

A God of Wealth:

Religion, Modernity, and the Rhetoric of the Christian Prosperity Gospel

By

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Michael C. Souders

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Co-Chairperson, Beth Innocenti, Ph.D

Co-Chairperson, Donn W. Parson, Ph.D

Frank Farmer, Ph.D

Scott Harris, Ph.D

Dave Tell, Ph.D

Date Defended: August 29, 2011

The Dissertation Committee for Michael C. Souders

certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

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Co-Chairperson, Beth Innocenti, Ph.D

Co-Chairperson, Donn W. Parson, Ph.D

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ABSTRACT

The Christian Prosperity Gospel (CPG) is a type of Christian preaching which asserts that the right type of Christian faith and practice will deliver wealth and well-being to believers. In an era of stagnating religious belief and distorted cultural symbols, the CPG is gaining adherents in congregations numbering of tens of thousands and media audiences in the millions. In this dissertation I argue that the rhetoric of the CPG operates by altering conventional religious and secular methods of reading texts and the signs of the world in order to give the audience a greater sense of agency in a period of social, economic, and spiritual uncertainty. Individual chapters take up questions of textual hermeneutics, the hermeneutics of lived experience, the use of Christian tropes in new social conditions, the political implications of the CPG, and its method of appealing to the audience. I conclude that the rise of the CPG is not only an attempt to resolve the problems of a fragmented symbolic environment, but is also both a product of, and reliant upon, the erosion of unified frames of religious and secular interpretation.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In this dissertation, I am interested in understanding how contemporary American preaching grapples with a rapidly changing social environment. More specifically, I am interested in the ways preaching enacts rhetorical strategies and theories in propagating an “eternal” message in a “post-structural” world. The object of examination is a contemporary version of preaching known as the “Christian Prosperity Gospel” (CPG)—a kind of preaching that declares, in the words of Gloria Copeland, “God knows where the money is, and he knows how to get the money to you.”¹ The preachers who constitute the advocates of the CPG including Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, Creflo Dollar, Joel Osteen, and many more are some of the most popular Christian preachers in the world. Osteen, the well-known pastor of Lakewood Church, reaches an audience of 40,000 in his massive church in Houston. He reaches a staggering 7 million persons each week via television with up to as many as 20 million unique persons each month.² Kenneth and Gloria Copeland reach millions of households via on-line broadcasts, radio programs, and Sunday broadcasts on a vast array of local television stations, from New York to Los Angeles to Miami to Seattle. Paul Crouch’s Trinity Broadcasting Network carries programs by all of the preachers studied here and is found on hundreds of cable systems nationwide. Books written by CPG preachers regularly appear at the top the *New York Times Bestseller* list.

The message of the CPG is a kind of preaching that goes to heart of the disestablished, commercialistic, and materialistic heart of American civic sense—a place where apocalypses, profits, blessings, and damnations are all marketed to a public accustomed to such processes.³ I seek to explore the ways that this rise of the CPG both reflects and is a consequence of rapidly

changing social conditions. Although I argue that the CPG is hard at work in America, attempting to maintain and restore credulous religious belief in America while preserving the profit-oriented materialism of modernist culture, it is the *way* that the CPG goes about its business that is the most interesting to me. In exploring that process, I hope to connect core elements of rhetorical theory to the everyday life of millions of Americans.⁴

The key research questions are: In what ways have Christian Prosperity Gospelists re-interpreted the traditional Christian Bible messages to create a Christian faith adapted to 21st-century social conditions, and by what means have they done so? What are the implications of these interpretive choices? Moreover, in what ways do the techniques of the CPG reflect broader techniques for both constituting and adapting belief systems to changing value conditions? Finally, what makes the CPG so appealing to audiences? Hence, we have questions about three areas: the hermeneutics of Scripture, the deployment of those readings in preaching, and the nature of the audience.

In this introduction, I argue that examining contemporary homiletics is important because it enacts many of the vital elements of rhetorical theory and can serve as a key lens to view how contemporary rhetorical theories play out in society. To this end, I forward several arguments. First, I argue that homiletics is a vital part of the rhetorical tradition—one that has, for most of the Western rhetorical tradition, been the preoccupation of rhetoricians. Second, I argue that contemporary rhetorical studies have largely ignored how homiletics deals with crucial points of all rhetoric, such as hermeneutical understanding, the working of rhetoric in particular cultural conditions, and the conception of community. This is unfortunate because homiletics is a significant bellwether of changing social conditions. Churches have often reflected these changing social circumstances because churches are at the foundation of many communities'

identity. Third, I provide an overview for the methodological themes found in each chapter. Finally, I outline the history, doctrines, and scope of the CPG and argue that the CPG is a unique point of access into contemporary visions of preaching and religion, with all of the attendant implications for hermeneutics, the influence of rhetoric on community, and vice-versa.

This study will attempt to add to existing literature on contemporary rhetorical theory in several ways. First, it will attempt to re-connect homiletics with the field of rhetorical studies within rhetoric and communication studies in contemporary terms. Most current work on homiletics views it almost entirely as a historical phenomenon. Second, this study seeks to demonstrate how symbolic processes of hermeneutics, textual analysis, and community formation connect to more concrete parts of society, even in the supposedly anti-intellectual climate of the CPG movement. Third, the dissertation adds to studies of how contemporary culture is adjusting to the fragmented social-symbolic environment. Finally, because homiletics deals with God and “‘God’ by definition transcends all symbol-systems” and therefore “language is intrinsically unfitted” to discuss God, this study serves as an opportunity to explore how rhetoric deals with the ultimate term in material ways.⁵

Homiletics and the Rhetorical Tradition

Homiletics has traditionally been a key focus of rhetoric. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines homiletic as, “The art of preaching; sacred rhetoric.”⁶ The *Catholic Encyclopedia* expands the term to say, “Homiletics is the science that treats of the composition and delivery of a sermon or other religious discourse. It includes all forms of preaching, viz., the sermon, homily, and catechetical instruction.” *The Catholic Encyclopedia* argues against those who claim homiletics is entirely separate from “profane” rhetoric, stating: “true oratory, as the art of persuasion, can never be out of place in the pulpit.”⁷

Homiletics has long been bound up with more general practices of rhetoric and philosophy. Since the Christ event, in almost every case in which there has been rhetorical controversy in the Western world, homiletics has had a part to play. From Augustine struggling to fend off the Second Sophistic and resolve the tension between his rhetorical education and his pseudo-Platonist views to the belletristic conflicts in Scotland, England, and America, the questions of *what*, *how* and *why* in preaching have been closely tied to society, politics, human function, and persuasion.⁸ The questions at hand in the history of rhetoric, ones argued between early Christians and Augustine, between Erasmus and Peter Ramus, and between Timothy Dwight and the folk preachers, continue to interest religious rhetoricians today.⁹ The conflicts between formal versus informal, doctrine versus narrative, hermeneutic interpretation versus textual literalist, modernist versus fundamentalist, education versus inspiration are faced by all preachers and reflect central rhetorical questions: how should one assess the material available for rhetoric and how can one be the most persuasive?

Contemporary Rhetorical Studies in Homiletics

The Lack of Interest in Homiletics

Despite declining religious belief and church attendance, preaching is still the way most people hear “words about the Word.” Homiletics is the way most speakers learn about those vital words. While Americans are widely known to mis-report church attendance (inflating the frequency of attendance, of course), at least 30-40% of American adults still attend church services on most Sundays.¹⁰ With a population of 308 million that means 90-125 million Americans still hear words about the Word week in and week out in person; yet those of us in rhetorical studies have not fully recognized this vital encounter with rhetoric in our publications.¹¹

One reason for this may be the perception that preaching is a kind of “dead language.” Contemporary scholarship tends to see religious language as either obsolete or the refuge of cultural conservatives or extremists. The idea that preaching is obsolete is reflected even in seminaries, where homiletics would seem to be of vital importance. Eugene L. Lowry recalls that upon his first appointment to teach homiletics at a religious institution, a fellow faculty member greeted him by saying, “Welcome. I understand you are going to be teaching blacksmithing.”¹² The same problem exists in rhetorical studies. Margaret D. Zulick reports that, “The field of homiletics is sadly overlooked by almost everyone outside its several denominated homes.”¹³

Hence, rhetorical studies have largely treated homiletics as a historical event—one with past significance but with few contemporary applications outside of tracing current secular practices. Most treatments of homiletics deal with preaching as a historical phenomenon whose study is important to understanding the medieval, Reformation, or pre-20th century modern periods.¹⁴ Many of these studies emphasize the significance of their studies to contemporary rhetoric and some draw parallels to contemporary situations but very few treat homiletics as a live practice. Those that do consider homiletic practice in contemporary form tend to examine the way that homiletic practices, such as the prophetic and jeremiadic genres, have become integrated into secular, political discourse.¹⁵ Few, if any, contemporary journals and books within the realm of rhetoric analyze the theories of preaching for anthropological or sociological purposes. To be sure, contemporary rhetorical studies do have an interest in religious rhetoric, *per se*, but interest in the *theory* or the implications of that theory as a reflection of society is not widespread.

In this section, I review the changing exigency of preaching in contemporary society to help explain the current lack of interest in homiletic study. Second I examine the state of three

areas of contemporary literature in homiletic studies: the study of homiletics as a *historical* phenomenon by rhetorical scholars, the study of homiletics as *theoretical* area of interest by rhetorical scholars, and the study of homiletic discourse as engaged by scholars outside rhetoric departments as they develop preaching methods for contemporary preachers.

The Loss of Identity, Religion, and Social Change

Contemporary rhetorical studies have paid scant attention to homiletics other than as a fleeting curiosity. Part of the reason for that might have to do with the social conditions under which global society currently labors. General religious belief is on the decline while religious extremism is on the incline. Rhetoric, the study of arguments based in probability, seems to be perfectly suited to a society based less in philosophical or religious truth and increasingly on contingent, fluctuating identity. The *idea* of rhetoric, then, is uncomfortable with the absolute, revealed truth of religion itself. In a society where fewer people practice religion and religion itself is increasingly associated with extremism, it would be unsurprising that scholars would generally avoid the subject.

Moreover, while all homileticians face changing cultural conditions, current preachers are battling to reinvigorate religious faith in an age of unprecedented social-symbolic breakdown. Anthony Giddens, the renowned sociologist of societal composition, argues:

In the conditions of late modernity, we live ‘in the world’ in a different sense from previous eras in history. Everyone still continues to live a local life, and the constraints of the body ensure that all individuals, at every moment, are contextually situated in time and space. Yet the transformations of place, and the intrusion of distance into local activities, combined with the centrality of mediated experience, radically change what ‘the world’ actually is. This is so both on the

level of the ‘phenomenal world’ of the individual and the general universe of social activity within which collective social life is enacted. Although everyone lives a local life, phenomenal worlds for the most part are truly global.¹⁶

Others concur—and not just those aware of the Information Age. Friedrich Nietzsche, more than 120 years ago, already declared that in the light of the end of all credible theological belief we can no longer find symbolic cohesion outside our own moral choices.¹⁷ Franz Kafka’s disorienting narratives, in which symbolic familiarity is not eliminated but twisted within symbolic structures until the grotesque emerges as “the nonchalant intrusion of the bizarre and horrible into everyday life, the subjection of ordinary people to an inscrutable fate,” reveal the disenchantment with calls for unity.¹⁸

Platonic categories, calls for religious faith, appeals to God (which god[s]?) hardly seem adequate to social conditions. The overt onto-theologies of Aquinas and Plato, which posited that the facts of identity and world-placeness are facts established by and connected to a divine source, no longer ring true in a world where cultural values clash constantly and where communication technology makes belief in the local religious and cultural meanings difficult to sustain.¹⁹ Identity conflicts, such as they are, now result from defensive efforts to consolidate identity, rather than springing from ontological truths. Manuel Castells remarks, “While in modernity, early or late, project identity was constituted from civil society (as in the case of socialism on the basis of the labor movement), in the network society, project identity, if it develops at all, grows from communal resistance.”²⁰ The psychologist Kenneth Gergen declared that in technological society, “The firm sense of self, close relationships, and community were being replaced by the multiplicitous, the contingent, and the partial.”²¹ The self has been reduced to little more than a series of relationships, conditional upon our location, and always subject to

change.²² Although rapidly expanding communication technologies have provided new ways to establish communities, these changes have dark undertones. In a later edition of the same book quoted above, Gergen reflects in the introduction that:

Burgeoning technologies did pull us together, but I did not predict how they would also erect walls between people. There are two important ways in which this happens. First, in spite of limitless opportunities for enriching understanding, adding potentials, and co-creating new worlds through the expanding arena of relationship, many people seem to vastly prefer using these technologies to cement their relations with those who already share their ways of life. Certainly one can appreciate the sense of security and support to which such tendencies contribute. But the result has increasingly become a dangerous distancing. When congregating with others who already share one's realities and values, strong tendencies are unleashed for such groups to seal themselves off from the rest of the world, to develop a sense of a superior good, and to brand those outside the network as a problem if not downright evil. The technologies of saturation thus lend themselves to islands of self-righteousness in a sea of antagonism.²³

Religious belief is a declining source of stability. Beyond the philosophically-based critiques of many past and contemporary scholars, the Pew Research Center has reported that religious belief, even in America, is rapidly declining. Less than half of those under age 30 reported religion as a major part of their lives, compared to over 70% of those over age 75.²⁴ The number of Americans that have claimed no religion or religious belief has doubled since the 1990s, with most of the increase occurring during the 1990s. Almost 34 million Americans claim to have no religion. Their demographic composition largely reflects the general population.²⁵

Although the total number of Christians continues to increase in the United States, the proportion of the nation that considers itself Christian has declined more than 10% in the past 20 years.²⁶

Charles Taylor assesses in his massive work *A Secular Age* that members of contemporary society are “ideologically fragmented” and, although people remain tacitly religious, people also are maintaining a “safe distance” from religion.²⁷

Thus, there is a perception that religion is of declining interest in the United States for philosophical, social, and psychological reasons. A more accurate view would be that a certain *type* of religious view is of declining relevance. As Taylor remarks, religious perspectives are still formative for many persons’ identities, even among the non-religious.²⁸ Even more directly, considering the rise of global religious radicalism abroad and the increasing prominence of religiously conservative parties and identity politicians in the United States, religion clearly still has significant relevance. Indeed, the desire for religion—in particular the eternal connection created by the “*symbols of collective unity*” at work in religion—may be a production of radical doubt at work in modern society.²⁹ Old iterations of religion may be dead, but new versions are emerging.³⁰

Homiletics in History of Rhetoric Scholarship

The bulk of extant literature on homiletics and preaching by rhetorical scholars is historical in nature. Such scholarship is usually justified not in terms of evaluating the effectiveness of the efforts for contemporary use, but rather that such literature helps us fill out our understanding of times in which certain preachers or theorists lived. Hence, the idea is that by understanding a certain preacher or a theory of preaching we might better understand how and why a certain event unfolded or how rhetoric, as a field, evolved.

A fairly distinct line can be drawn between four types of literature in this area. First, there is broad historical work on the religious rhetoric (i.e., preaching) of historical occasions. These come in essentially two types—description and analysis of particular figures and description and analysis of the rhetoric of a broader era of preaching or homiletic practice. Second, there is scholarship which attempts to root out elements of rhetorical theory implicit in the practice of key historical figures or communities. These works often describe common characteristics and then extrapolate a homiletic theory that those in the practice did not formally lay down. Third, there is a literature wherein the scholars examine works by historical figures that are not themselves sermons, but instead directions, thoughts, or guides on *how* to prepare and give a sermon. Finally, there are works which attempt to use both case studies and reflections on era-based homiletic works to attempt to capture an entire era of homiletic theory and practice.

Historical work on preaching practices of rhetorical figures and eras is widespread. Jerome Dean Mahaffey's *Preaching Politics: The Religious Rhetoric of George Whitefield and the Founding of a New Nation*, which attempts to throw light on the crucial role of Whitfield's preaching in setting the stage for the American Revolution, is precisely this sort of work.³¹ J. Clarke Roundtree, III's article on Charles Haddon Spurgeon's attempt to re-establish God's direct authority provides an example of this scholarship in short form.³² Other works attempt to capture preaching trends by analyzing a type of preaching as it existed in a particular era or location. Examples include F. Eugene Scott's article on the Ulster preaching tradition and Stephen J. Pullum's article on 20th-century female faith healers.³³ A second category of works attempts to assemble or describe the homiletic theories at work in a certain era by analyzing the sermons occurring in that era post hoc. The assorted essays in the volume *Preacher and Audience: Studies in Early Christian and Byzantine Homiletics*, in which most authors examine

early Christian sermons and assemble theories about them, represents this type of homiletic literature.³⁴

Historical scholarship on the homiletic theorists at work is probably the largest and most complete category of literature. Augustinian rhetorical studies, usually focused on *De Doctrina Christiana* in rhetoric, could fill many library shelves.³⁵ Significant contributions have been made on clergymen such as Augustine, Blair, Campbell, and Whatley as well as less known figures such as Phelps or the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard.³⁶ Unlike the research in the first category, these articles and books address a particular person's conscious reflections on the art of preaching rather than analyze sermons. In the truest sense, this is research into homiletics itself, though usually as historical interest or to draw bare connections to some contemporary practices.

The final type of literature is the research on entire eras of homiletic ideal. These works attempt to capture the spirit and essence of religious rhetoric in a period of time, often by analyzing both homiletic prescriptions and by examining acts of preaching themselves. Eugene E. White's *Puritan Rhetoric* is this sort of text, examining both reflections on the issue of emotion in Puritan rhetoric and providing ways emotion was (or was not) enacted.³⁷ James J. Murphy's *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages*, Don Paul Abbot's *Rhetoric in the New World*, and DeWitte Holland's edited volume *Preaching in American History* also embody this type of literature, to varying degrees mixing the homiletic speculations and theories of the times with the engagement of the activity itself.³⁸ Many other examples exist.

Perhaps due to their historical nature, few of these texts understand homiletics as a "live" subject. Justifications for study are usually made in terms of their relevance to the greater historical context or to understanding the rhetorical tradition rather than as an active intellectual endeavor. Unlike other work in intellectual history, such as the history of philosophy or science,

this work does not have an eye to present homiletics but instead transfers the relevancy claims into areas outside of homiletics themselves. Hence, understanding the Puritans might be critical to understanding Puritan intellectual life, early American Republicanism, or even our current rhetorical tradition, but no rhetorical scholar seriously considers the intellectual relevance of Puritan preaching ideals to contemporary practice. Most history of rhetoric scholarship considers itself modestly limited to history itself.

Contemporary Homiletic Theory in Rhetorical Studies

As noted, rhetorical studies give little attention to homiletics as a live subject. There is no organized attempt currently at work to theorize homiletics in terms of preaching effectiveness or its relevance to contemporary life. At the 2009 and 2010 National Communication Association annual conferences, no paper title among the thousands accepted for presentation included the term “homiletic” and only two (both in 2010) included the term “preach,” “preaching” or “preacher.”³⁹ Not a single panel was dedicated to the subject. Despite a general recognition that the relevance of religious rhetoric to society “has rarely been higher,” there is little work occurring on the broad significance of contemporary preaching.⁴⁰

This does not mean there is no scholarship occurring. Several books have been dedicated to the role of the homiletic tradition in contemporary rhetoric. Journal publications also demonstrate that there remains a smattering of interest in preaching as a reflection of the state of society. In addition, several significant scholars over the past 100 years have dedicated significant attention to homiletics and religious rhetoric.

Books on Homiletics

A variety of classic books in rhetoric have addressed the Bible in rhetorical terms, bringing an active discussion of rhetorical interpretation to bear on the key texts of the Christian

religion. These include Kennedy's *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* and Wilder's *Early Christian Rhetoric*.⁴¹ Wilder's book, in particular, addresses Biblical texts as rhetoric all their own rather than as the subject of the more standard literary interpretation. Kennedy's book attempts to situate the Bible in terms of its own rhetorical situation in order to heighten our understanding of its rhetorical technique. These books engage in rhetorical analysis of key religious terms; yet they remain outside active homiletics. There is little conception of the *contemporary* hermeneutic issues, techniques, or audiences at work in religious language.

Another variety of books, most particularly Bruce A. Rosenberg's *The Art of the American Folk Preacher*, attempts to describe and theorize the technique of the spontaneous Protestant preacher.⁴² Using ethnographic techniques, Rosenberg describes the structure, the sound, the reaction, and the pattern of presentation and its advantages; through interviews he explores how various local preachers compose and deliver sermons. While the descriptive and structural analysis in Rosenberg's study is singularly useful, it is not a prescriptive or propositional book regarding the proper technique of the preacher. It is sociological as it attempts to understand a particular subculture, but it does not draw any larger conclusion about contemporary society.

Several contemporary rhetorical theory books address the homiletic style and its employment in secular contexts. Sacvan Bercovitch's *The American Jeremiad*, for example, builds on Bercovitch's expertise in Puritan rhetoric to explore the jeremiad as a "shaping influence" on American society.⁴³ Bercovitch's study gives admirable attention to both the historical homiletic theory and practice of jeremiadic rhetoric in America and the continuing religious and pseudo-religious influence of that history on the nation. However Bercovitch's analysis never considered texts close to the original publication date of the book (1978).

Other works, such as Stephen O’Leary’s *Arguing the Apocalypse*, deal with particular translations of religious rhetoric, in this case apocalyptic rhetoric, into the social sphere.⁴⁴

O’Leary’s perspective, however, does not encounter preaching as technique. The message and style of the preaching, particularly of the Millerites, is moderately treated by O’Leary, but it is not a book focused on homiletics. It is a book which tracks religious rhetoric’s interpretive and rhetorical techniques in various stages of American society. The same can be said of James Darsey’s *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America*. Darsey’s series of case studies on prophetic rhetoric at work in oppositional and sometimes secular discourses provides important information and analysis on the position of the homileticist/prophet in relation to the audience and the way secular and religious prophets of all sorts justify their actions but does not reflect on preaching itself.

Somewhat different, however, is Brummett’s *Contemporary Apocalyptic Rhetoric*. Unlike Darsey or O’Leary, Brummett is distinctly interested in current religious rhetoric organized around the apocalypse and the techniques used to make that rhetoric work for rhetors and audiences. Brummett eschews secular apocalypticism in favor what he calls the real and religious apocalypse—the study of a belief and advocacy organized around actual religious doom.⁴⁵

Brummett is particularly interested in the way apocalyptic functions as a *homiletic technique*. He treats work like Hal Lindsey’s *Late, Great Planet Earth* as a preaching item that seeks to transform and influence listeners to a particular religious point of view, in this case how Lindsey leads the listeners’ worldview from a view of chaos toward an understanding of God’s plan.⁴⁶

Of course, Brummett’s interest is to understand—and in some sense, debunk—apocalyptic techniques. But Brummett’s work is at least partially a sociology of homiletics. He is interested in why these techniques of preaching work in this place and this time, and what they

mean about larger society. Thus, while Brummett's critical work displays a lack of religious credulity, it is, as a general type, in the line of study that I am interested in for this dissertation.

Journal Articles on Homiletics

Communication studies and rhetoric journals have demonstrated sporadic interest in contemporary homiletics. A few of these attempt to bridge the gap between the past and contemporary preaching. David C. Bicker's short article on medieval rhetorical theory, for example, attempts to link the preaching theories of the 13th through 15th centuries to contemporary homiletic practice.⁴⁷

More often, essays on homiletics focus on a new, future era of preaching. In 1964, Harold A. Brack published a review of books in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* which declared, "We are rapidly approaching the time when preaching will again make dramatic contributions to the spiritual and moral renewal of mankind." He predicts an era in which new homiletic techniques will reinvigorate the homiletic field.⁴⁸ Charles Bartow similarly declares that preaching will once again become relevant soon even if, as with Jeremiah, the words will ring "true to people...long *after* it had been spoken."⁴⁹

Indeed, journal publications within the field suggest that an attempt to conceive of a new kind of preaching is underway—and has been for quite some time. Gobbel and Ridenhour indicate preachers and parishioners are increasingly being "called to engage in an interpretive, hermeneutical process" when engaging religious proclamation.⁵⁰ Their argument is against the Christian Platonic ideal relying on an implanted, objective truth and in favor of the inspired but interpretive nature of Christian preaching. They follow Walter J. Ong in identifying that *meaning* is an *event* particular to one's place and time.⁵¹ Following the pattern, Robert Stephen Reid's "Faithful Preaching" describes four epistemes of contemporary homiletics and engages modern

and postmodern hermeneutic and homiletic theory to argue that in this time preaching needs to be oriented toward “creating an experience” rather than simple logical argument.⁵²

Richard F. Ward, however, notes that the hermeneutical and interpretive perspective, with its emphasis on performance of the Word, is not widely accepted.⁵³ Like early Christian authorities, many current religious leaders do not want to associate what they consider the authoritative Truth of the Gospels to persuasive techniques of interpretation, argument, appeal, and performance of rhetoric—the very issue that has vexed preachers since Augustine.⁵⁴ Relying on much of the research done on New Homiletics, Ward argues that despite the skeptics, performative preaching—the idea of creating community via an aesthetic emphasis—is vital to developing a relationship between the preacher, the audience, and the material via shared experience.⁵⁵

The homiletic debate over the concept of the creation of *shared experience* in preaching is very well overviewed by Reid, Bullock, and Fleer in “Preaching as the Creation of an Experience.”⁵⁶ This essay introduces secular communication and rhetoric scholars to the on-going argument of the New Homiletic adherents that preachers should privilege “the creation of experience as opposed to a propositional privileging of content.”⁵⁷ These theorists are seeking to overcome a wave of alienation among current and former Christians by focusing on the idea that “listeners are co-creators of the sermonic experience” using the “preacher’s own process of hermeneutical insight” to “affect an experience by cultivating the surprise of the Gospel through the preacher’s ability to embed that experience in the ‘local soil’ of the world of the congregation.”⁵⁸

Canonical Rhetorical Theorists and Homiletics

It is worth pointing out that these contemporary homiletic reformers are building on the scholarship of some of the most influential rhetorical theorists of the 20th century. Perhaps the most eminent rhetorician to engage in homiletic debate over the past half century is Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur was deeply concerned that the passage of time and the advent of modernism, with its erosion of traditional religious symbols and touchstones, had severely wounded traditional homiletic tools.⁵⁹ Although Ricoeur's systematic attempt to describe poetic, mythic, narrative, and metaphorical language is often treated in secular terms, it is distinctly and clearly theological; not in terms that allow it to be dismissed as a kind of 'theological speech' rather than rhetoric, *per se*, but a move toward understanding the theological language *as* rhetoric. To understand Ricoeur's technique of interpretation is also to understand a way of speaking or understanding religious language—a form of homiletics itself.⁶⁰ Ricoeur's perspective on religious language as both theory and practice, sociological and prescriptive, hermeneutically interpretive and active is, along with Gadamer, having significant influence on those seminarian scholars who teach on religious rhetoric.⁶¹

Other key theorists, such as Kenneth Burke, have contributed to the understanding of religious rhetoric by studying it as an analog to our general structure of terms. While Burke claims that he is not attempting to speak on the veracity of belief, as a work of religious rhetoric he provides significant insight into the function of language in religion. Picking up on a variety of theorists, including Heidegger, Burke traces how religious rhetoric functions, how it establishes hierarchies, and creates and erodes transcendence. Indeed, Burke's analysis of Augustine is a kind of analysis of homiletic technique and function.⁶²

In sum, while rhetorical studies have had a sporadic interest in homiletic and its moments of interest have reflected significant development in homiletics, there is no unified or sustained effort to link homiletics—classic or postmodern—to greater social problems. Yet rhetoric and homiletics face similar problems: changing concepts of identity, truth, and persuasion. Rhetorical studies have a great deal in common with homiletics; both are interested in what conditions and techniques make belief possible. Ricoeur knew that Christian belief was becoming increasingly difficult as the culture of the Bible and its various interpretive updates faded into the past. Burke knew religious rhetoric itself was indicative of a great deal more than just preaching. Burke's attempt to analyze religious rhetoric to exemplify key elements inherent in a wide range of social and civic rhetoric demonstrates just how closely rhetoric and homiletics are connected.

Homiletic Studies and Rhetorical Studies

It has already been observed that rhetorical studies have largely treated homiletics as a historical event. Yet homiletics is a field vitally connected to rhetoric. In this section, I explore some of the problems impacting homiletics and rhetoric together with a focus on the way contemporary philosophers, theologians, homilicians, and others name and handle the challenges.

Homiletics struggles with many of the same conceptual issues as secular rhetorical theory. Homiletics ask about the nature of rhetoric and the rhetorical nature of people—are persons fundamentally rational and propositionally focused or experientially and/or symbolically focused?⁶³ These exact concerns plague all rhetoric at large.⁶⁴ The problem of language itself—the ability to structurally connect meaning to particular messages—is one that cuts to the core of both rhetoric and homiletics. Contemporary theorists such as Jacques Derrida have placed substantial doubt on our ability to determine fixed meaning from texts.⁶⁵ For homiletics, the

problem is partially one of origin. Biblical hermeneutics—the development of an adequate understanding of the text of the Bible—is the presumed origin and test of effective preaching. Yet that understanding is in doubt in communicative practice. Although similarities have been drawn between contemporary deconstructive practices that attempt to demonstrate the arbitrariness of dominant interpretative practice and the medieval hermeneutic process, a lack of practical, reliable hermeneutics is perceived to pose a threat to the possibility of homiletics.⁶⁶ How can we base our entire world view on an artifact like the Letters of Paul, which have been altered, adjusted, and were written at a certain place, in a certain time, and are read by readers who live in a different place at a different time? How can we know what Paul *really* wrote, how much he *really* meant what he wrote, what he wrote *really* means, and if Paul ever imagined people in this time and place reading what he did write?⁶⁷

The problem is a general one for symbolic meaning. If the consequence of our current period of radical, dissociative social change and our obsession with rhetoric “in places and at times” is a lack of solid *terra firma* to ground meaning, then all there is is what Caputo calls “the flux,” the constant *kinesis* of meaning with no transcendent metaphysics of language.⁶⁸ *Logos* is not the traditional unchanging Word of Hellenistic Christianity but, as Kenneth Burke aptly noted, a part of the local production of language in particular social situations.⁶⁹ What is reasonable is determined in *local* terms.

The loss of this stolid, eternal Hellenism matters. Kierkegaard argued that Hellenism is inadequate for the modern world because the Greeks did not understand time. They were plagued by a desire for an infinite, fixed, eternal world in which our symbolic representations could, to varying degrees, accurately represent eternal meaning. Yet a Christian world is not fixed. Humans exist in finite time and are headed forward toward an afterlife of ambiguous portent.

God and society have not stood still. The flux has repeatedly prevailed on social, philosophical, political, and religious views. Acknowledging the problem of the flux and avoiding the use of philosophical, religious, or onto-theological shortcuts to get rid of it constitutes the difficult task of philosophy and religion today.⁷⁰

The universal lack of transcendent meaning complete with a clear symbolic method of communicating that transcendent meaning is a disquieting notion in any context. Yet this question is perhaps more immediately significant for homiletics than other forms of rhetoric because religious interpretation is one in which ambiguity traditionally will not do; God must have meant *something* particular and it must *somehow* be available to us.

Ricoeur felt the danger posed by the loss of fixed meaning and argued that homiletics has the vital task of reinvigorating religious rhetoric—and all rhetoric—by finding a new basis for conceptualizing rhetoric:

That the loss of the question of origin and of meaning must be treated prior to the question of preaching, because it is the restoration of this ground and this kind of humus of meaning which appears to me to be one of the tasks of Christian preaching. Christian preaching not only has to continue the language of the Scripture, but to restore signifying language, a language of being and existence, in order to find a cultural expression.⁷¹

Hence homiletics continues active debate into the function of rhetoric in religious contexts. But while the destruction of the traditional signifying role of language is important for *religious* or preaching rhetoric, it is also significant for all rhetoric. What do we do now that we have little basis for being sure what symbols mean or, in the case of religious or metaphysical symbolism, if they represent or mean anything at all? How can religious belief, political

perspective, cultural attitude, philosophical attitude, or academic study have value when the terms of symbolic exchange are constantly changing?

Some scholars, such as Jean Baudrillard, see the advent of post-structuralism as the destruction of all authentic *meaning* and the advent of pure simulated meaning.⁷² However, other post-structuralists see the destruction of traditional means of interpretation, with its fixed relationship between sign and signified, as opening the door for reinvigoration of the *possibility* of meaning. The discovery of the determined meaning of texts, they argue, was *never* tenable and now obviously so. Deconstruction, frequently pilloried as a villain in eliminating credulous belief, does not eliminate religious belief but instead opens up possibility by exploring ambiguity, by telling us that although our interpretations can never achieve certainty, that our acts of rhetoric are acts of community and acts of faith in the absence of certainty. Meaning *exists*—it is simply not pre-ordained or absolute. Deconstruction, as Caputo says, does the dirty work of eliminating blind metaphysics from religion. It “dehellenizes Christianity” by taking the certainty of Platonic rationalist science out of religion.⁷³ Deconstruction asks us to consider, now that we know Truth will not shoot from the sky like a bolt of lightning, what are we willing to believe now?⁷⁴

The answer given by some contemporary theorists is that we *make* meaning in the terms we hear and have *faith* in the accuracy of our interpretations, despite the lack of empirical support for fixity. Deconstruction helps us do so by exploring rhetoric in terms of *experience* of an *Event*—key terms in contemporary homiletics and theology. The Event—the visceral experience—is meant to be signified by the *Name*, the term we use to symbolize an experience, but the Event cannot be contained by the Name, and it can be represented by other Names (with similar inadequacy). The Event is not the Name; hence we cannot imagine that the Name *is* the

thing because the Event exceeds the Name. But the Event is also the truth of the Name, the reason we find the Name useful as representation even if it is inadequate as an expression of the Event. It is the reason for the Name's resonance.⁷⁵

Contemporary homilicians, such as Fred B. Craddock and Buttrick, have focused their concepts of preaching on the inspiration of experience of the gospel Event in and with the audience.⁷⁶ The Bible cannot be read or preached on its own terms. Buttrick declares, "The true hermeneutic of Scripture is ultimately social."⁷⁷ Buttrick sees the Bible as a deeply rhetorical document, steeped in metaphors that are interpreted in certain times and places via other metaphors—the dominance of one translated metaphor standing in as an accurate description of the meaning of the Christian gospel.⁷⁸ "Preaching is the exploration of a living symbol [Christ]" that represents the possibility and significance of God without being able to contain the event of God; the preacher, with inadequate words, expresses the inexpressible God (even Augustine recognizes the paradox).⁷⁹ Not to pass over the inexpressible in silence, as Wittgenstein suggests, but rather to attempt to express the inexpressible in hopes that it might be socially understood, despite the logical paradox of that proposition.⁸⁰

Homiletics is not, as has been traditionally proposed, the mere *expression* of theological ideas. It is an attempt to instigate an *Event*, a social coming together of a community, in a moment of identification, a rhetorical occurrence that (irony intended) exceeds expression.⁸¹ These events are both transcendent/universal and local. Religion is inherently about the universal yet *meaning* is local, a product of our life and times. Homiletics deals with ostensibly *universal topics* in *local* terms, yet the local (i.e., what the audience believes and what the rhetor can induce them to believe) bleeds into what might be considered universal. This fact is of deep significance to this dissertation. The analysis of upcoming chapters is always conducted with the

idea of community in mind; each subject or person examined is attempting, at all times, to create an *experience* of the universal in the local audience. The interpretive, poetic, proclamatory, declarative, and even deconstructive rhetorical functions that are examined are never intended to apply only to a single person but are meant to appeal to an audience and create *shared* meaning.

Unfortunately this facet of homiletics (and as Burke recognized, all rhetoric) remains almost entirely unexplored either as an element of rhetorical theory or as way of examining socially prominent rhetoric, especially of the religious type impacting millions of people weekly. The key concepts of rhetoric—hermeneutics, invention, arrangement, style, delivery, even memory and audience—are all critical concepts at play as daily practice in homiletic theory. Homiletics grapples daily with the contemporary troubles and changes in social life and yet rhetoric stubbornly refuses to explore its vital implications, or else relegates it to specialized journals or books with narrow appeal.

Summation of Current Literature on Homiletics

Rhetoric and homiletics share a history. Despite early Christian leaders' skepticism of rhetoric's traditional emphasis on probability rather than Biblical certainty, key figures like Aurelius Augustine of Hippo and a variety of medieval scholars worked to join rhetoric and religion together permanently. But it has always been an uncomfortable relationship; over the course of the rhetorical tradition there has been a give and take between those who have sought to de-emphasize the rhetorical qualities of homiletics in favor of Hellenic philosophy's emphasis on logic and metaphysical certainty.

In our world, changing social conditions, brought on by the advent of information and travel technologies and the culture clashes that come with them, are working to undermine the cultural certainties that made credulous metaphysical and religious belief so simple. Identity is

far more uncertain now as our basis for beliefs decline. This not a particularly new situation; Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and even the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus viewed the world as consisting of flux, not certainty.⁸² But prior to the currently on-going clash of global perspectives, chauvinist preference for one's own value set was much more tenable and provided a world that seemed far more stable.⁸³ Only as modernism reached a certain technological and cultural zenith has the full weight of cultural dissolution set in. In the United States, this situation has coincided with declining religious belief.

Perhaps because of this decline in religious credulity or perhaps as a part of it, rhetorical studies have not paid much attention to religious rhetoric or the act of preaching. Interest in religious rhetoric is almost always oblique. The interest is not the rhetoric itself but the historic significance or its civic transvaluation. Very few rhetorical studies take religious rhetoric seriously as a reflection of current culture's values or statuses. There is little on-going work regarding the hermeneutics or speech acts of preaching as broader bellwether. This lack of analysis of homiletic is unfortunate because of the vibrant discussions of homiletics occurring outside the traditional domains of rhetorical studies.

Postmodernism, late modernism, or whatever one wishes to call our current social situation, is a condition—not an attitude. It is not just the domain of theorists but exists and is at work in society. Until now there has been almost no scholarly work completed on the postmodern preacher in action in the world. To my knowledge there is no on-going attempt to find those engaged in homiletics in the real world and to analyze their methods, attitudes, and meaning in light of the new theories those scholars named in this chapter have developed. The goal of this dissertation is to rectify this lack of analysis by analyzing the preachers of the American Christian Prosperity Gospel.

A Preface on Methods

The CPG has a diverse and conflicted history and innovative, but controversial doctrines built for an audience struggling with material desires and spiritual emptiness. Such a rhetoric deserves study. Unfortunately, there has been a distinct lack of interest in explaining how preaching functions in our unique social period. My goal in this study is to rectify this lack of attention. This dissertation is built upon a series of studies taken up separately in each chapter. Although the particular methods of each study are included in the particular chapter, this section outlines the methodological thrust of the dissertation, hopefully giving readers a sense of coherency as they proceed along the series of studies.

Globally I proceed by utilizing methods of analysis that: hopefully acknowledge the tension between the universal and eternal message of religion and its temporally limited nature; incorporate the key structural, post-structural, sociological, psychological, and theological dimensions at work in contemporary preaching into a discussion of the way religious belief is constituted in a time that seems uniquely unfriendly to credulous religious belief; and analyze the performatively constituted communal relationship between the rhetor and the audience that is both grounded in and seeks to adjust the social situation.

The guiding principle of this study will be that preaching is intended to serve its audience as “equipment for living.”⁸⁴ As Buttrick notes, preachers have the task of relating “sin and salvation to the actualities of contemporary lived experience.”⁸⁵ Preaching—the process of interpreting the Gospel, conceptualizing the audience, and shaping sermons—is organized around helping people live their daily lives. Cultural circumstances today dictate that this process be more different now than it ever has been before.

Under this guiding principle, three arguments direct my methods. First, theology is intrinsically a rhetorical construction. Theology is produced in rhetoric, a special kind of rhetoric known as homiletics. As Burke, Buttrick, Ricoeur, and particularly Kierkegaard recognize, Christianity only exists insofar as its texts are interpreted and preached *in time*. Theology consists of what living, finite persons can identify with and believe. It is metaphor at work. Second, understanding homiletic theology at work can help us understand how symbols at large are (or are *not*) operating in a flux-oriented world. We live in a period when our sense of our individual, unique place in the world is in doubt. Watching and understanding religious symbols at work can help us grasp what is at work when *kairos* (special time) and *chronos* (regular time) exist in such deep tension. Only attention to this matter in the method can hope to answer how, when religious credulity is at an all-time low, some people continue to believe and some religious organizations even gain ground. Third, homiletic theology is not mere text, logic, device, science or sermons but *experience*. Religious belief is rooted in rhetoric, in particular linguistic attempts to create the collective experience of an *event*—a communal experience that exceeds limits of the expressible, and hence the limits of rhetoric itself. CPG preachers, using the hermeneutics of every-day life, search through the Gospel to re-interpret old Scripture in ways they believe reflect today’s values. These re-interpretations are presented to audiences in deconstructive format. To create experience, preaching presents and analyzes Biblical texts, debunking old interpretations and providing new ones. At work is the every-day work of interpretation that results in “hermeneutics of the *kingdom* of God;” a series of events that illustrate what Derrida meant when he indicated that deconstruction is not a conscious method but something that *happens*.⁸⁶ As always, rhetoric is about the creation of community, of identity, and this must be kept in mind.

Because rhetorical analysis of contemporary preaching is so rare, conceptualizing a method can be difficult. It is even more so considering the proliferation of types of preaching available today and the divergent functions of preaching in society. To understand religious rhetoric at work, a method must take into account the social context, the process of interpreting religious source material, the changing roles and demands of audiences, and the process of shaping sermons to inspire those audiences. If analysis is the “taking apart” of a particular event, any effective method must, in some sense, reduce and handle each of these elements on their own account. Yet the development of symbolic events is not so convenient as to be reducible to its parts. The process is too fluid for any reduction to do justice to it. Thus, some synthetic process must occur wherein the method takes the *Event* of preaching on its own account, not reduced to its bare elements.

