interviewees, those interviewees already knew that the church was supportive of my project. At Shalom Ministries I also was able to rely on a former member I knew from another context to connect me with an assistant pastor and two other ministry leaders, who later helped me to meet additional members. These types of referrals aided in cultivating rapport. Third, I described my project in ways that were disarming. On more than one occasion, interviewees asked me what my “argument” or “thesis” was, and I talked primarily about the inductive nature of ethnography, including how my specific argument would stem from my findings. I also told them that I was studying how adherents understood and articulated their experiences in churches that addressed concrete needs such as health and financial success. These answers were typically disarming because they were honest, because participants were comfortable with sharing about their personal experiences, and because participants were quite proud of their church and its beliefs. Fourth, I was able to gain rapport by ensuring confidentiality through consent forms and a verbal commitment to documentational anonymity for interviewees. These factors better positioned me to access useful information from congregants.

VIII. Participation Observation

After deciding which two churches to study, I chose to primarily attend Wednesday evening services at Prosperity Church and Sunday evening services at Shalom Ministries. I chose these two services for several reasons. First, by attending services that had a few hundred attendees instead of thousands of attendees, I sought to have more consistent interactions with the same attendees. I wanted to try ensuring that when I reached out to members for interviews

that this would not be my first point of contact with them. Second, members who are less invested in the church are often more likely to attend Sunday morning worship, whereas more committed members often attend additional services. By focusing on services that were not at peak times, I sought to increase contact with members who had longer and deeper histories with the church. Third, these two services did not have significant liturgical differences from Sunday morning services.

I attended both Prosperity Church and Shalom Ministries over the course of 12 months, beginning in September 2015. I attended 12 Shalom Ministries services, including two membership classes, and eight formal services at Prosperity Church. In addition, I conducted content analyses of 17 Shalom Ministries sermons and 16 Prosperity Church sermons which spanned 3 years (2012–2015). Each of these sermons was archived on their respective websites. Lastly, I interviewed 19 Prosperity Church members and two former Prosperity Church members. During the process of securing Institutional Review Board approval, Shalom Ministries' pastor declined to allow interviews with his parishioners.

By intentionally drawing from interviews, content analyses, and participant observation, this project has sought a multi-modal approach with multiple streams of data collection. The rationale behind a multi-modal approach is that each strategy presents merits and weaknesses. Content analyses of sermons were helpful because they allowed me to track how churches engaged specific themes over a sustained period of time. The sermons I analyzed were from 2012 to 2015, and I chose sermons that focused specifically on either health or wealth. Shalom Ministries' website has an audio archive of sermons, whereas Prosperity Church has a video archive of services. One limitation of these data sources is that neither of them allowed me to see how parishioners responded during the service beyond audio, since the focus was generally

on the preacher. Participant observation helped to complement this data source by enabling me to physically experience and observe attendee participation and ritual practices during more recent services. In addition, I was able to ask participants questions during the service about practices in which they were actively participating. Interviews were also helpful as ways for me to more directly inquire about specific topics of interest, although they lacked the ability to convey aesthetic and material components of ritual practices. Together, in-depth interviews, content analyses of sermons, and participant observation provided a fruitful multi-modal portrait of social contexts and dynamics at these two churches.

Participant observation enabled me to enter church social settings and to observe the practices and interactions of participants with minimal observer intrusion. There are two factors worth mentioning that shaped this process. First, it is important to recognize that an ethnographer is rarely a true “fly on the wall” observer. A key factor in participant observation is reflexivity, “the condition whereby any social research inevitably helps to constitute the phenomenon under investigation.”¹⁷² In other words, my role as observer was more active than innocuous, even if unintentional or subconscious. This dynamic was more evident in contexts such as in-person interviews or smaller membership classes and less evident in worship services that typically involved a few hundred people. The latter context allowed more observational anonymity, but reflexivity was always an important element of the social context. Nonetheless, the impact of reflexivity should not be overstated. While the ethnographer’s presence is important, not all presence is consequential enough to compromise one’s findings. To overstate the ethnographer’s presence can also fail to recognize the agency of other participants by assuming that the observer has more power over them than is true. Furthermore, instances in

¹⁷² Paul Atkinson, *For Ethnography*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2015), 27.

which the observer clearly impacts social dynamics provide opportunities to probe these impacts rather than fearing them.

A second factor in participant observation is the limitation of seeing a social setting through the eyes of adherents. The field of phenomenology has affirmed the difficulty of this endeavor, so it is important to acknowledge that an observer never fully experiences reality through another person's lens.¹⁷³ On the other hand, there is still insight that can be gleaned from these interactions. Particularly as I noticed how adherents responded to each other, I was often able to draw reasonable conclusions about their beliefs and practices. Furthermore, the goal in participant observation is not merely to intuit what someone else is experiencing, but to "occupy a shared social world."¹⁷⁴ This shared social world illumines how participants articulate and embody the relationship between their beliefs and practices, as well as the causal links between liturgical events. Being attentive to how adherents responded to specific events, which liturgical features were most prominent or repeated, and the language of leaders and laity, helped to illumine what these two communities deemed important and the theological and social rationales for that importance.

In my observation I sought to record any feature, event, or interaction that seemed interesting or significant. From the aesthetics of the space, to the types of cars in the parking lots, to liturgical elements and rhetoric, I took note of both discursive and non-discursive features. This required suspending my initial preconceptions of what I expected to see or conclude. In order to remember and record as many details as possible, during services I typically took notes about what was happening, and immediately after services I would add in additional details that included my initial interpretations of what occurred. I recorded fieldnotes

¹⁷³ See Alfred Schütz, *Phenomenology of the Social World*, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1967).

¹⁷⁴ Paul Atkinson, *For Ethnography*, 39.

over the course of 12 months, beginning in September of 2015, and I compiled about 40 pages of written notes from the 20 services that I attended. As I began reviewing this data, soon I recognized thematic trends from the services as well as how participants interacted with the space, liturgy, and one another. These dynamics provided a plethora of ethnographic data.

Although reflexivity was mitigated (although not removed) by the size of these church services, it inevitably affected the recording of fieldnotes. More specifically, “Descriptive fieldnotes, in this sense, are products of active processes of interpretation and sense-making that frame or structure not only what is written but also how it is written.”¹⁷⁵ In note-taking it is impossible to completely separate description from interpretation, particularly as the observer’s descriptions are often value-laden. At the same time, in this project I have sought to mitigate the overbearance of interpretation by offering multiple ways of understanding observed events as well as incorporating participant quotes that allow participants to speak in their own voice. Further, I have attended to the concrete practices of adherents rather than attempting to impose my conception of their primary concerns onto my analysis. In this way I have sought to embody an approach that attends “to *what those in the setting experience and react to as “significant” or “important”*”¹⁷⁶ instead of asserting my own agenda. For example, when I noticed that Prosperity Church members placed cash on the stage at moments during the sermon that resonated with them, these specific actions revealed which sermon claims were rhetorically potent and impactful. Yet I also asked an attendee seated beside me to describe what was happening. The descriptive then provides clues to how events should be interpreted. Another way this process occurs is through participant repetition. From repeated claims to repeated practices, repetition

¹⁷⁵ Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, 9.

¹⁷⁶ Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, 25.

helps to indicate the communal importance of specific events as well as how adherents feel about those events.

This project assumes that the relationship between description and interpretation is not confrontational but dialogical. By incorporating descriptively rich narrative alongside analysis, my account seeks to show as much as tell. My work presupposes that lived theology, as a means of bringing the socially descriptive into conversation with the theologically interpretative can be illuminative in ways that are perhaps more constructive than either of these two vantages in isolation.

IX. In-Depth Interviews

Interviews provided another valuable source of data for my research. While the pastor of Shalom Ministries was unwilling to grant interviews through UVA's Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols, I supplemented my interaction with Shalom Ministries parishioners by attending smaller membership classes and engaging attendees informally. This situation limited my ability to ask direct questions to interviewees in a controlled environment but did not prevent me from gleaning data from more informal interactions. This situation also made a multi-modal approach to data collection that included other tools more imperative, such as content analyses of sermons and participant observation.

At Prosperity Church I conducted in-person interviews with 18 Prosperity Church parishioners, one phone interview with Prosperity Church's pastor, and two in-person interviews with former Prosperity Church members. Prosperity Church's pastor agreed to IRB protocols; however, he also wanted to have control over the interview process. He instructed one of his elders to set up interviews, which would all be held at Prosperity Church, and he also insisted

that the interviews be only around 20 minutes long, that participants have the interview questions ahead of time, and that the church video record the interviews.

I sought to abide by these parameters, although some conversations were briefly extended on occasions in which the following interviewee arrived late. The elder who organized most of these interviews typically left around 15 minutes between scheduled interviews. In terms of questions, I used a prewritten list of questions that began as general inquiries about the interviewee's religious experiences before shifting to more pointed questions about specific dominant church themes. Those themes, which I derived from what I noticed during church services, included topics such as the believer's spiritual authority, financial gain, and physical healing. In addition, I aimed for an inductive approach through follow-up questions and exploring other conversational trajectories as they seemed appropriate. This approach helped to foster more spontaneous responses from participants. Further, the familiarity of the space as well as the leadership's endorsement of the interviews likely helped to foster trust and greater honesty among interview participants. In addition, I gave the elder criteria for who to select for the interviews, including membership longevity, and both age and gender diversity, which gave me access to members who I knew understood the church history and community well. Most of my interviews were with individuals, there were a few couples, and one family of five that included two teenagers. Out of the 18 in-person interviewees, nine were male and nine were female. Aside from the three youth, the average age was in the mid-thirties, although a couple interviewees were in their early fifties.

My interview questions sought to balance drawing out perspectives on specific themes and practices as well as personal stories. In this way, I often employed a fixed-question-open-response approach. Yet I also deviated from these questions to follow conversational trajectories

that arose from participant responses. For example, when I asked a woman about how she understood prosperity, I noticed that she not only mentioned an instance in which her pastor gave 30 thousand dollars away to congregants, but the language she used was to describe him as “dad.” This led to more spontaneous questions and conversation that illumined how members conceptualize their relationship to the pastor and revealed unanticipated power dynamics. This inductive approach to interviews also helped me to refine and adjust my questions in subsequent interviews.

Reflexivity remains a significant factor for in-person interviews, particularly since the interviewer has an inevitable level of control over the conversation. In my research I sought to mitigate this unilateral power by pursuing an inductive approach. This inductive approach involved more open-ended questions, it involved questions that could lead to personal stories, and I also gave space for interviewees to either share something of their own choosing beyond the scope of my questions or to ask me questions as well. As I began compiling interview transcripts I began recognizing trends, not only in terms of what participants shared about topics such as health and wealth, but even the language they used to express their views. Particularly as I began hearing interviewees echo one another, this was a sign that I was approaching theoretical saturation, the point at which less and less new data was arising from my research. I became convinced that I had interviewed enough participants to make a broader assessment of my findings.

X. Content Analysis

In addition to participant observation and in-depth interviews, content analyses of sermons provided a useful way to capture the beliefs of these two church communities. According to Klaus Krippendorff, contemporary content analysis has three distinguishing

characteristics: It is an empirically grounded method, exploratory in process, and predictive or inferential in intent.¹⁷⁷ More specifically, “Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use.”¹⁷⁸ In this project I have utilized content analyses of sermons in order to track homiletical engagement with the topics of health and wealth over a longer period of time.

Both Shalom Ministries and Prosperity Church have online archives of sermons spanning several years. As I began my research in 2015, I decided to focus on sermons from 2012 to 2015 in order to ensure a critical mass of relevant sermons and to track any rhetorical shifts over time. I specifically chose sermons that explicitly engaged either health or wealth. In addition, I tracked the percentage of sermons in each church that explicitly engaged these topics to determine how representative this topic was of sermons in these churches in general. Lastly, I was able to examine the role of scripture quantitatively, including which texts occurred most frequently and how the two churches compared to one another in terms of exegetical practice. The benefits of content analysis are that it not only allows the researcher to access the past and track historical trends, but it is also methodologically repeatable.

XI. Open and Focused Coding

As I organized my data I primarily relied on an open-coding method, identifying thematic and linguistic trends in what people said as well as practices and rituals that were liturgically significant. Through open coding I sought to avoid predetermining the thematic categories for engaging my data and instead relied primarily on terms and categories that arose from practitioners. In this way, “qualitative coding does not start from preestablished or fixed analytic

¹⁷⁷ See Introduction and Chapter One of Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2004).

¹⁷⁸ Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis*, 18.

categories but, rather, proceeds inductively by creating analytic categories that reflect the significance of events and experiences to those in the setting.”¹⁷⁹ While I already knew themes such as financial prosperity and healing would be frequent, open coding helped me to identify other themes such as spiritual authority or the roles of personal testimony, which proved comparably significant. My approach also employed more “focused coding” insofar as the sermons I chose were sermons that were explicitly about either health or wealth. In terms of sermons specifically, my “open coding” applied more to *how* pastors addressed these topics. An even more open form of coding would involve not discriminating thematically in my sermon selection, but such an approach would be beyond the scope and ambitions of this project.

To organize my data I transcribed interviews, sermons, and participation observation notes, and imported this data into NVIVO 11, a qualitative research software program. NVIVO enabled me to organize these transcriptions and to code data according to over 30 themes or “nodes.” These nodes then revealed which themes were most frequently engaged by participants, which helped to indicate which aspects of health and wealth were most rhetorically and liturgically significant.

XII. Lived Theology and Theological Ethnography

This dissertation draws from ethnographic methods to offer a lived theology of two Prosperity Gospel communities. My analysis of Shalom Ministries and Prosperity Church provides a thick description of these communities alongside a focused theological analysis. Yet this project also assumes that ethnography is a means to analytic generalizability. Thus, an analytic and comparative account of these communities helps to illumine the theological contours and practices of the broader Prosperity Gospel movement. In this way, “ethnographic

¹⁷⁹ Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, 175.

fieldwork does not merely generate descriptions of local settings, but also aims to the development of generic concepts that transcend the local and that can be applied across a range of social situations.”¹⁸⁰ This project assumes that generalizability is possible. Although generalizable conclusions are never without qualification as no two communities are identical, the similarities between Shalom Ministries and Prosperity Church collectively provide reliable insights into the broader Prosperity Gospel movement, while their differences illumine this movement’s internal diversity.

¹⁸⁰ Paul Atkinson, *For Ethnography*, 37.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CONTENT OF PROSPERITY

This chapter offers an account of how Prosperity Church and Shalom Ministries understand and engage the topics of financial prosperity and divine healing. While chapter two locates these two churches historically and liturgically within the broader Prosperity Gospel tradition, this chapter draws from ethnographic research to illumine their particular theologies of prosperity. This ethnographic data involves content analyses of 33 sermons, in-depth interviews with 21 participants, and participant observation notes from 20 church services. While the first two sections of this chapter examine and compare how these two communities understand the role of financial prosperity in the Christian life, the next two sections explore and compare their respective conceptions of divine healing. Finally, this chapter ends with an analysis of how these Prosperity Gospel communities promote an individualistic theological anthropology that is problematic for those who experience either ongoing poverty or lack physical health.

I. Financial Prosperity at Prosperity Church

“Entering a Debt-Free Area!” As attendees turn into the driveway of Prosperity Church, the first message they receive is that they are entering a unique and special place; a place where financial freedom is available to those who are a part of this community. What is seen communicates just as much as what is later said. As attendees park their cars, they enter Prosperity Church’s multimillion-dollar facility only after passing a beautifully landscaped area with a large multi-stream fountain. At the center of this fountain is a large rotating globe with the inscription acknowledging the power of the Bible. Before stepping foot into the sanctuary, congregants are given the impression that this ministry is concerned about financial freedom, the power of scripture, and an international scope.

Once inside the sanctuary, the aesthetics echo each of these values. An international sensibility becomes clear as the flags of a dozen nations are prominently displayed across the back of the stage. Additional features echo Prosperity Church's concerns for the nations and scripture as global and scriptural imagery mirrors the outside landscaping. The concern for financial success is also visible as banners with messages like "No Longer Debt Free!" line the upper balcony. In addition to these emphases, the aesthetics introduce healing as an important additional theme, with accompanying Hebrew Bible verses about God's ability to bring physical healing. This church communicates its intention to provide a space of healing for attendees.

At first glance, the liturgy of Prosperity Church places it neatly within the conventions of a typical black non-denominational evangelical church. Services take place on Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights, with a worship set of five songs, followed by a lengthy sermon, an altar call, a financial offering, and announcements. Yet the content of each of these practices is most significantly marked by an emphasis on financial prosperity. This focus further distinguishes Prosperity Church from other types of churches. Prosperity Church boasts several thousand members, but it would be shortsighted to conclude that hearing the promise of money from the pulpit works in isolation to garner such a large following. In reality, liturgical practices and accompanying aesthetics are equally important. These methods of formation begin well before attendees enter the doors of the church. Pastor Jones puts it this way in a sermon:

Your surroundings and your environment can affect what comes out of you. You got to be around the right stuff. That's why on purpose we put all this money into the grounds and with all that we know we want the whole building to be excellent; because it's affecting you. How can you "think broke" when you walk up in this building?

Jones is convinced that the visual appeal of Prosperity Church's campus is not just about presenting a favorable depiction of their ministry; it is about shaping specific personal and theological sensibilities regarding financial success. To "think broke" would involve either doubting that personal financial blessing is possible or settling for unnecessarily low expectations for what that gain should be. At Prosperity Church, the dominant message is that members should expect the best.

Learning to expect the best stems from surrounding one's self with indicators of financial prosperity, but also embodying that aesthetic personally. Pastor Jones often models this image by boasting of his luxury vehicles and expensive rolex watch. This reflects a frequent trend among Prosperity preachers of emphasizing financial success through personal attire and other material possessions. This gesture is a key way that believers not only verbalize their faith, but physically act in light of their expectations. As prominent prosperity preacher, Creflo Dollar, states:

This is a faith move that says, I'm doing all the things I know to do to become prosperous, so now I'll act as if it has already happened. This step requires you to change the way you talk and even the way you dress. You can't walk around wearing that same old polyester dress and shopping at Thrift Town.¹⁸¹

Dollar does not encourage financial irresponsibility, but he takes seriously the importance of embodying spiritual realities. In this way, manifesting the financial promises of scripture requires that believers attempt to live as though their financial prosperity is a reality.¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ Creflo A. Dollar Jr., *Total Life Prosperity* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999) 90.

¹⁸² Here prosperity preachers draw from E. W. Kenyon's aforementioned distinction between sense knowledge which is determined by what an individual sees and revelation knowledge that is based on personal faith in scriptural promises. They teach that the latter should determine an individual's actions. See E.W. Kenyon, *The Two Kinds of Knowledge* (Lynnwood, Washington: Kenyon's Gospel Publishing Society, 2004) 18.

This emphasis is also shaped by how Prosperity Gospel adherents read scripture. Prosperity Church interviewees referenced biblical examples such as how Solomon's temple was adorned in the Hebrew Bible,¹⁸³ the reference to heavenly streets of gold in the Book of Revelation,¹⁸⁴ and Jesus' claim that there are many mansions in heaven.¹⁸⁵ The logic is that if Christians are temples for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, it is appropriate for them to embrace an aesthetic of wealth. Furthermore, if visible wealth is an eschatological reality that manifests as mansions and streets paved with gold, adherents believe it is appropriate to approximate that reality presently.

In addition to personal and institutional aesthetics of wealth, liturgical practices are deeply formative. For example, immediately following the initial worship set, the worship team leaves the stage and a group of several parishioners begin to approach the stage. As Pastor Jones makes his way to the podium from a back room, these congregants begin to place cash all over the steps of the stage. This practice, known as a "seed offering," continues from this point until the end of the sermon. The assumption is that planting this financial "seed" will lead to a financial reward for the individual. As this practice continues throughout the sermon, the moments when individuals approach the stage often indicate specific sermonic statements that were rhetorically effective. Yet the impact of this practice is also *affective* as congregants are faced with the aesthetic of cash all over the stage for the duration of the service. This practice is culturally formative as it deepens a theological *and* psychological association between piety and money.

¹⁸³ This reference is found in 1 Kings 6.

¹⁸⁴ This reference is found in Revelation 21:21.

¹⁸⁵ This reference is found in John 14:2.

Once the sermon and altar call have concluded, an additional general offering occurs. Just as aesthetics takes on a prominent role in the seed offering, this general offering involves more than simply placing an envelope in an offering basket. First, Pastor Jones instructs all attendees to stand. Then he directs them to raise their offerings in the air and to hold them there. This gesture exposes those who either do not have or choose not to give a financial offering. There is some degree of anonymity concerning their donation amount as attendees have the option of placing their money inside a white envelope, however, it is clear if you do not have an offering to give. With these offerings physically raised, Jones leads the congregation in an antiphonal corporate confession, such as this:

I'm a tither. I'm a seed-sower. I'm sowing. I'm sowing right now. In good ground. And expecting my harvest. I'm expecting my harvest. I am expecting my harvest. I'm doing my part. And God will do his part. Thank you Lord. For Increase. Debt cancellation. And financial favor. I receive it all. Right now. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Although the specific content of this “positive confession” differs slightly each week, this creedal affirmation reiterates that those who “sow seeds” will reap financial rewards.

While the offering is accompanied by a corporate confession, Pastor Jones frequently affirms personal confessions on behalf of the congregation during sermons as well. On one occasion he declared:

I command money to come from the north, the south, the east, and the west. Hallelujah, you're blessed. Hallelujah, glory to God. Money cometh to you now. I curse lack. I curse lack. I curse lack! Abundance belongs to the child of God.

Jones commands money to come into the lives and pockets of parishioners, while identifying financial lack as a curse that positive confession alleviates. He takes this phrase, “money

cometh,” from the title of a book nationally known prosperity preacher Leroy Thompson.¹⁸⁶

Additionally, this impending financial abundance is particularly appropriate for those who are children of God.

In addition to the liturgical practice of positive confessions, music plays a significant role in the congregant’s experience. Prosperity Church is similar to many other African American churches which have expressive and charismatic worship. At Prosperity Church, prosperity is a dominant theme as words such as “favor,” “blessing,” and “overflow” seem lyrically ubiquitous. As one song at Prosperity Church put it, “waves of favor, vaults of favor, the winds are blowing our way.” How these lyrics are presented is just as important as what they state. Repetition is a key feature of Prosperity Church songs, inundating listeners with a message of financial gain. More specifically, the repetition of specific words or phrases towards the end of a song, musically known as a “vamp” effectively marries theology with emotive power as participants become more excited with each refrain. The prosperity message becomes not simply an intellectual issue but an emotional experience.

The Prosperity Gospel promotes a particular conception of God, arguing that God fundamentally desires the financial success and physical health of Christian believers. As a frequently cited biblical proof-text from John’s Third Epistle states: “Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth.”¹⁸⁷ While New Testament scholar Gordon Fee notes that “This combination of wishing for “things to go well” and for the recipient’s “good health” was the *standard* form of greeting in a personal letter in antiquity,”¹⁸⁸ for Prosperity Gospel communities, this statement also reflects God’s will for all

¹⁸⁶ See Leroy Thompson, *Money Cometh! to the Body of Christ* (1999).

¹⁸⁷ This verse is 3 John 2, and is in the King James Version, the predominant bible version used by black Prosperity Gospel communities.

¹⁸⁸ Gordon D. Fee, *The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels*, 10.

Christians. More specifically, they view *financial* prosperity as a key component of this verse's message and God's intent for the church. This assumption about financial prosperity is not just about the type of blessings God intends, but the extent of those blessings. As Pastor Jones states, "Abundance! That's how God thinks: abundance. He doesn't think 'not enough.' He doesn't think 'just enough.' Abundance! Abundance! You know what abundance means? Overflow...too much!" The logic is that if God is truly sovereign and deeply cares for God's people, God certainly wants them to have far more than they need to survive; the blessed life is a life of excess in general and financial excess in particular. A common saying in Prosperity Gospel circles is that we serve the God of "El Shaddai," the Hebrew word for "God Almighty," not "El Get By." Although critics often ascribe this conception of God to selfish materialism or consumerism, adherents believe it reflects divine fatherly love. As Pastor Jones states, "God don't want us struggling and wondering and barely making it through." In other words, God wants the best for God's people.

The Prosperity Gospel conception of God greatly shapes the Christology of its adherents. Adherents often claim that Jesus modeled the financially prosperous life. As one interviewee stated, "Some people don't realize it but you know Jesus wasn't broke. You know he had a treasurer.¹⁸⁹ You don't need a treasurer if you're broke." On multiple occasions, Prosperity Church members mentioned Jesus having a treasurer and suggested that this was an important indicator of his wealth. On the one hand, these types of claims about Jesus' socioeconomic status have a long history within the Prosperity Gospel movement. Years ago prosperity preacher Kenneth Hagin commented on first century Palestine, stating that "There weren't any Cadillacs then. But Jesus did ride a donkey. It was the "Cadillac" of that day – the best means

¹⁸⁹ This claim about a treasurer is a reference to John 13:29: "Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the festival, or to give something to the poor" (NIV).

of transportation they had.”¹⁹⁰ These types of associations between Jesus and financial resources shed particular light on the nature of discipleship since discipleship denotes the process of becoming more like Jesus. Adherents believe that God not only desires the financially abundant life for believers, but that Jesus modeled this life.

