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DEEP STORIES:
NARRATIVE'S ROLE IN AMERICAN
RELIGION AND POLITICS

Reading Packet 3

Boisi Center 2018-2019 Graduate Symposium on Religion and Politics

DEEP STORIES:

NARRATIVE'S ROLE IN AMERICAN RELIGION AND POLITICS

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POLITICS

Mike Pence says the American dream was ‘dying’ before Trump became president

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KEY POINTS

- Vice President Mike Pence says the American dream was “dying until President Donald Trump was inaugurated” in 2017.
- Trump’s policies are generating jobs and raising wages “at the fastest pace of all,” Pence says, which “gives evidence of the fact that the American dream is coming back.”
- According to a February poll by RealClearPolitics, a majority of Americans feel the American dream is in trouble.



Vice President Mike Pence as US President Donald Trump speaks.

Brendan Smialowski / AFP / Getty Images

Vice President Mike Pence [said Wednesday](#) that the American dream was “dying until President Donald Trump was inaugurated” in 2017.

“Was the American dream in trouble? You bet,” Pence said in an interview with CNBC’s Joe Kernan on [“Squawk Box”](#) Thursday morning. “I really do believe that’s why the American people chose a president whose family lived the American dream and was willing to go in and fight to make the American dream available for every American.”

Pence told Kernan that before Trump became president, trade deals pushed car manufacturers out of the country, something he saw while serving as Indiana’s governor, but Trump fought “for trade deals that put American jobs and American workers first.”

Some manufacturers have expanded in the U.S. since Trump began

his term in the Oval Office. In February, Ford announced [plans to invest](#) \$1 billion and add jobs at its Chicago factories as it makes cuts overseas. A Toyota and Mazda joint venture in 2018 [broke ground on a \\$1.6 billion](#) assembly plant in Alabama that is expected to open in 2021 and employ 4,000 people.

However, others aren't faring as well. [General Motors shut down a decades-old factory in Lordstown, Ohio, in March](#), leaving thousands of workers in search of new jobs.

Though the Trump administration had success in boosting manufacturing jobs, many feel the American dream still faces challenges, according to a [February poll](#) by RealClearPolitics.

Some 37% of the poll's voters said the American dream is alive, but under threat; 28% said it's under serious threat, but that there's still hope; 7% said it is dead; and 27% said it is alive and well.

But Pence said the American dream is recovering.

Trump's policies are generating jobs and raising wages "at the fastest pace of all," he said, which "gives evidence of the fact that the American dream is coming back. People are seeing opportunity open up. Small business confidence at record highs, according to the NFIB."

Indeed, the small business association's optimism survey hit a 45-year high in August and has remained strong, the group said in recent

press releases.

Pence's comments come as a number of U.S. billionaires and business leaders [call for fixes](#) to America's system of capitalism. Berkshire Hathaway CEO Warren Buffett, J.P. Morgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon, Bridgewater founder Ray Dalio and Microsoft founder Bill Gates — who are some of the wealthiest people in the country — have said the current economic system contributes to income inequality.

In a letter to shareholders last week, Dimon wrote he was exasperated by the growing inequality in the U.S. He recommended higher taxes on America's wealthiest citizens.

“If that happens, the wealthy should remember that if we improve our society and our economy, then they, in effect, are among the main winners,” Dimon said.

The White House did not immediately respond to CNBC's request for comment.

TRENDING NOW

Tax refunds are going to be delayed for filers claiming these tax credits

1 CDC prepares for possibility coronavirus becomes pandemic and businesses, schools need to close

2

Excerpt from:

**(Mis)Understood Values:
Rural, Working-Class, White America and the Barriers to Solidarity**
R. Zachary Karanovich

NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

A Portrait of the Rural, Working-Class, and White Community

As noted above, there has been a renewed or amplified interest in understanding the rural, working-class, white communities of the United States in the last number of years. There seems to be a direct correlation between this attention and the election of both Barack Obama and Donald Trump that in distinct ways prompted from some the forceful urging of values that, although possibly rooted in good intentions, emerged as racist, xenophobic, etc.¹

In order to understand better the underlying value system, it is important to hear from and try to understand the members of these communities. In 2016, when the desire to understand rural, working-class whites was arguably at its height, J.D. Vance published *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*.² In it, he tells his own story and attempts an analysis of both his own community and the larger society from within which he made his ascent. Vance was born into a family he himself refers to as “hillbilly.” His mother suffered from addiction and was in and out of various relationships—a source of instability for Vance. His maternal grandparents, especially his grandmother, became the stable parent figures he needed, supporting him in his studies, teaching him responsibility, encouraging him through a stint in the military and onto college. Throughout, Vance’s grandparents were also instilling in him a value system

¹ The racial component of this discussion is important. While I am unable to include a full discussion of its import here, I have included an explanatory note in Appendix A.

² New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2016.

typical of rural, working-class white communities. This value system might best be described as “honor culture.”³

Central to this value system is a *fidelity* to two groups: family and class. The first holds a priority over the second, but both are required. This fidelity manifests itself as a loyalty to family and to community. This is important in private, but more centrally as it is revealed in public—how one acts and what one says about their family or their “people.” The family, the community, and one’s own self are respected when the actions that are seen or statements said to those outside one’s family or community are perceived by those groups to which they refer are indeed honorable. Acting in this way communicates both a knowledge of who one is as well as the pride of holding such a social location—not an attempt at being something you are not or were not raised to be. It is not “bad” to have to work hard, and it is not “bad” to have to be frugal. There is pride in doing both well. In a word, there is pride in their class identification. Additionally, loyalty to family is central. As Vance describes of his grandmother: “She loathed disloyalty, and there was no greater disloyalty than class betrayal.”⁴ And she expected a “complete devotion to family.”⁵ To betray one’s family or class meant that one was “too big for their britches,” and class meant more than money.⁶

Hard work is another central value. Rural, working-class white communities ground their value system in the American Dream: anyone can make their way to a comfortable living by working hard; a meritocracy. For Vance’s grandparents, they shared a fundamental belief that the American Dream was real. As Vance says, “Still, Mamaw and Papaw believed that hard work mattered more. They knew that life was a struggle, and though the odds were a bit longer

³ Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy*, 15.

⁴ Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy*, 15.

⁵ Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy*, 41.

⁶ Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy*, 30, 63.

for people like them, that fact didn't excuse failure. 'Never be like these f***ing losers who think the deck is stacked against them. . . . You can do anything you want to.'⁷ This is a trust in the American Dream's possibility, that working hard will pay off, and that there are not systemic barriers to one's achieving success beyond drive, willpower, and perseverance.

The result of this success means that one *avoids social welfare programs*—programs that indicate one did not show honor to one's family or class and that one did not work hard. Social welfare is a stigma in the rural, working-class, white community. It is the antithesis of the community's value system. And yet, it is prominent. This points to a *contradiction* in the community and an *internal paradox* regarding their own identity that plays centrally in the community: a preference for viewing one's self in the most positive light and not engaging in self-critical reflection. As Vance describes of one of his grandmother's neighbors:

a lifetime welfare recipient, but in between asking my grandmother to borrow her car or offering to trade food stamps for cash at a premium, she'd blather on about the importance of industriousness. 'So many people abuse the system, it's impossible for the hardworking people to get the help they need,' she'd say. This was the construct she'd built in her head: Most of the beneficiaries of the system were extravagant moochers, but she—despite never having worked in her life—was an obvious exception.⁸

This internal conflict or contradiction points to another central aspect complicating the value system of rural, working-class whites: the honor culture in a culture of poverty. Vance argues, "[H]illbillies learn from an early age to deal with uncomfortable truths by avoiding them, or by pretending better truths exist. This tendency might make for psychological resilience, but it also makes it hard for Appalachians to look at themselves honestly."⁹ This buttresses the view that the community has an incapacity for critical self-engagement.

⁷ Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy*, 36.

⁸ Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy*, 57.

⁹ Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy*, 20.

Finally, *religion* has an interesting relationship with the value system. While not always central to the day-to-day practice of rural, working-class white, the identification as religious persons and the theological views they hold are integral. For Vance, while religion was not necessarily central in his experience, his grandmother taught elementary theological principles that affirmed the value system, but also underlined the precarity of life in such a system: work hard, do not squander God-given talent; Christianity demands care for family; forgive others for their and one's own sake; and God has a plan. But trust in God was not absolute protection against ill fortune. Life was fragile.¹⁰

These elements as essential to the rural, working-class, white values system—honor, loyalty, hard work, avoiding welfare, internal contradiction, and religion's supportive role—are further affirmed in the study undertaken by Arlie Russel Hochschild. She concludes after the in-depth study of a rural, working-class, white community in Louisiana where she explored the political divide that this value system was all a part of their “deep story.” In Hochschild's view, all of us have a deep story. Regardless of its grounding in fact, the “deep story is a *feels-as-if* story—it's the story feelings tell, in the language of symbols. It removes judgment. It removes fact. It tells us how things feel.”¹¹ As she explains it, the deep story is a response of both nostalgia and frustration—there is both a sense of the way things were, typified by the tenets of the American dream, as well as the keenly felt awareness that things are no longer functioning that way. And the deep story is a piece of evidence upon which people buttress their actions.

¹⁰ Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy*, 86-87.

¹¹ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: The New Press, 2016), 135.

To the rural, working-class whites that Hochschild interviewed, she found that the deep story she articulated that sought to encompass their value system and its current status was well received. She writes:

You are patiently standing in the middle of a long line stretching toward the horizon, where the American Dream awaits. But as you wait, you see people cutting in line ahead of you. Many of these line-cutters are black—beneficiaries of affirmative action or welfare. Some are career-driven women pushing into jobs they never had before. Then you see immigrants, Mexicans, Somalis, the Syrian refugees yet to come. As you wait in this unmoving line, you’re being asked to feel sorry for them all. You have a good heart. But who is deciding who you should feel compassion for? Then you see President Barack Hussein Obama waving the line-cutters forward. He’s on their side. In fact, isn’t he a line-cutter too? How did this fatherless black guy pay for Harvard? As you wait your turn, Obama is using the money in your pocket to help the line-cutters. He and his liberal backers have removed the shame from taking. The government has become an instrument for redistributing your money to the undeserving. It’s not your government anymore; it’s theirs.¹²

What her articulation of the deep story surfaces is the ongoing foundational role the American Dream plays, but that due to the government’s imposition of the values it wishes to uphold—imposed through the leadership of Obama, in this case—the American Dream is being imposed upon by those who have not played by the same set of rules, and these line-cutters are typically people of color, immigrants, and refugees. There is no questioning of the validity of the American Dream, but rather that it is not working because of rule-breaking by politicians and their beneficiaries. As a result, the relationship to larger structural elements of society are truly love-hate: the free market is “the unwavering ally of the good citizens waiting in line for the American Dream,” so they love it; but “the federal government [is] on the side of those unjustly ‘cutting in,’” and they, therefore, hate it.¹³

¹² Arlie Russell Hochschild, “No Country for White Men,” *Mother Jones Magazine*, September/October 2016, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/08/trump-white-blue-collar-supporters/>.

¹³ Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*, 150.

What is most problematic is the role of the American Dream. While some do achieve what is promised in this dream—consider Vance’s own success as a Yale-educated lawyer— as is the case with such success stories, he can be upheld as a model of the proper functioning of the American dream—which is, as Nancy Isenberg argues, a “myth.”¹⁴ Isenberg looks at the same class of people Vance represents but from a larger historical perspective. Her study shows that whereas the value system is indeed as it is articulated in Vance and Hochschild, the development of that value system—the enmeshed and inextricably linked American dream and some similar form of the deep story—is the product of and further supports ongoing educational oppression, economic exploitation, and political manipulation.

It was not until the realization that votes could be gained that presidential candidates began bolstering the narratives which rural, working-class whites believed. For example, Vance roots working-class whites’ support of Richard Nixon in his understanding that “‘payin’ people who are on welfare today doin’ nothin’! They’re laughin’ at our society! And we’re all hardworkin’ people and we’re gettin’ laughed at for workin’ every day!’”¹⁵ Rural, working-class whites were instrumentalized. As Lyndon Johnson said, “I’ll tell you what’s at the bottom of it. If you can convince the lowest white man he’s better than the best colored man, he won’t notice you’re picking his pocket. Hell, give him somebody to look down on, and he’ll empty his pockets for you.”¹⁶ This political manipulation affirmed the myth bound up in the community’s deep story and exploited the American Dream for political gain.

As a result of these factors, rural, working-class whites tended toward supporting smaller government and freer markets because this is what “fit” with the deep story, the myth, and the

¹⁴ Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400-Year Old Untold History of Class in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 313.

¹⁵ Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy*, 140.

¹⁶ Isenberg, *White Trash*, 264.

American Dream. This manipulation is not relegated to the past, however. In April 2019, Vice President Mike Pence commented, “Was the American dream in trouble? You bet . . . I really do believe that’s why the American people chose a president whose family lived the American dream and was willing to go in and fight to make the American dream available for every American.”¹⁷ Before Trump became president, Pence further argued, the American dream was “dying.”¹⁸ While I agree with Isenberg that the American dream is indeed a myth, even among those organizations that still believe in the American dream’s possibility, there is a disconnect between those rural, working-class, white communities who act on the basis of this American dream and the benefits that actually reach those communities.¹⁹

There is an interplay between a few concepts that have been used throughout this first part that need to be defined more precisely, although they all converge around the central term: myth. A myth can be understood in many ways, verging on the false—like a legend or a folk tale—or on the true—like an allegory or a parable (those stories that are used to communicate a truth). In this paper, myth functions in two ways. First, myths are understood as those falsehoods that are peddled by politicians, the media, and others that influence the underlying narratives. These underlying narratives include the deep story—a more holistic interpretation of the situation—and the American Dream—a sub-narrative within the deep story of rural, working-class, white communities. Second, these narratives are the myths, or the overarching

¹⁷ Ashley Turney, “Mike Pence says the American dream was ‘dying’ before Trump became president,” CNBC (April 11, 2019), available at <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/04/11/mike-pence-says-the-american-dream-was-dying-until-trump-was-inaugurated.html>.

¹⁸ Turney, “Mike Pence says the American dream was ‘dying’ before Trump became president.”

¹⁹ In a study completed by the Economic Innovation Group entitled, “Is the American Dream Alive or Dead? It Depends on Where You Look,” the organization found, for example, that among the counties in which the American Dream is out of reach—those distressed counties where young people will earn less than their parents, and where poverty and inequality is perpetuated across generations—“Trump carried 79 percent of these counties representing 72 percent of the population in the group—dominating this category of places more than any other.” Study available at <https://eig.org/dcieop>.

stories, that function as an interpretive tool for understanding experiences, even if it leads to the experience's misunderstanding. So, myths are both the falsehoods that feed the narratives and the narratives themselves that are used as the interpretive lenses through which one interprets the world.

With the influence of these myths, we find that, although they might initially be rooted in a good system of values (honor, loyalty, and hard work as part of a meritocracy), the decisions—generally speaking—of rural, working-class whites are often also contrary to their own good and drive them toward an incapacity for solidarity with those similarly situated, be they immigrant, refugee, or poor person of color.²⁰ Addressing this concern for solidarity is part of a project of rejecting the myths in their informative and interpretive forms to reconstruct a sense of moral understanding that deconstructs the false cultural framework that reinforces bias for the benefit of the few.

²⁰ Consider, for example, widespread support of the repeal of the Affordable Care Act by rural, working-class, whites and—paradoxically—the reality of who benefits from the law. See Vann R. Newkirk II, “Simply Repealing Obamacare Will Hurt the White Working Class,” *The Atlantic*, November 22, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/11/trump-healthcare-plan-working-class-whites/508325/>.

Church in the heat of the charismatic revival, returned to pentecostal circles chagrined. Attempts at imposing unity on this boisterous movement had failed. The "Seattle Presbytery," led by Dennis Bennett, and the "Charismatic Concerns Committee" of Oklahoma City had failed to deal with tensions between pentecostal and charismatic mainliners over such controversial practices as rebaptism or mass exorcisms.¹⁴² The wildly successful 1977 Kansas City charismatic conference that drew 45,000 registrants was forced to accommodate two warring factions of pentecostals. When the preachers known as the Fort Lauderdale Five organized hundreds of ministers in a hierarchy of submission and obedience they were derided as the "Charismatic Vatican."¹⁴³ Fears were expressed that the vigorous independence of the movement was being usurped by a few, maverick, more powerful church leaders. The momentum of the charismatic movement was carrying it further from the mainline and back toward the independence and unruliness of stand-alone pentecostalism. And as it did, unfettered pentecostalism found new homes in the rise of evangelical hybrids like John Wimber's Vineyard movement and Chuck Smith's Calvary Chapel.

In the years after the charismatic movement, the prosperity gospel continued to be shaped by the revival's deep imprint on the religious landscape. It was as if a door between pentecostal and traditional churches had been opened, and the prosperity gospel entered in with the rest. Churchgoing Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Catholics, to name only a few, looked at Holy Spirit-filled teachers with new interest. These nonpentecostal supporters—even those who remained in their own denominations—proved to be an unexpected boon to the swelling ranks of prosperity teachers. Over the years, this demographic would continue to generate many Monday-through-Saturday followers for prosperity conferences, publications, and media, despite their Sunday attendance at traditional congregations. The prosperity movement expanded further as it gathered up charismatic wanderers without a denominational home. After breathing the rarefied air of the Spirit, many did not want to go back.

3

Wealth

Jehovah Jireh (my provider)

TELEVANGELISTS JIM AND Tammy Faye Bakker needed to look no further than their own backyard to see how far the prosperity gospel had come. By the early 1980s, their 2,200-acre Christian resort and theme park in South Carolina, Heritage USA, had become the nation's third most-visited attraction. Tourists could wander from the pricey Heritage Grand Mansion, vacation houses, and restaurants to the roller rink, sprawling water park, and family-friendly campgrounds. It was a Christian playground for believers, who, flushed with their own successes, caught the vision of the charismatic couple who made the abundant life seem possible. The Bakkers presided over the electric church as television royalty, attracting audiences with their campy banter and theatrical delivery. Their high-roller lifestyle—complete with mansion, designer apparel, and twin Mercedes cars—made the couple icons of the billion-dollar televangelism industry and living examples of the power of faith to produce results. Both successful and controversial, Tammy and Jim, an Assemblies of God preacher, embodied the financial heights to which pentecostals had climbed and invited the rest to join the action. "The gospel to the poor," concluded Kenneth Copeland, "is that Jesus has come and they don't have to be poor anymore!"¹

The most controversial aspect of the movement was its radical claim to transform invisible faith into financial rewards. Its prophets proclaimed a palpable gospel, one that could be clearly seen and measured in the financial well-being of its participants. We miss an important part of the story if we detach divine finance from the larger promise of *demonstrable* faith. Believers accepted what the theologian Miroslav Volf dubbed the *materiality of salvation*, that the work of redemption begins in the here and now. Historically, pentecostals set themselves apart by their expectation that "signs and wonders" accompanied evangelism as anticipations of God's

reign. Authentic Christianity bore witness to itself not only by the truth of its teachings but also by the supernatural trail following in its wake. The prosperity gospel elaborated on this doctrine by teaching that these wonders manifested themselves in the life of every individual, and that faithful individuals should expect signs and wonders in their lives as evidence of the truth of their convictions. Further, financial abundance and good health stood as public and perpetual demonstrations of Christians' spiritual progress. Prosperity and health were two sides of the same coin. Gloria Copeland marveled that she "had been looking at finances and prosperity in a different way from other things, such as divine health . . . If a symptom of sickness came on my body, I would not stand for it . . . You should refuse lack just as quickly as you refuse sickness."²

This chapter follows the explosion of the prosperity gospel in the late 1970s and how it convinced believers to calculate their conviction according to their wallets. The movement thrived and survived a decadent decade ruled by supersized churches and televangelists with big hair and bigger promises. Success followed those ministers who learned how to combine media mastery, church-growth formulas, and openness to independent pentecostalism. Faith for finances had hit its stride. Its flashy reputation became a public relations nightmare in the late 1980s when the moral failures of a few tarnished the very idea of a glamorous minister. But the movement deftly refashioned itself for the postmodern 1990s as therapeutic and down-to-earth Christian self-improvement, tempering its *hard prosperity* with a *soft prosperity* image. The prosperity gospel had become the foremost Christian theology of modern living. In the movement's peaks and valleys, followers persisted in seeking a God of abundance in scripture, in the example of leaders, but most often, in the twists and turns of their own lives. Prosperity was a gospel of weights and measures. As preachers heaped promise after promise of monetary gain, supporters sought out scales by which to weigh their own rewards.

A Prosperous Movement

By the late 1970s, prosperity preachers could survey the charismatic landscape with satisfaction. The old guard among them had once been a tenting assembly of independent revivalists who envisioned pentecostalism as the "child of rejection and poverty."³ Now, they stood at the helm of the sprawling movement that remade much of pentecostalism in its image. The prosperity movement's tightly knit network—television personalities,

senior pastors, media moguls, traveling speakers, and miracle workers alike—shared a vision of universal spiritual laws that drew blessings from the spiritual plane for earthly use. Though the language varied, the movement could be identified by its heavily instrumental definition of faith that, as Kenneth Copeland stated, "can be controlled. . . . You can turn it off, or turn it on."⁴ Though the finer points of prosperity theology mattered, faith was faith only because it *worked*.