To manage the tensions between the historical grounding of the CPG and its effort to create a new, innovative reading of Christianity, two divergent approaches to methods will be at play. The historical ground and significance of patterns means that I gain significant insights using formal and structural techniques to analyze the CPG’s preaching. But formalist techniques are not enough. As Derrida remarks, “Form fascinates when one no longer has the force to understand force from within itself.”⁸⁷ To reduce our objects to genre, to detail the common features of their work and call it a day, constitutes a reduction of our technique to a static hermeneutic instead of encountering the works in themselves. Thus, I will also attempt to read the CPG preachers *outside* their genre, outside our expectations for them, with an understanding that we can never fully escape our frames of reference. Executed correctly, structural and post-structural analysis should play back and forth from chapter to chapter and within each chapter, each revealing as much as they can about my objects of analysis.

Objects of Study

The CPG provides an ideal opportunity to examine the intersection of rhetoric, contemporary cultural forces, and religion. In this section, I first outline the history, doctrines, and reach of the CPG. Second, I argue that a close rhetorical examination of this particular homiletic performance is warranted by the substantial audience and influence of the CPG in defiance of social trends; the general lack of attention given to the CPG; the complete paucity of examination in rhetorical studies; the key symbolic processes at work in the CPG; and the postmodern social implications of the CPG.

A Brief History of the Christian Prosperity Gospel

What I call the “Christian Prosperity Gospel” goes by many names: Word-of-Faith gospel, health-and-wealth gospel, name-it-and-claim it, or even the “faith gospel.” Throughout this dissertation I’ll use some of these alternative names but in sum they believe that the power of Christ is not limited to eternal life. Instead, “God intends for all faithful believers to live healthy and wealthy lives in this world.”⁸⁸ Whatever it is called, the idea that pious Christian faith should lead to material and health oriented benefits has a long history in American culture. Indeed, what we know in the form of Joel Osteen, T.D. Jakes, and Kenneth and Gloria Copeland are just the most recent (and most far-reaching) of a history of Christian wealth advocates. There are already in existence several adequate histories cited here, so here I will settle for briefly describing its history.

The idea of Christian prosperity is core to American history. The Puritans and Quakers both believed that God intervened and actively prospered His faithful believers.⁸⁹ Russell Conwell, a legend among American speakers for his “Acres of Diamonds” speech/sermons, advocated the idea that Christians have a moral duty to get rich and that God will benefit those

who wait in faith.⁹⁰ Similarly, while the idea that faith can have physical manifestations is as old as miracles, the concept of “faith cures” to illnesses has a more specific American history. In the mid-19th century, Phineas Quimby invented New Thought, which posited that physical illnesses were manifestations of mental pathologies. Quimby’s student, Mary Eddy Baker, Christianized the idea, believing that God would restore those who were whole spirituality to physical health.⁹¹ Both attracted many followers.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, many persons advocated the power of the mind and/or faith in manipulating the physical environment. In 1899, Helen Wilmans pushed the “Mental Science” or “power of mind” over an illusory material world.⁹² F.W. Sears pushed a “Law of Harmonious Attraction in Nature” in which the mental plane impacted the “brute” physical plane.⁹³ Napoleon Hill believed that he had discovered the “secret” of the wealthy magnates like Andrew Carnegie, Charles M. Schwab, and John D. Rockefeller. Denying that particular knowledge was relevant to success, Hill argued that faith and correct thinking, in the subconscious, could lead individuals to financial success. He announced, “Faith is the starting point of all accumulation of riches!”⁹⁴

Other authors, such as Charles Fillmore, the creator of the Unity Church within New Thought, propagated a religious orientation in such mentalist conceptions, arguing in the forward to his book *Prosperity* that, “It is perfectly logical to assume that a wise and competent Creator would provide for the needs of His creatures in their various stages of growth.” Fillmore went on to claim, “Jesus taught that we can incorporate life-giving rays in our mind, body, and affairs through faith... What we need to realize above all else is that God has provided for the most minute needs of our daily life and that if we lack anything it is because we have not used our mind in making the right contact with the supermind.”⁹⁵ Most directly related to the

contemporary prosperity gospel, E.W. Kenyon synthesized a wide range of New Thought, Pentecostalism, and Unity thinking into a single religious philosophy, advocating that “reality is actually created in the minds and affirmed in the speech of believers.”⁹⁶

Christian apologists sometimes use the mystic and occult influences on the CPG to distract from its deep roots in Pentecostal Christianity. Pentecostals have long believed in gifts of the Holy Spirit, gifts that included speaking in tongues, the exorcism of demons and faith healing. Although Pentecostalism was once shunned by mainline evangelicals and fundamentalist Christians for their beliefs, it is now widely accepted.⁹⁷ Pentecostalism’s appeal has always been in its gifts, which have provided physical, manifest evidence of God’s presence and have provided key benefits to its believers. Early Christian prosperity preachers had close ties to the Pentecostal community, originally establishing themselves as televised healing evangelists and later moving on to found the Word of Faith movement for the financial “healing” of Christians for who will positively and aloud confess the power of the Gospel over the material world.⁹⁸ Several scholars remark that it is mistake to attempt to separate the CPG from the Pentecostal movement, considering the CPG’s appeal is linked to the extension of the visible signs and pragmatic themes of classic Pentecostalism.⁹⁹

The contemporary CPG finds its beginning in the 1950s and 1960s with Oral Roberts and Kenneth Hagin, Sr. Hagin, who borrowed substantially from E.W. Kenyon and is also known as “Daddy Hagin” within the Word of Faith movement for his role in growing the CPG. Hagin, who claims to have been saved by God from death by a variety illnesses, claims that God visited him and gave him a path to a better life for Christians on earth. As one scholar notes, “the heart of the message was...promotion of a higher, ‘better’ life that faithful Christians can experience if only they are taught to alter their thinking and be bold enough to expect more than mere spiritual

blessing as a result of their salvation.”¹⁰⁰ It was Hagin, along with Oral Roberts, that began the mass media propagation of the CPG through radio and television in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Hagin founded the Rhema Bible Training Center, which has graduated and trained many contemporary CPG preachers. Of course, Oral Roberts founded Oral Roberts University in Tulsa.

Hagin and Roberts had profound influences on the most popular television preachers of the late 20th and early 21st century. Hagin’s student and Robert’s former personal pilot Kenneth Copeland appears on the *Trinity Broadcast Network* on the “Believer’s Voice of Victory Program,” which does much to perpetuate the CPG both as television program and as a foundation for direct mailing and magazine distribution.¹⁰¹ The Copelands have led massive revivals all over the world. As Hagin aged, Copeland took up much of the leadership of the CPG. The popular but now discredited preacher Jim Bakker was also a prosperity preacher, reporting in 1987 that “We preach prosperity. We preach abundant life. Christ wished above all things that we prosper.”¹⁰² Joel Osteen’s father, John Osteen, attended Oral Roberts University and was directly “encouraged” by Roberts and Hagin, Sr.¹⁰³ As Hagin, Sr. grew older, he passed on leadership of Rhema to Kenneth Hagin, Jr., who continued to train key CPG preachers. Contemporary megachurch pastors Creflo Dollar and Leroy S. Thompson were mentored by the Hagin and Copeland families.¹⁰⁴

The CPG has a significant influence beyond its basic believers. Fundamentalists like Jerry Falwell and the more traditional Pentecostal leader Pat Robertson have espoused at least some of its views to a wide audience, giving it mainstream credibility.¹⁰⁵ One Christian scholar reports that even among traditional Protestants outside the CPG tradition, the idea that God had “sanctified American culture in the names of prosperity, affluence, and abundance” drew no

dissent or skepticism.¹⁰⁶ Even the orthodox has embraced the unorthodox, as least among the congregation members.

Core Doctrines

In explaining the core doctrines of the CPG, it is important to note that there is some heterogeneity in the doctrines of the different preachers.¹⁰⁷ Yet there is a strong consistency in some basic doctrines that have developed over the course of the past 60 years. In the main, these are: covenantalism, Positive Confession, material wealth, and physical health.¹⁰⁸

Covenantalism

The CPG encourages adherents to believe that “the Bible is actually a contract between the born-again believers and God.”¹⁰⁹ By believing in the saving power of Jesus Christ and being born-again, the believer *by rule* gains certain benefits from God. The level of emphasis on this rule varies, but preachers will emphasize that Christians must believe that they are “covenant people” to whom power and favor is given in Christ as a reward for their faith. The faith, however, cannot just be faith in Christ and His saving power; it must be faith in the power and efficacy of the covenant itself. Believers are encouraged to *know* and *act* as though the covenant is true; that is to say, to plan, expect, and even *demand* blessings rather than simply hope for them. The covenant is emphasized to be *spiritual law*, meaning that it always works for those who believe. Those in the covenant are often said to be “living in victory” while those who are not in the covenant are living a “defeated” life.

Positive Confession

Positive confession is the belief that thoughts and, more importantly, words have direct power over the spiritual and physical universe. Words are assumed to have the power to change the course of events in the physical world. Positive thinking encourages positive outcomes and

positive speaking *assures* positive outcomes. Believers are encouraged to announce out loud that they are blessed and to “name it and claim it” over items they need or desire. On the flip side, “negative confession” or thinking is discouraged. Negative thoughts and words will manifest themselves in negative outcomes.

Healing

Considering the origins of the CPG in the Pentecostal healing tradition, it is no surprise that CPG preachers continue to preach the healing power of Christ. Believers in the CPG believe that positive confession and their covenantal relationship with God supernaturally prevent illnesses from occurring and supernaturally cure those illnesses that do arise. Believers are encouraged to verbally announce their ‘victory’ over illness. The writing and preaching of all CPG preachers is scattered with accounts of miraculous healing and promises of relief from chronic and acute disease through the power of Christ. Many of the CPG preachers, including Kenneth Hagin, Sr. and Joel Osteen, recount occasions when they or a family member was supernaturally healed. While early CPG preachers discouraged the use of doctors, believing that they were signs of weak faith, almost all contemporary preachers allow the use of doctors in conjunction with preachers. More recently, many CPG preachers have focused on mental health, especially freedom from stress and depression, as a key benefit of God’s power.

Prosperity and Wealth

Besides positive confession, the most fundamental distinction between mainline Pentecostals and the CPG is the belief that God wants all believers to be materially prosperous. Although many CPG preachers declare that prosperity is more than material wealth, most either tacitly or explicitly acknowledge that a core tenet of their faith is that God will “provide abundantly” for not just believers’ material needs, but, citing Ps. 34:10 statement that “they that

seek the LORD shall not want any good thing,” their material desires as well. CPG preachers vary in the requirements to receive wealth. Almost all require the use of positive confession. Many require tithing to their local church as baseline for receiving a financial or material blessing. Some encourage the concept of ‘seed money,’ an idea innovated by Oral Roberts in which believers donate money to the pastor, church, or other cause with the expectation that God will miraculously return and increase their money. The idea of seed money has been utilized by many prosperity preachers and even some more mainstream figures, including Pat Robertson. Seed money often makes its appearance during CPG services or revivals when members of the congregation come up and lay money on the dais.

The purpose of prosperity is three-fold. First, God is covenantally obligated to give authority and power to the believers with true faith. Second, God wants His believers to be happy and comfortable, some CPG preachers even preaching an ‘anointing of ease’ for the faithful. Third, prosperity among the believers serves the purpose of allowing believers to donate and build up the reach of the evangelical Christian message throughout the world.

The Reach of the Prosperity Gospel

The CPG now has a global reach. Once anathema to evangelical Christianity, it is now followed by millions of persons from South Africa, to South Korea, to Brazil.¹¹⁰ The Rhema Bible Training Center has installations across Europe and other parts of the world.¹¹¹ Scholars report prosperity-style Pentecostalism is flourishing among poor persons all over the globe.¹¹² In America, tens of millions hear preaching in person or on television each week. Among this group, prosperity preachers are a particularly popular genre of preachers. Through television, radio, and internet CPG preachers like Osteen, Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, and others reach tens of millions of viewers each most. Most are pastors of mega-churches that claim tens of

thousands of congregants. T.D. Jakes's Potter House has branch campuses in several major American cities.

The CPG preachers are noted for their ability to appeal to a wide range of audiences. Although the CPG has a particularly large audience in African-American communities, it is not a "black church."¹¹³ They have made strong in-roads into the white *and* African-American communities. The rise of the CPG to prominence in the 1970s and 1980s coincided with a rapid increase in the Black middle-class—the prosperity gospel churches grew with the rise of that Black middle-class, retaining the spirit and language of older Pentecostal churches with a comfortable atmosphere that affirmed the right to gain and use new-found wealth.¹¹⁴ Megachurches founded on prosperity principles are even supplanting the traditional African Methodist Episcopal (AME) churches in some communities.¹¹⁵ Many prosperity-oriented megachurches are noted for their ethnic diversity—a rare quality in American religious institutions.¹¹⁶

Defying the Economic Times

Hard economic times have not necessarily spelled difficulty for those preaching that "Money cometh to the Body of Christ! That means money cometh...now!"¹¹⁷ Almost 400,000 people continue to send the Copelands' ministries donations on a regular basis, many believing that donating to the Copelands has kept them from suffering the worst of the economic crisis.¹¹⁸ Most are unconcerned or even encouraged by the fact that the Copelands spend the money on items like a Citation X aircraft, luxury properties, and other items. The Copelands, for their part, urge their donors not to give into fear or allow economic problems to cause them to become "stingy." The attendees at these churches keep going to church, keep giving to the ministry and keep hoping for a blessing from heaven despite the growing suspicion among analysts that

prosperity preachers may be at fault for getting many people in over their heads in questionable loans and investments over the past few years.¹¹⁹

Joel Osteen's more low-key message focuses on the power of positive thinking but doesn't leave out God's duty to provide in abundance for His people. One parishioner, currently in car sales, declares, "'Jesus died for our sins. That was the best gift God could give us. But we have something else. Because I want to follow Jesus and do what he ordained, God wants to support us. It's Joel Osteen's ministry that told me. Why would an awesome and mighty God want anything less for his children?'"¹²⁰ By "support" this believer means God intends him to have a three-bedroom house on 25 acres with a private schoolhouse and some cattle—a vision God thoughtfully tailored to the man's Texan sensibilities. Osteen dedicated his third major book to preaching to those facing economic crisis. He remarks in the "Acknowledgements" that, "Probably more than any of my other books, I felt like a man on a mission with this one. So many people seemed to be dealing with extra burdens brought on by the economic downturn... I wanted to get this book out there to give them hope and inspiration."¹²¹

A Publishing Empire

Osteen's book brings to the fore another element of the prominence of the CPG. Besides the myriad megachurches, television, and radio broadcasts commissioned by the prosperity gospelists, there is also a publishing industry that pumps out books authored by its leaders. These books line the shelves of popular big box stores like Target and Wal-Mart as well as those of chain book retailers. They are immensely popular. Osteen's first two books were *New York Times* #1 bestsellers. Gloria Copeland's *God's Master Plan for Your Life* (2008) reached inclusion in the *New York Times* extended best-seller list for advice books. Kenneth Copeland has authored more than a dozen books, many published by his own publishing company.

Kenneth Hagin wrote many tracts and books laying down the laws of the CPG and the Word of Faith movement—a particular form of Christian heterodoxy that believes in the power of persons to control their physical surroundings via faith.

In many different ways and through very different avenues, prosperity preachers reach millions of Americans daily and continue their outreach efforts. Megachurches continue to grow. Osteen's Lakewood Church has expanded exponentially in just the past several years. The prosperity message is very popular among the United States' fastest growing population, Hispanic and Latino peoples. A vast majority of Hispanic and Latino Christians report believing that adequate faith leads to material rewards, despite the absence of evidence correlating religious belief with prosperity.¹²²

Yet as Hanna Roskin writes in *The Atlantic*, "It is not all that surprising that the prosperity gospel persists despite its obvious failure to pay off. Much of popular religion these days is characterized by a vast gap between aspirations and reality."¹²³ For these people, God is *hope* for a better future, and it is a better future that these preachers promise. That symbolic venture calls for attention by rhetorical scholars.

A Postmodern Gospel for a Postmodern Audience

If there is anything that past scholars agree on regarding the CPG, it is that despite its roots in American history, its current manifestation is a phenomenon of contemporary culture. Polemicists argue that the CPG is an accommodation of the profane mores of contemporary culture into a Christian context. McConnell and Gibson, as well as others, accuse the prosperity and Word of Faith preachers of intentionally misreading the Gospel to change the timeless Biblical message.¹²⁴ Indeed, they accuse the prosperity preachers of advocating a kind of self-centered, narcissistic version of Christianity.

In an unusual moment of convergence between secular and religious perspectives, secular scholars almost entirely agree—although without theological polemics. Lee and Sinitiere conclude that the prosperity preachers are postmodern, socially aware innovators that have tapped into the hypercapitalist culture of our time. The strength of Osteen, for example, derives from his emphasis on the power and desires of the individual voice:

Two themes inform nearly all of Osteen’s sermons: the importance of imagining a better, brighter future, and the ability of individuals to speak their future into existence. Positive thinking and positive speaking thus ensure a future charged with hope. Osteen’s message of uplift and personal transformation is appealing to his contemporaries because it is profoundly American.¹²⁵

James B. Twitchell wryly believes that megachurches are flourishing due to the branding of their churches as positive and oriented toward human development (“purpose-driven”) and because of the material success the preachers exude and promise.¹²⁶ In this postmodern, material religion, the doctrinal emphasis on separating sacred and profane evaporates. T.D. Jakes’ ostentatious wealth, for example, sits well with his audience’s consumer sensibilities, desire for entertaining presentation, aspirations for material wealth and postmodern blurring of religious and secular demarcations.¹²⁷ The preachers are, indeed, selling an image.

But the postmodernity at work is not simply the exuberant, materialist consumerism of religious capitalism. Scholars have identified an emptiness, a missing element at work in the audience. Dubisch and Michalowski identify twin emptiness at the root of the CPG—a desire for material affluence but a realization that material, commercial culture has led to a moral and spiritual disintegration. Harrison and Mitchem agree that African American communities are particularly interested in the CPG because it fulfills a longing for a missing justice, redress for

years of racial and economic mistreatment. It is an emptiness that Mitchem says prosperity gospelists plug with money. The counter-intuitive effort to reinterpret ordinary events as miracles reflects a desire to be set apart, to have an authentic, individual relationship with God and others in a physical and social world that, in general, has rejected the idea of divine power, individual revelation, and authentic relationships. As such, it is a reaction to the same agonizing forces of modernism that Castells, Gergen, and Giddens argue have reduced each individual to contingency. The CPG, instead of rejecting the world as traditional Christianity has often done, tries to walk the line between materialism and spiritual fulfillment.

The CPG is ‘postmodern’ because it attempts, via a theological supersession of rationalism and networked orientation of modernism, to assemble individualized world views out of a series of often-contradictory and swirling metanarratives. Instead of resorting to the philosophical or theological values of *logos* in the strong, metaphysical sense, it carries an anti-intellectual bent that focuses on *possibility* and *opportunity*—two keys values of rhetorical processes.¹²⁸ It seeks identity in group identification *and* narcissistic visions of God’s attention. It wants material prosperity *and* spiritual fulfillment. It deplores the moral decadence of America *and* yet embraces its capitalist foundations. And it attempts to fill a void by re-interpreting classic texts in new ways. It is postmodern rhetoric at work in contemporary life.

Lack of Scholarship

The CPG has received growing attention in popular media. *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times*, and *Time* have all run stories covering elements of the Christian gospel of prosperity.¹²⁹ Yet the phenomenon has not received much attention in conventional scholarship. In this section, I argue that the CPG itself, despite its significant audience in the United States, has received little specific scholarly attention.

There exist primarily three basic types of studies on the CPG. First, there are polemical studies that argue against the CPG from a more traditional Christian perspective.¹³⁰ Second, there are those studies that exist outside of communication studies—studies that take historical, sociological, psychological, or theological perspectives on the phenomenon of the CPG.¹³¹ Third, there is the scholarship done within the communication studies tradition.¹³² While there have been short studies done within the rhetorical tradition by Gary McCarron and a tangential study done by Stephen J. Pullum, neither takes a close look at the CPG. McCarron’s study contains some revealing analysis of the psychology and marketing strategies at work in the CPG but does not examine the larger social-cultural situation, the broad implications, or the key variables at work. Pullum’s study only deals sporadically with Gloria Copeland and, even then, only treats her as a faith healer. No study has broadly treated the prosperity preachers as a means of gaining insight into the key social and symbolic shifts in contemporary culture. Thus, a study that utilizes vital rhetorical-social methods would be a meaningful contribution to our body of knowledge on religious rhetoric, homiletics, and the prosperity gospel.

The Christian Prosperity Gospel as Symbolic Structure

Despite a lack of attention to the CPG, past studies have noted that the CPG functions as a vital social and symbolic event that functions to frame the lives of its adherents. Dubisch and Michalowski argue that the CPG functions as a way of resolving the key contradiction of contemporary religious life. The CPG appeals “to people who feel the pressure of what they view as a moral disintegration of American life yet who do not wish to forsake the possibilities for material affluence which that way of life offers.”¹³³ They posit that the CPG provides an interpretive schema that resolves the disjunction between the world-as-it-is (unfair, economically disparate) and how it *ought* to be (a place where Christians are rewarded for good behavior). In

the same edited volume, McCarron's study explicates the key equivocation at work in prosperity preaching and faith healing.¹³⁴ These preachers often claim "miracles" in line with the Biblical tradition, McCarron notes, yet the miracles they identify are not *violation-miracles*--the breaking-laws-of-physics miracles that the prophets and Jesus performed. They are *contingency-miracles*, events that are quite ordinary and mundane that are *interpreted* as miracles. McCarron notes that miracles performed and reported, which range from healing from a cold to finding a lost dog, are imbued with symbolic value far beyond their regular understanding. More reasonable explanations can be easily dismissed by those who need to maintain a certain socially constructed reality. *Experiencing* a miracle personally is a vital way to confirm to the believers the truth of their worldview *and* their own worthiness.¹³⁵ In their case study of Joel Osteen, Lee and Sinitiere reflect that Osteen's message succeeds because he places weight on the individual value of his listeners. Osteen helps them to feel they are participants in the "cosmic order" in a way that builds "self-worth."¹³⁶

Several other scholars, mostly focusing on the black community, have noted the CPG allows the historically disenfranchised and economically downtrodden members of black communities the means of gaining and regaining a positive attitude toward their position in society and symbolic explanations for the comings and goings of financial success. Lee's earlier study of T.D. Jakes focuses more specifically on the prosperity gospel itself and African Americans. T.D. Jakes often brags about his material wealth, including cars and suits, as a validation of his faith testimony. Harrison's study into the charismatic Word-of-Faith movement argues that the African-American population has particularly latched onto the CPG because of its message of "*empowerment*" and its belief that the individual can find power and fortune despite being "left out of the mainstream of economic and social life."¹³⁷ By focusing on self-

improvement as well as material blessings, Harrison notes, the CPG allows its adherents to see themselves improving, growing and becoming better persons even if the wealth never quite materializes. In contrast theologian Stephanie Y. Mitchem concludes that “growth implies that religious people learn other ways to develop a mature relationship with God. But a convenient Deity does not assist this growth and, in the prosperity tradition, turns God into a magic ATM machine.”¹³⁸ Mitchem believes that the history of discrimination against black Americans has created an emptiness, a nihilism, that results in *spiritual longing* that includes a desire for justice. Utilizing the traditional African beliefs in the power of the mind and spoken words, prosperity preachers play upon their desire for justice to suggest that “emptiness can be filled with steady incoming cash flows.”¹³⁹

In all of these cases, the concept of the CPG as an interpretive, hermeneutic schema is at play. The preachers both appeal to the audience’s desires and shape those desires. The preachers interpret the Gospel and provide the audience a way of interpreting their lives and the world around them. If effective religious rhetoric is, as Buttrick says, “a kind of cultural awareness; it helps us see how the people to whom we speak think, understand, visualize, and believe,” then surely the Prosperity Gospel is a great place to start.¹⁴⁰

The Case for the Study of Various Preachers

The CPG, and the wider Word of Faith movement, is a highly varied group of individuals who are linked by their belief that faith in God can deliver physical and financial benefits. To get a feel for what is at work in the CPG, and to combat the notion that its presence is limited to a few rogue preachers, this study will examine several key figures in the prosperity gospel movement. While each of the persons selected has his or her own particular approach to

preaching prosperity, each also had a vital place in the development of the CPG as it exists today.

Kenneth E. Hagin, Sr., sometimes called “Dad Hagin,” is the widely acknowledged father of the contemporary prosperity gospel.¹⁴¹ Beginning in the 1960s, Hagin had a significant influence on all of the other figures included in the study. His Rhema Bible Training Center (“rhema” understood as Greek for “a living voice”)¹⁴² served to train and ordain a “veritable army” of prosperity preachers.¹⁴³ Kenneth and Gloria Copeland were converted to the prosperity movements after hearing Hagin preach. Joel Osteen’s father, John Osteen, was also a sometime disciple of Hagin. Other significant prosperity preachers, including Creflo A. Dollar and Leroy Thompson, were also significantly influenced by Hagin.¹⁴⁴ Hagin’s unique assertions include the claim that he has had personal revelations and visitations from Jesus Christ.¹⁴⁵ One of his visions directly addresses the question of a “proper” reading of Biblical Scripture (and includes Hagin telling Jesus that he won’t believe him unless Jesus could demonstrate the accuracy of his directions to Hagin in the Scripture).

Kenneth and Gloria Copeland represent the second generation of prosperity leaders. Kenneth Copeland, in the patriarchal tradition of the Word of Faith movement, was anointed by Hagin as his successor in theological leadership.¹⁴⁶ Kenneth Copeland—a convert to Hagin’s ideas of revelation, prophecy, and prosperity—was, along with Fred Price, the first prosperity preacher to preach on national television.¹⁴⁷ Kenneth Copeland’s aptitude for television led to his position on the Trinity Broadcasting Network, whose popularity I’ve noted above, and is the largest Christian broadcasting effort in the nation.¹⁴⁸ Kenneth Copeland’s wife, Gloria Copeland, is an active participant in the network and is a successful preacher in her own right.



Figure 1. Joel Osteen on the cover of USA Weekend from the USA Today, April 22-24, 2011.

While Hagin may be the originator of the contemporary CPG and the Copelands the distributors of it, Joel Osteen has brought the CPG to the mainstream. Known as the “smiling preacher,” Osteen’s trademark grin can be seen on the cover of books and on major television broadcasts nationwide (figure 1). Osteen prayed at the governor of Texas’s inauguration and has shared a pew with former President Bill Clinton and his family. He is the pastor of the largest congregation in the nation and reaches more audience members via television than any other Christian televangelist. Osteen took over Lakewood Church, a congregation that already consisted of 8,000 members, from his father John Osteen in 1999 with no prior preaching

experience.¹⁴⁹ The senior Osteen was heavily influenced by Oral Roberts and Kenneth Hagin, both prominent prosperity preachers. The younger Osteen has taken his father's positive prosperity and self-improvement oriented messages and pulled them into the 21st century.¹⁵⁰ Since he took over, Joel Osteen has built his father's church to more than 40,000 members and has written three best-selling books. He remains the rising star of both televangelism and the prosperity gospel.

I single out Osteen for specific examination in two chapters. The reasons for this are partially already evident; except for perhaps Rick Warren, Osteen may be the most popular preacher in America with incredible social and political profile. But maybe most importantly, Osteen's preaching represents the most refined iteration of the CPG style—a third generation CPG preacher with strong appeal to persons of very diverse ethnic, cultural, national, and religious backgrounds. Osteen had taken off the rough edges off the CPG and mastered the practiced piety, positive message, polished presentation, and technological dissemination of his work. To examine Osteen is to examine, at least at the moment, the culmination of CPG preaching.

A variety of other significant prosperity preachers make supporting appearances in this dissertation, including Creflo Dollar, T.D. Jakes, Joyce Meyer, Joseph Prince, and Leroy S. Thompson. All of these preachers have excelled financially in their ministries and each has either succeeded as popular author, Christian motivational preacher, or is the pastor of a megachurch. I have included them to give my arguments a broader scan and to emphasize both the variety and the consistency in CPG views.

Each of the persons named here for study warrants particular attention. Each has particular ideas and techniques that exemplify particular aspects of the prosperity movement.

Use of these figures for case studies should provide ample territory for explaining the rhetoric of the CPG.

Particular Objects

In this dissertation, I take seriously Burke's statement, "The main ideal of criticism...is to use all that there is to use."¹⁵¹ Like Burke, I do not restrict myself to criticism, but also use texts to build upon theory and use theory to build upon texts. In examining the above list of authors, I use a wide variety of resources. The most prominent are books written by the CPG preachers. Most of these books are basically cleaned-up versions of a sermon series or seminar program, though not always. But I also use other available resources, including published interviews, radio shows, television shows, sermons that have been preserved on the online video medium of YouTube, the websites of the CPG preachers and more.

Although the CPG is the primary object of this dissertation, secondary focus is the work of the *anti-prosperity* gospelists. These are orthodox Christian apologists and polemicists that invest their time into attacking CPG. Though they are not the main object of study of this dissertation, the work of apologists like D.R. McConnell, Stephen Gibson, Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., and more serve not only as foil to the CPG, but as a crucial part of demonstrating the changing cast of religion in contemporary America.

Outline of Study

In Chapter 2, "The Absolute Hermeneutic and The Secret of Prosperity: Kenneth Hagin, Revelation, and the Gnostic Impulse," I examine Kenneth Hagin's hermeneutic techniques in interpreting the Scriptures, focusing on his idea of revealing the secret technique and meaning for correct interpretation.

In Chapter 3, “Christian Prosperity and the Magic World-View: Positive Confession, Occultism, and Theurgy,” I examine the occultic influences in the CPG and argue that the CPG provides good evidence of both the continued influence of the occult in American culture and for the idea that the CPG serves as a kind of deconstruction of traditional orthodox evangelical Christianity.

Chapters 4 and 5 are paired together, each part making one section of the overall argument that the CPG is a feature of a culture trapped in perpetual flux. In Chapter 4, “Gargoyles and Gospels, Part I: Settling into a Poetic of the Grotesque,” I take up a different reading of Kenneth Burke’s poetic cycle, arguing that contemporary culture is currently trapped in an elongated “frame of transition” that has facilitated the rise of unorthodox religious perspectives. In its companion Chapter 5, “Gospels and Gargoyles, Part II: The Strangely Familiar Symbolic Structures of the Prosperity Gospel,” I take up the CPG in specific and argue that it represents a “cultural gargoyle”—an experimental, amalgamated symbolic structure found in conditions of cultural flux constructed out the symbolic debris of previous, now debunked, symbolic structures.

In Chapter 6, “The Rhetoric of (Profitable) Liberation: The Prophetic Imagination and the “Freedom” of the Prosperity Gospel,” I examine the role of the CPG in assembling a rhetorical world-view that empowers individuals to take action for their own success, but also serves to interpret the function of economics and politics in a way that disables the idea of radical, collective change in the political economy.

In Chapter 7, “The Rhetoric of Time, Possibility, and the Event in Joel Osteen’s *Now Is Your Time*,” I dilate on Joel Osteen’s use of time in his preaching, arguing that Osteen’s

employment and contrasting uses of *time* are meant to influence the audience's hermeneutic lens and change their world-view on what is and is not possible.

In Chapter 8, "Identification, Narrative and Audience in Joel Osteen's *Become a Better You*" I again dilate on Osteen, focusing on the way that Osteen uses techniques of identification and narrative to connect the CPG to the contemporary audience.

In Chapter 9, "Conclusions and Implications," I attempt to distill the key implications of the CPG. I argue that while the CPG is a religious and cultural phenomenon certainly reflecting current times and preaching techniques, it also serves to reveal critical consistencies in the rhetoric of religion, including its penchant for continual deconstruction and renewal.

The intent of this study, beyond answering its research questions and supporting its thesis, is to argue for the significance of contemporary homiletic practice, not just in religious terms but as a window into the current state of our culture. Contemporary scholars address popular preaching only sporadically or immediately leap to its electoral implications. This study analyzes rhetorical and social forces at work in the rise of the contemporary CPG. While this dissertation cannot cover all that is contained in the CPG—and does not attempt to do so—it can illuminate the rhetorical situations available to the CPG, the techniques it uses to respond to that situation, and establish theories about why and how those techniques succeed. Those illuminations are relevant not only for those interested in the rhetoric of religion but for any person interested in how contemporary culture is adapting to and compensating for its shifting situation.

¹ Gloria Copeland, qtd. in Laurie Goodstein, "Believers Invest in the Gospel of Getting Rich." *New York Times*, August 15, 2009.

² Joel Osteen Ministries, "Joel Osteen," <http://www.joelosteen.com/About/JoelOsteen/Pages/JoelOsteen.aspx> (accessed 20 October 2009).

³ John A. Coleman, S.J., "Selling God in America: American Commercial Culture as a Climate of Hospitality to Religion," in *Meaning and Modernity: Religion, Polity, and Self*, eds. Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002), 141-142.

⁴ In concert with Michel de Certeau "everyday life" denotes the linguistic practices of normal life that constitute how non-elite society constitutes itself. de Certeau excludes preachers from the category of everyday life, considering them members of the elite, but I will argue that in our contemporary society preachers, particularly in popular churches, interact with society to provide vocabularies of social meaning. See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), xv-xvi.

⁵ Kenneth Burke, "On Words and The Word," *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1970), 15, note.

⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2009 online ed., s.v. "homiletic."

⁷ *Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1913 ed., s.v. "Homiletics."

⁸ R.P.H. Green. Introduction to Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, viii; W.R. Johnson, "Isocrates Flowering: The Rhetoric of Augustine," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 9 (1976), 222. There is little doubt that Augustine was most heavily influenced in his rhetorical studies by Cicero, who also opposed the relegation of rhetoric. See: Gerald A. Press, "The Subject and Structure of Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*," *Augustinian Studies* 11 (1980), 118-119; Hugh Blair, "Lecture XXIX: Eloquence of the Pulpit," *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Letters* (Philadelphia: Troutman & Hayes, 1853 [Kessinger Publishing Reprint]), 312-313; George Campbell, "Chapter X: The Different Kinds of Public Speaking in Use Among the Moderns, Compared, with a View to Their Different Advantages in Respect to Eloquence," *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1849 [Kessinger Publishing Reprint]).

⁹ Thomas M. Conley, *Rhetoric in the European Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 121-122.

¹⁰ C. Kirk Hadaway and P.L. Marler, "Did You Really Go To Church This Week? Behind the Poll Data." *The Christian Century* (May 6, 1998): 472-475. See also: C. Kirk Hadaway, Penny Long Marler, and Mark Chaves "Overreporting Church Attendance in America: Evidence that Demands the Same Verdict," *American Sociological Review* 63 (Feb.1998): 122-130; The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "Is a bad economy good for church attendance?" <http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=405> (accessed 6 November 2009).

¹¹ United States Census Bureau, "US and World Population Clocks,"

<http://www.census.gov/main/www/popclock.html> (6 November 2009).

¹² Eugene L. Lowry, "The Revolution of Sermonic Shape," in *Listening to the Word: Studies in Honor of Fred B. Craddock*, ed. Gail R. O'Day & Thomas G. Long (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 94.

¹³ Margaret D. Zulick, "Rhetoric of Religion." *The Sage Handbook of Rhetorical Studies* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009), 132.

¹⁴ Medieval examples include: David C. Bicker, "Medieval Theory of Preaching: A Perspective for Contemporary Homiletics," *Religious Communication Today* 5 (1982), 22-23; James J. Murphy, "Modern" Elements in Medieval Rhetoric," *Western Speech* 28 n. 4 (1964), 206-211. James J. Murphy, *Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press: 1971); Otto A. Dieter, "Arbor Picta: The Medieval Tree of Preaching," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 51, n. 2 (April 1965): 123-144. Reformation examples include: John L. Pauley II, "Metaphors in Reformation Era Hermeneutic and Homiletic Theory: Common Roots, Different Extensions," *The Journal of Communication & Religion* 17 no. 1 (1994) 53-70; Floyd Douglas Anderson, "Dispositio in the Preaching of Hugh Latimer," *Speech Monographs* 35, no. 4 (November 1968), 451-461. Pre-20th century modern examples include: Andrew J. Burgess "Kierkegaard on Homiletics and the Genre of the Sermon," *The Journal of Communication & Religion* 17 n. 2 (1994), 17-31; Russel Hirst, "Austin Phelps's Theory of Balance in Homiletic Style," *The Journal of Communication & Religion* 18 n. 2 (1995), 17-27; Russel Hirst, "The Sixth Canon of Sacred Rhetoric: Inspiration in 19th Century Homiletic Theory," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 25, (1995) 69-90; Russel Hirst, "Sacred Texts as Crucibles of Invention: Austin Phelps on the Art of Text Taking," *The Journal of Communication & Religion* 29 n. 2 (2006), 347-369; Michael-John DePalma, "Austin Phelps and the Spirit (of) Composing: An Exploration of Nineteenth-Century Sacred Rhetoric at Andover Theological Seminary," *Rhetoric Review* 27 no. 4 (2008), 379-396; Michael C. Souders, "Preaching the Restored Gospel: John Nicholson's Homiletic Theories for Young Mormons," *Rhetorica* 27 n. 4 (2009), 420-445. David W. Tell, "The Man and the Message: Timothy and Homiletic Authorization," *Journal of Communication & Religion* 26 (2003), 83-108.

¹⁵ See: Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978); Barry Brummet, *Contemporary Apocalyptic Rhetoric* (New York: Praeger, 1991); James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* (New York: New York University, 1997).

¹⁶ Anthony Giddens. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 187.

¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2006), 120; Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Maudemire Clark and Alan J. Swensen (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 25-26.

¹⁸ Adam Kirsch. “America, ‘Amerika,’” *The New York Times*, 2 January 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/04/books/review/Kirsch-t.html?pagewanted=all> (10 March 2010). I refer to the Kafka work with which I am most familiar—*The Castle*.

¹⁹ Clear in every work by Aquinas, but specifically in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae, Questions on God*, eds. Brian Davies and Brian Leftow (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Martin Heidegger takes up the implication of the collapse of onto-theology in Martin Heidegger, “The Word of Nietzsche,” trans. William Lovitt, in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (pp. 53-112), (New York: Harper, 1971).

Plato’s theory of forms, to my knowledge most extensively dealt with in *The Republic, Phaedrus*, and *Phaedo* constitute a sort belief in a plane of divine knowledge—an ontological and epistemological paradise.

²⁰ Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 11-12.

²¹ Kenneth Gergen. *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*. (New York: Basic Books, 1991), xiv.

²² Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 15.

²³ Kenneth Gergen. *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*, 2000 edition (New York: Basic Books, 2000), xv.

²⁴ Pew Research Center, “Growing Old in America: Expectations vs. Reality.” 29 June 2009. <http://pewsocialtrends.org/assets/pdf/getting-old-in-america.pdf> (4 December 2009).

²⁵ Barry A. Kosmin & Ariela Keysar with Ryan Cragun and Juhem Navarro-Rivera. “American Nones: The Profile of the No Religion Population: A Report Based on the American Religious Identification Survey 2008,” http://www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org/reports/NONES_08.pdf (4 December 2009).

²⁶ Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar. “American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS 2008): Summary Report” (March 2009), http://www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org/reports/ARIS_Report_2008.pdf (accessed 4 December 2009).

²⁷ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 727.

²⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 592.

²⁹ Giddens, *Modernity*, 207.

³⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 768-772.

³¹ Jerome Dean Mahaffey, *Preaching Politics: The Religious Rhetoric of George Whitefield and the Founding of a New Nation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007).

³² J. Clarke Roundtree, III, "Charles Haddon Spurgeon's Calvinist Rhetoric of Election: Constituting an Elect," *The Journal of Communication and Religion* 17 (1984), 33-34.

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⁴³ Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, xii.

⁴⁴ Stephen D. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse* (New York: Oxford University, 1994).

⁴⁵ Brummett, *Contemporary Apocalyptic*, 12-14.

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- ⁶⁰ Zulick, "Rhetoric of Religion," 13 - , *Thinking Biblically : Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
- ⁶¹ Reid, Bullock, and Flear, "Preaching as the Creation," 1-2, 8.
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- ⁶⁵ Jacques Derrida. *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).
- ⁶⁶ Oren Soffer, "The Textual Pendulum," *Communication Theory* 15, n. 3 (2005), 266-291.
- ⁶⁷ John D. Caputo. *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Post-modernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 46-47.

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- ⁶⁸ John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1987), 11-16.
- ⁶⁹ Kenneth Burke. *Attitudes Toward History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984/1937), 341-342.
- ⁷⁰ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 11-16.
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- ⁷² Soffer, "The Textual Pendulum," 276.
- ⁷³ John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 5.
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- ⁷⁶ Reid, Bullock, & Fleer, "Preaching as the Creation of Experience," 3.
- ⁷⁷ David Buttrick. *A Captive Voice: The Liberation of Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 11.
- ⁷⁸ David Buttrick. *Preaching Jesus Christ: An Exercise in Homiletic Theology* (Fortress Press, 1988), 14-17.
- ⁷⁹ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 10. "Have I spoken something, have I uttered something, worthy of God? No, I feel that all I have done is wish to speak; if I did say something, it is not what I wanted to say. How do I know this? Simply because God is unspeakable. But what I have spoken would not have been spoken if it were unspeakable. For this reason God should not even be called unspeakable, because even when this word is spoken, something is spoken. There is a conflict between words here."
- ⁸⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1922), 188, 189.
- ⁸¹ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 45-46.
- ⁸² ποταμοῖ σι τοῖ σιν αὐ τοῖ σιν ἐ μβ αίνουσιν, ἔ τερα καὶ ἔ τερα ὕ δατα ἐ πιπεῖ . Of course, Heraclitus also conceived of *logos* as a sort of obscure plan for the universe—a metaphysical truth that Plato refines to a more specific condition.