According to the Prosperity Gospel, if God intends for Christian believers to experience the financially “abundant life”¹⁹¹ Christ’s redemptive work must play a central role in addressing this concern. They understand the atonement as not only about addressing internal sin, but the curse of poverty. The typically cited passage for this claim is Galatians 3:13-14, which states:

Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree: That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith (KJV).¹⁹²

The belief that poverty is a curse is based on Deuteronomy 28, where the curses God indicates will result from Israel’s disobedience include economic hardship.¹⁹³ Poverty then becomes a spiritual problem for which Christ’s atonement is a spiritual answer. Prosperity Gospel preachers exegetically conclude that Christ’s sacrificial death renders poverty powerless in the life of believers and positions them to receive the blessing of Abraham. Just as Abraham had an abundance of possessions, believers can now expect to experience this type of material abundance.

¹⁹⁰ Kenneth E. Hagin, *Redeemed* (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Faith Library Publishing, 1978), 40.

¹⁹¹ This language of an abundant life is common among Prosperity Gospel adherents and is taken from Jesus’ words in John 10:10 that “The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly” (KJV).

¹⁹² As L. Ann Jervis notes in her commentary on Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians, “Paul speaks of the blessing given to Abraham in the first instance, which accords with the scriptural passages. Yet he immediately moves to his own interpretation of that blessing – the promise of the spirit.” See L. Ann Jervis. *Galatians* (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 92.

¹⁹³ See Deuteronomy 28:16-19.

Christ's work affords believers a new identity through their conversion. During my research, a frequently referenced verse regarding this identity was Ephesians 2:6, which claims that believers are seated with Christ in heavenly places. For Prosperity Gospel adherents, this identification endues them with spiritual authority. As one Prosperity Church interviewee stated,

We have power, man. See, the word says that we're seated... We're seated with Jesus, man, in Heavenly places. In Heavenly places were seated with him. Jesus opened the door for us to partake of it, and what I'm learning is that it's already done. You know what I mean? God already did it. And now it's up to us to receive and to walk in what he's done.

This claim is important because it affirms the believer's close connection to Jesus, but also because it gestures toward a realized eschatology in which the believer's authority is not simply a future reality yet to become available. The Prosperity Gospel claims that an ontological identification with Christ empowers believers by *immediately* entitling them to a new set of spiritual rights and privileges that can manifest tangibly.

These spiritual rights stem from a particular conception of God and carry specific content. As one Prosperity Church member stated, "When you're starting to operate in authority, when you start operating in who you know you are, [and] who you know God has created you to be, you could begin to tap into the prosperity that is for us. I mean we're king's kids. I don't know any king's kid that is broke." One of the primary rights of the believer is to be free from the curse of poverty and to enjoy financial prosperity as a child of God, their king. This relationship between divine kingship and Christian prosperity was a recurring theme throughout my research. The language of being a "king's kid" was often used by parishioners and sermon

titles that emphasized the believer's royal positioning helped to communicate a sense of not only self-worth but material entitlement.

In addition to the language of royalty, another repeated theme was “the power of connection.” This theme has direct bearing on how Prosperity Church members understand their spiritual authority. Pastor Jones argues that the authority of a church member can be enhanced by their relationship with him and the church. In a sermon on this theme he stated, “When you are – those that are really are connected, tied into the ministry correctly – you have authority beyond what you can see, and if you pay close attention there will be times that my anointing will come upon you and you will know it ain't yours.” Here Pastor Jones is drawing from a particular understanding of spiritual anointing, which typically involves an endowment of power, gifting, or privileges. Just as a king is anointed in the Hebrew Bible for a particular position and role, Jones suggests that spiritual anointing provides believers with authority. In his sermons, Jones conveys a strong belief that his spiritual anointing and power is especially strong, but he also believes that this power can rub off on other believers under the right conditions. This association between spiritual authority and one's relationship with the pastor reveals how spiritual authority can be shared or transferred.

On the one hand, being anointed with spiritual authority can result from being connected to specific people who have spiritual power, but it also involves awakening spiritual power that may lay dormant within a Christian believer. In my interview with Pastor Jones he commented on this issue claiming that

the power connection cannot give you something you don't have. The power of connection can only awaken what's already there and I believe there's so many people in the Body of Christ that have so much potential and they have so much, they just - you

need somebody who knows how to mine diamonds, the gifts, the callings, the wonderful things that God has placed into the lives of his people.

In my interview with him, Jones said that he believes his pastoral role resembles the role of a coach. Since many believers fail to recognize their own spiritual authority, his job is to identify their potential and help them to cultivate it. The culture of Prosperity Church presents this dialectic of realizing one's inherent authority as a Christian, while also recognizing how authority stems from relational connections.

The spiritual authority that stems from being connected to an empowered or "anointed" pastor and church has specific content. Commenting on the attire that new members receive which are inscribed with the words "no more debt!" Jones states that

by wearing [this attire] when you become a member of Prosperity Church you inherit everything that's on the church. There is a debt-free anointing on the ministry and once you come in that debt-free anointing can come on you. Houses, cars, credit card bills, hospital bills, tax bills; I don't care what type of bill it is...It don't have no chance under this anointing.

Here Jones suggests that by being a part of the Prosperity Church community, believers have an opportunity to enjoy the tangible benefit of coming out of financial debt through a shared spiritual anointing. So not only is there a spiritual authority that derives from identification with Christ through conversion, but there is newfound authority through church membership. Jones and his members also assume that church membership becomes empowering because of the anointing on their church as a whole. In his words, there is a unique "money anointing on this church." Membership at Prosperity Church enables believers to personally enjoy financial blessings.

While becoming Christians as well as being connected to Prosperity Church and its pastor position believers to reap financial blessings, the believer still has agency in actualizing this potential. Using spiritual authority begins with exercising personal faith. Faith is understood to be a spiritual force that can change physical realities. Yet this faith must be accompanied by verbal affirmations, or “positive confession,” in order to be effective. A common proof-text for this concept in Prosperity Gospel communities is Romans 4:17, where the Apostle Paul states that God “callesth those things which be not as though they were” (KJV).¹⁹⁴ While this verse primarily refers to the creation narrative where God speaks the world into existence, Prosperity Gospel adherents understand this verse as indicative of the creative power that their words now possess. In light of this conviction, Pastor Jones encourages his congregation to “start speaking this stuff just like God spoke this stuff in the beginning.” Both words and faith are important because in Jones’ words, “you can’t be timid when you speak to something when you say it; you have to mean what you say.” This claim draws from a passage in the Gospel of Mark in which Jesus suggests that the combination of faith and speech can move mountains.¹⁹⁵

In addition to how faith and positive confession help to foster financial prosperity, monetary donations play essential roles in the believer’s potential for financial gain. In particular, tithes are expected as the bare minimum amount that parishioners will donate. The tithe refers to a tenth of one’s possessions in the Bible, and according to Pastor Jones, “What’s the tithe? It’s 10% of the gross [income]; not the net.” Assumptions about tithing among

¹⁹⁴ The King James Version is the primary version used at Prosperity Church as well as in a large percentage of Prosperity Gospel churches.

¹⁹⁵ Mark 11:23 “For verily I say unto you, That whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those things which he saith shall come to pass; he shall have whatsoever he saith” (KJV).

Prosperity Gospel communities are largely grounded in an interpretation of Malachi chapter three, in which the Israelites are commanded not to rob God by withholding their tithes and offerings. These tithes and offerings were goods intended to support the Levite priests who served in the temple. Drawing from biblical passages that discuss tithing, Prosperity Gospel preachers affirm that the command to tithe is both a command for Israel and for the contemporary church.¹⁹⁶

Pastor Jones claims that tithing is only the first step in financial donations. He states that “The tithe the Lord say is mine. In other words, it belongs to me. So when you give to God you really start your giving after the tithe. If I don’t give him the tithe, what am I doing? You’re taking something that God said ‘that’s mine.’” Offerings are distinct from tithes and they are not considered offerings until the full tithe has already been donated. In addition to general offerings, there are two special types of offerings: “first fruit” offerings¹⁹⁷ and seed offerings. First fruit offerings sometimes refer to a large financial offering in January, but more frequently they refer to when a believer makes a financial offering after they receive a paycheck but before they have paid any other bills. Jones argues that first fruit offerings also apply to non-salary income. He claims that “it’s something about when God gives you wages you didn’t earn: birthday money, bonuses, whatever – he wants the first fruits of all your increase. Somebody died in your family and leave you some money? Did you have it before? That’s increase; he wants the first fruit of all your increase.” This distinction between tithes and offerings is also important because the expectation of first fruit offerings applies to income tax returns even

¹⁹⁶ Another important proof-text is Matthew 23:23, in which Jesus seems to assume that tithing remains the expectation for God’s people. Those who disagree with this interpretation further distinguish between the expectations God has for Israel and the expectations of the church.

¹⁹⁷ The notion of firstfruit offerings draws from commands in the Hebrew Bible in Deuteronomy 26 as well as New Testament proof-texts such as Romans 11:16.

though the tithe is supposed to already have been applied to gross income. While Jones affirms that financial donations are helpful for funding ministry work, he primarily emphasizes the benefits it provides for the givers. In his words, “legally God can’t get involved with your finances until you give him the first[fruits].” The logic is that God deeply desires to bless God’s people with financial abundance, but if those people do not donate money, God’s hands are tied.

The second significant type of special offering is a seed offering.¹⁹⁸ Seed offerings primarily occur toward the beginning of services at Prosperity Church, although they continue intermittently throughout the sermon as well. Seed offerings involve parishioners placing cash on the steps of the stage. The assumption is that these financial “seeds” will lead to a harvest for congregants who give. Commenting on this practice, Jones explains to potential newcomers the rationale stating, “What are all them people doing? They are sowing. That’s how you get blessed...When you sow seed you receive a harvest.” While Jones is clear that harvests are not always exclusively financial, he affirms that these seed donations are one important way to ensure financial abundance. While any financial donation can be considered a “seed,” specific “seed offerings” play a unique liturgical role in the believer’s life. For Jones, this logic of seed-sowing not only provides direction but explains past good fortune. He proclaims to his congregants: “You are not where you used to be. Your seed has promoted you and taken you to another place...Our seed has changed our status.” Thus, this framework of seed-sowing is not just about ensuring a future reward, but provides a hermeneutical lens for interpreting how adherents arrived at their current level of success.

To his credit, Pastor Jones cautions his parishioners against viewing their relationship with God as merely a means toward a financial end. He challenges them, stating, “Do you really

¹⁹⁸ Common proof-texts for this concept are Luke 6:38 and Galatians 6:7-8.

love God or do you love what he can do for you? When you get to a point where you love him more than things, things won't be a problem." Jones does not want to resist the notion that material possessions are desirable, but intends to situate the believer's pursuit of such goods within a greater commitment to God. Prosperity Gospel preachers often find themselves within this tension of navigating the expectation for financial success alongside the temptation toward selfish ambition and unencumbered materialism. Those within the broader movement cover the spectrum in terms of how much they are concerned about this tension as well as how well they address it. Whether the rhetoric and practices of Prosperity Church effectively sustain the prioritization of piety over wealth remains a live question, but Jones is clear that parishioners should not idolize possessions in ways that compromise their faithfulness.

Although critics of the Prosperity Gospel might be tempted to reduce the content of its message to selfish materialism, this assessment is not adequate. Prosperity Church leadership and laity frequently affirm that personal gain is not the purpose of financial gain. As one parishioner put it, "How are you going to fund the gospel? How would we go overseas and preach the gospel? How would we go into community and do things locally, because we do a lot of things locally as well as internationally? So how will we be able to do that if we don't have prosperity to do it." For Prosperity Church members, personal prosperity and church mission are not mutually exclusive but rather require one another. Prosperity Church is very engaged in international missions and fully funds every member who travels overseas. Domestically, there are ministry teams that provide support for a variety of populations including the incarcerated, victims of domestic abuse, and those with histories of substance abuse. Prosperity Church has even gained state-wide recognition for its supply of community service volunteers. Prosperity Church members view their church as responsible for being engaged in the broader community.

As Pastor Jones states, “the God kind of prosperity is I want to help somebody else; worldly prosperity [is] get all you can.” While there is a low probability every attendee shares this perspective, the rhetoric of church leaders affirms serving the community as a priority.

At the same time, the particular ways this emphasis on serving the community plays out are not without criticism. For example, two former members of Prosperity Church expressed frustration that often service opportunities seemed more about publicity than altruism. Public events were often filled with volunteers, but also cameras and local news reporters. One parishioner who left the church also mentioned her frustration with the church’s efforts to help the poor within Prosperity Church. After acknowledging the contrast between the pastor’s luxury vehicles and the fact that some members did not have reliable transportation, she stated, “I’ve had other experiences where I’ve known people to go to the church to ask for help and didn’t get it” and how this affected some of her friends. These friends fell into financial hardship, and sought help from Prosperity Church. In response, she claimed that “the first thing the church did was pull their tithing record and said they hadn’t tithed long enough to be worthy of help. So [they] vowed never ever to step back into Prosperity Church again. I’ve known a couple [similar] cases.” For this parishioner, both the dominant emphasis on financial prosperity and the process for how the church appropriated funds undermined the trust she had in the ministry. She would soon begin attending a different church. These concerns notwithstanding, those within Prosperity Church are often presented with testimonies of times when the church has paid off debts or the pastor has given parishioners cars. These success stories dominate liturgical rhetoric and marginalize contrasting narratives.

II. Financial Prosperity at Shalom Ministries

While Prosperity Church presents a picture of the Prosperity Gospel as primarily concerned with connecting piety with financial gain, Shalom Ministries helps to reveal how the Prosperity Gospel is not a monolithic movement. Shalom Ministries and Prosperity Church both drink from the same well of the historical Word of Faith movement, but the rhetoric and practices of Shalom Ministries leave attendees with a slightly different impression of the relationship between faith and finances.

One of the first visible differences between Shalom Ministries and Prosperity Church is that Shalom Ministries aesthetics are much less overt. Shalom Ministries members similarly occupy a multimillion-dollar facility, but there are no water fountains with rotating globes outside the building, nor are there international flags or large balcony banners inside the sanctuary. While there are clear signs that the space is a church, its simpler and more modest décor presents the aesthetic of a typical conference center.

Liturgically, Shalom Ministries services are similarly structured to Prosperity Church. There is a worship set of four songs followed by a sermon and financial offering. During the offering there is an accompanying corporate confession as attendees are instructed to hold their donations high in the air. Sermons at Shalom Ministries are also often marked by the rhetoric of prosperity, employing language of financial harvest and blessings. Yet one notable difference between Shalom Ministries liturgy and Prosperity Church liturgy is that Shalom Ministries does not incorporate an official “seed offering” into each service. Although financial prosperity is a frequent theme, it does not dominate the liturgy to the same extent as Prosperity Church services.

Echoing Prosperity Church, Shalom Ministries’ emphasis on financial prosperity is unintelligible apart from its particular conception of God. Their pastor, Absalom Smith,

emphasizes God's desire to bless believers and Smith stresses that God is active in the lives of God's people. Smith is concerned that his parishioners are hearing false messages that question not only the appropriateness of financial success for believers, but the question of whether God desires that success. He claims that "When you're hearing negative things against the church being blessed it's not God that's saying that. I mean he's not going to lay out a plan of blessing and there turn around and try to talk to you into being cursed. Poverty is a curse." In context, here Smith is referring to God's promise to bless Abraham and is suggesting that by extension that is God's desire for Christians.

While those at Prosperity Church and Shalom Ministries often explained poverty by relating it to curses listed in Deuteronomy 28, Pastor Smith also grounds his understanding of poverty within the creation narrative. As he expositors Genesis 3:17 in which God curses the ground because of Adam's sin, Smith asserts that "what he's going to describe here is poverty which is as a result of Adam's sin." Smith suggests that when God curses the ground and promises that Adam will endure hard labor, this blow to economic prosperity shows how poverty has a spiritual root. This spiritual root requires a fundamentally spiritual response.

Believers can also expect God to help them financially prosper because of the sacrificial death of Jesus. The dominant Christology at Shalom Ministries resembles the theology of Prosperity Church in that they each affirm the atonement as God's response to the curse of poverty. Commenting on Jesus' death, Smith states that "Poverty had to be placed on Jesus. Otherwise you and I would still have to suffer it because it's part of the penalty of sin...In paying the price for our sin Jesus took the punishment of poverty so that we could be delivered from

poverty.”¹⁹⁹ Poverty is particularly unfitting for the believer because Christ’s atonement establishes victory over the curse²⁰⁰ of poverty and provides Christians with spiritual authority. As a result, believers then have the responsibility to live in light of this assurance.

Jesus’ relationship to money is significant for how both Shalom Ministries and Prosperity Church understand finances. As I began to explore the nuances of Shalom Ministries rhetoric and practices, an important distinction from Prosperity Church became clear. Both congregations affirmed that Jesus was rich, but whereas members of Prosperity Church understood richness in terms of excess or abundance, Shalom Ministries members equated richness with lack of need. Members of Prosperity Church were quick to assert that Jesus was wealthy, citing Jesus treasurer as primary proof. Pastor Smith echoed this language, asserting that “Jesus was rich. Yes, he was; he never lacked a single thing.” Later he would add: “He wasn’t poor; he had a treasurer that carried the bag that had the money in it that they needed. Well why didn’t he have more? Because he had everything he needed.” Although both communities affirm that Jesus was prosperous, they have different understandings of precisely how Jesus modeled the financially blessed life. This distinction between whether Jesus’ richness equated with excessive wealth or whether it denotes financial stability is important because it has direct bearing on how a church articulates what it means to follow Jesus.

While those at Shalom Ministries did not equate the blessed life with excess wealth, they did affirm wealth as good and desirable. In a sermon on Israel’s reliance on manna from heaven in the wilderness, Pastor Smith stated that “what we’re talking about here does not conflict with

¹⁹⁹ At this point in his sermon, Pastor Smith immediately cites 2 Corinthians 8:9, which states: “For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich” (KJV).

²⁰⁰ This view of poverty as a spiritual curse typically draws from a reading of Deuteronomy 28:16-19 and Galatians 3:13-14, although the pastor at Shalom Ministries also related it to the Edenic curse of Genesis 3:17.

believing God for abundance. That’s actually the plan, but the question is: Can abundance be handled? See, with the manna they had abundance right from the start. They could have over done it but they had to learn how – took forty years – they had to learn how to take it one step at a time.” In his sermons, Pastor Smith both encourages his hearers to expect financial success and he cautions them not to exercise self-control and to resist developing unhealthy emotional attachments to money.

To gain a clearer distillation of how Shalom Ministries approaches the issue of financial success, I attended a one-session course that the church offered on the topic. This course was a part of their new membership curriculum, which is a series of classes designed to introduce members to the theology of the church. The first thing I noticed was that although the course was advertised as “Authority for Financial Prosperity,” the handout during the actual class was entitled, “Authority for Prosperity.” While this discrepancy may have simply been an effort to shorten the title, the change actually aligned well with how church leaders and members engaged the topic. One of the initial comments from the instructor was that prosperity “has nothing to do with money. It has to do with all of your needs being met.” Throughout this course and in several sermons, leadership at Shalom Ministries emphasized financial prosperity but frequently couched this emphasis within a much broader conception of the blessed life. While the members at Prosperity Church certainly understood prosperity as a more expansive category than finances, financial gain took on a far more dominant role there than other aspects of personal success. Shalom Ministries promoted less concern for financial wealth in particular.²⁰¹

The idea of seed-sowing is a dominant theme at Shalom Ministries. While there is not consistent practice of “seed offerings” akin to placing cash on the stage at Prosperity Church, the

²⁰¹ The specific definition of prosperity on the course handout stated: “True prosperity from a biblical perspective is God’s ability working to meet the needs of every aspect of our being.”

rhythm of investing in God’s work and expecting a “return” is common. This topic appears frequently in sermons but also shapes liturgical practices, such as corporate confession. On one occasion Pastor Smith led his congregation, stating:

Say this with me: Lord Jesus, as of this day I commit myself to the kingdom of God to sow into the kingdom. I’m not going to just talk about it. I’m not going to just dream about it or pray about it or wish things were different. I’m gonna do something. I’m gonna do something. I’m gonna sow seed and father, I thank you. I know you’ll be faithful to multiply that seed and return it to me abundantly in the name of Jesus. Today is the day that I decide that my life is changing. I’m sowing myself, my finances, my abilities, my time. I’m sowing into the kingdom in Jesus’ name, Amen.

This confession repeats a frequent pattern at Shalom Ministries of embracing a key tenet of the Prosperity Gospel – in this case “seed-sowing,” but situating that doctrine within a broader conception of faithful practice. In his sermons, Pastor Smith claims that money is only one way to sow a seed, and in this specific positive confession, finances comprise one of four named ways to invest in God’s work. While financial gain is an expectation and goal for believers at Shalom Ministries, this aspiration is contextualized alongside a variety of other ambitions.

Even the aesthetic component of financial success that characterizes much of the Prosperity Gospel movement takes on a much less significant role at Shalom Ministries. While Pastor Jones boasts of a private jet, luxury vehicles, and a luxury coach vehicle for the church, Pastor Smith expresses concern about the temptation toward greed that can arise from financial aspirations. Although many churches within the Prosperity Gospel movement suggest that having visible signs of wealth is important both because it is a believer’s spiritual right and because it makes Christianity attractive to the world, Smith claims that believers should seek to

be content in order to resist overindulging in material excess. While critiquing greed, he asserts that “contentment is the opposite of that. I’m not impressed with your show. I’ve got everything I need. It doesn’t make any difference to me if your car is nicer than my car, your house is bigger than my house, your clothes are newer than my clothes. It makes absolutely no difference whatsoever because I’m satisfied with my homer of manna.” This reference to manna connects the narrative of Israel’s reliance on daily manna in the wilderness with the impetus to be content with simply having a level of socioeconomic success that meets one’s needs.

III. Divine Healing at Shalom Ministries

While the theme of financial prosperity is more dominant at Prosperity Church, the topic of physical healing is more commonly discussed at Shalom Ministries. Shalom Ministries sermon titles only occasionally mention healing explicitly; however, the theme of healing frequently arises within the context of more general topics such as discipleship or the believer’s spiritual authority. This pattern resembles how Shalom Ministries engages financial success; central Prosperity Gospel themes of wealth and health are each couched within broader categories of Christian living.

Positive confession is another important way that healing is promoted through liturgy. On one occasion Smith leads his congregation, stating,

Say this together: Thank you Father for divine health. I accept my healing as part of my inheritance. Lord Jesus you took strikes upon your back for my healing. The shedding of your blood broke the power of sin. I have no debts to pay all my debts are paid; I’m completely redeemed. There’s no purpose for suffering in my life. I do not accept suffering as a way of life in the name of Jesus. I embrace the will of God for my life to live and be vital to accomplish my purpose and I will not back off in Jesus’ name, Amen.

This practice is a way to emphasize that just as words have creative power to foster financial success, they can facilitate physical healing. Here Smith draws from the primary scriptural proof-text concerning healing in Prosperity Gospel circles: Isaiah 53:5. This verse is often understood as part of a broader messianic passage and includes the phrase, “with his stripes we are healed” (KJV). In light of this verse, Prosperity Gospel adherents claim that the atonement of Jesus Christ not only grants believers a right to forgiveness and financial success, but it makes physical healing accessible as well. The underlying assumption is that if sickness is the result of sin, then sickness is fundamentally spiritual and Christ’s atonement must address this issue. As Smith mentions on another occasion, “The price that Jesus paid at Calvary included washing away the sin, and for taking away the attack of the sickness and disease. See, sickness and disease is considered by God to be a punishment for [Adam’s] sin.” Since sickness is fundamentally spiritual, believers now have the authority to reject sickness as a reality in their lives through faith and positive confession. Liturgically, corporate positive confession reiterates this perspective among participants.

According to the Prosperity Gospel, physical healing is a past event for Christian believers. Bridging the aforementioned verse from Isaiah 53:5 and 1 Peter 2:24 with the Epistle to the Ephesians, Smith declares: “That’s the reason about why he says you *were* healed. So when did you get healed? At Calvary! ‘Well I wasn’t there.’ [The] Book of Ephesians says you were²⁰² you were, in Christ!” This claim reiterates the role that the believer’s identification with Christ plays in assuring physical healing. Physical healing is not simply a future aspiration; it is a spiritual reality yet to manifest. Since Jesus Christ has already fulfilled his role, the ball is now in the court of the believer.

²⁰² This is a reference to Ephesians 2:5-7.

The believer is responsible for having faith regardless of their physical symptoms or their doctor's diagnosis. Pastor Smith asserts that "it doesn't have anything to do with the condition of your body; your faith does not have anything to do with your body."²⁰³ Faith is of the heart." The three assumptions behind this claim are that sickness is fundamentally spiritual, Christ has overcome sin and sickness through his death, and that spiritual truths are more ontologically real than physical realities like symptoms. Within the Prosperity Gospel this position has led to differing views on how to respond to medical science. Some within the Prosperity Gospel tend to discourage certain medical practices, such as chemo therapy, but Pastor Smith affirms the legitimacy of medical help for the believer.²⁰⁴ Nonetheless, medical help can never replace faithful reliance on God and accompanying practices such as positive confession. Smith asserts that "God uses all kinds of things to get people out of trouble and medical science is a God-send; it did not come from the devil." God can use the believer's faith and even use tools such as medicine or surgery, but ultimately God is the source of healing.