The prosperity gospel was unhindered—and untested. Miss America winners had become hosts on its television networks, and city mayors heaped accolades upon their hometown heroes.⁵ Oral Roberts, Pat Robertson, and Kenneth Copeland were becoming household names while hundreds of lesser known ministries pumped out books plastered with rainbows, waterfalls, and waving wheat that reminded people that, as one title extolled, *There's Plenty For You*. Christian bookstores advertised their manuals for everything from the uses of faith, the reality of healing, and overflowing finances, to the looming end times, and the Christian family. Its authors had a kitschy charm, posing for cover photos shaking their fists at the devil or waiting for a shower of blessings under prop umbrellas. People didn't seem to mind a little corniness as long as it caught nonbelievers' attention. The preaching duo Brenda and Mack Timberlake, for example, bathed their 80,000-square foot church of steel and concrete in the cornflower blue of Mack's trademark suits. (Brenda's characteristic sequins never found architectural expression.) Borrowing a term previously used only to describe the ideas of Kenneth Hagin, a new subculture of believers calling themselves Faith, Word, or sometimes Word of Faith people boldly professed positive words as if to shake down heaven's treasures.⁶ The message so captivated and even scandalized co-laborers of this gospel that, by 1981, worried colleagues called a meeting with Kenneth Hagin to express concerns that his graduates were "confessing Cadillacs."⁷

The prosperity gospel's newfound prominence in the pentecostal-charismatic world was written in the headlines of every major conference advertisement. In the 1970s, a prosperity preacher was just one of many Jesus freaks in sideburns and bell-bottoms, but in the 1980s the movement rose up to dominate the stage. Figure 3.2 visually represents all conference participation in the 1980s as advertised in *Charisma* magazine, the era's most widely read charismatic periodical with 100,000 readers.⁸ (For more on how to interpret the prosperity movement's network, see appendix B.) Clearly the two most striking features of this picture are the frequency of these pastors' interactions and the centrality of prosperity



FIGURE 3.1 Kenneth Hagin and Friends T. L. Osborn, Kenneth Hagin, and Oral Roberts share the stage at Hagin's 1983 camp meeting.

Source: Used by permission of the Holy Spirit Research Center, Oral Roberts University.

preachers in the pentecostal domain. Names such as Oral Roberts, Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, Robert Tilton, Benny Hinn, and Marilyn Hickey—whose reputations were inseparable from Christian teaching on divine money—became the most frequently featured speakers of the 1980s. The simple fact was that spirit-filled American churches advertised prosperity preachers more than any other kind of speaker.

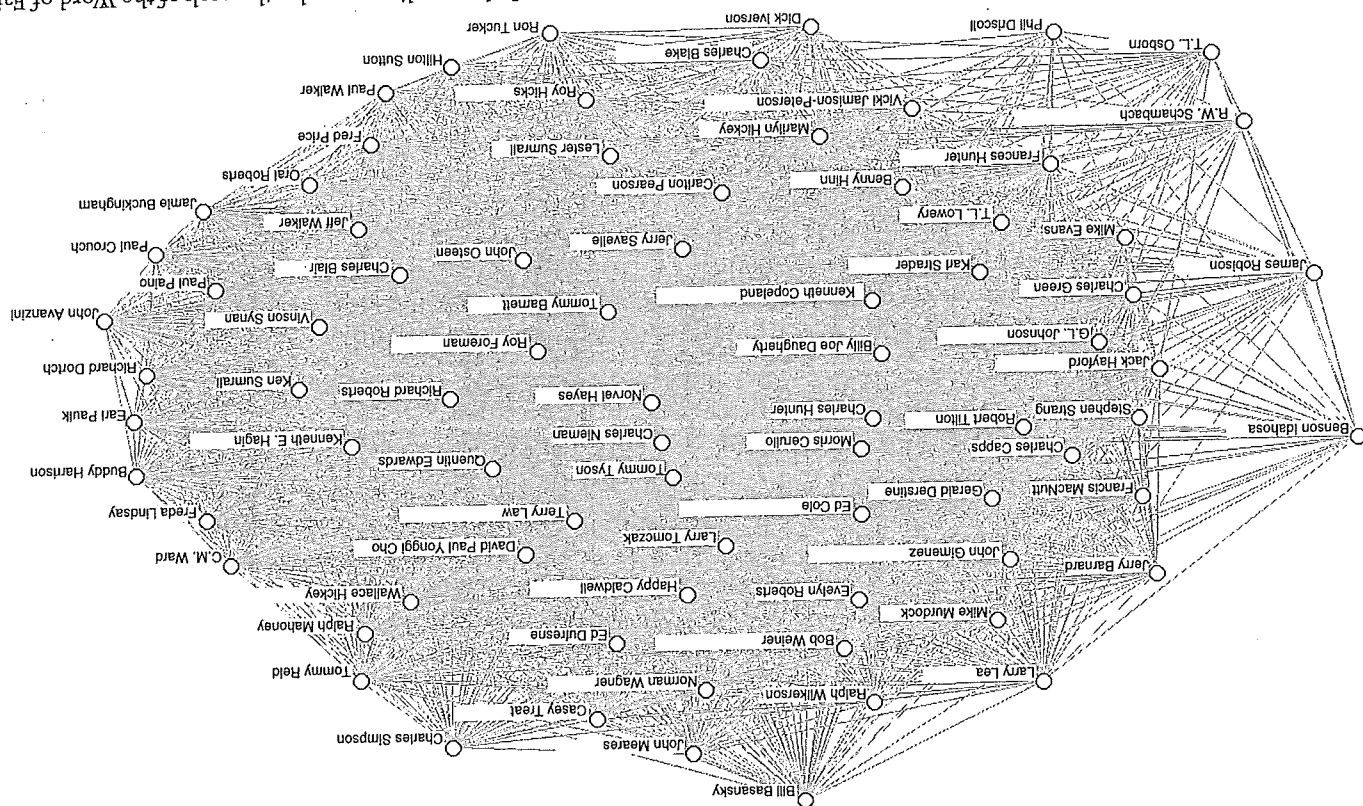


FIGURE 3.2 1980s Conference Participation Advertised in *Charisma* The golden age of televangelism was also the peak of the Word of Faith movement's influence over the pentecostal conference circuit. Anyone associated with Oral Roberts and Kenneth Hagin was a conference mainstay.

Prosperity preachers dominated the conference circuit as the must-see superstars of the pentecostal-charismatic world. Leaders from the bygone charismatic movement, like Francis McNutt and Larry Tomczak, still lingered, but it was clear as day that prosperity preachers stood at the forefront. Kenneth and Gloria Copeland's "Victory Seminars" took them in a yearly circuit of almost two-dozen major cities for a total audience of 80,000. Francis and Charles Hunter, known as the Happy Hunters, brought their healing revivals and prosperity theology to hundreds of American cities. Oral Roberts, Pat Robertson, and Kenneth Hagin could pack the Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International's bustling annual conventions. By the late 1980s, the organization had spearheaded 2,646 chapters worldwide, gathering monthly attendance of 600,000 to 700,000.⁹ Those with modest reputations—Jerry Savelle, John Gimenez, Vicki Jamison Peterson—used conferences as opportunities to hone their skills and garner wider audiences. Connection was the lifeblood of independent ministries, and conferences, television, and magazines pumped fresh faces and crowds into circulation.

We can see the rough parameters of the prosperity movement at this time—what observers traditionally associate with the term Word of Faith—by focusing on the conference associates of Oral Roberts (figure 3-4) and Kenneth Hagin (figure 3-5). The nearly identical connections shared by Roberts and Hagin illustrate how the movement was both diverse and united. Diverse, as the prosperity gospel gained its vast reach through multiple pillars of support. United, as these preachers' dense web of association allows us to regard them as a single entity.

Until the mid-1970s, the message had never been a full-fledged movement. The prosperity gospel had always been a minor theme in a larger revival or a major theme in a smaller revival.¹⁰ Now, the prosperity movement could claim not only a shared theological platform, but also a newly stabilized base of publications, conferences, associations, and television programs through which pastors promoted their ministries and those of fellow prosperity teachers. In many respects, the movement duplicated the successes of the healing and charismatic revivals that preceded it and in some ways even enveloped it.¹¹ While magazines of the charismatic revival folded, Oral Roberts, Kenneth Hagin, and T. L. Osborn ramped up their efforts and made their own glossy magazines major evangelistic tools. The personal connections that invigorated postwar independent pentecostalism still coursed through the faith movement, but an observer might have to look in different places. Favored friends not only could

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system access is completely estimated, and there is no regular

time.

These men and women, and many others, have decided to come together under the banner of holy revelation in

John 17:21 to provide one complete 24-hour TV channel of

teaching and ministry each day, including prime

time.

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expect an added advertisement for their upcoming crusades, but a seat on a university advisory board or even an honorary degree.

Its teachers began to cement their informal connections among diverse ministries by joining associations, alternatively called fellowships, which acted as voluntary societies of ordained ministers. Unlike denominations, fellowships did not ordain ministers or oversee the ministries of their members; these loose-knit networks typically shared little more than a brief faith statement, an annual conference, and the company of fine colleagues. In 1978, Jim and Kathleen Kaseman founded the Association of Faith Churches and Ministers (AFCM) "to promote fellowship among the ministers who shared their vision of taking the 'Word of Faith' message to the world."¹² With growing numbers of new churches and ministries founded in the name of faith, Jim Kaseman, a graduate of the charter class of Rhema Bible Training Center, sought to bring much-needed resources to their growing ranks. The following year, Buddy Harrison, Kenneth Hagin's son-in-law, organized the International Convention of Faith Ministries (ICFM) as a voluntary organization of ministers bound by their commitment to the Haginite theology. More would follow. Louisiana pastor Charles Green founded the Network of Christian Ministries in 1984. The Rhema Ministerial Association International (RMAI), founded in 1985, soon followed to provide Rhema graduates with the benefits of official alumni support. In 1986, Oral Roberts formed the International Charismatic Bible Ministries (ICBM), whose annual conference became one of the most publicized and best-attended events in the pentecostal-charismatic world. The vast majority of its founding members were confident spokespersons for divine wealth.¹³ The proliferation of faith associations meant more choice, but not necessarily more competition. Many teachers joined more than one, as badges of belonging.

Flushed with enthusiasm, ministers flooded the market with publications on the many uses of faith.¹⁴ There were manuals for the basics like *Say-It-Faith*, *Power of Agreement*, *Healing the Sick*, and *Successful Living*. Others attempted to cultivate new niche markets with how-to guides such as *Guarantee Your Child's Success* and *Positive Childbirth* ("Could pregnancy and delivery really be exciting and fun?") and children's books like *Adventures in Faith*. A string of cowboy movies, with titles like *Covenant Rider*, applied faith principles to the Wild West. These starred Tulsa youth evangelist Willie George as a U.S. marshal backed up by fellow televangelists Kenneth Copeland (as Wichita Slim), Jesse Duplantis (as evil Saul Gillespie), and Jerry Savelle as the down-home evangelist. Amidst the shootings,

lynchings, and chase scenes, there was always time for a reassuring chat around the fire about covenant principles. Entrepreneurial to the bone, few opportunities eluded the prosperity preachers. Even the aerobics craze of the 1980s found a spiritual home in one evangelist's godly exercise regime, "Confession Calisthenics."¹⁵ (Ten minutes a day, the author claimed, and "you can achieve more! You can experience more prosperity in your life! More success! More victory!") This expansion came easily for most major ministers, who already devoted an arm of their organizations to media and publishing. In 1975, Buddy Harrison founded Harrison House as a general publishing house for Word of Faith literature. Christian bookstores across the country began to feature a display near the cash register filled with pocket-size "classics" of the prosperity gospel. Prosperity books, much like early twentieth-century success literature, swelled the ocean of cheap paperbacks.

Doctrinally speaking, it was the heyday of Hagin's Word of Faith theology and its mechanistic account of spoken prayer. But as indebted as many were to Hagin's teachings, celebrity prosperity preachers made remarkably similar claims in large part because they were so often in each other's presence. The highest-attended conferences featured the same roster of speakers, mixed and matched from only a few dozen names. The largest independent ministries sponsored annual conferences that became a steady evangelistic circuit for other popular ministers, forging strong connections between far-flung preachers. The movement had enough institutional muscle to support big-time celebrities, convert the ambivalent, and nurture the next generation of up-and-comers to this new way of thinking. Junior versions of their famous parents, like Kenneth Hagin Jr. and Richard Roberts, had come of age with all the conviction of youth. The movement teemed with pastors preaching, praying, singing, prophesying, and invoking miracles side-by-side. And though they might grumble that so-and-so stole their ideas about vows or unfairly got top billing, they seemed grateful to have each other. There was power in numbers.

The movement, though expansive, still had room to grow. Ministers educated by Oral Roberts University, Rhema Bible Training Center, Christ for the Nations (CFN), and other like-minded schools were still green. Commissioned as missionaries, the first graduating classes set out to experience the thrilling demonstrations of faith at work. These eager novices fanned out across the United States and Canada to found hundreds of congregations. Gene and Sue Lingerfelt, protégés of Lester Sumrall, founded what would be the Overcoming Faith Christian Center in a dingy

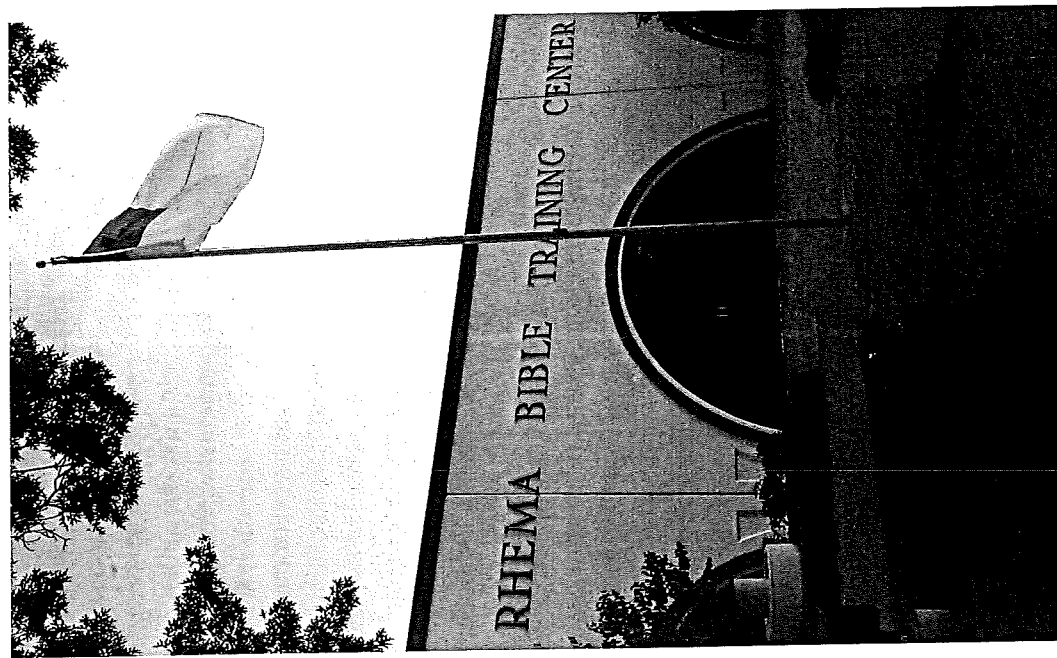


FIGURE 3.6 Rhema Bible Training Center Entrance to Rhema Bible Training Center. Founded by Kenneth Hagin in 1974, the school became the institutional center of the Word of Faith movement.

Source: Author's photo.

Ramada Inn, preaching about the significance of words for success, healing, and prosperity.¹⁶ Many graduates struggled through lean years of small-time ministry, but the success of the few sweetened the medicine. Billy Joe and Sharon Daugherty were instant hits, winning national audiences with their down-home charm and organizational savvy.

These former students of both Christ for the Nations and Oral Roberts University planted their own towering congregation and Bible school in the shadow of the 60-foot bronze statue of praying hands marking the entrance to Oral Roberts' campus, a permanent reminder of their entwined fortunes. Even preachers with a small but stable platform rolled out their own schools. Tennessee businessman Norvel Hayes, for example, founded New Life Bible College with students he accumulated on his speaking tours. Rhema Bible Training Center produced an armada of evangelists and church planters. (See table 3.1) Vicki and David Shearin founded Word of Life Christian Center in Nevada as a holy alternative to Vegas' goddess, Lady Luck, while Rick and Sharon Ciaramitaro began Canada's first Rhema success story in the secular climes of southern Ontario.

African American leaders, nurtured by this tight circle of white prosperity ministries, grew in number and stature. Keith Butler, one of Rhema's first graduates, built Detroit's Word of Faith Christian Center from a pocket-sized congregation to a megachurch so large that he took the title of bishop. The turn toward faith ministries meant leaving other influences behind. When James Hash and his sister Francene inherited their parents' apostolic congregation in the 1980s, they used what they had learned at Rhema Bible Training Center and Victory Bible Institute to modernize their legacy. Their parents had railed against ecclesial habits accrued in slavery and pentecostal "legalism," while the new generation quoted prosperity preachers and corporate coaches to push their growing congregation toward becoming a "ministry of excellence." The Hashes watched their church grow from a few hundred to a few thousand as they opened the doors to Kenneth Copeland, Fred Price, Kenneth Hagin, Tommy Barnett, and (later) T. D. Jakes, and Myles Munroe.¹⁷

Frederick K. C. Price, who counted himself the theological heir of Kenneth Hagin and Oral Roberts, became the preeminent African American educator about God's money. In 1970, Price's experience of the Holy Spirit pulled him away from traditional black denominations and toward the white prosperity circles of Hagin, Roberts, and Copeland.¹⁸ His crusades, publications, sprawling Los Angeles congregation, and nationwide television program broke new ground in black churches, which would turn increasingly toward prosperity preachers in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁹ Price's prosperity manuals like *High Finance: God's Financial Plan*, *Name It and Claim It*, and *Prosperity on God's Terms* were always in season.

The only prosperity preacher who could rival Price's fame among black audiences was the charismatic singer Carlton Pearson. Pearson, reared

Table 3.i Contemporary Prosperity Megachurches Founded in Church-Planting Heyday

Founder	Megachurch	Year
Kenneth E. Hagin	Rhema Bible Church (Broken Arrow, OK)	1974
Mike and Kathy Hayes	Covenant Church (Carrollton, TX)	1976
Rick Thomas	Abundant Life Christian Center (Margate, FL)	1977
Charles Nieman	Abundant Living Faith Center (El Paso, TX)	1977
Randy Morrison	Speak the Word International (Golden Valley, MN)	1977
Jimmy Evans	Trinity Fellowship (Amarillo, TX)	1977
Rod Parsley	World Harvest Church (Columbus, OH)	1977
Lawrence and Darlene Bishop	Solid Rock Church (Monroe, OH)	1978
Andrew and Viveca Merritt	Straight Gate International Church (Detroit, MI)	1978
Keith and Deborah Butler	Word of Faith Christian Center (Detroit, MI)	1979
Casey and Wendy Treat	Christian Faith Center (Seattle, WA)	1980
David and Roxanne Swann	Faith Christian Family Church (Clovis, NM)	1980
Jim and Marguerite Reeve	Faith Community Church (West Covina, CA)	1980
David Demola	Faith Fellowship Ministries (Sayreville, NJ)	1980
Dick Bernal	Jubilee Christian Center (San Jose, CA)	1980
Mac and Lynne Hammond	Living Word Christian Center (Minneapolis, MN)	1980
Phillip and Holly Wagner	Oasis Christian Center (Los Angeles, CA)	1980
Tommy Barnett	Phoenix First Assembly of God (Phoenix, AZ)	1980
Sharon and Billy Daugherty	Victory Christian Center (Tulsa, OK)	1981
Jason and Gale Alvarez	The Love of Jesus Family Church (Orange, NJ)	1982
David and Vicki Shearin	Word of Life Christian Center (Las Vegas, NV)	1982
Gene and Sue Lingerfelt	Overcoming Faith Christian Center (Arlington, TX)	1984

Table 3.1 (continued)

Founder	Megachurch	Year
Walter and Cindy Hallam	Abundant Life Christian Center (La Marque, TX)	1985
Robb Thompson	Family Harvest Church (Tinley Park, IL)	1985
Kevin and Sheila Gerald	Champions Centre (Tacoma, WA)	1986
Thomas Anderson	The Living Word Bible Church (Mesa, AZ)	1986

Though Tulsa remained the institutional heartland, prosperity churches spread widely across the suburban Midwest, Pacific Northwest, and Mid-Atlantic with a heavy concentration in the Sun Belt.

within the Church of God in Christ, became the darling of the movement for his powerful voice in song and in sermon. As his conference participation demonstrates (see figure 3.7), Pearson was a protégé of Oral Roberts and boldly asserted a like-minded message: "God will increase thirty-, sixty-, and a hundred-fold return on the tithe.... The giving starts *after* we've tithe'd, or as Oral Roberts used to say so often, 'Giving is not a debt you owe; it's a seed you sow.'"20 He was an early ambassador of racial reconciliation, touring with Oral Roberts's son Richard and the ORU World Action Singers to promote the university's interracial character. In 1977, Pearson struck out on his own as a traveling evangelist and founding pastor of Higher Dimensions Evangelistic Center in Tulsa. In 1988, he founded the famous Azusa conference, which quickly became the staging ground for up-and-coming African American singers and preachers to gain recognition. Pearson would go on to launch many careers in the following decade, including an undiscovered pastor from West Virginia named T. D. Jakes.