⁸³ This is true is in pedagogy as well. Access to greater amounts of information exposes those in education pursuits like academic debate to a wider range of ideas, preventing a “homogenous monoculture of arguments.” See Scott Harris, "Databases in the Marketplace of Academic Debate: A Response to Tucker," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 32, no. 1 (1995), <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=5000390286>.

⁸⁴ Kenneth Burke, “Literature as Equipment for Living,” in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 293-304.

⁸⁵ David Buttrick. *Preaching Jesus Christ: An Exercise in Homiletic Theology* (Fortress Press, 1988), 15.

⁸⁶ Quote from John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 26; Jacques Derrida, “Letter to a Japanese Friend,” in *Derrida and Différance* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 3-4.

⁸⁷ Jacques Derrida, “Force and Signification,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Suffolk: University of Chicago Press, 3.

⁸⁸ Quentin J. Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture* (Salem, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1991), 133, 134. Quotations from both pages.

⁸⁹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, and Other Writings*, Trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 85, 209.

⁹⁰ Russell Conwell, *Acres of Diamonds* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1915).

⁹¹ Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It? Prosperity Preaching and the Black Church* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2007), 82.

⁹² Helen Wilmans, *The Conquest of Poverty* (1899), reprinted in *The Prosperity Bible: The Greatest Writing of All Time on the Secrets to Wealth and Prosperity* (pp. 999-1055) (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2007), 1045.

⁹³ F.W. Sears, *How to Attract Success* (1914), reprinted in *The Prosperity Bible*, (pp. 1075-1111), 1076.

⁹⁴ Napoleon Hill, *Think and Grow Rich* (1937), reprinted in *The Prosperity Bible*, (pp. 1-185), 38.

⁹⁵ Charles Fillmore, *Prosperity* (1936), reprinted in *The Prosperity Bible* (pp. 407-505), 409-410.

⁹⁶ Milmon F. Harrison, *Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 6. The Christian polemicist D.R. McConnell argues,

fairly convincingly, that Kenneth Hagin, Sr., plagiarized the writing of E.W. Kenyon; see, D.R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995).

⁹⁷ George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1991), 42-43, 77-78. Even mainline, traditional denominations like Catholicism, Anglicanism, and a variety of Lutheran sects saw large increases in charismatic believers during the late 20th century.

⁹⁸ Allan Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 145-146, 220-222.

⁹⁹ Anderson, *An Introduction*, 223-224; Simon Coleman, *The Globalization of Charismatic Christianity: Spreading the Gospel of Prosperity* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 46-47.

¹⁰⁰ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 7.

¹⁰¹ Schultze, *Televangelism*, 142-143.

¹⁰² Jim Bakker, qtd. in Schultze, *Televangelism*, 115.

¹⁰³ Shayne Lee and Phillip Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and the Spiritual Marketplace* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 30-31.

¹⁰⁴ Mitchem, *Name It*, 72, 76-81.

¹⁰⁵ Schultze, *Televangelism*, 134-135.

¹⁰⁶ Schultze, *Televangelism*, 135.

¹⁰⁷ The most significant outlier included in this dissertation is Joseph Prince, whose message of prosperity is pitched in rather different fashion from the main, Rhema-oriented preachers found in this dissertation.

¹⁰⁸ For more on the doctrines of the Christian Prosperity Gospel, see Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 87; see also, Dennis Hollinger, "Enjoying God Forever: A Historical Sociological Profile of the Health and Wealth Gospel," in *The Gospel and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Douglas J. Moo (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1997), 13-26.

¹⁰⁹ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 9.

¹¹⁰ Coleman, *The Globalization*, 27-28.

¹¹¹ Anderson, *An Introduction*, 86-87.

¹¹² Donald E. Miller and Tesuano Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) 29-30, 175-177. Interestingly, some scholars report

that the CPG is relatively empowering for believers outside the United States compared to the traditional religious theologies which encourage the acceptance of suffering; see, Celilia Loreto Mariz and Maria Das Dores Campos Machado, "Pentecostalism and Women in Brazil," in *Power, Politics, and Pentecostals in Latin America* (41-54), eds. Edward L. Cleary and Hannah W. Stewart-Gambino (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), 48-49.

¹¹³ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 132.

¹¹⁴ Shayne Lee, "Prosperity Theology: T.D. Jakes and the Gospel of the Almighty Dollar," *Crosscurrent*, Summer 2007, 228.

¹¹⁵ Mitchem, *Name It*, 1.

¹¹⁶ David Van Biema and Jeff Chu. "Does God Want You to Be Rich?" *Time*, 18 September 2006, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1533448,00.html>, (accessed 1 August 2010), in print 48-56.

¹¹⁷ Leroy S. Thompson, Sr. *Money Cometh! To the Body of Christ* (Tulsa, OK: Harrison House, 1999), 2.

¹¹⁸ Goodstein, "Believers Invest."

¹¹⁹ Hanna Roskin, "Did Christianity Cause the Crash?" *The Atlantic*, December 2009, <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200912/rosin-prosperity-gospel> (accessed 30 November 2009).

¹²⁰ Van Biema and Chu, "Does God Want," para. 4.

¹²¹ Joel Osteen, *It's Your Time: Activate Your Faith, Achieve Your Dreams, and Increase in God's Favor* (New York: Free Press, 2009), vii.

¹²² Roskin, "Did Christianity," para. 9. "Among Latinos the prosperity gospel has been spreading rapidly. In a recent Pew survey, 73 percent of all religious Latinos in the United States agreed with the statement: 'God will grant financial success to all believers who have enough faith.'"

¹²³ Roskin, "Did Christianity," para. 51.

¹²⁴ McConnell, *A Different Gospel*; Stephen Gibson, *Prosperity Prophets* (Salem, OH: Allegheny Publications, 2006), 51.

¹²⁵ Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 39.

¹²⁶ James B. Twitchell, *Shopping for God: How Christianity Went from In Your Heart to In Your Face* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2007), 214.

¹²⁷ Lee, "Prosperity Theology," 235.

¹²⁸ The Prosperity Gospel's anti-intellectualism is noted by Mitchem, *Name It*, 124-125. The classic, sophisticated rhetorical values are laid out by John Poulakos, "Toward a Sophistic Definition of Rhetoric," in *Landmark Essays on Classical Greek Rhetoric*, ed. Edward Shiappa (Davis, CA: Hermagoras, 1994), 56.

¹²⁹ Roskin, "Did Christianity.>"; Goodstein, "Believers Invest;" Van Biema and Chu. "Does God.?"

¹³⁰ McConnell, *A Different Gospel*; Gibson, *Prosperity Prophets*.

¹³¹ Jill Dubisch and Raymond Michalowski, "Blessed Are the Rich: The New Gospel of Wealth in Contemporary Evangelism," in eds. Marshall Fishwick and Ray B. Browne, *The God Pumpers: Religion in the Electronic Age* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987); Twitchell, *Shopping for God*; Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*; Mitchem, *Name it*; Harrison, *Righteous Riches*; several others cited in this chapter either address the CPG as a global issue or have selections on the Christian Prosperity Gospel while addressing other topics.

¹³² Pullum, "Sisters of the Spirit," 111-125; Gary McCarron, "Lost Dogs and Financial Healing: Deconstructing Televangelist Miracles," in eds. Marshall Fishwick and Ray B. Browne, *The God Pumpers: Religion in the Electronic Age* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987); Michael Jeffress, "A Study of the Demographics, Exposure Levels, and Perceptions of Pastor Joel Osteen's Viewing Audience" (paper presented at the National Communication Association conference, San Diego, CA, November 2008); Luke Winslow, "Classy Morality: The Rhetoric of Joel Osteen," in *Uncovering Hidden Rhetorics*, ed. Barry Brummet (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008).

¹³³ Dubisch and Michalowski, "Blessed," 42.

¹³⁴ McCarron, "Lost Dogs," in Fishwick and Browne.

¹³⁵ McCarron, "Lost Dogs," 25.

¹³⁶ Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 43.

¹³⁷ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 159; emphasis original.

¹³⁸ Mitchem, *Name It*, 122.

¹³⁹ Mitchem, *Name It*, 49.

¹⁴⁰ David Buttrick, "Who is Listening?" in Eds. Gail R. O'Day and Thomas G. Long, *Listening to the Word: Studies in Honor of Fred B. Craddock* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 205.

¹⁴¹ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 5; McConnell, *Different Gospel*, 55.

¹⁴² Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 7.

¹⁴³ McConnell, *Different Gospel*, 76.

¹⁴⁴ Mitchem, *Name It*, 68-83.

¹⁴⁵ McConnell, *Different Gospel*, 61-62.

¹⁴⁶ McConnell, *Different Gospel*, 77. For more on the patriarchal line of succession see, Mitchem, *Name it*, 71-72.

¹⁴⁷ Shayne Lee, "Prosperity Theology: T.D. Jakes and the Gospel of the Almighty Dollar," *Crosscurrent*, (Summer 2007), 229.

¹⁴⁸ Mitchem, *Name It*, 71.

¹⁴⁹ Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 26.

¹⁵⁰ Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 30-31.

¹⁵¹ Kenneth Burke, "The Philosophy of Literary Form," in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 23.

CHAPTER 2:
THE ABSOLUTE HERMENEUTIC AND THE SECRET OF PROSPERITY:
KENNETH HAGIN, REVELATION, AND THE GNOSTIC IMPULSE

We have not been given privileged access to The Secret, to some big capitalized know-it-all Secret, not as far as we know.¹

It hardly accords with the dignity of religious revelation that humankind is of itself capable of discerning the truths of religion.²

When we believe God for a promotion or financial blessing, He will give us an idea, a concept, power, favor, an ability that positions us to receive what we want from God...He gives us hidden wisdom or revelation knowledge.³

The CPG is obsessed with hermeneutics. Its most fundamental contention, its core exigency, is that current Christianity has failed to properly read and interpret the Word of God. Its most significant substantive doctrinal argument is that God wants and has enabled all Christian believers to obtain material prosperity, physical health, and mental well-being if they have a proper understanding of God's word and engage in positive confession. Yet those positions are rooted in its claim that Christian ministers have failed to read the Word, failed to correctly interpret the Word, and therefore have failed to properly teach the Word. Kenneth Hagin, the "Dad" of the Word-of-Faith prosperity movement, argues, "Too many Christians (preachers included)...will swallow whatever is poked in their mouths. Many people in the

Church have been religiously brainwashed instead of New Testament-taught. Without knowing what the Bible says, and having limited spiritual discernment, they are tossed by every wind of doctrine.”⁴

The charge is serious. Christianity is the religion of the Book. It “depends upon knowing how to read, how to read the Jewish Scriptures, how to the read the signs of the life and death of Jesus.”⁵ In the traditional scheme, interpretation of the text is a prior question to the homiletic process and to teaching. As Augustine wrote, a sound teaching of the Scriptures is fundamentally rooted in a sound reading of the Scriptures. However, the task of a “sound” reading is not simple. The complexity of the New Testament (NT) is further complicated by the fact that it is a selective text built upon the Christ’s oral interpretation of the Old Testament (OT) and His dictates toward the NT, ostensibly herd by Apostles, who decades later chose to write them down. Indeed the OT itself is also supposedly built upon an oral tradition.⁶

Thus, the layers of interpretation are imposing (assuming, of course, we have any interest in a fixed, historical interpretation of the Scripture). In this, the most adamant critics of the CPG are constrained by the parameters of their own hermeneutic perspective. The most vicious polemics against the message of prosperity come from other evangelical, charismatic, and/or fundamentalist ministers who are deeply interested in exact, correct interpretation of Scripture. D.R. McConnell, the most well known of these critics, describes himself as a supporter of the charismatic, evangelical interpretation of Christianity.⁷ Christian evangelicals are characterized by a belief that the Bible is “the highest religious authority.”⁸ Fundamentalist Christians even more strongly emphasize the “inerrancy” of the Biblical text, to the point of rejecting any empirical evidence to the contrary (Darwinian evolution, for example).⁹ For fundamentalists the Bible consists of a series of exact and factually true propositions.

While many evangelicals would not quite go as far as the fundamentalists, the fundamentalist influence on the broader community of Christian evangelicals tends to push evangelicals toward a more literal interpretation of scriptural materials. Combined with the doctrine of *sola scriptura* (“Scripture alone”) which prohibits contextual, historical, traditional, authoritative or empirical commentary on the meaning the Scripture, many Protestant Christians are left in the position of applying a hermeneutic that involves the belief that the meaning of the Bible is mostly literally true, that the Bible is the most authoritative possible reference on religious and social issues and physical facts, and that they must be able to interpret and understand its meaning themselves without reliance on specialized knowledge or authoritative interpretation. Each believer is, in some sense, on his or her own in searching for the True meaning of texts written between 1800 and 2500 years ago, without the aid of any unique “key” to unlock its meaning. The challenge of understanding such ancient documents in today’s terms is the core challenge to Christian faith today; how, as Kierkegaard asks, do we become contemporaneous with Christ?¹⁰

The argument of this chapter is that the CPG attempts to remedy the difficult hermeneutic situation of many evangelical Christians by letting the reader in on what John Caputo calls ‘The Secret’: the unique key to the correct interpretation of the Bible and thereby, the correct understanding of the Christian religion. As the first epigram on this chapter observes, the primary problem of contemporary hermeneutics of any kind—religious or non-religious—is the *lack* of reference to an absolute, correct meaning of Scripture. The layers of interpretation involved in both reading the signs of the world and reading the signs of the scriptural text make discovering and defending a singular meaning a very difficult task. Yet, by exploiting the parameters of reading set up by evangelical and fundamentalist hermeneutic techniques and by adding to the

mix a theophanic revelation (i.e., a revelation delivered by the immediate presence of God) of hermeneutics, the leaders of the CPG propose to reveal the *gnosis* (secret knowledge) of scriptural interpretation and justify its deviation from more orthodox Christianities.

The purpose of this chapter, however, is more than just explaining the reading technique advocated by the CPG. My goal is to set the stage for understanding the terms of hermeneutic issues and homiletic theologies in a late modern society. The CPG, at a basic level, is much like many other attempts to resolve the problems of reading, interpretation, and teaching the signs which appear in texts and the world. As my “Introduction” indicated, the problems of modernity and postmodernity have made reference to traditional means of reading the signs of the world more difficult. Choosing between competing versions of events is an increasingly perilous task. In the face of advanced, post-industrialist capitalist culture, old methods of homiletic interpretation and explanation of the Scripture are failing to do the task Ricoeur says is set for them: the bridging of the eons. Facing this challenge, the CPG is an attempt to do what the advocates of “New Homiletics” wish—to plant the Scriptures in local soil of contemporary culture. That the CPG does so by exploiting the ‘traditional’ parameters of fundamentalist and evangelical hermeneutic frameworks demonstrates the deconstructive nature of contemporary interpretation. Of course, the CPG is not a model of deconstructive processes—it deconstructs order merely to restore it. But it serves as a good representative anecdote for the way that contemporary readings attempt to accommodate contemporary cultural preferences by deconstructing traditional hermeneutics opposed to them while simultaneously attempting to maintain or restore a foundational basis for interpretation.

To make my argument and to demonstrate this point I begin by examining the hermeneutic tradition and outlining John Caputo and Jacques Derrida’s concept of the problem

of contemporary textual hermeneutics and *The Secret* as a core motive of the hermeneutic project. Second, I look at the hermeneutics of Kenneth Hagin, who played a major role in re-invigorating the CPG and training the current generation of CPG preachers. I examine how the aberrant hermeneutical tendencies of the CPG provide it with certain rhetorical advantages; advantages derived from its Gnostic foreignness, but also from its grounding in the Christian tradition. In doing so, some intrinsic vulnerabilities of Christian hermeneutics are exposed. An extended conclusion discusses the implications of this hermeneutic investigation of the margins of Christianity and links it to the broader social situation. I conclude by highlighting the core issues of technique and form in hermeneutics brought to the fore by the disagreement between the critics of the CPG and Kenneth Hagin.

Hermeneutics and *The Secret*

Hermeneutics is a complex word but it has a simple meaning. To engage in hermeneutics is merely to engage in the process of understanding messages. The term “hermeneutics” is grounded in the name of the Greek god Hermes—the divine messenger delivering the divine message. The heritage of this appellation is one with continuing power. This section of the chapter discusses hermeneutics as the process of finding and revealing the ‘divine’ message, in our case, the Truth of a text. To do so, I first review the history of hermeneutics as a process of unveiling the Meaning of a text and discuss key contemporary challenges and defenses of that purpose. Second, I examine the relationship of divine revelation and hermeneutics, suggesting that divine revelation is an attempt to bypass hermeneutics to reveal once and for all *The Secret* hidden in the text. Finally, I argue that by relying on divine revelation and rejecting the complexities and uncertainties of hermeneutics, those focused on divine revelation attempt to use the Scriptures as books of knowledge, rather than faith.

The 'Secret' Mission of Hermeneutics

Hermeneutic theorists have long sought the true method to unlocking the core meaning of texts. Substantial effort has yielded dubious results. The harder one looks for the concrete meaning of a text, the more that meaning seems effaced. In this section, I review the history of hermeneutics, noting its search for authorial intent, examine the efforts of contemporary theorists to pin down an elusive theory of textual meaning, and outline the dangers that come from a belief in a hidden, secret, and true meaning of a text.

The Hermeneutic Tradition of Authorial Intent

To some extent, the mission of hermeneutics has always been to reveal The Secret of interpretation—to give the reader the tools to correctly interpret a text and find its true meaning. For religion, this means understanding Scripture in orthodox fashion. Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*, for example, is designed to provide Christian preachers with the tools necessary first to correctly interpret the Scriptures and then to teach a particular Christian doctrine that eventually obtains the privilege of the title "orthodoxy."¹¹ In the fifth century Roman world (as now) there was considerable doctrinal confusion and a pressing need to demonstrate that the Scriptures could amount to a consistent and understandable religious position.¹² Later, as the basic project of hermeneutics evolved, the purpose of hermeneutics became to provide a method through which the reader was able to grasp the meaning of the author. For these early scholars of hermeneutics, it was understood that a good author and a well-trained reader could, in fact, convey and decode precise meanings of texts. The Reformation, in particular, called for a hermeneutics that would attempt to apply a literal, denotative understanding of the Scripture.¹³ This version of hermeneutics, now often referred to as exegetical studies, still finds strong adherents. Christian prosperity opponents like McConnell, Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. and others still

emphasize that the precise and discoverable meaning of the Bible remains the key point of Biblical textual analysis and interpretation.

It was left to later scholars of the Romantic period, like Friedrich Schleiermacher, to make the point that understanding was contingent upon the linguistic influence of a particular person with a particular state of mind. Instead of resting on the idea that meaning was basically a matter of clarity in writing and reading ability, Schleiermacher made the point that while understanding of text is possible and a higher quality of understanding is desirable, the sum of understanding is held in check by a person's experience and condition—and that understanding could continually further evolve.¹⁴ Later, Saussure and Humboldt would assert that a degree of objectivity—if not total objectivity—of understanding could be established if language were organized properly according to fundamental structures and forms of linguistic understanding that appeared universally, although manifesting themselves differently across different languages.¹⁵ Still later theorists like Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer argue that the limit of interpretation exists in the linkage of the world of the text and the world of the interpreter—the two “horizons” that exist. The hermeneutic process is a kind of “historical-linguistic event which envelops both the interpreter and his object” in order to create an understanding that is built around the historical location and experience of the interpreter.¹⁶

The Elusive Notion of Meaning

In the past century hermeneutics has become a particularly prominent philosophical issue, as well as a problem for religion and rhetoric. Caputo, in the opening epigram, notes that the issue of religious interpretation is bedeviled by the fact that there is not access to The Secret; the layers of interpretation in the scriptural genealogy make discovering “authorial intention” a very tricky task. Indeed, Paul Ricoeur's demand for a better symbolic language of Scripture in

preaching—a better rhetoric that allows people now to identify with the ancient symbols of the Bible—is based upon his rejection of the belief that a universal proclamation of the “True” Word will automatically invoke a visceral, transcendent reaction in the hearer.

The works of Ricoeur and Gadamer have led advocates of the New Homiletics to encourage preachers to work on bonding the “horizons” of the listener with Biblical myth by reading the gospel as a narrative to be linked to the narrative of the congregations’ lives—an essential rhetorical task.¹⁷ It is a key moment of hermeneutical re-interpretation to read/speak the text as mythic narrative for the present. David Buttrick calls for a “double consciousness” in which a single person would bond the credulous reading techniques of a believer with the skeptical reading techniques of someone who lives in the material world within one mind.¹⁸ The critical point in religious terms is that this means rejecting the “hermeneutics of suspicion” that seek to debunk the Biblical myth and instead practicing a *believing* hermeneutics as a disclosure of the heritage and possibilities of faith.¹⁹

It’s clear to most that a total historical knowledge of the Scriptures is probably impossible. We cannot ever fully grasp quite what the text was intended to say or how it fit into its specific period of time.²⁰ But Derrida goes further, indicating that the metaphoricity of language itself makes hermeneutics, as “revealing” (*aletheia*) a fairly futile task. Language is endlessly entailed to plurivocality; attempts at the science of metaphor rely on metaphysical assumptions and circular or mystical justifications, i.e., The Secret. Derrida is adamant that there is not primordial meaning to language to be revealed.

Some scholars have seen this anti-metaphysical claim in explicitly negative terms, seeing it as inherently skeptical about the significance of metaphor and language compared to Ricoeur’s hopeful and constructive hermeneutics.²¹ In response, Caputo advocates a ‘radical hermeneutics’

that embraces the necessity of reading but rejects the possibilities of objectivity or technique. Caputo argues it is merely fantasy to imagine that hermeneutics will ever function in a way that can deliver something like an objective meaning of text. He rejects the idea that the horizon of the object and the horizon of the reader can be bonded in a meaningful way that has privileged hermeneutic value. Such a perspective merely continues the belief that there is some deep message within such myths that speaks across epochs and can settle us into the proper viewpoint of our times.²² While Ricoeur wants to eliminate a hermeneutic of suspicion in favor of a mythic re-reading and interpretation of the scriptural narrative in terms of our times, the implication of Derrida's analysis is that such a seemingly open hermeneutic is really just *deeper* structural hermeneutics—a search for the deep, secret, core saving message within the story.²³ It is, in some sense, still in search of The Secret deep in the *mythos* of the past:

We hermeneuts who know the code, who know how to read backward, are able to find another possibility—like those trick cards which display different scenes when held at different angles...Everything would flip into a new beginning. But, for Derrida, that is the dream of presence: eschatology now.

For Derrida, there is...no guiding logic of reversal—only the free play of differences.²⁴

Radical Hermeneutics and the Danger of the Secret

To handle (but not resolve) the problem of *différance*, Caputo advocates radical hermeneutics. Radical hermeneutics means facing up to the dangers, the “the wolves” that pursue meaning and interpretation. No *mythos* can settle into a privileged position of interpretation—the myth cannot be distilled to a position where it is not subject to the play of various interpretations.²⁵ For Caputo that is not a negative beginning. Instead it opens up new

possibilities, requires new daring, and ensures that none may ever hold the keys of The Way to the exclusion of all other ways. It is not the abandonment of attempting to discern meaning, but provides a very healthy dose of skepticism about the authorial and authoritative power of those who claim to know.

The reason why a healthy skepticism is important is because The Secret isn't harmless. The danger of the Secret is that "the advocates of The Secret always keep a fully staffed Secret Police."²⁶ The claim to possess The Secret is the claim to possess Power, a particular position of intellectual, political, and even religious privilege that exercises the power of *logos* and *veritas* against its opponents. Those who claim to know The Secret may feel morally authorized to act against those who do not possess The Secret or do not abide by it, sometimes to the level of discursive or even physical violence. To have The Secret and to convince others you possess it is to take on a uniquely dangerous tenuous and privileged position. The Secret, as an artifact, is a *pharmakon*—the cure and the poison. It may quench our thirst for certain knowledge, but it carries dangers all its own, intellectual, social, religious and political.²⁷

Caputo is no atheist; indeed, he imagines that the problem of undecidability is the key question of the Christian faith. Christianity, as the religion of the Book, is open and free precisely because hermeneutics fails to deliver the Law. Faith is the ability to believe knowing that belief carries no guarantees and no certainty. Deconstruction, and the radical hermeneutics it manifests, is a "good gift" because it disrupts the dangerous idol worship of the text and makes each person responsible for his or her own interpretations—and hence, his or her own ethical and moral choices. No one can claim anything he or she does is, without a doubt, God's Will.²⁸ This takes to heart Gadamer's advice that hermeneutics is about "getting an angle on things" or finding a way into a text that helps us understand history; we have no other way but reading.

What Caputo objects to is the way that believers imagine they have been let in on The Secret of the text—and that the believer is in a superior position to the non-believers by way of this knowledge.²⁹ Instead, the line between believer and unbeliever is unclear, unknown, because The Secret is unknown: “The secret is, there is no Secret.”³⁰ The ability of the believers to decree the Law or the Way onto the non-believers is effaced by the fact that believers are never sure of what they know, only what they believe.

Unless, that is, God speaks.

The Revelation of The Secret

In the second epigram, Gadamer notes that religious revelation is premised on recognition of the limits of human knowledge. The need for divine intervention is grounded in the inadequacy of our own ability to figure out how to read or assess the divine nature of the world. In that light, this sub-section examines the role of revelation in the process of hermeneutics—or rather, it examines how divine revelations regarding textual meanings are meant to replace humanist hermeneutics.

In the sense that religious revelation has a “dignity,” we might say that its impetus must be that human rationality or intuitive or emotional capacities are insufficient to discern God’s plan. Against the failure of human projects to understand particular historical events, texts, or to grasp the teleology of history, divine revelation steps in to resolve the matter.³¹ Revelation exists specifically to save us from the hermeneutic problem—to intervene in the course of events or the reading of a text to declare that God has, in fact, delivered the absolute and correct interpretation of the text—and to assume all the authority that is imbued by a God-given decree.³²

The linkage of divine revelation and the hermeneutic impulse is ingrained in the Christian tradition itself. Christ came preaching from hermeneutics. Jesus continuously linked himself to a

certain reading of the Hebrew Scriptures, arguing that He was the fulfillment of these terms and challenging the priests and Pharisees to read the Scriptures more closely (Mark 12, for example). Christ not only plotted a new direction for the Jewish religion, he announced a new type of Judaism (ultimately, Christianity). But He did so on the premise that His new Abrahamic religion was always-already the plan of God, as revealed in the Scripture. Christ argued that He was the fulfillment of the OT, not its ending. It was when the Disciples—after much cajoling—finally understood how Christ fit into that reading of the Scriptures that Christ disappeared into the air.³³

Revelation itself is a rhetorical notion. It serves to allow one party to structure the interpretive processes of others. The term “revelation” can have a wide range of meanings, but all revelation is a *revealing*—God reveals it to a person, a person reveals to other persons (an audience). Sometimes revelation reveals dictates that become Scripture; the Laws of Moses, for example, or the encounter of St. Paul on the road to Damascus or the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. These revealed “big paradigmatic historical events” form the core of Christian Scripture.³⁴ But revelation is not reserved for these events—revelations can also occur in *regards* to Scriptures, as a lower order Event that directs believers away from one interpretation and towards another. Revelation as inspired insight was, prior to the growing dominance of reason, the key method of interpreting the text—and they remain competitors.³⁵ The power of such revelation is functionally a rhetorical act; when the interpretation is presented as divinely *revealed*, the efficacy of the revelation is grounded in the suasive power of the preacher’s testimony of faith.³⁶

The Secret takes its rhetorical form in the mandate of meaning of divine revelation. Divine revelation sets aside, by fiat, all the normal humanistic problems in interpretation. It rejects the procedural *aletheia* of reason-based hermeneutics and it claims for itself the power of

Logos—the factual, divine rule of the Word. The receivers of revelation claim for themselves unique access to The Secret. They not only affirm the generally accepted premise that the Scriptures contain, somewhere, the Code of Truth but declare they possess the exact, definite way of finding and decoding the Code in a method outside the humanistic tradition. Unlike the rest of us who wander through scriptural and religious interpretation wondering at the silence of God and attempting to determine if our dreams, feelings, or desires reflect the Voice speaking to us, the divine hermeneuts proclaim such wondering ended. The Christian *aporia* presented by the silence of God and His distant and unknowable nature is simply by-passed. The challenge of Ricoeur, the struggle to find the proper language of God in an era separated by thousands of years from His last, direct Testimony vanishes into the air. Divine revelation means to replace the uncertainty of humanistic interpretation with the certainty of God's meaning. Those hearing the revelation of meaning are being encouraged to understand that the revelation is not speculative, not proximate, but specific, exact and definite. It is epistemologically justified in the very strongest sense. It is *knowledge*, not faith.

Such revelations and prophecies are high utility. Institutions can use them to maintain orthodoxy and control, while dissenting groups use them to challenge orthodoxy. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints makes common use of revelation by permitting its President/Prophet to decree specific, divine mandates. Sometimes these decrees clarify the meaning of existing Christian or LDS Scriptures. Often, however, they direct the LDS Church to take on a specific policy/theology change; to wit, the elimination of polygamy or the admittance of African-Americans into the priesthood. These revelations become canonical themselves. In the Protestant tradition, divine revelations do not become canonical—they do not obtain a

position equal to the Bible, although they are ostensibly similarly inspired and serve the purposes of power and counter-power resistance.

For modern and late modern religionists, the problem of God is a problem of interpretation. Faith is belief in the light of the cold truth that God will not descend from the sky and deliver full meaning to each individual. God has not spoken, in the Scriptural sense, since the first century C.E. Ricoeur imagines a new method, a linguistic bridge, linking the consciousness of the then and now—a new language that would bring the ancient Gospel to life. Buttrick’s work is specifically intended to be the practical implementation of this idea. Caputo, on the other hand, believes that such a signifying language, such a revealing of the transcendence, is simply more modernism at work—a continued faith in the ability of the humanistic tradition to reveal the divine facts of Scripture or possibly a method to gain a mystic insight. Instead, in a cold hermeneutics, Caputo urges us to give up these ideas. Meaning is an *effect*, he indicates with no mystic *aletheia* emerging.³⁷ There is no heat of metaphysics or theology available to us in language that can unlock The Secret—we can only believe. Unlike Buttrick’s double consciousness in which one must read and hear as a believer and as being-in-the-world, Caputo argues that we cannot separate ourselves, cannot double ourselves. If we believe, we must believe without the believer’s codebook. These are the hard facts of hermeneutics—a hermeneutics that gives up on achieving anything like objectivity.

The Secret and the Structuring Power of Gnosis

Cold hermeneutics are not the norm of Christian evangelicalism, obviously. Faith and knowledge, rather than being understood as separate, almost *opposing* forces, are linked together. Individuals, inflamed by the heat of belief, *know* they are born again by faith. The process of Scriptural text is “hot” in the sense that evangelical readers believe themselves infused with the

sanction of the Holy Ghost (signified literally by flames at the Pentecost in Acts 2:1-6). Faith is knowledge. But the inverse is also possible. In the Gnostic tradition knowledge is the faith. Gnosticism reveals specific mechanics of the universe as structure and espouses knowledge and control over that structure. The Gnostic Secret is not a soteriological (soul saving) faith in the power of God but the revelation and possession of individual efficacy in the universe through knowledge. This sub-section describes how divine revelation as a form of knowledge alters hermeneutics.

Divine revelation serves to undermine the hermeneutic process of priests and scholars. But instead of (coldly) acknowledging the trace and core undecidability of the text and the lack of access to the voice of God, divine revelation by-passes textual problems by disputing a different premise of hermeneutics. While radical hermeneutics disputes the premise that hermeneutics can find a 'more' objective interpretation, the revelationists dispute the exigency of hermeneutics, i.e., that God does not interpret for us. Those believing in latter-day divine revelation maintain that God continues to speak and that His words reveal the meaning of The Word. As Caputo asks, "What else does 'divine revelation' mean than that something has dropped out of the sky and revealed The Secret that we could not come up with on our own?"³⁸

Belief in divine revelation creates a dramatically different perspective. While contemporary hermeneutics see the problem as the contrast between the radically interventionist God of ancient Scriptural myth and the silent, inert God of the contemporary world, those who trade in divine revelation fully and unproblematically embrace the ancient *mythos*, refusing as much as possible the debunking process involved in the social symbolic interpretative approach to Scriptures. Rather than attempting to rectify the Scripture with the world, they rectify the world to Scripture, believing that all cosmic activity of the Scriptures is at work presently. It is

an epistemological literalism that believes that Biblical narrative accurately signifies a hidden, underlying dramatic structure of the universe with a cast of characters vying directly for control of the Earth. These characters use certain tactical and strategic maneuvers to gain or lose control of spheres of the earth, utilizing secret laws of the universe to manipulate the visible (but ultimately *deceptive*) world. In this world, the Gospels cement into books of *gnosis*, books of knowledge, rather than books of faith. They describe a secret drama and a secret universe that operates legalistically and mechanically, just below the surface of the world accessible by the physical senses. Those with the right *knowledge* can participate in that secret world, utilizing that knowledge of the hidden world to produce outcomes in the visible world. The Gnostic reading of the Scripture is believed to be as factual and as methodologically effective as car repair; they describe, figuratively speaking, what's going on under the hood of the universe and provide the believer the tools to interact with the hidden "real" plan of the universe.

When I apply the term *gnosis*, I do so with awareness of four facts: (1) Gnosticism has always haunted the Christian faith, (2) Gnosticism does not represent a single, interpretive tradition, (3) there was never an ancient religion called Gnosticism, and (4) Gnosticism should be understood only as an analytical category in relation to Christianity—an aberrant, fictional heterodox Christianity that serves mainly to outline the boundaries of orthodoxy.³⁹ But I embrace it precisely because it is orthodox Christianity's Other, an entelechial outgrowth or reading of the Christ tradition that is dangerous precisely because it espouses to be Christianity. It illuminates the reason why heresy is more dangerous than apostasy. Disaffiliation is one thing, but the heretic's claim to present a true, competitive Christianity is far more insidious. Gnosticism—a plague to the ancient polemicists—reveals the unique problem of false identity.⁴⁰

Despite its nominal non-existence as a unified group, the Gnostic *tradition* is alive and well today. Even absent the fact that there exists a variety of contemporary Gnostic churches, there are a variety of metaphysical sects that claim to reveal the structure of the universe—and quite a few that claim to ground their viewpoints in the Christian faith. From the writing of Rhonda Byrne and Napoleon Hill on New Thought and the mystical power of positive thinking in influencing physical events in the conveniently titled book *The Secret*, to Charles Fillmore and his belief in the unified divine mind, to Catherine Ponder’s series on the universal laws of prosperity, including those found in the Christian Scriptures, the notion of a secret code book that reveals secret, powerful knowledge remains strong.⁴¹ Byrne, for example, claims that the Universe functions as a transmission receiver and that whatever a person thinks can and will happen, according to the Law of Attraction. The structure and the details of how to manipulate these forces constitute *The Secret*: the key to the success of almost every person in the world.

Divine revelation bears much in common with more obvious Gnostic impulses. Revelation means to establish, by fiat rather than by technique, the “Absolute Hermeneutic” by taking meaning back to the absolute Origin—the root of meaning. The Origin’s authority gives its believers understanding, and through understanding, power. It gives access to a position of correctness and often access to spiritual and physical efficacy in the world. Unlike radical hermeneutics, which coldly acknowledges God’s total ontological and epistemological distance, the prophet uses revelation to attempt to solve the difficulties of interpretation. While radical hermeneutics are an attempt to face up to the deep problems of a “correct” reading, divine revelation is an attempt to avoid reading—an attempt to proclaim, once and for all, the meaning of the text. In fact, it makes reading the text irrelevant, since its meaning has already been superseded by the divine interpretation. The Absolute Hermeneutic is a claim for the end of

hermeneutics, for it makes interpretation technique irrelevant. The *gnosis*, the mystery of the universe has been revealed—there is no “mystery of faith.”⁴²

Fortunately or unfortunately such attempts to bypass reading are rarely successful. Revelation attempts to wall off interpretation, but interpretation as a rhetorical act is always mediated by distance, by *différance*. The revelation is only, at most, transcendent for the receiver. Everyone else is in the position of scrambling for its full meaning, buffeted by epistemological limitations. Paul received direct revelation yet we who hear Paul must interpret. Plato may have *seen* the divine rationality, but as volumes of books evidence, we who lack such access can only read, interpret, discuss and ponder.⁴³ The same is the case for modern prophets. Further complicating matters, there is always more than one claimant to the correct interpretation, some with vested social, political, or financial interests at work. And every divine revelation is confronted by the more orthodox hermeneuts at work, wielding the force of polemics, cultural prejudices, and ascribed and formal authority against those who proclaim “a different gospel.” There are always the powers of the religious and social status quo undermining any attempt to subvert *their* claim to interpretative authority. There is always more than one Secret Police at work and some are more firmly established than others. Divine revelation prophecy, and the incumbent epistemological strength that such revelation demands, is always *pharmakon*, standing ambiguously between divine good and occultic evil, depending on who one asks.

Hermeneutical Secrets, Divine Revelation, and the Prosperity Gospel

Perhaps because divine revelation never fully succeeds in side-stepping hermeneutics, the CPG relies heavily on both Biblical hermeneutics and exegesis and the anti-hermeneutical process of divine prophecy.⁴⁴ In the prior section, I explicated how hermeneutics was driven by

the elusive nature of The Secret meaning of texts and noted that divine revelation was an attempt to side-step the difficulties of hermeneutics. Yet the nature of experience means that such efforts can never fully succeed and CPG preachers must deploy a certain hermeneutic of their own. They do so with gusto. This section examines the hermeneutic methods of the CPG preachers and outlines their perspectives and their emphasis on textual support and interpretation, even to the extreme of demanding God be comported to the text.

Word-of-Faith preachers rely heavily on scriptural reference and make significant efforts to instruct audiences on the ‘core’ meanings of the text. Greek and Hebrew translations are ‘clarified,’ historical contexts are illustrated, and specific passages are highlighted. Yet for all these humanistic exegetical processes, it is divine revelation that serves the most significant purpose. Divine revelation, as it does in many cases, serves the purpose of imbuing the prosperity preachers’ hermeneutic conclusion with the stamp of epistemic privilege.

These divine revelations are often doctrinal and sometimes grotesquely textually based. In *The Believer’s Authority* (hereafter, *TBA*), Hagin proclaims that God has personally revealed to him the spiritual authority and power that individuals hold over the world. He states, “In 1952, the Lord Jesus Christ appeared to me in a vision and talked to me for about an hour and half about the devil, demons, and demon possession.”⁴⁵ In the course of that conversation, Hagin reports that Jesus proclaimed a new (to Hagin) doctrinal point. Christ tells Hagin that despite widespread belief to the contrary, God and Jesus cannot do anything about the actions of the devil or the demons that in the material world create illness, poverty, and disaster. The authority to control those demons, Jesus indicates, has been given away by the Father and Son to the sons and daughters of Adam. Only humans could work against the devil and demons on earth. Surprised, Hagin claims, “I said, ‘Now dear Lord, I just can’t accept that. I never heard or

preached anything like that in my life!’ I told the Lord I didn’t care how many times I saw Him in visions—He would have to prove this to me by at least three Scriptures in the New Testament.”⁴⁶

Setting aside the theological claim, the conversation itself is an odd picture. Hagin, confronted with a manifestation of the Lord, rejects Christ’s revelations and demands Scriptural confirmation. He demands that God comport Himself to the text, rather than the text conforming to God. Strange as it is, it is consistent with the conservative Protestant viewpoint that the Bible is a closed text. Unlike the LDS Church, which periodically produces new Scripture as a result of prophecy and revelation, Hagin is following the tradition which believes that the Bible is God’s complete Word.⁴⁷ Any prophecy must be an interpretation of what is already written. To maintain any sense of orthodoxy, Hagin must maintain that he is not producing a new message at all, but is only revealing that which was already inside Scripture but had not been understood. Hagin hence maintains that he has merely been preaching the “simple ageless gospel.”⁴⁸ It fits with the evangelical tradition which proclaims that the Scripture is the highest authority. In this case, even Christ is required to comport himself to it.

Christ complies with Hagin’s demand by producing *four* scriptural references (one wonders what Hagin would have said if Christ had produced only *two*). In producing each “proof text” for this doctrinal point, Christ functionally enrolls Hagin in a brief workshop in Scriptural hermeneutics. Christ makes some corrections to the translation of the Greek, explaining that sometimes the translator erred by translating the Greek word for “authority” as “power.” The Lord also extends and contextualizes the meaning of certain passages, clarifying Peter’s thinking in regards to the Devil in 1 Peter 5:8.⁴⁹ He emphasizes that Peter intended that each person must act for him- or herself against the Devil, not rely on God. Christ also extrapolates implications

for Hagin, “The second reference Jesus gave me was Mark 16:15-18...He said, ‘The very first sign mentioned as following *any believer*...is that they shall cast out devils. That means that in my Name they shall exercise authority over the devil, because I have delegated my authority over the devil to the Church.”⁵⁰

Hagin’s account of divine authority demonstrates the mechanics of the divine hermeneutics in attempting to put an end to the interminable debates over meaning. First, by putting the imprint of divine power on a translation, Hagin’s Christ eliminates both the conventional disagreements over translation, the problems of translating ancient languages in ways we might understand today, the trustworthiness of authoritative and sometimes competing translations, and the intrinsic impossibility of meaning transference. As the introduction to the *American Standard Version* makes clear, some of the terms in the KJV have come to mean fully the reverse of what they meant in 1611.⁵¹ And yet, to borrow the language of Burke, by mystic means that which was before impossible (full translation) becomes possible through the power of direct communication with the Deity.