In addition to these methods, Shalom Ministries emphasizes that healing can occur through a transfer of spiritual power through people or objects. Referring to practices common in Jesus' ministry and the early church, Smith claims that "the idea is to get the biblical visualization understanding of tangible healing power. It's transferred through objects through the laying on of hands, through oil, through water, [and] through mud." In addition to preaching about this approach, Smith frequently invites attendees to come to the front of the altar to receive intercessory prayer and for others to lay hands physically on them. Sometimes this practice is

²⁰³ Here Smith echoes E.W. Kenyon's aforementioned distinction between sense knowledge and revelation knowledge. See E.W. Kenyon, *The Two Kinds of Knowledge* (Lynnwood, Washington: Kenyon's Gospel Publishing Society, 2004), 18.

²⁰⁴ Smith addresses this directly in a sermon stating: "medical science is not the devil although people who attempted to walk in divine health two generations before me were of the mind that any compromise at all with medical science was a disregard of faith hallelujah now I'm telling you this was a big learning curve for me."

prompted at Shalom Ministries by a belief that God has supernaturally told him that someone needs healing – a practice known as receiving a “word of knowledge.” At other times a sermon focus on healing leads to this practice during the service.

Often intercessory prayer, laying on of hands, and positive confession each work in tandem liturgically. On one occasion, laying on of hands occurred as attendees were instructed to pray for those seated around them in need of healing. This approach decentralizes pastoral authority insofar as it reiterates the authority that each believer possesses. On another occasion, Smith invited those in need of healing to come down to the front of the stage. About 40 people then approached the front steps. After reading 1 Peter 2:24,²⁰⁵ Smith instructed parishioners to repeat the words: “The power of sickness and disease is broken in the name of Jesus.” Then after joining others in laying hands on those seeking healing, he verbally affirmed the authority that they had in Jesus and further instructed parishioners stating, “As you go, just call it done.” For Prosperity Gospel churches, the pursuit of healing is both personal and communal.

This notion that the health of believers is a present reality that must be continually affirmed is a frequent theme at Shalom Ministries. In one of their membership courses entitled, “Authority for Healing,” the instructor asserted that “When an attack comes against us, we are not the sick trying to get healed...You *are* healed regardless of the doctor’s report.” On the one hand, prosperity theology presents sick believers as in a defensive position, forced to address the attack of sickness. On the other hand, this theology affirms that believers already have victory over both sickness and its symptoms. To view this as crude denialism would miss the logic of the claim. The instructor was clear that believers should not ignore physical symptoms, but he

²⁰⁵ Echoing the language of Isaiah 53:5, this passage states, “Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed” (KJV).

encouraged them to view such symptoms as “illegal,”²⁰⁶ and as less real than the spiritual truth of their health. This theology is fundamentally a statement about the superiority of the spiritual world and spiritual laws over physical realities.

IV. Divine Healing at Prosperity Church

The theology of healing presented at Prosperity Church closely resembles the perspectives of those at Shalom Ministries. Both communities affirm that physical healing is a spiritual right of believers. Pastor Jones advises his parishioners, asserting that “what you’re gonna have to understand is when you’ve been given authority over things you got to understand it’s under you: sickness, disease, poverty, lack, not enough – all that stuff is under you.” In my interviews with parishioners they echoed this assumption and often referred to physical healing as part of either their “prosperity package” or “benefits package,” analogous to employee benefits. In other words, health already belonged to them.

One result of this perspective is that it provides a strong account of human agency. One woman explained how realizing her authority reshaped her response to physical suffering. She relayed a personal story, stating:

We have three children and before our first child was born I had a miscarriage. Before my second child was born I had a miscarriage. But when I got pregnant with my third child I said ‘Absolutely no more, I will not do this. I rebuke this. I’m going to carry this baby to full-term. This child has purpose and there’s a reason for this child to be here and I’m not gonna allow the enemy to steal this child from me.’ And because I stood up in

²⁰⁶ This emphasis on the role of spiritual laws draws from the aforementioned work of E.W. Kenyon. See also E.W. Kenyon, *The Father and His Family* (Lynnwood, Washington: Kenyon’s Gospel Publishing Society, 1993).

my authority I had that child and I did not have a miscarriage. So authority and healing most definitely go hand in hand.

This story reveals several of the implications that the Prosperity Gospel view of healing has for adherents. Since it is assumed that God has already done his part by securing the opportunity for health through the work of Jesus Christ, the believer has both the ability and the responsibility to exercise their spiritual authority for physical health. Although this woman did not explicitly blame herself for her previous miscarriages, she accredited herself with the success of her third pregnancy. Her perspective suggests that the believer's authority renders them responsible in the cases of both physical sickness and health. Both situations can be explained by whether the individual exercised their spiritual authority. This view affirms the power of God in the life of the believer while promoting a particular conception of Christian responsibility.

V. Prosperity Church and Shalom Ministries

Although Prosperity Church and Shalom Ministries are both clearly within the Prosperity Gospel movement, their respective differences demonstrate that this movement is not monolithic. The two central tenets of physical health and financial success each play significant roles in both contexts but manifest in slightly different ways. Although leaders and laity at Prosperity Church explicitly affirm prosperity as a broader category than financial success, in practice the pursuit of wealth takes on a dominant role in how they conceive of the blessed life. From the sermon topics, to seed offerings of cash all over the steps of the stage, to boastings of a private jet and luxury vehicles, Prosperity Church promotes financial success as a key reflection of piety. They even have an financial empowerment curriculum, which provides resources and training for those who are on the job market. The theology of financial gain at Prosperity Church resembles

the theology of Shalom Ministries, but in practice the liturgy, aesthetics, and programs mark a distinction.

A key difference in how Shalom Ministries approaches financial success is that its practices suggest that prosperity denotes a lack of need more than it is reflected by material excess. Pastor Smith emphasizes contentment and is wary of how an overemphasis on wealth might compromise personal faith and Christian witness. He states that “the so-called prosperity message has gotten a negative rap but not without cause. See, prosperity is the will of God but not for vanity purposes [or] greed.” Pastor Jones has made similar comments, but Prosperity Church’s liturgical practices do not encourage the same degree of caution. Another way that Shalom Ministries decentralizes financial success is by often engaging financial success within the context of other marks of successful Christian living. One example is by using the category of “sowing” to describe not only financial donations but to indicate service to others or the act of sacrificing one’s time or abilities. Another example of less emphasis on financial gain is that less than 40% of Shalom Ministries sermons in a calendar year are explicitly about some form of prosperity, whereas this theme colors every Prosperity Church sermon to some degree. Together these ministries reveal that nearly identical theology can find divergent expression through distinctly different liturgy.

Although theologies of money manifest differently in these two communities, their approaches to healing are more similar. Both churches view sickness as a result of sin and they believe Christ’s atonement affords believers an opportunity for healing today. The key difference in how they engage healing concerns how often they address this topic directly. Pastor Smith regularly invites attendees to the front of the stage during the service to receive prayer for physical healing. This is one of the most frequent forms of an altar call at Shalom

Ministries. Attendees are often invited to either come to the front to receive prayer for healing or to remain in the audience and allow those around them to pray for them there. Prosperity Church holds an altar call at the end of every service, but the four invitations that are given each time are to 1) convert to Christianity, 2) rededicate one's life to God, 3) become a Prosperity Church member, or 4) receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues. The topic of physical healing takes on much less prominence than financial success in sermons at Prosperity Church as well. These patterns reveal that although both churches affirm the roles of health and financial success in the lives of believers, they differ both in terms of how often and in what ways they engage these topics.

VI. The Power of the Prosperity Gospel

A key question the success of the Prosperity Gospel raises is “Why is this movement so effective at drawing and maintaining adherents?” A key catalyst for this process is the role of charismatic pastoral figures. Sociologist Max Weber's account of charismatic authority can by extension help to illumine how the charismatic leader functions in Prosperity Gospel communities in particular. Weber distinguishes three types of legitimate authority: rational authority that stems from legal rules; traditional authority that is grounded in longstanding practices; and charismatic authority which finds its power in the character of a particular leader. Charismatic authority is unique insofar as the other forms of legitimate authority primarily derive their power from a specific office or role. In contrast, charismatic authority denotes a respect for qualities that reside in a particular person. As Weber states, “In the case of charismatic authority, it is the charismatically qualified leader as such who is obeyed by virtue of personal trust in his revelation, his heroism or his exemplary qualities so far as they fall within the scope

of the individual's belief in his charisma."²⁰⁷ According to Weber, charisma is internal to this type of leader and he also claims that the origins of charisma are generally regarded as divine or supernatural.²⁰⁸

A crucial factor in charismatic authority is recognition on the part of those under this authority. Recognition of authority *as* charismatic is the key catalyst for fostering obedience. Weber states that "Psychologically this recognition is a matter of complete personal devotion to the possessor of the quality, arising out of enthusiasm, or of despair and hope."²⁰⁹ Weber's account of the follower's likely motivations is instructive for how we understand the persuasiveness of the Prosperity Gospel. On the one hand, in my interactions with parishioners I noticed a common narrative of personal journeys from despair to hope. During interviews at Prosperity Church, for example, there were multiple instances of parishioners describing how they entered Prosperity Church in the midst of various life struggles, from broken marriages to substance abuse. Testimonials during Shalom Ministries services evidenced a similar trend.

It is noteworthy that testimonies of what led parishioners to join Prosperity Church and Shalom Ministries were often not exclusively about poverty or sickness. This reality speaks to the question of whether adherents enter these churches because they desire health and wealth specifically, or whether adherents who might not prioritize these specific pursuits in their devotional lives are later reshaped by these churches to focus on them. On the one hand, the size and scope of the Prosperity Gospel movement suggest that both scenarios are likely occurring; there are adherents who previously embraced a focus on these themes and there are people who did not. This reality is significant because the assumption that adherents are

²⁰⁷Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1978), 216.

²⁰⁸ Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, 241.

²⁰⁹ Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, 242.

exclusively or even primarily obsessed with money or healing fails to recognize the holistic vision and communal narrative that these churches effectively convey. To Weber's point, these adherents are compelled by a broader vision of hope.

This communal narrative of the good life provides hope, but it is also inseparable from the charismatic figure who promotes it. In addition to how personal struggles often push parishioners to embrace these churches, they become attached to a hopeful message and its messenger. Charisma is a helpful category for describing the nature of this messenger's persuasiveness. Although Weber ascribes charisma to personal qualities rather than exclusively to an office, he suggests that charisma can be transitory since there is the chance that a leader may not keep their promises or will lose their abilities. At one point he asserts, "If proof and success elude the leader for long, if he appears deserted by his god or his magical or heroic powers, above all, if his leadership fails to benefit his followers, it is likely that his charismatic authority will disappear."²¹⁰ This perspective illumines how rhetoric functions in Prosperity Gospel churches. In both Prosperity Church and Shalom Ministries, there is a strong emphasis on what the charismatic leader affords church members. At Prosperity Church, testimonies from the pulpit of how many cars the pastor has given away to parishioners, expensive instruments he has provided for musicians, or his emphasis on the church covering all expenses for overseas mission trips, each reiterate the tangible ways that their leader gratuitously wields his authority for the benefit of congregants. Although Pastor Smith at Shalom Ministries did not frequently boast of car giveaways, recurring acts such as laying hands on parishioners during prayer for healing communicates that – to use Weber's language – he maintains God-given powers which benefit his followers. These types of leadership practices reveal that charismatic authority in

²¹⁰ Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, 242.

Prosperity Gospel churches not only presents a communal narrative of the good life but promotes the “recognition” and “complete personal devotion” to the leader that Weber describes.²¹¹

While Weber is helpful in conceptualizing charismatic authority, there are other factors that likely contribute to charismatic authority. In Clifford Geertz’ essay, “Centers, Kings, & Charisma: Symbolics of Power” he describes charisma as “a sign of involvement with the animating centers of society.”²¹² While primarily applying this idea to secular rulers, he suggests that charisma is a product of symbolic power rather than an individual’s personal characteristics. His description of charisma illumines the ritual of preaching and overall pastoral rhetoric insofar as the pastor’s charismatic authority derives much of its strength from its connection to the symbolic power that their office and sanctuary aesthetics represent. Considering Geertz and Weber’s insights together suggests that assessing charismatic authority within the Prosperity Gospel context requires recognizing the role of personal qualities alongside symbolic representations of power. Although personal qualities have a privileged role in how charismatic authority functions, symbolic power further buttresses authority.

Michel Foucault’s conception of power also helps to clarify how power functions within a community. Foucault critiques the notion that power functions primarily as the control that a sovereign has over its subject. Instead, he claims that “Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power.”²¹³ According to

²¹¹ Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, 242.

²¹² Clifford Geertz, ed. Sean Wilentz. “Centers, Kings, & Charisma: Symbolics of Power” in *Rites of Power: Symbolism, Ritual, and Politics since the Middle Ages*. (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, 1999), 15.

²¹³ Michel Foucault, ed. Colin Gordon. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*. (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1980), 98.

Foucault, power is not primarily a substantial possession of a sovereign, but rather refers to a network of relations that sovereigns and their subjects simultaneously inhabit. Individuals do not personally possess power, but perform power in the act of relating. Furthermore, all individuals participate in power relations as active agents to some degree. Foucault's position is instructive because it suggests that the act of preaching, for example, is not simply an exercise of a preacher's personal power over a congregation but an event of power *with* a congregation. Jonathan Walton's account of adherents within prosperity gospel churches as well as Marla Frederick's study of African American Christian women echo this point that congregants are not simply passive objects of power, but agents of discretion and even resistance.²¹⁴ That could manifest in moments when parishioners do not ascribe to a preacher's claims or on occasions when they do not obey specific pastoral recommendations. Yet within this network of relations between clergy and laity, all participants construct and participate in the exercise of power. Foucault affirms that authentic power relations involve an exertion of control but this process presupposes resistance and the possibility for disobedience.

Religion scholar and ritual theorist Catherine Bell helpfully identifies rituals as a primary context in which power dynamics of both control and resistance occur. She claims that "Ritualization is a strategic play of power, of domination and resistance, within the arena of the social body."²¹⁵ An analysis of power, especially within the context of liturgical rituals, requires recognizing the role of charismatic authority alongside the agency of those who submit to that authority. On the one hand, adherents generally maintain discretion and agency in power relations. Yet this discretion only partially mitigates the persuasive force of charismatic

²¹⁴ See Jonathan L. Walton, *Watch This!: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism*, (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 168; Frederick, *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith*, (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 148.

²¹⁵ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), 141.

authority within the context of ritual. Addressing this issue, a crucial component of ritualization as the context of power relations is what Catherine Bell calls “misrecognition.” Bell states that ritualization

is a process that works below the level of discourse. It produces and objectifies constructions of power (via the schemes that organize its environment), which the social agent then reembodies. Ritualized agents do not see themselves as projecting schemes; they see themselves only acting in a socially instinctive response to how things are. Thus, the production and objectification of structured and structuring schemes in the environment involve a misrecognition of the source and arbitrariness of these schemes. These schemes tend to be experienced as deriving from powers or realities beyond the community and its activities, such as a god or tradition, thereby depicting and testifying to the ultimate organization of the cosmos.²¹⁶

Bell’s claims illumine how misrecognition nuances power dynamics within the context of ritual in at least two key ways. First, she suggests that much of how power functions is non-discursive. Rhetoric is only one way that a charismatic leader shapes the sensibilities and submissiveness of a community. Second, the ritualized agent internalizes certain sensibilities in ways that can blind them from how power is functioning insofar as those power dynamics become normalized through ritual. In other words, ritualization masks the arbitrariness and subjective origins of specific executions of power. This aspect of ritualization underscores how in addition to the agency that adherents exercise when choosing and investing in a Prosperity Gospel community, this agency is nonetheless subject to and in subconscious dialogue with the power dynamics which both charismatic authority and ritualization create.

²¹⁶ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 143.

It is important to note that often in Prosperity Gospel churches the consolidation of power on the charismatic figure is reinforced by both church culture and polity structure. At Prosperity Church, for example, Pastor Jones openly critiques the notion that he should be subject to other forms of ecclesial authority. During a critique of church boards that can offer directives to the pastor, he claims that “That is out of order...That is not apostolic government” and that “There’s no way we’d be where we are today if we had a board telling us.” Although Pastor Smith at Shalom Ministries does not frequently stress his own authority over congregants, he does emphasize the role of submission as an important Christian value. In the context of a sermon on Romans 13, a passage where the Apostle Paul argues for respecting the authority of political powers, Smith asserts that “You have to choose to exercise your authority to obey. It’s not about the man; it’s about the law.” Later he would add that “None of the writers of the New Testament fell into the trap of vilifying the authorities.” While Smith does not match Jones in the degree to which he vocalizes opposition to a polity that lacks pastoral accountability, both pastors cultivate a communal emphasis on submission to authority. Within the context of Prosperity Gospel churches, that authority is both a function of the pastoral office and the assumed divine nature of pastoral calling.

Any discussion of the power of the Prosperity Gospel also requires addressing the role of mass media in its propagation. Televangelism, in particular, is relevant for how we understand the role of the charismatic figure because of how its development relates to the notion of celebrity. Historian Grant Wacker notes that there was a postwar surge in celebrity culture in America. He acknowledges that celebrity culture preceded World War II, but cites at least three factors in a postwar wave of celebrity visibility and influence: First, returning veterans contributed to the idea of cultural heroes; second, electronic media such as radio, movies, and

television made public figures increasingly accessible; third, mass consumer culture increased and “Just as material goods could be mass produced, so too celebrities could be marketed as generic commodities.”²¹⁷ Moreover, religious leaders occupied a distinguished cultural space insofar as their status as celebrities was also coupled with divine validation and an aura of the sacred. Since the 1960s and 1970s, televangelism has been a primary vehicle for promoting celebrity culture within the church.

This celebrity culture fuels esteem for the preacher and elevates their persuasive power for at least two key reasons. First, Geertz’ claim that charisma stems from symbolic power is evident as the preacher’s connection not only to the pastoral office but to the visual representations of economic success buttress their mass appeal. These visual representations include pastoral attire, personal possessions, and images of a flourishing church and ministry. Each of these features then functions as the content of religious celebrity identity. Second, celebrity identity in televangelism is often connected with personal narratives of overcoming life obstacles.²¹⁸ From T.D. Jakes acknowledging humble beginnings in which he “didn’t know how we would pay the electric bill to keep the church warm for Sunday service in winter,”²¹⁹ to Paula White’s experiences of childhood poverty,²²⁰ the personal triumphs of megachurch televangelists not only present them as paragons of success, but render them deeply relatable for their hearers.

²¹⁷ Grant Wacker, *America’s Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 68.

²¹⁸ Marla Frederick offers a helpful description of this process when she states that “televangelists have built thriving electronic and print media ministries from testimonies of God’s supernatural intervention into the most desperate areas – finances, health, family, and sexuality. Triumphant stories of redemption affirm the possibility of overcoming struggle. Whether intentionally or not, such testimonies work well in hyper-mediated contexts.” See Marla Frederick, “Reimagined Possibilities: Prosperity and the Journey to Redemption” in *Televised Redemption: Black Religious Media and Racial Empowerment*, (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2016), 130.

²¹⁹ Ten Commandments of Working in a Hostile Environment: Your Power Is Your Purpose, 149.

²²⁰ Charity Gibson, “Paula White Talks Poverty, Claims to Know Formula for Financial Freedom” in *The Christian Post*, last modified November 25, 2016. <https://www.christianpost.com/news/paula-white-talks-poverty-claims-to-know-formula-for-financial-freedom-watch-171710/>

This relatability helps to construct an image of religious celebrity that is both elevated and attainable. As T.D. Jakes, a megachurch pastor with aesthetic similarities to Prosperity preachers states, “There were times when I worked two jobs to supplement my preaching. I didn’t always know how long it would take to get to “better days,” but I never stopped believing that they were ahead. That is why I am telling you it doesn’t matter where you start. It matters where you finish.”²²¹ As those who hear this rhetoric recognize the accessibility of personal success, their fidelity to the religious celebrity and their message deepens.

It is worth noting that many of the reasons for the Prosperity Gospel’s appeal are not completely dissimilar to the appeal of other churches, including charisma, power dynamics, and a sense of hope. I interviewed one woman who had left Prosperity Church after attending for 16 years, including the formative years in which it transitioned denominationally, geographically, and liturgically. When I asked about some of the major transitions, she described the deep sense of community that characterized Prosperity Church during Jones’ early tenure. This sense of community, which preceded an emphasis on prosperity, is what drew her to the church. In her words, “You could still touch people; you could still approach the pastor.” Over time this accessibility shifted as the pastor acquired more security and was increasingly unavailable. He began making less hospital trips to parishioners and there was a more frequent refrain of “bishop is busy” from his assistants as people reached out to him. Although some of these shifts are not uncommon for a quickly growing church, this woman began to question whether Prosperity Church was still a good fit for her, considering how community was a major catalyst in how she initially became involved.

²²¹ T.D. Jakes, *Ten Commandments of Working in a Hostile Environment: Your Power Is Your Purpose*, (New York, NY: Berkeley Publishing Group, 2009), 149.

Her desire to leave would not culminate in departing until there were more liturgical shifts as Prosperity Church began emphasizing financial prosperity. When I asked about how she made this decision she responded, saying, “I knew it was time when I started seeing the whole money on the altar thing...That never felt right; it still doesn’t today.” As these “seed offerings” became more commonplace at Prosperity Church, she felt increasingly uneasy. When I asked her how this practice started in Prosperity Church, she stated, “I think it began when they started bringing in [another famous Prosperity preacher]. So that’s where that initially came from; that’s when it really started not feeling like church for me.” This woman’s story is important not simply because the message of prosperity helped expedite her exit, but because it provides another example of how there were reasons for her initial interest (and exit) beyond financial desire.

VII. Individualism and Self-Sufficiency

So what is at stake in this discussion of how the Prosperity Gospel achieves and maintains mass appeal? The Prosperity Gospel’s emphasis on spiritual authority for wealth and health informs a particular conception of individualism that has important implications for its adherents as well as broader society. Understanding this perspective begins with historically tracing its sources. Since the Civil War, many factors have shaped modern forms of American individualism that emphasize self-reliance. According to sociologists Edward Grabb, Douglas Baer, and James Curtis, the nineteenth century influx of European immigrants as well as the Civil War were the real catalysts for the beginning of modern American individualism.²²² Immigrants often viewed America as their chance for individual freedom whereas the Civil War

²²² Edward Grabb, Douglas Baer, and James Curtis, “The Origins of American Individualism: Reconsidering the Historical Evidence,” *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 24, no. 4 (1999): 527.

helped to solidify a national vision and augmented cultural myths of liberty due to emancipation. Sociologist Robin Williams Jr. points to factors such as industrialization, urbanization, and increased mobility as agents in further fragmenting social bonds after the Civil War.²²³ Williams does not claim that American individualism has completely replaced social groups; rather, he argues that now “local groups and family units take a less prominent place in the total social structure.”²²⁴ Increased mobility naturally affected the intimacy of the nuclear family, and as sociologist Steven Tipton notes, the rise of industrialism led to societies in which “it became more difficult to see work as a contribution to the whole and easier to view it as a segmental, self-interested activity.”²²⁵ As a result, a form of individualism emerged in America that placed greater emphasis on self-reliance and self-determination.

With the rise of industrialism, individualism took on new significance. Historian Jim Cullen remarks, “It was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that the link between the self-made man and economic success became primary.”²²⁶ Figures such as Andrew Carnegie, Thomas Edison, and Henry Ford were paradigmatic examples of this myth. The myth of the self-made man, both during the Gilded Age and later during the postwar economic boom, involved an optimism that assumed economic success was generally achievable for all.

American individualism and self-determination greatly shaped the aforementioned New Thought movement, one of Word of Faith theology’s primary theological sources. New Thought emphasized that thoughts and words have creative power and control over the material world due to metaphysical laws. As New Thought proponent Charles Fillmore argued, “There is a law that

²²³ Robin Williams, *American Society*.

²²⁴ Robin Williams, *American Society*, 491.

²²⁵ Stephen Tipton., Ed. Robert Bellah., *Habits of the Heart*, (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 66.

²²⁶ Jim Cullen, “The Problems and Promise of the Self-Made Myth,” *The Hedgehog Review*, June (2013): 14.

governs the manifestation of supply, and we may learn that law and apply it by mental determination and faith in the logical sequences of spiritual realities.”²²⁷ For Fillmore and other New Thought advocates, when an individual becomes aware of the laws that govern the physical world they can manipulate these laws for personal gain. Adherents were encouraged to rely on the powers of thought and speech to cause their desires to manifest in the material world because of the certainty of universal metaphysical laws.

New Thought metaphysics would eventually shape the Word of Faith movement through E.W. Kenyon and Kenneth Hagin. E.W. Kenyon was an early 20th century Baptist pastor whose writings and ministry were influenced by New Thought principles, and these principles would later influence Kenneth Hagin, a Pentecostal preacher who helped to found the Word of Faith movement. Kenyon and Hagin incorporated New Thought’s emphasis on metaphysical law into a doctrine of the law of faith. The law of faith affirms that the believer has a legal right before God to have prosperity through faith and positive confession. Faith is belief in the promise of prosperity and positive confession verbally affirms that promise. As Word of Faith theology developed, Rev. Oral Roberts’ emphasis on donating or “sowing” financial seeds for a financial return would provide yet another avenue for tapping into the law of faith.²²⁸ As sociologist Tony Lin notes, “Both Hagin and Roberts were the perfect ambassadors for this Gospel of the American Dream because they were preachers with humble beginnings who went on to lead international (and very prosperous) ministries.”²²⁹ This pattern of Prosperity Gospel leaders embodying key elements of the American Dream was undergirded by a theological framework that provided this vision with divine validation.