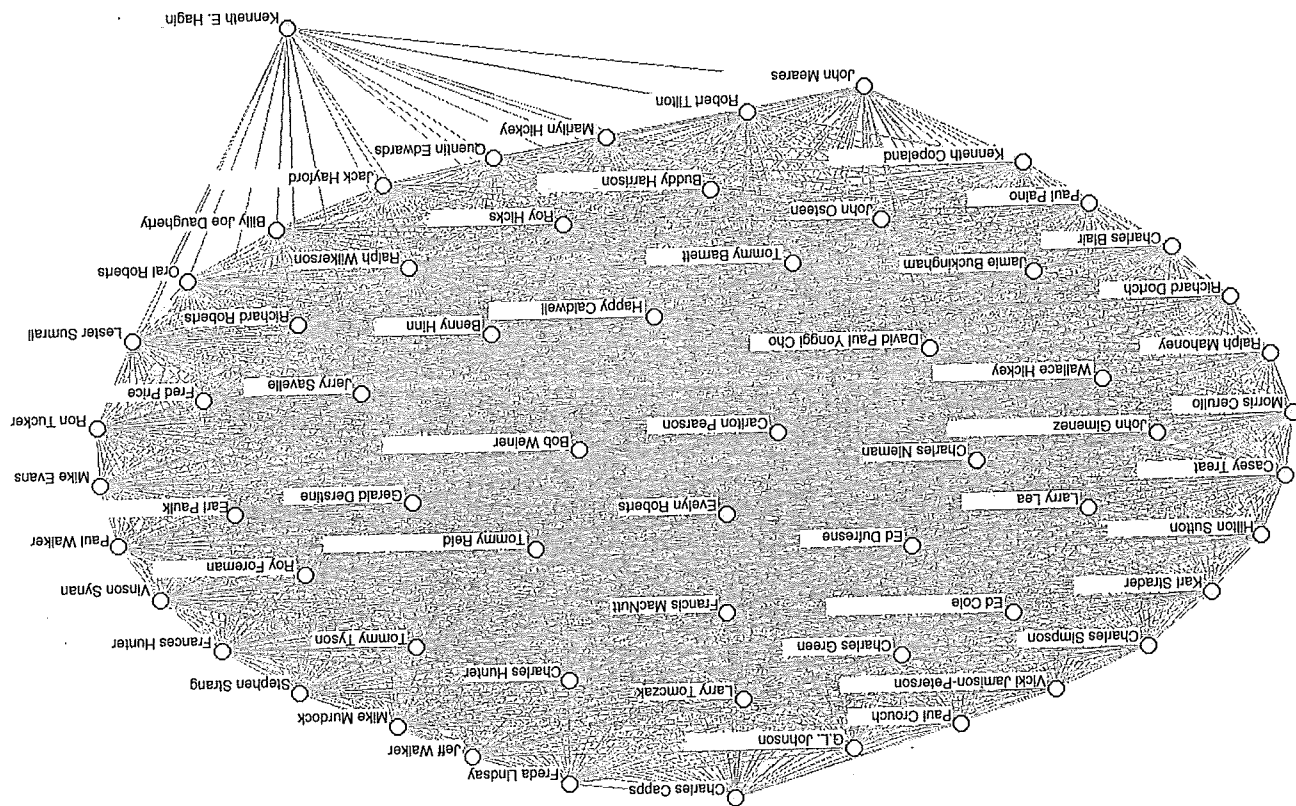
A flood of black teachers, nurtured inside faith institutions, began to spread their message of divine prosperity to African American audiences. Some saw their message as an end-run around structural barriers. Ed Montgomery built up his 7,000-member Abundant Life Cathedral with the belief that "in God's economy there were no cultural, ethnic, or racial barriers. God responds to faith, anyone's faith."²¹ Others walked the tightrope between a social and a supernatural gospel. Like their mentor, Kenneth Hagin, Charles and Carolyn Harrell, pastors of the 1,800-member Full Gospel Christian Center in Pomona, California, preached positive confession but added "education and economics" as equally necessary for

transforming the inner city. They taught faith-filled words, financial miracles, vocational skills, career counseling, and black heritage classes to “help black men shake the welfare mentality and help rebuild the collapsed family structure among the poor.”²² Rhema’s Keith Butler added a nonprofit foundation to his 5,000-member congregation, dedicated to finding economic solutions for Detroit’s disenfranchised. Rising African American stars like Mack and Brenda Timberlake, Phillip and Brenda Goudeaux, and Lamont and Connie McLean joined a host of prosperity preachers founding “Christian centers” (not “churches”) in an effort to strip ecclesial forms of false “religious” idioms and uncover the raw power of God. They put phrases like “More Than Conquerors” above their doors and sported tailored suits befitting the executive roles they had assumed.

The prosperity gospel was becoming increasingly influential among Latino Americans. It is difficult to identify precisely when the faith message crystallized in Latino churches, but pervasive media exposure certainly sped its early formation. Radio broadcasts, television programs, paperback volumes, and regular conferences reached out to scattered audiences long before church membership reflected the movement's impact. Ministries, for their part, responded quickly to significance of Spanish-speaking believers. Kenneth Hagin's *La Autoridad del Creyente*, for example, appeared in 1974. And, beginning in the 1970s, Latino pentecostals had begun to leave their denominations for prosperity-preaching churches.²³ Though Spanish-speaking faith churches lacked the large numbers and well-known personalities that earned national attention, the examples of a few thriving congregations made clear that their importance was only a matter of time. These congregations grew from a variety of sources. Massive churches like Iglesia el Calvario began as offshoots of existing Anglo congregations with an emphasis on faith teaching and evangelism. Church planting by Mexican-American graduates of any number of prosperity Bible schools brought many small- to medium-sized congregations to life. By the mid-1980s, waves of immigrant prosperity churches led by immigrant pastors had hit Spanish-speaking populations in Miami, Houston, Los Angeles and across North America. Toronto's Faithful Remnant Spanish Church, served by Puerto Rican pastors Abel Casillas and his wife Apostle Mayra Casillas, began in 1985 and would grow to be one of Canada's largest Spanish-speaking congregations.²⁴

Classic pentecostals, squared away in their historic denominations, were lukewarm about the success of the prosperity gospel. The International Church of the Foursquare Gospel published a curt rebuke in their

FIGURE 3.7 Carlton Pearson's Conferences Carlton Pearson's conference participation in the 1980s. Pearson remained largely within his mentor Oral Roberts' sphere of influence until he branched out on his own in the late 1980s.



monthly magazine, even while their own General Supervisor Roy Hicks' friendship with Kenneth Hagin and Gordon Lindsay was written all over his publications, *The Word of Faith: Use It or Lose It*, and *Praying Beyond God's Abilities*.²⁵ The Assemblies of God looked askance at teachers within their fold who preached on divine wealth, as ministers like Karl Strader and Jim Bakker tested the limits of denominational bounds. The leading Assemblies of God evangelist Jimmy Swaggart publicly denounced them as more "charismatic" than "pentecostal" for their prosperity leanings. "Pentecostals and charismatics are two different worlds," he declared. "It is my feeling they should be one way or the other."²⁶ Jack Hayford, at the helm of the 6,000-member Church on the Way, cautioned humility and patience to the throngs of those "claiming authority." He could continue to act as father, then grandfather, to a movement centered on a familiar account of a God who "deals in words."²⁷

Most overlooked the rift between the two, while supporters protested that their gospel was simply that old-time religion. "Pentecostal historians have told me that the very same things my father teaches today were taught by the pioneers and founders of the Pentecostal movement, and I know this is so," said Kenneth W. Hagin Jr., who called his father's work a "distillation of all that was good in the great movements in the past."²⁸ Certainly a number of faith teachers saw themselves as grounded in the work of a previous generation. T. L. Osborn's apprentice Don Gossett published *The Power of Your Words* and *Words that Move Mountains* with alternating chapters by himself and E. W. Kenyon. Gordon Lindsay edited a collection of the writings of John G. Lake, while Watchman Nee was resurrected as a like-minded preacher for his thoughts on the spiritual man.²⁹ The purified truth centered on faith, the unseen force that turned the spoken word into reality. With the structures of the movement firmly established, secured by educational, ministerial, and promotional platforms, followers set out to convince subsequent generations that "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Hebrews 11:6). As the ranks of the faith-filled ballooned, believers smiled at the newfound prosperity of their home-grown gospel.

Jehovah Jireh

Daisy and T. L. Osborn raised their flutes of orange juice in a toast for the camera under the caption "GO FOR IT!"³⁰ The 1983 photo book featured a day in the life of the two wealthy evangelists enjoying the latest, greatest

fads of the decade. They jogged through suburbia in sweatbands, cruised to the mall in a shiny Chevrolet, and lounged in their florid home on overstuffed couches. Interspersed with footage from their lifetime of overseas crusades, Daisy marveled about the life that a true believer could aspire to. "Can you imagine, honey," she gushed, "they'll be able to get material success, pay their debts, get out of poverty!!! It will be easy with the 7 SECRETS and the 60 SECONDS a day for just 7 days!" The free booklet, advertised in the *National Enquirer*, was a testimony to celebratory consumption. To followers of the prosperity gospel, God revealed himself as *Jehovah Jireh*, God the Provider.

God lavished on believers not only spiritual blessings but also the material comforts that lightened the load of everyday living. "The Lord shall provide all my needs," ran the lyrics of Benny Hinn's favored crusade anthem, "*Jehovah Jireh* takes care of me."³¹ The Christian way offered more than subsistence living. Tradition-bound Christians scraped by with barely enough while true believers drilled deeper to tap into the abundant lives that God promised. "He is *Jehovah-Jireh*," explained up-and-coming Rod Parsley, "the God of more than enough. He gives us the ability to plant, to harvest, and to gather the abundance into the storehouse."³² (According to Genesis 22:14, Jehovah Jireh referred to the place where God provided a ram for Abraham to sacrifice instead of his son Isaac.) Everyone possessed the God-given potential to sow and reap their financial harvest with plenty to spare. Poverty marked a spiritual shortage. Faith believers claimed the promise from Jesus' lips that he came "that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly."³³ Outsiders called it baptized materialism. Followers called it living in the overflow.

Three arguments grounded the movement's defense of biblical wealth. First, prosperity theology turned to the cross as the solution to all human needs. Jesus' death and resurrection abolished not only sin and disease but also poverty. In order to understand this financial provision of the atonement, we must recall the priority placed on spirit by the movement. Poverty took on spiritual dimensions as a demonic force that separated people from their godly inheritance. Poverty—as an evil spirit—required a spiritual solution. Jesus reclaimed dominion over the earth from Satan when he took on the spiritual debt of poverty on the cross. "He took your place in poverty," argued the African American pastor Leroy Thompson of Word of Life Christian Center in Darrow, Louisiana, "so you could take His place in prosperity."³⁴ As a result, believers could claim wealth as one of their rights and privileges in Jesus' name.

Some teachers found it more difficult to explain wealth than they did health. Jesus' crucifixion tied the atonement to suffering as a corollary of sickness, but there was no moment teachers could point to that signaled Christ's defeat over poverty. Only those who specialized in divine finance approached the subject with much gusto. Pastor Thompson described Jesus' resurrection as the moment when "He couldn't stand being broke any longer! He came up on the third day! He said, in effect, 'Enough of this!'"³⁵ Jesus rose from the grave as the redeemer of poverty's curse.

Second, believers argued that they followed in the Master's steps. Jesus himself possessed great wealth, and it followed that his devotees should also. Snippets from Jesus' life offered a few clues. "As soon as Jesus arrived, that anointing to prosper acted like a magnet, drawing wise men with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh," argued the Kenneth Copeland protégé Creflo Dollar. "Those were not cheap gifts, either. Prosperity attached itself to baby Jesus immediately, and that same gift to prosper has been given to us as heirs of Christ."³⁶ That the guards divided Jesus' cloak among them at his crucifixion suggested that his belongings were valuable.³⁷ *Heart of a Billionaire* author Thomas Anderson, pastor of the Living Word Bible Church in Mesa, Arizona, counted Mary and Joseph's donkey ride to Bethlehem as proof of their wealth, arguing that the animal was the contemporary equivalent of a Cadillac.³⁸ *Rich God, Poor God* author John Avanzini detailed Jesus' designer clothes and expensive anointing oils as further evidence. To be sure, the matter caused some disagreement. Kenneth Hagin Sr. and Oral Roberts established a strong precedent for the argument that Jesus lived a wealthy life but defeated poverty on the cross, while others seemed to be content that Jesus' lifetime of poverty was part of his messianic purpose.³⁹ Further examples of righteous people of wealth sprang readily from the pages of the Old Testament. Preachers understood the high stakes of proving that their savior could be an economic exemplar, much as a late medieval debate about the poverty preached by the mendicant orders had caused a defense of Jesus and his disciples as members of the landed gentry with their own coats of arms. So, too, evangelists continued to scour Jesus' life for signs that he had paved the way for prosperous living.

Third, believers rooted prosperity in covenant theology as an extension of the ancient promises God made to Abraham.⁴⁰ Favor and riches sprang from faithfulness to the Abrahamic covenant. "In the Old Testament, according to Deuteronomy," Kenneth Hagin explained, "poverty was to come upon God's people if they disobeyed Him."⁴¹ The scriptures were

shot through with the Deuteronomic imperative that blessings accompanied the keeping of the Law (and curses greeted its disobedience). Christians were beneficiaries of Abraham's "spiritual promissory note," explained the Denver evangelist Marilyn Hickey.⁴² Pre-Fall humanity once enjoyed unimpeded access to wealth in the Garden of Eden, "when He surrounded Adam and Eve with every material blessing they could possibly need."⁴³ Their sin transferred legal dominion of the earth to Satan, who kept humanity in want of health, provision, and God's power. Jesus' death and resurrection flooded the world with new victory and financial reminders of believers' redeemed status as God's children. As the gospel-singer Donald Lawrence sang in "Back to Eden":

Our families blessed; finances blessed . . .
 . . . Jesus came now all is well.

The saints claimed a rich inheritance as their own.

The surprising gains of prosperity theology in pulpits, publications, conferences, and television airtime strengthened its leaders' resolve to raise their ministries to ever-increasing heights. Teachers, invigorated by constant growth, confidently confessed brighter futures. They concluded that nature yielded to the proper use of divine principles. Mechanistic accounts of giving and receiving dominated. Faith teachers differed in their interpretations of the exact relationship between the spoken word and its coming into being. This was a decade of *hard prosperity*.

Hard prosperity drew a straight line between life circumstances and a believer's faith. Faith operated as a perfect law, and any irregularities meant that the believer did not play by the rules. Specificity was the key to successful prayer. Participants were instructed to name their pleas, their wishes, and even their dollar amounts to command spiritual forces to their desired ends.

Charles Capps stood as one hard prosperity preacher among many. Capps, an ordained minister and popular guest on Gloria and Kenneth Copeland's television program, systematized faith theology into an iron-clad system of causality. The spoken word, by activating faith, bound God to the individual's proclamation. When the one-time farmer built a housing subdivision north of England, Arkansas, he took on a mountain of debt to finance his project. Convinced that faith could remedy the situation, he arranged the numerous mortgages for the development properties on the kitchen table. "Notes," he said, "listen to me. I'm talking to

you. Jesus said you would obey me. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, I command you, I say to you, BE PAID IN FULL . . . DEMATERIALIZE . . . DEPART . . . BE GONE . . . IN JESUS' NAME, YOU WILL OBEY ME!"⁴⁴ When asked if this seemed "silly," Capps confidently replied that the Bible was more practical than believers realized. After all, the proof of the pudding is in the eating: the mortgages were paid, the properties sold, and his subdivision became a success. Capps's major work, *The Tongue: A Creative Force*, sold more than three million copies.⁴⁵

Hard prosperity hammered giving and receiving into rigid rules. First, pay tithes. Though all faith teachers preached about the significance of tithing, hard prosperity found God in the details. Some churches kept detailed financial reports on their members, even asking them to submit tax records to verify that they paid their full tithes. Finance teacher John Avanzini spoke for all when he cited failure to tithe as the primary reason that God failed to return money to believers. Second, hard prosperity made financial miracles an everyday prospect. Positive confessions tailored to "supernatural debt-cancellation" or blessed billboards that automatically multiplied its contents, arrived in believers' mailboxes.⁴⁶ Testimonies of sudden infusions of cash dominated the discussion.

Third, the process was largely epistemic. "Proper thinking produces finances," Avanzini stated simply.⁴⁷ Positive confession seemed so powerful that considerable debate arose within the faith movement about the degree to which anyone could use it, regardless of holiness. More than a few suggested that perhaps wealthy people unconsciously lived out the truth. The first lady of one North Carolina congregation argued that anyone could tap into it without personal faith, as she had begun "naming it and claiming it" before she understood its implications.⁴⁸ The finer theological points mattered less than the conclusion: divine wealth came with an easy trigger.

Formulas for wealth grew increasingly precise. Tithes alone did not guarantee that the windows of heaven stayed open. The doctrine of "first fruits," first introduced in the 1960s, became a standard classification of donation. For example, the person who received a \$50 raise had to donate the first \$50 to God. Positive confessors began to affix their tithes and offerings with specific wishes, a practice Oral Roberts had dubbed "naming your seed." Some whispered their desires as they placed their envelope in the offertory. Others took it a step further, taking pains to inscribe the donation itself with their confession. Believers with checking accounts might have their checks printed with scripture about blessing or write verses in

the memo line. One wrote, "Money cometh unto you," on the check, hoping that the bank teller would repeat it and positively confess on her behalf. Believers occasionally scribbled their confessions on dollar bills. It was an inventory of ordinary hopes that required small miracles. "For a new car." "For a promotion." "For new school clothes." When needs were met, believers proudly put them on display. Automobiles were marked as heaven-sent with vanity plates boasting PRAYED 4, BLESSED, 100 FOLD, and LUKE 12:31 ("But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added unto you").

The "hundredfold blessing" (last mentioned in our discussion of the midcentury healing revivals) served as the most common calculus of God's "money-back guarantee." It was often said that God rewarded givers a hundred times their original donation.⁴⁹ Gloria Copeland, a famous evangelist in her own right, calculated the returns: "You give \$1 for the Gospel's sake and \$100 belongs to you; give \$10 and receive \$1000; give \$1000 and receive \$100,000. . . . Give one airplane and receive one hundred times the value of the airplane. Give one car and the return would furnish you a lifetime of cars. In short, Mark 10:30 is a very good deal."⁵⁰ Hard prosperity emphasized its contractual nature, describing God as unable to "multiply back" blessings except to those who give correctly.⁵¹ The laws of the harvest formed an exact science. Televangelist Jimmy Swaggart decried the hundredfold blessing as "outright fraud."⁵² Kenneth Hagin later repented of his own teaching on the matter: "I no longer tell people to expect the hundredfold return on their offerings. I just stay with what the Word of God says: 'Give and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over' (Luke 6:38). I always claim the 'running over' blessing."⁵³ Though other faith teachers protested that the world could not contain enough riches to reward everyone with a hundredfold return, popularity favored the literal minded.

The extravagant promises of the hundredfold blessing became increasingly popular during the troubled 1970s. Money-multiplication strategies seemed credible in light of the broad cultural shifts concerning credit that left Americans with greater faith in an invisible economy. In the mid-1970s, growing inflation and stagnation, dubbed "stagflation," were hallmarks of a sluggish economy. Unemployment and the price of consumer goods continued to rise.⁵⁴ Credit and debt—previously stigmatized as marks of moral weakness—became a strategy to cope with soaring inflation.⁵⁵ Consumers who paid for goods on credit could expect to pay less in real terms, as inflation devalued the amount they owed. Money became



FIGURE 3.8 100 Fold Car This vanity plate, seen outside a Joel Osteen event, suggests the driver's confidence that God rewards with mid-sized family sedans.
Source: Author's photo.

increasingly theoretical, as the connection between the value of one's labor and one's income grew increasingly unpredictable. From the creation of the Visa card in 1973, credit card spending grew at a rate of \$3.5 billion a year as more shoppers began to put their faith in the value of dollars they did not yet see. These economic conditions boosted consumer confidence in unseen multipliers. For many, faith in supernatural hundredfold returns appeared a reasonable economic strategy. It was a movement that treasured the God of checks and balances, whose financial formulas and principles ensured that, when all was tallied, God was more than fair.