Moreover, Christ’s contextualization of the meaning of Peter comes back to the original mission of hermeneutics—an attempt to fully encapsulate authorial intent. Unable to obtain authorial intent by human means, Hagin turns to Christ to find out, without any uncertainty, what Peter meant regarding human action and the demons and devils that afflict humankind. True to the evangelical belief that Scriptural meaning is constant, Hagin has no interest in the gaps of time and language between Peter’s time and contemporary life with its bank accounts, global economics, and technologies of life and destruction. The concerns that modern scholars articulate about the problems of understanding Scriptures against the flow of time and culture are thrown down by the direct intervention of God.

Finally, by extending the implications of otherwise obscure scriptural passages, for example, by declaring that *prayers* for supernatural healing or financial gain should be replaced by *demands* for them, Hagin demonstrates the process of extending Scriptures into the present. In the Puritan preaching formula, the last part of the sermon was dedicated to interpreting the Scripture for the daily lives of the people around. The goal was to take generalized doctrines derived from ancient texts and integrate them with the demands of life in the Puritan community. Audiences were expected to listen analytically, critically evaluating textual meaning and doctrinal application. But Hagin “skips” the hermeneutic task of the preacher and the interpretive act of the sermon by reporting that Christ himself has already performed the work. Christ has declared the meaning of the text—it means one should not pray, one should demand. Critical hermeneutics or historical exigencies are simply unnecessary because Christ Himself has revealed the objective, Original meaning.

Rhetorical Moves, Gnosticism and the Absolute Hermeneutic

Hermeneutics, as a mode of interpretation, is a rhetorical move both because it interprets symbols and creates understanding and because it enables those interpretations to be propagated in other rhetorical events. This final section of the essay examines both Hagin and his critics as rhetorical actors propagating different interpretive methods in a competitive discursive landscape. I note that, similar to the odd position of Hagin as both hermeneut and prophetic anti-hermeneut, Hagin derives deconstructive power from his absolutist positions on the correct way to read to the Gospel. This deconstructive power is grounded in Hagin’s strategy of over-identifying with certain traditional evangelical concepts of hermeneutics and preaching in a way that supports the CPG. That tension, plus Hagin’s ability to *preach* hermeneutic method, makes Hagin a particularly difficult opponent for his critics.

Deconstructive & Absolute Hermeneutics

The polemicists are not wrong when they see Hagin and company as a threat. As Ricoeur observed, every myth is in direct competition with all other myths for primacy, “Myths have never stopped battling one another; every myth is iconoclast toward others.”⁵² The particular danger of the CPG to orthodox Christianity lies in its deconstructive use of the signs and techniques of the evangelical tradition and its redeployment of those very signs and techniques for its own purposes and perspectives—purposes more consonant with the materialist desires of a diverse audience. It does not *generate* a new religion of out nothing. Instead, it relies upon the entelechial extension of what already exists in the Christian tradition to carve out its doctrines. Deconstruction, as a phenomenon, is not built around a critical attack on a text or a debunking of a text. Instead, deconstruction is the act of revealing the susceptibility of a text to re-interpretation, to reversal of meaning, to its own liabilities. The possibility of deconstruction lies within the text itself, in the tension between the undecidability of meaning in the text and desire to make a text *mean* something specific and particular. It subverts the traditional interpretive schema that places textual interpretation prior to the homiletic process. As a homiletic form of AStheology, rather than an exegetical one—opportunities are found in the gaps in knowledge about the text rather than in a specific meaning. As Habermas (disapprovingly) states, deconstruction is interested in de-privileging the certainty of *logos* as a kind epistemological starting point.⁵³

It is strange, perhaps, to talk about Hagin’s deconstructive hermeneutics at the same time as we discuss his belief in the Absolute Hermeneutics. Yet one relies on the other, in this case. Hagin’s approach to hermeneutics is a deconstructive process—it reveals how belief in textual certainty, divine revelation, interpretive technique, and analytical form, originally meant to attain

certainty of meaning, can serve to undermine the orthodoxies that employed them in the first place. In some sense, Hagin's Absolute Hermeneutic is a deconstructive challenge to the possibility of Absolute Hermeneutic in general. After all, there can only be One Secret—not many competitors, unless everyone is a little skeptical about the idea of The Secret in the first place. The Church Fathers knew precisely this—the religion without doctrinal limits and heresy has no identity at all. That fact that Hagin might not see his own hermeneutics in this light should not dissuade us from seeing it in this role.

In that context, Hagin's employment of The Secret and the Absolute Hermeneutic is a crucial rhetorical move. From the critic's perspective, interpretation itself is always a rhetorical act—but it is particularly so in the context of homiletic theology, where hermeneutics, theology, persuasion, and proclamation merge into one.⁵⁴ In the CPG the Absolute Hermeneutic is a result of the divine mark that Hagin declares for himself. By claiming access to The Secret through divine means, he is distancing himself from the likes of Harold Camping or William Miller calculating the date of the Rapture or Apocalypse. He is not a mere decoder or interpreter competing with other humans struggling to understand the mathematical, denotative code of Scriptures. That, actually, would have more in common with the exegetes and modern Biblical hermeneutists, who search for the truth via *poiesis*. Instead, Hagin is declaring, in some sense, his own absolute epistemic privilege and infallibility of interpretation, the possession of *Logos*.

By embracing divine revelation as The Secret Key to Meaning, Hagin declares his positions insulated from human argument. Through the Absolute Hermeneutic—the technique of reading and understanding that cannot be disputed because of its divine endorsement—Hagin gives himself a potential strategic advantage against those professing his error. It creates a series of forced choice for the audience and exploits implicit (and sometimes explicit) tendencies and

professions of the orthodox Christian churches. For one, it forces his audience to decide if direct revelation is possible. Particularly among Christians, there is significant historical and social pressure to answer in the affirmative. To say “no” flies in the face of significant doctrines of charismatic and evangelical Protestantism, which premises itself on an individual’s direct access to God and for Protestants and non-Protestants alike would entail the rejection of the divine communication of several significant religious figures who have been described as having such power. If that question is settled in favor of “yes,” the next question is whether or not Hagin has had a revelation. In this, Hagin’s competitors are again at a disadvantage. Evangelicals have long believed in some kind of communication between humans and God, and the two Great Awakenings and history of charismatic revivals demonstrate the tendency of American religious audiences to embrace such claims. Even Hagin’s strong polemicists accept that there are charismatic gifts, like visions. The critics attempt to set up particular doctrinal boundaries between “gifts” and “cultic” or Gnostic elements, but the premise of Hagin’s claim to divine power is the existence of such beliefs within the text and within the Christian tradition. Moreover, given the de-centralized and personal emphasis of American Protestant evangelicalism, the polemicists cannot be seen as attempting to institutionally dictate the authoritative position on Hagin’s claims. The polemicists are even limited in their ability to deny Hagin’s specific claims to the power of faith. Denial of supernatural healing, for example, flies in the face of the charismatic tradition—and most polemicists don’t deny healing miracles. Instead, they object to the “dogmatization” and codification of the healing miracles—a position whose nuance leads to even more problems, as I’ll note momentarily.⁵⁵

In response, Hagin is not reluctant to proclaim his position as supernatural prophet on the basis of a broadly accepted power of charismatic gifts and Christian offices (though he tends to

say that he has the power of *prophecy* rather than being a *prophet*). In *I Believe in Visions (IBV)*, Hagin declares he was raised from dead by God on several occasions and testifies to being miraculously cured of a crippling heart defect and a fatal blood disease.⁵⁶ He recounts other circumstances in which he was supernaturally healed from devastating paralysis and illness.⁵⁷ The ends of several chapters in *TBA* proclaim extra-scriptural prophecies—though the prophecies all support his interpretation of Scripture. In *IBV*, Hagin proclaims that prophecy and revelation are active in daily life and writes that he has had eight major visions of God and several minor ones (it's unclear what minor means in this case). He claims he has seen and performed miracles beyond those of the Bible. He maintains that he has had contact with the Lord on a higher plane than Paul or Peter.⁵⁸ He responds to skeptics who deny the existence of such powers or who reject that Hagin has by charging that these critics are rejecting the offices of ministry set down in the Gospel and thus denying the literal meaning of The Word.

Hagin also sets out to demonstrate that his interpretation has been actively proven by events. In *IBV*, Hagin recounts that early in his prosperity ministry God helped, by miracle, to sell his 8' foot wide trailer home by providing him an angel to serve as his agent. God's declaration of assistance is, Hagin declares, consistent with the Scriptures; Jesus Himself clarified for him directly that the key message of Hebrews 1:14 is that ministering angels are meant precisely for the profitable benefit of humans.⁵⁹ The declaration that angels financially serve humans is not just a passing claim. In Hagin's eighth major vision God again reveals to Hagin that he will receive money through the same ministering angels.⁶⁰ Indeed, God indicates this is a primary mission of angels. Again, the angels succeed.

If the role of these angels is so fundamental, why has no one before understood them? Hagin's answer echoes the form taken up by every concerned Christian hermeneutic on most

doctrinal misunderstandings. The reason people haven't understood the role of angels is because they have not learned to properly understand the Scriptures—and without a proper understanding of Scriptures, one would not know how to properly use faith. However, instead of turning to hermeneutic technique, Hagin looks to revelation. It took God Himself, Hagin remarks, to break Christians out of their hermeneutical malaise. Hagin establishes his claim to The Secret and takes aim at the exegetical techniques, pointing out that they have failed to account for God's will. He states, "The Lord Himself taught me about prosperity. I never read about it in a book. I got it directly from heaven... We young preachers swallowed whatever our elders said about prosperity; we didn't take the time to examine the Word of God on the subject. We were taught that if you're really *humble*, you're poor."⁶¹

The narrative of how this occurred is particularly interesting. Hagin reports that during a low moment of poverty while serving as a missionary, he prayed to God about Isaiah 1:19, which he records as, "*If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land.*" God spoke to him and said that, yes, if Hagin was obedient and willing, the Scripture passage did mean that he would receive good things. But God castigates Hagin for failing to believe in the passage in terms of prosperity. God proclaims that faith works the same in every sphere—if you can control demons of illness with faith, you can control demons of finances and achieve blessing, "*Faith is the same in the financial realm as it is in any of the others.*"⁶²

Of course, Hagin had a suspicion that Scripture is at odds with evangelical Christian orthodoxy even before God speaks to him. He finds some interpretive tension on his own, through simple attention to the text. That suspicion and subsequent textual investigation proves vital; without that insight, Hagin would not have been able to pray for clarification on the issue

and therefore would never have received the message of prosperity. Indeed, the process that Hagin follows is in the best tradition of the hermeneutic *sola scriptura*.

Moreover, Hagin's description of God's mode of demonstrating the linkage of faith and finances provides some insight into Hagin's focus on the Absolute Hermeneutic. In Hagin's account, God is textual interpreter *par excellence*. God does little without textual support. The polemicists charge that Hagin comes up with his doctrines on prosperity and health out of whole cloth. Yet Chapter 3 of *How God Taught Me About Prosperity* is entirely dedicated to explicating how God interpreted the Scriptures for Hagin to demonstrate that the message of prosperity was always-already contained in the Scriptures. (The chapter title itself, "Back to the Beginnings," recalls the search for the Origin of scriptural meaning.) Hagin says that it is because of a trained incompetence in most preachers that God must intervene. God needs to "correct...theology a little."⁶³ How? By textual clarification, of course. God brings to Hagin's attention scriptural reference after scriptural reference, interpreting them one by one and clarifying that God has given humans dominion and power on earth, material and spiritual power. The text, God argues, shows that Christians have radically misunderstood the extent of their power in the world. In order to use that authority for prosperity, God says humans must, "'Claim whatever you need... 'You say, *Satan, takes your hands off my money!*'"⁶⁴ That message is not, of course, the language of any verse in the Bible, but it is what God declares the accumulation of several scriptural passages to *mean*--the *veritas* of Scripture. It comes straight from the horse's mouth of Meaning Itself--the very Origin of Logos.

In "naming and claiming it" there is also a question of correct technique and method in taking action. This is not technique in terms of reading, but in praying and believing. If one reads and interprets Scripture correctly, according to Hagin, one finds that there is a different way of

approaching both God and the spiritual and material worlds—the Absolute Hermeneutic reveals the rhetorical The Secret as well. In some versions of God’s declaration, God begins by telling Hagin to stop his previous way of addressing money. God says, “Don’t pray like you have been. Whatever you need, claim it in Jesus’ Name.”⁶⁵ The lynchpin in enacting authority over a variety of aspects of the universe is a question of method. The key to authority—and the key to achieving material prosperity and health—is getting the right formula of understanding (the right *knowledge*), beginning with the right hermeneutic:

You see, a lot of times, our thinking is wrong. It’s not in line with the Bible. And if our *thinking* is wrong, then our *believing* is going to be wrong. And if our *believing* is wrong, then our *talking* is going to be wrong. You’ve got to get all three of them—your thinking, your believing, and your speaking—synchronized with the Word of God.⁶⁶

It all begins with thinking, with knowing—and understanding thinking is revealed by a proper reading. Once you think and know you can properly believe. Once you properly believe, you can properly act—speaking, in the Word-of-Faith tradition.

Gnosis, Hermeneutical Methods and the Limits of Orthodoxy

The emphasis on knowledge and technique constitutes, in combination with the legalistic limits on God’s omnipotence and the altered descriptions of the cosmic organization, much of the charge of Gnosticism that critics level at Hagin and his followers. The particulars vary. But as I noted above, the polemic objections to the CPG have as much to do with the struggle to temper the extreme possibilities of orthodox Christianity as with the CPG itself. The primary goal of such polemics is to argue down the prosperity preacher’s extreme emphasis on faith, reliance on God’s Providence, and the CPG’s rejection of materialist causes. It might sound

strange to say that the CPG rejects materialism while orthodox evangelical Christian polemicists maintain it, but the point holds. The CPG's metaphysics indicate that most significant things do not find their cause in the material world, but in an invisible spiritual world. Orthodox evangelicals are loathe to concede that the real cause of all events is a hidden playing field of spiritual combat.

One example is reason. Faith, of course, does not rely on reason. But the contemporary polemicists say that there are limits to the degradation of reason (something that James K.A. Smith says reflects their embeddedness in modernity). In defending orthodox evangelicalism McConnell declares Hagin's position on divine revelations regarding the flow of finances an abhorrent kind of anti-rational fideism—i.e., it revels in a total rejection of natural causes in favor of mysticism or full reliance on God.⁶⁷ God, claims McConnell, has given humans rationality as a key gift and would not organize the world around Hagin's 'anti-rationalist' mysticism. "Christianity may transcend reason, but it does not reject it."⁶⁸ The idea that there is a strange key, a perfect knowledge, or a secret structure of the universe that does not rely on reason frustrates McConnell, Stephen Gibson, and David F. Wells—although each seems comfortable enough with a kind of "Absolutely *Not* Hermeneutic" to declare that those who believe in the CPG risk their immortal souls.

The frustration of the polemicists toward the Absolute Hermeneutic of the CPG is clearly manifested in their writing. Gibson asks, "Why is this movement so popular?" and laments that people are always looking for religious shortcuts to avoid suffering.⁶⁹ Wells is discouraged by churches that make religion an easy set of comfortable (and materially beneficial) beliefs.⁷⁰ Universally, the polemicists believe that if people just understood what the Bible *really* teaches, people would not fall into the trap of believing these prosperity "heretics." Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.

declares the “health, wealth, and prosperity” message a “bogus gospel” and accuses its advocates of scriptural cherry picking:

There are pieces of the truth in most of the claims...but like most heresy, the false parts are accepted in the name of the small kernel of biblical truth found in each claim. What is needed is less prooftexting over random passages taken from here and there in the Scriptures. Instead, we need to develop large teaching passages on each of these themes and see what Scripture teaches in its wholeness, rather than in just an assortment of bits and pieces quoted randomly from texts with authoritative assurances that that is what the texts mean in these contexts. We need more teaching from the Word on this subject, not less.⁷¹

Even the basic nature of the Scriptures is misunderstood, according to critics. McConnell put the problem this way: “The Faith theology badly distorts the relationship between God and his Word;” in particular, the relationship between The Word and God.⁷² McConnell believes the Word reflects God’s Will, but that CPG preachers interpret it as a binding law upon God (hence, why Jesus *can’t* expel demons). Gibson expresses deep concern at their use of Christian terminology and both the preachers’ and followers’ indifference to the logical contradictions in their teachings and theology. Better (more rational?) exegetical technique and better hermeneutic process would, in the polemicist’s mind, quickly debunk these preachers. A critically-minded orthodox preacher would never go over to the Word-of-Faith seeker-sensitive model of church, and a well-educated, well-taught congregation would never put up with such preachers.

And yet the polemicist’s solution, illustrated by Kaiser, appears very close to the exegetical and hermeneutic procedure used by Hagin and other prosperity preachers. Hagin does not, as Kaiser implies, always quote a single, decontextualized verse at a time. He dedicates

pages and pages to a half dozen verses. He contextualizes Scriptures historically. He compares and relates one set of passages to another. He describes and redescribes the narratives of the OT and the NT. He attends to translation and Biblical scholarship. At least in *form*, Hagin appears to do precisely what Kaiser asks. If we keep in mind that Hagin is a *preacher*, even in text, it's hard to find a manner of preaching that would be more formally in line with Kaiser's method.

In fact, Stephen Gibson's main line of attack in *The Prosperity Prophets* follows precisely the procedures used by Hagin to make his case: Gibson contextualizes Scriptures, redescribes passages, cites Biblical scholarship, corrects translation, and defends doctrine. In *The Midas Touch* (hereafter, *TMT*), written precisely to respond to such challenges, Hagin's defenses of his position are rooted in contextualized scriptural references, re-translation, clarifications of Scripture contexts, testimonies to the success of his beliefs, and simple extrapolations. Hagin's forms of homiletics are well within, either by design or accident, the evangelical tradition. In fact, at times they are even more evangelical than those of the evangelists. Most Word-of-Faith churches, even more than most other evangelical denominations, require their audiences to carry a Bible and study it along with the preacher during the sermon, seemingly doing the hard hermeneutic work the polemicists demand and asking the audience to critically consider the text for themselves (the didactic nature of critical thinking regarding divine mandate is, of course, something one can wonder at).

Given these formal similarities, one wonders how an audience could distinguish between the doctrinal claims. Tradition favors the polemicists, but to an audience listening to these competing versions of the gospel, it may sound as difficult to sort out as the hermeneutic circle itself—all is merely description versus redescription. However, Hagin has an advantage, what Gibson lacks: the divine stamp, the access to the Absolute Hermeneutic and The Secret it

reveals. The Absolute Hermeneutic, delivered by God, provides a trump of sorts. For the polemicists, ironically, it serves precisely the same purpose—a demonstration that they have not yet abandoned intellectualism or tradition in favor of simple prophecy.

The CPG is also a place for the contemporary polemicists to put limits on the orthodox belief in the direct blessing of Christ. While most of the critics believe that God does bless His people, even materially, they object to the idea that *Godliness is Profitable*.⁷³ They also reject the idea that there are spiritual laws of prosperity that simply must be understood to gain material benefit.⁷⁴ This type of cause-effect for material gain smacks of occultism. Indeed, Dave Hunt and T.A. McMahon accuse the Word-of-Faith preachers of being “Trojan horses” that are injecting Satanic and occultic methods and rules into the church (a charge examined extensively in Chapter 3).⁷⁵

Hagin’s first line of defense against the occultist charge is to reverse the direction of the charge and claim the critics themselves have failed to read, understand, or take seriously the scriptural message. In the opening pages of *TMT*, Hagin takes up the charge against prosperity by arguing that 3 John 2 (“Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth”) refers to full prosperity, including money. Moving exegetically and translating the Greek, Hagin argues the Greek term that is translated as “prosper,” *euodoo*, means “good road” or more specifically “good journey.” No journey, Hagin reasons, can be good without sufficient funds. Hagin also notes that the Greek term *euodoo* is in other places understood by the orthodoxy to mean money. In 1 Cor. 16:1-2 Paul directs the Corinthians, “Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered (ευοδωται) him, that there be no gatherings when I come.” If God’s

prosperity means *money* in the case of a church offering, it must refer to financial issues in John. “I believe this verse clearly means God wants His children to prosper materially, physically, and spiritually.”⁷⁶

That’s hardly the only Biblical reference or act of interpretation. The CPG does not, as Kaiser charges, lack for references to Biblical texts or contextual investigation (though the quality of that citation or contextualization is questionable). In a single chapter in *TMT*, Kenneth Hagin cites more than twenty scriptural passages, engaging in explication, clarification of translation, and arguments on the proper reading of each part.⁷⁷ Other prosperity preachers are similar. Leroy S. Thompson, the head of Ever Increasing Word Ministries and the pastor of the Word of Life Christian Center in Darrow, Louisiana, piles on the Biblical references by the dozen in each chapter of his book *Money Cometh!* Even Joel Osteen, comparatively light in his scriptural emphasis, makes at least a half dozen or so Biblical allusions or citations per chapter or sermon.

What’s clear is that Hagin benefits and exploits key, already existing sets of Christian evangelical beliefs. Though exotic, his doctrines are not *sui generis* but built on threads of thought already in the evangelical orthodoxy. Even the basic prosperity claim is based on a faith-effect relationship found in conventional evangelicalism. Most evangelicals believe God will provide materially for the faithful. But McConnell tries to place a limit on the extent to which such events occur. He charges that Matthew, chapter 6 only indicates that God will meet the *basic* needs of believers, not the vast wealth various prosperity preachers promise.

McConnell claims that Hagin’s interpretation of Scriptures is fundamentally at odds with the operation of the natural world. But McConnell is confronted by the conundrum that Hagin poses for traditional evangelical Christianity. McConnell believes in the supernatural

intervention of God in the world, he concedes that God will supernaturally provide material benefits to believers, though only “basic needs.”⁷⁸ McConnell thus agrees with the most basic premise for Hagin’s claim. Indeed, when McConnell protests that Hagin and his fellow CPG preachers reject basic rules of economics and science with their idea of faith prosperity, one might be left wondering how that same criticism does not apply to McConnell’s theology. McConnell even explicitly concedes the faith-benefit relationship when he says “The Faith teachers are quite correct in directing believers to God and the promises of his word in order to get their needs met...God promises his faithfulness to meet the basic needs of the believers.” Whether material goods are supernaturally delivered for prosperity or to alleviate basic needs, both violate the basic laws governing the material world.

Similarly, Hunt and McMahon’s accusation that Hagin engages in a kind of faith-outcome sorcery is complicated by Hagin’s basis in the faith mechanism familiar to the evangelical tradition. Evangelicals often believe in this sort of relationship, at least to a lesser degree. Hunt and McMahon readily agree that God will shower blessings on the faithful, just not in the way Hagin proposes. Hagin is far too close to the Unity Metaphysics or New Thought advocates for them.⁷⁹ Indeed, despite the best efforts of the contemporary polemicists like the ancient ones, to make these Gnostic tendencies appear foreign, strange, and radically different, even suspiciously Oriental (as the ancients charged), the CPG seems to differ in terms of *degree* not *kind*.⁸⁰

What is clear is that Hagin’s Absolute Hermeneutic reveals that The Secret is not foreign to orthodox evangelical Christianity, but rooted in orthodoxy itself. McConnell can argue that God *chooses* to provide, rather than is *bound* by some kind of law to provide material benefits. It is even a theological distinction with some heft. However, both McConnell and Hagin say God

will *invariably* respond to the believer's needs, making the doctrinal distinction between God's relationship to metaphysical rules as either superior or subservient likely beyond the scope of most believers. Hagin's position seems much like a logical extension—the entelechial outgrowth—of McConnell's reading of the Scriptures—one that admits to an intervening, materially providing God.

Many charge that by declaring Satan the 'god' of the material world, Hagin creates deep, theodictic problems, that is to say, problems for the belief in the full and total sovereignty of God. God is not all-powerful in this scheme. Yet Hagin's "Gnostic" cosmology provides the means for doing that reversal and handles some theodicy issues that complicate Christianity. By arguing that through the Most High God the Father the individual has power over the lower, evil god (Satan) of the material world, Hagin argues that he has correctly arranged the faithful over Satan. On that basis Hagin claims that many Christian preachers lack the courage to believe in a fully powerful, unlimited God—a fundamental strategic reversal of McConnell's charge that the CPG denigrates God's omnipotent sovereignty. He charges that those who refuse this schema actually make Satan out to be more powerful than the faithful, and hence, God. Traditional Christianity relies on the inferior position of God and fears defeat rather than celebrating triumph:

The trouble with us is that we've preached a 'cross' religion, and we need to preach a 'throne' religion...The cross is a place of defeat, whereas the Resurrection is a place of triumph....He has raised us up together with Him. Glory to God, learn how to take your place of authority. *The right hand of the throne of God is the center of power in the whole universe!*⁸¹

Few have exercised that power, Hagin says, because few have gained possession of the “spiritual comprehension” that God desires for all people—what else is it but *knowledge* that his people lack, Hagin wonders.⁸² It is the orthodox preachers who lack the understanding and faith to know that Satan is inferior to God, “The average Christian has more faith in Satan’s authority and power than in God’s!..If you’d listen to the average...preachers preach, you’d get the impression that the devil is bigger than everybody and that he’s running everything.”⁸³

The contemporary polemicists, like the ancients, refer to themselves as the “orthodoxy” and declare for themselves the true and right interpretation of Scriptures. But Hagin’s challenges emerge from the very same texts, exploiting the very same traditions. Thus, while McConnell cites Christian Scriptures to support his position that God will provide a very limited set of material benefits, Hagin also cites significant Scriptures. Hagin locates passages in which material benefits are strongly indicated, such as Pss. 1:1-3: “Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper” or Isa. 1:19, “If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land.” What else could these Scriptures mean, Hagin reasons, other than that God will not only provide basic needs but will provide an abundance of goods to the faithful? When Pss. 34:8-10 urges, “O taste and see that the LORD is good: blessed is the man that trusteth in him. O fear the LORD, ye his saints: for there is no want to them that fear him. The young lions do lack, and suffer hunger: but they that seek the LORD shall not want any good thing,” how could it mean anything other than that God will provide for the believers’ “wants” and not just “needs?”⁸⁴ What else could the OT narratives of Job,

Abraham, and so many others who profited immensely through faith mean other than that God will raise up those who believe—the very definition of faith (*pistis*).

In Hagin’s reversal of the Scriptural charge, that is to say, his claim that only he takes Scripture literally, he is again acting out of premises familiar, not foreign, to the evangelical Christian tradition. Kaiser, in protesting the use of the Old Testament to support the cause-and-effect claims made by the prosperity gospel, is forced to make a broad concession—and even double back on the idea of a clear text. It is true, Kaiser remarks, that the OT indicates that faithfulness results in many material interventions by God. But, Kaiser says, the more dramatic cases must be understood in terms of the *illustrative* purposes of the OT, not as “crude allegorization.” Further, while wealth *is* a blessing from God, it cannot be overvalued. And, Kaiser protests, the CPG often takes messages meant to warn the entire *community* Israel as personal statements.⁸⁵

To be fair, while Kaiser’s stance is that Biblical interpretation should be based on the understanding of the context, history, and a correct translation of the Gospel, he acknowledges that the accurate discovery of the exact truth is difficult. His exegetical approach, outlined in *Toward an Exegetical Theology*, takes a very methodologically rigorous stance based in the belief that interpretation is fundamentally about finding the exact intent of the Scriptural authors—the exact intent being what God wants to convey.⁸⁶ That’s Kaiser’s own version of the Secret, cloaked in methodological rigor (and the definition of methodological confirmation bias). The stance creates significant hermeneutic and theological problems. Kaiser’s focus on difficult methods requiring significant academic aptitude, study, and perception undermines the power of the laity in interpreting Scriptures, a key Protestant tradition. Kaiser’s exegetical position, notably Calvinist, implies that only a well-educated audience with a strong grasp on context,

interpretation, history and perhaps even the Greek language itself can fully understand the Scriptural message. The premise of *sola scriptura* and the plain-meaning of the text come rapidly under threat.

Kaiser's version also places a seemingly arbitrary and contradictory limit—even one that undermines the evangelical hermeneutic preference for a literal understanding of the text. He concedes God's material blessing in some cases—as long as it isn't too personal. For example Kaiser maintains that God will reward the faithful and especially a community of the faithful with material benefits, including military victory and perhaps even prosperity but refuses too strong an interpretation of this idea by noting that much of the gospel should not be taken at face value.

The uncomfortable position Kaiser is forced to argue—however well grounded—is well represented by his attempt to contest Hagin's use of Pss. 103:3 in support of faith healing. Kaiser concedes that Pss. 103:3 does, in fact, read, "He forgives all my sins and heals all my diseases." However, Kaiser clarifies the context and translation and notes that the Greek term translated as "disease" in the KJV is used in Deuteronomy and Chronicles to refer to the distress of sin and its physical, mental, and spiritual consequences. Not all disease is a direct result of sin, Kaiser reasons, so therefore the "diseases" that Pss. 103:3 speaks of curing do not represent all disease. Kaiser thereby concludes, Pss. 103:3, which says. "He...heals all my diseases" "cannot be used to claim that God heals all diseases."⁸⁷

Perhaps the best and final example of the problem that Hagin's Absolute Hermeneutic of The Secret poses for the orthodoxy has to do with the most traditional defense against the Gnostics and heretics: that they are false prophets performing false miracles. The Gnostics are claimed to operate outside the bounds of Scripture. Reserving for themselves the role of

gatekeepers to their own version of the Absolute Hermeneutic—or at least the Absolutely Not Hermeneutic—they declare Scriptural meaning and, by rule, exclude the prosperity gospelists.

To prove the point, Kaiser (as do Hunt and McMahon) claims that the scriptural test can easily demonstrate the heresy and false prophet status of Hagin:

Hagin claimed that this truth came to him in a vision in 1953. But this vision must accord with Scripture, for that is one of the tests given in Deuteronomy 13 and 18 for a false prophet. All attempts to invent new truth that goes beyond Scripture must be labeled for what they really are: heretical.⁸⁸

But it is never so procedurally cut and dry, never so legalistic. One suspects some fast dealing is occurring or that a cart is being placed before a horse. After all, Kaiser's test (the orthodoxy's norm) *already* assumes the hermeneutic privilege of his own interpretation of Scripture and thereby finding Hagin in violation of that interpretation ignores that it is hermeneutics itself that is being contested by Hagin. It is Hagin's divinely approved Absolute Hermeneutic that is challenging that evangelical orthodoxy's Absolute Hermeneutic. Kaiser and McConnell believe that The Secret is hidden within symbols, allusions and literary references of the Scriptures, waiting to be discovered by moving ever closer to the Absolute Hermeneutic through exegetical method. Hagin relies on both conventional hermeneutics and the Absolute Hermeneutic delivered from the Voice of God Himself. By supporting God's ability to provide such interpretation via other interpretation (a hermeneutic circle, one might even say) Hagin provides an alternative, over-arching metanarrative to compete with the evangelical metanarrative that he claims is based in Scripture and mandated by God.

But how are the competing metanarratives to be judged? How can we make distinctions between two versions of the Word? Accuracy, in Kaiser's view, is a factual problem to be solved

by methodical investigation. There is one true intention of the author which constitutes a factual and discoverable artifact of meaning. Once uncovered by the proper methods, they speak mostly for themselves or at least possess epistemic and perhaps even suasive privilege over inaccurate interpretation. Homiletics, in Kaiser's view, properly begins when these facts are discovered.

But rhetoric cannot be reduced to fact presentation and, in this case, the facts and the methods of uncovering the facts are being contested in the homiletic setting itself. In the rhetorical setting, all we have is words about the Word, description and re-description.⁸⁹ We in the audience do not have direct access to either Kaiser's Absolute Hermeneutic of Method or Hagin's Absolute Hermeneutic of Divine Revelation. We do not know The Secret—at least not initially. We are radically disconnected from the Word. Methods, including hermeneutical methods, can certainly be presented, but their claims to superiority or inferiority to the audience, like their conclusions, are descriptions, questions of suasive power. It is Hagin that spoke to Jesus and sat with him arguing about textual analysis, not us. Interpretation—and therefore, theology—occurs *in* the rhetorical act of preaching. We hear that preaching and move from there.

The charges are difficult to sort out. Hagin's opponents claim the privilege of orthodoxy. But Hagin claims that he is acting *in accordance* with the Scriptures, not against them, obviating the direct charge that he is outside the bounds of orthodoxy. Hagin repeatedly argues that Christ did not reveal a completely new idea to him, but rather that Christ revealed a *new interpretation* to him of existing Scriptures. While many polemicists claim that Hagin is picking and choosing "random" Scriptures to support his viewpoint, Hagin makes precisely the same claim about his accusers and those who go overboard on emphasizing prosperity, "I believe pastors and teachers have a responsibility to teach the full Word of God, not just one part."⁹⁰ Hagin argues that he is

very attentive to the problem of interpretation as well, noting that he is not wantonly advocating a kind of Christian hedonism or materialism. Instead he notes in a section titled, “Interpret the Word of God Correctly,” that “We must ‘rightly divide’ the Word of God and carefully seek the truth in interpreting the Scriptures.”⁹¹ Hagin reports that it was God Himself who told him that preaching such direct cause-effect outcomes was a poor idea—and contradictory to the Word. Instead, Hagin reports, we merely know that God will give abundantly to believers. Hagin’s *TMT* is largely dedicated to both responding to critics of the CPG and to tempering the claims of many prosperity preachers. Although he admits over-emphasizing some points of prosperity, he maintains that he remains a far more attentive student of the Word than his critics.

It is his increased attention to the Word, inspired by divine revelation, which Hagin claims enables him to find the contradictions in orthodox Christian interpretation. For example, he argues that the poverty-piety linkage is an *argumentum ad antiquitatem*, rather than a Scripture-based, theological principle: “In time, even erroneous teachings become traditions not easily changed. They are passed down from one generation to another, and the new generation accepts the error without question because that’s ‘what we’ve always believed.’”⁹² In contrast, Hagin maintains that even his revelatory knowledge is based entirely in the word. “If you get any revelation from God, friends, check it in the line of the Word, and then put it into practice for yourself before you start preaching it.”⁹³ What is this except Kaiser’s own method for finding false prophecy, the most orthodox of tests? And what is Hagin’s charge but the most severe charge that any Protestant can make, i.e. that those against him are ignoring the Word itself in favor of ecclesiastical tradition (*paradosis*) and the interpretive authority of an orthodox *magisterium*?

Hermeneutics in Competition

As the previous section explicated, the crucial difference between the ‘orthodox’ evangelical polemicists and the ‘gnostic’ prosperity gospel espoused by Kenneth Hagin is grounded in hermeneutics. Though Hagin’s prosperity message is deeply grounded in establishing the Absolute Hermeneutic of Divine Revelation to reveal The Secret of Meaning and structure both in the Biblical text and the universe, his key reinterpretation of the text using the liabilities of the evangelical tradition demonstrates a key deconstructive move. The claims of the polemicists that Hagin lies fundamentally *outside* Scriptures and brings occultic practices in Christianity, while not entirely without merit (as per Chapter 1), certainly fails to recognize that Hagin’s suasive power derives from Hagin’s *internal* dissent from the evangelical tradition. Hagin actively works within the guidelines of the polemicists. He exegetically quotes, translates, contextualizes, interprets, and grounds his doctrinal claims in the Scriptures. He employs his charismatic gifts within the strictures generally accepted by Pentecostal-influenced Christianity.

But Hagin does more than simply provide defensive pleas to be included within orthodoxy—he uses the evangelical hermeneutic tradition to reverse challenges against him, claiming that it is his critics, not him, that have failed to read, correctly read or correctly interpret the Scriptures. Citing Scriptures that indicate prophecy is a gift of the spirit, Hagin both claims that gift for himself and accuses those who reject it of failing to read/believe the Word. Similarly, by citing OT narratives and NT passages that seem to explicitly indicate that material rewards await the faithful, Hagin forces those who oppose the CPG to hedge against such claims, making fine distinctions between ‘basic’ needs and material rewards or walk back on the literalist hermeneutic tradition. The polemicists, though far more rigorous than Hagin, are left with less

than clear interpretations of the Word and various levels of distinctions that make understanding the core message of certain Scriptural passages more difficult rather than less difficult.

Hagin seems to understand that hermeneutics is a rhetorical process, no less so in the context of preaching. Hagin makes his act of interpretation a part of his sermon-making, constantly citing, educating, and teaching both specific messages and hermeneutical method. Hagin is constantly at work boosting the credibility of his version of Scriptures, contextualizing passages, comparing parts of the Bible to demonstrate their consistency, explaining translations, re-translating (with God's help) key passages as necessary, and finally, solidifying his own position as prophetic figure with access to the Absolute Hermeneutic and full knowledge of The Secret. Where McConnell, Kaiser, Gibson, and others speak of the exegetical process as a separate prior process to accurate preaching, Hagin explicitly integrates it into his preaching. As his church services demonstrate, his students understand these events as such. Word-of-Faith services are often something closer to a mass Bible study than a traditional preaching service. Rarely does the prosperity preacher simply explicate and preach on a single passage—each sermon is packed with verses, blocks of verses, explanations of context—all the things that Kaiser believes are vital to *stop* the prosperity preachers.

So if Hagin is at least nominally employing Kaiser's method, why is it that Hagin reaches his so-called heretical conclusions? If the audience is so attentive to the Word as indicated by the audience's role, why are they susceptible to Hagin's message? Two unsavory alternatives lie before polemicists, assuming they do not come to the conclusion that Hagin is correct. First, they can charge that although Hagin is nominally following the procedure, he is not following it in the right way. This is a respectable claim. Yet, as has been noted in this chapter, this places these Protestant polemicists in the difficult position of setting up ever more difficult standards for

understanding or grasping true Scriptural meaning. Kaiser's approach in *Toward an Exegetical Theology*, though rigorous, hardly gives one much comfort that any solid understanding of Scripture is achievable by most of the laity. Moreover, Kaiser concedes in that text that perfect understanding of the text is not and might not be able to be achieved—though Kaiser is sure a single meaning does lie underneath the layers of ambiguity.

Alternatively, the polemicists can fall back on the standard charge that a proper ability to understand or preach the Good News relies on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Hagin, they might (and do) say, lacks that fire of the Holy Spirit. Problematically, there is little way to distinguish between two competing claims to possess the imprint of the Lord. McConnell and Wells may claim it, of course, but there is an inherent problem in claiming that your interpretation of Scripture demonstrates that only those who are inspired by the Holy Spirit can accurately interpret the Scriptures. Circularity is not the friend of foundationalism.

In addition, none of the polemicists are immodest enough to claim to have discoursed directly with God over matters of doctrine. Though each confirms that he believes such gifts are possible, none claims that gift for himself. Hagin is not so shy. For some, the extremity of Hagin's prophetic claims may alienate them. But given the evangelical, Pentecostal, and Fundamentalist Christian tendency toward more adamant and radical expressions of faith, the call for moderation in terms of prosperity seem out of place and modesty a kind of intellectualist defect. Recalling Gadamer's epigram, the furtive, illusive nature of the textual trace in Scripture seems to demand immodest revelation. Extremes are demanded in the search precisely because Meaning is beyond human capacity. If religious hermeneutics is interested, terminally, in the Absolute Hermeneutic that reveals The Secret, it only makes sense that it comes directly from Above, where ambiguity fails in the face of the Form. Evangelicals and fundamentalists are

hardly unfamiliar with a radical faith in God contrary to the open-endedness of empirical investigation or appearance. Thus when Hagin states, “Sometimes an extreme emphasis is necessary to shock and awaken a sleeping, lethargic, and apathetic church to recognize a neglected truth,” one has difficulty imagining any evangelical minister disagreeing.⁹⁴

Conclusion

The preacher has broad pastoral power over the hermeneutics of the flock. It is the preacher whom most congregations look to do the heavy hermeneutical lifting and provide the signifying meaning of the gospel text, as a part of the process of homiletic theology.⁹⁵ Despite the demand for *sola scriptura*, no text is complete without an interpretation.⁹⁶ The premise of this chapter has been that hermeneutics is always interested in The Secret, in finding the Absolute Hermeneutics which can unfurl the science of textual meaning. It’s an on-going mission of the hermeneutic project to find the Code, the Key that unlocks Meaning. Certain kinds of hermeneutics, radical hermeneutics, follow the implications of deconstruction into the full realization that the science of hermeneutics is hopeless and that there is no Secret and no Absolute Hermeneutics that reveals Meaning. Rather than being the destruction of hermeneutics, this realization is actually the salvation of the hermeneutics, preserving it from calcification and the radically tyrannical nature of Absolute Meaning. As Walter Brueggemann remarks, there is something terribly undemocratic about the concept of technique—it walls out interpretation and it is never neutral, “the knowledge so derived is always in the interest of royalty.”⁹⁷ As the likes of McConnell, Kaiser, Gibson, and Hunt and McMahon demonstrate, there is a police for disciplining the practices of technique and method.

Hagin is not a radical hermeneut. He, just as much as the polemicists, believes that there is an Absolute Hermeneutic. More so, since he believes and claims he received it directly from

God. Attempt to destroy the Secret and it will re-emerge again.⁹⁸ Yet, by his very process of proclaiming a “different gospel,” Hagin deconstructs the hermeneutics of traditional evangelical Christianity. Far from being an occult foreigner bringing mystic methods to Christianity, Hagin reveals that the mystic perspective can be grounded in the Christian text itself. Though his critics portray him as lacking in scriptural knowledge and weak in interpretive skill, Hagin’s preaching reveals intense attention to details, and—at least formally—a close adherence to the evangelical tradition and method. The content of Hagin’s analysis may produce a different gospel, but the form is not far from what the likes of Kaiser and McConnell demand.

It is remarkable that Hagin’s interpretations have produced such defensive reactions in the orthodox evangelical Church. I believe this chapter has demonstrated the reasons this should be so. Those who ascribe to orthodoxy are prevented, by the structure of their own beliefs, from disputing the basic ways Hagin makes his claim to the Method of Absolute Hermeneutics. The orthodoxy believes in Absolute Hermeneutics, believes that it will reveal The Secret, believes in divine revelation, believes in charismatic gifts, and ostensibly believes that Scriptural interpretation should be open to any person. Though the polemicists may claim that Hagin’s ideas originate *outside* Christianity in the Gnosticism of occultism, metaphysics, New Thought, Christian Science, and the like, Hagin himself justifies his beliefs entirely within the evangelical Christian tradition.