²²⁷ Charles Fillmore, *Prosperity*, 72.

²²⁸ This emphasis draws from the ministry of Oral Roberts, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s.

²²⁹ Tony Lin, “The Gospel of the American Dream,” *The Hedgehog Review*, June (2013): 37.

The Prosperity Gospel offers a specific logic for unlocking personal financial prosperity. Faith, positive confession, and accompanying actions such as “seed-sowing,” each provide ways to access wealth. These methods not only acknowledge how spiritual and physical worlds interrelate, but affirm that financial prosperity is a fundamentally spiritual issue. Drawing from a particular reading of Deuteronomy 28, Word of Faith teachers argue that poverty is a curse that requires a spiritual remedy.²³⁰ Yet the believer has the ability to overcome this curse as they obey the law of faith by performing the necessary actions. This ability stems from the reliability of spiritual laws that God has established.

In broader American culture, this emphasis on self-reliance and individual ability has problematic implications for how Americans responds to wealth disparities. Drawing from an international Pew survey from the early 2000s, Sociologist Claude Fischer claims that “Americans are considerably more likely than other Westerners to attribute poverty to poor people’s own traits or will and are considerably less likely to endorse government intervention in economic inequality.”²³¹ This tendency not only suggests that American individualism is distinct, but reveals one of the social implications that can stem from this form of individualism. The ideal of self-reliance within American individualism can hinder an adequate response to systemic causes of wealth disparities.

Similarly, the Prosperity Gospel incorporates an American individualism that does not generally challenge but affirms America’s capitalist structures. As sociologist Milmon Harrison notes, this theology “encourages individuals to be successful within the existing economic and social system rather than seeking to overthrow it or necessarily to reform it to any great

²³⁰ Kenneth E. Hagin, *Biblical Keys to Financial Prosperity*, 11.

²³¹ Claude Fischer, “Paradoxes of American Individualism,” *Sociological Forum* 23, no. 2 (2008): 365.

degree.”²³² Prosperity theology suggests that believers do not have to overcome structural factors because the spiritual world has ultimate control over the physical world. Furthermore, success *within* the prevailing economic structures is often viewed as divine validation of one’s piety.

Prosperity teachers generally embrace a form of theological colorblindness that suggests that Christian identity nullifies the social barriers contingent upon race. This interpretation of Christian identity often draws from Galatians 3:28, which states that “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (NRSV). Yet the Prosperity Gospel interpretation has implications for how adherents respond to systemic injustice. As Pastor Leroy Thompson states, “if you’re black, for example, a lack of prosperity doesn’t have anything to do with your being black. So don’t tell me, “Oh, we’ve been held back so long.” *Nobody* can hold you back when you’re walking in God’s Word and you’re obeying Him!”²³³ Thompson makes several problematic assumptions. First, he assumes that a community’s history of oppression is ultimately inconsequential for their socioeconomic mobility. Second, he assumes that personal piety renders social barriers ineffective. While this assumption stems from confidence in both spiritual law and divine faithfulness, it presents an account of human agency that is exclusively individualistic. The Prosperity Gospel suggests that individuals can overcome social barriers through their own obedience to the law of faith. This law of faith is an expression of American self-reliance as the individual has the ability to ensure their own success through the appropriate actions. Yet this American logic fosters a perspective that hinders one’s ability to acknowledge systemic injustice.

²³² Milmon F. Harrison, *The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion*, 149.

²³³ Leroy Thompson Sr., *Money Cometh!: To the Body of Christ*, 40.

In addition to how a specifically American individualistic logic compromises the ability of Prosperity Gospel churches to address poverty on a systemic level, it also shapes a particular theological anthropology. More specifically, American individualism encourages Prosperity Gospel adherents to embrace a particular conception of the self. The Prosperity Gospel's account of the blessed life, and by extension the blessed person, affirms personal wealth and health as the marks of piety. This perspective elevates the wealthy believer, for example, as it divinely validates their social *and spiritual* status. This view lacks a framework for affirming the spiritual integrity of those who experience ongoing poverty while also undermining the impetus for locating financial obstacles primarily in structural injustice. Self-sufficiency then characterizes the ideal Christian life, both in terms of the state of financial success and the means for achieving it. The goal is to experience a financial state of lacking financial need, and the means to pursue this state are each personally achievable. Not only are those not experiencing financial prosperity unable to experience the full Christian life, but there is no alternative theological framework for their situation that simultaneously avoids calling their piety into question and questioning their capacity for the good life. The Prosperity Gospel valorizes financial self-sufficiency while neglecting a vision for a more equal distribution of wealth in society.

A similar pattern is evident concerning divine healing. The Prosperity Gospel devalues those with physical problems, such as sickness or physical disability both by valorizing the fully functional body and by lacking a theological framework for the spiritual integrity of those lacking full health. The aforementioned example from Prosperity Church in which a woman ascribed her miscarriages to a personal neglect of spiritual authority demonstrates how this perspective provides a hermeneutical lens for physical suffering. If physical suffering is

fundamentally spiritual – both in its origin *and* its perpetuation – the believer maintains the capacity for addressing these issues. Yet setting up the fully functional body as a theological ideal and a key marker of piety undermines the integrity of those who lack such bodies.

American Individualism shapes the theological anthropology of the Prosperity Gospel in ways that impact its approaches to both health and wealth. The Prosperity Gospel emphasizes the personal agency and spiritual authority that Christian believers have over sickness and poverty. More specifically, the Prosperity Gospel characterizes the blessed life as a life of self-reliance and self-sufficiency in the areas of health and wealth, as believers do not have to rely on anything beyond their spiritual capacity to engender success. Yet this framework lacks a helpful vision for those who remain unable to bring about health and wealth for themselves, whether due to personal circumstance or systemic barriers. In addition, Prosperity Gospel individualism undermines an adequate impetus for systemic approaches to addressing poverty as well as a recognition of the social determinants of health. Instead, an individualistic theological anthropology gives shape to a vision of the good life that offers more problems than promise.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL, DIETRICH BONHOEFFER, & SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

I. Introduction

Word of Faith theology, also known as the Prosperity Gospel, claims that God desires for all believers to be financially wealthy and physically healthy. Christ's redemptive death is thought to provide believers with access to these promises through faith, verbal affirmations, and financial donations. Building on these claims, this chapter explores how Prosperity Gospel individualism fosters particular conceptions of human and divine freedom. I begin by briefly sketching Word of Faith metaphysics, which draws from nineteenth century New Thought and shapes an ethic of self-reliance. Such an ethic fosters the Prosperity Gospel belief that personal piety sufficiently overcomes systemic barriers to socioeconomic progress. Next, I place this individualistic ethic into conversation with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's accounts of freedom and responsibility, drawing from Bonhoeffer's *Creation and Fall* and *Ethics*. I contrast Prosperity Gospel individualism with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's claim that freedom, as the content of the image of God in humanity, is always a relational "freedom for" God and neighbor. Bonhoeffer resists the notion that freedom is an autonomous capacity for self-determination and self-sufficiency, and while his perspective does not invalidate the pursuit of wealth as such, it situates this exercise of freedom within a broader framework of interdependence and sociopolitical responsibility.

While the first half of this chapter examines how Bonhoeffer's conception of human interdependence can inform Prosperity Gospel responses to socioeconomic inequalities, the latter half of this chapter then turns to Bonhoeffer's conception of ethics to examine Prosperity Gospel

approaches to divine healing. Those within the Prosperity Gospel often claim that spiritual laws render divine healing an inevitable result of sufficient faith and piety, but such a claim is grounded in a principle-based ethic that presumes divine will and divine action. Drawing from two of Bonhoeffer's essays, "Basic Questions of a Christian Ethic" and "Christ, Reality, and Good," I examine Bonhoeffer's distinction between "the good" and "the will of God" to demonstrate not only how a less rigid conception of divine healing might better accommodate those who do not experience healing, but also how such conceptions can more effectively affirm divine freedom. Such a conception can then affirm divine sovereignty while sacrificing neither divine freedom nor the spiritual integrity of those who remain sick. Additionally, I engage Bonhoeffer's conceptions of human limitation and creatureliness in his *Creation and Fall* to provide the positive content for a theological anthropology that better accommodates those without robust physical health. This chapter argues that Bonhoeffer's relational theological anthropology both provides a critique of Prosperity Gospel individualism and presents a communal framework that can help address poverty and sickness in ways that are instructive for the broader church.

II. The Prosperity Gospel and Human Freedom

New Thought was a metaphysical movement that became popular during the mid-to-late nineteenth century. It emphasized that thoughts and words have creative power and control over the material world due to metaphysical laws. For New Thought advocates, when an individual becomes aware of the laws that govern the physical world they can harness these laws for personal gain. New Thought proponents assume that the universe is characterized by abundance, which can be accessed by those who obey the proper laws of thought and speech.²³⁴ The power

²³⁴ Charles Fillmore, *Prosperity*, 104.

of human speech can then manifest the desires of the mind. New Thought would influence an early twentieth-century Baptist pastor named E.W. Kenyon, whose writings subsequently shaped the ministry of the Word of Faith movement's founder, Kenneth Hagin. Hagin incorporated New Thought's emphasis on metaphysical law into a doctrine of the law of faith. The law of faith affirms that the believer has a legal spiritual right to prosperity through faith and verbal affirmations as a result of Christ's work. Faith is belief in the promise of prosperity and "positive confession" refers to when someone verbally affirms that promise. As Word of Faith theology developed, it would eventually incorporate an emphasis on donating money or "sowing financial seeds," as a third avenue for tapping into the law of faith.²³⁵ This movement would burgeon into the broader Prosperity Gospel movement.

According to Prosperity Gospel teachers, many believers experience financial hardship because they are ignorant of their own spiritual rights and the formula of faith, positive confession, and donations that are necessary to access those rights. Due to the metaphysical laws of faith, Christ's work assures believers a right to financial prosperity. The knowledge of a believer's 'legal' rights, from this perspective, reveals how these methods are adequate to remedy wealth disparities. As African American Pastor Leroy Thompson states, "As more and more Christians receive the revelation of divine prosperity in their spirits and act on what they've received, they will march out of poverty on a straight path toward divine prosperity."²³⁶ One of the key distinctives of Prosperity Gospel communities is fundamentally epistemological. They believe they have received the unique knowledge that leads to prosperity and they intend to spread this message to other believers. The social responsibility of these communities to the

²³⁵ This emphasis gained prominence as a result of the preaching and writing of Oral Roberts, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s.

²³⁶ Leroy Thompson Sr., *Money Cometh!: To the Body of Christ*, 7.

church and to the world is not primarily political, but pedagogical. Faith and piety are the formula for personal prosperity.

This perspective fosters a particular conception of human freedom. Adherents are free from social structures that perpetuate poverty because of the power of individualistic self-determination and the reliability of the law of faith. The methods of faith, positive confession, and financial donations are thought to allow an individual to overcome systemic barriers to financial success and to “pull themselves up by their own bootstraps.” Individuals do not need to rely on each other to overcome poverty because poverty is a spiritual curse that each person has the spiritual resources to overcome. Furthermore, precisely because the Prosperity Gospel logic of work presupposes self-reliance, adherents can be blamed for their own inability to prosper financially. Such individuals are oftentimes seen as deficient in faith or lacking in piety. This potential for blame affirms both human ability and the reliability of faith, positive confession, and financial donations. One’s freedom from structural barriers to financial success helps to shape an individualistic conception of freedom that valorizes self-sufficiency rather than interdependence.

III. Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Freedom and Responsibility

The Prosperity Gospel presents a conception of freedom that is largely marked by individualistic self-determination. Yet in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s collected lectures on Genesis 1-3, *Creation and Fall*, he argues that “freedom is not something that people have for themselves but something they have for others.”²³⁷ Just as God is free for humanity through covenantal love, human beings reflect the *imago dei* in their freedom for both God and neighbor.

²³⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, ed. John de Gruchy (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, MN, 2004), 62.

Bonhoeffer suggests that freedom is inherently relational, rather than being an autonomous human quality, capacity, or attribute.²³⁸ Although the Prosperity Gospel presents freedom as a means for personal gain and self-sufficiency, Bonhoeffer presents freedom as an opportunity for self-giving and interdependence. He claims that human freedom presupposes that human beings are bound to each other.²³⁹ This boundedness denotes an ontological interdependence that encourages communal uplift rather than exclusively individualistic progress.

Yet demonstrating the relationality of human freedom raises questions about the *content* of that freedom. What does such freedom for one's neighbor, for example, look like? Building on his account of human freedom in *Creation and Fall*, Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio* and his *Ethics* further reveal the form that this freedom for others takes. There Bonhoeffer shifts from the language of freedom to the language of responsibility. Echoing Christ's vicarious action on behalf of humanity, human responsibility involves action on behalf of one's neighbor rather than oneself.

In *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer explains the nature of human responsibility under the category of vicarious representative action. He claims that ethically speaking "human beings do not exist 'unmediated' qua spirit in and of themselves, but only in responsibility vis-à-vis an 'other.'"²⁴⁰ Bonhoeffer argues that members of the Christian community must *exist for* each other, and they express this relationality through acts of love. The specific actions he recommends are works on behalf of one's neighbor, intercessory prayer, and the forgiveness of sins.²⁴¹ Bonhoeffer views these three works as substitutionary acts of self-renunciation. Christ

²³⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 63.

²³⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 63.

²⁴⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, ed. Clifford Green, (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, MN, 2009), 50.

²⁴¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 184.

provides the model for this vicarious representation and allows believers to embody Christ in how they responsibly relate to one another. Here Bonhoeffer articulates how vicarious representative action functions within the church community.

While Bonhoeffer outlines vicarious representation within the church in *Sanctorum Communio*, he reveals how this representative character of human responsibility extends beyond the church in his *Ethics*. There he states that “What confers the freedom to act responsibly toward the world and within history is to recognize Jesus Christ as God’s love for the real world with its real history, politics, etc.”²⁴² Human representative action is Christological not only in content, but extent. Christ’s vicarious work is on behalf of the world, which reveals the intended scope of the believer’s responsibility. The objects of human freedom extend beyond the church to include others in the world.

Bonhoeffer’s understanding of human responsibility has implications for human actions, but is also a statement about humanity’s disposition. As Larry Rasmussen notes,

With the term “responsibility,” Bonhoeffer designates the basic answering (*Verantwortung*) of the person to life. That is, Bonhoeffer is not speaking first of all about specific responses to particular persons in given situations. He is speaking of a fundamental response of one’s own life to life itself. He means a basic posture, an overarching life-orientation that affects all actions, all responsibilities.²⁴³

This basic posture is significant because it provides the foundation for the exercise of responsibility in concrete moments of ethical decision. In those concrete moments, responsible action can take a variety of forms. Bonhoeffer claims that “Responsible action is neither determined from the outset nor defined once and for all; instead, it is born in the given

²⁴² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford Green (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, MN, 2009), 233.

²⁴³ Larry L. Rasmussen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance*, (Abingdon Press: New York, NY), 37.

situation.”²⁴⁴ Responsible action is about discerning the will of God in concrete moments. Otherwise, the will of God can become subsumed under a preconceived notion of “the good.” Bonhoeffer is concerned that acting exclusively on the basis of ethical ideals can foster a form of self-justification that does not sufficiently take concrete situations into account. In contrast, Bonhoeffer suggests that in the concrete moment of decision the individual acts responsibly as they acknowledge the risks and uncertainties that accompany such action. This action is risky because it does not have the security of relying on a universal ethical principle. As Stephen Plant remarks, “God judges Christians’ actions and if they have acted wrongly, they trust in the forgiveness of God, not as a right, but as a promise made by God in Christ.”²⁴⁵ Bonhoeffer suggests that the decision to enter into risky ethical decision is more capable of meeting the demands of the concrete historical moment. This approach also affirms that the believer must continually and humbly seek, rather than presuppose, God’s will. From a situational standpoint, responsibility is a response to concrete ethical moments, and from a dispositional standpoint it is a response to Godself. As Wolfgang Huber notes, Bonhoeffer “understood responsibility as an answer, given through living one’s own life, to God’s address to the human.”²⁴⁶

Bonhoeffer’s ethical framework provides a corrective to the Prosperity Gospel in several ways. First, the Prosperity Gospel promotes a principle-based ethic for responding to socioeconomic inequality. Individual believers exercise their freedom through personal faith, positive confession, and financial donations. Adherents understand these methods as universal and sufficient responses to financial struggle and view them as ways to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. This ethical framework for how the believer should respond, however,

²⁴⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 221.

²⁴⁵ Stephen Plant, *Bonhoeffer*, (Continuum Press: New York, NY), 125.

²⁴⁶ Wolfgang Huber, *Ethics: The Fundamental Questions of Our Lives*, (Georgetown University Press: Washington, D.C.), 90.

codifies a particular conception of divine will. In Bonhoefferian terms, the Prosperity Gospel suggests that the believer already knows what it is to do the good because they already know the will of God. Yet Bonhoeffer's framework reveals the fallibility of "principle-based" ethical systems in which divine will primarily functions as a known given rather than a will that must be continually discerned. Instead, Bonhoeffer suggests that the will of God must always be sought, whether that involves an individual discerning how to relate to wealth in general or how to overcome financial struggles in particular. It is only within an ethical framework that is *not* exclusively principle-based that Prosperity theology can have the necessary theological flexibility to respond to wealth disparities in America in more socially productive ways. The Prosperity Gospel approach to wealth disparities dissuades believers from addressing systemic issues that could challenge America's capitalist structures. Furthermore, success *within* the prevailing structures is often seen as divine validation of one's piety. Yet the affirmation and perpetuation of unjust social structures could be a site at which Bonhoeffer's critique bears fruit, challenging Prosperity Gospel adherents to reconsider how their accounts of human freedom and responsibility inform their relationships to the broader society and how such accounts impact disadvantaged communities.

Although Bonhoeffer's conception of ethics is not principle-based, it is fundamentally Christocentric. In his essay "Ethics as Formation," he claims that formation according to scripture "does not mean that the teachings of Christ or so-called Christian principles should be applied directly to the world in order to form the world according to them. Formation occurs only by being drawn into the form of Jesus Christ..."²⁴⁷ In other words, ethical formation does not occur through imitation but participation. Here Bonhoeffer accents Christ's agency in

²⁴⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 93.

conforming the believer, church, and world into a Christocentric form, rather than these realities attempting to conform themselves to ethical principles.

Human beings become conformed to Christ as a participation in Christ's incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection.²⁴⁸ This participation involves embracing creaturely freedom as true humanity, and acknowledging that one is both judged and justified by God. These realities "are not imitations or repetitions of Christ's form, but the form of Christ that takes form in human beings."²⁴⁹ In this way, Bonhoeffer maintains the uniqueness of Christ's reality while revealing how human beings participate in that reality. This understanding of ethics as formation is instructive for Prosperity theology insofar as ethics is not reducible to principles, nor reducible to actions, but involves the dispositional form that provides the conditions of possibility *for* responsible action. Otherwise, even responsible actions can function as products of principles rather than of Christocentric conformation and participation.

Bonhoeffer reveals that the expression of this form is grounded in love for one's neighbor. He states that "Christ did not, like an ethicist, love a theory about the good; he loved real people. Christ was not interested, like a philosopher, in what is "generally valid," but in that which serves real concrete human beings."²⁵⁰ Bonhoeffer suggests that for the church to exercise its freedom for others in service, this endeavor must stem from love for these others. In this way, he also critiques the often overly dichotomized spheres of church and world. Just as the Christocentric form of the church creates the conditions of possibility for responsible action within and toward the world, love motivates and sustains such action.

²⁴⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 94.

²⁴⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 96.

²⁵⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 98.

Yet a lingering question remains: Does Bonhoeffer's ethics result in a form of moral relativism? In other words, if there are no universal principles for ethical decisions, are there *any* parameters for ethical discernment? One of the ways Bonhoeffer responds to this question is through his discussion of the law. He claims that "Certainly no responsible activity is possible that does not consider with ultimate seriousness the boundary that God established in the law."²⁵¹ Christian laws such as the Decalogue or the principles of the Sermon on the Mount are crucial boundaries for how the believer acts responsibly in the world. The believer must always take them into consideration and to violate them necessarily incurs guilt. Yet the believer is primarily accountable to a person (God) rather than a principle. Since these norms are guides by which the believer is responsible toward *God*, obeying the will of God may lead the believer to disobey the letter of the law in a particular moment. Bonhoeffer states that responsible activity "will recognize Jesus Christ as the ultimate reality to whom it is responsible, and precisely through Christ it will be freed from the law for the responsible deed."²⁵² Although the ethical moment might require the believer to disobey the law, their responsible action prioritizes the will of God in the concrete situation. Here Bonhoeffer attempts to hold at least three realities together: the integrity of biblical laws, the contingency of concrete ethical situations, and the freedom of divine will. The law provides necessary ethical parameters, but never to the neglect of these other concerns.

Bonhoeffer also guards against ethical relativism through his understanding of divine mandates, which he identifies as marriage and family, government, culture (or work),²⁵³ and the church.²⁵⁴ The world has its ontological ground and *telos* in the reality of Christ and through

²⁵¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 297.

²⁵² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 297.

²⁵³ In his corpus, Bonhoeffer alternates between culture and work as a distinct mandate.

²⁵⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 388.

these divine mandates the relationship between Christ and the world becomes concrete.²⁵⁵ God has commandeered these earthly institutions to promote the divine commandment. Their roles as divine mandates remain dynamically contingent upon divine will and are not inherent qualities. Bonhoeffer describes them as “organizing structures...of the reality of God’s love for the world and for human beings that has been revealed in Jesus Christ.”²⁵⁶ These mandates are dynamic realities and cannot be equated with specific historical forms, such as the Nazi regime or Victorian ideals of the family, for example. Instead, they point beyond themselves to the ultimate reality of Christ and are intended to help individuals live responsibly toward others. Divine mandates prevent ethical relativism while fostering the dynamic organizing structures that guide human action. On the one hand the concept of divine mandates enables Bonhoeffer “to redress an abandonment of the natural order by Protestant theology.”²⁵⁷ Yet it also provides a way to envision humanity’s role within that order.

The role of the church as a divine mandate illustrates the church’s social responsibility in a way that is instructive for the Prosperity Gospel. Prosperity theology promotes an individualistic ethic that does not promote an ecclesial response to systemic injustice. In contrast, Bonhoeffer reveals that one of the implications of the interrelatedness of the divine mandates is that the church has a responsibility to challenge institutions when necessary. He claims that “government should be challenged about very specific problems whose remedy is part of its divine mandate. In so doing, however, the church cannot simply cease to be church. Only by fulfilling its own mandate can it legitimately question the government about fulfilling its mandate.”²⁵⁸ This claim has several implications. First, the church’s critical and constructive

²⁵⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 68.

²⁵⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 390.

²⁵⁷ Stephen Plant, *Bonhoeffer*, 88.

²⁵⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 398.

posture towards government is in continuity with its own role to proclaim the reality of the world's reconciliation with God through Christ. In other words, the church's role as witness fosters its prophetic posture on a systemic level. This witness does not reveal the church's *freedom from* such a role, but its *freedom for* it. Furthermore, the church's critical posture towards government is not simply a call for the government to function as a proper institution in general, but as a divine mandate in particular. The encompassing reality of Christ provides the impetus for the church's prophetic posture towards the government and shapes the content of this prophetic witness. In addition to Bonhoeffer's account of personal freedom and responsibility, the church's role as a divine mandate reveals how Christian responsibility in the world functions on a corporate level.

IV. The Church and the World

In contrast, the Prosperity Gospel affirms separatist sensibilities with respect to broader society, strongly distinguishing between believers who have received the "revelation knowledge" of prosperity, and nonbelievers (and believers) who have not. This assumption about the uniqueness of the Prosperity Gospel community fuels a separatist logic of entitlement, which might explain why positive confessions tend to be individualistic rather than intercessory on behalf of disadvantaged communities. Since any individual can choose to comply with the law of faith, it then becomes plausible that "those with a sense of Christian entitlement believe that non-Christians, and other Christians who do not believe as they do, do not deserve benefits."²⁵⁹ This individualism also stems from the conviction that social ills are fundamentally spiritual issues. Rather than recognizing the interdependence of the church and the world, Prosperity

²⁵⁹ Debra J. Mumford, *Exploring Prosperity Preaching: Biblical Health, Wealth, & Wisdom*, (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2012), 123.

theology affirms a hard distinction between them. In contrast, Bonhoeffer suggests that the church's witness against the world occurs *within* the world and presupposes the world's ontological basis in the reality of Christ. Nonetheless, a separatist sensibility within the Prosperity Gospel ultimately hinders an impetus for social responsibility beyond the boundaries of the church community. This does not mean that Prosperity Gospel communities never engage needs outside of the church, but rather points to a theological liability that renders such engagement an option rather than a necessity.