Megaministry

In 1983, the Bakkers opened their Praise the Lord (PTL) television studio at Heritage USA to fanfare and a personal note from the equally sunny President Ronald Reagan, who congratulated the duo on their efforts to help "many Americans endure and triumph."⁵⁶ This was an America of renewed confidence. It had ditched the president associated with national malaise and humiliation in the Iran hostage affair and replaced him with one whose campaign slogan was "It's Morning Again in America."⁵⁷ In foreign policy the nation finally felt able to forget the debacle of Vietnam and flex its muscles once more as first Grenada and then Panama were invaded and bent to the American will. A new generation of medium-range missiles

was installed in Europe despite massive protests and Soviet opposition. The diffident Carteresque approach to the Soviet Union gave way to an uncompromising vision of the USSR as an "evil empire." Popular culture reveled in glitter and extravagance: disco, the drug-soaked club scene, big hair, shoulder pads, glam rock, and designer fashions. The decade's economic expansion accompanied a market-oriented viewpoint and an ethic of excess memorialized in the film *Wall Street* as "greed is good." By 1989, the unlooked-for fall of Eastern European communism produced a triumphalist aura surrounding all things capitalist. The galloping optimism and individualism fit well with a decade of growth by the faith movement.

Ministry took on larger-than-life proportions. Megachurches (with 2,000 plus members) loomed large on the religious landscape as innovative centers of revival. In 1970, megachurches numbered 50. By 1990, the total swelled to 310.⁵⁸ Of these, roughly three dozen congregations orbited within the prosperity network, a modest but vital minority. Celebrities like Jimmy Swaggart, the Bakkers, and the Crouches headed multimillion-dollar media conglomerates supported by hundreds of thousands of viewers. Oral Roberts alone commanded an annual budget of \$125 million.⁵⁹ By 1980, his eponymous university had graduated its thirteenth and largest graduating class at 781 students. A. A. Allen's Miracle Revival Fellowship headquartered in Dallas claimed 500 affiliated churches and approximately 10,000 members.⁶⁰

Prosperity megachurches were comparatively late bloomers in the church growth movement that believed that bigger was always better. In the 1970s, the broader conservative Christian culture—fundamentalist, charismatic, evangelical, and pentecostal camps alike—had fallen in love with church growth as an end in itself. Los Angeles pastor Frederick Price spoke for them all when he said: "Every church should be a big church."⁶¹ In their enthusiasm for the great commission, American evangelicals discovered the possibilities for expansion embedded in the work of Donald McGavran, his successor C. Peter Wagner, and their institutional home, Fuller Theological Seminary's School of World Mission. This seedbed and its resulting conferences, seminary classes, literature, and knock-off institutes formed the framework of the church growth movement. In the early 1980s, prosperity preachers joined its interdenominational leadership as natural experts in increase. The intersection between the two movements was like a meeting between old friends. The faith movement's emphasis on results and the materiality of salvation easily absorbed the goal of church growth as a sign of its own faithfulness. Thus in 1985, the Chicago Church Growth and Leadership Conference advertised the expertise of

Word of Faith star Billy Joe Daugherty, *Your Church Can Grow* author C. Peter Wagner, positive thinker Robert Schuller, and the Korean pastor of the world's largest church, David Yonggi Cho. All shared a vision of the God who wanted to bless them abundantly.

The prosperity movement rapidly cultivated transnational connections. By the mid-1980s, Christ for the Nations Institute could claim an astounding overseas legacy. The small school had helped build 4,074 churches in 100 countries and translated 25 million books into 50 languages.⁶² David Yonggi Cho became the patron of American prosperity preachers and a wildly popular conference speaker in his own right. His influential book *The Fourth Dimension* (1979) featured a dense theological exposition of the unseen forces of faith and a foreword by church-growth expert Robert Schuller. The success of these native megaministries cemented the international dimensions of the prosperity movement.

During the larger-than-life 1980s, America's largest churches were growing—not from a flood of the unchurched—but from the increasing concentration of seasoned churchgoers under one roof. Some theorists predicted that these baby boomers were spiritual wanderers whose comfort in big box establishments—university classrooms, corporate cubicles, and Walmart aisles—predisposed them to church models that resembled these large institutional forms. Others, such as sociologist Mark Chaves, argued that there was an economy of scale at work; small churches simply could not compete with the range of services larger churches could provide.⁶³ Church growth strategists hoped to capitalize on this by making contemporary churchgoing feel as comfortable as trips to the mall. Continuing in this commercial vein, experts recommended that churches implement marketing strategies and view their church as a product and their worshippers as consumers. As populations drifted from city centers to the suburbs, and later to “edge cities” growing near metropolitan hubs, pastors and congregations built sprawling church campuses near freeways and interstates, hoping to capture the largest market share. Each congregation tailored their product to capitalize on their target audience, demographic preferences, and selling features.⁶⁴ Nondenominational evangelical churches that adopted market-driven features to make their services visitor friendly won recognition as “seeker sensitive” churches.⁶⁵

Prosperity megachurches embodied the entrepreneurial logic of this movement to the utmost, and included the corporate models that seeker-sensitive megachurches were willing to employ in both theology and practice. Many prosperity megachurches built in this decade minimized

“churchlike” features such as crosses, steeples, or stained glass in favor of the bricks, steel, and glass of a corporate headquarters. Predominantly white prosperity churches with strong evangelical connections cultivated the atmosphere of an unbuttoned workplace. Women and men could forgo dressy Sunday fashions in favor of the attire of casual Fridays. (Not that polo shirts, khakis, and artfully distressed loafers—the uniform of the average suburban man—did much to disguise their comfortable economic status.) African American megachurch fashion tilted in the opposite direction; custom monograms on the inside of a man's jacket cuff or the gleaming buckle of a woman's designer purse displayed a more overt indication of personal wealth.⁶⁶ Yet the same logic prevailed: for faith worshippers there was never a clear distinction between church and the marketplace. Senior pastors took on the title chief executive officer (CEO), frequently splitting their ministries into “for profit” and “not for profit” branches. Successful pastors considered themselves true entrepreneurs, arguing that kingdom principles were, in fact, business principles.⁶⁷ They called it kingdom business.

California televangelist Robert H. Schuller, *The Hour of Power* broadcaster and church-growth guru, was one of the ministers most in the public eye.⁶⁸ Ordained in the Reformed Church in America like his positive thinking predecessor Norman Vincent Peale, Schuller exhibited an early flair for advertising and church growth. For example, when he could not find property for his church plant in Garden Grove, California, he rented a drive-in theater and preached to the 50 assembled cars while perched on the roof of the refreshment stand. His advertising jingle said it all: “Come as you are in a family car.” Drive-in church services (later with sermons piped in through the car radio) remained a fixture of his ministry and a tribute to his interest in making religion appealing to the unchurched. This consumerist model paid off handsomely, allowing Schuller to undertake a hugely expensive building project dubbed the Crystal Cathedral, a church of glass large enough to house a river. The Tower of Hope, with a 90-foot glowing cross, soon followed. Schuller's expansive vision won the day. His church ministry sprawled and added a school, retirement home, call center, and local outreach programs. He topped the *New York Times* bestseller list with a reconfiguration of “positive thinking” into “possibility thinking.” His books, which included *Move Ahead with Possibility Thinking* (1967), *Peace of Mind through Possibility Thinking* (1977), *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation* (1982), *Tough Times Never Last But Tough People Do* (1983), and *The Be Happy Attitudes* (1985), established Schuller as the self-help

authority of his generation. He founded the Robert H. Schuller Institute for Successful Church Leadership to show others the path he had trod. Schuller's career shows how the earlier trends of positive thinking had grown intertwined with the pentecostal prosperity crowd. At the end of his career, when Schuller sat down with Paul Crouch on Praise the Lord, the two old friends marveled at their personal discoveries of God's abundance, albeit using different language.⁶⁹

Televangelism

This was the golden age of televangelism and prosperity preachers ruled the decade as stars of the small screen. The "Electronic Church" ballooned from five million in the late 1960s to 25 million by the mid-1980s, giving numerous faith teachers top-billing in living rooms across the country (see table 3.2).

In 1983, Jimmy Swaggart, Oral Roberts, Robert Schuller, and Rex Humbard were the most watched of the religious programs nationwide. Schuller's *The Hour of Power* repackaged the church's worship services for mass viewing, an unlikely idea that by 1983 garnered 2.5 million viewers.⁷⁰ Three religious networks—the Bakkers' Praise the Lord (PTL), the Crouch's Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), and Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN)—pumped out religious programming 24 hours a day, seven days a week. As these ministries could produce no more than a few hours of programming per day, they desperately needed other material to fill the time. This offered a golden opportunity for up-and-comers to gain exposure, albeit for small audiences. Sociologist Jeffrey Hadden noted that "for a while, almost anyone who could produce a videotaped program could send it to one of these new networks and be

accepted for satellite broadcast.⁷¹ The focus on money that characterized the televangelist decade owed some of its reputation to these cowboy preachers who jockeyed for attention with their low-budget shows saturating the airwaves.

Through the 1980s, prosperity preachers squeezed television for every last emotional drop. The frequent use of direct appeals to the camera—teaching, arguing, cajoling, or even pleading with at-home audiences—defined the era as the high drama of tent revivalism brought to prime-time television. Emotion ebbed and flowed through every broadcast, and those who taped their programs before live audiences learned to ride the current. Nothing tested the financial resolve of viewers (and the mettle of leaders) like telethons. Their marathon programming was a feat of organization and improvisation as preachers scrambled to fill the time with education, entertainment, and financial pleas. Jim Bakker made fundraising history when the fledgling CBN failed to meet its telethon goal and he burst into tears. The boards lit up with incoming calls, flooding the station with pledges as viewers frantically responded to his emotional entreaties.⁷² Subsequent telethons tried to duplicate Bakker's magic, with varying results. TBN founder Paul Crouch credited his first telethon, side-by-side with Jim Bakker, as the beginning of his experimentation with the prosperity gospel. "Without really realizing it at the time," Crouch recounted, "I had put into motion one of God's most powerful laws—the laws of giving and receiving—sowing and reaping."⁷³ Close-up camera shots and roller-coaster emotions made telethons the favored fundraising tool of the decade and a perpetual demonstration of the power of sentimentality. Bakker proved to be one of the most successful fundraisers in television history, perennially demonstrating his ability to connect to audiences with his maudlin charm.

Television and prosperity theology were a natural fit; spiritual programming proved not only an effective tool of evangelism but also one of generating income. Outsiders commonly reduced all prosperity theology to fundraising, a cliché that had some merit. Faith televangelists dominated religious programming as masters of persuasion, able to inspire the continuous financial donations required to maintain their electric churches. Appeals for donations came in many forms. The Bakkers kept a loose lid on their emotions, weeping or rejoicing openly as financial goals were missed or met.⁷⁴ Televangelist and church planter Don Stewart mastered the hard-sell tactics of his predecessor A. A. Allen, promising viewers miraculous returns on their donations. Faith pledges became a fundraising

Table 3.2 Top Syndicated Television Ministries (1981)

Television Ministry	Number of Viewers
Oral Roberts	2,351,000
Jimmy Swaggart	1,780,000
PTL Club	1,050,000
700 Club	705,000
Kenneth Copeland	381,000

Source: Margaret M. Poloma, *The Charismatic Movement: Is There a New Pentecost?* (Boston: Twayne, 1982), 175.

basic with audiences phoning in their promised donation. Yet the networks' dependence on faith pledges repeatedly left them in the lurch. A Trinity Broadcasting Network telethon went awry when it turned out that a fourth of its pledges had come from prank callers.⁷⁵ Teachers threatened that "unpaid vows" constituted a terrible sin, but they could do little.⁷⁶ They too had to live by faith.

Faith televangelists memorably went to great lengths to cultivate intimacy with their television audiences. Teachers presented themselves foremost as family, inviting viewers into stage sets imitating the preacher's own home. Constant declarations by teachers that "I love you . . . I pray for you each day" assured viewers that they were known and loved.⁷⁷ Studios trimmed their stages to mirror conventional notions of gender. Male preachers sat at a desk or living room chair with few accessories, while women were perched among flower arrangements or at the kitchen table itself. Husband and wife teams were popular, referring to one another by first names, and often revealing personal information and anecdotes about their married life. Couples such as Jim and Tammy Bakker and Jan and Paul Crouch lived out their married life on camera, teasing, flirting, and even arguing before live studio audiences. Children and extended family popped in, introducing viewers to the cast as a family and inviting listeners to be part of the family. The staff of volunteers answering phones in the backdrop of the Bakkers' shows reminded audiences that they were only a call away. The steady stream of footage of faces in the audience—joyful, concerned, inspired, or chastened—further connected viewers to a preacher who almost seemed as close as the television screen.

Televangelism soaked up the glamour and conspicuous consumption of the decade. Though headlines might be a tad longer and suit jackets a little stiffer, on-screen preachers wanted to be counted every bit as fashionable as any other wealthy celebrity in the public eye. The prosperity gospel made modest inroads in men's fashion, as its star preachers updated their designer apparel with the width of their ties or the length of their sideburns. The young Jim Bakker made a splash with his gold chains and blue and green suits. T. L. Osborn took the greatest fashion risks, as he surprised his suit-and-tie colleagues by alternating between native costumes from his crusades and bell-bottoms, open shirts, and leisure suits. On the controversial terrain of women's bodies—especially female preachers' bodies—the prosperity gospel made a lasting impression. Teachers like Tammy Faye Bakker and Jan Crouch became media icons for their conspicuous displays of wealth, earning them the constant criticism (or shy

admiration) of viewing audiences for their "worldliness." Their radical departure from pentecostal-holiness standards of dress dismayed traditionalist supporters. Jan Crouch's infamous beehives were piled high with cotton-candy pink and purple tufts of hair. Tammy Bakker faced constant opprobrium for her heavy mascara, blond bouffant, and country-girl sex appeal. "Painted hussy, that's all I can see, like Jezebel," huffed an elderly male viewer.⁷⁸ But when Tammy Faye peeked out at the camera from under her white fur hat, she embodied (as well as sang) the title of her musical album: *We're Blest*.⁷⁹

Testing Televangelism

Before the scandals. After the scandals. The prosperity gospel can be divided into these two distinct eras, separated by a gulf of suspicion. The exponential growth of prosperity TV sputtered in 1987 when a series of outrages tested audiences' faith in its leaders. In February, the City of Faith hospital founder Oral Roberts faced national ridicule when he fell short of his eight million dollar fundraising goal and wrote to followers that he would retreat to Oral Roberts University's prayer tower to fast and pray until the stated goal was met or "God calls me home." Richard Roberts confirmed his father's dire situation in a follow-up letter, stating that without the funds earmarked for medical missions, "God will not extend Dad's life."⁸⁰ The media derided Roberts's emotional blackmail, while the sympathetic observed that prophecy was a lonely profession.⁸¹

The following month the fresh-faced Jim Bakker shocked the nation when reporters revealed that he had committed adultery in 1980 with a 21-year-old church secretary named Jessica Hahn. *The Charlotte Observer* broke the news that Bakker used PTL funds as hush money. Rival televangelist Jimmy Swaggart led the charge against his fellow Assemblies of God minister, denouncing him as "a cancer that needed to be excised from the body of Christ."⁸² John Ankerberg, a Christian talk-show host, further accused Bakker of homosexual encounters. Bakker resigned his presidency of PTL and attempted to salvage his faltering empire by giving temporary control to the *Old Time Gospel Hour* preacher Jerry Falwell. Yet the damage had been done. Shortly thereafter, the Assemblies of God defrocked Bakker for sexual misconduct.

Bakker's trouble had only begun. Falwell discovered the full extent of the Bakkers' financial mismanagement and denounced them in a news conference as unrepentant frauds. A firestorm of controversy ensued as

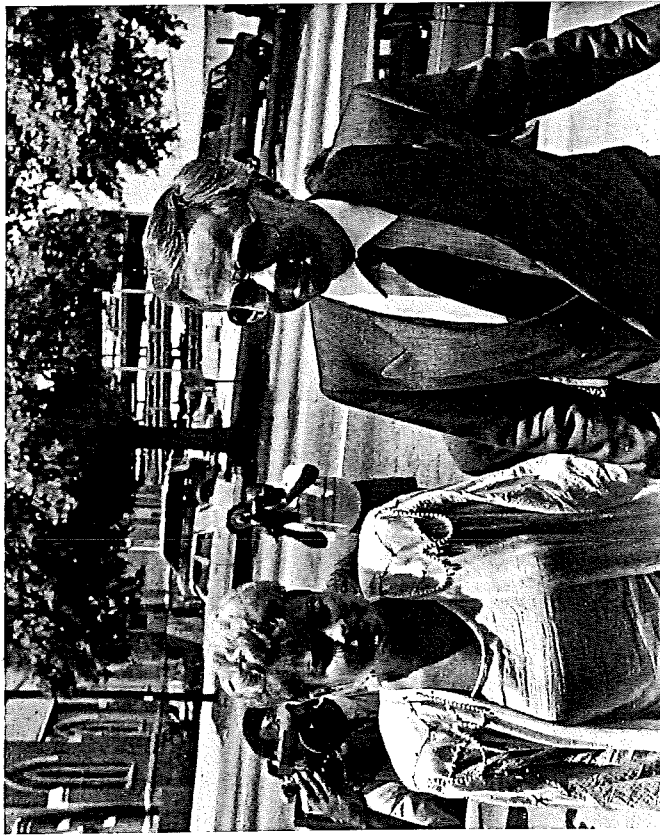


FIGURE 3-9 Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker interviewed by reporters at U.S. Bankruptcy Court, June 29, 1988.

Source: Copyright © Don Sturkey 1988, North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library.

the public learned about the Bakkers' lavish living while their ministry had floundered in debt, and cover stories in *Time* and *Newsweek* gave details of the Bakkers' annual salaries and bonuses in excess of a million dollars. Reports emerged that a few years prior, the Bakkers' questionable spending had narrowly escaped charges from a Federal Communications Commission investigation of their purchases of a Corvette, mink coat, and 42-foot houseboat. PTL ministries filed for bankruptcy and, in 1989, Jim Bakker stood trial for fraud and conspiracy. A jury convicted him for defrauding viewers by overselling lifetime "partnerships" that entitled members to stay at the Heritage Grand Mansion, raking in payment for thousands of time-shares that the property could not accommodate. Long lines of picketers protested the court's mistreatment of Bakker who, they argued, was a man of God. To many insiders, these faith teachers loomed as spiritual giants beyond reproach because they had transformed believers' lives. Bakker went to prison for five years, and Tammy filed for divorce.

PTL's downfall exposed the uncomfortable disparity between rich leaders and traditional views of Christian stewardship. The extravagant lifestyle that once testified to the Bakkers' piety now sealed their condemnation as reports of their gold-plated bathroom fixtures and air-conditioned doghouses emerged. In many ways, the couple's convictions accelerated their downfall. Audiences loved them for their demonstrative faith—yet the burden of their gospel was it always had to be *proven* in an endless cycle of bigger and better. Only scant days before their disgrace, the debt-plagued ministry broke ground on what was to be the world's largest church, a 1.25 million square foot complex with a \$100 million price tag.⁸³ Heritage USA alone cost an exorbitant amount to build, and Jim's illegal attempts to keep it afloat landed him in deeper waters. As Tammy later reflected, the financial pressure was suffocating. Tammy developed an addiction to anti-anxiety medication, while Jim turned to romantic affairs. They skated the "thin ice of monthly contributions."⁸⁴ Soon they fell through.

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. The career of Jimmy Swaggart (who by this time had abandoned the prosperity gospel) fell to pieces when he exposed the adultery of a fellow preacher, Marvin Gorman. Gorman, himself a proponent of prosperity teaching, retaliated by producing evidence of Swaggart's sexual misconduct.⁸⁵ The Assemblies of God suspended and defrocked Swaggart. An estimated 100 million people worldwide tuned in to watch Swaggart's tearful apology. Televangelists and their humiliation was fodder for popular derision. In 1990, even NBC's furry extraterrestrial ALF openly parodied the recent scandals by mortifying his sitcom family with his attempts to open a Christian theme park and become a faith healer.⁸⁶ Television viewership plummeted as the widespread support for celebrity preachers soured. The grins, tears, and fundraising pleas that had defined the decade no longer won popular support for this upwardly mobile message, and few observers, academic or otherwise, predicted its return.