Hagin’s hermeneutic ‘anti-technique,’ which by-passes all the hermeneutic and exegetical technicalities of Biblical interpretation while simultaneously engaging those techniques, leads the polemicist to ever-more complex, nuanced, careful, and obscure distinctions between the True Belief of orthodoxy and Hagin’s heretical Gnosticism. Polemicists become mired in details of technique, of correct interpretation, in tracing the historical influences of Hagin. They are

constantly trying to cut off Hagin's entelechies of Scripture and the evangelical tradition at the pass. They are constantly reversing the mode of evangelicalism's enthusiasms, attempting to temper enthusiasms, regulate doctrines, and even end up implying that only the most well-trained minds can really grasp the Scripture. Only Hagin seems to grasp that interpretation is both a rhetorical act on its face and a part of the homiletic performance to a public audience.

Why this polemical obsession with technique and form? For one thing, criticisms of form, which are criticisms of method, come to the fore "when one no longer has the force to understand force from within itself."⁹⁹ Lacking Hagin's belief in God as active hermeneut *par excellence*, the polemicists are left in the position of needing another method of validating their faith in the Absolute Hermeneutic. For the polemicists, the possibilities of Scriptural meaning have already been determined, though the Absolute Hermeneutic has not yet been discovered. Hence, proper technique must be applied to obtain the proper conclusion, and the technique is only proper if it obtains the proper conclusions. Yet does anyone believe that if the Absolute Hermeneutic were revealed, it would be embraced if it contradicted orthodoxy and hierarchy? Like Paul Mann's figurative Book of Ethics, the discovery of the True Book of Hermeneutics would not explode all books, as Wittgenstein asserts, but instead would sit quietly among other such speculative books, policed into silence by the polemics of orthodoxy or until, as Chapter 4 and 5 discuss, the orthodoxy begins to collapse under its own inadequacy.¹⁰⁰ That is not born in any flaw native to its own ideology or doctrines, but rather the trace, i.e., the flaw is the missing Key that would eliminate the free play of *différance* itself and replace it with grounded meaning from sign-to-signified. It is what would change the Scriptural narrative, Symbols and mystery from *mythos* in denotative science of meaning: The Secret. The Gnostic trick is to literalize the myth into knowledge.¹⁰¹ In many ways, by by-passing all hermeneutic technique (though not

persuasive technique, clearly) in favor of direct revelation, Hagin merely beats the polemicists to the punch.

But like the polemicists, Hagin's claim to know The Secret, while persuasive to some, has not exploded all the books of theology. Though God has allegedly directly communicated the direct meaning of Scripture to Hagin, we are still engaged in hermeneutic. Reading *IBV* or *How God Taught Me About Prosperity*, one is not awed or overthrown like Paul on the road to Damascus, struck blind by the insight of the Lord (Acts 9:3–9). Hagin's Absolute Hermeneutic has not destroyed hermeneutics, leading the radical hermeneut to the strong suspicion that Hagin's hermeneutics are not Absolute at all. Instead, Hagin is back at work in hermeneutics by interpreting, translating, contextualizing, illustrating, and explaining. Though Hagin tries to sidestep Ricoeur's hermeneutic dilemma, i.e., the problem of crossing the eons of time between the Scripture narrative and the present, by having the Lord speak in this latter-day and thus fusing the horizon of the author, text, and the listener, hermeneutics has not disappeared. We still must listen and interpret and evaluate, sort and judge the text, the sermon, the interpretation itself. The problem of ambiguity, of the trace, is not eliminated even by the radical intervention of a speaking God (radical hermeneutically, anyway—less radical politically, as Chapter 6 discusses). As Caputo recognizes, even the appearance of Christ Himself would require a hermeneutics of Savior recognition—as the NT shows quite clearly. In the case of the CPG, we must have the ability to read the Signs of The Christ in a world where the vast majority of persons have no access to a Voice of God that can do the work of interpreting the Word of God for them. Instead, we must read the signs of the Signs, we must interpret the Text to interpret whether Hagin is able to able to interpret the Text or speak to God Himself.

In this, we are far nearer to the disciples on the Road to Emmaus than to Paul on the Road to Damascus. Hagin, like Paul, has the benefit of direct discourse with God on these matters. One wonders, at times, why the text matters at all to Hagin. But we are not like Paul or Hagin. We do not have direct discourse with God. Like the disciples to whom Christ appeared on their way to Emmaus, we know reading the signs, the texts, is vital to creating a solid understanding, a hard grip on Meaning. Christ/Plato/Aristotle/Augustine H/himself has told us so. The Secret lies in the Scriptures—on accurate reading. But we do not have such access to the Secret, no primary access to Meaning; we do not know the Absolute Hermeneutic. All *écriture* is inhabited by *différance*, for us, by instability of interpretation. Not only is that so, but the reminder of cultural clash, of deconstruction, is that the Origin is irretrievable—if we are cold hermeneutics, radical hermeneuts, we know the Origin will never return. It is present in Form but it has no substance—it is the specter, present but intangible, unknowable. It is the trace that warns us that although the Origin can be spoken of, it cannot be recaptured or touched, whatever the exegetes claim. The Origin calls us, but in a voice that never tells what it is.

In the face of these fears, which are sociological and not merely intellectual, Hagin plays our Paul re-assuring us that though we are confused and frustrated by the inadequacies of hermeneutics and the technicalities of the exegetes and theologians, fear not—he has spoken to God on the way to Damascus and he is here to send us letters filled with the Message. Like the Gospelists, he deconstructs the orthodoxy as an insider with a New Revelation that re-interprets the meaning of the Hebrew Bible, not replaces it. It is the supplement. Rather, these revelations are the true, fulfilled meaning of the Text, not its rejection. Temptingly, the Good News saves us from the trembling feeling of not knowing. The orthodoxy, with its Dead Word, instead of the contemporaneous Living Word, sticks to its guns, using Pharisaic method, textual analysis,

scholarly induction, and lukewarm procedures in attempting to damp down the enthusiasm it helped create.

Is this not the broader hermeneutical situation played out on a Christian stage? In the face of hermeneutical confusion and an inability to read the signs of the times or discern how ancient traditions and philosophies apply to our radically polysemic culture, we are confronted by orthodoxies claiming that nothing is happening here, that meaning is stable, that tradition must be defended at all costs, though its methods (the Enlightenment?) themselves provided the analytical tools that undermined the certainty of the historical/political/cultural *telos*. When examining the span of history, we are left wondering what the story is—is it the Western End of History, the dialectical movement of material forces, is it the realized prosperity of a Christian nation duly blessed? If none of these, what *do* the signs of the times mean? In the face of the decline of the prominence and hegemonic power of orthodoxy's power to read, its onto-theological detail and methodological complexity seem unconvincing. Forced to explain itself, troubling questions appear, like, 'Why is Meaning so hard to understand when meaning and the desire to make meaning is everywhere?' 'Where is history going and why can't I understand it?' After all, has anyone but a high priest ever claimed to understand what Hegel *means*?¹⁰² In the interim, new parties appear with new Absolute Hermeneutics, new tactics, new revelations, new missions, new *telos*. These forces, these new Absolute Hermeneuts, have new Secrets to tell us, new insights into history, more suited to our times, less steeped in the archaic languages of previous but now-forgotten high periods of civilization (Greeks? Romans? Italians? Scots? Germans? *The French*?). It is Hidden Wisdom—The Secret, they are selling. The deconstruction of Meaning, the auto-deconstruction of it, has created the opening, the form of demand. This new version of the Secret appears in a variety of forms. In the case of Rhonda Byrne, they simply call

it *The Secret*. In the case of scholarly texts, they are wrapped in the cloak of things like analytic philosophy and dialectics—the science of history, interpretation, meaning, etc.

New Secrets, same as the Old Secrets, to some extent. But let's not get trapped in formal analysis. Let's ask the specific questions of our New Secret—in our case, the CPG. How do the preachers of the New Secret view the world? How do they navigate the modernist forces that badly damaged the CPG's Christian predecessors? What provided the opening of this hermeneutics, this Secret? Can the purveyors of these New Secrets prevail over their competitors? What do they provide the audience that their forbearers cannot? That is the topic of the remainder of this dissertation.

Suffice to close this chapter, I hope I have demonstrated that the CPG is deeply engaged in the revealing of the Secret, in the wielding of the Absolute Hermeneutics. It does so against the orthodoxy but using the master's tools. It is an entelechial exploitation of the hermeneutic and theological parameters of the evangelical orthodoxy. Its Gnostic tendencies and its mystic influences are not born of foreignness from Christianity, but are native to it; or at least, such mysticism as exists is stated in Christian terms.

As such, the CPG poses an identity crisis for Christianity. In ancient times, the Gnostic category was invented for the *benefit* of Christianity, as a phantasmal Other that could be caricatured for the purpose of consolidating the catholic identity and doctrines. Today, the CPG is an Other that refuses to be an Other—one that subverts orthodoxy while claiming to be orthodoxy itself, a displacement of the Proper Name rather its replacement. Moreover, the 'Gnosticism' of the CPG (occultic, by some accounts) reach takes on far more urgency as millions of American Christians and growing numbers of believers outside America ascribe to its seeker-sensitive platform. Simultaneously, orthodox evangelicalism struggles to maintain

members, adding a sharp edge of urgency to the polemical mission. The conflict exposes the limits of appeals to theology as a prior question to rhetoric. Though the CPG preaching is steeped in folksy stories and preaching methods of low church Protestantism, the CPG is hard at work in the hermeneutical task and homiletic theology, deconstructing the opposition and erecting new structures, new methods, new systems, new cosmological dramas—ones that are uniquely suited to these late modern times.

¹ John D. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 1.

² Hans-Georg Gadamer, “On the Divine in Early Greek Thought,” in *Hermeneutics, Religion, & Ethics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999/1970), 37.

³ Creflo Dollar, *Winning in Troubled Times* (New York: Faith Words, 2010), 21.

⁴ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 5. Quote from Kenneth Hagin, “Send Now Prosperity,” in *The Midas Touch: A Balanced Approach to Biblical Prosperity* (Tulsa, OK: Faith Library Publications, 2000), 4.

⁵ Caputo, *More Radical*, 196.

⁶ Paul Ricoeur, “Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Hermeneutics,” trans. Kathleen Blamey in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 93.

⁷ D.R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel*, Updated Edition. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995, xviii.

⁸ George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 235-236.

⁹ George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1991), 118.

¹⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 60.

¹¹ Augustine of Hippo. *On Christian Teaching*, trans R.P.H. Green (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹² Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, "Introduction," in *The Hermeneutics Reader*, ed. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (New York: Continuum, 1985), 2.

¹³ *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), s.v., hermeneutics.

¹⁴ Mueller-Vollmer, "Introduction," 11-12.

¹⁵ Mueller-Vollmer, "Introduction," 13-14.

¹⁶ Mueller-Vollmer, "Introduction," 40.

¹⁷ Susan Karen Hedahl, "All the King's Men: Constructing Homiletical Meaning," in *Preaching as a Theological Task*, ed. Thomas G. Long and Edward Farley (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 87; see also, Robert Reid, Jeffrey Bullock, and David Fleer, "Preaching as the Creation of an Experience: The Not-So-Rational Revolution of the New Homiletic," *The Journal of Communication and Religion* 18 (1995).

¹⁸ David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 279-280.

¹⁹ Richard Kearney, "Between Tradition and Utopia: The Hermeneutical Problem of Myth," in *On Paul Ricoeur: On Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. David Wood (New York: Routledge, 1991), 64-70.

²⁰ Mark C. Taylor, *Deconstructing Theology* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1982), 70. This is emphatically *not* to say that historical research is pointless. Instead, it is merely to put a strong footnote on the fact attempting to capture contextual meaning is problematic. We understand texts from our position, intrinsically, not from its historical place (whose historical place?).

²¹ Morny Joy, "Derrida and Ricoeur: A Case of Mistaken Identity (And Difference)," *Journal of Religion* 68 (Oct. 1998), 508-526. Morny is not one of those who view Derrida negatively, but is instead merely explicates the controversy.

²² John Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1987), 153-155.

²³ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 169.

²⁴ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 170.

²⁵ Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 291-293.

²⁶ Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 137.

²⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Plato's Pharmacy*, in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 63-171.

²⁸ Caputo, *More Radical*, 213.

²⁹ Caputo, *More Radical*, 236-237.

³⁰ Caputo, *More Radical*, 40.

³¹ In an early draft, I said “clarify” the matter, but the goal isn’t clarity—it’s *resolution*.

³² Caputo, *More Radical*, 193; The authority of prophet is examined by James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

³³ Caputo, *More Radical*, 194-195.

³⁴ Buttrick, *Homiletic*, 113.

³⁵ Carl A. Raschke, James A. Kirk, and Mark C. Taylor, *Religion and the Human Image* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1977), 194-195.

³⁶ Gadamer, *Hermeneutics*, 122.

³⁷ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 189.

³⁸ Caputo, *More Radical*, 10.

³⁹ This is well discussed by Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

⁴⁰ King, *What is Gnosticism?* 25.

⁴¹ Rhonda Byrne, *The Secret* (New York: Atria Books, 2006); Charles Fillmore, *Prosperity* (1931), in *The Prosperity Bible: The Greatest Writings of All Time on the Secrets to Wealth and Prosperity* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2007), 409-728; Catherine Ponder, *Secret of Unlimited Prosperity* (Marina Del Rey, CA: Devorss & Company Publisher, 1981). Some of Ponder’s other books include the titles *The Millionaires of Genesis* and *The Millionaire from Nazareth*.

⁴² Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 204-205.

⁴³ James K.A. Smith, the scholar of Radical Orthodoxy, makes a similar observation, noting that acceptance of revelatory interpretation requires a prior faith. Without the accurate faith, interpretation will vary. Smith is a bit more optimistic about the power of the regenerated heart to accurately interpret the Word; see, James K.A. Smith,

Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 48.

⁴⁴ Distinctions are sometimes made between hermeneutics and exegesis. Those opposing hermeneutics and supporting exegesis sometimes disparagingly maintain that hermeneutics attempts to link the Scripture to the present while exegesis is interested in the original authorial in the context of the work's own times. There is some justification for that description of hermeneutics, of course. Ricoeur, for example, describes hermeneutics as located at the "intersection of the (internal) configuration of the work and the (external) reconfiguration of life;" see Paul Ricoeur, "Life in Question of Narrative," in Wood, *On Paul Ricoeur*, 27. But as the review of hermeneutic history in this essay makes clear, this description of exegesis is no more than a prior incarnation of hermeneutics. Though there might be some significant differences between hermeneutics and exegesis, one of them certainly is not that hermeneutics is historically accommodationist while exegesis is not. One wonders how, exactly, the fully internal exegesis manages to exclude the externality of the interpreter. Indeed, the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* merely states that hermeneutics is, "the first order art and the second order theory of understanding and interpretation of linguistic and non-linguistic expressions." (*Hermeneutics*, para. 1). *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* implies exegesis—particularly Protestant literal exegesis—is a type of hermeneutic. When scholars do make a distinction, exegesis generally refers to an applied historically and intra-textually oriented hermeneutic technique. That is how I am provisionally using the distinction here.

⁴⁵ Kenneth Hagin, *The Believer's Authority*, Second Edition (Tulsa, OK: Faith Library Publications, 1995/1967), 29-30.

⁴⁶ Hagin, *The Believer's*, 30.

⁴⁷ The LDS Church believes in an open scriptural canon. In some ways Hagin's move is similar to Joseph Smith, Jr.'s Restorationist gospel. In the LDS tradition, Smith is confused by the variety of interpretations of Scriptures and prays for clarity. In response, God gives Smith the message that the current Bible has been corrupted and delivers to him the restored gospel of the Book of Mormon. That's not too different from Hagin's description of the how Jesus indicates that parts of the Gospel have been incorrectly translated, leading to confusion and error.

⁴⁸ Kenneth Hagin, Jr., qtd. in McConnell, *A Different Gospel*, 3. Hagin, Jr., is himself quoting his father.

⁴⁹ Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: Whom resist stedfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world (1 Peter 5:8-9).

⁵⁰ Hagin, *The Believer's*, 32. Italics original, underlining in my emphasis.

⁵¹ Derrida, in specific, identified the impossibility of an 'accurate' or exact translation in "Letter to a Japanese Friend"—the localized meaning can never be transferred or fully replicated. Jacques Derrida, "Letter to a Japanese Friend," in *Derrida and Differance*, ed. Wood & Bernasconi (Warwick: Parousia Press, 1985), 1-5.

⁵² Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Charles E. Reagan & Dave Stewart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 41-42.

⁵³ Jurgen Habermas, "Leveling the Genre Distinction Between Philosophy and Literature," in *The Derrida-Habermas Reader*, ed. Lasse Thomassen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 15.

⁵⁴ Buttrick, *Homiletic*, 279-281.

⁵⁵ McConnell, *A Different Gospel*, 158.

⁵⁶ Kenneth Hagin, *I Believe in Visions*, Second Edition (Tulsa, OK: Faith Library Publications, 1989), 11-12.

⁵⁷ Hagin, *I Believe*, 25-27; see also, Hagin, *I Believe*, 25-27.

⁵⁸ Hagin, *I Believe*, 117-119.

⁵⁹ Hagin, *I Believe*, 95; Heb 1:14, "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?"

⁶⁰ Hagin, *I Believe*, 131-133.

⁶¹ Kenneth Hagin, *How God Taught Me About Prosperity* (Tulsa, OK: Faith Library Publications, 1991/1985), 1-2.

⁶² Hagin, *How God*, 11.

⁶³ Hagin, *How God*, 13.

⁶⁴ Hagin, *How God*, 17-18.

⁶⁵ Hagin, *Midas*, 31.

⁶⁶ Hagin, *Midas*, 4-5.

⁶⁷ McConnell, *Different*, 108-109.

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- ⁶⁸ McConnell, *Different*, 109.
- ⁶⁹ Stephen Gibson, *Prosperity Prophets* (Salem, OH: Allegheny Publications, 2006), 51.
- ⁷⁰ David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 36.
- ⁷¹ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “The Old Testament Case for Material Blessings and the Contemporary Believer,” in *The Gospel and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Douglas J. Moo (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1997), 40-41.
- ⁷² McConnell, *Different*, 143.
- ⁷³ Kenneth Hagin, *Godliness is Profitable* (Tulsa, OK: Faith Library Publications, 1982).
- ⁷⁴ McConnell, *Different*, 170.
- ⁷⁵ Dave Hunt and T.A. McMahon, *The Seduction of Christianity: Spiritual Discernment in the Last Days* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1985), 12-21.
- ⁷⁶ Hagin, *Midas*, 230.
- ⁷⁷ Kenneth Hagin, “Send Now Prosperity,” in *The Midas Touch: A Balanced Approach to Biblical Prosperity* (Tulsa, OK: Faith Library Publications, 2000), 1-15.
- ⁷⁸ McConnell, *Different*, 174-175.
- ⁷⁹ Hunt and McMahon, *Seduction*, 102-103.
- ⁸⁰ King, *What is Gnosticism?* 7; McConnell, *Different*, 174-175.
- ⁸¹ Hagin, *Believer's*, 16.
- ⁸² Hagin, *Believer's*, 17.
- ⁸³ Hagin, *Believers*, 16, 28.
- ⁸⁴ Hagin, *How God*, 17-18.
- ⁸⁵ Kaiser, “The Old Testament,” 38, 40. The community versus individual focus of the CPG is explored at length in “Chapter 6: The Rhetoric of (Profitable) Liberation.”
- ⁸⁶ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998).
- ⁸⁷ Kaiser, “The Old Testament,” 39.
- ⁸⁸ Kaiser, “The Old Testament,” 39.

⁸⁹ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*. (New York: Cambridge University Press). 90-91; Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

⁹⁰ Hagin, *Midas*, 198.

⁹¹ Hagin, *Midas*, 151.

⁹² Hunt & McMaMahon, *Seduction*, 12; Hagin, *Midas*, 4.

⁹³ Hagin, *Midas*, 37.

⁹⁴ Hagin, *Midas*, 192.

⁹⁵ Caputo, *More Radical*, 31; Hedahl, "All the King's Men," 83-84.

⁹⁶ Taylor, *Deconstructing*, 80.

⁹⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Hope Within History* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), 89.

⁹⁸ Caputo, *More Radical*, 13.

⁹⁹ Derrida, "Force and Signification," in *Writing and Difference*, 4.

¹⁰⁰ Paul Mann, *Masocriticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 255.

¹⁰¹ Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Symbols," 46-47.

¹⁰² Bakhtin argued humans are intrinsically infused with the desire to make meaning at an ontological level; see Frank Farmer, Introduction to *Landmark Essays on Bakhtin, Rhetoric, and Writing*, ed. Frank Farmer (Mahwah, NJ: Hermagoras Press, 1998), xiv.

The entry for G.W.F. Hegel in the *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* begins, "Of all the major Western philosophers, Hegel has gained the reputation of being the most impenetrable." Yet the paragraph concludes, "Through his influence on Marx, Hegel's thought has changed the course of nineteenth and twentieth century philosophy." See, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, s.v., Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich.

CHAPTER 3:
CHRISTIAN PROSPERITY AND THE MAGIC WORLD VIEW:
POSITIVE CONFESSION, OCCULTISM AND THEURGY

For D. Michael Quinn

In *Philosophy in a New Key*, Susanne K. Langer takes a typically 20th-century modern view of magic, assessing that:

[An act] really sinks to the inane conception of “magic” only when one assumes a *direct* relation between the mimicked event and the expected real one; in so far as the pantomime is enacted before a fetish, a spirit, or God, it is intended to move this divine power to act, and is simply a primitive prayer. We are often told that savage religion begins in magic; but the chances are, I think, that magic begins in religion. Its typical form—the confident, practical *use* of a formula, a brew, and a rite to achieve a physical effect—is the empty shell of a religious act.¹

In Langer’s conception, magic is a poor attempt to defy natural laws via supernatural means; mainly through the empty, largely formulaic use of symbolic rites, words, and talismans.

Religion, Langer contrasts, is a “gradual envisagement of the essential pattern of human life.”²

That religion and magic are related in their emphasis on the supernatural Langer has no doubt, but magic is mere *technique*, whereas religion is the symbolic expression of something “profound.”

Langer’s characterization of magic and religion, denigrating as it is to one and glorifying to the other (at least in aspiration), would well serve the Christian apologists and polemicists who have attacked the CPG as occultist or magically oriented. Langer’s position certainly does much

for the dignity of religion, itself often derided for its mystical beliefs, by kicking the figurative mystic dog of magic. As Chapter 2 discusses, a great deal is accomplished for orthodox Christianity by contrasting itself to its heterodox Other in the CPG. One pair of polemicists, for example, derides the CPG doctrine of “Positive Confession” as rooted in the source of all occultist traditions—the denigration of God—and characterizes it as a part of the “coming satanic religion of the Anti-Christ.”³ Kaiser and McConnell separately report that a Christian belief in prosperity, while not intrinsically wrong, should not be understood on the basis of a word-power that results in specific outcomes in the CPG style; that is to say, seeking results via technique is not Scriptural but occultic.⁴

It is hard to deny that there is something occultic about the CPG. After all, the term “occult” is directly related to the concept of what is hidden or secret. It is the revealing of that which is outside the normal understanding.⁵ And the preachers of the CPG are, as Chapter 2 established, interested in revealing a hidden knowledge that can be used to direct effect by its practitioners. Positive Confession does, in fact, rely on the power of the spoken word to enact specific changes in the physical environment by appealing to the spiritual, in this case the Trinity. Thus, this chapter is not interested in answering the charges of occultism. Instead, this chapter is interested in embracing the charge and examining the God-oriented magical worldview, the *Weltanschauung*, of the CPG, an idea I have not-so-subtly borrowed from the historian of Mormon culture, D. Michael Quinn.

The occult has a home in American religion. Quite contrary to the perspective of Langer or the polemicists, in which the occult is something foreign and likely demonic, religion and magic have often been found together in tolerance and even in partnership. As Quinn’s book on early Mormon culture and a wide variety of literature indicates, occultism and particularly

theurgy were long considered complimentary, or at least non-contradictory, to established religious patterns.⁶ As this chapter demonstrates, the American religious tradition has long co-existed with an American occult tradition.

This dissertation is a study in rhetoric and hence this chapter will focus on rhetoric. More to the point, this chapter examines the CPG's doctrine of "Positive Confession" as an act of rhetoric embedded in the larger mystical purpose of rhetoric itself. I am interested in what way words have power, where that power comes from, and how that power is enacted. The occult is also deeply interested in the power of rhetoric. More specifically, I mean to locate the occult into a study of the rhetoric of everyday life as an on-going, fluid, and tactical *Weltanschauung* that subtly adjusts the symbolic rituals of everyday life by imbuing them with a contingent, occult perspective. In contrast to Joshua Gunn's assessment that occultism is over and done, destroyed by postmodernism, I maintain that occultism is alive and well, even resurging, in a renewal of an ancient partnership between magic and religion. Theurgy—God magic—has always been symbiotic with religion, plying the ground between orthodoxy, heresy, and paganism. Today, occultism is part of postmodern life, perhaps facilitated by it. More tentatively, I forward the idea that the CPG, in declaring its theurgist doctrines of Positive Confession, is restoring the occult to its partnership with religion in resistance to the total hegemony of the modernist, scientific perspective—a perspective which places very little value on the power of words.

Extant literature on the occult is extensive and this chapter will not attempt to account for it all. Instead, I proceed with relevant summaries and material and attempt to set the stage for understanding the CPG as a return of theurgy, and hence, the occult. First, I forward some key definitions of the occult and magic. Second, I examine the occult tradition, paying close attention to the American occult tradition that focuses less on the glamorous world of Satanism and

witches and more on the theurgist elements of folk magic, academic magic and superstition. Third, I examine the doctrine of Positive Confession as an example of the theurgic tradition. Finally, I discuss the way that the potential for the occult is not destroyed by the conditions of late modernism/postmodernism, but rather revived by them.

Defining the Occult and Magic

Of the two terms “magic” and “the occult,” the occult is easier to define. I have already mentioned that “occult” merely means that which is hidden or not in plain view. Generally, it is taken as an esoteric practice, knowledge or formula that is outside the normal understanding of the physical or spiritual world. Thus, though the term “occult” is often burdened with negative, evil, or satanic connotations, it does not necessarily imply any of these things. As this chapter will demonstrate, much of the occult is oriented toward God, not away from God.

Defining magic is more difficult. As the following discussion demonstrates, arguments over the limits of “magic” take up many pages of anthropological, historical, philosophical, religious, and even rhetorical scholarship. Scholars have attempted to associate magic with both scientific and religious motives, proposing that magic represents the early form of either science or religion. Some, like Langer, indicate that magic is a derivative of religion.

The distinction between the substantive, faith *content* of religion and the mere *formality* of magic is a popular one. Bert Hansen notes that historically, religious power was understood to be premised on the moral character and faith of the believer. In this view, religious faith and power require no special knowledge except faith in basic doctrines. In contrast magic is a technical activity that required special knowledge and procedures. It worked for whoever could execute its techniques. Even knowledge of more advanced chemistry or machinery was seen as a kind of occultism because it was considered beyond the regularly understood natural.⁷

Others define magic on the basis of its outcome orientation. John Middleton remarks:

Magic is usually defined subjectively rather than by any agreed upon content. But there is wide consensus as to what this content is. Most peoples in the world perform acts by which they intend to bring about certain events or conditions, whether in nature or among people, that they hold to be consequences of these acts. If we use Western terms and assumptions, the cause and effect relationship is mystical, not scientifically validated.⁸

Others affirm this practical definition of the occult, noting that the practical application of magic to immediate problems marks its similarity to science. It is *craft*, not a moral or societal structure. James G. Frazer remarked that society had progressed through a series of outlooks from magic to religious to scientific; the modern period being delineated by the domination of the scientific world view.⁹ In his foundational study, Malinowski argued that magic is a kind of pseudo-science, a study of the underlying, primeval laws of the universe—something available when natural cause-effect relationships are not well understood.¹⁰ Both science and magic are morally neutral techniques for manipulating the physical world.¹¹ And magic, like science, is about executing the will and desires of the practitioner rather than the will of any deity.¹² Though magic is similar to magic in that it is mystical, there is no question of *earning*, morally, magical power. Magic is, in this view, a learned art—an occult skill for any person to use that gives power over material and spiritual things.¹³

Others reject the characterization of magic as a primitive or pseudo-science. Ernst Cassirer, for example, specifically addresses Frazer's claims and argues that magic is an attempt to transcend physical limits of time and space and therefore cannot be described as a pseudo-science.¹⁴ Moreover, Cassirer rejects the attempt to separate magic and religion, noting that while

we tend to privilege religion as a symbol of high culture and magic as mere superstition, “our anthropological and ethnographical material makes it extremely difficult to separate the two fields.”¹⁵ As Neusner remarks, there is strong tendency to simply say ‘what I do is religious miracle, what you do is magic.’¹⁶

It is true that many magical practices are theologically neutral and do not rely on God. Many, however, do rely on God—or at least are in concert with the theological bent. Vetter argues that there are no uncrossable lines between religion and magic. One cannot separate religion and magic by interest in a Deity, for example, since some occult, magical practices specifically invoke or even pray to God or gods. One cannot neatly separate them on the basis of practical outcome, either, since many religious services and prayers pray for worldly outcomes—religious healing, prayers for blessings, prayers for rain or an end to rain, prayers for forgiveness, are all prayers with an outcome in mind. For example, one 17th-century prayer book has more than 1500 prayers tailored for specific circumstances.¹⁷ That level of specificity would be pointless unless the tailored incantations were expected to have some particular efficacy based upon their linguistic arrangements. Further, many magicians act more humbly toward the gods than do many religions, being convinced of those gods’ immediate power.¹⁸ Magic, Vetter concludes, is often just the epithet delivered toward religious practices that are now out of practice.¹⁹ Much more frequently, magic and religion appear together. As Claude Levi-Strauss observes in *The Savage Mind*, “There is no religion without magic any more than there is a magic without at least a trace of religion.”²⁰

That said the formal distinction between religion as a universal moral system and magic as a technical practice is useful. Generally speaking, magic may demand particular conduct on the part of the practitioner but “give little or no attention to group ethics, and emphasizes

personal ethics primarily as another instrument to achieve the desired ends.”²¹ Religion, on the other hand, demands certain conduct out of all persons, not just adherents; as Burke remarks, “Religion seems to be the rationalization which attempts to control the specifically *human* forces.”²² Though the overlap of religion and magic make them hard to distinguish in any practice, some distinction can be made between moral and existential concerns of religion and the immediate, practical concerns of magic.²³ Durkheim notes that like religion, “Magic, too, is made up of beliefs and rites...it has its myths and dogmas; only they are more elementary, undoubtedly because, seeking technical and utilitarian ends, it does not waste time in pure speculation.”²⁴ Still, Durkheim echoes Levi-Strauss, remarking that in practice, “magic is hardly distinguishable from religion...magic is full of religion just as religion is full of magic.”²⁵

In this chapter, I will proceed with the presumption that though there is a provisional, formal scholarly distinction between the moral, communal, and existential concerns of religion and the technical, practical concerns of magic, they significantly overlap. In fact, this chapter will make much of that overlap and the relationship between magic, science, and religion. What magic and religion have in common is the appeal to mystical, otherworldly knowledges and power. Neither attempts to understand precisely how such power works, but instead focuses on gaining power. Both magic and religion involve rites and rituals, belief structures and cosmological dramas. Magic and science, on the other hand, join at the level of practical applications, as attempts to gain knowledge that enable control of the immediate, physical environment. Magic and science want results, observable and material, though magic is relatively unconcerned with understanding the sequence of casual events, only the initiation and the outcome.

The Occult Tradition

Occultism and magical beliefs have never been entirely separate from the religious tradition. Anthropologists have struggled to establish the dividing line between religion and magical beliefs. As Neusner points out, there is a strong habit of decrying any mystic practices outside the acceptable standards of the community as “magic,” with either superstitious or diabolical overtones.²⁶

Religiously speaking, the OT acknowledges that sorcerers have real power, though subordinate to God.²⁷ Certainly the secret rites of the Jewish temple had occult elements. The power of the Tetragrammaton (YHWH) certainly strikes many scholars as deeply related to word-magic. The power of the Tetragrammaton comes from its utterance. Its power is held in check so long as it is not spoken aloud, a right reserved for the High Priest only. The power of the Tetragrammaton led Jewish mystical sects to the invention of other Names for God, each imbued with its own power to be utilized for specific purposes to obtain particular outcomes in a name-oriented *techné*.²⁸ Later, Jesus Christ was sometimes perceived as a kind of sorcerer or purveyor of the occult. It can hardly be denied that Christ and the Apostles performed miracles that are hardly different from sorcery.²⁹

Despite the Church’s opposition to sorcery, during the first 1000 years magic traditions were generally tolerated. The Bible was often used for fortune telling, even by the religious authorities.³⁰ Magic was common enough in the medieval period that most of those who practiced magic either at the folk level or elite level would not have thought of themselves as magicians.³¹ During the witch panics, magic-using Cunning Folk were employed to solve crimes, even by the Bishopric.³² The populace and even the witch courts relied on the magic of Cunning Men and Women to discover and counteract the diabolical power of witches.³³ During the Renaissance, a wide range of academic elites, including prominent Oxford and Cambridge

professors and members of the English court, pursued occult studies.³⁴ Magic was wrong for “magicians understood the study of the occult as a form of systematic inquiry into nature’s hidden (occult) spiritual properties.”³⁵ Richard Napier (1559-1634), a devout Anglican priest and leader, believed magic and science were complimentary systems. It was not considered the same as witchcraft.³⁶ Learned magic or academic magic was often contrasted to witchcraft.³⁷

The study of magic was not very well differentiated from scientific investigations until the 17th century.³⁸ Science, magic, and religion were often viewed as complimentary since each of these arenas originally dealt with *natural* forces. God was considered a natural force, science studied natural phenomena, and magic used cosmologically natural principles.³⁹ It was only Calvinist suspicion of Catholic mysticism and secret rites combined with the empiricists’ conflation natural with observable and physical that occultism was finally pushed into the demonic category and the cooperative relationship between religion, magic, and science began to fall apart.⁴⁰

The Oxford professor Robert Burton (1577-1640) wrote in 1628 that “Sorcerers are too common; cunning men, wizards, and white-witches, as they call them, in every village, which if they sought unto, will help almost all infirmities of the body and mind.”⁴¹ True in England, but even more true in North America where history is littered with circumstances of the occult.⁴²

Officially the North American Puritans suppressed the study of the occult but Increase Mather (1639-1723) and John Hale (1636-1700) reported that occult beliefs were absolutely rampant.⁴³ Unofficially many of the key figures in North American Puritanism pursued their own interests and studies into the occult and remained “attracted to occult ideas.”⁴⁴ Puritan minister John Winthrop (1587-1649) maintained a library on the occult and Cotton Mather (1663-1728) produced his own system of horoscopes even as he condemned astrology. Puritan ministers were

reputed to have healed the sick and even averted Indian arrows through quick prayers and relied on dreams to tell the future.⁴⁵ While religion generally tended to the soul, practical magic obtained particular ends of health and material goods.⁴⁶ Rituals, words of power, and potions—all extra-religious in a technical sense, seemed effective in treating a wide variety of physical and mental conditions.⁴⁷ Beliefs in dreams, prophetic visions, shape-shifting and more remained strongly in play.⁴⁸ Though the witch-trials at Salem were deeply embedded in the politics of the period, the ability of those involved to ascribe the community's trials to witchcraft was based in an already-existing assumption of magical power.⁴⁹

Mystical experiences in religion were not unusual either in early American experience or after the founding of the United States. The religious enthusiasm of the First and especially the Second Great Awakening found people falling into trances, experiencing angelic visions, and theophanic events. The degree of extremity of these events increased as time went on. Brainerd reported experiencing the direct presence of God during his conversion in 1738.⁵⁰ The founder of Mormonism, Joseph Smith, Jr. (1805-1844), regularly claimed divine encounters in founding the LDS Church.

All kinds of other occultic practices remained in place through the 18th century, including fortune telling, water-witching or divining, treasure hunting with magical seer stones, and more. The sale of occult books rose significantly at the end of the 18th century. The popularity of these works and more daily occult practices were likely boosted by the relative weakness of organized religion. In the colonial period, only about 15 percent of all whites were part of a particular church. Uneducated folk preachers and the influx of African magical practices added to the proliferation of magical beliefs.⁵¹

In the mid-19th and early 20th century, Spiritualism, theosophy (“god wisdom”) took the occult into Christian circles. Mesmerists claimed a scientific basis in physical and psychological processes to explain religious experience—and identified themselves with ancient occultic knowledge on the operation of the body.⁵² Spiritualists believed they had discovered ways to access the spiritual world, and these means were natural spiritual avenues. Spiritualists argued that this was, in fact, a kind of empirical science, a technology even; a spiritual “telegraph.”⁵³ However, these techniques bear a closer resemblance to occult techniques of necromancy. The extent of these practices reached the highest levels. Mary Todd Lincoln believed she spoke to her dead son. Abraham Lincoln, as well as several members of the cabinet, participated in séances in the White House.⁵⁴

What there was distinctly *not* enthusiasm for in America was the debunking of occultist beliefs. An early-19th-century text debunking folk fortune-telling could not find a second printing while occult texts went through many editions.⁵⁵ As modernism seemed to seep deeper and deeper into American society in the mid and late 19th century, there seemed to be an increase in occultist beliefs. Belief in witchcraft remained significant until the end of 19th century.⁵⁶ Much practical occultism was integrationist, attempting to accommodate science into theological beliefs. Other occultist beliefs were attempts to account for the increasing encounters of American society with the spiritual beliefs of other cultures. Theosophy, for example, focused on accepting both science and the religious beliefs of other cultures.⁵⁷

Deep into the 19th century and into the 20th century, discussions and beliefs in occultism remained prominent. William James found the incredible increase in reports of visions, spells, and mesmerism that occurred during the 19th century to be strong evidence for an uptick in mysticism. James’ purpose was not to reject science but rather to “mediate” between science and

mysticism and to indicate that mysticism dealt with something supra-rational, beyond the purview of empiricism or rationality but nonetheless extant.⁵⁸

The belief in nearly-magical cures in religion did not fade in the 20th century. Many twentieth-century theurgists proposed mentalist concepts of Christianity. These declare that the powers of mind include self-healing, control over the physical environment, psychic powers, word powers, and more. E.W. Kenyon (1867–1948), the proto-founder of the Word-of-Faith movement and Christian Science, advocated the use of faith-cures.⁵⁹ Even prominent American religions like Mormonism still include secret ceremonies, incantations, prophecies, and even a belief in physical powers that borrow much from occult traditions (though they refer to them as ‘sacred, not secret’).⁶⁰

A Contemporary Occult

The occult’s prominence declined in the 20th century but it did not die. In fact, the late 20th century appeared to experience a revived interest in the occult.⁶¹ A proliferation of books on the subject published in the last 20 years seems to support this claim. In fact, the bookshelves of any bookstore are practically brimming over with ‘self-help’ books that advocate not just positive thinking, but the idea that positive thinking and positive *speaking* can directly influence the physical events of the world. The most prominent of these is Rhonda Byrne’s *The Secret* and its sequel *The Power*.⁶² Advocated by the marketing power house Oprah Winfrey, *The Secret* claims to reveal “the law of attraction...the most powerful law in the universe...It is the law that determines the complete order of the Universe.”⁶³ It is ancient knowledge, Byrne remarks, understood by Babylonians and utilized by every successful person. The idea is simple—positive thinking begets positive outcomes. It’s a three step process: “The first step is to ask. Make a command to the Universe...Step two is believe. Believe it’s already yours...How it will

happen...is not your concern.”⁶⁴ The final step is to “just feel good,” though Byrne indicates it works faster if you indicate your desires out loud. Simple: ask, believe, and receive. The quotes included in the text from ancient writers, the Bible, contemporary gurus, Buddha, and others give it the solid feel of theosophical, universal wisdom.

Byrne is hardly the only occultist on the market. The nearly dozen publications of Wayne W. Dyer, a psychologist and motivational speaker, espouse very similar beliefs. Writing such titles as *Real Magic: Creating Miracles in Everyday Life*, *Wisdom of the Ages: A Modern Master Brings Eternal Truths into Everyday Life*, and *You’ll See It When You Believe It*, Dyer attests that he found a way to make miracles happen every day.⁶⁵ He remarks, “The real you, the unique you, is 99 percent invisible...The largest chunk of who you are is something beyond form.”⁶⁶ The publication of *The Prosperity Bible* is another strong indication of the occult trend. *The Prosperity Bible* is a virtual encyclopedia of modern mystical/occult thinkers from Napoleon Hill (*Think and Grow Rich*), to Charles Fillmore (*Prosperity*), to Robert Collier (*The Secret of the Ages*).⁶⁷ Collier, for example, urges readers to believe in an “all-pervading Intelligence” that a correctly-oriented individual may tap into for incredible, even omnipotent wisdom and power. The technique of gaining that power, Collier writes, is the “The Magic Secret.”⁶⁸ Catherine Ponder’s series of books, from the *Healing Secrets of the Ages* to *The Secret of Unlimited Prosperity*, similarly advocates the Unity perspectives that associate mind power with physical power.