Bonhoeffer challenges believers to cultivate love for those outside the church walls as a motive for the church's freedom and responsibility towards them. His conception of love-inspired responsible action on behalf of those within the world relies on a reconceptualization of the church-world distinction. Bonhoeffer claims that throughout church history the Christian and worldly realms have been juxtaposed against each other. Certain interpretations of Luther's doctrine of two kingdoms have fueled this dichotomous outlook. Bonhoeffer claims that according to such visions, "reality as a whole splits into two parts, and the concern of ethics becomes the right relation of both parts to each other."²⁶⁰ He suggests that these types of perspectives generally carry at least two implications. First, the reality of Christ is no longer seen as all-encompassing; Christ is relegated to one realm at the exclusion of the other realm. A second implication is that a strong separation between the church and world can be used to sanction an individual's participation in only one realm. When the two kingdoms remain separate, both Christ and the individual become compartmentalized. In contrast, Bonhoeffer argues that the witness of the New Testament confirms that the two kingdoms must both be seen within the context of God's revelation in Christ. As a result, "genuine Christian responsibility

²⁶⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 56.

encompasses all activity within the world. It most certainly cannot be confined to some kind of isolated religious sphere.”²⁶¹ This claim directly contrasts the Prosperity Gospel’s separatist sensibilities.

Nonetheless, Bonhoeffer does not want to completely forsake Luther’s doctrine of two kingdoms. Although Bonhoeffer argues for the unity of the Christian and worldly realms in Christ, he does not want to undermine the Church’s distinct role as a visible community that occupies “space” in the world.²⁶² This space is not an end within itself, but it is the means by which the Church witnesses to the world. Bonhoeffer states that “the church is the place where it is proclaimed and taken seriously that God has reconciled the world to himself in Christ.”²⁶³ While the Church needs space within the world, this space does not put it in opposition to the world and its institutions. Rather, this space allows the church to live into its role as a witness to the world regarding the world’s reconciliation to God. As Wolfgang Huber remarks, “it is characteristic of Bonhoeffer’s theology that he starts not with possibilities which have to be realized but with a reality which has to be actualized.”²⁶⁴ The church testifies of the world’s reconciliation with God and it embodies a cruciform witness through responsible vicarious action on behalf of those within the world. This conception of the church-world relationship provides an instructive framework for the Prosperity Gospel insofar as it reveals how Prosperity theology might balance a commitment to the church’s uniqueness with social responsibility within and for the world.

²⁶¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 239.

²⁶² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 62.

²⁶³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 63.

²⁶⁴ Wolfgang Huber, “Bonhoeffer and Modernity,” in *Theology and the Practice of Responsibility*, eds. Wayne Floyd Jr. and Charles Marsh, (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International), 12.

Bonhoeffer's distinction between the "ultimate" and the "penultimate" is also helpful for conceptualizing how he might challenge Prosperity Gospel communities to understand their social responsibility in the world. The ultimate concerns the reality and word of divine mercy that affirms the believer's justification before God. It is an eschatological reality that denotes the event of grace. The penultimate presupposes and draws its intelligibility from the ultimate. Bonhoeffer states: "What concerns us in all that has been said about penultimate things is this: preparing the way for the word."²⁶⁵ The penultimate points to the ultimate as it helps to create the conditions for its concrete manifestation (although God creates the conditions for its ontological reality). It is also the space in which the individual becomes more capable of hearing and receiving the word of grace. In this way, the penultimate prepares the way for justification.

This preparation primarily refers to the responsible action that helps those within the world to hear the word of God's grace. Bonhoeffer states that "Preparing the way is indeed a matter of concrete intervention in the visible world, as concrete and visible as hunger and nourishment."²⁶⁶ In this way, the penultimate is not simply an interval that precedes the ultimate, but the context of action that promotes the ultimate's arrival. Bonhoeffer claims that social injustices such as poverty can impede the manifestation of the ultimate by hindering an individual's ability to hear the word of grace.²⁶⁷ Yet this possibility only reiterates the responsible action necessary to address such social concerns. As Stephen Plant notes, "Ultimately, doing good won't save you – or those to whom good is done – but God still wills us to do good things because it prepares the way for grace."²⁶⁸

²⁶⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 160.

²⁶⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 164.

²⁶⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 161.

²⁶⁸ Stephen Plant, *Bonhoeffer*, 116.

Bonhoeffer does not want to promote the alleviation of penultimate injustices as an exclusively social agenda. Rather, responsible penultimate action “depends on this action being a spiritual reality, since what is finally at stake is not the reform of worldly conditions but the coming of Christ.”²⁶⁹ Here Bonhoeffer reiterates that responsibility in preparation for the ultimate is not simply about social action but spiritual orientation. He claims that these actions must be accompanied by both humility and repentance.²⁷⁰ Responsible penultimate action takes concrete form in the world as it is accompanied by humility and repentance and points to the world’s ultimate reconciliation in Christ.

Bonhoeffer’s distinction between the ultimate and penultimate is instructive for the Prosperity Gospel. Prosperity theology suggests that Christian identity allows believers to have ultimate victory over the systemic barriers to economic success without addressing those barriers directly. Yet Bonhoeffer shifts this logic. He reveals that the issue is not simply “How does the reality of one’s justification rectify social ills?” but “How does addressing social ills prepare the way for justification?” In other words, the Prosperity Gospel offers justification as a precondition for socioeconomic success, whereas Bonhoeffer reveals how efforts toward socioeconomic equality can prepare the way for justification to occur. Here Bonhoeffer reveals how Prosperity theology might move forward; he demonstrates that responsible penultimate action on behalf of those within the world creates the conditions within which the reality of the believer’s justification can manifest. Responsible penultimate action helps to facilitate evangelism. Bonhoeffer’s account of the penultimate also suggests that by *not* addressing

²⁶⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 164.

²⁷⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 164.

systemic barriers to socioeconomic success, Prosperity theology does not adequately prepare the way for the word of grace to be proclaimed, hindering its own evangelistic witness.

V. The Prosperity Gospel, Bonhoeffer, and the Church

Bonhoeffer's reflections provide a critique of the Prosperity Gospel, but they also indicate how the broader church might respond to socioeconomic disparities more faithfully. On the one hand, Bonhoeffer presents a vision for how believers should live within the world. The church has a social responsibility toward the world that is grounded in Christology. The scope of Christ's redemptive work reveals that participation in that work involves a personal piety that engages broader systemic sin and inequality within the world. Furthermore, the character of Christ's vicarious suffering on behalf of others helps to illumine the content of Christian social engagement. As believers engage in this work they must continually and communally discern the will of God in their specific social context.

Bonhoeffer's ethical proposal is grounded within a deeply relational theological anthropology. He claims that the *imago dei* means that human beings are ontologically bound together, rendering them responsible for one another. This perspective does not invalidate individual financial gain *as such*, but situates such an endeavor within a broader framework of interdependence and communal uplift instead of self-sufficient individualism. Bonhoeffer reveals how the Prosperity Gospel, and the broader church, might move forward. Individuals are *free from* unjust structural barriers to financial success, but only insofar as they are *free for* each other in responding to systemic barriers to equality through responsible vicarious action.

Drawing from New Thought metaphysics, the Prosperity Gospel promotes universal principles of faith, positive confession, and financial donations that shape an account of individual freedom. This freedom functions as a sufficient means for personal financial success.

Yet Dietrich Bonhoeffer's accounts of freedom and responsibility reveal that Prosperity theology does not go far enough. By not recognizing freedom as a relation between human persons, the Prosperity Gospel is limited in how it can address wealth disparities on a societal scale. Instead, the roles of theological and ethical principles present a codified and universal vision for how believers should exercise freedom for personal gain. Bonhoeffer's writings reveal that a greater emphasis on freedom as relational and as an expression of responsibility for others provides a more fruitful and faithful account of how the church should respond to socioeconomic disparities in the world.

VI. The Prosperity Gospel and American Culture

What is at stake in a discussion of how individualism shapes the Prosperity Gospel is not only how its conception of the individual inhibits how adherents address systemic realities, but how it shapes its own participants. In particular, this movement's appropriation of American individualist culture fuels both capitalistic and consumeristic sensibilities as it encourages personal financial gain and the continual pursuit of the material possessions that signify gain. William Cavanaugh's discussion of consumerism is particularly helpful for understanding this process. He defines consumerism as "a restless spirit that is never content with any particular material thing."²⁷¹ He argues that consumer culture is not fundamentally characterized by an attachment to material goods, but by *detachment*. In this way, consumer culture denotes a particular disposition toward material goods. Since Prosperity theology assumes that God intends the best material goods for God's people, adherents continue to expect and pursue the

²⁷¹ William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eastern Mennonite University, 2008), xi.

goods that signify wealth. This pursuit can become insatiable as it promotes American cultural sensibilities.

This consumer culture impacts how Prosperity Gospel adherents view material possessions as well as how they view spending money. For example, during a “Prosperity Revival” Pastor Leroy Thompson discouraged his parishioners from going to Wal-Mart too frequently.²⁷² According to Thompson, “Wal-Mart [is] basically for broke people.”²⁷³ On one level, Thompson is encouraging his congregants to *actively anticipate* their impending financial breakthrough. Shopping at a more expensive establishment becomes an act of faith. Yet Thompson is also cultivating a certain type of consumer desire. Congregants cannot be content with their current possessions because those possessions do not reflect the best blessings that God has for them. This consumer desire assumes a notion of human flourishing that prioritizes individual desire rather than the common good. This appropriation of American individualism prevents a more expansive conception of the common good that would generate a fundamentally different orientation towards material possessions.

The role of consumer culture in Prosperity Gospel communities reveals how consumerism relates to religious values. In *Consuming Religion*, Vincent Miller contends that consumer desire does not completely oppose, but actually draws from, religious values and sensibilities. According to Miller, consumer desire “resembles more profound longings for transcendence, justice, and self-transformation enough to be able to absorb the concepts, values, and practices of religious traditions into its own forms without apparent conflict.”²⁷⁴ Within the

²⁷² Leroy Thompson. “The Prophetic Apostolic Seals, Secrets and Mysteries of Prosperity” (Sermon, Word of Life Christian Center, Darrow, LA, November 16, 2012).

²⁷³ Leroy Thompson, “The Prophetic Apostolic Seals, Secrets and Mysteries of Prosperity.”

²⁷⁴ Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture*, (New York, NY: Continuum Press), 144.

Prosperity Gospel movement, consumer culture provides a particular method for pursuing spiritual fullness and piety before God. Nonetheless, the values assumed by consumer culture typically remain distinct and detached from a concern for communal flourishing on a broader societal level. At the very least, there is no logically necessary theological impetus for connecting individual gain to communal uplift within this framework.

The chief mechanism for consumer culture in America is the advertisement. According to sociologists Robert Goldman and Stephen Papon, consumer ads are ideological sites that help to promote a particular construction of the world and the consumer's relationship to that world.²⁷⁵ In this way, "Consumer ads typically tell stories of success, desire, happiness, and social fulfillment in the lives of the people who consume the right brands."²⁷⁶ Ads invite the reader into a cultural narrative that consumer capitalism has constructed, training the individual to desire the things that comprise a particular lifestyle.

Historian T.J. Jackson Lears notes the shift in early twentieth century America in which "The older culture was suited to a production-oriented society of small entrepreneurs; the newer culture epitomized a consumption-oriented society dominated by bureaucratic corporations."²⁷⁷ Within this context the growing significance of media only buttressed the role of advertising in society. As advertising trends took advantage of a growing therapeutic ethos, they helped to promote and sustain consumer culture. While advertising in the late nineteenth century primarily presented information, soon ads more intentionally sought to foster formation. Thus, "By the

²⁷⁵ Robert Goldman and Stephen Papon, ed., Juliet Schor and Douglas Holt. *The Consumer Reader*, (New York, NY: The New Press, 2000), 95.

²⁷⁶ Robert Goldman, et. al., *The Consumer Reader*, 82.

²⁷⁷ Hanna Rosin, "Did Christianity Cause the Crash," *The Atlantic Monthly*, 304.5 (2009).

early 1900s the most successful advertising agents were trying not only to attract attention but aggressively to shape consumers' desires."²⁷⁸

The logics of advertising also shape how Prosperity Gospel preachers present themselves. In his study of black televangelism, social ethicist Jonathan Walton notes that "Word of Faith teachers seldom if ever wear robes, opting for tailer-made three-piece suits."²⁷⁹ The frequent combination of suits, luxury vehicles, and other amenities collectively cultivate a particular consumer desire among congregants, just as ads habituate consumers into patterns of desire. Nonetheless, Prosperity Gospel teachers promote aesthetics of American upper class life that are often individualistic, materialistic, and not oriented towards communal and social uplift.

Jonathan Walton describes how ministries that have been shaped by Prosperity theology can also become direct participants in the American capitalist enterprise. He states, "The more people the ministry can attract, the better the financial contributions that can subsidize and expand the television ministry or the services provided throughout the week at the church."²⁸⁰ In this way, the logics of the American economy shape the quotidian functions of church ministry. On the one hand, this may not seem self-evidently problematic. Yet the capitalistic commodification of ministry often determines which programs are televised as well as what pastors decide to preach. The tools of consumer capitalism are not simply means for propagating Christianity but can ultimately shape the content of that propagation. Since the logic of capitalism's efficiency maximizes self-interest and profit, any marriage between capitalism and Christianity has the potential to compromise the integrity of the latter.

²⁷⁸ Hanna Rosin, "Did Christianity Cause the Crash."

²⁷⁹ Robert Goldman, et. al., *The Consumer Reader*, 96.

²⁸⁰ Jonathan Walton, *Watch This!: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism*, 6.

The Prosperity Gospel movement appropriates American culture in a variety of ways. First, it endorses a form of American individualism that prioritizes personal autonomy and self-determination. As historian Kate Bowler notes, “The prosperity gospel’s emphasis on the individual’s responsibility for his or her own fate resonated strongly with the American tradition of rugged self-reliance.”²⁸¹ This emphasis on self-determination finds expression in the individual’s ability to shape their own material reality through faith, positive confession, and “sowing” financial seeds. Yet the optimism inherent within this American notion of self-reliance compromises the degree to which Prosperity theology can adequately address social injustice. It is assumed that social barriers cannot prevent an individual’s socioeconomic mobility, which renders the individual culpable for their own immobility as a result of a presumed impiety or insufficient faith. This conviction echoes the American Dream because “At its core, the dream claims that all those who work hard and play by the rules have an equal chance to succeed.”²⁸²

Prosperity theology also appropriates American culture insofar as it endorses an idea of chosenness. Prosperity Gospel adherents identify with biblical Israel and view themselves as inheritors of divine blessing. Yet this theology allows the promise of Israel’s inheritance to be over-determined by the narratives of American consumerism, which can lead to a nearly exclusive emphasis on material acquisition. Writer Hanna Rosin explores how this self-reliant optimism may have even contributed to the recent housing crisis in America. She notes how “the growth of the prosperity gospel tracks fairly closely to the pattern of foreclosure hot spots,” such as exurban middle class and urban poor communities. At its worst, the convergence of American optimism, chosenness, and materialism can contribute to situations such as the 2008/9 housing crisis in which many Americans optimistically and naively enter into contracts that they

²⁸¹ Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, 227.

²⁸² Tony Lin, “The Gospel of the American Dream,” 35.

cannot uphold.²⁸³ At the very least, this correlation raises questions about the pragmatic liabilities of a theology that promotes the inevitability of success. Yet this optimism stems from a theological conviction that one is chosen by God for material favor.

The Prosperity Gospel appropriates American culture through social features such as individualism, consumer culture, and the logics of advertising. Through the aesthetics of ministers, rhetoric, and communal practices, this theology cultivates an insatiable and individualistic consumer desire for wealth and materialism, instead of fostering greater concern for the common good. It endorses a complicit rather than critical posture towards the dangers of consumer capitalism that reinforce wealth disparities in America. While the Prosperity Gospel attempts to respond to the concrete needs of its adherents and can even offer individuals hope for socioeconomic advancement, it appropriates American culture in ways that present more problems than promise.

The theological anthropology of the Prosperity Gospel is deeply shaped by American culture in general, and individualism in particular. This formation creates problems which are both theological and social. Prosperity Gospel individualism valorizes self-sufficiency and self-determination, while failing to recognize the impact that social forces have on an individual's ability to succeed financially. This creates a theological problem insofar as it brings one's piety into question, and socially it suggests that such individuals remain incapable of experiencing the full Christian life. This form of individualism undermines the theological impetus for systemic approaches to socioeconomic disparities since these disparities are not understood as primarily the result of social forces beyond the immediate control of the individual believer. In contrast, Bonhoeffer's theological anthropology resists this American emphasis on self-sufficiency and

²⁸³ See Hanna Rosin, "Did Christianity Cause the Crash."

self-determination. Instead, he affirms the ontological inseparability of all human beings who are made in the image of God and claims that this inseparability should move Christian believers to assume both their need for interdependence and to assume the theological imperative to advocate personally and systematically for one another's well-being.

VII. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Ethical Question, and Divine Freedom

Analogous to how the Prosperity Gospel's individualistic ethos valorizes self-sufficiency and self-determination regarding financial gain, this sensibility emphasizes the ongoing spiritual accessibility of physical healing for believers who have adequate faith and piety. This view presents an individualistic conception of human freedom for both the sick individual and the person who may prayerfully intercede for their healing. Although intercessory prayer is an important practice in Prosperity Gospel communities, both the sick individual and their intercessor assume that the faith and piety of the sick generally will have a determinative effect on the outcome of prayer. Further, churches often give much less attention to the systemic or social factors that might contribute to particular sicknesses. Instead, sickness often becomes characterized as a fundamentally spiritual obstacle. While Prosperity Gospel teachers increasingly do not deny the usefulness of tools such as modern medicine, the theological assumption remains that spiritual resources available to an individual remain more powerful and determinative. Further, this emphasis on the sufficiency of personally accessible spiritual resources ignores a broader conception of public health and a recognition of social determinants that might impact the presence and frequency of sickness. These social determinants could range from culturally shaped eating habits, to access to preventative medicines, to access to exercise facilities. Recognizing the significance of these social factors requires understanding both health and sickness as socially shaped realities rather than simply personal problems.

Moving beyond an overly individualistic conception of physical health and healing also requires reconsidering the nature of divine will because this individualism is grounded in assumptions about both God's desire for the believer's physical health and a specific understanding of how God desires for believers to achieve and maintain that health. In Bonhoeffer's essay "Basic Questions of a Christian Ethic," he offers a conception of ethics that is relevant for evaluating how the Prosperity Gospel views the will of God. He describes the attempt "to present universally valid Christian norms and commandments applicable to contemporary ethical questions" as a fundamentally hopeless endeavor.²⁸⁴ Bonhoeffer's claim stems from the conviction that the moral categories of good and bad only apply to concrete situations in which moral actions manifest. He suggests that to understand such categories in the abstract is incompatible with the nature of these categories as such. One reason for this assertion is that the category of ethics, according to Bonhoeffer, is always a product of historical contexts. This reality undermines the assumption that ethics can ever function as a set of universally applicable principles. What is at stake for Bonhoeffer is that a *Christian* ethic of universal principles undermines the necessity of a believer's active dependence on God. He states that

You must act and behave such that in each of your actions you are mindful of also acting before God, mindful that God has a certain will and wants to see that will done. Each particular moment will reveal the nature of that will. You must merely be perfectly clear that your own will must in every instance be accommodated to that divine will; your will must be surrendered if the divine will is to be realized.²⁸⁵

²⁸⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, ed. Clifford Green, "Basic Questions of a Christian Ethic" in *Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928-1931*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 359.

²⁸⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Basic Questions of a Christian Ethic," 365.

Christian ethics is fundamentally about the believer's orientation towards God and a posture of active listening and submission in the moment of ethical decision. An implication of this view is that it also affirms divine freedom. Since divine will cannot be completely presumed in the moment, the believer cannot impose their preconception of divine will onto God. Bonhoeffer's framework affirms the believer's ongoing dependence on God while preserving an emphasis on divine freedom. At the same time, Bonhoeffer claims that an ethic of universal principles undermines human freedom as well because human ethical action becomes constrained by the very same principles that predetermine their moral value.²⁸⁶

At the heart of Bonhoeffer's ethics is the role of the believer's relationship with God. He states that "If I have principles, I feel I am secured *sub specie aeternitatis*. In that case, I would control my own relationship with God, as it were."²⁸⁷ Yet this is precisely the gesture of Prosperity theology insofar as "the formula of faith" (positive confession in faith or "name it and claim it") can abstract God from the ethical equation. This abstraction does not remove God, but instead reduces God insofar as divine will becomes an aspect of a principle-based logic. God's will regarding physical healing functions as a theological given, rather than a live theological question. More specifically, God's will that a believer experiences physical healing now is complemented by the assumption that faith and piety are God's predetermined means for effecting that will in the current moment. In this situation "principles" become abstract and depersonalized, while ethical discernment morphs into a principle-based formula of positive confession. Instead, Bonhoeffer argues that believers must constantly look to Christ for the answers to their ethical questions in each particular situation, without presuming the nature of divine will nor the faithful human response to that will. In this way, Christians "cannot decide a

²⁸⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Basic Questions of a Christian Ethic," 366.

²⁸⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Basic Questions of a Christian Ethic," 330.

priori what to do but rather will know only when they have actually entered into the situation of crisis itself and are conscious of being addressed by God.”²⁸⁸

Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics* echoes this critique of principle-based ethics in ways that are instructive for the Prosperity Gospel. In his essay, “Christ, Reality, and Good,” Bonhoeffer argues that the questions of how to become good and how to do good are improper ways of engaging the problem of ethics. He claims that instead individuals “must ask the wholly other, completely different question: what is the will of God?”²⁸⁹ When the will of God drives the ethical question, God’s will determines how “the good” is defined. Otherwise, the will of God can become subsumed under a preconceived notion of “the good.” An individual’s act of faith in Christ as the ultimate reality allows them to recognize the priority of the will of God. Then “the good” as the will of God revealed in Christ defines human conceptions of good and evil rather than the reverse. In this way, the ethics by which the created order should function finds its source in Christ.

This ethical framework provides a corrective to the Prosperity Gospel in several ways. First, Prosperity theology presupposes that God desires for Christian believers to be wealthy. Based upon this assumption, this theology instructs believers to reap the benefits of their status as believers through faith, positive confession, and “sowing” financial seeds. This ethical framework for how the believer should respond, however, depends on the codification of a particular conception of divine will. In Bonhoefferian terms, the Prosperity Gospel suggests that the believer already knows what it is to do the good because they already know the will of God. Yet Bonhoeffer’s framework reveals the fallibility of “principle-based” ethical systems in which

²⁸⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Basic Questions of a Christian Ethic,” 377.

²⁸⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ed. Clifford Green, “Christ, Reality, and Good” in *Ethics*. (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, MN, 2009), 47.

divine will primarily functions as a given rather than a will that must be continually discerned. Instead, Bonhoeffer suggests that the will of God must always be sought, which could apply to how an individual discerns what the appropriate material lifestyle, what type of car they should drive, or how they should spend their money. It is only within an ethical framework that is *not* primarily “principle-based,” that Prosperity theology can have the necessary theological flexibility to resist as well as respond to the American cultural context in more socially productive ways.

Bonhoeffer’s ethical framework has similar implications for the Prosperity Gospel approach to divine healing. While the Prosperity Gospel’s response to sickness is deeply individualistic, Bonhoeffer’s perspective could free its adherents from the weight of its assumptions. More specifically, by viewing the issue of God’s will concerning health and the believer’s responsibility as live questions, new theological and interpretive possibilities can arise. Questioning assumptions about how believers experience healing could lessen the theological necessity for believers to view their ongoing sickness as a result of personal spiritual insufficiency. Furthermore, questioning an individualistic view of healing could open new avenues for thinking about systemic approaches to health problems. In particular, considering the role of public health issues in sickness could illumine ways that God’s will might be exercised through collective actions to address social determinants of health such as access to healthcare, access to exercise resources, or access to fresh produce.²⁹⁰ With a broader and more permeable conception of how God, and by extension the church, might engage the issue of health, the church then becomes better positioned to pursue increasingly systemic and more comprehensive solutions. At the same time, this perspective resists undermining the spiritual

²⁹⁰ In the next chapter I provide a more detailed account of how the field of public health might inform less individualistic Prosperity Gospel praxis.

integrity of the suffering insofar that it recognizes that the initial determinants of this suffering and their perpetuation are often social even more than they are personal.

Bonhoeffer's claims do not result in mere ethical relativism, but are grounded in particular ways of relating to God and others. As Sabin Dramm notes in her analysis of Bonhoeffer's "Basic Questions of a Christian Ethic,"

ethical acts in Christian life take place between two poles that cause tension but also give them power. The poles are, in wholly New Testament language, freedom and love: ethical acts have their source in love – and can even be described basically “as love” – that becomes creative in freedom.²⁹¹

Just as at other points in Bonhoeffer's corpus divine mandates provide dynamic but ongoing ethical parameters, here love exercised through freedom provides the contours for responsible action. Bonhoeffer's contention that the individual must discern the will of God personally must be juxtaposed alongside his emphasis on the social character of ethical responsibility. Otherwise interpreting his position might render a less accurate and more individualistic approach to ethical decisions. On the one hand, Bonhoeffer claims that “Ethical decisions lead us into the most profound solitude...” and that “precisely because I am face to face with God in this solitude, I alone can know what is right or wrong for me personally.”²⁹² Yet this claim resists an exclusively individualistic approach to ethics insofar as the contours of the ethical decision for Bonhoeffer are always shaped by social considerations.