What appeared to be a theological and ethical crisis of confidence had multiple causes. The declining viewership of religious television in the late 1980s partly reflected market forces. The expanding opportunities that fueled televangelism in the early 1980s—from 24-hour religious networks to ballooning television syndication—tapered off by mid-decade, leaving too many big fish in a shrinking pond. The crowd of preachers that had filled

up round-the-clock programming now saturated the market, driving up prices for airtime. In 1975, the televangelism pioneer, Rex Humbard, appeared on 175 stations with an average audience of almost 10,000 households per station. Increased competition and airtime costs forced Humbard to cut back, his losses barely mitigated by aggressive mass mailing and telemarketing solicitations. In 1985, the Ohio evangelist had lost 36 percent of his stations. By the year's end, the *Cathedral of Tomorrow* broadcast tumbled off the air.⁸⁷

The disgrace of financial mismanagement continued to haunt faith networks. Larry Lea, dean of the seminary at Oral Roberts University, called it a "chasm of mistrust."⁸⁸ Earlier attempts to subject televangelists to financial oversight had failed. The 1979 formation of the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA) had been a much-publicized lame duck. The National Religious Broadcaster's Ethics and Financial Integrity Commission was scarcely more effective. Though it expelled Jimmy Swaggart, the commission refused to fully investigate charges brought against TBN founder Paul Crouch.⁸⁹ Broadcast ministries continued to fill their boards with family members who reaped rewards from the ministry, further obscuring financial transparency. "God is shaking his church," warned *Charisma* editor Jamie Buckingham. "Today's shaking is forcing leaders to turn to one another."⁹⁰

When prosperity teachers returned to the spotlight, some things had changed significantly. In a media environment that had learned to mistrust overwrought emotional preaching and beseeching figures, new faces like Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer, T. D. Jakes, Creflo Dollar, and Eddie Long replaced flamboyant stereotypes with a suave, businesslike image. By the mid-1990s, these postmodern prophets would not beg but rather focus on the returns. They would offer "tools" in the form of relationship guides, financial principles, or family reconciliation. The new generation of teachers set aside much of the hard prosperity that had characterized the decade in favor of the therapeutic inspiration of *soft prosperity*. They were now preaching to a less credulous, more cynical generation, who tended to put little faith in institutions but were willing to invest heavily in relationships and personal emotion. They elected a president who could "feel their pain." It was a wired generation, linked by e-mail and search engines, exploring all that the World Wide Web could do for them. But for all that audiences had become media-savvy and accustomed to high-tech solutions to daily inconveniences there were still millions who sought the now old-fashioned and supernatural working of the prosperity gospel.

The New Overcomers

The decline of white televangelist empires did little to dampen many black churches' enthusiasm for faith, wealth, and victory. In the same year that Jim Bakker was sentenced to federal prison and Oral Roberts's City of Faith hospital shut its doors because of lack of funds, Frederick Price opened the 10,000-seat Faith Dome in Los Angeles, which would become the nation's largest worship center. The prosperity gospel thrived in numerous black churches with all the innocence and delight of youth. The faith message is only a newborn, warned Pastor Ed Montgomery in 1988, "and we must get that baby through childhood and adolescence and into adulthood."⁹¹ More and more African Americans, undeterred by the scandalous dalliances of a few white television preachers, shared Montgomery's desire to raise up the message in their own churches.

Throughout the 1980s, prosperity theology rose with new vitality in African American churches and enormous prosperity churches sprang up like daisies (see table 3.3). The largest black congregations in the country were swept up in a larger charismatic revival of their own, a turn toward

Table 3.3 African American Prosperity Megachurches Founded Before and After the Televangelism Scandals

Senior Pastor	Church (Location)	Founded
I. V. Hilliard	New Light Christian Center (Houston, TX)	1983
Eddie Long	New Birth Missionary Baptist Church (Lithonia, GA)	1983
Lamont McLean	Living Faith Christian Center (Pennsauken, NJ)	1985
Creflo Dollar	World Changers Ministries (College Park, GA)	1986
William Winston	Living Word Christian Center (Forest Park, IL)	1988
Marvin Winans	Perfecting Church (Detroit, MI)	1989
David Evans	Bethany Baptist Church (Lindenwood, NJ)	1990
Rickie Rush	Inspiring Body of Christ Church (Dallas, TX)	1990
Dale Bronner	Word of Faith Family Worship Center (Austell, GA)	1991

Note: Ron Gibson's Church of God in Christ congregation was effectively reborn in 1987 when he took charge. It grew from nine members to more than 4,500 under his guidance.

enthusiastic worship and gifts of the spirit. The majority were massive, one-off start-ups, led by magnetic and well-educated pentecostalized preachers across denominational lines.⁹² Scholars have parsed this phenomenon in various ways. Jonathan Walton divided these spirit-filled churches into ecclesial categories, each with its own aesthetic and culture: neopentecostal (both denominational and independent), charismatic mainline (historic black denominations), and Word of Faith (nondenominational prosperity churches).⁹³ Tamelyn Tucker-Worgs's illuminating sociological survey found pentecostal influences common to virtually all black megachurches, though they exhibited diverse theological orientations (prophetic, black theology, nondenominational, and prosperity gospel).⁹⁴ But the lines between these categories often blurred. The prosperity movement had nurtured black preachers inside their predominantly white independent networks, but now the message had outgrown its original structures. African American leaders from classic pentecostal, neopentecostal, and historic black denominations not only began to join faith preachers onstage, but tailored the message of wealth for their own audiences.⁹⁵

The influence of the prosperity gospel spread far beyond the faith movement we have mapped so far, for at least four reasons. First, the message suited the economic mood. An emerging generation of black prosperity preachers spoke to a rising black middle class and those hungry for spiritual gifts that fed daily life. As African Americans entered the middle class in greater numbers, becoming more prosperous, mobile, and aware of a hard-won higher status, many flocked to the churches that reified their hopefulness and ambition. Observers worried that black churches were no longer able to seat the middle class and the poor under the same steeple.⁹⁶ The this-worldly focus of African American megachurches in general (and prosperity-preaching megachurches in particular) reflected believers' yearning to extend the economic, social, and political gains of the civil rights movement into limitless possibilities.⁹⁷

The second (and related) reason centers on African American migration. In the Reverse Great Migration, as it is sometimes known, African American populations drifted away from Northern cities and settled in the South and Southwest.⁹⁸ Further, African American city-dwellers everywhere were leaving for the suburbs. These uprooted people (much like white pentecostals before them) sought out prosperity churches to make sense of their new social location. Their burgeoning churches predictably settled in urban black centers like Houston, Dallas, Los Angeles,

Atlanta, Chicago, Washington D.C., and Detroit, home to the highest number of megachurches and African Americans.⁹⁹ As Tucker-Worgs argued, the new black megachurches functioned like prewar storefront churches—migrant churches for a transplanted people.¹⁰⁰

Third, interaction among megachurch leaders led to theological cross-pollination. The prosperity movement was growing increasingly top-heavy, captivating many of the country's largest white and black churches. Prosperity preachers were fast becoming the gatekeepers to the most coveted pulpits, and those who joined them onstage could expect exciting and lucrative opportunities to follow. As black churches of all ecclesial and doctrinal varieties grew larger and more successful in the 1980s, their leaders enjoyed friendlier relationships and often found more in common with each other than with their denominational kin or headquarters. Megachurch pastors were orbiting in a postdenominational sphere of shared platforms and concerns. Multimillion dollar institutions had saddled these pastors with common burdens and elevated them to similar heights. Further interaction bred familiarity (and often similarity). Pastors in close physical and relational proximity often found themselves speaking two languages—one reflecting their theological and educational training and another better suited to address postdenominational popular audiences.

Fourth, African American congregations have historically been the institutional epicenter of mutual aid, what W. E. B. Du Bois called "the central organ of organized life," and the place to debate and work out questions of political action, spiritual solace, and community meaning.¹⁰¹ Black churches forged a long tradition of self-help. As C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya observed, this survivalist practice began in "the crucible of the slave quarters" and carried through the country's barbed history of racial inequality.¹⁰² Black religious communities, barred from the luxury of separating spiritual and socioeconomic spheres, not only shouldered social services but assumed the tasks of fostering economic mobility.¹⁰³ In this context, the spiritual solutions proposed by the prosperity gospel joined timeworn debates about the relationship between the so-called black church and forms of social and economic liberation.¹⁰⁴ The materialism and hyper-individualism of the prosperity gospel—what scholars have identified variously as "thaumaturgical" or "positive thought materialism"—was tempered by other emancipatory visions.¹⁰⁵ As diverse denominational streams poured into the prosperity gospel, these newcomers allowed a blurring of roles not seen

before: the prophetic could merge with the priestly or the social gospel with the empowering of individuals. In African American churches (particularly denominational churches) the prosperity gospel emerged as a concordant theme that blended with other long-standing concerns.

Consider these four factors—class, migration, cross-pollination, and mutual aid—in the rise of one black megachurch in suburban Atlanta. In 1986, the Disciples of Christ called one of their rising stars, Cynthia Hale, to found a congregation in Decatur, Georgia. This bedroom community of Atlanta was the new home of thousands of wealthy black migrants looking for religious experiences that mirrored their growing ambitions.¹⁰⁶ The city was fast becoming a hotbed of the prosperity gospel, and Hale's growing reputation drew her outside of her predominately white mainline denomination and toward pentecostalized audiences, more plugged into televangelism than seminary disputes.¹⁰⁷ The constant interaction with prosperity preachers, observed Hale, began to influence her theology to the point where her sound technician casually remarked that she was "finally starting to sound like everyone else." The comment stopped her in her tracks. "I had to check myself," recalled Hale candidly. She maintained her conviction in divine economic empowerment (as well as her respect for thoroughgoing prosperity preachers) but made a concerted effort to balance her message of "whole life prosperity" with her theological and exegetical roots. The result was a hybrid pentecostal-mainline identity and a revolving door of guest preachers with similarly varied commitments.¹⁰⁸ She did not mind being called a prosperity preacher as she promoted tithing, seed-faith, and "more-than-enoughness," but flatly rejected mechanistic accounts of divine formulas as "Reverend Ike-ish." The church bought her a Mercedes ("people don't want to see their pastor looking broke") but also established a nonprofit ministry to fulfill their "social mandate from God" to provide far-reaching healthcare, education, and affordable housing for the community's poor.¹⁰⁹ The prosperity gospel was breaking new ground.

Holy Ghost Prosperity

Holy Ghost denominations—black and white—handled the prosperity gospel like quicksilver. Most proceeded cautiously and trusted only the most experienced hands. And yet who could resist the chance to transform spiritual mettle into something more? Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the prosperity gospel appeared as a common resolution to the problem of

modernizing the pentecostal legacy. The Church of God in Christ and the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, the two largest denominations, stood astride black pentecostalism with questions to resolve. Should they follow the well-trod way of television ministries? Should their annual conferences remain a dignified assembly of bishops or show an openness to the wider pentecostal world? All denominations had begun to face the slow hemorrhaging of church attendance and aging demographics. The inherent conservatism of denominational headquarters tested the patience of the senior pastors of their largest churches who searched for ways to stay young, fresh, and on the pulse of cultural trends. The famed televangelist Clarence McClendon put his small (and historically white) Four-square denomination on the map with his vast television ministry and bustling 12,000-member church. His buoyant prosperity preaching and youthful good looks (said to draw so much attention that he was forced to file restraining orders against women in his congregation) charmed audiences with such success that his denomination hesitated to rein in his extravagant lifestyle.¹¹⁰

The Church of God in Christ (COGIC) cracked open their doors to the prosperity movement under the leadership of Bishop G. E. Patterson and his era of media expansion, shining a spotlight on COGIC through radio and television expansion.¹¹¹ He and Charles Blake, the future head of the denomination and pastor of one of the country's largest churches, ruled as denominational royalty on the pentecostal conference circuit.¹¹² They wore the priestly collar, robes, the stoles of consecrated men and the slight frown of administrators. Patterson embraced a televangelist career on Black Entertainment Television and the Trinity Broadcasting Network, but with none of the glitz of television mainstays like Frederick Price. Blake was foremost a pastor and ambassador of the largest African American denomination. In a decade marked by cutbacks in social services, his West Angeles Church of God in Christ earned a reputation for community outreach with programs addressing unemployment, homelessness, small business development, and neighborhood revitalization.¹¹³ Both thrived within the high walls of classical pentecostalism as esteemed bearers of its traditions. Here they adopted forms of the prosperity gospel altered to familiar aesthetic forms, with the red carpets, dark wood pews, rich choir gowns, lively praise, and the breathy cadence of hooping (sermonic song) so at home in black pentecostalism. Blake and Patterson became decorated speakers at Oral Roberts's International Charismatic Bible Ministries' Conference. (Blake would go on to join the Board of Directors for

both the ministry and university.) They appeared frequently beside Word of Faith favorites, often seeming more at home with the wider prosperity network than shut up in denominational circuits. For example, in 1993, Blake joined Frederick Price and Joyce Meyers as the headliners at the West Coast Azusa Conference, and, in 1994, Patterson appeared with R. W. Schambach, T. L. Osborn, John Osteen, Rod Parsley, Daisy Osborn, and David Nunn under a canvas cathedral.¹¹⁴ The annual COGIC Holy Ghost conference began to feature not only a robed assortment of in-house leaders but also visiting faith celebrities.

Charles Blake's message, for example, demonstrates the diverse forms of "prosperity preaching" inside denominational pentecostalism. His preaching lacked the instrumentalism of classic Word of Faith theology: while he spoke little of positive confession, he promised listeners their faith would transform their economic and physical health situations. Rather than the story of Abraham's covenant, Blake preferred the biblical tale of the slave-turned-ruler named Joseph, who "kept faith in the dream no matter what his circumstances. He made the best of the situation and God caused him to prosper."¹¹⁵ It modeled the entrepreneurialism and sweat equity of a prosperity gospel but also communal and institutional transformation of a social gospel.¹¹⁶

The prosperity gospel became a common language within classic pentecostalism to talk about a religion of solutions. Apostle Otis Lockett of Evangel Fellowship Church of God in Christ billed his church as "Providing Biblical Solutions for Life, Family, and Work."¹¹⁷ The chief apostle of COOLJC (Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ), William Lee Bonner, son of a Southern sharecropper, gloried in his discovery of prosperity teaching through its nineteenth-century roots in Ralph Waldo Emerson and showed his flock how their thoughts could take them to financial levels they never dreamed possible.¹¹⁸ Pentecostals, black or white, who could preach prosperity and grow their churches found that they had their uses to denominational headquarters. Despite the ambivalent legacy of the prosperity gospel inside denominational structures, successful prosperity teachers always seemed to land on their feet and be called to serve at the highest levels. After his church reached 2,000 members, *Anointing for Acceleration* author Otis Lockett was appointed the National Director of Church Growth and Development for the Church of God in Christ.

Charles H. Ellis III, later chosen as the leader of the 1.5 million-member Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, blended prosperity theology into

a densely pentecostal form. His recent predecessors in the presiding bishop's seat, Norman Wagner and Horace Smith, had been old hands on the conference circuit that brought prosperity preachers into their churches and confidences.¹¹⁹ Ellis continued this tradition in his sacramental vestments befitting a pentecostal bishop, clergy jackets embroidered with his Greater Grace Temple logo at his breast pocket and a clerical collar bobbing at his neck. He preached with the fervor of a Holy Ghost minister rather than the didactic manner of most prosperity teachers, an exclamation of "Hyal!" serving as the metronome of his melodic phrases. He stuck to the fundamentals—salvation, prayer, praise, healing—but returned to the inevitability of victory and blessing. As Ellis made clear in a Sunday sermon about living abundantly in the face of dire economic circumstances:

[God] said "Whatsoever he doeth shall prosper."

And that's where I'm trying to move to in my walk with God. I'm trying to get to the place, where *everything* I do, according to the Word and will of God, it comes to fruition.

It's got to prosper.

It's got to come to pass . . .

But if you *plug in*,

to the Word of God—

like the blessed man of Psalm One—

If you *plug in* to the source of the power . . .

if you stay connected to the vine,

then you will produce and you will bring forth.

And it will not matter what's going on in the world,

people will look at you and have to call you blessed.

People will look at you and have to call you delivered.

People will look at you and have to call you the righteousness of God.

Am I talking to anybody in here?

I'm trying to get to the place, where everything I touch it turns to gold.

I'm trying to get to the place, where everything I touch it's got to come forth.

Where everyone around me

They've got to be blessed.¹²⁰

To grasp hold of these blessings, he continued, believers must delight in the Lord. Read the scriptures. Speak words of praise and wait until the appointed (but fast approaching) time when God will bring forth "their season" of provision. Like Blake's, his was not a hard prosperity. Ellis evoked the images of harvest without the laws of sowing and reaping; he implored listeners to dwell on the upbeat without the mechanism of positive confession. Yet the gilded guarantee of the prosperity gospel remained: God brings adherents to that place where dust turns to gold.¹²¹

Prosperity and Black Neopentecostalism

One of the most striking sources of growth in the prosperity movement was the rise of African American neopentecostalism unmoored by denominations. A wave of independent ministries brought an emphasis on spiritual gifts and ecstatic worship to some of the nation's largest congregations. The New Black Charismatics, as the historian Scott Billingsley has called them, shared the earlier charismatic movement's playful wonder at the Spirit and classic pentecostalism's investment in its power. But unlike the charismatic movement's nostalgic and alternative vibe, neopentecostal congregations positioned themselves as modern, media literate, and expansionist. As Jonathan Walton argued, these churches adopted a contemporary aesthetic and a flexible attitude to popular culture, jettisoning traditionalism as a barrier to the spread of the gospel. Efforts to engage contemporary audiences ranged from the entertaining (senior pastors and their first ladies dressed like drill sergeants to host spiritual bootcamps) to the mildly scandalous (like R. A. Vernon's church-growth manual entitled *Size Does Matter*). Many neopentecostal churches developed into natural allies of prosperity theology as they sought to become relevant in a highly consumerist culture. They engrossed audiences with the latest in video projection; theater seating; and sermons on sex, work, and children that addressed the pressures of a fast-paced world. The typical neopentecostal male pastor had two uniforms, an untucked tailored shirt with designer jeans and a fitted three-button suit-and-vest combination. Pastors found that parishioners wanted leaders who looked and preached like an ambassador for unrelenting progress.

The prosperity movement grew so pervasive that it captured the imagination of even the most preeminent African American preacher of his generation and one of the most sought-after speakers in the country, Thomas Dexter (T. D.) Jakes.¹²² Jakes, founder of the nation's eleventh

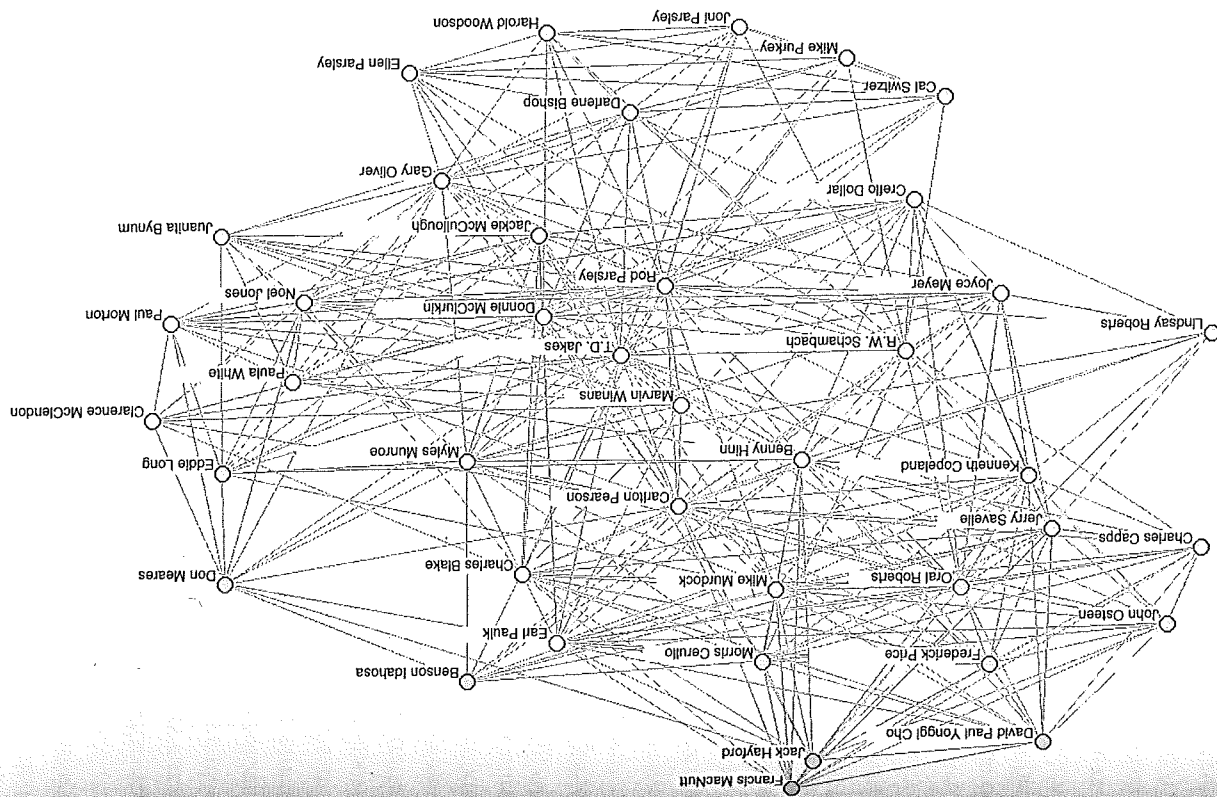
largest church, the Potter's House, ruled the American media as one of the nation's leading preachers. He solemnly stared out from the cover of *Time* magazine under the heading, "Is This Man the Next Billy Graham?" and was a *New York Times* bestseller, a Hollywood film producer, Grammy nominee, and an advisor to presidents. His fame had not come easily. Reared a Baptist, he converted to pentecostalism as a teenager, pounded the preaching circuit in West Virginia, and, in 1979, began Greater Emmanuel Temple of Faith, a small congregation in the mining town of Montgomery. His first evangelistic efforts in the early 1980s yielded a short-lived radio ministry, *The Master's Plan*, and a fledgling Bible conference. In the 1990s, Jakes moved his ministry to Charleston, where it grew from a hundred members to more than a thousand. His message centered on emotional healing, a theme that struck market gold with his series *Woman, Thou Art Loosed!* Jakes's focus on psychological healing for women addressed domestic violence, discrimination, rape, and divorce, issues he explored in his 1993 book and conference of the same name. *Woman, Thou Art Loosed!* became a phenomenon, with two million copies in print, record-breaking conference attendance, a play, a gospel album, and a film adaptation. It also began a long stream of media exposure. In 1993, Jakes began a weekly television program, *Get Ready with T. D. Jakes*, and, a year later, an accompanying radio program. By 1995, his national success brought increased scrutiny, as West Virginia newspapers drew attention to Jakes's lavish living. In 1996, Jakes decided to forget winning them over and transplanted his ministry to Dallas, Texas. He founded The Potter's House Church, headquarters of T. D. Jakes Ministries, his nonprofit outreach, and T. D. Jakes Enterprises, his for-profit wing. Potter's House flourished in its new locale, attracting predominately African American audiences with white and Hispanic minorities. His church claimed over 50 outreach programs, intent on raising the economic status of believers and nonbelievers alike. He earned a reputation as a preacher who taught "the formula of faith" but knew its limits: "Do I believe in supernatural return on your giving? Yes, sir! Do I believe God blesses tithes and offerings? Yes, I do. But why should we teach you to claim a car without teaching you about the car payment and interest rates on the loan?"¹²³ His tempered messages did not prevent him from "sowing into" the ministries of hard prosperity preachers. Ron Carpenter Jr., for example, claimed that T. D. Jakes had helped buy his megachurch for him.¹²⁴ At one time, Jakes both counted Paula White and Juanita Bynum as his spiritual progeny.