Though no magic brews, pentagrams or covens appear in these books and each testifies to its compatibility with current religious traditions, the theurgist themes and occult tradition are apparent in these works. Each “reveals” wisdom of the ages. Each prescribes certain steps that must be taken, mini-rituals that must be performed before “miracles” occur, and each testifies its

procedures will result in tangible outcomes. Like the occult traditions of the 19th century, these occult traditions tend to mix psychology, psychic powers, and religion freely—you might even find some of these titles in the psychology section of a commercial bookstore. Most dubiously cite some scientific research or scientists to establish some empirical chops (Byrne cites Einstein, Dyer cites psychological research). Most address positive worldly concerns. Ponder’s books are disproportionately oriented toward wealth-gaining. Byrne’s books are focused on “success”—and not the heavenly kind. They are meant to solve *practical, immediate* problems in the best tradition of academic and folk magic. They are, in sum, a contemporary occult tradition.

Living Occultism and Contemporary Scholarship

Occultism has had a long life in European and especially in American history. Far from being driven out from the legitimate places of society by science, it has developed in a way that adapted to circumstances of modernism. The recent occult upsurge contradicts Joshua Gunn’s recent claim that “the sense of the occult as comprising a ‘tradition’ died at the end of the twentieth century; in postmodernity, the age of surveillance and publicity, there can be no coherent tradition of secrecy.”⁶⁹ Gunn remarks that the secret language of occultism had collapsed, the medieval “language of the birds” no longer in play. Moreover, Gunn remarks that occultism—and Satanism in particular—has been commodified, stripped of all of its significant meaning and made ready for the mass-market.⁷⁰

If publicity, commodification, and mass marketing are the death of the occult as a “tradition,” then the occult has been dead for centuries. Printers could barely keep up with the demand for books on the occult in the 18th century. In the 19th century, Spiritualism, mesmerism, water-witching, visionaries, all were “secret” practices that were bought and sold, marketed and packaged. Tickets were sold to demonstrations. Treasure-hunting, a favorite occult practice of

Joseph Smith, Jr., was an inherently wealth-seeking venture. But despite the publicity the occult did not die. Though the Reformation brought a sharp decline in the cooperation between magic and religion and the empirical sciences damaged its mystical explanations and its claim to efficacy, magic remained.⁷¹ The discrepancy between the reports of the occult's demise and its continued presence might be a product of a focus. Current research tends to focus on the Satanic or diabolical elements of magic, yet theurgy (god magic) and other forms of the occult probably played a much greater role in the occult tradition. Indeed, if the occult tradition is reduced to Satanism, there is hardly an occult tradition at all.

Gunn remarks 'the secret that there is no secret' marks the end of the occult. Yet the occult relies upon a *myth*, an aura, of secrecy and hidden-ness and not on its immediate reality. The occult is not an unknown-unknown; it is something known that bears the trace of the unknown. As for its position within a complete "tradition," there is very little to indicate what European occult element ever stood alone, separate from its integration with and opposition to science and religion. The occult "tradition" has not generally been a stand-alone or coherent belief system but a part of the European and American culture. It is not dead but very much alive. Surveillance is not a problem for the occult because the occult was always meant to be seen.

Why has the occult regained such prominence in contemporary society? As Chapter 1 remarks, late modernism is marked by a lack of transcendent, symbolic structures that interpret meaning. Perhaps more significantly, however, in a globalized society, vast faceless forces of economics, politics, and social interaction dictate the fate of individual persons. As the Great Recession that began in 2008 reveals, individual effort, training, or ability can only marginally improve a person's economic future. Inscrutable forces result in the firing and long-term

unemployment of loyal, competent workers. Recent reports note that the income gap between the wealthy and the poor has increased dramatically in America while opportunities for class mobility have declined.⁷² The American dream may be fading, crushed by the cold reality of the abstract modernist flows of global economics and culture clash.

Magic, in response, provides efficacy where there is none previously. The classic role of magic is efficacy in one's life. Taylor notes that the perceived efficacy of magic is tied to the community's collective belief in its reality.⁷³ In prior times, magic gave persons access to knowledge, and therefore power, that they would not otherwise possess. Mysterious, otherwise inexplicable diseases can be explained and potentially cured, weather controlled, misfortune averted, the movement of the stars explained and given significance, the future predicted, and more. All such magic requires is a crack, a space in the overarching cold, raw reality of modernist science, for collective belief—a gap in the legitimating power of the overarching scientific metanarrative.⁷⁴ For a community searching for efficacy where the physical and social sciences seem to provide offer none, it is hardly surprising that magic—the superseding of those sciences—has returned to the fore.

Summary

Contemporary literature declares the occult “dead” or “declined.” I've argued that it is not so. Though it may be less broadly influential in terms of the practices of everyday living, the occult is alive in America. Previous analysis of the occult has too narrowly defined the occult in America and has erected, to contrast the merely “occultic,” an occult “system” which was, in all likelihood, never the way the occult was broadly practiced. Far from being Satanic, most occult practices were either conducted specifically with God in mind or as a parallel to religion, as theologically neutral as the physical sciences.

The occult tradition has maintained itself in the United States despite the advent of modernist discourses that thoroughly debunk its practices. Just as in the 18th century, there is far more interest in the occult than there is in its rejection. Modernist conceptions of life, scientific perspectives, and mainline religions dominate the sociological scene, yet the occult remains partnered with both and with a rather remarkable audience. *The Secret*, which might be described as esoteric-lite, was a *New York Times #1 Bestseller*.

The occult tradition has been, in America, at all times mass marketed. Mesmerism put on displays for paying customers, treasure-hunters looked for wealth and accepted fees for searching, Spiritualists employed the most prominent of its practitioners in séances. But most of all, there are *books*. Books, books, and more books, all revealing the secret knowledge, the words of power, the underlying structure of the cosmos. Some have even achieved a level of scholarly legitimacy, particularly viewpoints like mesmerism and Spiritualism. At least two ostensibly occult religious structures, Scientology and Mormonism, have attained something close to mainstream acceptance and now claim millions of followers.⁷⁵

I do not wish to dispute the distinction between ‘occultism’ and the merely ‘occultic,’ though I am unsure about its historical reality. I have no claim regarding the coherency of contemporary occult rhetoric or practices. Yet I would contest the characterization that most persons now encounter the occult around campfires and in ghost stories.⁷⁶ Instead, the occult—and occult rhetoric—are all around us in both religious and popular culture. If one reduces the occult to diabolical knowledge (certainly the sexiest, most movie-ready version of the occult) you will not find it many places. But if the occult is understood as the revealing of esoteric, “hidden,” secret, and magical knowledge based in ritual, knowledge of craft, and the practical,

material outcomes of decidedly immaterial processes—as most scholars have understood the occult—the occult remains inescapable in society.

Moreover, there exists a certain magic world-view. It is possible that this world-view is weaker than ever before and that magic has declined in significance. But just as religion maintains its hold in the face of the hegemonic influence of the scientific world-view, magic keeps its hold. Godbeer characterized medieval England as “magico-religious,” a mixture of Christianity and folk magic.⁷⁷ The remainder of this chapter is dedicated to demonstrating that current occult functions in the same way, that is to say, that the CPG contains within it a “magico-religious” world-view that freely mixes the existential, moral and soteriological concerns of Christianity with direct, practical, and craft-oriented power of incantations and rituals of magic. It is a world-view, in a sense, that encompasses the entire structure of the universe, and it makes no distinction between the occultic elements of its beliefs and the religious ones. To the preacher and believer of the CPG, the world is a place of preternatural powers, Godly material blessing invoked by proper prayer procedures, angelic and demonic causes, and unseen actors. Nothing is coincidence and nothing is luck, goes the CPG mantra; everything in the world has an otherworldly cause—as Cassirer would observe, the universe is unified in a cosmological drama.⁷⁸ It is, in some sense, a rhetoric and world-view of resistance. Through its every day practice, it resists the hegemony of not only the agnosticism of the scientific world-view, but also the naturalist empiricism of the scientific world-view.

Positive Confession and the Power of Words

The CPG is enamored with the power of spoken words, down to its very institutions. The Rhema Bible Training Center, Kenneth Hagin's training ground for Word-of-Faith ministers, receives its name from the Greek word, *rhema*, which means "thing said." Like many of the current occult authors on the mass market, CPG preachers emphasize the importance of positive thinking. Similar to Byrne's claim that the universe does not understand the "negative," CPG advocates encourage believers to focus on what they *want* instead of what they *don't* want. But the CPG adds the power of the spoken word, the significance of the utterance. The words we speak, according to the CPG, have power. To achieve the complete package of faith, Hagin remarks, you align your thinking, your believing, and your *speaking* with the Word of God.⁷⁹

In the CPG the power of the spoken word is known as the doctrine of "Positive Confession." In Positive Confessions, believers are encouraged to speak aloud their desires as a statement of faith. They confess their faith that God will provide what they need—they "name it, and claim it," as the saying goes. What they declare they want or need, they will receive. Though what is claimed is sometimes authority over non-physical entities like devils or demons, the point is that it results in some physical outcomes, usually the gaining of a benefit to physical health or material wealth. Kenneth Copeland (figure 2) remarks:

What you need to use as the basis for your inner image and for the words you speak is the Word of God. The Word has supernatural power... Think about Creation. God wanted light. So He said, "*Let there be light*" (Genesis 1:3). The words he spoke were directly related to his inner image... Words are powerful... Words are so important they determine our eternal destiny... In fact,

that is the part of you and me that is so like God. We have the unique privilege to choose and speak words.⁸⁰

Magic and word power have long been tied together. The tradition of word-power—of a secret mixture of words that could exercise power over others—is a common cultural belief, from Sumerians to Egyptians to the Semites. Much of the denigration of rhetoric in the early modern



Figure 2. Gloria and Kenneth Copeland⁸¹

period was a result of the experimentalists' concern over the mystic power of words and the strange power they had over the mind.⁸² Brian Vickers argues that magic is largely based in an entelechial extension of rhetorical thinking; a literalization of metaphors. One thing is not merely *like* another in terms of substituting one knowledge for another, but is a physical surrogate.

Words have a direct, immediate connection to actual events—they contain key essences of material objects. Rhetoric *acts* upon the world and on the minds of humans in physical, metaphysical and psychological ways.⁸³

Believers in the power of occult words often believe the speaking of words constitutes the action element of language—the beginning of whatever powers the words on the page hold. But mere words on a page will not do. It is spoken words that constitute a force.⁸⁴ The occultists understand words as “not mere instruments (i.e., words to dress the ideas), but rather as enchanted devices capable of transmogrifying reality and, in certain configurations, transporting audiences in metaphysical states of mind.”⁸⁵ At least partially, magic parallels contemporary rhetoricians’ thoughts on the power of words, particularly its Burke-like emphasis on words as the action themselves rather than as mere representations.⁸⁶

In the CPG the power of words is not merely words used toward moral or existential ends. The CPG stresses being born-again as an antecedent to material blessing, but it receives relatively less emphasis than it might in traditional evangelical denominations. After all, the CPG appeals to the audience because it provides benefits *beyond* the moral or soteriological ones. The CPG gives guidelines for living *this* life, not preparing for the one hereafter (as Chapter 8 will expand on). To explicate the function of this Positive Confession, I’ll move through the practical aspects of the CPG doctrine of Positive Confessions and its reliance on a magic world.

The Practical Gospel

One of the core distinctions between magic and religion that scholars tend to agree upon is the distinction between the practical outcomes of magic and the broader, community-oriented ethical element of religion. If this is so, the CPG might rightly be known as a kind of occultism—after all, as Chapter 2 discussed, it intrinsically deals with the revealing of esoteric

knowledge. As Hagin stated about God's revelation to him, "The word of knowledge, He pointed out, is supernatural revelation."⁸⁷ Gloria Copeland (figure 2) preaches that the practical side of God's Word is the supernatural secret.⁸⁸

There is no doubt the CPG preachers are interested in moral conduct. T.D. Jakes's book *Life Overflowing* and many other works by CPG preachers are filled with calls for better moral conduct and demands that the reader or listener be born again. But that is hardly the end of it. The impetus of their preaching, what sets the CPG preachers apart, is that they believe that their preaching reveals a formula of belief that will have an immediate, practical impact on the lives of believers—and not just through improved character and conduct. Consider the following excerpts:

There is enough undiscovered wealth in the poorest nations to turn their poverty into abundance if they would just believe the Gospel. Even if there weren't, God is more than able to put it there (Kenneth Copeland).⁸⁹

Seeking God will keep you healthy. It will enable you to prosper financially and bring peace into your home, healing to your body, and joy to your life (Gloria Copeland).⁹⁰

Many Christians did not understand how to apply practically the Word of God to their everyday lives. As a result, they failed to see His Word manifested in their lives, and they remained broke, busted, and disgusted...If people were taught how to apply the Word to their lives, they would prosper (Creflo Dollar).⁹¹

As these passages demonstrate, the distinction that the CPG makes is that, in addition to eternal salvation, the Scriptures all promise at least some terrestrial salvation, immediate practical benefits. As Osteen argues, "God wants us to enjoy our lives right here in the nasty now

and now...you can accomplish your dreams before you go to heaven!"⁹² Dollar, perhaps of all the three above, gets to the essential point. What the CPG does is transfer the Christian Scriptures from the realm of the spiritual and aspirational with its deep questions regarding death, sin, salvation, eternal life, and earthly worthiness into the eminently *practical*. The CPG promises not just eternal life, but solutions to everyday problems like poverty, debt, lack of promotions, misbehaving children, and even weight-loss—problems attributed by modernism to global economics, socio-economic disadvantage, genetics, psychological histories, and other inaccessible, inscrutable sources.

It is almost painful to point out that these issues that prosperity preachers promise to provide solutions for are precisely the types of issues dealt with by both folk and academic magic in prior centuries. The Christian churches had their own mystical endeavors to solve these problems, but when practical problems arose in the daily household, most persons in the medieval and early modern period turned to the local Cunning Folk or sorcerer for solutions, not institutional religion. Even in Salem, the witches were originally discovered by another witch.⁹³ This does not mean that the practical problem could not be addressed by religion—Christian Science, Mormonism, Unity thinking, Catholic mysticism all address practical problems—but rather that when scholars consider institutional *religion* or religious thinking or symbolism, they do not include a solution to drug-addiction or overeating. In the CPG, the tradition of Christian faith for handling issues of the eternal is occultically applied to issues of the immediate.

The Supernatural World

It is one thing to know that the CPG deals with esoteric knowledge and promises to address practical problems, but it's another question to understand exactly why this is the case. After all, plenty of non-mystical or non-occultic sects like Methodists or Lutherans believe that

faith in their versions of Christianity can be of immediate and practical benefit to believers. What sets the CPG apart in this aspect is that it believes in the *supernatural* intervention of God to solve practical problems. The CPG is not simply promising that faith will strengthen the believers to overcome trials. The CPG preachers are promising that God will supernaturally intervene in the physical laws, human psychology, and international flows of capital. Compared to those systems, the CPG may even seem comparatively less mystical—indeed masters of technocratic economics or technology are often referred to as “wizards” in popular contexts because of their understanding of seemingly mystical processes.⁹⁴

Here, now, there is a problem of definition. Magicians of prior eras, though they dealt with esoteric knowledge and occult procedures, believed that the magic they were engaged in was fundamentally natural since it was a part of the spiritual laws of the cosmos. It was not a violation of the rules of the universe because it was a part of the universe.⁹⁵ By “supernatural,” the preacher of the CPG essentially means the same thing. The “natural” in the CPG conception is simply the physical and immediate world, governed by scientific laws. The supernatural world is the “spiritual” world, which is also ostensibly “natural” in the sense of being normal. Yet, these spiritual laws and rules—which operate just like physical ones—hold precedence:

We must understand that there are laws governing everything in existence.

Nothing is by accident. There are laws in the world of the spirit, and laws in the world of the natural. These laws of the natural realm govern the natural, physical world and our activities in it... We need to realize that the laws of the spiritual world are more powerful than the laws of the physical world. Spiritual law gave birth to physical law.⁹⁶

Kenneth Copeland's occult conclusion is inescapable—power over the physical exists in control of the spiritual. Much like the medieval magicians analogized the interaction of the invisible world to the physical to the pulling of hidden strings, Copeland's schema makes the physical world a mere subordinate production. Knowledge of the spiritual laws gives one significant power over the physical world. Indeed, all of what might be expected from a scientific, physicalist understanding of the world, while valid on face (“laws of the natural govern the natural”), does not stand up to those able to access a secret, hidden spiritual world.

Believers can see that unseen world. When faced with a myriad of problems from finances to health, the believers should not be discouraged by what the outlook is within the physical realm. Instead, using seer-like powers, Osteen encourages his audience to, “Look into that invisible world, into the supernatural world, and through your eyes of faith, see that situation turning around. See your joy and peace returning...Once you see by faith, it can come into existence in the physical world.”⁹⁷

Nothing is by accident. There is an invisible world with its own laws that supersedes the visible, physical world. Those with certain knowledge and belief can see this world and understand its relationship to the physical world. Understanding it can help the believers (practitioners?) deal with a myriad of the practical problems. Certainly, in schematic terms, we are far from the problems that define rarified air of religion, with its emphasis on the eternal. This is the supra-physical mechanics of daily life, dealt with by preternatural knowledge and powers. It's an interpretive scheme so radically different that it requires a whole other procedure of language.

The Rituals of the Christian Prosperity Gospel

Having rituals does not make a belief structure occult. As the first section of this chapter noted, rituals are merely the symbolic expression of ideas, conceptions and beliefs that have trouble being articulated. In religion, the rituals tend to express a desire to connect and honor another deity or being. Prayers and supplications are normal.

If the CPG is, however, interested in not only the religious but also the occult, we should expect that it will have technical procedures, methods and processes by which the believer will be able to obtain the power in the supernatural world. And it is just so. In fact, the CPG almost universally advocates a three-step process of engaging the supernatural world. First, believers must get their *thinking* aligned correctly. They must understand the Word of God and what it means for them spiritually. In some cases that means aligning themselves morally with the Word of God. In other cases, it means the believers must clearly understand and visualize what they want. Second, the believer must have *faith* that what they desire will happen. The believers must *believe* that what they want or desire is coming to them through the Lord. Sometimes, as in the case of T.D. Jakes, believers are encouraged to believe that what they desire is *already* given to them. Finally, they must *speak* the words that set spiritual laws in motion.

Thinking Right

The idea that the mind is a “battle-field” is a central concern of the CPG. Though each preacher takes it in a different direction, the idea that one must *think* right before one can gain God’s material blessings or exercise God’s delegated authority is a central tenet. While Hagin emphasized that individuals must align their thoughts with God, more contemporary prosperity preachers like Joyce Meyer (figure 3), T.D. Jakes, and Joel Osteen have more clearly echoed the secular occultists in emphasizing positive thinking. Meyer’s book *Power Thoughts* emphasizes

that attitudes are choices that direct the course of one's life. Meyer emphasizes, via a group of scriptural "Power Packs" at end of each chapter, that certain thoughts are vital to changing an individual life. Meyer isn't just advocating positive thinking for an attitude change; she believes it is vital to access God's will; "Choose to see the power available to you through God if you trust Him more than your circumstances. Always remember that nothing is impossible with God!"⁹⁸



Figure 3. Joyce Meyer preaching.⁹⁹

T.D. Jakes (figure 4), preaching to his congregation, declares, "You must fix the mind, before you can bestow the blessing...get my mind ready for this year, because this year there's going to be blessings, there's going to be miracles, there's going to be opportunities!"¹⁰⁰ Osteen similarly believes that the image in the mind is vital to success, "What you keep before your eyes

will affect you. You will produce what you're continually seeing in your mind. If you foster an image of defeat and failure, then you're going to live that kind of life. But if you develop an image of victory, success, health, abundance, joy, peace, and happiness, nothing on earth will be able to hold those things from you.”¹⁰¹

The passage from Osteen hints there is a flip-side to positive thinking. Not only is positive thinking beneficial, but negative thinking is detrimental—and not only as an opportunity cost. Osteen indicates that negative thinking will result in negative outcomes. Like Byrne's Law of Attraction, Osteen seems to indicate that if someone thinks negative thoughts, those thoughts will be manifested.



Figure 4. Bishop T.D. Jakes preaching. ¹⁰²

Though these principles are ostensibly supernatural, CPG authors frequently cite scientific research. Pointing out just one case, Meyer cites Dr. Caroline Leaf, a leader in “Neuro-Metacognitive Learning,” who reports that “The Word and science believe the mind and the

brain are one.”¹⁰³ In addition, Meyer cites other research touting the benefits of positive thinking and concluding that positive thinking creates positive physical outcomes. Most of the research Meyers cites addresses physiological outcomes and some is nothing more than research on placebo effects, but Meyer concludes that it demonstrates conclusively that “positive thinking yields positive results.”¹⁰⁴ Extending that research analogically, Meyer (as do Osteen and others) puts science to work confirming or hinting at the supernatural. Science, of course, can’t prove God. But it serves the purpose of demonstrating that Meyer’s beliefs are not *irrational*, but *supra-rational*.

Believing in Faith

For the CPG it not enough to have a positive attitude. Any person can have a positive attitude. As Creflo Dollar preaches, any person can think that he or she will get something—it takes faith to actually believe it: “Christ redeemed us so that we could believe and receive what the blood has done...So that you will have no problems having the blessing that comes into your life...so when poverty tries to show up you’ve been redeemed so the blessing can fight poverty.” You may *know* that you are blessed but “your lack of faith...keeps you sidelined and the blessing is not able to work the way it’s supposed to work.”¹⁰⁵

Belief in the efficacy of magic is not an unusual requirement for the magic to work, especially in contemporary magic. Dyer repeatedly remarks that you must have a *faith* in the unseen in order to gain mystic benefits.¹⁰⁶ But in the case of the CPG, the occultic powers are theurgic—they rely upon God. From Hagin to Gloria Copeland to Creflo Dollar to Joel Osteen, all emphasize that the power comes from God. Though it is spiritual and it is law, material or physical blessings are a power derived from God. Hagin emphasizes that the power is delegated authority over the spiritual world (and thereby, the physical world).¹⁰⁷ Osteen argues that it’s a

product of love, appropriately analogous to the blessings of a father bestowed upon his children.¹⁰⁸

This is far from the satanic occult that is characterized in the media or the esoteric doctrines of lost civilizations. The rhetoric of this belief structure is solidly within the Christian camp. Christ is at the center of every discussion of power. As Dollar noted, it is Christ that redeemed the believers and enabled them to receive the blessings. In Hagin's case, as we saw in Chapter 2, it was Christ who reveals the knowledge to Hagin through a series of theophanic experiences. Joyce Meyer encourages her readers to stay constantly in touch with God, because God makes all the blessings occur.¹⁰⁹ Kenneth Copeland argues that without God, people cannot control their mental states in their entirety, making the power of positive thinking and focus impossible.¹¹⁰ Faith in God is an essential part of the mystic abilities of the CPG believer.

The Power of Words

Although the mind and faith are prerequisites to the power of Positive Confession, it is the *spoken word* that gives Positive Confession its power. As Malinowski observed, in the magic schema, it is the voice that holds the power of activation.¹¹¹ Modernity, for its part, tends to understand the universe in terms of *motion*. The physical universe operates on the basis of what the CPG might describe as natural or unthinking or unconsidered ways.¹¹² In contrast the magician does not believe that the universe operates on the basis of motion, though it may in the absence of any action taken by those with proper knowledge and technique. The occultist, as Gunn has noted, believes that the universe is constantly manipulated by the wills of various forces, pushed along by the symbolic incantation and vocal supplication of the believer/practitioner.¹¹³

That the Word plays a significant role in the Christian outlook has already been established. But in the world-view of the prosperity gospels, the Word of God carries unique weight. It contains within it the ability to access the power of God and use it for immediate and concrete ends. It would be easy to misunderstand the prosperity preachers, for emphasis on the power of words sounds very similar to the pop psychology they frequently cite. Osteen remarks, “Words are similar to seeds. By speaking them aloud, they are planted in our subconscious mind, and they take on a life of their own; they take root, grow, and produce fruit of the same kind.”¹¹⁴ One could imagine Phil McGraw making the same remarks.

But the psychological idiom in which many of the prosperity preachers speak (examined more closely in Chapter 8) belies the supernatural force assigned to words. Three pages after making the rather bland psychological observation regarding the power of words, Osteen declares of David facing Goliath, “David looked right into his eyes [and] said... ‘I come against you in the name of the Lord God of Israel.’ Now those are words of faith! Notice, too, that he spoke the words aloud. He didn’t merely *think* them; he didn’t simply *pray* them... Those are the kind of words you must learn to speak in your everyday circumstances.”¹¹⁵ In this passage Osteen notes that the spoken word is the completion of the necessary ritual of word power—you must think something; but you cannot merely think it, you must believe it; but you cannot merely believe it; you must *speak* it. It is the audible utterance that puts the Word into action in the life of the believers.

Consider the following emphases on the power of the spoken word:

Friend, there is a miracle in your mouth. If you want to change your world, start by changing your words... If you’ll learn how to *speak the right words* and keep the right attitude, God will turn that situation around. (Osteen)¹¹⁶

You cannot get to where I am talking to you about tonight, unless you employ your divine apparatus. Your mouth is your divine apparatus... The Word is powerful. The blessing is power. This divine apparatus is the switch that turns it on. (Dollar)¹¹⁷

When you speak God's word, the moment His promises come out of your mouth, something happens in the unseen realm. (Osteen)¹¹⁸

When we release our faith with the words of our mouth, it goes to work for us like a servant and does what we send it to do. (Gloria Copeland).¹¹⁹

These results are not questions of salvation. Words of victory are not questions of moral conduct or righteousness. They are, as Cassirer remarks, questions of technique and power over the physical environment. We've already seen how Kenneth Hagin believes that angels, if summoned correctly, serve the purposes of those who speak the right words. In Positive Confession one must *speak* aloud what one desires. When Osteen encourages his readers to "*Switch over to a language of victory*" he clarifies that he wants his audience to "Talk about the way you want to be...something supernatural happens when you speak out."¹²⁰ Hagin even declares that Positive Confession is not really a form of praying at all—it is a form of "claiming" or declaring authority over an area. When you speak aloud, you are exercising a form of command using the authority that God has given to believers, if you will only understand the formula.¹²¹

The Formula of Incantation

Magic is ostensibly characterized by technique, whereas religious belief is characterized by simple faith. As Peter Brown noted, faith is supposed to work for any person who simply *believes*. But the CPG requires particular techniques to make Positive Confession work. It

requires the three ingredients already named, mind, faith, and the spoken word, but it also requires a particular method of summoning the power that can alter the efficacy of the theurgical power of the believers. As Osteen declares, “If you don’t unleash your words in the right direction, if you won’t call in favor, you will not experience...blessings.”¹²² Kenneth Copeland remarks about the significance of proper form:

The success formulas in the Word of God produce results when used as directed...It doesn’t make sense to the natural mind that with faith you can have whatever you say, though it may be contrary to what you can see with your physical eye. But Jesus said it, and by the eternal Almighty God, *it is so!* When you act on it, mix your faith with it and don’t doubt in your heart, this spiritual law will work for you.¹²³

The person must be *specific* in his or her claim/request. It will not do for a person to pray, in general, for supernatural blessing. Though God “is not limited to the laws of the natural,” the prosperity preachers repeatedly emphasize that without the proper method of address either to God or without specific subjects, God either will not act or cannot act. Improper address will “limit” God.¹²⁴ Each preacher emphasizes that specific prayers will deliver specific results, i.e., “Every time you’re faced with choice, not just about your spiritual life, but about your job, your family, your health, or your finances...The Holy Spirit will illuminate the Word of God to you and help you apply it to specific situations...that will open the door to more of His blessing in your life.”¹²⁵ Osteen remarks that it is vital to “Learn to speak God’s favor over every area of your life. If you’re not experiencing as much favor as you would like, start declaring it more often.”¹²⁶ When you apply your faith and prayers in specific situations, God “will give us...hidden wisdom or revelation knowledge.”¹²⁷

Utilizing the ingredients of the incantation, Kenneth Copeland also remarks about the form, “Develop a true image of you and your family prospering based on what the Word of God says about you. *Believe* it in your heart. Then *speak* these Scriptures aloud! Put these spiritual laws to work. Claim them as your own.”¹²⁸ As Hagin emphasized, the key is to *claim* them. One must talk as though the item was already in the possession of the believer. T.D. Jakes, in particular, emphasizes the idea that true faith means believing that God has already planned to give you what you desire and that such faith “is the catalyst that accelerates the divine transfer of wealth.”¹²⁹ Gloria Copeland remarks that you must “continue to act and talk like it is done. Refuse to consider contrary circumstances....refuse to let your faith waver [sic], that change will take place.”¹³⁰

It is vital to note the mystic means of the incantation power of Positive Confession. The preachers emphasize that there are spiritual laws that govern the natural world, but none explicates precisely how these laws work. In fact, each emphasizes that the *how* is not a question that can be answered. Though you cannot see it, things are happening behind the scenes. Osteen reports story after story about how coincidences have worked out in his favor and the favor of other believers. Osteen believes that none of these things, from airplane seat upgrades to home purchases to sale prices on clothes, are coincidence. They are simply the aligning of events by God in response to Osteen’s desires. Similarly, Hagin’s angelic servants manipulate circumstances in unknown ways to make what seems impossible occur. The supernatural power of God does not follow the natural rules of the material world, though it is manifested in the material world.

Accounts of magical power abound in the sermons and books of the prosperity preacher. Osteen attests that his mother was healed from a terminal disease by declaring aloud her own

health. Gloria Copeland recounts two stories of the incantation power of the God. In one account, she tells the story of a congregation in the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka that commanded in God's name that the tsunami waters stop rising; and though the surrounding buildings were engulfed, the waters did not rise in the church. Similarly she reports that during the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, one of the members of the Faith Exchange Fellowship near the WTC confessed the power of Psalm 91 and used "the power of God's Name" to access "the secret place of the Most High" and escaped the falling debris of the towers by physically flying through the air in a protective bubble.¹³¹

What's remarkable about these accounts and the instruction on how to use the word power of God is the technical emphasis. Leroy S. Thompson declares that when people announce the two words, "Money cometh!" that there is particular power in those terms, which he proclaims he received directly from the Lord.¹³² More broadly than the simple ritual process named in Hagin and Copeland's methods of claiming authority and accessing the spiritual rules, it is notable how *procedural* the full realization of the mystical power of faith is. Osteen's first book, a *New York Times* #1 Bestseller, has "7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential." T.D. Jakes's *Life Overflowing* is constituted by *6 Pillars for Abundant Living*. Joyce Meyer's *Power Thoughts* consists of *12 Strategies to Win the Battle of the Mind*. Each indicates that there are definite procedures and techniques, practices and methods to obtaining God's blessing for this life. Gloria Copeland and Kenneth Hagin both report that gaining power in their own lives was a process of studying, understanding, and refining their own power in God. It took Hagin a while, for example, to precisely understand when and how to use God's power. Gloria Copeland recalls that early in her use of God's immediate power, she did not exercise the power in the right ways or at the right level.¹³³ But with practice, study, meditation, and speaking, each gains more power

and more control over the physical circumstances of their lives through the manipulation of the spiritual circumstances.

Blessing, Cursing, and the Neutrality of Word Magic

Ostensibly, faith is required to access the power of Positive Confession. One must have faith to gain God's power in the spoken word. Yet it does not require faith for people to speak negatively and curse themselves or others. The Positive Confession has more power than the curse, certainly. T.D. Jakes remarks that "no witch's hex" can prevail on the mind that is thinking, believing, and speaking with God.¹³⁴ But that does not deny that words have power even without the blessing of God.

Osteen makes a strange point on this subject. Cautioning his readers on the power of negative words, Osteen recounts the story of Jacob, Esau, and Isaac. In the story (Genesis 27), Isaac's younger son Jacob deceives Isaac into giving Jacob the familial blessing for the first born by dressing in Esau's clothes and claiming to be Esau. When Esau arrives to receive his blessing, Isaac realizes his error but sadly reports that he cannot give Esau the blessing. As Osteen remarks, "Isaac's answer was insightful and powerful: 'No, the words have already gone forth, and I cannot take them back. I said that Jacob will be blessed and he will always be blessed.' Do you see the power of words? . . . We need to be extremely careful about what we allow to come out of our mouths."¹³⁵

Ostensibly, Osteen's point is that words carry spiritual power and he emphasizes that "you can't ever get those words back."¹³⁶ Yet these are not words spoken in faith. They lack the procedural power outlined by the prosperity preachers. But Osteen urges his audience to understand that in the case of Jacob, "the words his father spoke over him would impact him, *for either good or evil*, the rest of his life."¹³⁷ I have highlighted the portion that indicates good or

evil, because it is not in concert with the theurgist powers noted above. Indeed, in this case the power of words operates outside of God. Osteen remarks that the Scriptures themselves attest to the fact “that with our words we can bless people or we can curse them.”¹³⁸

Thus, the power of words is a neutral force of *summoning*—a conjuring force. Osteen remarks that, “God-talk brings God on the scene. Enemy-talk brings the enemy on the scene... You must choose which voice comes to life.”¹³⁹ If you choose the God-talk, you will receive benefits. If you speak negatively, you order the forces of the universe against you. If you say that you will not receive an interview, you will not receive an interview. If you say that you will be sick, you will be sick. “With your own words you’d be sealing your fate.”¹⁴⁰

In some accounts, even the blessing of God cannot stand when negative words are spoken aloud. Osteen declares that the promises of God cannot overcome “negative words.”¹⁴¹ Discouragement leads to negative talking, which leads to more negative events. Just like Rhonda Byrne’s “Law of Attraction” in *The Secret* (itself a handbook on mystical prosperity), negative thinking—or in Osteen’s case, *speaking*—will attract bad events. Astonishingly, Byrne even suggests in her work that negative thinking on the part of victims of mass murders caused the mass murder because disaster is *attracted* to those who think negatively.¹⁴² Osteen never makes quite such a claim, but the concept of *cursing* or even witch-hexing, in Jakes’s terms, is exactly the same. By using negative words, individuals can curse themselves and others.

What we have is a mystical rhetoric of identification. Although the special powers of blessing are theurgic, all words have power—power that is independent from the Will of God. The spiritual world has laws that are neutral, that submit to the spoken will of human beings. Those who believe in the word-power of the Gospel take a mystic look at the universe. In understanding and proclaiming the rhetoric of the Word, they choose, as Gloria Copeland

remarks, to interpret that Gospel literally. The stories of magical powers in the OT and NT are not simply stories told to get us to understand a point, to grasp the significance of words, but literally true. When the OT says, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit,” Copeland remarks that “I have chosen to take it quite literally.”¹⁴³ It takes positive words that identify with God to gain blessings. Negative words, which do not identify with God, conversely identify with The Enemy. The Secret, to Copeland, is that we should not look to material causes to understand the natural world, but spiritual causes that can be practically dealt with by identifying with God.¹⁴⁴

A Magical World-View and the Rhetoric of the Universe

It should be clear, by now, what I mean by my claim that the CPG espouses a magical world-view. In the CPG, the universe is governed by spiritual laws that supersede the natural laws revealed by scientific investigation. Whereas the modernist outlook assigns a great deal of what occurs in the world to *motion* and, therefore, to the random and unthinking mechanical procedures of the universe, the CPG preachers declare that *nothing is accidental*; behind every event there is the working of spiritual forces. Curses, blessings, God, the devil, and demons are at work everywhere, being summoned into the world by the power of speech in human beings. By declaring that ‘nothing is impossible with God’ and urging their believers to claim things and opportunities in God’s name, the CPG preachers urge their listeners and readers to see a universe which is always and at every point contingent upon invisible forces that can be accessed by those who possess the right knowledge, the correct rituals, and the proper words.

For those who know these Secrets, great powers and opportunities await. Miracles—practical ones, that solve daily problems—come from the spoken word. If the believer can draw upon the power of God correctly, using the correct practiced technique, the whole world can

operate differently. Promotions can be gained, fancy cars purchased, debt relieved, finances can grow; Gloria Copeland specifically notes that such beliefs will benefit the bank account. The exact mystic machinations of the spiritual world are, of course, outside our immediate observation; but those with eyes of faith can see the *possibilities* that lie in the manipulation of the spiritual laws and they know how to gain them. Correct belief does, quite literally, grant believers the occult power of the Seer, able to envision a world that operates differently and able to see the unseen levers of power behind every seemingly insignificant act. Whereas others simply see, say, a computer's random need to select one passenger for an upgrade to First Class seating, the believer understands that there are no random events. The whole seating process of the aircraft has been dictated by the spiritual laws of the universe.

Moreover, the universe is not intrinsically *natural*, simply requiring the intervention of God once in a while to benefit the believers—it is always acting in response to the spoken words of human beings. In Burke's terms, the universe relies on action and rhetorical appeals, instead of the motion of physical sciences.¹⁴⁵ Like the action of God in speaking to create the universe, the speaking act of humans always impacts the universe, for good or for ill. In Hagin's vision of the world, there are always angels or demons lurking behind every act, summoned by the attention or inattention of human beings to their use of language. More contemporary preachers eschew that kind of demonology but continue to emphasize that positive and negative speaking *directly* influence the spiritual world and, thereby, the physical world. Through Positive Confession, believers can gain a positive influence over the events of Universe, but if they fail to use the theurgist power, that does not mean they have no power. Words *always* have power in the scheme. Language, as Stark described, is always enchanted. When believers use 'God-talk,' the events of the universe will respond. People will be more likely to be persuaded by them,

events will fall their way. When anyone, believers or otherwise, speaks negatively, or uses ‘Enemy-talk,’ negative things happen. Curses occur. Words themselves, the means of exchange in the universe, are entirely neutral. They convey the will of persons, manifested in spoken words, for good or for evil.

This magic world-view, oddly enough, does not reject the power of scientific thinking. In fact, every preacher appeals to scientific research to support his or her views. In some sense, each seeks to find in the physical sciences a sense of legitimacy and support—signs of the logic of the supernatural in the natural world. Osteen, for example, explains the power of human beings as a result of having God’s DNA in our system, citing scientific evidence for the significance of DNA for inherited characteristics. Such efforts are unsurprising. Galbreath noted that one of the key ways that the occult attempts to legitimate itself in the modern era is by expressing itself in scientific or quasi-scientific terms. It uses factual scientific evidence, analogically extended, to explain the structure of the universe.¹⁴⁶

However, the universe is ultimately supra-rational. I choose the term “supra-rational” instead of irrational because it is a rationality, in this world-view above the mainline modernist rationality. The most significant trope of the CPG is the mystified doctors who, having declared a patient terminally ill and recovery impossible, are stunned to discover that through the power of Positive Confession, the patient has, in fact, recovered completely. These doctors serve as a kind of reluctant testimony, scientists of the natural world who are forced to recognize the limits of the rules of the natural. The CPG does not, of course, ignore that these doctors have a certain knowledge that itself has efficacy. Instead, they claim that above the world of science and medicine exists a higher “science”—an occult science that can, at any time, circumvent the rules of the natural universe by pulling supernatural strings.

Positive Confession, then, does not espouse the rejection of the natural world, merely its subservience to the spiritual world. The world-view is not without its internal problems. One might wonder, for example, why any knowledge of the natural world is needed, if every event in the natural world has a supernatural cause. Why are there natural laws at all if the spiritual world governs everything? What explains the consistent outcomes of the empirical sciences and humanistic studies compared to mystical knowledge structures? These are not outcomes addressed by the CPG. Indeed, though the CPG appeals to a plethora of scientific support and anecdotal empirical evidence for its success, it does so without discussing the larger cosmological problems involved in its world-view. As Chapter 8 will discuss, these are not questions that are of much interest to its audience.

Historically, rhetoric—the spoken word—has been a crossing point for magic, religion, and science. The rhetorical outlook of the CPG privileges the power of rhetoric to an occult level. Language has mystical powers, far beyond the power of the mere physical sciences. In the CPG, words reflect and apply the most important thing in the universe—the will. God’s Will, human beings’ will, the Devil’s will. The universe, in their scheme, is a rhetorical place, responding most to the expressed will of each of these beings. How we choose our words matters most. As Copeland says, our words reveal our innermost heart, and the universe takes these utterances very seriously. Words are no mere *representation* of the events of the natural world—they are the actions which cause other events. As Burke remarks, the magical outlook is a rhetoric addressed to the Universe. Though we may scoff, with Burke, that ““word magic”” is “an attempt to produce linguistic responses in kinds of beings not accessible to the linguistic motive,” this is not so in the theurgist outlook of the CPG.¹⁴⁷ For the believers in the CPG, it is a rhetoric addressed to God or the Devil, the governing entities of the universe. Though

contemporary preachers leave out Hagin's demonology, the assumption is that there are thinking, intellectual entities hiding behind every action which must be commanded/persuaded through the use of language. Demons imposing illness or poverty, witches sending out curses, a God waiting to bestow blessings—these beings must be persuaded to act or flee by the individual possessing the right power of words of Positive Confession. The magic world-view requires a rhetorical key.

Conclusion

I hope I have demonstrated that the occult is not dead, disappeared, or gone. It is, in fact, gaining a particular resurgence in the theurgists of the CPG. This partnership of the magical and religious rhetoric (or magical and scientific rhetoric, for that matter) is not new. Centuries of magicians have claimed to draw their power from the blessings of God. Though we can provisionally separate the forms of magic and religion by their intentions and areas of address, in practice religion has never been free of the occult. The OT and NT are filled with magical accounts, practical, daily problems solved by the power of religious magic. Wealth is gained, the dead are raised, demons are cast out, illnesses are healed, fishes are multiplied, individuals fly, curses and blessings are spoken, sorcerers are defeated and employed, visions are gained, the future is seen, dreams are interpreted, the presence of God is summoned.

Why then, has this occult aspect received so little attention, except from polemicists who are quick to describe the CPG as occultic, with all its demonic connotations? Perhaps it has to do with the very daily, practical nature of magic itself. Recent scholars have been enamored of the grandiose, the demonic, and the extremely esoteric. Yet, as Malinowski noted, most magic is entirely mundane. It is monotonous, often shallow, and deals with the daily, practical problems of everyday living.¹⁴⁸ Though its means are mystical—an interesting sounding word—few people are interested in learning or examining the rather unexciting world of the magical address

of credit card debt. Occultism at the personal level, exercised by millions of individuals in regards to their daily lives, is not particularly exciting. It is easy to mistake for mere superstition. Yet, in the case of the CPG, these ‘superstitions’ are not the isolated occultist process of tossing spilled salt over the shoulder. These daily, occultist beliefs are part of an entire world-view—one that ascribes even the smallest events to spiritual forces at work daily. Such a world requires the privileged position for rhetoric. Spoken language, in this case, becomes the essential power of the universe, persuading commanding vast supernatural forces for those with the proper knowledge, faith, and practice, although often for the most ordinary, mundane reasons.