Not only does Bonhoeffer's theological anthropology affirm the ontological inseparability of human beings, but this inseparability has specific ethical importance. In

²⁹¹ Sabine Dramm, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: An Introduction to His Thought*, (Peabody MS: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 93.

²⁹² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Basic Questions of a Christian Ethic,” 367.

particular, love for both God and neighbor inform how ethical discernment occurs. As individuals experience proper relationship with one another, mediated through Christ, this ontological reality shapes how they exercise their ethical freedom for one another. As Clark Elliston notes, “in acknowledging the mediation of Christ, human relationality is returned to human beings in a new way. It is not an immediate relation of complete knowledge and intimacy with another, but a relation of creatureliness and service.”²⁹³ Service rather than domination can then result from ethical decisions because ethical discernment occurs within the context of a commitment to neighborly love. This social concern can reshape Prosperity Gospel sensibilities regarding health because it raises important questions about the most effective way to pursue the health of others. By coupling this concern with an ongoing discernment of how God desires for the church to pursue this endeavor, new possibilities arise for individual believers and the collective church to exercise neighborly love on a more systemic level. In this way, Bonhoefferian sensibilities function as the conditions of possibility for a new way of understanding both God’s perspective on physical health and God’s ethical prescription for Christian believers.

VIII. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Creatureliness, and Limitation

While Bonhoeffer’s critique of principle-based ethics challenges the Prosperity Gospel to reconsider its approach to physical health, his theological anthropology also offers a vision for a constructive alternative to Prosperity Gospel individualism. The Prosperity Gospel perspective on the body presupposes a conceptual conflation between physical health and piety, precluding a framework that does not call into question the sanctity of sick or otherwise impaired bodies. As

²⁹³ Clark Elliston, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Ethical Self: Christology, Ethics, and Formation*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016), 54.

he comments on humanity's original fall, Bonhoeffer claims that the nature of God's prohibition to eat of the forbidden tree indicates Adam's freedom, but also "indicates to this human being who is addressed as a free person their limit or boundedness, that is, the human being's creatureliness."²⁹⁴ Bonhoeffer's theological anthropology affirms the inseparability of freedom and limitation. Just as relational freedom is the content of the image of God in humanity, limitation is inherent to proper creatureliness before God. Freedom goes hand in hand with limitation; further, limitation provides the context and the conditions of possibility for the proper exercise of freedom. Bonhoeffer also decouples Adam's ability to recognize his boundary, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, from Adam's knowledge of sin. Boundary presupposes neither sin nor temptation. Rather, "Adam understands this prohibition and the threat of death only as a renewed gift, as the grace of God. The limit is grace because it is the basis of creatureliness and freedom."²⁹⁵ The proper corollary to humanity's boundary is not sin or temptation, but divine grace. With this reality, creaturely limitation maintains an inherently positive valence. Human limitation then becomes not an unfortunate hindrance, but a divinely ordained gift. As a prelapsarian reality, humanity's limit both evidences proper creatureliness and humanity's proper dependence on Christ as the center of human existence.

Humanity's fall expresses its rejection of limitation and is humanity's attempt to become like God, *sicut deus*. For Bonhoeffer this reality is not merely semantic or functional, but ontological. Humanity does become like God, assuming God's place in "the middle." To position oneself in the middle is to reject limitation as well as creaturely dependence on God. As *sicut deus*, humanity now rejects Christ as its proper center and source. Bonhoeffer claims, "Humankind is now *sicut deus*. It now lives out of its own resources, creates its own life, is its

²⁹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 85.

²⁹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 87.

own creator; it no longer needs the Creator, it has itself become creator, inasmuch as it creates its own life.”²⁹⁶ Rejecting limitation is a fundamental act of self-sufficiency. This gesture compromises humanity’s proper station, while also undermining humanity’s ability to hear a corrective word from God.

This understanding of humanity’s limit is instructive for how the Prosperity Gospel understands the body. The Prosperity Gospel correlates perfect health with piety, suggesting that for Christians the former often evidences the latter. This view leaves little to no conceptual space for an account of the body that affirms the spiritual integrity of those who do not experience good health and a fully functional body. Without a more nuanced and expansive account of the body, the Prosperity Gospel offers an unhelpful way to understand those who remain sick as well as those who experience physical disability. This is an anthropological problem because it presupposes a specific ideal of the human. This is a theological problem because it correlates that human ideal with a theological rationale.

In her book, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities*, Deborah Creamer echoes the logic implicit in Bonhoeffer’s reflections as she describes the positive role limitations might play in how to understand the human body. Creamer refers to her constructive proposal as a “limits model” of disability, contrasting it with two dominant perspectives: the medical model and the minority model. The medical model typically views disability as a biological or physical limitation such as being blind or lame. Further, the differentiation between those who are disabled and those who are not is usually rigid; there is no liminal space or gradation between these categories. In contrast, the minority approach to disability focuses more on the social and environmental factors that prevent

²⁹⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 115.

opportunities and hinder access for specific groups of people. This perspective emphasizes how social determinants shape the experience of individuals in ways analogous to physical impairment. For example, an oppressive social structure might hinder one's ability to enjoy certain privileges that others easily experience. While the medical and minority perspectives are not mutually exclusive, the medical model approaches disability as a physical or biological issue, whereas the minority view primarily addresses social factors that discriminate.

Creamer affirms the usefulness of these models but also notes their limitations. On the one hand, they assume a limited view of disability insofar as the category itself does not allow for gradation and fluidity; rather, one is either disabled or not. In contrast, she claims that

Though this fluidity may not be the primary experience for all people, either with or without disability, most of us experience some situations where we feel more or less disabled than in other situations. Such fluidity reminds us that disability is not just an either/or—it is also a “when,” “where,” and “how.” Lived experiences of disability like these have no home within either the medical or minority models.²⁹⁷

In this way, Creamer presupposes a broader working definition of disability by recognizing that hindrances to personal actions or access are often physically, socially, *and* situationally determined. “The experience of disability” then becomes a more helpful category for understanding human experience than a rigid ability-disability binary. Undergirding Creamer's perspective is a desire for societies to normalize the experience of disability. She recognizes that other disability models often presuppose certain conceptions of normalcy, which can then negatively impact the disabled, either through social othering or more concrete forms of discrimination. Creamer attempts to constructively disrupt the implicit anthropologies that

²⁹⁷ Deborah B. Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 31.

operate within dominant perspectives on disabled persons. She claims that “Key to the limits model is the recognition that “disability” is actually more normal than any other state of embodiedness.”²⁹⁸ Whether an aging person who gradually loses abilities, or a marginalized population for whom certain privileges are inaccessible, Creamer seeks to affirm the prevalence of the experience of disability, and limitation more broadly.

On the other hand, Creamer is not denying that there are situations in which individuals should seek to overcome their experience of disability. Someone who is being deprived of access to adequate resources, for example, should seek equality and justice. Similarly, someone with vision problems has a right to desire corrective eye surgery. Creamer’s point is that all instances of human difference or disability do not necessarily imply human defect. Furthermore, an experience of disability does not necessarily suggest personal fallibility or culpability. Creamer also does not want to draw a crude equivalency between all types of disability. For example, she is not claiming that blindness is qualitatively the same experience as social disenfranchisement. From her perspective disability is not about sameness; it is about a spectrum of common experiences. The breadth of this spectrum not only resists the othering and marginalization of the disabled but categorically situates the experience of disability within the realm of normal experience. Recognizing the prevalence of disability, broadly construed, then places the onus on those generally considered able-bodied to recognize the frequency of disability as well as consider how they might best support, accommodate, and advocate for those who experience limitation.

Creamer notes that her limits model, which she also terms a “gifts” model, affirms three religious claims: Limits are unsurprising, intrinsic, and good (or at least not necessarily evil).²⁹⁹

²⁹⁸ Deborah B. Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 32.

²⁹⁹ Deborah B. Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 94.

This conception of the human goes hand in hand with an alternative way to understand sin. She claims that

When understood as part of what it means to be human, limits are no longer something to be overcome in search of perfection or something that is experienced as a punishment for sinfulness. From the limits perspective, sin might now be redefined as an inappropriate attitude toward limits as we both exaggerate and also reject our own limits and the limits of others. Disability might be understood as limits that are not accommodated by the environment.³⁰⁰

With these remarks Creamer contextualizes the agency of sin in at least two ways. Sin occurs either when humans resist the appropriateness of limits, as such, or when humans do not shape social contexts that respond ethically to the needs of those who experience limitation. This framework provides a way to reconceptualize how Prosperity Gospel churches understand their responsibility in the face of limitations as well. It suggests that the first questions should not be, “What did this individual do to cause this?” or “What does this individual need to do to fix themselves?”, but rather “How might we best support this person or community in the midst of their limitation?” or “How might we respond to any negative factors that helped create this limitation?” Either of these latter two questions recognizes the reality of limitation without viewing that reality through the exclusive lenses of individual fallibility or individual responsibility. Instead they provide space for recognizing social determinants of limitation as well as the frequent innocence of those who experience limitation.

In Bonhoeffer’s 1934 sermon on the words of 2 Corinthians 12:9, “...my strength is made perfect in weakness,” Bonhoeffer reveals how human limitation relates to a positive

³⁰⁰ Deborah B. Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 33.

account of human weakness. In context, Germany in the early 1930s witnessed the rise of eugenics programs that would later lead to euthanasia programs. Bonhoeffer recognized the problematic sensibilities that undergirded eugenics research as well as increasingly popular notions of the *Übermensch*. Such sensibilities hierarchize humanity and denigrate those presumed to be biologically inferior. In contrast, Bonhoeffer asserts,

Weakness is holy, therefore we devote ourselves to the weak. Weakness in the eyes of Christ is not the imperfect over against the perfect; instead, strength is the imperfect and weakness the perfect. It is not the weak that has to serve the strong, but the strong has to serve the weak, and not through benevolence but with care and reverence. Not the powerful is in the right, but ultimately the weak is always in the right. So Christianity means a devaluation of all human values and the establishment of a new order of values in the sight of Christ.³⁰¹

Bonhoeffer's claims not only had implications for the context of Nazi Germany, but can speak to the theological anthropology of the Prosperity Gospel today. First, Bonhoeffer ascribes holiness to weakness, resisting the idealization of certain conceptions of the human body that denigrate those with evident limitations. Second, Bonhoeffer suggests that the presence of weakness places an ethical demand on those who are "strong." This demand has the character of reverence instead of paternalistic charity. As such, it resists the temptation to fault the weak for their station in life. Third, and perhaps most importantly, a proper conception of the weak and the "strong's" response to them is fundamentally Christocentric. The weak are valorized precisely

³⁰¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, ed. Isabel Best, *The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 170.

because Christ has become weak. Thus, “Why is suffering holy? Because Christ suffered in the world at the hands of humankind...”³⁰²

It is important to view Bonhoeffer’s conception of weakness in this sermon alongside his comments on humanity’s limit in *Creation and Fall*. Together they suggest that another impetus for a positive view of those who are weak is the reality that both limitation and weakness are proper to creatureliness as such. This reality also speaks to the ubiquity of weakness among human beings. As a result, human creatures have a responsibility to affirm the value of those who are more evidently weak and exercise their creaturely freedom on the behalf of such persons. This posture could inform a theological anthropology for the Prosperity Gospel that validates those who suffer instead of denigrating them.

³⁰² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 170.

CHAPTER FIVE
THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL, MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., &
(UN)REALIZED ESCHATOLOGY

I. Introduction

A theological analysis of the Prosperity Gospel raises a crucial sociological question: Why do Prosperity Gospel adherents find this movement's message compelling? Moreover, why do *so many* adherents embrace its message? While it is tempting to assume that the mere promises of wealth and health are sufficient to garner a mass following, a more nuanced and accurate explanation must consider several other questions. How are these promises presented? What roles do liturgy, aesthetics, and power dynamics play in helping such promises gain rhetorical traction? Finally, what reasons do adherents actually give for why they find the Prosperity Gospel persuasive? This chapter explores these questions to illumine precisely why the Prosperity Gospel is attractive.

This chapter argues that the specific content of the Prosperity Gospel message is primarily effective because it is couched within a broader communal narrative of progress. I define "communal narrative" as the social and spiritual journey that adherents understand themselves to be on toward personal success. The Prosperity Gospel communal narrative is grounded in an identification with the biblical narrative of Israel in general, and the Promised Land motif in particular. More specifically, just as Israel understood the Promised Land as a God-given possession that they had the responsibility to claim, the Prosperity Gospel suggests that believers are similarly on the cusp of claiming the full benefits of the Christian life, most especially health and wealth. In response, this chapter examines Martin Luther King Jr.'s reflections on the Exodus to argue that taking the Exodus more seriously in rhetoric and liturgy

would foster a more socially responsible ecclesiology among Prosperity Gospel communities. A communal identification with the Exodus motif offers a more helpful framework for acknowledging the unrealized expectations of the blessed life without sacrificing Christian hope.

II. Prosperity Church and Communal Progress

Prosperity Church members often express a deep confidence in the notion that their lives are inevitably getting better. My interview questions about how they would describe the path they saw their lives currently taking were always met by profound optimism. Sometimes their responses were couched in testimonies about what God had done in the past.³⁰³ Yet more frequently their answers reflected the assumption that God simply desired great things for them. As one woman asserted, “You know it’s beyond my imagination right so I’m not going to limit him by saying it’s this or that.” Here this interviewee draws from the language of Ephesians 3:20-21, which are frequently cited verses at Prosperity Church. There the writer provides benedictory remarks stating, “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory...” (NIV). Adherents assume that God’s plans are always greater and more desirable than the plans that they can conceive on their own.³⁰⁴ This is a view frequently expressed by Pastor Jones.³⁰⁵ Such a perspective fuels an expectant outlook that is grounded in the assumption that God desires to bless believers beyond what they can imagine. It is also noteworthy how this notion of

³⁰³ As one woman stated, “It’s never a dull moment to me. It’s always something happening whether, I mean, from hearing testimonies [to] supernatural things. You always see something manifest whether it’s natural things like paying off a car, paying off a debt. I’m hearing the testimony [that] somebody got healed... We’re doing something new. It’s always something going on in Prosperity Church. It keeps your interest. It’s keeping you like ‘okay what’s next.’ It’s literally like you’re on the cutting edge and I just I love it I love it... nothing stops; everything is progressing.”

³⁰⁴ Another commonly cited verse is Isaiah 55:9, which states, “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts” (KJV).

³⁰⁵ Pastor Jones often describes financial blessings as one way this verse manifests in the lives of Christians.

expectancy relates to the role of positive confession. This interviewee, and others within the broader movement, assume that the power of words can both promote *and* prevent the social progress that God desires for them. While adherents often have specific expectations for how prosperity will look in their lives, these concrete expectations function within a broader openness about divine activity. As another interviewee stated, “We don’t know our future. We don’t know where we’re going right now, but we know that God has a plan for our lives. So we know that whatever it is and wherever it is, is whatever he’s planning for us and we’re excited about that.” This openness always includes financial gain but is not exclusively defined by that specific form of prosperity. It reflects a broader sensibility that good things in general are always on the horizon.

Prosperity Church members are convinced that their individual lives have upward trajectories, but this directly relates to their progression as a community. Just as a balcony banner proclaims “From God’s house to my house,” their personal prosperity reflects and is ensured by the spiritual favor that God has granted their church. At one point, Pastor Jones explains how this appeals to members, stating:

That’s why folk keep coming to Prosperity Church: [Be]cause we don’t know what’s gonna happen next. But I’ll tell you what; we ain’t gonna stand still. I’m tired of being in traditional churches where they’re talking about what they gonna do five years ago and haven’t done it yet. I need to go somewhere where anything can happen because if anything can happen in the church anything can happen in my house!

According to Jones, this sensibility that the community is progressing is attractive to attendees because it gives them hope for their own lives. The responses of interviewees confirm this claim, suggesting that from a rhetorical standpoint, although the content of the Prosperity Gospel

message distinguishes this movement, how this appeal gains traction is not altogether unique. Put more simply, the Prosperity Gospel provides hope for a better future and both a framework and accompanying practices which continually reinforce that hope. According to Jones the uniqueness of his church's communal narrative is that although many churches talk about where they envision themselves, the rhetoric of "traditional" churches often fails to manifest in tangible accomplishments. This distinction is believed to render Prosperity Church preferable.

The theological framework for this communal narrative of progress involves a particular conception of God's desires. Pastor Jones argues that "The Lord is never satisfied with where you are"³⁰⁶ and that "It is a sin to stay where you are."³⁰⁷ This rhetoric buttresses a communal emphasis on progress with a theological mandate. God desires progress, and to be satisfied is sinful and defies God's good intentions. This perspective is not unique in the sense that it affirms a general conception of Christian growth; its peculiarity stems from the content of that progression. If believers are not en route to spiritual growth *and* financial increase, then something must be wrong. Both of these forms of progress are crucial marks of the blessed life. An alternative perspective would be complicit with Satan's desires. As Jones claims in a sermon on financial gain, "Satan wants you to stay on the same level and he wants you to be satisfied." Embracing this communal narrative of upward social mobility involves resisting Satan by embracing divine will and the community's conception of that will.

Much of Prosperity Church rhetoric emphasizes developing a consistent expectation for spiritual and tangible blessings from God. Adherents must have faith and participate in the community to experience the full benefits of their faith, including practices such as "sowing" financial seeds. These concrete actions afford the believer a special status as being favored by

³⁰⁶ This comment was stated in light of Psalm 115:14.

³⁰⁷ This comment was stated in light of Psalm 115:14.

God. While on the one hand Christian identity alone makes financial and physical prosperity possible, when they exercise their faith and piety properly, the resulting favor actualizes these benefits. The language of divine favor simply connotes how their spiritual rights as believers are in the process of being actualized as signs of divine pleasure. At one point Bishop Jones compares the favor they now have as akin to attracting a multitude of bees because you are covered by honey. In other words, this favor will consistently attract good things to them. Furthermore, Jones states that “Favor is not a one-time event...Favor, if you got it, you got it.” This claim is crucial for the Prosperity Church communal narrative because it suggests that the blessings of God are always either actual or impending. Favor is a spiritual status that justifies ongoing expectancy.

III. Shalom Ministries and Communal Progress

At Shalom Ministries, there is a similar emphasis on the community moving forward. While the rhetoric and practices at Shalom Ministries tend to emphasize health more than wealth, the community still considers an expectant financial outlook an appropriate mentality. For example, in a sermon on blessedness Smith remarks:

If your eyes are on him you have a constant state of financial security so your life ought to be moving forward all the time without reference to what’s happening in the world. Oh they’re going to have a problem; they’re going to have their boom and they’re going to have their bust - their variableness. But if you have your eyes on God, because he’s good as your source, then you’re always going to be moving forward in some way.

In context Smith is discussing the ebbs and flows of economic booms and busts and he assures his community that they will continue moving forward financially regardless of those shifts. They can expect to move forward because their progress is spiritually dictated and not subject to

the whims of secular systems. This assumed distinction between spiritual and secular power is significant because the priority of the believer's spiritual rights renders their spiritual and material progress inevitable. Further, their upward mobility results from the certainty of God's goodness. Since God is good, and God is in ultimate control of the world, the spiritual *and* material trajectory of believers is on sure footing.

Shalom Ministries sermon titles on financial harvest and financial blessings reiterate that the contemporary moment is a particularly significant time for communal progress. There is frequent discussion of spiritual "seasons" in which believers should expect divine favor and blessings, but these seasons appears continual rather than intermittent. At one point Pastor Smith describes this claiming that there are

Old Testament prophecies about the fact that there's a financial reckoning coming just like it was with the nation of Israel, when God led them out of the wilderness. Egypt paid up because they had been holding their wages back for 400 years...So it's called a wealth transfer. Now it's your choice to be a part of that...So instead of thinking poverty you ought to be thinking prosperity because of the season that we're coming into.

Here Smith argues that a logic of "seasons" for prosperity is supported by the Old Testament and points to how Israel was given material goods from Egypt as they began the Exodus. He then suggests that the conditions of possibility for this to manifest in the lives of his hearers have already been met. Thus, members simply have to choose to partake of this "season" that the entire church is now communally entering. Communally they have the opportunity to experience new financial blessings, and later Smith asserts that much of the reason for this impending financial gain is to promote the gospel. Typically Shalom Ministries, and those within the broader Prosperity Gospel movement, do not identify current moments as *not* being times or

seasons of spiritual harvest. The impetus for this assumption is twofold. First, God's desires for the prosperity of believers is always a theological given, so prosperity is accessible because divine will is buttressed by divine power. Second, as believers who are favored by God, accessible prosperity becomes actual as believers live in accordance with their spiritual rights. Although the language of seasons suggests that certain times are not particularly conducive to significant material progress, both the logic and liturgy of the Prosperity Gospel depict these seasons as constant.

IV. The Prosperity Gospel and Communal Narratives

Prosperity Church and Shalom Ministries are two examples of how key Prosperity Gospel claims function within a broader communal narrative of success and social mobility. Such claims gain rhetorical traction because they are embedded within an overarching narrative in which adherents locate their identities. This narrative greatly draws from the biblical stories of Abraham and Israel. As prominent Prosperity preacher Frederick Price states, "Christ has redeemed me *from* the curse of the law so that the *BLESSING* of *ABRAHAM* might come upon me."³⁰⁸ For Prosperity Gospel adherents, poverty is a spiritual curse from which the blessing of Abraham delivers them. Abraham then becomes a paradigmatic model of faith and his financial prosperity reveals a crucial aspect of the Christian believer's material inheritance. Just as Abraham enjoyed economic success, believers today are heirs of these promises as Abraham's spiritual children. Yet the subsequent biblical stories of Israel are even more crucial for understanding the narrative identity of Prosperity Gospel communities. Commenting on God's

³⁰⁸ Frederick K.C. Price, *Name it and Claim it!: The Power of Positive Confession*, (Tulsa, OK: Harrison House, 1992) 101.

promise to bring Israel into the Promised Land in Deuteronomy 8:7, prosperity preacher Leroy Thompson remarks to his congregation,

Say that out loud: “The Lord is bringing me into a good land!” What is the opposite of a good land? A *bad* land! A bad land is a poverty land. But God is not bringing you into poverty; He’s bringing you into a good land! Actually, verse 7 is talking about God’s chosen people, Israel. But we are God’s people if we are in Christ.³⁰⁹

Here Thompson identifies Prosperity Gospel adherents with the narrative moment of Israel entering and possessing the Promised Land. The logic is that just as God had given this land and the material prosperity within it into the hands of Israel, contemporary believers have spiritual right to these blessings today.

On the one hand, Prosperity Gospel adherents identify with Israel in terms of their status as God’s chosen people. This perspective is of course not novel within Christianity. The idea of election is common. Yet their identification with Israel also carries a particular *content*. To be identified with Israel is not a statement about election in the abstract, but election *to* something. Just as Israel’s election leads to the material prosperity that the “Promised Land” represents, Prosperity Gospel communities view themselves as heirs of a specific inheritance. This identification with Israel fosters a communal narrative identity that is defined by God’s intention to bring God’s people into material wealth *and* physical health.

Prosperity theology closely connects the narratives of Abraham and Israel with Christology. Believers can reap the “blessing of Abraham” and enter the “Promised Land” because of Christ’s sacrificial death. As Prosperity preacher Fred Price states, “God has made an investment, a deposit, in Christ for us. We have to start with the spiritual and bring them, by our

³⁰⁹ Leroy Thompson Sr., *Money Cometh!: To the Body of Christ*, 83.

faith, into the physical three-dimensional world.”³¹⁰ Christ’s work assures believers a right to financial prosperity and health, as long as they exercise their spiritual authority through faith and verbal affirmations. Faith and positive confession affirm one’s inclusion into a communal narrative of success and health, and financial donations or “seeds” ensure eventual monetary returns. These methods enable believers to reap the promises of Christ’s atonement that affirm their identification with Israel’s narrative.

At Prosperity Church, this theme of possessing the Promised Land deeply shapes the rhetoric, aesthetics, and liturgy of the church. When I first arrived at this church I noticed decorative features, such as large balcony banners proclaiming emphasizing how believers are “taking territories” – a phrase echoing the biblical conquest of Canaan. As one member asserted, “One of our mottos is...taking territories. It’s something that you see month in, month out, year in, year out. So for me it’s just that it really truly is an action-oriented Church.” This parishioner embraced a focus on the Promised Land motif and saw this emphasis as a way to foster a dynamic church with a proven commitment to progress.

At Prosperity Church, the Promised Land motif is also liturgically significant. For example, this theme regularly informs sermons. On one occasion, Pastor Jones preached on Israel’s conquest of the Promised Land and instructed his listeners, saying, “He gave you the land, but you have to possess it.” Prosperity Church members are encouraged to understand themselves as experiencing the same situation as the Israelites, on the cusp of experiencing God’s tangible promises; blessings that have already been rendered theirs by Christ’s redemptive work. After another sermon on the Promised Land, this sermonic emphasis on claiming God’s

³¹⁰ Frederick K.C. Price, *Name it and Claim it!*, 149.

promises was echoed musically as well. Immediately after the sermon and altar call, the worship team began singing a song called “No Limits.” The chorus states:

No limits, No boundaries
I see increase, All around me
No limits, No boundaries
I see increase, All around me
Stretch for, Break for
Release me, Enlarge my territory

This is a popular Prosperity Gospel song and is taken from a biblical passage known as “The Prayer of Jabez.”³¹¹ Although this passage from 1 Chronicles is simply based on an individual asking for God’s blessings, Prosperity Gospel adherents connect this emphasis on claiming territory with the conquest of the Promised Land. Liturgically, both sermons and singing reiterate a logic of spiritual and material possession.