Though fellow neopentecostals could never match Jakes's fame, they exhibited a similar flair for sanctified commerce. These churches embraced luxury and personal blessings as an extension of their stylish, contemporary aesthetic.¹²⁵ In 1990, Pastor Rickie Rush founded the Inspiring Body of Christ Church in Dallas with a reputation for frenetic sermons and a megawatt smile. Over the cheers of worshippers, he preached about a God who, like a fast-food chain, worked tirelessly behind the scenes to "fill your special orders." First, however, the believer has to pay for what they want. "God never said you couldn't have it," he chastised, "only that you had to pay for it first."¹²⁶ In 1989, Marvin Winans of the Grammy-winning musical Winans family founded The Perfecting Church in a Detroit, Michigan, basement with a congregation of eight people. Outgrowing location after location, the church came to build a performing arts charter school, a transitional home for women, a television studio, and 30 ministries serving a range of needs. These neopentecostal churches were densely networked to each other but also to the larger prosperity movement. Marvin Winans's annual conferences, for example, regularly assembled Word of Faith stalwarts R. W. Schambach, Charles Capps, Kenneth Copeland, and Creflo Dollar with neopentecostals like T. D. Jakes, Paul Morton, and Noel Jones. (See figure 3.10 for Marvin Winans's neopentecostal conference associations.) Neopentecostal preachers adeptly wove the prosperity gospel into a modern message of Christian adaptation to an ever-changing digital world.

Historic Black Denominational Prosperity

The prosperity gospel followed in the wake of neopentecotalism and its surprising revival of charismatic influences within mainstream African American churches. Pentecostal-flavored preaching, emotional worship, emphasis on the Spirit, and an interest in supernatural gifts enlivened these old-line churches and opened their doors to a new perspective on holiness. High-spirited talk of wealth and health found its way into some of the largest churches in the dominant Baptist and Methodist culture. The aesthetics of these churches remained mostly unchanged: pastors in clerical collars, prominently displayed crosses, and sanctuaries fashioned in the age-old style rather than as television studios. There was little of the didactic atmosphere found in worship spaces of independent prosperity churches, where parishioners were wont to bring pens and notepaper to take down the teaching;¹²⁷ rather congregants could be found waving their

FIGURE 3.10 Marvin Winans's Conferences Marvin Winans's conference participation as advertised in *Christianity Today* magazine. Winans's sphere of associates offers a snapshot of shared Word of Faith and neopentecostal influences like Noel Jones and T. D. Jakes.



arms, shouting "Amen!" and taking off uncomfortable shoes to dance in the Spirit. Those pastors who began traveling in prosperity circles tended to be media-savvy, entrepreneurial, and trend-setting mavericks willing to take a little heat from headquarters in order to broaden the scope of their ministries. Their parishioners, in turn, loved them for lingering on topics so close to everyday life.

Frank Reid, pastor of the historic Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) church in Baltimore, Maryland (and guest star on the gritty crime show *The Wire* set in the Charm City), hoped to steer his denomination toward a distinctly Wesleyan prosperity gospel. In the 1980s, his presiding bishop, John Bryant, was instrumental in reclaiming Methodism's sanctified heritage and opening the denomination to pentecostal influences and explosive church growth. Educated at Yale and Harvard, Reid was one of several Bryant protégés with the talent, media savvy, and administrative ability to raise up megachurches that would remake the A.M.E. in this new image.¹²⁸ Young guns, like Baltimore megachurch pastor Jamal Bryant (the bishop's son), followed in these footsteps with eye-catching sermon titles like "I Just Want to Be Successful" and seminars on "How to Create Wealth."¹²⁹ Reid understood his role as a mediator between those attempting to ignore the prosperity gospel and those too easily persuaded by its extremes. He sought to reclaim the prosperity gospel as a Methodist idea with a liberative end—the wholesale economic empowerment of black America. Just as God's promise of abundant life had once fostered upward mobility for the newly disciplined Methodists drawn from slavery and the English lower classes, Reid argued, so should contemporary believers be counseled to be better managers of their time, talent, and treasure.¹³⁰ This, he warned would be a "costly" prosperity gospel, while an easy prosperity gospel required nothing but a hustling preacher. He decried abuses of practices, like confession and visualization, but cautioned believers not to ignore the scriptural foundations of 30-, 60-, 100-fold blessings and Mark 11:24's "I shall have what I say." He preferred to be called an "empowerment preacher" as his sermons unveiled God's "biblical keys to abundant living" and the need to "put on the winning ways of Christ-like champions."¹³¹ He spoke of generational "strongholds" rather than curses that bound Christians who used fatalistic words (others might have spoken here of "negative confession"). He hoped that the denomination could offer a reasoned middle ground between independent pentecostalism and historic black churches. "The survival of the African Methodist denomination," warned Reid, "hinges on how well we engage and embrace this debate."

Kirbyjon Caldwell headed the second-largest congregation in the largely white United Methodist Church and traveled in the nation's highest circles. Caldwell was well known for his role as a spiritual advisor on the national political scene and a pioneer in community development as the founder of the Power Center—a cluster of services including a bank; an AIDS outreach center; Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) center; and the Memorial Hermann Hospital health clinic. His book, *The Gospel of Good Success*, promoted "God's mathematics" and common-sense wisdom for creating financial abundance; he could be found on the rosters of national conferences dominated by prosperity teaching.¹³² Nary a Methodist book could be found in his ministry's bookstore, stuffed with the glossy inspiration of neopentecostals like Eddie Long and Myles Monroe. Caldwell promised readers a sure path to God-given prosperity and the miracles wrought by the divine "multiplication process" of tithing. He plotted a slow (but measurable) trajectory toward Christian victory proven by his own example. Even so, many of the familiar ingredients of prosperity messages were absent. He preferred to speak of praise over positive confession, no longer attributing to words the properties of quick cement. He downplayed the instantaneousness of health and wealth; nonetheless, faith yielded rewards. "God has promised you power, abundance, and good success," Caldwell argued, "God did not make provisions—whether it's stocks and bonds, nice cars and nice homes, or peace of mind, joy, and healthy self-esteem—for Satan's kids. God's provisions are for His children, if they're for anybody!"

Pentecostalized Baptists (playfully called "Bapticostals") seemed to find a natural place for the prosperity gospel. A dozen of the largest black Baptist congregations responded quickly to the growing interest in divine health and wealth (see table 3.4). These churches, some independent and some denominationally tied, began to incorporate faith teachers and theology into their Baptist identity. In 1992, Paul Morton of New Orleans' St. Stephen's Baptist church accepted spiritual gifts as central to his ministry. Saying that he knew too much about the Holy Spirit to ignore it, he added Full Gospel to the church's name (along with 10,000 more members) and embarked on a more independent ecclesial path that would see him presiding over the Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship with more than 5,000 affiliates. He "covenantant" other black leaders, like Kenneth Ulmer, Clarence McClendon, and Eddie Long, with the dream of synthesizing black Baptist and pentecostal traditions.¹³³ The fellowship was diverse, but

among many things it soon became a hotspot for prosperity megachurch pastors aspiring to bishoprics.¹²⁴

A new pentecostalized realm had been opened. Many of the most successful African American pastors had forged a postdenominational world of densely networked churches and leaders. Publishers and Bible colleges clamored to share in their reputations, and new opportunities arose for conferences, speaking tours, and accolades. Friends International Christian University, a distance-learning institute centered in Florida, granted honorary doctorates to the highest rung of African American celebrity pastors, including prosperity preachers like T. D. Jakes (Dallas), Clarence McClendon (Los Angeles), Paul Morton (New Orleans), and Ira Hilliard (Houston). Small networks of local black prosperity churches thrived by corporate worship, sponsoring trips to nearby crusades, and mixing and matching their preachers as visiting speakers. In the 1980s and 1990s, the movement had far outreached its largely white foundations. African American churches baptized in the prosperity gospel were like the Grammy-award-winning Clark Sisters—they went from singing “Nothing to Lose” to “Name It, Claim It.”

Table 3.4 African American Baptist Megachurches Participating in the Prosperity Movement

Church	Senior Pastor	Numbers	Location
Mount Zion Baptist Church	Joseph Walker III	25,000	Nashville, TN
New Birth Missionary Baptist Church	Eddie Long	25,000	Lithonia, GA
Bethany Baptist Church	David Evans	23,000	Lindenwood, NJ
The Fountain of Praise	Remus Wright	16,000	Houston, TX
Jericho City of Praise	[In Transition]	15,000	Landover, MD
Faithful Central Bible Church	Kenneth Ulmer	13,000	Inglewood, CA
St. John Church	Denny Davis	12,000	Grand Prairie, TX
First Cathedral	Leroy Bailey Jr.	11,000	Bloomfield, CT
Greater St. Stephen Full Gospel Baptist Church	Debra Morton	10,000	New Orleans, LA
The Park Church	Claude Alexander Jr.	8,000	Charlotte, NC
Elevation Baptist Church	T. L. Carmichael Sr.	3,000	Raleigh, NC

Soft Prosperity

The prosperity movement that emerged in full health and vigor in the early 1990s was more diverse than ever before. It had survived the disgrace of many of its standard-bearers and outgrown its denominational boundaries. It appealed both to white Americans and those of color. It was no longer a child from the wrong side of the tracks but a powerful movement with boundless confidence. It claimed many of the nation's largest churches, and others like the Victorious Faith Center in Durham, North Carolina, one of hundreds of small congregations swept up in the heterogeneous prosperity movement. Nationally, prosperity theology coursed through popular television, radio, books, seminars, conferences, and many of the country's largest congregations. Locally, the message wound its way into hundreds of independent pentecostal churches, loosely associated with other like-minded churches, sharing ministers, church programs, worship events, and healing services, offering the saints a host of solutions for their particular spiritual and physical needs. In churches large and small, the movement had developed a smooth new language and style of persuasion that admirably fit the times. It was therapeutic and emotive, a way of speaking that shed its pentecostal accent for a sweeter and secular tone that I call “soft prosperity.”

Teachers like Joel Osteen, John Osteen's son and successor at Houston's Lakewood Church, softened the hard causality between the spoken word and reality. Prophets of soft prosperity tied psychological-to-fiscal success, believing that a rightly-ordered mind led to rightly ordered finances. Osteen chose mainstream language over Christian jargon, changing the term “positive confession” to “positive declarations.” Yet the principle remained the same: change your words, change your life. He wrote: “Every day, we should make positive declarations over our lives. We should say things such as, ‘I am blessed. I am prosperous. I am healthy. I am talented. I am creative. I am wise.’” For Osteen, the transformative power of positive confession could be demonstrated psychologically, rather than appealing to the forces of faith. The words build self-image, Osteen taught, for “as those words permeate your heart and mind, and especially your subconscious mind, eventually they will begin to change the way you see yourself.” A healthy mind became an important indicator of good spiritual health and a vibrant conduit of faith. Life's circumstances still depended on a believer's use of faith. Divine wealth eventually came to good people, he reasoned, for a chain of causality-linked thought, the

spiritual self, and life's circumstances. "As you speak affirmatively, you will develop a new image on the inside, and things will begin to change in your favor." God rewarded the faithful with wealth, though believers typically earned it indirectly. Perhaps a careful budget tamed household overspending or the boss noticed the believers' cheerful attitude and tapped them for promotion. "If you'll do your part, God will do His," promised Osteen. "He will promote you; He'll give you increase, but first you must be a good caretaker of what you have." Promotion and increase arrived as an assortment of ordinary and supernatural opportunities. A believer should simply rely on God's promises of an abundant life. "Call in what God has promised you," Osteen urged readers.¹³⁵

African American prosperity preachers, in particular those with denominational ties, often added an entrepreneurial twist in emphasizing the slow work of upward mobility. Debt counseling. Tax write-offs. Job banks. Small business loans. Pragmatic and bootstrapping methods charted the long journey to prosperity. Bishop Noel Jones, pastor of the 10,000-member City of Refuge church, demonstrated this dual mental and tactical commitment in *Vow of Prosperity*. His soft prosperity defined success as the net result of right thinking because "your spirit will either attract negatively or positively," but he also lent equal weight to the gritty details of financial management.¹³⁶ He warned readers of the dangers of overnight success, urging them to embrace the process of receiving God's blessings.

Paula White embodied the therapeutic spirit of the times as the everyday woman who offered biblical solutions to poverty and a broken spirit. This televangelist and megachurch pastor preferred to call herself a life-coach and motivational speaker. Her books, *You're All That*; *Deal With It*; *Simple Suggestions for a Sensational Life*; *Birthing Your Dreams*; and *He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not* promised to deliver readers, especially women, from pain that might prevent victory. As Phil Sinitiere and Shayne Lee observed, it was a spiritual climate that favored confessional tones.¹³⁷ Believers wanted their pastors to have tell-all journeys to share and minds they had to master along the way. White introduced readers to a thought-world that was potent, where the successful would learn to get their minds to "work for them."¹³⁸ She traced the relationship between these thoughts, positive or negative, and life's circumstances.

Your thoughts become your words.
Your words become your actions.

Your actions become your habits.
Your habits become your character.
Your character becomes your destiny.¹³⁹

In a sense, therapeutic language replaced sentimentality as the preferred medium of religious advice giving. Healing revivalists before them had worried that it hovered too closely to positive thinking. The new generation had converted to a new way of thinking, in which spirituality doubled as mental warfare and mental health.

Sunday Prosperity

Most Sunday services passed without a word from the first lady of the Victorious Faith Center in Durham, North Carolina, who appeared calmly to accept her husband's fiery prose, nodding or fanning herself. Her stillness may have been mistaken for mildness, but she too had a stubborn fire. Other worshippers seemed to draw their enthusiasm from the crescendoing piano or the pastor's admonitions, rather than the stolid presence of the first lady. Yet one Sunday, the first lady rose unexpectedly from her seat in the first row, turning toward the congregation.

Faith requires action, she declared with surprising volume. Faith requires that believers resist signs of Satan's power—disease, poverty, and lack—and reclaim God's abundance. Her small figure seemed to grow as the room grew more excited when she led believers in a measure to put poverty in check. She urged everyone to stand and prepare to receive. She explained that after she called, "Money cometh unto me, NOW!" each congregant must proclaim this faith and reach out for God's blessings. They must act as if God's financial blessings poured out, and money fell from the sky to meet every need. "MONEY!" she shouted, the congregation calling out with her. "Cometh unto me . . ."—she paused in anticipation—"NOW!" With that, the first lady began to dance. Her legs bounced in place, high-heeled shoes kicked under a chair, and her short arms pumped as she reached high and plucked invisible dollar bills from the sky. The room danced, as some 80 believers, young and old, threw off their inhibitions and joined her. The murmur rose to a din as people began to call out their needs. Most of them fervently reached out for the money visible to their spiritual eyes. Young mothers jostled their babies as they jumped, while elderly women waved their arms to catch what fell. Tears streamed down as people remembered what they desired or the losses that *they*

hoped to replace. "Money cometh unto me NOW!" voices called again, echoing the first lady's refrain. When the moment faded, feet slowed and hands clutched their invisible findings. The first lady sank into her seat and resumed her quiet authority, the silent demonstration of what invisible faith, when made visible, could accomplish.¹⁴⁰

Prosperity congregations, unable to find sufficient precedent in pentecostal and Holiness church practices, developed modern rites to celebrate divine wealth on Sunday morning. Although, there was little uniformity across the movement's diverse congregations, several trends emerged. Tithing eclipsed the sermon, worship, and communion as the emotional peak of the service, as pastors pushed their audiences to envision greater financial miracles. Soft prosperity churches commonly kept the mood light as the ushers took the offering, reminding audiences "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7). Hard prosperity congregations adopted stronger measures, dwelling on the negative consequences that befell the uncharitable. In the book of Malachi, teachers found ample evidence that Christians cursed themselves when they "robbed God."¹⁴¹

Financial themes surfaced throughout the service. Congregations might open the worship service with positive confessions tailored to wealth, such as, "I am out of debt. I am healthy and wealthy. I'm having good success." Testimony found new purpose as churches made liturgical space to glorify the financial and physical improvements in their members. Small churches allowed members to pipe up with news of a newly acquired car, promotion, or home, while megachurch pastors read them aloud in a segment for prayer and praise. St. Peter's Church and World Outreach Center placed tall glass coffers labeled "Answered Prayers" at the foot of the pulpit. One might be forgiven for thinking that at a prosperity gospel service speech and ceremonies would be about receiving, but, in fact, the emphasis is often on giving—to the ministry. There seemed to be as many ways to separate the faithful from their money as there were pastors. Giving was turned into a public spectacle, the new liturgy.

Innovative tithing rituals compelled members to present their donations before curious eyes. Pastor Marvin Winans of Perfecting Church in Detroit separated the givers from the bystanders when he asked those "who give more than \$30, but only more than \$30" to stand and bring their offerings to the altar. "I want you to give 'cause we need a bigger church," he stated bluntly.¹⁴² Soft prosperity preachers in tune with white evangelical audiences typically offered more subdued requests, sometimes simply announcing what percentage of their congregation was

giving their full tithes. Numerous black prosperity churches followed sanctified church custom in asking all present to stand and file past the offertory plate or (in the case of megachurches) bucket.¹⁴³ Empty-handed believers touched the bucket and prayed that they might soon have something to give. It raised to new heights the old-fashioned custom of placing a wooden tablet at the side of the sanctuary, totaling last week's attendance and offerings. Lynette Hagin, Kenneth E. Hagin's daughter-in-law, introduced an interactive tithing convention adopted by many Rhema churches. Participants raised their tithing envelopes in the air and repeated this offering prayer:

This is my seed. I sow it into the Kingdom of God. I sow because I love God and want to see [insert name of church] continue to fulfill what God has called us to do.

I believe that as I sow my seed, it shall be given unto me—good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over! It shall come back to me in many ways!

I thank You, Lord, for good opportunities coming my way. I thank You that the windows of Heaven are opening because of my obedience to sow my seed.

I thank You, Lord, for the favor of God upon my life and the grace to prosper, as You have promised me in Your Word.¹⁴⁴

At the mention of "good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over," Rhema Bible Training Center graduates even added their own playful actions.

Tithing, in part, was about show and tell. People were called to stand, dance, wave, or parade their donations before the congregation and television cameras. In Orlando, Florida, Faith World placed transparent buckets emblazoned with the word "release" on the stage at the end of every aisle for parishioners to "sow into" a moment in the sermon. At Paula White's Without Walls church, a feminine aesthetic pervaded the sanctuary and encouraged giving through the provision of floppy pink envelopes which tithers were encouraged to wave during the service. Solicitations for tithes to her church offered concrete guidelines:

I'm enclosing my best offering of:

- ☐ One month's pay
- ☐ One day's pay



- ☐ One week's pay
- ☐ My best First Fruits offering

The Minneapolis megachurch Speak the Word Church International suggested to its mostly immigrant congregation that they could donate fine jewelry and foreign currency in lieu of dollars. "The silver is mine and the gold is mine," declares the Lord Almighty" (Haggai 2:8) read the handout, explaining that treasures placed in the offering bin would be liquidated for resale.¹⁴⁵ (Tiny print at the bottom allowed that the vendors used may include businesses that church board members have an interest in.) Other churches laid the bare bills on the platform as the preacher paced a stage littered with cash and checks.