The presence of the occult in the most common of daily religions should not be unexpected. Folk magic has been a near constant throughout the modern period—although at modernism’s highest point magic receded in the face of science. Religion, with its grandiose narratives and otherworldly rhetoric, often has little to do with the daily needs of the believer. And while elites have made distinctions between religion and magic throughout the modern period, treating one with reverence and the other with scorn, most persons to this day do not understand the differences between science, religion, and magic. Indeed, some of the greatest intellectual luminaries of the modern era, including Ernst Cassirer, Claude Levi-Strauss, and Emile Durkheim, have been skeptical of the claim that there *is* any practical difference between religion and magic. Both involve ritual, preternatural powers, supplication, and belief. The division is often a product of mere supernatural chauvinism. Religion and magic both trade in the same currency—the power of human actions to impact an unseen but very real supernatural world. One can understandably raise an eyebrow at those religionists who denounce the CPG as

preposterously irrational occultism while comfortably believing Christ rose from the dead, made water into wine, walked on water, and will raise the dead at the End of Time.

The magic/science divide is a bit harder to parse. The modernist will scoff at the CPG's claim to efficacy and its hokey stories of persons saved from falling debris, plane crashes, or diseases through the magic power of prayer. The modernist will insist, above all, that science and technology constitute real power while all else is superstition. Perhaps this is so. But it must be remembered that for most persons, there is little difference between the esoteric knowledge of modern medicine and high technology and the occultism of Christian miracles. This is particularly so in a nation already rife with belief in the supernatural. In many ways, modernism and its emphasis on the inscrutable, global forces of economics, culture, science, politics, and more have left many feeling even more out of control than in the past. Both Creflo Dollar and Joel Osteen's most recent books promise to show readers how to use the occult power of the CPG to counteract the forces of the Great Recession that has stretched from 2008 to the writing of this chapter. It gives the reader control. It relies upon the ancient ideas that "rhetoric invokes" and that humans actions lie at the root of all events in the universe.

This is nothing new. Psychological research in the occult has long understood that magical thinking has helped its believers cope with the mysterious, terrifying forces in their lives. Just as most persons in the 17th century did not fully grasp the distinction between magic, science, and religion, persons today may have little interest in parsing the blurred distinctions and secret languages that operate in each camp. To these persons science, faith, and magic need not be in contest. If medicine can cure a disease, so be it. If not, magic-like faith has a role in keeping the believer in control of the situation. Certainly, a world in which poverty and illness are caused by intelligent, evil spirits that can be countered by summoning or invoking Godly

forces is a much simpler, much less terrifying one compared to a world governed by the mindless and cruel probabilities of the natural and macro-social world.¹⁴⁹

Lastly, I cannot close this chapter without addressing the significant increase in the popularity of the occult beliefs in contemporary life. After all, though the occult never disappeared and can never disappear, it certainly waned in significance during the first three-quarters of the 20th century. Now, however, the theurgist occultism of the CPG commands the attention of tens of thousands in megachurches all over the nation. Why is this so?

I will briefly suggest that what is emerging in the theurgist magic world-view of the occult is a subtle rhetoric of resistance to the hegemonic power of modernism. One of the key premises of this dissertation is that the modernist conception of life—one dictated by material, rationalist ways of thinking managed by technology and manipulated and tested by science—is losing much of its absolutist appeal. For the greater part of the 20th century and perhaps longer, the modernist concept of life reduced the universe and its beings to raw physical and physiological objects to be subjected to scientific study and technological management. Religious beliefs, like magical ones, declined in the modernist period as its techniques and structures were subordinated to the processes of rationality and empirical study. To the modernist outlook, the universe was material to be manipulated—language merely the descriptor of a static, inanimate world.¹⁵⁰ The modernist not only demands these views to be respected, the modernist demands their absolute authority—an authority that was bolstered by the sheer power of modernist approaches to produce longer, better lives, and reliable methods for obtaining ever better results. As Heidegger concludes, it is an organizing, securing, hegemonic process based in a static world picture.¹⁵¹

In his seminal work *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau remarked that in the face of the overwhelming strategic force of dominant structures, rhetoric can serve as a counteracting, tactical means of resistance. Though imperial forces rule the day and direct opposition to those forces is not practical, those who oppose or wish to resist those forces may avoid direct confrontation and instead use “everyday conversation” to manipulate and counteract the force of the imperial discourse. Though disciplinary techniques exist in the world, there are ways, below the level of hegemonic strategy, that groups and cultures can enact “anti-discipline.”¹⁵² These “tactical” discourses cannot count on legitimacy in the broader arena—they do not have a discursive space of their own from which they can launch resistive maneuvers. Instead, they must exist with the hegemonic discourse of the dominant, disciplinary perspective. Rhetoric is conducive to the tactical. It relies upon opportunities; timely interventions that allow it to maximize its appeal. Whereas the language of modernist technological and scientific management has no ability to make itself more palatable—it is, as Stark notes, attached to the idea that words have no power at all—rhetoric has the ability to tailor itself to an occasion. Whereas the overarching structure of modernism is rigid in its way of speaking, rhetoric enables the tacticians to be flexible, to utilize tropes and figures as needed, to confront as little or as much as is needed and in different ways to different places.¹⁵³ James C. Scott has commented that in the face of dominant power structures, discourses of resistance most commonly manifest themselves in “active manipulation of rituals of subordination to turn to good personal advantage.”¹⁵⁴ In sum, the *enthymematic* and figurative powers of rhetoric allow itself to draw upon the audience for a persuasive advantage.

Joshua Gunn has suggested that the occult cannot survive the surveillance of the postmodern, where nothing is hidden. Yet the occult remains and is even gaining power. I

suggest it does so through the use of rhetorical tactics of the type cataloged by de Certeau—it relies upon the audience to create a rhetoric that resists the hegemony of modernist thinking and creates for itself a space in which belief in the occult becomes possible. The CPG is not directly contesting the authority or efficacy of modernist scientific thinking—direct confrontation is impossible. It even borrows from the scientific tropes to bolster its own credibility. It is a rhetoric of magic tailored to the ingrained religious sense of a traditionally religious nation—and a culture that, in Charles Taylor’s terms—is searching for something to believe in besides the cold, raw methods of modernism. The CPG is a rhetoric of the everyday, concerned not with the grandiose problems of the global economy or even really with eternal salvation, but with the rituals and practical devices of everyday life, even to the point of the mundane and, yes, the boring. The CPG intends to bend and alter the world-view of the believers to see job interviews, real estate deals, personal relationships, financial investments, child-raising, and even the mundane dangers of urban life not in terms of the scientific outlook of modernism, but in the magical terms of a Christian occult. Chapter 6 will examine the way that CPG reinforces the status quo socio-economic arrangements, but for now it suffices to say that the CPG challenges the hegemony of the modernist world-view not by overturning its rituals or even its benefits of material wealth and physical health, but by altering the understanding of how those items work. Postmodernity, far from making such occult beliefs impossible to maintain, has reduced the hegemony of the modernist metanarrative and provided an opening through which such low-level resistances to the abstract power of modernism can be credibly believed.

¹ Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*, Third Edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 154-155.

² Langer, *Philosophy*, 155.

³ Dave Hunt and T.A. McMahon, *The Seduction of Christianity: Spiritual Discernment in the Last Days* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1985), 97-98.

⁴ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Old Testament Case for Material Blessings and the Contemporary Believer," in *The Gospel and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Douglas J. Moo (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1997), 37. In considering Langer and the polemicists' denigration of the Positive Confession, one is sometimes tempted to reply, "Ah, I see, it is occultist because it expects prayer to *work*."

⁵ Robert Galbreath, "Explaining Modern Occultism," in *The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives*, eds. Howard Kerr and Charles L. Crow (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 15. The further citations that support this would be too long to include here.

⁶ D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World-View*, Revised and Enlarged. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998). See also, Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 269

⁷ Bert Hansen, "Magic, Bookish." In *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. Joseph F. Strayer (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1987), 8:33, 36.

⁸ John Middleton, "Magic," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987), 9:82.

⁹ Donald Hill, "Magic: Magic in Primitive Societies," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 9:90.

¹⁰ Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science, and Religion* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1954), 69, 76.

¹¹ Malinowski, *Magic*, 86.

¹² A.A. Bard, "The Survival of the Magical Arts," in *The Conflict Between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* (100-125) ed. Arnaldo Momigliano (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 101.

¹³ Peter Brown, *Religion and Society in the Age of St. Augustine* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1972), 139-140.

¹⁴ Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 94, 95.

¹⁵ Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, 93.

¹⁶ Jacob Neusner, "Science and Magic, Miracle and Magic in Formative Judaism: The System and Difference," in *Religion, Science, and Magic*, eds. Jacob Neusner, Ernest S. Frerichs, and Paul Virgil McCracken Flesher (61-81) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 63.

¹⁷ George B. Vetter, *Magic and Religion: Their Psychological Nature, Origin, and Function* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1958), 163

¹⁸ Vetter, *Magic and Religion*, 159.

¹⁹ Vetter, *Magic and Religion*, 168.

²⁰ Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), 221.

²¹ Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, xxvi.

²² Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 44.

²³ Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 636-637.

²⁴ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (New York: The Free Press, 1915), 57.

²⁵ Durkheim, *The Elementary*, 58. For more on the dynamics of this relationship see, William J. Goode, "Religion and Magic: A Continuum," *Ethnos* 14 (1949), 172-182.

²⁶ Jacob Neusner, "Science and Magic, Miracle and Magic in Formative Judaism: The System and Difference," in *Religion, Science, and Magic*, eds. Jacob Neusner, Ernest S. Frerichs, and Paul Virgil McCracken Flesher (61-81) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 63.

²⁷ Bert Hansen, "Magic, Bookish." In *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. Joseph F. Strayer (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1987), 8:33.

²⁸ Wayne Shumaker, *Natural Magic and Modern Science: Four Treatises, 1590-1657* (Binghamton, New York: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1989), 19.

²⁹ Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 5.

³⁰ Jean-Claude Schmitt, "Magic and Folklore, Western European." In *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. Joseph F. Strayer (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1987), 28.

³¹ Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 3.

³² Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 27.

³³ For example, in 1593, George Gifford writes that Cunning Folk are an effective defense against the power of witches; see Peter Haining, *Witchcraft Papers: Contemporary Records of the Witchcraft Hysteria in Essex, 1560-1700* (London: Robert Hale & Co., 1974), 79. Haining reports that Cunning Folk were almost never prosecuted for their practice of magic (20).

³⁴ Mordechai Feingold, "The Occult Tradition in the English Universities of the Renaissance: A Reassessment," In *Occult and Scientific Mentalities in the Renaissance*. Edited by Brian Vickers, 73-94 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). 78, 84-86; Thomas, *Religion*, 269.

³⁵ Ryan J. Stark, *Rhetoric, Science, & Magic in Seventeenth-Century England* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 3.

³⁶ Michael McDonald, *Mystical Bedlam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 16-17.

³⁷ Peter Brown, *Religion*, 139-142. The separation of witchcraft from learned magic was not definite, however. Witch-hunter and political theorist Jean Bodin condemned learned magic, as did witch-hunt opponent Johann Weyer. See, Johann Weyer, *On Witchcraft: An Abridged Translation of Johann Weyer's De praestigiis daemonum*, eds. Benjamin G. Kohl and H.C. Erik Midelfort (Asheville, NC: Pegasus Press, 1998); Jean Bodin, *On the Demon-mania of Witches*, trans. Randy A. Scott (Toronto : Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 1995); Stark, *Rhetoric, Science, & Magic*, 4.

³⁸ Hansen, "Magic, Bookish," 32.

³⁹ Stark, *Rhetoric, Science, & Magic*, 4.

⁴⁰ Stark, *Rhetoric*, 91; McDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, 16-17; Thomas, *Religion*, 270

⁴¹ Robert Burton, qtd. in Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 9.

⁴² Galbreath, "Explaining," 31.

⁴³ David Hall, *World of Wonders, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 102-103.

⁴⁴ Richard Godbeer, *The Devil's Dominion: Magic and Religion in Early New England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 6; Hall, *Worlds of Wonders*, 7.

⁴⁵ Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 109.

⁴⁶ Stephen Wilson, *The Magical Universe: Everyday Ritual and Magic in Pre-Modern Europe* (London: Hambledon and London, 2000), 431-432.

⁴⁷ MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, 7.

⁴⁸ Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 41, 19-20.

⁴⁹ Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Knopf, 2002); Cotton Mather, *The Wonders of the Invisible World: Being an Account of the Tryals of Several Witches, Lately Executed in New-England*, 3rd Edition (London: John Dutton, 1693). Despite the plague of witches, most of those who practiced learned magic still considered their art a gift of God, if not quite miracles; see Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 271.

⁵⁰ Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 14.

⁵¹ Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 26-27; Jon Butler, "The Dark Ages of American Occultism, 1760-1848," in Kerr and Crow, 58-78.

⁵² Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances & Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 139.

⁵³ Taves, *Fits, Trances & Visions*, 167. Joshua Gunn has commented that the revealing of the occult is often tied to the development of new technology. Spiritualists found the spiritual telegraph, seekers of Electronic Voice Phenomenon find voices in the television; Joshua Gunn "On Vocalic Projection: EVP, Backmasking, and the Archival Impulse." Presentation delivered by invitation to the Department of Communication Studies, University of Kansas, Lawrence, 2 September 2009.

⁵⁴ Mitch Horowitz, *Occult America: White House Séances, Ouija Circles, Masons, and the Secret History Mystic History of Our Nation* (New York: Bantam Books, 2009), 57-62. Lincoln was not a believer in these séances.

⁵⁵ Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 17-20.

⁵⁶ Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 19.

⁵⁷ Robert S. Ellwood, Jr., "The American Theosophical Synthesis," in Kerr and Crow, 111-134.

⁵⁸ Taves, *Fits, Trances & Visions*, 249, 271.

⁵⁹ Taves, *Fits, Trances & Visions*, 310-312; E.W. Kenyon, *Jesus the Healer* (Seattle: Kenyon's Gospel Publishing Society, 1943); E.W Kenyon, *The Hidden Man: An Unveiling of the Subconscious Mind* (Seattle: Kenyon's Gospel Publishing Society, 1970).

⁶⁰ R. Laurence Moore. "The Occult Connection: Mormonism, Christian Science, and Spiritualism," in Kerr and Crow, 155.

⁶¹ Galbreath, "Explaining," 20.

⁶² Rhonda Byrne, *The Secret* (New York: Atria Books, 2006); Rhonda Byrne, *The Secret: The Power* (New York: Atria, 2010).

⁶³ Byrne, *The Secret*, 4-5.

⁶⁴ Byrne, *The Secret*, 47-62.

⁶⁵ Wayne W. Dyer, *Real Magic: Creating Miracles in Everyday Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); Wayne W. Dyer, *Wisdom of the Ages: 60 Days to Enlightenment* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002); Wayne W. Dyer *You'll See It When You Believe It: The Way to Your Personal Transformation* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989).

⁶⁶ Dyer, *You'll See It*, 13.

⁶⁷ *The Prosperity Bible: The Greatest Writing of All Time on the Secrets to Wealth and Prosperity* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2007); Napoleon Hill, *Think and Grow Rich* in *The Prosperity Bible* (1-184); Charles Fillmore *Prosperity*, in *The Prosperity Bible* (409-505); Robert Collier, *The Secret of the Ages*, in *The Prosperity Bible* (831-998).

⁶⁸ Collier, *The Secret of the Ages*, 853, 869

⁶⁹ Joshua Gunn, *Modern Occult Rhetoric: Mass Media and the Drama of Secrecy in the Twentieth* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama, 2005), xxii.

⁷⁰ Gunn, *Modern Occult Rhetoric*, 203-204.

⁷¹ Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 277-279, 647-668.

⁷² As Income Gap Balloons, Is It Holding Back Growth?, National Public Radio, July 10, 2011, <http://www.npr.org/2011/07/10/137744694/as-income-gap-balloons-is-it-holding-back-growth?ps=cprs> (accessed July 16, 2011).

⁷³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 41-43. Unbelief in the "enchanted" world-view must be harshly punished, as it broke down the collective faith in the power of magico-religious belief. Such a breakdown was intolerable and to be avoided at all costs.

⁷⁴ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 6-14.

⁷⁵ I do not mean to make the belief structures of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints equivalent to the Church of Scientology. Both, however, contain occultist elements in the sense that both claim to possess a secret knowledge that gives them unique spiritual and physical power. I hope that my efforts to point out the magical elements of both Catholicism and Protestantism will serve as some defense against the claim that I am grinding any kind of scholarly axe against a particular religious denomination.

⁷⁶ Gunn, *Modern*, 110-111.

⁷⁷ Godbeer, *Devil's Dominion*, 11.

⁷⁸ Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, 80-81.

⁷⁹ Kenneth Hagin, *The Midas Touch: A Balanced Approach to Biblical Prosperity* (Tulsa, OK: Faith Library Publications, 2000), 5.

⁸⁰ Kenneth Copeland, *The Image of God in You* (Tulsa, OK: Harrison House, 1987), 6-7.

⁸¹ Image obtained from Kenneth Copeland—Ministries, <http://www.kencopeland.com/> (accessed August 16, 2011).

⁸² “The fact that the new philosophers continued the use of tropes to denounce tropes is entirely beside the point...They had no desire to remove figurative language from all discourses, or even scientific discourses, which are packed full of tropes, and not surprisingly so, given that language is tropological by nature. And neither did the experimentalists disparage eloquence, another often-suggested axiom. Rather, the shared antipathy toward occult philosophy and witchcraft. Charmed rhetoric, broadly understood, was the true antithesis of the new plain style. Advancers of learning used the idea of plainness to distinguish between their non-magical understandings of language and esoteric beliefs held by wizards, witches, theurgists, and other practitioners of mysterious arts, of whom there were many. “Plainness” denoted a lack of enchantment in discourse, not an absence of figuration, and it functioned as a shorthand way of dissociating one’s rhetoric from numinous modes of writing, where style continued to operate as a form of sorcery, where tropes had charm, either naturally or preternaturally imbued.” Stark, *Rhetoric*, 2.

⁸³ Brian Vickers, “Analogy versus Identity,” in *Occult and Scientific Mentalities in the Renaissance*, 96, 106, 123; see also, Donald Hill, “Magic: Magic in Primitive Societies,” *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 9:92.

⁸⁴ Wilson, *The Magic Universe*, 429.

⁸⁵ Stark, *Rhetoric, Science, & Magic*, 9-10.

⁸⁶ Gunn, *Modern Occult Rhetoric*, 246.

⁸⁷ Kenneth Hagin, *I Believe in Visions*, Second Edition (Tulsa, OK: Faith Library Publications, 1989), 114.

⁸⁸ Gloria Copeland, *God's Master Plan for Your Life* (New York: Putnam Praise, 2008), 58.

⁸⁹ Kenneth Copeland, *Prosperity: The Choice is Yours* (Fort Worth: Kenneth Copeland Ministries, 1985),

10.

⁹⁰ Gloria Copeland, *God's Master Plan*, 44.

⁹¹ Creflo Dollar, *Winning in Troubled Times* (New York: Faith Words, 2010), 7.

⁹² Joel Osteen, *Become a Better You: 7 Keys to Improving Life Every Day* (New York: Free Press, 2007),

41.

⁹³ Norton, *In the Devil's Snare*, 20. A witch cake is utilized in an attempt to discover the source of a preternatural affliction.

⁹⁴ Alan Greenspan was famously described as a “wizard” of economics. Thomas Edison was described as wizard for his mastery of technology. Although these are casual tropic uses, not literal ones, it is easy to imagine that upon consideration, esoteric knowledge of economics or technology probably are a kind of partially literalized analog of arcane mysticism. For examples on Greenspan as wizard in the popular media, see: *Frontline*, “The Greenspan Era,” posted October 20, 2009, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/warning/themes/greenspan.html>, accessed July 21, 2011. On Edison, see: Randall Stross, *The Wizard of Menlo Park: How Thomas Alva Edison Invented the Modern World* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2007).

⁹⁵ Stark, *Rhetoric*, 3; also, Thomas, *Religion*, 269.

⁹⁶ Kenneth Copeland, *Prosperity*, 47.

⁹⁷ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 79.

⁹⁸ Joyce Meyers, *Power Thoughts: 12 Strategies to Win the Battle of the Mind* (New York: Faith Words, 2010), 29.

⁹⁹ Image attached to the article by Corine Gatti, “Joyce Meyer Talks Power Thoughts, Life,” beliefnet, <http://www.beliefnet.com/Inspiration/Joyce-Meyer-Talks-Power-Thoughts.aspx> (accessed August 16, 2011).

¹⁰⁰ T.D. Jakes in “Bishop T.D. Jakes—Free Your Mind.” n.d. Youtube. Retrieved June 16, 2011 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5MZpatXx4V8>.

¹⁰¹ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 5.

¹⁰² Image was attached to an article by Nicole Shirley, “Pardon me pastor – Spiritually full and physically starved,” Antigua and Barbuda News Pages, <http://antiguaspeaks.com/news/?p=5105> (accessed August 16, 2011).

¹⁰³ Meyers, *Power Thoughts*, 25-28.

¹⁰⁴ Meyers, *Power Thoughts*, 25-28.

¹⁰⁵ Creflo Dollar in “Creflo Dollar - Being Blessed Through Words.” n.d. Youtube. Retrieved June 16, 2011 from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sb_j8nxcswM&NR=1.

¹⁰⁶ Dyer, *You’ll See It*, 15, “How? By believing you are a soul with a body rather than body with a soul. You will create for yourself a life that is literally without limitations.” Also pp. 30, 47-56, 245.

¹⁰⁷ See Chapter 2. Hagin believes God delegated certain authorities to humans and gave them supernatural power over the earth.

¹⁰⁸ The familial trope is discussed at length in Chapter 4.

¹⁰⁹ Meyer, *Power Thoughts*, 21.

¹¹⁰ Kenneth Copeland, *Prosperity*, 25.

¹¹¹ Malinowski, *Magic*, 7.

¹¹² Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California, 1969), 65.

¹¹³ Gunn, *Modern Occult Rhetoric*, 426. See also, Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969), 44.

¹¹⁴ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 122.

¹¹⁵ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 125.

¹¹⁶ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 125. My emphasis.

¹¹⁷ Dollar, “Creflo Dollar - Being Blessed Through Words.”

¹¹⁸ Osteen, *It’s Your Time*, 124.

¹¹⁹ Gloria Copeland, *God’s Master Plan*, 109.

¹²⁰ Osteen, *It’s Your Time*, 120-121.

¹²¹ Hagin, *The Midas Touch*, 31-32.

¹²² Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 125.

¹²³ Kenneth Copeland, *Prosperity*, 49-50.

¹²⁴ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 127.

¹²⁵ Gloria Copeland, *God's Master Plan*, 65.

¹²⁶ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 46. Areas that Osteen encourages the reader to speak favor over: business, real estate, clients, before a presentation.

¹²⁷ Dollar, *Winning in Troubled Times*, 21.

¹²⁸ Kenneth Copeland, *Prosperity*, 50.

¹²⁹ T.D. Jakes, *Life Overflowing*, 15.

¹³⁰ Gloria Copeland, *God's Master Plan*, 106.

¹³¹ Gloria Copeland, *God's Master Plan*, 279-280. It's easy to imagine that such stories might have earned those involved an arrest and witch-trial in the 16th and 17th centuries.

¹³² Thompson, *Money Cometh!*, 123. "There is power in those two anointed words."

¹³³ Gloria Copeland, *God's Master Plan*, 113.

¹³⁴ T.D. Jakes, *Bishop T.D. Jakes—Free Your Mind* [video]. Retrieved June 16, 2011 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5MZpatXx4V8>.

¹³⁵ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 138.

¹³⁶ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 138.

¹³⁷ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 134. My emphasis.

¹³⁸ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 133.

¹³⁹ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 126.

¹⁴⁰ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 126.

¹⁴¹ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 124.

¹⁴² Byrne, *The Secret*, 28. "Often when people first hear this part of the Secret they recall events in history where masses of lives were lost, and they find it incomprehensible that so many people could have attracted themselves to the event. By the law of attraction, they had to be on the same frequency as the event...the frequency of their thoughts matched the frequency of the event."

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- ¹⁴³ Gloria Copeland, *God's Master Plan*, 115.
- ¹⁴⁴ Copeland, *God's Master Plan*, 44.
- ¹⁴⁵ Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 65.
- ¹⁴⁶ Galbreath, "Explaining," 29-30.
- ¹⁴⁷ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California, 1969), 45.
- ¹⁴⁸ Malinowski, *Magic, Science, and Religion*, 69-70.
- ¹⁴⁹ McDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, 216-217.
- ¹⁵⁰ Kenneth Burke, "Terministic Screens," in *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1966), 44-45.
- ¹⁵¹ Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (115-154), 121-122; 152-153.
- ¹⁵² Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), xv.
- ¹⁵³ de Certeau, *The Practice*, xx.
- ¹⁵⁴ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 33.

CHAPTER 4:
GOSPELS AND GARGOYLES, PART ONE:
SETTLING INTO A POETIC OF THE GROTESQUE

Kenneth Burke wrote in *Attitudes Toward History* that the poetics of any time were constructed as “mental equipment (meanings, attitudes, character) by which one handles the significant factors of his time.”¹ Burke imagined that poetic trends deployed certain symbolic structures and patterns that served as tools of interpretation—ways of making sense (or even nonsense) of the times—a world-view, in the terms of the previous chapter. Following William James, Burke took literature as a way of either welcoming or resisting circumstances with which we are confronted.² The purpose of these poetics is threefold: first, the critical symbol structure of the poetic is a reflection of an era; second, the symbolic structures are attempts to account for the era; third, the symbolic structures are driving forces for defining an era.³

We now exist in in-between times—a place between welcome and resistance. This dissertation has already laid out the evidence for a breakdown of the traditional symbols of religion, neatly summed up by several scholars’ observation that church-goers feel a sense of “homelessness” as the core foundations of religious belief have collapsed into a “postmodern nihilism.”⁴ Charles Taylor dourly reports that as we push onward toward secularism, we sit beneath a Sword of Damocles that is “disunity and meaninglessness.”⁵ Few contemporary scholars summarized the situation better than William Barrett, who observed that increasing rational organization of society and life has brought on this homelessness by presenting humans, “with a universe that was neutral, alien, in its vastness and force.”⁶ David F. Wells observes that the rise of technological, capitalist culture has so captured contemporary psychology that much

of remaining religion is fundamentally shallow, reading like “the owner’s manual for operating the machine, replete with steps, easy-to-follow directions, and practical ‘how-to-do it’ formulae”:⁷ If you do this, you get that. Considering the easy faith and material outcomes of the CPG, it seems to be precisely what Wells has in mind.

This chapter explicates the strange state of contemporary American religion. I argue that we are trapped in a state of elongated symbolic transition that has facilitated the emergence of new, heterodox interpretations of Christianity. By “elongated,” I do not necessarily mean that the transition period is necessarily temporally longer, although I tend to think it will be. More significantly, I mean that the transition has warped from a buffering period between two periods into its own sustained period of suspended transition. This state of transition is at least in part a result of the mutual incompatibility of existing symbolic frames of secularity and religion. In particular, I argue the symbolic chaos and uncertainty in Western Christianity reflects a certain “settling” into a transitory poetic revealing what Burke called the “grotesque.” In the following chapter, I’ll argue that contemporary prosperity preaching, though it has a long history in the American tradition, is best understood as the peculiar symbolic formations Burke described as a “gargoyle.” Gargoyles are particular manifestations—discursive formations—of the periods of cultural and symbolic transition in which the debris of the previously debunked and collapsed symbol systems is reassembled into new forms. These forms, often odd or terrifying, both resemble and diverge from the old forms. They are mutations that fit strange times where unified structures of interpretation have collapsed.⁸

My claim for a ‘grotesque gospel’ is complex. It has sociological, rhetorical, and literary components; hence, I divide it in two parts. In this chapter, I outline the evidence indicating that we are currently in this state of transition and explicate Burke’s theory of poetic frames of

interpretation. In contrast to Burke, who believed that transition stood in a cycle between periods of rejection and acceptance, I contend that we are ‘settled’ into a grotesque *era*, rather than a mere transition, from which there is no immediate escape. To accomplish this task, I first outline Burke’s poetic categories, organized in cyclical form. Second, I review the evidence of the breakdown of traditional religious poetic frames of acceptance and attempt to provide an explanation for the breakdown. Third, I reconsider Burke’s cyclical process and argue that it has stalled in a transition. Finally, I outline the process of analysis that will be used in the following chapter.

Poetic Cycles

To understand my claim that an elongated transitional frame is now dominant, it is important to understand poetic cycles and the place of ‘frames of transitions’ in that process. In this section, I review the significance and implications of Burke’s cycle of the poetic frame. I begin by noting the significance of frames to the process of interpretation. Second, I review Burke’s poetic cycle of frames of acceptance, rejection, and transition. Finally, I note that though the cycle is progressive, it is not necessarily a positive progression.

Examining social dynamics, Burke imagined society moving in symbolic cycles. The degree of social cohesion and coherence relied upon the ability to maintain a commonly understood symbolic system that encouraged similar interpretation of natural and social phenomena. For although Burke acknowledged the existence of an *a priori* world of objects and events, he argued, “Stimuli do not possess an *absolute* meaning...Any given situation derives its character from the entire framework of interpretation by which we judge it.”⁹

Thus how we account for symbol-events relies significantly upon how they fit into a framework. Thinking of Husserl, we might imagine that the way we sort out and place the many

signs of the *Erlebnisstorm* depends on a variety of cognitive sorting mechanisms. Perhaps to put it too simply, if we were put to the task of determining whether an event should be interpreted as figurative lemon or lemonade, our conclusions would both reflect and be driven by the symbolic schema we used to understand the event.

Burke refers to symbol systems that function to facilitate a person or society's ability to live (relatively) comfortably in the world as *frames of acceptance*. Events, objects, and other phenomena are understood within a symbolic system that accounts for nearly all events, good or bad, and places them in a pattern that society can live with. For example, I may not like the fact that hail annually causes significant damage to my car, but in my scientific frame of acceptance I can understand hail as natural phenomenon with no relationship to any sinful behavior I might have engaged in. A different frame of acceptance might see weather phenomena as directly related to individual behavior and hence accept adverse weather as just retribution for moral failings. Either frame, fully internalized, prevents one from railing against the injustice of hail. At a societal level, the ability to jointly comprehend events or actions maintains a level of group cohesion. If a whole society can imagine that the coming of rain can be understood as related to piety in observing a certain moral code, that society can agree that certain actions or rituals are desirable or undesirable.

However, when these frames of acceptance fail to effectively account for, explain, or make the universe livable for individuals and society, negative *frames of rejection* occur in which old systems are abandoned, debunked, and discarded. Between the period of rejection and new periods of acceptance, *frames of transition* are characterized by the creation, re-invention, testing, and abandonment and subsequent re-assembly of new and old symbols into new relationships and structures.¹⁰

Burke remarks that the themes of the medieval period and its demise reflect this very process. The feudalist metaphor of family and the medieval symbolic unity between Church, government, and social organization, analogized by Christ's body, served as 'frames of acceptance' that explained existing social organization and stratification. Yet, as these frames were stretched to cover every instance, resistance occurred—entrepreneurial merchants had trouble accepting their divine place in the family, for example. As a frame of rejection emerged, the Protestant movement began in *opposition* to the medieval frames of feudalism and the Roman Church, including a *disassociative* process that attacked the unity of function in medieval power. The Reformation demanded separations of economics, church, state, and civil hierarchy. Rejection invited transition periods—periods where new religious schemes emerge: Calvinism, Lutheranism and many more that failed to fully develop. Initially in flux and sometimes warring with each other and the Roman Catholic tradition, these transition groups, spurred into more peaceful states by the growing profits to be had in the Enlightenment period, slowly calcified into their own frames of acceptance (or died away completely).¹¹

The promise of Burke's cycle is that we would move from settled periods, to unsettled ones, to periods of turmoil and back to settled states. The cycles move in a procession. Burke cites the "the historic curve on the graph of Western culture," a reference which may be tongue-in-cheek but which nonetheless indicates an evolutionary cycle. Frames of acceptance and rejection do not settle forever, but their form reappears under different circumstances. For example, Burke remarks that the materialist perspective that ended most of the West's religious wars was stretched to its breaking point during the 20th century, risking "decadence, neurosis, anger" and a move, again, toward frames of rejection.¹²

The procession of symbolic frames is not necessarily good. Burke wonders whether or not the materialist frames, bent on exploitation and the production of dangerous technologies, will result in the extermination of humankind. And the frames of acceptance cataloged by Burke do not necessarily reflect desirable outcomes. The “epic” frame of acceptance, for example, establishes a frame of acceptance built around accepting “the rigors of war” and promoting the warlike hero. Such a frame is meant to unify a society around a heroic figure and imbue its citizens with values that enable members to accept the violence of war.¹³ In adopting these frames there is a procession that settles society into comfortable patterns. In that, Burke is in line with many contemporary sociologists and political scientists.¹⁴

Symbolic Breakdown

But what if progress is in substantial doubt? What if the historical patterns, sociological cycles, and symbolic trends are somehow lacking or have stalled? What if symbolic breakdown is a *sustained* condition? In fact many leading scholars believe that the frame holding together modernity and religion has cracked, spurring a period of transition that, unlike earlier transitions, will not abide the cyclical pattern and will not subside into new frames. Manuel Castells remarked that the loss of the orderly procession of social change has left people unable to recognize the subtlety of contemporary social-symbolic shift.¹⁵ In this section, I review the evidence for a broad symbolic breakdown, noting the divorce between religious and scientific perspectives. Contrasting this era with prior ones, I argue that we are in a unique period—perhaps not more fragmented but less able to manage or account for the cultural, symbolic fragmentation. While the desire for religion has not been eliminated, its sustainability in the face of modernist logic has become difficult. A variety of persons, religious and secular, have noted the difficulty of the situation. Yet it is precisely in this environment that we will see the

strangest of cultural formations, grotesque assemblages of cultural symbolic debris that attempt, like prior frames, to make sense of the world.

Anthony Giddens argues that contemporary life is fundamentally different from the pattern of life in every other era of history.¹⁶ A host of scholars, including Lyotard, Gergen, Buttrick, and others have observed that as our cultural histories have been confronted with the traditions of other cultures, our ability to stake out certainty in our preferred patterns of symbolic interpretation have declined.¹⁷ The justifications for particular, partisan religious symbolic structures have particularly suffered. Walter Brueggemann remarked that "older modes of assertion about reality have an increasingly empty ring, even if we do not understand all the reasons for the change."¹⁸ Raschke, Kirk, and Taylor observe that there has been a "sudden and intense shattering of the bedrock assumptions about the cosmos that have been second nature...for generations."¹⁹ As the traditional forms of religious authority have collapsed, new religious groups have flourished.

In the Burkean cycle, therefore, one might conclude that our current poetic scheme is a period of *transition*. The wide-ranging poetics of new religions reflects the need for new tools to interpret an altered social world. Nothing is out of line here—in fact, the decay of traditional religious interpretations seems, in the Burkean sense, to reflect the 'curve of history.' Once certain frames cannot be sustained—in this case, in the light of the tension between modernity and religion—new frames will be found. Robert Putnam believes so, indicating that the current decline of civic engagements and the investment of social capital (a frame of acceptance, if there ever was one) is cyclical: "American history carefully examined is a story of ups and downs in civic engagement, *not just downs*—a story of collapse *and* of renewal."²⁰ Considering religion's inseparable relationship to American civic participation, we should expect that civic renewal will

include a renewal of religious institutions.²¹ And, if Raschke, Kirk, and Taylor are correct that “in a post-traditional age the automatic transfer of ideas and images from older to younger, from established authorities to novices...becomes difficult, if not impossible,” it is only so in the sense that all frames of acceptance (traditional symbolic interpretations) will meet resistance, collapse, and be followed by a chaotic transition period, and a return to a kind of normality.²²

Analysis of current social conditions that *presumes* a return to order does not take current conditions at full value. Giddens, for example, is not merely observing that this time is different from the previous frame of acceptance, but is making an argument that the entire procession of history has been interrupted by new facts. Unlike almost all previous Western civilizations, contemporary society has no need for God to explain the material facts of the universe. That fact, as Nietzsche knew, is profound. Charles Taylor argues that modernity—with its world-description that requires no participation from God—has fundamentally altered the nature of religion in relation to society. Taylor is worth quoting at length:

We have undergone a change in our condition, involving both the alteration of the structure we live within, and our way of imagining those structures. This is something we all share, regardless of our differences in outlook...What we share is what I have been calling the “immanent frame”; the different structures we live in: scientific, social, technological, and so on, constitute a frame...which can be understood on its own terms, without reference to the “supernatural” or “transcendent.” But this order of itself leaves the issue open whether, for purposes of ultimate explanation or spiritual transformation, or sense-making we might have to invoke something transcendent...The consequences of this change for religion have been complex and multidirectional...The developments of Western

modernity have rendered virtually unsustainable earlier forms of religious life, but...new forms have sprung up. Moreover, this process of destabilization and recomposition is not a once-for-all change, but is continuing. As a result the religious life of Western societies is much more fragmented than ever before, and also much more unstable.²³

The significance of Taylor's conclusion is remarkable. Although religion as a force has not entirely evaporated, it is no longer *required* as a foundation of the universe. This is a dramatic departure from the past. In Western society, Christianity and its theological discontents have long been foundational social organizers. Peter Berger noted that "religion...serves to maintain the reality of the socially constructed world within which men exist in their everyday lives."²⁴ This is particularly true, Berger argues, in cases where easy explanations for events or things do not exist, "marginal situations" that place basic interpretation of reality in question. This includes altered consciousness states like dreams, nightmares, twilight periods—but also our thoughts of things like our own significance in the cosmos. Religion helps us locate ourselves and the events that happen to us as well as legitimate the activity of the universe.

Moreover, religious symbologies serve the purpose of legitimating our own social norms. The power of religion as a social organizer stands in both its power to reflect our images and exceed them. In religion, we see the operation of the universe as we desire it to be. Religion gives us standards to live by. Of course, these standards are usually our own creation, "religion serves as a...looking glass in which humanity beholds its own image, its ideal portrait of itself."²⁵ The key, though, is that despite its origins religion is decidedly not taken as self-creation. Instead, it is understood as the imprint of metaphysics—rules that are suprapersonal and hence are not based in the changeable fashions of humanity. Humans accept(ed) religion as

objective, not as a product of our imagination. From this position religion obtains its power as a normative social force for coherence—a coherence that reflects our desires.²⁶

Burke's analysis accounts for religious conflict. For example, religious conflict interrupted the frame of acceptance set in final form by Aquinas. Burke posits that the religious conflicts that followed the medieval period were quelled by material (profit) concerns. Yet in material concerns, religion played a vital role. Observing much the same course of history as Burke, Weber observed that "the ends of religious and magic actions are predominantly economic."²⁷ In the post-medieval period, religion—new versions of which were created in the Reformation—was a vital *legitimizing* force of commercial concerns. Christianity, following the loss of its near total hegemony to the Reformation and Enlightenment, embarked on a critical partnership with business and economics.

This was the case until very recently in America. Following the Second World War, Americans enjoyed a period of unprecedented material wealth. The overwhelming interpretation was that America had earned its newfound economic dominance after 15 years of war and depression. But it had not, as it were, been earned as a reward of raw power, i.e., the spoils of victory. Instead, it was divinely ordained: "If...prosperity was central to the American way of life, so was religion. For it could be seen as following God's design, and America as a nation was especially founded to realize this design."²⁸

The conclusion fit a framework already well-entrenched in the United States. American tradition has long been deeply rooted in connections between capitalism, and religion.²⁹ Though capitalist economics and enterprise, and not theology, have guided American progress, for Americans the prosperity of modern society did not occur in the absence of God. God remained

the fundamental key to legitimizing the profiteering that was occurring. Religion also served to legitimate the political and social choices the United States had made over the 20th century.

Throughout this period the American religio-capitalist frame of acceptance, which Weber summarizes as the ‘Protestant Ethic,’ was being stretched by the growth of the natural and social sciences. That, of course, had been occurring for quite some time even before 1882, when Nietzsche announced insufficiency of God as a foundation for a morality in the future.³⁰ The removal of the vitality of God from a variety of facets of life had been building at least since the period of Descartes and Galileo. Yet Christianity was able to adapt itself to changing social circumstances by reorienting its place in order to remain a key social force—a phenomenon Burke refers to as “casuistic stretching.” Indeed, the church was uniquely innovative at introducing “new principles while theoretically remaining faithful to the old.”³¹

However, the case facing religion now is not an internal contradiction, i.e., an attempt to paper over Christianity’s prior ban on usury while simultaneously permitting it; but rather its fundamental lack of necessity to a coherent view of the world. Modernity has settled into its entirety—it is hegemonic to the point of containing extremely predictable ways of determining the likely and unlikely, as well as dictating the possible and impossible, with no need for a divine force. Famine, disease, death, wealth, and even unlikely events like winning the lottery or being struck by a tornado can be explained without reference to God’s will. People no longer require the church’s legitimization of economic activity. Capitalism has “naturalized” into something perceived to be near a physical science and no longer in need of supernatural endorsement. Indeed, profit motives sometimes appear in direct contradiction to the strictures of the Judaic and Christian Scriptures. In combination with Western culture’s confrontation with other frames of interpretation—ones that undermine the West’s claims to objective truth—Christianity’s

‘metanarrative’ account is greeted with significant skepticism.³² Secular, technological, and immediately practical processes have replaced religion as the grantor of legitimacy.