Yet what has been most telling is how this theme affects the ways that adherents understand their own spiritual journeys. On more than one occasion I interviewed members who referred to physical healing and financial wealth as part of what they called their “prosperity package.” One interviewee explained this by likening such blessings to the benefits package you receive for a salaried position. In a Prosperity Gospel vein this means that these material benefits are already yours; they simply must be believed and claimed through faith and verbal affirmations.

³¹¹ 1 Chronicles 4:10 states, “Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, “Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain.” And God granted his request” (NIV). It is also worth noting that this prayer became extremely popular in Prosperity Gospel circles with the publication of Bruce Wilkinson’s *The Prayer of Jabez*, which has sold over 10 million copies since its release in 2000.

It is worth noting, that there nothing particularly novel about a Christian emphasis on the Promised Land. The notion of a realized eschatology in which certain spiritual realities are already true of believers is also not novel.³¹² What is peculiar is the specific content of this theological convergence. More specifically, these realized benefits that echo the Promised Land narrative are primarily about financial wealth and physical health. The reason this logic is problematic is because it undermines the spiritual integrity of those who remain poor since it lacks a helpful framework for their identities. Instead, if you remain poor, it raises questions about the adequacy of your faith and personal piety.

The same logic applies to physical health. For example, when I asked one of Prosperity Church's members during an interview to reflect on the relationship between their spiritual authority and physical health she responded with a personal testimony of how she miscarried her first two children. Then she said,

When I got pregnant with my third child, I said 'absolutely no more – I will not do this. I rebuke this. I'm going to carry this baby to full term. This child has purpose. And there's a reason for this child to be here, and I'm not going to allow the enemy to steal this child from me. And because I stood up in my authority, I had that child and I did not have a miscarriage.

This woman ascribed the success of her third pregnancy to her decision to stand up in her spiritual authority and claim health for herself and her baby. According to her, that was the crucial difference. Yet the underside of this is that it suggests that her previous pregnancies could have been prevented if she had just known her spiritual rights. Presumably her children

³¹² Aforementioned passages from the Epistle to the Ephesians are perhaps the most obvious examples.

could have survived if she had just stood up in her authority and actualized her rights over her physical body.

The problem with the realized eschatology that is implicit in how the Prosperity Gospel appropriates the Promised Land motif is that it places so much of the responsibility for health and wealth on the believer. You can always pull yourself up by your own spiritual bootstraps if you just know your rights, and have enough faith and piety. On the one hand, this has implications for how adherents interpret their own sickness as well as the sicknesses of others. Yet this perspective also has implications for how adherents understand systemic sources of wealth inequality. Prosperity Gospel preachers generally consider addressing systemic barriers to wealth equality unessential because believers can overcome these barriers through faith and piety.”³¹³ Since this logic presupposes an ethic of self-reliance, adherents are believed to be responsible for their inability to prosper financially. Such persons tend to be regarded as deficient in faith or lacking in piety. As a result, this implicit realized eschatology neglects a legitimate framework for those who experience ongoing sickness or poverty. Such an eschatology undergirds how Prosperity Gospel adherents understand their identification with Israel’s story in general, and the narrative moment of inheriting the Promised Land in particular; it suggests that they already have access to what they seek.

V. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Exodus

On the one hand, a realized eschatology undergirds the claim that the benefits of the Promised Land are already accessible for believers. Yet this view finds a contrast in Martin Luther King Jr.’s reflections on the story of Israel. Although King recognized the importance of the Promised Land, he viewed the Promised Land as unrealized for African Americans,

³¹³ Leroy Thompson Sr., *Money Cometh!: To the Body of Christ*, 40.

preferring the Exodus as the dominant communal motif. As a result, he did not claim that the things for which they longed were spiritual realities for which they could simply actualize their faith. Instead he conceptualized blacks as not having yet entered the abundance which they sought, and as needing to fight faithfully against systemic oppression.

It is impossible to understand King's engagement with the Exodus without considering the African American interpretive tradition he inherited. King often employed a figural interpretation of scripture, a hermeneutic common within African American church traditions dating back to the antebellum era that affirmed continuity between biblical figures or tropes and contemporary people. Typology was the most significant type of figural interpretation for African American hermeneutics in general, and King's understanding of the Exodus in particular. The Exodus then became not just a historical account of Israel's deliverance, but an archetype – a story of liberation that is echoed in subsequent liberative moments throughout history.

Within African American hermeneutics the category of typology cannot be equated or reduced to mere symbolism or analogy for at least two reasons.³¹⁴ First, recurring types are understood more literally than analogies. For example, black slaves did not just assume that they were similar to biblical Israel; they saw themselves as also actually being God's people. Second, types are broader than symbols insofar as they connote a worldview beyond the isolated repeated figure or event. Black slaves saw themselves as inhabiting the broader religious worldview associated with the Exodus trope. On the one hand, the expansiveness of Exodus typology is also clear from how multiple aspects of the narrative are often given contemporary

³¹⁴ Here I am drawing from Keith D. Miller's description of typology; see Keith Miller, "Alabama as Egypt: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Religion of Slaves," in *Martin Luther King Jr. and the Sermonic Power of Public Discourse*, (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 20.

appropriations, including Egypt, Pharaoh, and Moses. Yet beyond the particularities of figures such as Moses or Pharaoh, the Exodus narrative painted a picture of how God interacts with humanity and shaped how slaves understood their own journeys. Much of the effectiveness of the Exodus as a communal theme has been due to its interpretive capacity and expansiveness; it has provided a lens that is nuanced enough to accommodate a variety of corporate experiences. As Gary Selby notes, the Exodus “explained the successes they experienced, the problems they faced, and disappointments they suffered.”³¹⁵ In preaching and especially in the singing of spirituals, black slaves were drawn to the Exodus for these reasons. As Union Army chaplain W.G. Kiphant reflected on how slaves were drawn to the Exodus narrative, he claimed that “There is no part of the Bible with which they are so familiar as the story of the deliverance of the children of Israel.”³¹⁶ The conviction that the Exodus was a communal archetype and hermeneutical framework would resound throughout African American Christian history in general and resonate with King in particular. This conviction led King not only to identify the story of Israel with the story of black Americans, but with the stories of all contemporary movements that sought the liberation of oppressed groups.

King’s hermeneutical and homiletical sensibilities were incubated in the church but also influenced by his theological training. In addition to his familiarity with ways of engaging scripture within the Baptist church, Crozer Seminary further exposed King to higher criticism while he was a student. Studying under figures such as George Washington Davis informed how King negotiated his commitments to evangelical faith alongside theologically liberal perspectives. Theological liberalism informed King’s concern for the universal truths of the

³¹⁵ Gary Selby, *Martin Luther King and the Rhetoric of Freedom: The Exodus Narrative in America's Struggle for Civil Rights*, (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2008), 10.

³¹⁶ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 311.

Bible, whereas evangelicalism within the context of Jim Crow made connecting these truths with practical realities indispensable. As King scholar Richard Lischer notes, “Between the precritical tradition of the black church and the higher criticism of the exegetes, the theologian Davis mediated to King a progressive method of interpretation that moved from the particular to the universal and the corporate to the personal.”³¹⁷ King’s formative experiences in the South and later in seminary, would shape how he read the Bible in the pew as well as the pulpit. In the hands of King, the Exodus would become a primary tool for illumining the universal truth of God’s liberative work as well as empowering people to engage that work practically.

One of the first significant examples of this perspective in King’s corpus is the sermon “The Death of Evil upon the Seashore.”³¹⁸ In this sermon, King begins by affirming the reality of evil, pointing to biblical examples such as the creation narrative as well as contemporary examples such as imperialist oppression and warfare. He contends that the major world religions each acknowledge a cosmic tension between light and darkness, good and evil. King then turns his attention to the biblical narrative of Israel’s exodus from Egypt. In this sermon King depicts the Egyptians as symbols of evil, colonialism, and oppression; while Israel symbolizes devotion to the God of the Hebrew people. The pivotal moment in this sermon is the death of the Egyptians at the hands of God. King claims that “The death of the Egyptians upon the seashore is a glaring symbol of the ultimate doom of evil in its struggle with good.” The death of the Egyptians functions as evidence that God has defeated evil, and it foreshadows the ultimate defeat of evil cosmically. The Red Sea represents the inevitability of evil being overcome.

³¹⁷ Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Word that Moved America*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), 1999.

³¹⁸ This sermon was originally given at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, on July 21, 1955. It was later given on other occasions, including May 17, 1956 in New York City.

This sermon centers on the moment during the Exodus when Pharaoh's army has been destroyed and Israel has made it to the other side of the Red Sea. After summarizing the scene, King then connects the Exodus with the efforts of oppressed groups throughout the world to overcome colonial oppression. King initially refers to colonialism as a contemporary "Egypt" before then transitioning to an analysis of America in which he refers to segregation as Egypt. For him, Egypt is an archetype for systemic oppression. Yet although King does not see blacks as having already entered the Promised Land, he reaffirms why they can still have hope. King describes the Supreme Court ruling against segregation as the parting of the Red Sea, and then broadens the scope, claiming that "There is a Red Sea in history that ultimately comes to carry the forces of goodness to victory."³¹⁹ For King, freedom, justice, and equality are both unrealized and inevitable. Yet it is precisely this liminal space between reality and redemption – unrealized flourishing – that provides a framework for understanding ongoing injustice *and* provides a rationale for continuing the fight against injustice. In other words, acknowledging this liminal space of unrealized redemption makes sense of a broken world, without denigrating those who have been broken by it, and pushes Christian believers to work for change.

While King identifies the Egyptians with the forces of evil, this perspective is nonetheless shaped by his commitment to nonviolence and the biblical command to love one's enemies. King urges his listeners, stating, "Let us remember that as we struggle against Egypt, we must have love, compassion and understanding goodwill for those against whom we struggle, helping them to realize that as we seek to defeat the evils of Egypt we are not seeking to defeat them but to help them, as well as ourselves." There are several reasons why King provides these

³¹⁹ Martin Luther King Jr., "The Death of Evil upon the Seashore" (sermon, New York, NY, May 17, 1956), The Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute, http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/Vol06Scans/July1962-March1963DraftofChapterVIII,TheDeathofEvilUpontheSeashore.pdf

prescriptions. First, he views the command to love as not only compatible with but inseparable from the necessity of fighting for justice. Both direct action and nonviolence are means by which the oppressed resist the Egyptians, and the logic of agape informs these practices. Second, his perspective is shaped by the scope of redemption; he believes that God desires both to free the oppressed and to transform the hearts of oppressors. It is possible that this accounts for why King often refers to evil as a force, suggesting that evil is not reducible to specific people, but is a reality from which even the “pharaohs” of the world can and must be delivered. Third, King’s emphasis on loving one’s enemies in spite of the textual account of the Egyptians facing death, demonstrates the fluidity of typological hermeneutics. Perhaps reflecting the theological liberalism he imbibed while attending Crozer Seminary, King prefers to focus on the universal truth of evil’s defeat over the implications that physical death in the scriptural text might have for exegetical application.

This sermon promotes a particular way of seeing the struggle for liberation, but also portrays a vision of communal identity. Gary Selby helpfully notes how narrative identification is a helpful category for understanding precisely how King’s sermon presents the Exodus story and invites his hearers to enter that story.³²⁰³²¹ On the one hand, narrative identification shapes how hearers are led to identify with Israel as the protagonist community. For example, King asserts that “Many years ago the Negro was thrown into the Egypt of segregation, and his great struggle has been to free himself from the crippling restrictions and paralyzing effects of this vicious system.”³²² This emphasis communicated to King’s listeners a sense of who they were as

³²⁰ Gary Selby, *Martin Luther King and the Rhetoric of Freedom*, 59.

³²¹ Gary Selby describes narrative identification, emplotment, and causality as three key categories for understanding King’s sermonic rhetoric in the “Death of Evil upon the Seashore” sermon; see Gary Selby, *Martin Luther King and the Rhetoric of Freedom*, 52.

³²² Martin Luther King Jr., “The Birth of a New Nation” (sermon, Montgomery, AL, April, 7, 1957), The Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/birth-new-nation-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>.

God's people and that they were in the process of working towards freedom with God's help. On the other hand, narrative identification also shapes how King's hearers are intended to feel. King encourages his listeners, stating,

Let us not despair. Let us not lose faith in man and certainly not in God. We must believe that a prejudiced mind can be changed, and that man, by the grace of God, can be lifted from the valley of hate to the high mountain of love.³²³

Here King again connects the hope of divine liberation with agape for one's oppressors. As God's people, their community must not lose hope in divine deliverance and it also must not lose hope that oppressors can experience redemption. Further, since King often opts to identify evil as a depersonalized force rather than exclusively as specific people, he reveals how narrative identification helps his hearers to understand their oppressors in specific ways relative to the Exodus. On the one hand, he leads his hearers to associate specific people with the Egyptians. Yet although this identification is actual, it is neither exhaustive nor logically necessary. Put more simply, their oppressors are currently functioning in the role of the Egyptians, but their possible redemption and the reality of evil as a cosmic force means that they do not have to remain Egyptians. Narrative identification reveals how King's sermon led his original hearers to conceptualize their own identities, the identities of their oppressors, and the identity of God, relative to the Exodus narrative. When King originally delivered this message, his remarks helped to further inscribe this communal identification with the Exodus narrative, or what Gary Selby refers to as a "movement consciousness," several months before large scale efforts such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott began.

³²³ Martin King, Sermon, "Birth of a New Nation." April 7, 1957. Montgomery, Alabama.

In addition to this paradigmatic sermon, King's speeches also contain important references to Israel's journey. As the Montgomery Bus Boycott was swinging into full gear, King remarked that "You don't get to the promised land without going through the wilderness. Though we may not get to see the promised land, we know it's coming because God is for it."³²⁴ In context, a judge had fined King for violating anti-boycott laws. King's reflections are significant because he demonstrates how the journey through the wilderness is not exclusively a description of opposition to freedom at the communal level, but that it can be a way to interpret personal obstacles as well. The difficult journey toward freedom that the Exodus narrative captures sheds light on both systemic hindrances and personal struggles. Later in a speech a few months after the Montgomery Bus Boycott ended, King would urge his listeners, stating:

Go out with that faith today. (*All right, Yes*) Go back to your homes in the Southland to that faith, with that faith today. Go back to Philadelphia, to New York, to 1957 Detroit and Chicago with that faith today (*That's right*), that the universe is on our side in the struggle. (*Sure is, Yes*) Stand up for justice. (*Yes*) Sometimes it gets hard, but it is always difficult to get out of Egypt, for the Red Sea always stands before you with discouraging dimensions. (*Yes*) And even after you've crossed the Red Sea, you have to move through a wilderness with prodigious hilltops of evil (*Yes*) and gigantic mountains of opposition. (*Yes*) But I say to you this afternoon: Keep moving. (*Go on ahead*) Let nothing slow you up. (*Go on ahead*) Move on with dignity and honor and respectability. (*Yes*).³²⁵

³²⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., "Address to MIA Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church" (speech, Montgomery, AL, March, 22, 1956), The Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute, http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu:5801/transcription/document_images/Vol03Scans/199_22-Mar-1956_Address%20to%20MIA%20Mass%20Meeting.pdf

³²⁵ Martin Luther King Jr., "Give Us the Ballot," Address at the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom" (speech, Washington D.C., May 17, 1957), The Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/give-us-ballot-address-delivered-prayer-pilgrimage-freedom>

In context, King's remarks during this speech primarily concern the right for blacks to vote. He acknowledges how much work is yet to be done, but his rhetoric never loosens its grip on the importance of hope. Here King claims that his hearers must not accept the status quo but must continue to fight for their rights to have equal rights as citizens. King affirms the tension between realism and optimism that the logic of the Exodus journey embodies within the African American interpretive tradition.

In addition to the "The Death of Evil upon the Seashore," a second significant *sermonic* example of King's appropriation of the Exodus was his sermon, "Birth of a New Nation." "The Birth of a New Nation," originally delivered a couple months after the end of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, was inspired by Dr. King's visit to Ghana as it celebrated its independence from Britain. This sermon begins with an account of how Africa was originally colonized by European powers and the Gold Coast, now known as Ghana, fell under British rule. King describes how colonialism not only brought about tangible oppression but violated the freedom that is basic to being human. As a result, in Ghana as well as other countries the inevitable desire to become free manifested in resistance to imperial control. King states that "There is something in the soul that cries out for freedom. There is something deep down within the very soul of man that reaches out for Canaan. Men cannot be satisfied with Egypt." Here King contextualizes the fight against colonialism within humanity's basic quest for freedom, while also interpreting this quest through the lens of the Exodus narrative. Just as Israel longed for the freedom associated with the Promised Land, all oppressed people share this existential yearning. In the case of Ghana, King notes the pivotal work of Kwame Nkrumah to push for Ghana's independence, Nkrumah's imprisonment, and his eventual rise to become Ghana's first President.

In this sermon, King draws parallels between the Exodus and Ghana's freedom from the British Empire as well as the American Civil Rights Movement. As King describes the independence of Ghana he remarks, "This nation was now out of Egypt and had crossed the Red Sea. Now it will confront its wilderness. Like any breaking aloose from Egypt, there is a wilderness ahead. There is a problem of adjustment."³²⁶ It is noteworthy that King does not view the Promised Land as the next step after the Exodus. Rather, he acknowledges the wilderness ahead, alluding to the long transition, not just from bondage to freedom, but from freedom to flourishing. Put differently, even the progress of experiencing the Exodus does not accomplish the fullness of freedom; there is still much to confront and endure. Later in his sermon, and elsewhere, King mentions that even in the Promised Land you have to deal with opposing giants. Here he echoes the biblical story of the conquest of Canaan in which Israel's entrance into the Promised Land is fraught with struggle and resistance. One of the first obstacles they encounter is a plethora of giants in the land.³²⁷ King's point is that the Promised Land is not yet realized, and even if it were, this does not mean that all is well. The crucial takeaway from King's reflections is that he is able to embrace this tension between affirming hope and affirming a framework for ongoing unrealized "beloved community." His remarks can invite Prosperity Gospel communities to recognize this tension as well.

King's speech, "A Christian Movement in a Revolutionary Age,"³²⁸ also reveals how King embraces this tension. In this speech, King begins by acknowledging how scripture reveals God as invested in social revolution. Particularly within the context of understanding God's role in the Exodus, King suggests that the revolution God intended was both personal and societal.

³²⁶ Martin King, Sermon, "Birth of a New Nation. April 7, 1957. Montgomery, Alabama.

³²⁷ See Numbers 13:33.

³²⁸ Martin Luther King Jr., "A Christian Movement in a Revolutionary Age," (speech, Europe, Sept. 28, 1965), The King Center, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/christian-movement-revolutionary-age>.

He remarks, “The God of our fathers is a God of revolution. He will not be content with anything less than perfection in His children and in their society.”³²⁹ King then continues his frequent rhetorical pattern of connecting biblical narratives with contemporary Civil Rights struggles. He gives this address in light of both the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, affirming that these are important moments in liberation. Nonetheless, he recognizes that the fight for freedom is far from over. He asserts, “And now we have come to the threshold of the Promised Land. We have shattered the legal barriers of segregation and discrimination, but there are new giants which await us in the land. These giants not only threaten us as Negroes, but they threaten the structures of our entire society.”³³⁰ Here King recognizes that progress has been made but alludes to the biblical story of Israel’s journey toward the Promised Land to describe the remaining obstacles to equality. The Hebrew Bible notes that when the Israelites sent spies into the land of Canaan they quickly noticed and were intimidated by giants in the land.³³¹ These giants stood in the way of an easy conquest of Canaan. King claims that in the American context the “giants” are “political reform in the South, economic reform in the North and establishment of a community of peace and freedom around the world.”³³² King continually embraces the tension of affirming progress while acknowledging ongoing struggles. He suggests that not only have Americans *not* yet entered the Promised Land, but that even when they do, there will still be struggles. At the same time he suggests that hope is on the horizon as the Exodus has begun.

King’s reflections on the Exodus, from the earliest version of the “Death of Evil upon the Seashore” to that “Birth of a New Nation” sermon, demonstrate important rhetorical shifts. In the earliest version of the “Death of Evil upon the Seashore” sermon, delivered in July 1955, the

³²⁹ Martin Luther King Jr., “A Christian Movement in a Revolutionary Age,”

³³⁰ Martin Luther King Jr., “A Christian Movement in a Revolutionary Age.”

³³¹ See Numbers 13.

³³² Martin Luther King Jr., “A Christian Movement in a Revolutionary Age.”

crossing of the Red Sea is the pivotal narrative moment. In particular, events such as the *Brown vs. Board of Education* are identified as the moment of this crossing. It is not until later versions of this sermon that the wilderness is mentioned and assumes a greater rhetorical role. By later versions of this sermon, and especially during speeches around the time of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, King draws from the biblical account of Israel's wanderings in the wilderness to articulate the realities of both progress and ongoing obstacles in the struggle for civil rights.³³³ This shift reveals one way that King's engagement with Israel's Exodus is constantly in conversation with the changing social and political landscape of his hearers. By the time he delivers his speech, "I've Been to the Mountaintop," King situates his hearers yet further along Israel's journey out of Egypt.³³⁴ On the one hand, King's reflections on the Exodus throughout his career frequently place his community and their struggles within the context of Israel's exodus from Egypt. Yet at each moment an acknowledgment of progress is fully integrated and compatible with the reality of unmet expectations.

In addition to shifts from an exclusive focus on the crossing of the Red Sea to the incorporation of later narrative moments in Israel's exodus, there is also a rhetorical shift in King's explicit use of the exodus. As Gary Selby notes,

by the time he preached his "Birth of a New Nation" sermon, King had transformed the Israelites from the passive recipients of God's gracious actions to agents with the ability to choose to rise up against injustice and who, through their determined efforts, succeed in moving to the Promised Land.³³⁵

³³³ Notable examples include: Address to MIA Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church, March 22, 1956, Montgomery, Alabama; Give Us the Ballot," Address at the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom, May 17 1957, Washington D.C., Vol. 4 of MLK Papers; Facing the Challenge of a New Age Address on December 3, 1956.

³³⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., "I've Been to the Mountaintop," (sermon, Memphis, TN, April 3, 1968), The King Center, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/ive-been-mountaintop-0>

³³⁵ Gary Selby, *Martin Luther King and the Rhetoric of Freedom*, 108.

While “Death of Evil upon the Seashore” emphasizes God’s work on behalf of the Israelites, by the time he delivers “Birth of a New Nation,” King offers a more urgent and specific charge to engage in current liberative efforts. King never suggests that human agency and divine agency are mutually exclusive, but as Civil Rights efforts unfold, King increasingly emphasizes the role that social justice work plays in God’s ongoing effort to bring reconciliation. To this end, in “Birth of a New Nation” he encourages his hearers to “rise up and know that as you struggle for justice, you do not struggle alone. But God struggles with you.”³³⁶

Throughout King’s sermons and speeches, the Exodus functions as a crucial motif. The biblical account of Israel’s journey out of bondage toward freedom provides an interpretive lens for his hearers to understand their own communal identity, the identities of their oppressors, and the identity of their God. On the one hand, King’s references often included more extensive reflections on Israel’s journey with descriptions of events such as the crossing of the Red Sea or Israel’s journey through the wilderness. The “Death of Evil upon the Seashore” and “Birth of a New Nation” sermons are primary examples of this approach. Yet King would also allude to these biblical scenes with briefer references that would bring the entire narrative to mind. As Gary Selby notes, in King’s rhetoric during the Montgomery Bus Boycott for example, King’s “references to the Exodus take the form of a “code” through which a brief passage, often a phrase or a single word – *captivity, Egypt, Pharaoh, Red Sea, wilderness, Promise Land* – is used to evoke the larger story.”³³⁷ Yet regardless of the extent of King’s explicit description of the Exodus, the rhetorical effect remains profound. These references had a galvanizing and mobilizing effect on his listeners evoking a sense of communal solidarity, hope, and mission.

³³⁶ Martin King, Sermon, “Birth of a New Nation. April 7, 1957. Montgomery, Alabama.

³³⁷ Gary Selby, *Martin Luther King and the Rhetoric of Freedom*, 82.

Communal hope stemmed from the remembrance of God's past actions whereas a sense of mission affirmed the reality of unrealized beloved community.

VI. Martin Luther King Jr., the Prosperity Gospel, and the Exodus

Both Pastor Jones and Pastor Smith consider the Exodus significant, but they tend to focus on what Israel receives rather than what remains unrealized. As mentioned earlier, Smith states that "Just like it was with the nation of Israel when God led them out of the wilderness Egypt paid up because they had been holding their wages back for 400 years...so it's called a wealth transfer. Now it's your choice to be a part of that." Here Smith comments on how the Egyptians gave the Israelites silver and gold as they began the Exodus.³³⁸ Just as Israel received financial wealth from the Egyptians, now Shalom Ministries members have a spiritual right to similar blessings. They can experience a "wealth transfer." At Prosperity Church, Pastor Jones draws from the same passage of scripture to suggest that one way his church members will get out of debt is by God using others to financially bless them. He instructs them saying,

You're looking for God to give it to you. God says I'm gonna take somebody who already has it and I'm gonna give you favor with them. They're so loaded they're gonna give some of what they got and help you along your way. You can't pay it but they can pay it ten times. That's favor!