The significance of divine wealth led churches to publicize tithing and to set givers apart from the crowd. Pressure was often subtle. Pastors might ask congregants to turn to their neighbors in the pew and inquire: "Did you give what you were supposed to?" and to tell any reluctant givers, "I'm not going to sit by you if you're not here for victory!" At a megachurch in a destitute area of Maryland the speaker breathlessly recounted how the previous week for the culmination of Pastor's Appreciation Month many givers had promised donations of \$1,000, even \$50,000. What would be given this week? Those who had been absent last Sunday and missed out on this opportunity were told to stand and to "name their seed" of no less than \$1,000. The first man to stand coughed and looked around as the video camera closed in on his face. With his shirt untucked and his cautious expression, he seemed like a man out of step with the polish and confidence of the congregation. When the speaker asked him to announce what he was "sowing," he stunned the audience by saying: "I'll sow what I got." This news was received with silence and muttering, as the preacher surmised that he could not have been at this church very long to think that those with a small or vague offering would prosper.¹⁴⁶

Seminars to teach pastors these financial techniques became a cottage industry. Bishop Don Meares of the 5,000-member Evangel Cathedral and Michael Chitwood, creator of the *Building and Accumulating Wealth* system, toured the United States for months with their "Church Financial Seminars." Hyped by a theological cross-section of the prosperity movement (including Shirley Caesar, Kenneth Ulmer, Dennis Leonard, Clarence McClendon, and John Avanzini), it promised to teach pastors the basics:

- How to Prove Tithing is in the New Testament
- How to Deal with Delinquent Tithers
- How to Double the Pastor's Salary
- How to Complete Your Pledges in 120 Days
- How to Prove that Non-Tithers are Robbers

Seminar topics like "How to Setup a Love Offering Program LEGALLY" allowed pastors to receive gifts without violating their tax exemption status as charities.¹⁴⁷ The advertisement featured Bishop Jimmie Ellis of the Victory Christian Center raving, "I did not realize how underpaid I was on my salary and housing allowance. I am now making 3 times what I was making." Divine finances came as a lesson to all.

The megachurch pastor Clint Brown stressed the significance of touch, urging those in the audience who would not or could not tithe to "Just get something in your hand. If you are not tithing then at least give an offering, have something in your hand!" James Hash, an African American graduate of Rhema Bible, paraded with his wife on the stage of his St Peter's Church and World Outreach Center in Winston-Salem, telling his congregation, "You're looking at Mr. and Mrs. Favor!" One of the deacons was asked to join them, followed by a dozen more representing the different ministries of the church, holding hands to create a long chain that would allow the pastor's favor to rub off on them and spread to the whole church.¹⁴⁸

Small churches claimed an equal share of prosperity. Bishop Edward Peecher's Chicago storefront church, the New Heritage Cathedral, printed their "Personal Confession" in the bulletin:

I am under Divine Decree of Increase. God has spoken Increase to me. I am destined to Increase, my anointing is Increasing, my wisdom is Increasing, my health is improving—EVERY DAY is a day of Increase for me and my family.¹⁴⁹

A banner near the altar of the Memorial Baptist Church of Newark read: "Are you giving God a tip or a tithe?"¹⁵⁰ Large churches proclaimed victory over their own financial woes. The conference organizer of "Would Thou Be Made Whole?"—in celebration of the singer-preacher Shirley Caesar—attempted to meet the conference's diminishing budget by praying over the offerings asking God that the small bills be transformed into larger denominations. It was a frequent joke at prosperity gatherings that

the audience be given more time to write out their checks because it was time consuming to write all those zeros at the end of the amount.

Some prosperity preachers earned their reputations as biblical mathematicians. Earlier pentecostals and fundamentalists, like many before them, had mined apocalyptic literature for the raw data of prophecy, unearthing fragments from Daniel or Revelation for clues that foretold the unraveling of time. This was exacting work, a tangle of dates counted backward and forward through the reigns of kings and stretches of exile. A handful of prosperity evangelists including faith healer Benny Hinn and Millionaire University™ creator John Avanzini approached scripture as a treasure trove of covenants, agreements cut between God and ancient Israel. The obsession with numerical precision often influenced the ways they encouraged Sunday giving. Televangelist Mike Murdock, a staple on *Paula White Today* and Benny Hinn's *This Is Your Day*, saturated his messages with numbers: *365 Wisdom Keys*, *31 Reasons People Do Not Receive Their Financial Harvest*, and *7 Ingredients In Every Miracle*. Symmetry was encouraged. Ministers might ask for \$3,500 for a 35th anniversary in the ministry. George Bloomer, spiritual son of Eddie Long, divided his Durham-based Bethel Family Worship Center into lines come tithing time: a \$10 line, a \$50 line, a \$100 line, etc. Grammy-winning Shirley Caesar preferred marches: marches of men, marches of women, with a preordained amount in their hands. Sometimes mathematics worked in favor of the congregation. Pastor Mike Freeman of Spirit of Faith Christian Center in Temple Hill, Maryland, celebrated the 17th anniversary of his church by giving away envelopes full of money to 17 people born on the 17th. (Pastor Mike was not born yesterday—he spent fifteen minutes of his sermon checking the IDs of those claiming to be born on the auspicious day.)

Sometimes preachers abandoned smooth persuasion for old-fashioned hell-fire. The mild-mannered Jim Hammond of Minneapolis' Living Word Christian Center played the part of a financial exorcist, releasing his audience from satanic control over their money. "Devil, take your hands off my \$9,500!" he shouted, asking his white congregation filled with lapsed Lutherans to substitute their own number and demand that the Devil release it. It was a low-flying theology, hovering just above people's daily needs and desires.

Give and get. Divine prosperity rested on a simple exchange. To be sure, careful preachers warned believers against giving to get, but all agreed that openhearted givers should expect to see significant returns. Money served as a common and practical means of assessing one's faith.

Yet the actual calculation of gains and losses in a believer's life proved more difficult. Whether donations appeared in the heat of a crusade or the cool of a casual Sunday, believers often struggled to account for precisely how much the prosperity gospel yielded.

Every now and again, divine wealth came as miraculously as a sudden bank transfer or a mysterious envelope of cash in the mailbox. Joan, a visiting prophetess to the Victorious Faith Center, testified that her \$255 tithe was recompensed by following God's instructions to find the same amount in the parking lot of a particular store.¹⁵¹ Most often, however, calculations demanded a roundabout arithmetic. One of Kenneth Hagin's favorite stories of financial obedience illustrates this calculus at work. A poor widow in his congregation scarcely had enough to eat but faithfully paid her tithes. One night during a revival, the woman's mentally ill daughter accepted the gospel and was miraculously restored to near-perfect mental health. She soon married. Hagin later discovered that the young woman's husband died in a truck accident, and that his ample insurance left her several hundred thousand dollars. "I was so glad, praise God," wrote Hagin, "that I had obeyed God and had taken her mother's tithes. This girl had learned to pay tithes, too. . . . Would she ever have gotten to that place if she hadn't been obedient in her finances?"¹⁵² To the casual observer, the connection between a mother's donation and her daughter's tragic loss seemed a distant one. Yet the faithful saw providence, not coincidence, at work. As Paula White explained of God, "He is the master puppeteer who is making all the right moves, orchestrating each event that comes your way, preparing your blessing. . . . and He is doing everything that concerns you in His perfect time."¹⁵³ No circumstance fell outside God's purview. Believers did what they did best: they found God in the particulars of their lives. Members of VFC told me of God's providence in securing a loan, a company car, or winning a bidding war over a new home. God provided for them as faithfully as He did for Moses, parting the seas that they might pass through.

The flip side of this same coin was the veiled threat of misfortune for those who tried to escape God's consequences. Evangelist Joyce Meyer recalled that her attempts to avoid tithing caused all her household appliances to malfunction, exacting from her the amount that her tithes would have been. Because she did not have her "seed" in the ground, she explained, Satan stole her money.¹⁵⁴ Pastor Walton warned parishioners that robbing God might bring a curse on their houses. Their appliances and cars would break down. "Money gets away from you," he said, shaking

his head.¹⁵⁵ Followers repented of withholding their tithes, but then worried about the residual debt they owed God. "How can I 'clear my account' with Him?" fretted a reader of Marilyn Hickey's *Charisma* column.¹⁵⁶ The world of prosperity was a closed spiritual system, encompassing all aspects of everyday life. "Spiritual currency works the same as natural currency," explained Gloria Copeland. "If you have an abundance in your natural bank account, you can enjoy plenty of material things. If you have an abundance of faith in your spiritual account, you can enjoy plenty of *everything*—wealth, health, good relationships, peace, success."¹⁵⁷ Believers treated faith as a loose Christian equivalent to Hinduism's karma, an explanation for causality in which all actions brought good or ill consequences. It was both the carrot and the stick, as "*whatsoever* we sow, whether good or bad, is coming up again!"¹⁵⁸

For those who could not yet see prosperity in their own lives, patience became the highest virtue. "Patience! The power twin of faith!" exclaimed Kenneth Copeland.¹⁵⁹ Virtually every book on the subject of prosperity addressed the issue of God's timing. Brother John Avanzini listed "No Patience" as one of the 25 major obstructions to blessing. "Everything God does is scheduled. . . . Just hold on," urged Paula White.¹⁶⁰ Juanita Bynum's popular song encouraged believers to rest in the gap between asking and receiving with the single, repeated refrain: "I don't mind waiting for you, Lord."¹⁶¹

Leading by Example

Leaders proved to be the most powerful demonstrators of divine wealth, and the living testimony and continued revelation of successful prosperity teachers presented an idealized portrait of what it meant to live victoriously. Their chauffeured cars and private jets served as tangible reminders of their blessedness, as Creflo Dollar reminded his congregation: "I own two Rolls-Royces and didn't pay a dime for them. Why? Because while I'm pursuing the Lord those cars are pursuing me."¹⁶² As embodiments of prosperity, these pastors offered tangible reminders of God's goodness and the abundant provisions in store for all who believed. Frederick Price, pioneer of African American prosperity theology, made his financial success a perennial theme with a theological bottom line: "I'm only doing it so that you can see that there's somebody the same color that you are, breathing the same contaminated air, paying the same outrageous prices for everything else, and I'm prospering because of the Book."¹⁶³ In short,

they served as "proof-producers," divining rods for the community to understand the work of the Lord.

Dollar's rise to fame demonstrated this desired career trajectory. When Atlanta singer and rap-phenomenon, Ludacris, starred in the music video, "Welcome to Atlanta," a faux-tour of his city's hip-hop landmarks, Pastor Dollar was the first stop. Between footage of a raunchy tour guide and Ludacris's camera-close rapping, the senior pastor of World Changers Church International stood solemnly in front of the 30,000-member facility that had made him an urban black sensation. As pastor of the 15th-largest church in America, an African American congregation, Dollar's popularity reached into unlikely spheres. As the spiritual son of Kenneth Copeland, an older generation of pentecostals respected Dollar's exuberant traits. Handsome and quick-witted, he commanded a female fan base that crossed racial lines and ensured frequent invitations to women's conferences. In 2008, for example, Joyce Meyer's Women's Convention slated Dollar as the sole male speaker. A popular presenter across diverse sectors of the American Christian landscape, Dollar succeeded in bringing an urban black ministry to national acclaim.

Dollar's reputation was born and bred in Atlanta. A native of College Park, Dollar grew up in the Methodist church, converting to pentecostalism as a teenager. His first pastoral efforts came in West Georgia College, where he and a roommate started a "World Changers Bible Study." Under his guidance, the group grew to 300 attendees.¹⁶⁴ Dollar's subsequent graduate work in counseling, though unrelated to theology, equipped him as a teacher and self-help advisor. In 1986, Dollar founded a church in College Park, Georgia, with eight members. Their numbers grew steadily, though not meteorically, despite Dollar's ambitions.¹⁶⁵ In the early 1990s, however, the church's growth increased exponentially. In 1991, Dollar began construction on an \$18 million facility, the World Dome. While large-scale building projects formed the rule, not the exception, in faith ministries, Dollar's projects facilitated both his growing ministry and a spiritual symbolism. In keeping with his teachings against debt, Dollar refused any bank financing, gradually paying for the facility himself. By December 24, 1995, World Changers Ministry International began services in the new 8,500-seat sanctuary and Dollar proved his theological point. As his church biographers stated, "The construction of the World Dome is a testament to the miracle-working power of God and remains a model of debt-freedom that ministries all over the world emulate."¹⁶⁶

Dollar majored in spiritual finances. His television program, *Changing Your World*, launched in 1990, was syndicated on almost 200 television stations and cemented his reputation as God's financier. Each broadcast offered strategies to achieve Christian victory, largely through the "supernatural method of finance."¹⁶⁷ The close of his November 24, 2004, broadcast explained things clearly. As Dollar sat comfortably beside his wife, Tafti, they summarized the findings of their series, "Becoming Financially Fit." "God is the one giving us the power to get wealth," he explained, quoting Psalm 66:10, that "we went through the fire but thou brought us to a *wealthy place*." He smiled jubilantly as he arrived at the punch line: "We've been bought out! And brought out!" God saved and rewarded, a lavish promise to every believer. His dozen popular titles like *Total Life Prosperity* (1999), *No More Debt!: God's Debt Cancellation Strategy* (2001), and *Claim Your Victory Today* (2006) detailed his financial promises from God. Dollar's consistent focus on godly acquisition made financial empowerment seminars a hallmark of his ministry.

Fellow faith teachers hailed Dollar as one of the youngest success stories of the American prosperity movement. In 1998, Oral Roberts confirmed his achievement with an honorary doctor of divinity degree, and a host of like-minded preachers, black and white, counted him as an ally. His was an unlikely accomplishment: a multimillion dollar ministry in an Atlanta neighborhood where 20 percent of citizens lived below the poverty line. Yet the ministry itself seemed proof that Dollar's optimistic brand of self-help delivered concrete results.

Believers, for the most part, wanted their leaders to live well. Yet these examples of lavish living rarely escaped the criticism that they exploited their followers by profiting from their donations. Media pundits relentlessly cataloged televangelists' assets and expenses as evidence of greed and probable corruption. Insiders protested that heaven's windows stood wide open, and pastors hardly could be faulted for acting on a divine prescription for prosperity. In truth, believers rarely acknowledged the line between manipulation and abundant living until it had been crossed. In 2007, the publication of images of Dollar's mansion provoked heated criticism, as did reports of Ohio evangelist Joyce Meyer's \$23,000 toilet seat.¹⁶⁸ Yet, on the face of it, these displays of wealth were not a *theological* problem. Their divine economy operated on the principle that they lived in a world of more-than-enough. It was when pastors mishandled funds that believers typically lost faith. When Jim Bakker defrauded shareholders of Heritage USA, the problem at first was not that he profited. That he

resorted to deception undermined the grounding logic of his gospel: wealth comes to any and all who ask. If accumulation was easy, why do it secretly? And why must he do it at the expense of others? Bakker, by his actions, had seemed to live in a world of not-enough.

The mighty fell hard. Famed faith teacher Robert Tilton made national news when reporters showed him dumping thousands of prayer requests into the dumpster after removing the money from the envelopes. In 2007, a lawsuit alleging the illegal use of university funds led Richard Roberts to resign his presidency of Oral Roberts University.¹⁶⁹ (The university survived with an infusion of cash from Pat Robertson and Christian retail mogul Mart Green, as well as the interim presidency of Billy Joe Daugherty of Victory Christian Center.) The same year, Senator Chuck Grassley of Iowa opened an investigation into the finances of many of the most famous names in prosperity theology: Benny Hinn, Eddie Long, Joyce Meyer, Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, Creflo and Taffi Dollar, and Randy and Paula White. It was a narrow road, and few managed to walk it without rebuke.

Some gave up the prosperity gospel altogether. Jimmy Swaggart was one of the first. In 1982, in his *The Balanced Faith Life*, Swaggart excoriated his fellow Assemblies of God televangelists for preaching prosperity theology, retracting the message that he himself had espoused in *The Confession Principle and the Course of Nature*, published earlier that year.¹⁷⁰ Jim Bakker's post-prison biography *I Was Wrong* denounced the faith message as false. The globetrotting healer Benny Hinn waffled. The celebrity T. D. Jakes played both sides of the prosperity debate. Though he closely associated himself with prosperity preachers, promoting the ministries of up-and-coming faith teachers like Paula White, he avoided the "P-word" for fear of "being positioned in a camp of preachers who some say have marginalized the Gospel and relegated it in favor of capitalist ideals." He rejected the "so-called Prosperity Gospel" as a confused attempt to reach a "capitalistic, tax-sheltered heaven."¹⁷¹ The elderly Kenneth Hagin penned *The Midas Touch* to correct some of the abuses of the movement he helped shape, forbidding ministers to "lead people to believe that prosperity means conspicuous, lavish wealth. It simply is not true that everyone who has faith for prosperity will live in a palace, drive a luxurious car, and dress in expensive designer-label clothes."¹⁷² Before his death, he assembled a meeting of some of the leading prosperity preachers (including Kenneth Copeland) and castigated preachers who sought financial gain, corrupting spiritual truths with wrong motivations at the expense of the Body of Christ. Yet the

message that faith works had proved so successful that no one, not even Hagin, could take it back.

Tammy Faye Bakker later recalled that the impetus behind Heritage USA was that they wanted a place where followers could catch the vision of PTL. Most preachers undoubtedly would have built a church. That the Bakkers built a Christian wonderland testified to the joyful and enterprising spirit of the movement. They had wanted believers to meet Jehovah Jireh, the God of more-than-enough.

4

Health

Jehovah Rapha (my healer)

THE VICTORIOUS FAITH CENTER (VFC) in Durham, North Carolina, was lit up like a jack-o'-lantern, its orange-tinted fluorescent lights illuminating the bustling sanctuary as seen from the street outside. Sandwiched between a nail salon and a payday loan office in a mini-mall, the storefront church rang with shouts of praise and prayer on this and every Wednesday night. A dozen or so women—elders, deacons, and mothers of the church—bantered and laughed as they prepared for the service. The din of chatter ceased when a woman stumbled through the doors and stood teetering there, her eyes scanning the room and her face twisting as if she were in pain. A mother of the church sprang from her seat, crossed the room, and pulled the newcomer, a fellow church member, into a tight hug.¹ "Praise God!" Shouts of encouragement erupted from all corners. The woman's face brightened and ran with tears as people clustered around her in a spontaneous praise circle.

"I'm going to praise His name!" sang the church mother, beginning the familiar tune of a VFC favorite. "Each day is just the same!" joined another. The stomping of tennis shoes on the beige-carpeted floor anchored the chorus:

He healed my body, He touched my mind,
He saved me JUST IN TIME.²

The woman, whose name was Essence, I soon learned, had just taken her first unaided steps after a sudden illness had left her paralyzed. The VFC members celebrated her healing as a triumph over Satan, who robs believers of the health, prosperity, and abundant life that God grants to all the faithful.

EPILOGUE

America's Strange Breed

The Long Legacy of White Trash

Two persistent problems have rumbled through our "democratic" past. One we can trace back to Franklin and Jefferson and their longing to dismiss class by touting "exceptional" features of the American landscape, which are deemed productive of an exceptional society. The founders insisted that the majestic continent would magically solve the demographic dilemma by reducing overpopulation and flattening out the class structure. In addition to this environmental solution, a larger, extremely useful myth arose: that America gave a voice to all of its people, that every citizen could exercise genuine influence over the government. (We should note that this myth was always qualified, because it was accepted that some citizens were more worthy than others—especially those whose stake in society came from property ownership.)

The British colonial imprint was never really erased either. The "yeoman" was a British class, reflecting the well-established English practice of equating moral worth to cultivation of the soil. For their part, nineteenth-century Americans did everything possible to replicate class station through marriage, kinship, pedigree, and lineage. While the Confederacy was the high mark—the most overt manifestation—of rural aristocratic pretense (and an open embrace of society's need to have an elite ruling over the lower classes), the next century ushered in the disturbing imperative of eugenics, availing itself of science to justify breeding a master class. Thus not only did Americans *not* abandon their desire for class distinctions, they repeatedly reinvented class distinctions. Once the government of the United States began portraying itself as "leader of the free world," the longing for a more regal head of state was advanced. The Democrats swooned over Kennedy's Camelot, and Republicans ennobled the Hollywood court of Reagan.

American democracy has never accorded all the people a meaningful

voice. The masses have been given symbols instead, and they are often empty symbols. Nation-states traditionally rely on the fiction that a head of state can represent the body of the people and stand in as their proxy; in the American version, the president must appeal broadly to shared values that mask the existence of deep class divisions. Even when this strategy works, though, unity comes at the price of perpetuating ideological deception. George Washington and Franklin Roosevelt were called fathers of the country, and are now treated as the kindly patriarchs of yore; Andrew Jackson and Teddy Roosevelt descend to us as brash, tough-talking warriors. Cowboy symbols stand tall in the saddle and defend the national honor against an evil empire, as Reagan did so effectively; more recently, the American people were witness to a president dressed in a pilot jumpsuit who for dramatic effect landed on an aircraft carrier. That, of course, was George W. Bush, as he prematurely proclaimed an end to combat operations in Iraq. Left out of our collective memory, meanwhile, are corporate puppet presidents such as William McKinley, who was in the pocket of Big Steel and a host of manufacturing interests. When presidential candidate Mitt Romney in 2012 responded to a heckler with the line "Corporations are people, my friend," he inadvertently became the new McKinley. The "1 percent" were his constituency, and wearing blue jeans did little to loosen his buttoned-up image.

Power (whether social, economic, or merely symbolic) is rarely probed. Or if it is, it never becomes so urgent a national imperative as to require an across-the-board resolution, simultaneously satisfying a moral imperative and pursuing a practical cause. We know, for instance, that Americans have forcefully resisted extending the right to vote; those in power have disenfranchised blacks, women, and the poor in myriad ways. We know, too, that women historically have had fewer civil protections than corporations. Instead of a thoroughgoing democracy, Americans have settled for democratic stagecraft: high-sounding rhetoric, magnified, and political leaders dressing down at barbecues or heading out to hunt game. They are seen wearing blue jeans, camouflage, cowboy hats, and Bubba caps, all in an effort to come across as ordinary people. But presidents and other national politicians are anything but ordinary people after they are elected. Disguising that fact is the real camouflage that distorts the actual class nature of state power.

The theatrical performances of politicians who profess to speak for an

"American people" do nothing to highlight the history of poverty. The tenant farmer with his mule and plow is not a romantic image to retain in historic memory. But that individual is as much our history as any war that was fought and any election that was hotly contested. The tenant and his shack should remain with us as an enduring symbol of social stasis.

The underclass exists even when they don't rise to the level of making trouble, fomenting rebellions, joining in riots, or fleeing the ranks of the Confederacy and hiding out in swamps, where they create an underground economy. Those who do not disappear into the wilderness are present in towns and cities and along paved and unpaved roads in every state. Seeing the poor, whether it is in the photographs of a Walker Evans or a Dorothea Lange, or in comical form on "reality TV," we have to wonder how such people exist amid plenty. As she cast her eyes upon southern trailer trash in the middle of World War II, the *Washington Post* columnist Agnes Meyer asked, "Is this America?"

Yes, it is America. It is an essential part of American history. So too is the backlash that occurs when attempts are made to improve the conditions of the poor. Whether it is New Deal policies or LBJ's welfare programs or Obama-era health care reform, along with any effort to address inequality and poverty comes a harsh and seemingly inevitable reaction. Angry citizens lash out: they perceive government bending over backward to help the poor (implied or stated: undeserving) and they accuse bureaucrats of wasteful spending that steals from hardworking men and women. This was Nixon's class-inflected appeal, which his campaign staff packaged for the "Silent Majority." In the larger scheme of things, the modern complaint against state intervention echoes the old English fear of social leveling, which was said to encourage the unproductive. In its later incarnation, government assistance is said to undermine the American dream. Wait. Undermine whose American dream?

Class defines how real people live. They don't live the myth. They don't live the dream. Politics is always about more than what is stated, or what looms before the eye. Even when it's denied, politicians engage in class issues. The Civil War was a struggle to shore up both a racial and a class hierarchy. The Confederacy was afraid that poor whites would be drawn in by Union appeals and would vote to end slavery—because slavery was principally a reflection of the wealthy planters' self-interest.

Today as well we have a large unbalanced electorate that is regularly convinced to vote against its collective self-interest. These people are told that East Coast college professors brainwash the young and that Hollywood liberals make fun of them and have nothing in common with them and hate America and wish to impose an abhorrent, godless lifestyle. The deceivers offer essentially the same fear-laden message that the majority of southern whites heard when secession was being weighed. Moved by the need for control, for an unchallenged top tier, the power elite in American history has thrived by placating the vulnerable and creating for them a false sense of identification—denying real class differences whenever possible.

The dangers inherent in that deception are many. The relative few who escape their lower-class roots are held up as models, as though everyone at the bottom has the same chance of succeeding through cleverness and hard work, through scrimping and saving. Can Franklin's "nest egg" produce Franklin the self-made man? Hardly. Franklin himself needed patrons to rise in his colonial world, and the same rules of social networking persist. Personal connections, favoritism, and trading on class-based knowledge still grease the wheels that power social mobility in today's professional and business worlds. If this book accomplishes anything it will be to have exposed a number of myths about the American dream, to have disabused readers of the notion that upward mobility is a function of the founders' ingenious plan, or that Jacksonian democracy was liberating, or that the Confederacy was about states' rights rather than preserving class and racial distinctions. Sometimes, all it took was a name: before becoming known as a Reconstruction-era southern white who identified with black uplift or Republican reforms, the scalawag was defined as an inferior breed of cattle. The scalawag of today is the southern liberal who is painted by conservative ideologues as a traitor to the South for daring to say that poor whites and poor blacks possess similar economic interests. —

And that is how we return to the language of breeding, so well understood in an agrarian age, so metaphorically resonant in the preindustrial economy in which restrictive social relations hardened. If the republic was supposedly dedicated to equality, how did the language of breeds appeal as it did? To speak of breeds was to justify unequal status among white people; it was the best way to divide people into categories and

deny that class privilege exists. If you are categorized as a breed, it means you can't control who you are and you can't avert your appointed destiny.

Breeding. The erstwhile experts in this socially prescriptive field of study interpolated from the science and widespread practices of animal husbandry. The mongrel inherited its (or his or her) parent's incapacities, they said, just as ~~as~~ towheaded children with yellowish skin were produced through living on bad soil and inbreeding. In these ways, negative traits were passed on. Scrubland produced a rascally herd of cattle—or people. Breeding determined who rose and who fell. The analogy between human and animal stock was ever present. As Jefferson wrote in 1787, “The circumstance of superior beauty is thought worthy of attention in the propagation of our horses, dogs, and other domestic animals; why not in that of man?”

Under a related form of logic, Manifest Destiny became a desirable means to open land routes and squeeze bad breeds out of the country, presumably through Mexico. In 1860, Daniel Hundley imagined that poor white trash would magically march right out of the United States. The old English idea of colonization required that the poor had to be dumped somewhere. The population had to be drained, strained, or purged. The very same thinking fed social Darwinism and eugenics: if tainted women bred with regular people, they would undermine the quality of future stock. Either nature would weed out inferior stock or a human hand would have to intervene and engage in Galton's notion of controlled breeding, sterilizing the curs and morons among the lowest ranks.

It was just as easy to ignore inequality by claiming that certain breeds could never be improved. As W. E. B. Du Bois explained in 1909, southern politicians were lost in the vacuity of illogic. They had fallen to arguing that any form of social intervention was pointless, because man could not repel nature's force; some races and classes were invariably stuck with their inferior mental and physical endowments. The South's claim to be protecting the public good by endorsing the existing regime that rewarded the already privileged was inherently antidemocratic. Blaming nature for intractable breeds was just a way to rationalize indifference.

While President Reagan loved to invoke the image of the “City upon a Hill,” his critics were quick to point out that membership in that shining city was restricted, as much in the twentieth century as it had been in

the seventeenth. Under Reaganomics, tax rates for the moneyed class were drastically cut. Governor Mario Cuomo of New York related the problem in memorable fashion as keynote speaker at the 1984 Democratic National Convention: “President Reagan told us from the beginning that he believed in a kind of Social Darwinism, survival of the fittest . . . [that] we should settle for taking care of the strong, and hope that economic ambition and charity will do the rest. Make the rich richer, and what falls from the table will be enough for the middle class and those who are trying desperately to work their way into the middle class.” Cuomo's stark language echoed Du Bois, his anti-Darwinian inflection a reminder of the mind-set that justified dividing stronger from weaker breeds. It wasn't enough to preserve the status quo; inequality could be expanded, the gap widened between classes, without incident and without tearing the social fabric. In 2009, the 1 percent paid 5.2 percent of their income in state and local taxes, while the poorest 20 percent paid 10.9 percent. States penalized the poor with impunity.¹

Class has never been about income or financial worth alone. It has been fashioned in physical—and yes, bodily—terms. Dirty feet and tall, low faces remain signs of delinquency and depravity. To live in a shack, a “hovel,” a “shebang,” or in Shedd town or in a trailer park, is to live in a place that never acquires the name of “home.” As transitional spaces, unsettled spaces, they contain occupants who lack the civic markers of stability, productivity, economic value, and human worth.

Job opportunities for all—the myth of full employment—is just that, a myth. ~~The~~ economy cannot provide employment for everyone, a fact that is little acknowledged. In the sixteenth century, the English had their “reserve army of the poor” who were drummed into the military. Modern America's reserve army of the poor are drummed into the worst jobs, the worst-paid positions, and provide the labor force that works in coal mines, cleans toilets and barn stalls, picks and plucks in fields as migrant laborers, or slaughters animals. Waste people remain the “mudsills” who fill out the bottom layer of the labor pool on which society's wealth rests. Poor whites are still taught to hate—but not to hate those who are keeping them in line. Lyndon Johnson knew this when he quipped, “If you can convince the lowest white man he's better than the best colored man, he won't notice you're picking his pocket. Hell, give him somebody to look down on, and he'll empty his pockets for you.”

We are a country that imagines itself as democratic, and yet the majority has never cared much for equality. Because that's not how breeding works. Heirs, pedigree, lineage: a pseudo-aristocracy of wealth still finds a way to assert its social power. We see how inherited wealth grants status without any guarantee of merit or talent. To wit: would we know of Donald Trump, George W. Bush, Jesse Jackson Jr., or such Hollywood names as Charlie Sheen and Paris Hilton, except for the fact that these, and many others like them, had powerful, influential parents? Even some men of recognized competence in national politics are products of nepotism: Albert Gore Jr., Rand Paul, Andrew Cuomo, and numerous Kennedys. We give children of the famous a big head start, deferring to them as rightful heirs, a modern-day version of the Puritans' children of the Elect.

In Thomas Jefferson's formulation, nature assigned classes. Nature demanded a natural aristocracy—what he termed an “accidental aristoi.” The spark of lust would direct the strong to breed with the strong, the “good and wise” to marry for beauty, health, virtue, and talents—traits that would be bred forward. One significant difference between Jefferson's master class and the eugenicists of the early twentieth century was the former's singular focus on the male making his selection, and the latter's urging the middle-class woman to carefully inspect the pedigree of the man she hoped to marry. Marriage has always been connected to class status: today's online dating services are premised on the eugenic notion that a person can find the perfect match—a match presumed to be based on shared class and educational interests. In 2014–15, a series of television commercials for eHarmony.com was sending the same message: that no “normal” middle-class applicant has to be stuck with a twadry (i.e., lower-class) loser. And as the historian Jill Lepore has pointed out in the *New Yorker*, the entrepreneurial Dr. Paul Popenoe began his career as a leading authority on eugenics, before moving on to marriage counseling, and eventually launching computer dating in 1956. Some dating services have been quite blatant: the website Good Genes promised to help “Ivy Leaguers” find potential spouses with “matching credentials,” by which was meant a similar class pedigree.²

The rule of nature was supposed to supplant artificial aristocracy with meritocracy. At the same time, though, it allowed people to associate human failures with different strains and inferior breeds, and to assign a certain inevitability to such failure. If, in this long-acceptable

way of thinking, nature ruled, nature also needed a gardener. The human scrub grass had to be weeded from time to time. That is why squatters were used as the first wave of settlers to encroach on Indian lands, then were chased off the land when the upscale farmers arrived; in time, policing boundaries extended to segregation laws, and after that to zoning laws, separating the wheat from the chaff in the creation of modern suburbia. Class walls went up in the way property values were modulated in carefully planned towns and neighborhoods.

It was easy for nineteenth-century Americans to equate animals and humans. Stallions were like elite planters, and naturally given the best pastures; the weak tackies, like white trash, lazed about the marshlands. While it is not discussed very often, our society still measures human worth by the value of the land people occupy and own. The urban ghettos, no less than the trailer parks on devalued land on the city's edges, are modern representations of William Byrd's Dismal Swamp: an unsafe, uncivilized wasteland that is allowed to fester and remain unproductive.

Location is everything. Location determines access to a privileged school, a safe neighborhood, infrastructural improvements, the best hospitals, the best grocery stores. Upper- and middle-class parents instruct their children in surviving their particular class environment. They give them the appropriate material resources toward this end. But let us devote more thought to what Henry Wallace wrote in 1936: what would happen, he posed, if one hundred thousand poor children and one hundred thousand rich children were all given the same food, clothing, education, care, and protection? Class lines would likely disappear. This was the only conceivable way to eliminate class, he said—and what he didn't say was that this would require removing children from their homes and raising them in a neutral, equitable environment. A dangerous idea indeed!

We have always relied—and still do—on bloodlines to maintain and pass on a class advantage to our children. Statistical measurement has shown convincingly that the best predictor of success is the class status of one's forebears. Ironically, given the American Revolutionaries' hatred for Old World aristocracies, Americans transfer wealth today in the fashion of those older societies, while modern European nations provide considerably more social services to their populations. On average, Americans pass on 50 percent of their wealth to their children; in Nordic countries, social mobility is much higher; parents in Denmark give 15

percent of their total wealth to their children, and in Sweden parents give 27 percent. Class wealth and privileges are a more important inheritance (as a measure of potential) than actual genetic traits.³

Lest we relegate discredited ideas to the age in which they flourished, we can admit that eugenic thinking is not quite dead either. The poor can starve "a little," says Charlotte Hays, and there are surely others who feel the same way. The innocuous-sounding term "fertility treatment" enables the wealthy to breed their own kind, buying sperm and eggs at "baby centers" around the country. Abortion and birth control, meanwhile, are for evangelical conservatives a violation of God's will that all people should be fruitful and multiply, and yet this same fear of unnatural methods of reproduction does not engender opposition to fertility clinics. Antiabortion activists, like eugenicists, think that the state has the right to intervene in the breeding habits of poor single women.

Poor women lost state-funded abortions during the Carter years, and today they are proscribed from using welfare funds to buy disposable diapers. To modern conservatives, women are first and foremost breeders. This was tellingly displayed during the Republican primary debates in 2012, when candidates boasted about the size of their families, each trying to outdo the last, as the camera panned across the podium. The Republicans were mimicking the pride of the winners of the "fitter family" contests held at county fairs in the early twentieth century. A reporter joked that Jon Huntsman's and Mitt Romney's children should breed, "creating a super-race of astonishingly beautiful Mormons." There remains in America a cultural desire to breed one's "own kind." As with the nepotistic practices that continue in a variety of fields, class is reproduced in ways that are not dissimilar to the past.⁴

Some things never change. More than one generation has deluded itself by buying into the notion of an American dream. A singular faith exists today that is known and embraced as American exceptionalism, but it dates back centuries to the projections made and policies put in place when the island nation of Great Britain began to settle the American continent. It was Richard Hakluyt's fantastic literature that graduated to a broader colonial drive for continental domination. The same ideology fueled the theories of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, and Thomas Jefferson. (Meanwhile, London economist William Petty's idea of political arithmetic gave force to a long fascination with demographic

growth.) Teddy Roosevelt had a dream, too, of rewarding parents with large families, encouraging eugenically sound marriages, and recognizing the American as the healthiest member of the Anglo-Saxon family.

This brings us to the slavery/free labor corollary. It was James Oglethorpe in Georgia who first put into practice a sensitive and sensible idea: allowing slavery to thrive would retard economic opportunity and undermine social mobility for average white men and their families. In this way, racial dominance was intertwined with class dominance in the southern states, and the two could never be separated as long as a white ruling elite held sway over politics and rigged the economic system to benefit the few. We now know, of course, that slavery and repression of African American talent was tragically wrong. So why do we continue to ignore the pathological character of class-centered power relations as part of the American republic's political inheritance? If the American dream were real, upward mobility would be far more in evidence.

Let's get it right, then. Because there was never a free market in land, the past saw as much downward as upward mobility. Historically, Americans have confused social mobility with physical mobility. The class system tracked across the land with the so-called pioneering set. We need to acknowledge that fact. Generally, it was the all-powerful speculators who controlled the distribution of good land to the wealthy and forced the poor squatter off his land. Without a visible hand, markets did not at any time, and do not now, magically pave the way for the most talented to be rewarded; the well connected were and are preferentially treated.

Liberty is a revolving door, which explains the reality of downward mobility. The door ushers some in while it escorts others out into the cold. It certainly allows for, even encourages, exploitation. Through a process of rationalization, people have long tended to blame failure on the personal flaws of individuals—this has been the convenient refrain of Republicans in Congress in the second decade of the twenty-first century, when former Speaker of the House John Boehner publicly equated joblessness with personal laziness. Another former Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, captured headlines at the end of 2011 when he seemed ready to endorse Jefferson's Revolutionary-era solution to poverty by making schools into workhouses. Gingrich: "You have a very poor neighborhood. You have students that are required to go to school. They have no money, no habit of

work.... What if they became assistant janitors, and their job was to mop the floor and clean the bathroom?" It was only in the midst of the Great Depression that the country fully appreciated the meaning of downward mobility. At that time, when a quarter of the nation was thrown out of work, the old standby of blaming the individual no longer convinced anyone.⁵

For the most part, daily injustices in average people's lives go ignored. But that does not mean that poor people are numb to the condition of their own lives. Politicians have been willfully blind to many social problems. Pretending that America has grown rich as a largely classless society is bad history, to say the least. The "1 percent" is the most recently adopted shorthand for moneyed monopoly, bringing attention to the ills generated by consolidated power, but the phenomenon it describes is not new. Class separation is and has always been at the center of our political debates, despite every attempt to hide social reality with deceptive rhetoric. The white poor have been with us in various guises, as the names they have been given across centuries attest: Waste people. Offscourings. Lubbers. Bogtrotters. Rascals. Rubbish. Squatters. Crackers. Clay-eaters. Tackles. Mudsills. Scalawags. Briar hoppers. Hillbillies. Low-downers. White niggers. Degenerates. White trash. Rednecks. Trailer trash. Swamp people.

They are blamed for living on bad land, as though they had other choices. From the beginning, they have existed in the minds of rural or urban elites and the middle class as extrusions of the weedy, unproductive soil. They are depicted as slothful, rootless vagrants, physically scarred by their poverty. The worst ate clay and turned yellow, wallowed in mud and muck, and their necks became burned by the hot sun. Their poorly clothed, poorly fed children generated what others believed to be a permanent and defective breed. Sexual deviance? That comes from cramped quarters in obscure retreats, distant from civilization, where the moral vocabulary that dwells in town has been lost. We think of the left-behind groups as extinct, and the present as a time of advanced thought and sensibility. But today's trailer trash are merely yesterday's vagrants on wheels, an updated version of Okies in jalopies and Florida crackers in their carts.

They are renamed often, but they do not disappear. Our very identity as a nation, no matter what we tell ourselves, is intimately tied up with the dispossessed. We are, then, not only preoccupied with race, as we know we are, but with good and bad breeds as well. It is for good reason that we have this preoccupation: by calling America not just "a" land of

opportunity but "the" land of opportunity, we collectively have made a promise to posterity that there will always exist the real potential of self-propulsion upward.

Those who fail to rise in America are a crucial part of who we are as a civilization. A cruel irony is to be found in the aftermath of the Hollywood film *Deliverance*, a gruesome adventure that exploited the worst stereotypes of white trash and ignored the poverty that existed in the part of the country where the movie was made. One actor stands out who was not a trained actor at all: Billy Redden. He played the iconic inbred character who sat strumming the banjo. He was fifteen when he was plucked from a local Rabun County, Georgia, school by the filmmakers because of his odd look (enhanced with makeup). He didn't play the banjo, so a musician fingered from behind, and the cameraman did the rest. Interviewed in 2012 to mark the fortieth anniversary of the film, Billy said he wasn't paid much for his role. Otherwise, the fifty-six-year-old said, "I wouldn't be working at Wal-Mart right now. And I'm struggling really hard to make ends meet."⁶

The discomfort middle-class Americans feel when forced to acknowledge the existence of poverty highlights the disconnect between image and reality. It seems clear that we have made little progress since James Agee exposed the world of poor tenant farmers in 1941. We still today are blind to the "cruel radiance of what is." The static rural experience is augmented by the persistence of class-inflected tropes and the voyeuristic shock in televised portraits of degenerate beings and wasted lives in the richest country that has ever existed. And what of Billy Redden? In 1972, a country boy was made up to fit a stereotype of the retarded hillbilly, the idiot savant. Today his mundane struggle to survive can satisfy no one's expectations, because his story is ordinary. He is neither eccentric nor perverse. Nor does he don a scraggly beard, wear a bandanna, or hunt gators. He is simply one of the hundreds of thousands of faceless employees who work at a Wal-Mart.

White trash is a central, if disturbing, thread in our national narrative. The very existence of such people—both in their visibility and invisibility—is proof that American society obsesses over the mutable labels we give to the neighbors we wish not to notice. "They are not who we are." But they are who we are and have been a fundamental part of our history, whether we like it or not.