For both Smith and Jones, the reality of material wealth at the beginning of the Exodus marks Israel's story long before the material blessings of the Promised Land. Since Egypt unexpectedly gave Israel spoils, church members should expect financial blessings from unlikely places. At both Prosperity Church and Shalom Ministries even the Exodus motif is about the material manifestation of their spiritual benefits rather than unrealized abundance.

³³⁸ See Exodus 12:35.

It is also important to note that although the theology of Shalom Ministries closely resembles the theology of Prosperity Church, explicit references to the Promised Land are much less frequent. There are no banners echoing the biblical conquest of Canaan or routine sermon titles about possessing the Promised Land. Nonetheless, the underlying theology still echoes the conviction that believers must lay claim to material goods which God has already given to them. These Christian benefits are available to all who embrace the tools of faith, positive confession, and monetary donations. Yet these convictions reveal how the communal narratives of both Prosperity Church and Shalom Ministries succumb to a similar theological liability; they endorse a realized eschatology that lacks an adequate framework for those who suffer from either ongoing poverty or physical health. Health and wealth remain Christian benefits that are within spiritual reach of each individual believer.

Another result of this theology is that it shapes how adherents respond to the lack of wealth and health. In the case of wealth, since the Prosperity Gospel views financial lack as fundamentally individual, there is no theologically necessary impetus to actively address systemic obstacles to financial equality. Poverty is primarily an individual problem that can be rectified through personal piety. Both the Prosperity Gospel and King affirm human agency in the quest for socioeconomic mobility, but King's vision of Christian action is much more consistently systemic. Further, although King and the Prosperity Gospel both affirm the inevitability of good's cosmic victory over evil, King rejects the social passivity that can arise from overconfidence in the sufficiency of faith. In "The Birth of a New Nation" King cautions his hearers, stating,

Don't go back into your homes and around Montgomery thinking that the Montgomery City Commission and that all of the forces in the leadership of the South will eventually

work out this thing for Negroes, it's going to work out, it's going to roll in on the wheels of inevitability. If we wait for it to work itself out, it will *never* be worked out! Freedom only comes through persistent revolt, through persistent agitation, through persistently rising up against the system of evil.³³⁹

While both King and the Prosperity Gospel affirm the centrality of faithful action in the pursuit of freedom and equality, the content and scope of that action differs in significant ways. Since evil is not only spiritual but systemic according to King, it requires faithful action that addresses both expressions of evil as well. For King the scope of Christian social responsibility is broader both in terms of the necessity of civic engagement beyond personal piety, and the concern for oppressed groups beyond the Christian community.

In addition to the issue of poverty and socioeconomic inequality, King's vision is instructive for how Prosperity Gospel communities engage physical health. A concern for individual healing could be complemented by a broader concern for public health at the neighborhood or city level. In Prosperity Gospel churches there is generally much more conversation around healing or curing personal sickness than broader disease prevention or quotidian health promotion. As a result, there remains an opportunity for churches to learn from fields such as public health in order to serve populations more effectively.

The field of public health attempts both to prevent disease, injury, and death, and to promote holistic health. Public health practitioners differ from medical clinicians insofar as clinical practice primarily treats and manages illness whereas public health professionals place more emphasis on disease and injury prevention. By complementing curative measures with preventative methods, public health offers an approach that differs from much Prosperity Gospel

³³⁹ Martin King, Sermon, "Birth of a New Nation. April 7, 1957. Montgomery, Alabama.

rhetoric. Whereas the rhetoric around healing in Prosperity Gospel communities is often curative, public health suggests that a preventative approach is just as important. Public health pursues this emphasis by identifying social determinants of health and developing programming in response to the factors which either inhibit or promote health.

Prosperity Gospel churches have an opportunity to appropriate the insights of public health practitioners in ways that reflect King's vision of systemic justice. First, a common practice within public health is a community health needs assessment. A community health needs assessment refers to the process of identifying and measuring opportunities for health improvement in a community, often through qualitative research. Assessments help to confirm the actual needs of a community and typically include a gap analysis that identifies the disparity between current health outcomes and ideal health outcomes. A community needs assessment begins the process of confirming the actual needs of a community as a precondition for program development. This is a valuable practice because it resists the tendency, common among evangelical churches, to assume that specific needs, predetermined by the church, should be prioritized in a locale and to impose accompanying programming without first confirming those specific needs through research or input from non-church community members. Although it is unlikely that church leaders will extensively study public health methodology, the general practice of evaluating a community's health needs in a structured way can broaden how church communities engage the issue of physical health.

As church communities identify health needs, the relationship between physical health and social systems becomes more evident. For example, if a church identifies a high rate of diabetes in a specific community, it is important to explore possible social determinants of this health problem. These determinants could include factors such as education and income level,

race, occupation, access to transportation, and geography. Social determinants can then inform the specific programming a church develops or supports to address that specific health need. Appropriate programming could include health education within the church, investing in health resources outside of the church, or advocacy for healthier commercial food options in a specific neighborhood through public policy. This way of engaging public health affirms that the pursuit of health is not reducible to a false dichotomy between clinical care and divine healing. Rather, disease prevention and health promotion can foster healthy communities in a more sustained way. This approach reflects King's values both because it engages communities beyond the bounds of the church and because it recognizes the relationship between personal health and social systems.³⁴⁰

The field of public health does not affirm the impact of social determinants on health to the neglect of individual responsibility; rather, it recognizes the roles of both individuals and social factors in public health. Further, public health seeks to provide an account of how the relationship between individuals and systems functions. Analogous to how the behavior of individual Prosperity Gospel adherents is shaped by the systems, culture, and practices of their church community, human behavior in general is constantly being impacted by broader social factors and networks. As Richard Riegelman and Brenda Kirkwood assert,

Thus, changes in behavior often require more than individual motivation and determination to change. They require encouragement and support from groups ranging

³⁴⁰ Another way to think about the practice of need assessments is to consider an “inverse needs assessment,” which is more common among community organizing groups. This practice involves soliciting evaluations from neighborhood members regarding how well they think an organization is addressing local felt needs.

from friends and families to work and peer groups. Behavioral change may also require social policies and expectations that reinforce individual efforts.³⁴¹

The mutual role of individual effort and social determinants in protecting and promoting health demonstrates how a concern for addressing social determinants of health might complement the emphasis on self-determination within the Prosperity Gospel movement. Rather than suggesting that individual effort can overcome hindrances to health, public health can encourage churches to prioritize addressing the social causes behind negative health outcomes.

A more expansive and systemic approach to both poverty and public health would shift Prosperity Gospel sensibilities in significant ways. First, both poverty and public health resist a realized eschatology insofar as systemic hindrances to wealth and health are ongoing problems. Second, the pursuit of social justice defies the separatist sensibility within the Prosperity Gospel movement that prioritizes the success of those within the church, while placing less emphasis on the plight of nonbelievers. A more systemic approach to poverty and sickness ultimately requires a reshaped communal narrative in which a communal identification with Israel still takes seriously the social responsibility of the church beyond its membership.

Throughout King's writings he recognizes the inseparability of the church and the world, pushing his audiences to extend their concern to all of humanity. In his essay "The World House," King captures this insight, asserting,

Another grave problem that must be solved if we are to live creatively in our world house is that of poverty on an international scale. Like a monstrous octopus, it stretches its choking, prehensile tentacles into lands and villages all over the world. Two-thirds of the peoples of the world go to bed hungry at night. They are undernourished, ill-housed and

³⁴¹ Richard Riegelman and Brenda Kirkwood, *Public Health 101: Healthy People-Healthy Populations*, (Burlington, MA: Jones and Bartlett Learning, 2015), 84.

shabbily clad. Many of them have no houses or beds to sleep in. Their only beds are the sidewalks of the cities and the dusty roads of the villages. Most of these poverty-stricken children of God have never seen a physician or a dentist. There is nothing new about poverty. What is new, however, is that we now have the resources to get rid of it.³⁴²

In this essay, King uses the metaphor of a world house to capture how people of different backgrounds across the world are interconnected and in need of one another. As global neighbors there is now an imperative to attend to the social issues that not only impact us directly, but impact others who are now more connected to us than ever before. In this passage King recognizes how poverty and the lack of health are interrelated, and he challenges his readers to consider how utilizing tangible resources and a systemic approach to social ills can remedy these results of social injustice.

Embodying a concern for addressing social ills, including poverty or disparities in public health, requires not only concrete systemic efforts but particular communal sensibilities. Self-interest remains central to American individualism, and the frequent prioritization of self-interest over communal uplift can hinder sustained social progress. As a result, working on behalf of at-risk communities, including extra-ecclesial populations, requires a commitment that is not primarily contingent upon easily apparent ecclesial benefit. Often in American culture, the assumed lack of personal benefit can compromise efforts that might otherwise garner greater communal improvement. As Bernard Turnock states,

The failure to effect comprehensive national health reform in 1994 is an example of this phenomenon. At that time, middle-class Americans deemed the modest price tag of health reform to be excessive, refusing to pay more out of their own pockets when they

³⁴² Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here? Community or Chaos?*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1968), 187.

perceived that their own access and services were not likely to improve. The bitter political conflict accompanying the enactment of national health reform legislation in the form of the Affordable Care Act of 2010 reflected these same themes.³⁴³

Turnock notes how the perceived lack of personal benefit can undermine concern for those beyond one's social location, which in his example is people who are not middle-class. This reality suggests that in the case of Prosperity Gospel communities, increased efforts to address public health concerns must be accompanied by a concern for non-ecclesial communities that is not contingent on the church's direct benefit. This perspective does not have to assume that the church will not benefit; to the contrary, there are a variety of ways churches can benefit from this type of work, including how these activities form congregational culture and can even increase membership. Yet if self-interest functions as an underlying or overt litmus test for social engagement, this places an unnecessary limit on the scope of such engagement. If King's vision of a world house as well as his claim that "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" are both true, the implication is that both justice and the lack thereof will have corresponding effects beyond the scope of the at-risk community in question. Put differently, helping to address the needs of another community will positively affect the community that is responsible for providing aid. In the case of alleviating poverty this benefit could take the form of lower crime rates or improved health which can indirectly improve healthcare insurance premiums by placing less strain on the insurance system.

Drawing from Martin Luther King Jr.'s insights, there are several other practical ways that Prosperity Gospel churches, including Prosperity Church and Shalom Ministries, could promote a more ethically responsible communal narrative. First, Prosperity Gospel leaders and

³⁴³ Bernard J. Turnock, *Essentials of Public Health*, (Burlington, MA: Jones and Bartlett Learning, 2016), 12.

practitioners could more frequently incorporate Biblical texts that acknowledge the reality of Christian suffering and the biblical injunctions to care for the marginalized of society. This rhetorical shift could help to foster a theological framework for recognizing how the reality of suffering is not incompatible with divine faithfulness, nor human faithfulness, but is the result of an unredeemed world. Second, Prosperity Gospel leaders and practitioners often recite memorized confessions during church services – creeds that affirm God’s blessings of wealth and health. This deeply formative ritual may provide an important liturgical opportunity to affirm the faithfulness of both God and believers in the midst of suffering as well as the broader sociopolitical responsibility of the church. Third, music exerts a profound influence on Prosperity Gospel communities through messages of financial success and healing. A lyrical reconsideration of how to engage such issues could be a significant step toward reshaping communal sensibilities around both Christian and non-Christian suffering in the world. Such liturgical changes could promote a communal narrative that renders more ethically responsible church practices theologically necessary. This ecclesiological shift would affirm the inseparability of Christian practice and extra-ecclesial sociopolitical engagement. Yet it could also nurture more fruitful eschatological sensibilities in which the poor or sick have their spiritual integrity and value affirmed.

The Prosperity Gospel offers a communal narrative that presupposes a problematic realized eschatology. The Prosperity Gospel draws from the biblical stories of Israel to promote a communal narrative of success that assumes that believers have *already* inherited the “Promised Land.” It claims that the benefits of Christ’s sacrifice are present spiritual realities that must be claimed through faith and verbal affirmations. This perspective presupposes a realized eschatology in which the full benefits of Christian identity are presently accessible. Yet

since health, wealth, and success are already considered spiritual rights and realities for believers, this framework undermines the spiritual integrity of those who experience ongoing poverty or physical sickness. Such a theological framework implies that the lack of such blessings indicates personal spiritual deficiency. In contrast, Martin Luther King Jr.'s sermonic reflections on the Exodus offer a more ethically responsible vision for how to understand and engage both the poor and physically sick. King's insights can constructively inform Prosperity Gospel praxis.

It is important to note that although there are ways the Exodus motif helpfully frames ecclesial social action and resists a realized eschatology, the notion that the Exodus is the most helpful biblical theme is not without complications. On the one hand a typological reading of the Exodus, taken to the extreme, could suggest an antagonistic posture towards whites in ways that undermined the core sensibilities of nonviolent direct action. The Egyptians do not experience redemption but punishment by death. Further, the Exodus could be read as a moment of collective passivity that encourages a complacent piety that exclusively awaits God's action rather than joining that action. King's writings and work address these concerns in two key ways. He addresses the punishment issue by marrying justice with an invitational and inclusive conception of the beloved community as the content of that justice. He also addresses the passivity concern by assuming that just as Israel had to actively cross the Red Sea, it is necessary for black Americans to physically march and pursue justice in concrete ways. His exegetical use of the Exodus demonstrates that the text is not self-interpreting, but must rhetorically function alongside broader biblical values of loving one's enemies and active participation in the kingdom of God.

A third potential complication is the nature of the Exodus' contemporary applicability. In a critique of black liberation theology's use of the Exodus, womanist theologian Delores Williams offers this concern, contending that there is always the risk of consigning "the community and the black theological imagination to a kind of historical stalemate that denies the possibility of change with regard to the people's experience of God and with regard to the possibility of God changing in relation to the community."³⁴⁴ Her concern is that an exclusive reliance on the Exodus as a communal hermeneutic for how blacks understand their relationship to God is incompatible with the reality that the black community continues to change. Williams does not want to deny the historical importance of the Exodus, nor its contemporary usefulness; rather, she affirms that other theological and social sources are also necessary to capture the current state of black American Christians more adequately. In particular, she points to "non-Christian and non-Jewish sources" that might prove socially and theologically generative.³⁴⁵ Williams indicates the importance of not viewing the Exodus as the exclusive interpretive lens for how black Christians understand divine action and faithful social engagement. King foreshadows some of these sensibilities insofar as he draws from people of other faiths, with Mahatma Gandhi's nonviolence as the most notable example. Another helpful implication of Williams' remarks is that understanding the Exodus as necessarily compatible with, and even in need of, other socially responsible views and values broadens its relevance and applicability beyond the black Christian community specifically.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁴ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 151.

³⁴⁵ Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 152.

³⁴⁶ Williams' account of surrogacy is also instructive for the Prosperity Gospel insofar as the community often becomes a financial surrogate for pastors, bearing the brunt of the financial burden as pastors reap financial profits.

More recently, postcolonial hermeneutics has demonstrated that this openness to other paradigms and sources must be accompanied by an acknowledgement that biblical events can often raise as many ethical questions as they answer. As R.S. Sugirtharajah notes regarding the Exodus, “God is the one who emancipates Israel, but also in the process destroys Egyptians and Canaanites.”³⁴⁷ Postcolonial hermeneutics challenges readers of scripture to view the Exodus from the vantage of Canaanites and to acknowledge that a prescriptive assessment of this narrative also requires other conversational sources. Martin Luther King Jr. and postcolonial theorists like Sugirtharajah both recognize the problem of violence in the Exodus, but they deal with it in two different ways. Both thinkers agree that the Exodus should not be read in a vacuum, but King nuances a reading of the Exodus with a canonical hermeneutic that marries the Exodus with a New Testament emphasis on agape. By complementing his understanding of the Exodus with an emphasis on nonviolence and an inclusive beloved community, King attempts to mitigate the ways that the Exodus or Promised Land motifs can be coopted to endorse either divine or human violence, respectively. On the other hand, the problem of biblical violence leads thinkers like Sugirtharajah to turn towards nonbiblical sources. Sugirtharajah asserts that “For postcolonialism, the critical principle is not derived only from the Bible but is determined by contextual needs and other warrants. It sees the Bible as one among many liberating texts.”³⁴⁸ Neither King’s typological reading of scripture, nor postcolonial hermeneutics outright denies the Exodus’ usefulness, but they both suggest that this use must be dialogical.

While evangelical sensibilities likely preclude Prosperity Gospel churches from valuing nonbiblical sources on par with scripture, coupling a prioritization of the Exodus alongside other

³⁴⁷ R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, (New York, NY: Oxford Press, 2002), 118.

³⁴⁸ R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 118.

postcolonial reflections on scripture could shape more socially responsible practices. For example, taking postcolonial exegesis seriously, calls into question whether the Promised Land is the most helpful metaphor for Christian communal narratives. Although both the Exodus and the Promised Land present interpretive problems, the Exodus differs insofar as the active role of the community of faith remains nonviolent. An uncritical endorsement of the Promised Land motif risks sanctifying a logic of material success at the expense of marginalized groups. Postcolonial criticism implies that reading scripture not only “from below” but “from abroad” might expose how the Prosperity Gospel promotes a capitalistic vision that often fuels economic disenfranchisement on a global level. While capitalistic values such as rational self-interest, competition, the commodification of workers, and surplus profit often work in concert to promote economic exploitation globally, the Prosperity Gospel generally does not challenge these realities. Instead it encourages adherents to rely on the spiritual power of piety for economic success. The Exodus would prove more helpful in this regard because it evidences liberation apart from economic exploitation. During the Exodus Israel receives the spoils (or reparations?)³⁴⁹ of Egypt,³⁵⁰ which contrasts the pattern of material success at the expense of others during the conquest of Canaan.³⁵¹ For these and other reasons, the Exodus is a more useful interpretive paradigm, not only for Prosperity Gospel communities, but the broader church.

In contrast to the Prosperity Gospel, King resists a fully realized eschatology by suggesting that the Promised Land is not a present reality. His focus on the Exodus affords him

³⁴⁹ Delores Williams raises the possibility of viewing these spoils as reparations; see *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 150.

³⁵⁰ The account of Israel leaving with Egyptian wealth is in Exodus 12:36.

³⁵¹ In addition to these exegetical concerns, postcolonial criticism raises the question of whether the Prosperity Gospel replicates the colonial project by promoting American culture in ways that either undermine or replace indigenous practices. This is a topic that Tony Lin will address in a forthcoming book on the relationship between the Prosperity Gospel and the American Dream.

a hermeneutical and homiletical dynamism that can express the hope of the Promised Land without sacrificing an adequate interpretive framework for poverty, suffering, and unrealized expectations for the “beloved community.” In his sermons, King captures this tension by pointing to Israel’s journeys through the Red Sea and the wilderness as two narrative analogues for contemporary obstacles in the ongoing struggle for freedom and equality. As a result, King does not consider the Promised Land a present reality. Yet it is precisely this recognition that the oppressed have not “arrived” that helps to provide Christian believers with a helpful framework for pursuing a land, and a life, “flowing with milk and honey.”

CONCLUSION

“WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?”

This dissertation provides a theological analysis of the Prosperity Gospel, the fastest growing segment of Christianity globally. This project offers several important interventions into broader theological discourse. Most obviously, it directly engages a movement largely ignored by academic theology. By focusing on the Prosperity Gospel, as well as drawing from qualitative research methods, this dissertation contributes to the growing corpus of theological works which take the religious and quotidian lives of faith communities seriously. In addition, popular reflections on the Prosperity Gospel generally engage its emphasis on wealth without attending to how it approaches the issue of divine healing. This analytic tendency only contributes to problematic caricatures of the Prosperity Gospel as exclusively interested in wealth acquisition. Instead, this project provides an account of both wealth and health within the Prosperity Gospel, as well as demonstrating how these two emphases are deeply interconnected.

Addressing the relationship between health and wealth within the Prosperity Gospel is at the heart of this dissertation's central thesis. I argue that the Prosperity Gospel presents a individualistic theological anthropology that is harmful for those who experience ongoing poverty or continue to lack robust health. This theological anthropology emphasizes personal self-sufficiency over interdependence and lacks an adequate framework for affirming the spiritual integrity of those experiencing poverty or sickness. This project's focus on theological anthropology and its accompanying views of the good life demonstrates how the Prosperity Gospel's conceptions of health and wealth are products of a similar logic. That logic valorizes personal success and self-sufficient individualism without an adequate account of human interdependence.

The ethical reflections of Dietrich Bonhoeffer help to capture and respond to this vision of the good life. Bonhoeffer offers a theological anthropology in which the content of the image of God in humanity is an ontological interdependence and creaturely limitation that leads to true freedom and responsible action. His work helps to identify the gesture toward self-sufficiency in the Prosperity Gospel as an echo of humanity's desire to be *sicut deus*; an attempt to live out of its own resources. What is at stake in this difference between individualism and interdependence is not only a theoretical distinction, but the possibility of a theological impetus capable of fostering sustained social solidarity and advocacy on behalf of one's neighbor. Bonhoeffer's emphasis on interdependence more effectively challenges Christian believers to attend to the concrete needs of others without conflating concrete need with impiety.

Despite its theological liabilities, the Prosperity Gospel remains an incredibly popular movement. Through my ethnographic and theological research, I have sought to probe where the roots of this appeal lay. This dissertation concludes that contrary to popular assumptions, the specific lust for money rarely plays an exclusive or central role in why adherents embrace the Prosperity Gospel. Rather, they are presented with a broader and more holistic vision of personal success, couched within a communal narrative of social progress. This holistic vision offers hope amidst suffering and gives adherents a sense of identity and purpose. In this way, the Prosperity Gospel involves communal identification alongside an emphasis on individual self-sufficiency as the content and product of that identification. In other words, as believers join the proverbial Prosperity Gospel communal bandwagon, God is expected to provide them with the material goods that will remove their need for help. This dynamic demonstrates that the full story of the Prosperity Gospel's theological anthropology cannot be told with reference to either

individualism or communal identification exclusively; both realities play significant roles in how adherents understand themselves and the good life to which they aspire.

The work of Martin Luther King, Jr., helps to reveal how the theological liability of the Prosperity Gospel communal narrative is also a function of its narrative content. Echoing Israel's conquest of the Promised Land, Prosperity Gospel adherents view themselves as having dominion over the spiritual curses of poverty and sickness. They understand this victory as a result of identification with Christ's redemptive work and as a means for accessing material prosperity. King's insights offer a corrective to this communal narrative by providing a framework that does not sacrifice realism for hope. Put differently, King denies a realized eschatology that assumes that the Promised Land is a present reality while he still views that Land as on the horizon. This perspective is grounded in King's explication of the Exodus. This conceptual contrast between the Prosperity Gospel's realized eschatology and King's more "now, but not yet" sensibility is instructive for the Prosperity Gospel as well as the broader church. By pushing back on problematic realized eschatologies that undermine the necessity of systemic reform via an overspiritualizing gesture, this dissertation challenges the broader church to recognize King's words as a corrective to tendencies within the church writ large.

A key claim in this project, and much of qualitative research, is that a targeted and limited scope of inquiry can nonetheless be analytically generalizable. There are several reasons why this project provides an example of how specific case studies might illuminate the broader Prosperity Gospel movement in America. First, each of these two churches is firmly implanted within the Prosperity Gospel tradition. Since its inception, Shalom Ministries has been steeped in the Word of Faith tradition, with its founding pastor having studied at the Word of Faith movement's flagship ministry training institution, RHEMA Bible Training College. Similarly,

Prosperity Church now ranks as one of the most influential Prosperity Gospel churches on the east coast, and is directly shaped by some of the three most well-known black Prosperity preachers in America. In addition, this dissertation's conclusions speak to the broader movement because they are grounded in ethnographic work that foregrounds the actions and reflections of practitioners. From content analyses of sermons, to participant observation, to formal and informal interviews, inductively gathered empirical data provide an essential precondition for this project's conclusions. As a work of lived theology, this dissertation's theologically normative aims are intended to complement rather than replace a thick description of how adherents practice and respond to their faith commitments.

The differences between Shalom Ministries and Prosperity Church also help to depict the theological and liturgical breadth of the broader movement. Together they resist popular caricatures that view the Prosperity Gospel as either monolithic or exclusively focused on material greed. In addition, they reveal how even the nature of financial prosperity is not self-evident. As Prosperity Church members identified prosperity with excess and abundance, and Shalom Ministries members equated it with lack of need, these two perspectives illumined subtle but significantly different perspectives on the relationship between faith and finances. This comparative assessment also helps to reveal how the breadth of the Prosperity Gospel provides preconditions for internal critique and theological refinement. This possibility for internal critique is important because it suggests that a critique of the Prosperity Gospel does not have to throw out the baby with the bathwater. There remain internal resources that can provide a path forward for the broader Prosperity Gospel movement. Perhaps as a construct, the Prosperity Gospel itself occupies an Exodus moment, grasping for the Promised Land but not yet having arrived at its potential as a theological framework. A turn away from an individualistic realized

eschatology would position the Prosperity Gospel to speak more effectively to the broader church as it names concrete social needs as essential components of any viable ecclesial theology. Only then can those within and beyond the Prosperity Gospel movement collectively help those in the American context experience what it means to be “blessed and highly favored.”

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