What comes next is hard to understand. Charles Taylor refers to the “secular age” post-religion as “schizophrenic, or better, deeply cross-pressured.”³³ Taylor’s description reflects Gergen’s belief that contemporary life is divided, experiences and expression of self are partial, and identity is being deeply complicated by cultural and technological pressures with few grounds for orienting the self outside of technological or scientific claims. William Barrett:

Religion, before this phase set in, had been structure that encompassed a man’s life, providing him with a system of images and symbols by which he could express his own aspirations toward psychic wholeness. With the loss of this containing framework man became not only dispossessed but a fragmentary being.³⁴

But this “secular age” is not filled with unbelievers. There are still theists, Christian, Muslims, Sikhs, and agnostics. In fact, there remains a desire to believe even while secular logics reign and most of Western culture does little in reference to God. As this dissertation documents, millions are *becoming* believers in prosperity theology. Still, as Taylor wryly remarks, just as many people admired and were inspired by the preaching and values of the late Pope John Paul II, few felt compelled to follow John Paul II’s moral dictates.

Therefore, tension still exists in the frame. While Christianity’s position as a wall against the disorder of secularism has collapsed, it remains a powerful cultural symbol and the desire of many hearts. In addition, the “emptiness” of modernity is itself a framework of failure. Modernism, on its own account, is missing something that provides a drive toward spiritual (if not religious) belief.

What is clear is that a certain frame of acceptance has collapsed. In a very broad sense, Christianity has long been able to partner itself to the United States' cultural evolution. Religion, in fact, managed to make itself vital to the position of the American way-of-life in terms of the universe. In the sense of everydayness, the assurance that the United States stood in a privileged position by divine placement served to resolve many questions about the nation's—and by extension, its citizens—place in the universe. The metaphysics of Christianities that galvanized the American identity as the holders of divinely dictated economic, political, cultural and religious orders have collapsed, buried by encounters with other cultures and the seemingly final triumph of modernity.

The collapse of traditional religious structures and dissatisfaction with the secularist interpretations that have maimed it have led some to try radical amputations to its metaphysics. David Platt, for example, attempts to cut away the materialist, economic justifications and implications of modernism in order to save Christianity. Platt rejects what the backmatter of his book *Radical* describes as the manipulation of “the gospel to fit our cultural preferences.”³⁵ Platt urges his readers to reject the “nice, middle-class, American Jesus. A Jesus who doesn't mind materialism and who would never call us to give away everything we have.”³⁶

In the place of the metaphysics of the Christianized American Dream, Platt urges readers to commit their resources and lives to the radical Christian problem: “If more than a billion people today are headed to a Christless eternity...then we don't have time to waste our lives on the American dream.”³⁷ The urgency of life, therefore, is to convert unbelievers, and Platt exhorts them to engage in missionary work. As inspiration, Platt depicts people all over world (usually “villagers”) who desire the Gospel: “Imagine what it would be like to look into a pair of Bedouin eyes and for the first time introduce this person to Christ.”³⁸ Confronting those

“comfortable” Christians who might decry his belief in nearly universal damnation as unjust, Platt simply responds, “There is no injustice in God.” Case closed.³⁹

Platt’s *Radical* reflects a frame of rejection—a plaint against the prevailing frame of acceptance.⁴⁰ It would perhaps be overstating the case to indicate that *Radical* is entirely based in a frame of rejection. After all, it contains a framework for understand one’s purpose in life. But the premise of the work is to *reject* the alliance between materialism and Christianity that has grown up in American culture. The efficacy of the work is questionable—the conservative *New York Times* columnist David Brooks remarks that we shouldn’t expect a rejection of materialism to emerge—but the very existence and prominence of the work reflects an attempt to pinpoint the deficiency in the current framework.⁴¹

Plaints against modernism are widespread, not just from a Christian angle. Jacques Ellul, Martin Heidegger, and many others are sharply critical of the spiritual emptiness of contemporary society.⁴² Modernism, in all technological fruition, in some ways demands the subservience of non-technological thinking—the elimination of mystery:

It...is predicated, ironically enough, on concealment, the self-concealing of the mystery. We can never control or manage or even grasp the mystery, the belonging together of revealing and concealing. In order to approach the world in a manner exclusively technological, calculative, mathematical, scientific, we must already have given up (or lost, or been expelled by, or perhaps ways of being such as we are even impossible within) other approaches or modes of revealing that would unfold into knowledges of other sorts. Those other approaches or paths of thinking must already have been obliterated; those other knowledges must already have concealed themselves in order for technological or scientific revelation to

occur. The danger of a managerial approach to the world lies not, then, in what it knows - not in its penetration into the secrets of galactic emergence or nuclear fission - but in what it forgets, what it itself conceals. It forgets that any other truths are possible, and it forgets that the belonging together of revealing with concealing is forever beyond the power of human management.⁴³

What approaches, then, is that modernism demands the forgetting of non-technological perspectives. Yet despite such harsh critiques, none of these efforts has been able to correct or resolve the fragmentation of religious life in the Western world.⁴⁴ If, as Taylor argues, traditional forms of religion are now unsustainable, it remains to be seen what sustainable frame can emerge in its place. Facing the dual problem created by technological modernity's spiritually empty triumph, Heidegger famously remarked that modernism was so empty that "Only a god can still save us. I think the only possibility of salvation left to us is to prepare readiness, through thinking and poetry, for the appearance of the god or for the absence of the god during the decline; so that we do not, simply put, die meaningless deaths, but that when we decline, we decline in the face of the absent god."⁴⁵

Thus we stand in the *transition*. Complaints abound; credulous religious beliefs and technological modernism, with its emphasis on progress and material benefits, both stand surrounded by heavy criticism. All three of Burke's historical rationalizations, the ways we attempt to get control over the forces of our world, seem discredited or distasteful. Few believe that ancient magics control the natural world; far fewer than ever before believe that religious dictates control their individual behavior; technological management of life is decried as an ethical and moral black hole.⁴⁶

In this light, then, it is perhaps best to view the current self-help crop of books, with their six to twelve keys to somehow living a better life, as handbooks on navigating this transition. If “homelessness” and a fragmented sense of self are dominant, these self-help handbooks are the literature of the transition, each putting in its bid to alleviate the lost-ness of the transition. They are guidebooks for navigating these transitional periods, each proscribing a recipe for resolving the cultural and religious uncertainties and vagaries of our times. Each is miniature philosophy, didactic and trite as they usually are, making its claim to progress out of the transition toward a settled frame of acceptance—that is, a way of living our lives.

The success of these books is conditioned upon the existence of the crisis and their own failure to resolve it. The sheer numbers of these books are evidence of their futility (and hence, because each one is futile, the profitability of producing more). In reality an awareness of the diversity in the symbolic interactions of entire worlds of people makes settling on a particular symbolic organization nearly impossible.⁴⁷ Thus, rather than moving us from the rejection of old structures into the creation of new, generally accepted frames, the transitional period has instead elongated itself into perpetuity. We exist (are ‘trapped’ might also be appropriate) in a period continuously characterized by the *grotesque*—a period of symbolic invention and rearrangement, and reassembly during which new symbolic structures are perpetually being developed out of the ashes of the old, failed structures. In the standard Burkean interpretation, these grotesque symbolic experiments begin as disjointed, unusual, even horrifying developments but eventually achieve general resonance and settle back into frames acceptance (the frame that facilitates societal cohesion and function) through a process of naturalization.⁴⁸

However, I suggest that our grotesque period cannot and will not easily settle into generally accepted modes of social functioning. Recent history and scholars point to an on-going

and growing critical fracture in our contemporary frame, based largely in the break between religion and modernism. The hegemonic force of secularist, modernist worldviews need not tolerate religion for legitimation. Indeed, not only has modernism broken its partnership with religion but it has undermined the very role of religion as an organizing force of the universe. Yet for all its explanatory, organizing, and predicting power, the emptiness of modernism is manifest, leaving many adrift. Thus, I suggest that our in-between space will not subside, that it may be a between-place, a transition, that is less between-places than a place itself—but one without form or structure, a no-place; an unsettled settling, to be obtuse. As such it will perpetually invent new symbolic structures that are simultaneously useful for some, alienating or horrifying to most but not quite move into a frame of acceptance. In this case, we should not expect a unified civic or religious culture.

Rethinking the Grotesque

My argument about a continual grotesque period requires some rethinking of what Burke means by the grotesque. In light of the elongation of the transition and continuing unsettled-ness of modernity and religion, I mean to suggest that the grotesque, in its role of a transition, has rebelled against its cyclically determined purpose and contains within it the possibility of a transition without direction, without purpose, and ultimately, without acceptance and therefore without *metaphysics*. I believe the CPG comprises an artifact of this elongated grotesque period—a unique discourse that is designed to be self-perpetuating in a way that matches the repetition of change in the grotesque. In this section I first explain the nature of the grotesque, and its unique figure, the gargoyle. Second, I examine the difference between the traditional Burkean cycle and the contemporary circumstance, a circumstance anticipated by Burke himself, though only as a note.

The conventional reading of Burke is that frames of transition—and the grotesque in particular—take root when decrepit structures of symbolic organization and logic are under significant scrutiny. The grotesque is a period of *invention* when new ways of assembling and interpreting symbols is needed. Burke remarks, “Grotesque inventions flourish *when it is easiest to imagine the grotesque, or, when it is hardest to imagine the classical*...One sees perspective beyond the structure of a given vocabulary when that structure is no longer firm.”⁴⁹ During the grotesque new systems are developed and assembled and put on public display. Like the vast majority of artistic efforts, most are considered lightly and rejected, allowing for experimentation with still more partial or more complete systems. But the result of the invention in the grotesque period is that bits of pieces of some of the different experimental logo-symbolic formations that seem so absurd and out of the ordinary will come together, evolve, and settle into the outlines of a new frame of acceptance. Thus, while the grotesque is a form of what Burke terms Perspective by Incongruity,⁵⁰ it functions to transition our symbolic organization from inadequacy and chaos to functionality and stability by providing us with a variety of ways to understand the world from which we can pick and choose *à la carte*.

In this traditional Burkean conception, the transition stands between acceptance and rejection—and therefore, because of the immutable link between acceptance and rejection, between acceptance and acceptance and between rejection and rejection itself. It is a period, if only provisional and fleeting, when acceptance and rejection remain suspended, bracketed. It is, for example, skeptical suspicion but not yet commitment to skepticism itself. The suspicion of skepticism but also the suspicion of credulity is a gargoyle—an impossible rationality, a mystic formation that may appear unruly, incredible, even disgusting but which appears, in degrees, in almost everywhere you look.⁵¹ The grotesque itself is a revealing of that which has been hidden

by the prevailing order. Burke analogizes it to the medieval practice of re-organizing categories via counterintuitive essences. Where the medieval “science” may have clearly understood that birds fit in a discrete category of their own, the grotesque scientists of the gargoyle imagined and associated the wings of an eagle, a demon’s claws, a goat’s head, and a lizard’s body via some alternative structure of similarity, such as representations of the four essential elements (earth, air, fire, water) or some other means. In philosophical terms, grotesque re-classifies the known into unusual categories via mystical methods, revealing the horrors of the current structures and re-orienting the reader toward new interpretations and classificatory systems.⁵²

At certain times, Burke makes a distinction that is meant to separate symbolic terms from the way that they have been naturalized into a metaphysic. In *Permanence and Change* Burke remarks about the concept of rights:

Biologically, the rudimentary properties of living, such as food and water, are not ‘rights’ but ‘necessities.’ *Symbolically*, there can be property to which one has...a ‘right’ though the possessing of it may not be biologically necessary. The notion of “rights” in nature is a quasi-naturalistic, metaphysical subterfuge for sanctioning in apparently biological terms a state of affairs that is properly discussed in terms specifically suited to the treatment of symbol as motive.⁵³

Burke follows the excerpt by noting that Bentham was accurate in separating rights from nature and placing them with man-made laws and obligations that depend upon “the resources of language for their form.”⁵⁴ In fact, he even acknowledges the metaphysics of his previous assertions about the concept of bureaucratization (that which turns the imaginative into the ordinary).⁵⁵ The goal of this bureaucratization, Burke notes, or rather the purpose that it serves is

Order, and to preserve Order, Hierarchy. The creation of a ‘proper’ order that allows some sort of pragmatic (that word again) social organization.

Order and Hierarchy together constitute a frame of acceptance and functioning shared *telos*. In the normal procession of frames, we would expect that a turbulent period of strange formations and odd cultural phenomena would be followed by a settling period. Modernist technological thinking may have divorced religion, and the experience of other cultures might challenge our assumptions, but a new frame—ostensibly more modernist and more culturally universal in spiritual terms—would emerge. But if Taylor and so many other social and religious critics are correct, there is no longer a necessary or natural *telos*. Christianity seems unnecessary and modernism is dismally hollow. The universal, spiritual unifying force of shared purpose itself may be at risk. The implication of a lack of shared purpose is detailed by Burke:

For with a pronounced heterogeneity of action-patterns, plus a speculative or statistical or philosophical or accountant group dealing exclusively in problems of spiritual coordination that the many distinct moralities of production (interests) give rise to, we seem to have found the perfect setting for a culture of gargoyles, grotesques, and caricatures unless some distinct master-purpose can both guide and restrict the speculative output. In other words, *freedom* must be defined by *purpose*. Otherwise, we are simply “free” to continue flying apart from one another in the direction of mental “chaos.”⁵⁶

My case for symbolic divergence and chaotic interpretation can be challenged, of course. There may be those who point to the increasing prominence of extremist religious discourses as evidence of the increasing influence of religion in civic life. However, I believe it makes more sense to understand these extremist positions in three capacities, discussed in the opening

chapter. First, these ‘defensive identity projects’ are efforts to consolidate coherent frames of acceptance as a *reactionary* measure against the encroachment of symbolic destabilization.⁵⁷ Second, as a result of this fear of modernist culture, religious conservatives of all types are becoming more vocal (and sometimes violent) even as they decline in adherents in the West. Indeed, their reactions to the collapse of the “*symbols of collective unity*” are more evidence of the state of transition. Finally, it must be understood that these efforts are *not* efforts to return to some previous religious order. They are amalgamations of imagined orders past and the perceived needs of the present and are thus not any real evidence of the resilience of the older frames.

It’s important to realize that the prevailing “culture of gargoyles” is not limited to religion. As the opening chapter made clear, Western culture is facing fractures at civic as well as religious levels. However, given the analysis laid out here, that is to be expected given the significant relationship between religious unity and civic unity. Religion provides a key area of symbolic identification that can serve to legitimate social and economic activity. In the past, it has been the glue of many societies. In the same sense, it is also the source of division, identification and division being two sides of the same coin (this is precisely what is at work in defensive identity projects). The extent of the relationship between religious breakdown and civic breakdown is beyond this scope of this dissertation—but the reality of the connection must be acknowledged. All of Western culture is facing significant fractures, in social, political, and religious spheres.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that contemporary religious culture, much like civic culture, is working within an elongated period of symbolic transition, brought on by the collapse of the frame of acceptance which paired religion and secular modernity together. As secular modernity has displaced the need for religious legitimacy, its inability to stand on its own as source for existential or social coherence has become manifest.

Using Burke's poetic categories, I've argued that the condition of the contemporary symbolic crisis in modernity and Western Christianity has made the movement from a frame of transition to a more settled, socially coherent frame of acceptance unlikely. We are, in fact, settling into the transition—one characterized by the emergence of provisional frames that attempt to address the deficiencies of the prior frames by assembling the symbolic debris of the old frames. These new frames—symbolic “gargoyles”—involve significant reinterpretation.

So what is left? If my claim that we exist in an elongated period of symbolic transition is true, why is it that so many old symbols still hold resonance? And what is left for analysis? Well, one thing, gargoyles of course. Religion has not disappeared; it just no longer appears in the same forms and without the legitimating force or alignment. Second, Christianity remains the touchstone religion in American political spheres. Tens of millions still attend church each Sunday. Prosperity preachers are growing in influence. In attending mega-churches, huge numbers of persons gather together to hear new spins on old Biblical stories—ones that have been told in one form or another for nearly 2000 years. Books espousing religious self-help, such as the ones by Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyers, and Gloria Copeland, top the nation's best-seller lists for long periods of time.

The next chapter analyzes this “culture of gargoyles”—or at least gargoyles within that non-culture. Given the absence of a stable, symbolic architecture for the culture of gargoyle, an overarching account of its details may be quite impossible. Yet, at the same time, it is possible to account for the oddity to be expected in the culture. Perhaps more importantly we might capture what Burke might call the *attitude* of the period by examining some key discursive formations that appear within the culture of gargoyles. The central purpose of transitional periods is to pick up the pieces left behind in the wake of prior periods and attempt to put them together in a pattern that can assist society in dealing with the times. These efforts will not be uncontested. In fact, these efforts should be a primary front in the contest to make sense of the phenomena of experience. Open conflicts over interpretation will be the norm:

Meaning or symbolism becomes a concern precisely at that stage when a given system of meanings is falling into decay. In periods of firmly established meanings, one does not *study* them, one *uses* them: One frames his acts in accordance with them.⁵⁸

When searching for grounds of analysis such periods cannot be too sharply delineated.⁵⁹ Rhetorics and literatures that emerge in the transitional may also include elements of acceptance and rejection. In this case, it would be difficult to write a coherent self-help book without those parts (and what are books on hermeneutics but self-help books?). However, the larger point stands: wherever we find substantial argument over the meaning of symbols, we can recognize a transitional period. The unique element of our time is that we should not expect the interpretive scheme of any particular advocate to fully re-arrange the *Erlebnisstorm* in a way that immediately wipes out its competitors. Wittgenstein imagined that if the true book of ethics—a how-to-do-it of conduct—could be written, it would immediately destroy all the other books in

the world. Paul Mann replies that in our time, the true book of ethics would simply collect dust in the library because it “would never be heard above the yammering,”⁶⁰ much as Brooks thinks it unlikely that Platt’s *Radical* would lead to a mass change in consumer patterns. Caputo highlights this deconstructive attitude in a selection from Charles Sheldon’s 1896 novel *In His Steps* (the origin of the phrase “What Would Jesus Do”). Asked if after adequate study and prayer it would be “possible to reach the same conclusions always in all cases” about what Jesus would do, Sheldon’s deconstructive preacher is first silent and then answers, “No, I don’t know that we can expect that.”⁶¹

How long will the transition last? How long will we will be plagued by ambiguity, uncertainty, and monstrous symbolic structures? The nature of the problem is that we do not know. Certainly, many scholars in periods of unrest have imagined that the unrest may continue forever, only to find a return to settled-ness in due time. But contemporary modernism and cultural access is nearly universal and instant in a globalized capitalist culture. The emptiness that modernist culture engenders is difficult to alleviate when there is no space to escape it or isolate a community so that it can develop a frame of acceptance without the challenge of modernism.

It may be the case that orthodoxy is gone, perhaps never to return—in the West we may never again find the kind of religious or interpretive unity that characterized prior civic-religious life. But in the grotesque, its symbols may find new life. If the how-to manuals of our time covered in this dissertation of the Christian Prosperity Gospel(s) are truly a part of the grotesque, we are likely to find the power of recycled symbols re-assuming certain powers. These symbolic conflicts are observable—they tend to be fairly explicit, or at the very least, easily recognizable when contrasted to the prior orthodoxies.

Helpfully, these new assemblies tend to occur in predictable areas that lend themselves to analysis: Symbols of authority, concepts of identification, terms of acceptance and rejection, “rituals of purification and rebirth,” transcendence upward and down, prayer, and socio-economic organization, “bureaucratization of the imaginative,” “alienation,” and “repossession.”⁶² The process of analysis—the breaking apart of the whole into its component parts—is a somewhat specious process that does not quite do the advertised job of explaining how a certain symbolic system functions. But they are the *topoi* of moral templates; and it is precisely moral templates that the CPG intends to give its readers. Wells may be right that the how-to manuals of religiosity developed by the prosperity preachers are trite and formulaic. But however mechanistic they may be, they are some of the most popular manuals of interpretation available today.

In the next chapter, I examine five prominent Prosperity Gospelists--Creflo Dollar, Gloria Copeland, T.D. Jakes, Joel Osteen, Joseph Prince, and Leroy Thompson—in order to describe the particular gargoyles of the CPG. In particular, I take up the task of parsing how these gospelists utilize the symbolic debris around them, including business, religious, scientific, and cultural symbols, to develop their particular brand (quite literally, according to Twitchell) of Christianity. I will proceed with an eye toward understanding how these five preachers use the debris of the prior symbolic frameworks in their versions of Christianity, focusing on their use of the traditional language of Christianity as a way of accounting for changing social conditions.

The “architecture” of this culture of gargoyles remains to be seen. Given what I’ve indicated so far, it is one that is likely to be fluid, even surprising. Simply examining one set of literatures of the grotesque may not be able to reveal its entirety—that may, in fact, be impossible. But examining such a literature, including the CPG in particular, might reveal

something both about the appeal of the CPG itself and about the functioning the grotesque in these strange times.

¹ Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, Third Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 34.

² Burke, *Attitudes*, 3-4.

³ Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change*, Third Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xxvii-xxviii.

⁴ David J. Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 1, 29; David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 37.

⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 719.

⁶ William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1958), 35.

⁷ Wells, *Above All*, 36.

⁸ Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 112.

⁹ Burke, *Permanence*, 35.

¹⁰ Burke. *Attitudes*, p. 57. "Though 'acceptance' and 'rejection' cannot be sharply differentiated (the 'acceptance' of A involving the 'rejection' of non-A)...The distinction suggests two other modes, preponderantly transitional, the grotesque and the didactic. The grotesque focuses in mysticism; the didactic to-day is usually called propaganda."

¹¹ Burke, *Attitudes*, 126-141, 28.

¹² Burke, *Attitudes*, 27.

¹³ Burke, *Attitudes*, 35-36.

¹⁴ Robert D. Putnam and Lewis M. Feldstein with Don Cohen. *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2004).

¹⁵ Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 427-428.

¹⁶ Anthony Giddens. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 187.

¹⁷ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 15; Kenneth Gergen. *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*. (New York: Basic Books, 1991), xiv; David Buttrick, "Who is Listening?" in *Listening to the Word: Studies in Honor of Fred B. Craddock*, eds. Gail R O'Day & Thomas G. Long, eds. *Listening to the Word: Studies in Honor of Fred B. Craddock* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 193-196.

¹⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Texts under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) 8.

¹⁹ Carl A. Raschke, James A. Kirk, and Mark C. Taylor, *Religion and the Human Image* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1977), 238.

²⁰ Robert D. Putnam. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1995), 25.

²¹ Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Updated Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 219.

²² Rashke, et al., *Religion*, 239.

²³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 594.

²⁴ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1969), 42.

²⁵ Rashke, et al., *Religion*, 7.

²⁶ George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, ed. Charles W. Morris (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934/1962), 295-297.

²⁷ Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*. trans. Ephraim Fischoff (Boston: Beacon Books, 1993), 1. Quotation brought to my attention by Carl A. Raschke, James A. Kirk, and Mark C. Taylor, *Religion and the Human Image* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1977), 22.

²⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 505-506.

²⁹ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 209.

³⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), 181 (III: 125).

³¹ Burke, *Attitudes*, 229.

³² Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

³³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 727.

³⁴ Barrett, *Irrational Man*, 35.

³⁵ David Platt, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2010).

³⁶ Platt, *Radical*, 13.

³⁷ Platt, *Radical*, 157.

³⁸ Platt, *Radical*, 159.

³⁹ Platt, *Radical*, 159.

⁴⁰ Burke, *Attitudes*, 44.

⁴¹ David Brooks, "The Gospel of Wealth," *The New York Times* (September 7, 2010), A25.

⁴² Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Knopf, 1964); Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper Perennial, 1977).

⁴³ Ladelle McWhorter, "Guilt as Management Technology: A Call to Heideggarian Reflection," Heidegger and the Earth: Essays in Environmental Philosophy," in *Heidegger and the Earth: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, 2nd Edition, ed. Ladelle McWhorter and Gail Stenstad (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 11-12.

⁴⁴ Insomuch as there is a "Western world" to speak of in a global society.

⁴⁵ Martin Heidegger, "Der Spiegel Interview with Martin Heidegger (1966)," Interview with *Der Spiegel*, accessed January 19, 2011 at <http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~other1/Heidegger%20Der%20Spiegel.pdf>. Scanned from Gunther Neske & Emil Kettering (eds), *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism*, New York: Paragon House, 1990, pp. 41-66.

⁴⁶ Burke, *Permanence*, 44-45.

⁴⁷ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 187. The objective of technology, according to Heidegger ("The Age of World Picture," p. 134-135), is exactly the sort of conquest of world-picture that Giddens

argues has been denied by technology itself. The resolution of this contradiction may be that the technological viewpoint seeks the rejection and incoherence of all settled frames of acceptance except its own.

⁴⁸ Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, p. 70.

⁴⁹ Burke. *Permanence and Change*, p. 117.

⁵⁰ Burke, *Permanence*, p. 113.

⁵¹ To speak of the *telos* of a suspicion of skepticism may be the most accurate description of current academics available—precisely because it’s a *telos* that cannot be agreed upon but everywhere reigns.

⁵² Burke, *Permanence and Change*, p. 112.

⁵³ Burke, *Permanence and Change*, p. 275.

⁵⁴ Burke, *Permanence and Change*, p. 276.

⁵⁵ Burke, *Permanence and Change*, p. 281. “In an early work (*Attitudes Toward History*), when talking about man as a political animal, we featured the term “bureaucracy.” Or more accurately, “bureaucratization.” It was matched by an antithetical term, “the imaginative.” That is, there said to be plans or purposes, somewhat vaguely conceived in the imagination; and by the forming and use of organizational devices, these “imagined” ends were carried out, with varying degrees of success and varying degrees of public acquiescence. The notion had a degree of relevance. It also had its metaphysics.”

⁵⁶ Burke, *Permanence and Change*, p. 253, note 1.

⁵⁷ Castells, *The Power*, 11-12.

⁵⁸ Burke, *Permanence*, 162.

⁵⁹ Burke, *Attitudes*, 57.

⁶⁰ Paul Mann, *Masocriticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 255.

⁶¹ Charles Sheldon, qtd. in John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 37.

⁶² Burke, *Attitudes*, 202.

CHAPTER 5:
GOSPELS AND GARGOYLES, PART TWO:
THE STRANGELY FAMILIAR SYMBOLIC STRUCTURES OF THE CHRISTIAN
PROSPERITY GOSPEL

The previous chapter argued that contemporary society's ability to assemble an agreed-upon means of symbolic interpretation has been eroded by the slow collapse of the alliance between secular modernism and religion and the increasing erosion of the hegemony of European cultural and religious symbolic interpretations. Unlike previous such symbolic cycles, in which society has moved quickly (though sometimes messily) from frames of acceptance, to frames of rejection, through a transition, and back to acceptance, I suggested that the current, messy transitional phase is far more settled than ever before. Society has generally moved away from coherent symbolic frames of acceptance toward an environment where provisional, contingent, 'grotesque' symbolic structures hold sway, structures that are assembled from the 'symbolic debris' of the collapsed structures of the past.

In this chapter I argue that the CPG is a paradigm case of the "culture of gargoyles," a social-symbolic phenomenon that emerges in the unrest of grotesque. In it the pieties of old symbols are rejected and provisionally replaced by new, experimental structures. Yet, the symbols are not *new*, just restructured. These new assemblies of old symbolic pieces, what Burke calls *gargoyles* because of their strange yet familiar combinations of seemingly unlike or even unnatural parts, are bonded by mystic means. Old symbols regain new life by re-arrangement. In this chapter, I intend to demonstrate that in the face of the collapse of the overarching American

metanarratives of religion, the preachers involved in the CPG are doing precisely this: picking up the symbolic debris and innovating new, unique symbolic structures to fit the unrest of the times.

This combination of the old in new forms produces an aesthetic of familiar-difference that is one of the CPG's greatest assets. Indeed, the CPG's cooption of the traditional, familiar language of evangelical Christianity for its own (heretical) purposes is a core challenge to evangelical Christianity:

The church has not seen this gospel for what it is largely because of what Walter Martin calls 'the language barrier of terminology.' The Faith movement uses so much evangelical and Pentecostal terminology and so many proof-texts that most believers are lulled into a false sense of security as to its orthodoxy.¹

Formally, the parts and pieces of the CPG resemble nothing more than traditional Pentecostal preaching. But the assembly of the symbolic pieces is meant to create new meanings, new logical conclusions. These gargoyles, these new explanations of age-old linguistic formations, are not mere geological features in a broad discursive landscape. They are meant by their users and consumers to be cultural lodestones, hermeneutic and ethical devices that are meant to assist the audience in interpreting the world and taking action within it. That these lodestones are, like many other evangelical approaches, filled with paradoxes should not distract from understanding that these are handbooks for life.²

The purposes of this chapter are three-fold. First, I want to shed light on the social-symbolic method and logic of the CPG itself, helping to explain its strange familiarity and perhaps, by circumlocution, some of its appeal. In addition, I want to use the CPG as a paradigmatic case, a symptom of a culture with few unified ways of sorting through the *Erlebnisstorm*—a culture that is suspended in the grotesque. Finally, I mean to emphasize the

resilience of these symbolic structures, noting as I go the unusual strength that symbolic structures have obtained.

The objects of study will be the writing and preaching of six key prosperity gospelists: Creflo Dollar, Gloria Copeland, T.D. Jakes, Joyce Meyer, Joel Osteen, Joseph Prince, and Leroy Thompson.³ The goal is not to provide an in-depth reading of the sermons or writings of each but to survey the symbolic re-assembly process involved in their sermon messages. These preachers share a common history. All except Meyer are pastors of mega-churches with at least 10,000 members, all except Prince have a legacy in the Word-of-Faith movement grown out of the teaching of Kenneth Hagin and Oral Roberts, and each teaches that God wishes each person to obtain a prosperous life. Indeed, most travel in private jets either owned by the minister personally or their tax-exempt ministries.⁴

In examining the work of these preachers, I focus on four main clusters of Christian tropes: ‘victory,’ ‘sowing and reaping,’ the covenant, and the family, examined in that order. Through this examination, I argue that strangeness of the CPG is related to its deconstruction, re-development, and *entelechi*al extension of these traditional, familiar tropes. The term “trope” reflects the way that language serves to organize a range of contingent cognitive and rhetorical elements. Hayden White remarks that when we say language operates “*tropologically*” we mean that language “prefigures a field of perceptions in a particular modality of relationships.”⁵ White’s emphasis on the structuring quality of certain rhetorical devices neatly captures how I argue these rhetorical devices organize a series of other terms.

Gargoyles of Linguistic Resilience

If Christianity were a consistent religion, obtuse to contradiction and unable to adapt to its time, it would have collapsed long before our contemporary era. But as the last chapter remarked, Christianity is uniquely adept at “casuistic stretching”—that ability to adjust a frame of interpretation to account for new situations.⁶ However, the challenges confronting contemporary Christianity may be greater than ever before. It faces challenges not just to its own particular theological chauvinism, but to theism itself and its necessity to ethical life.

The contradictions that contemporary Christianity demands—accommodation to modern, material life and its opposition—is nowhere more apparent than in the strange, glitzy, grotesque of the CPG. In the prosperity gospel a religion which was traditionally *opposed* to the modern world and utilized language which was distinctly anti-modern is redeployed and reworked to create a Christianity in line with the times. The CPG is, oddly, anti-modern in its theory; miracles and not economics produce wealth, for example. But it is also very modern in its sensibilities. The material is what matters. It is the both/and of a logical contradiction.

In the following sections, I’ll explore tropes used to accomplish this task of symbolic merging. The driving force behind my analysis is the premise that core tropes serve the purpose of structuring the understanding of reality. The tropes I have selected for analysis have maintained strong resilience over time. As Burke notes in *Grammar of Motives*, in human relations it is not enough to merely tell a person how something works or note correlative relationships or directives. That which is unknown must be structured by the known, learned about and related to things that are understood, and thus moved from a state of abstract incorporeality into a (metaphorically) tangible substance by transference of vocabularies.⁷

Victory

Perhaps no refrain echoes more loudly in the repertoire of the CPG preachers than the call to “live in victory.” Osteen urges his congregation to “program their mind for victory... you will become what you believe.”⁸ Joyce Meyer, in the introduction to *Power Thoughts*, states that the unique purpose of the book is to help the reader to “live in greater measures of power and authority over the enemy...receive God’s blessings and...help you build mindsets that empower you to live in a place of strength, success and victory every day.”⁹ T.D. Jakes concludes that “even struggles are an opportunity to show off the victory if my mind can handle the change.”¹⁰ None of these CPG preachers quite means the classic “victory” over sin.¹¹ In this section, I examine the way the CPG manages to pick up and re-assemble the “victory” trope as part of a broader move away from questions of salvation toward the daily, financial concerns of contemporary consumers.

The call to achieve a metaphorical ‘victory’ is a familiar Christian trope, particularly in the American evangelical and Pentecostal traditions. Paul himself announces Christ’s victory over death in 1 Corinthians 55-57, “Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The most famous of American preachers have often utilized the victory trope. Jonathan Edwards remarks in his sermon “The Excellence of Christ,” “It was in Christ's last sufferings, above all, that he was delivered up to the power of his enemies; and yet by these, above all, he obtained victory over his enemies.”¹² Billy Sunday, one of the most famous preachers of the 20th century, often preached about the victory that Christians had over death and sin. Billy Graham declared in his 1952 book *Peace with God* that, “The moment you made your decision for Christ

[the Devil] suffered a tremendous defeat... From now on he is going to tempt you and try to lead you into sin. Don't be alarmed. He cannot rob you of your salvation, and he need not rob you of your assurance and victory.”¹³

The martial theme embodied in “victory” is intentional. When traditional American preachers proclaim the victory of Christ or the victory of the Christian, they mean Christ’s victory over Satan, and therefore death and sin—or, in the case of Graham’s use of the trope, the symbolic tactical battle of the individual against Satan, sin, and Hell. The battle against sin is symbolically embedded in the grand language of the cosmic struggle between God and Satan. The believer’s struggle against sin and effort to secure salvation is presented *locally*, as a skirmish in the larger war, as a literal, tactical confrontation against an immediately present Satan attempting to manipulate forces against the believer. Graham, in fact, says that in the struggle against sin, “War has been declared! You now have two natures in conflict, and each one is striving for the victory.”¹⁴ In the *victory* trope, Satan serves as the metonymical stand-in for whatever particular sin might be committed and *victory* and *defeat* are the stand-ins for the possibilities available to the person. Yet the figurative nature of the conflict in discourse is no less *real* for the tropic substitution. The individual—each person, as Graham made clear—is following the role of Christ in standing against Satan in a very real sense.

The tradition of personifying sin and death is strong in Christianity. Graham proclaims, “When I understand that Christ in His death gained a decisive victory over death and over sin, then I lose the fear of death. The Bible says that “He also Himself likewise took part of the same that through death He might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil.”¹⁵ Sin is not, as per Augustine, the absence of good or a tear in the fabric of the universe—it is a literal contest between entities of good and evil.

In the Pentecostal tradition, “victory” is everywhere. Whereas many Christians tend to see the cosmic contest between good and evil in epic terms, far above the immediate scale of daily life, the Pentecostal tradition envisions a daily and immediate contest between the power of Satan and the power of God and His believers. In that contest, the risen Christ has given the believer power of the physical world. The ills, particularly physical ills of the body, are a result of demonic powers seeking to interfere with the believers:

The ongoing conflict between good and evil, evil is real—not illusory—but... God has already triumphed in principle and will ultimately disclose that victory everywhere. In the New Testament this belief is dramatized by the Gospel stories about Jesus Christ casting out demons as a sign of the coming Kingdom; and by the somewhat more sophisticated concept found in the writings of Paul which proclaims the victory of Christ over the "principalities and powers," the collective and superindividual forces that impact human destiny.¹⁶

The metaphoric power of this trope is significant. As the passage from Graham indicated earlier, the *victory* trope is a part of a broader “war” metaphor that helps the participant to see him- or herself engaged in an oppositional struggle. Such oppositional perspectives are familiar to the evangelicals and fundamentalists. Fundamentalism, in particular, is organized in *opposition* to the baseness of the material world and in opposition to cultural trends that seek to change the interpretation of the gospel. Christian “militancy” in the “fight” against new ideas of the gospel is a key defining characteristic of the fundamentalist Christian *gestalt* (and perhaps of all religious fundamentalism).¹⁷ Certain tropes, Ricouer has observed, become foundational for a discourse. It is not hard to conclude that the *victory* trope, structured within the greater metaphor of the cosmic “war” between God and Satan, is a foundational trope for evangelical and

fundamentalist discourses.¹⁸ Its main advantage is the way that it provides purpose to each individual (soldier of Christ), locates them cosmically (involved in the cosmic struggle), and explains the daily struggles of life (caused by demonic/Satanic forces), and provides a remedy (Christ's—and hence the believer's—inevitable victory over demonic forces).

What the CPG changes is the willingness to stretch the “victory” trope beyond the broad and eternal struggle against temptation, sin, death, and damnation and toward the immediate daily events of life. The casuistic stretching involved is not extreme. Faith healing has always been a strong, immediate part of the Pentecostal strand of Christianity.¹⁹ Pentecostalism, with its odd speaking in tongues and theatrical presentation, was once considered an embarrassment to evangelicalism, but its shrewd integration into political conservatism and business culture by figures like Pat Robertson granted it legitimacy in Christian circles.²⁰ Thus, when Osteen urges his audience, “Don’t send out any more defeat, no more sickness, no more crazy hormones, this is a new day! Send out health! Send out healing! Send out strength! Vitality! Victory!,”²¹ he is drawing upon a Pentecostal vocabulary and evangelical metaphor with deep grounding in the American Christian tradition. Prosperity preachers simply add “finances” to the list of items to be handled by God. “Everything may be falling apart—your finances, your health, your business, your children...But don’t be discouraged...[T]hrough your eyes of faith, see that situation restored.”²²

Even Graham, the leader of non-Pentecostal evangelicalism in the United States during the 20th century, is liable to slip the term victory into non-cosmic events. Speaking of an alcoholic who was able to overcome his addiction, Graham remarks, “Christ had given him *victory* over his vicious habit...turned around, he changed his direction, he changed his way of thinking--he had been converted!”²³ Alcohol, of course, was traditionally associated with a host

of sinful and socially destructive behaviors—and Graham says nothing regarding the direct Satanic or demonic influences that made the man susceptible to alcohol.

Yet there is an inherent strangeness in the CPG’s extension of these “victory” tropes. Meyer, for example, declares that God wants to grant His people “victory” over nutritional issues:

The Holy Spirit brings us into nothing but *victory* and freedom. When God gives us a plan, that plan will work! I believe the twelve reasons people...are overweight given in this book will open doors of understanding to you...[D]etermine to let Him use the scriptural teachings in this book to give you the strength, wisdom, and power you need to apply the practical teachings in it about nutrition and food. I believe and have thanked God in advance that as you read this book, He will do a mighty work in your life to set you free from bondage.²⁴

The “bondage” and the “truth” tropes are a part of the overall metaphor of cosmic war. Lest one think that being overweight is merely a mundane health issue, Meyer tells us that it is related to the vital battle of good against evil, “Food...may not be a sin, but it certainly can be a trap of the enemy to destroy us and our witness for the Lord.”²⁵ The “victory” trope, then, is extended into questions of nutrition itself. Overeating is not, at its core, a material concern but a *spiritual* concern that is related to material outcomes. *Victory*, in this case, is not just a loss of weight but the defeat of The Enemy (Satan) and possibly the preservation of salvation itself.

In “victory,” the individual can identify daily with the ultimate symbol of authority. It bonds the cosmic with the mundane, everyday life of the Christian. “Victory” comes to mean that God is interested in every finite detail of life—victory is not merely related to your eternal

soul, it is a victory in the material world, to socio-economic organization. Joseph Prince (figure 5) remarks, “With adequate exposure to...God’s Word, good fruits are produced in your life effortlessly. Your victory is a fruit. Your success is a fruit. Your health is a fruit. Family harmony is a fruit. Career success is fruit.”²⁶ God’s Word, in Prince’s scheme, enables triumph against all the forces, which are arrayed against the individual. The reverse is enthymematic; all barriers to health, family, and career, are acts of the Enemy in the eternal war. Prince exhorts the reader: “Go after the presence of Jesus in your life. He is your wisdom and victory over every



Figure 5. Joseph Prince preaching.²⁷

battle today!”²⁸ In Prince’s process of substitution, every single struggle is a “battle,” linked to the cosmic war of Good and Evil.

The process of identification is a moment of re-birth—a new opportunity. Creflo Dollar, in a chapter titled “Overcoming Selfishness,” argues that “the most vital component of victory” is love. “If we can get our love walk in line, we can achieve unprecedented results in our relationships, finances, family, and personal lives.”²⁹ Dollar argues that love is “guaranteed” to yield these benefits to the believer. Doubt in that victory and its direct benefits is a tool of Satan: “The enemy is always looking for ways to undermine that confidence...Doubt is one of the primary strategies that he uses. Satan’s objective is to get us to start questioning these things we see in the Word...It is deception at its finest.”³⁰ Dollar thus phrases “victory” as intimately related to total faith in the *material* outcomes of belief in the CPG. Thinking and believing positively/confidently is, as Meyer calls it, “ammunition for you to use as you wage war against the enemy in the battlefield of your mind.”³¹

This new “victory” allotrope—a gargoyle whose meaning is related to a battlefield of material blessing, not eternal salvation—is self-inoculating. Prosperity preachers encourage their audience to code those who criticize the CPG as functionaries of the Enemy. Discussion of the veracity of the trope or its extension from issues of sin and salvation into material benefits is not simply a discussion of beliefs, but itself an insidious discussion that serves the strategic purposes of Satan. Dollar remarks, “This message about prosperity has been greatly attacked over the years because people have been deceived by the enemy. Satan wants to convince us that ‘all preachers want is our money.’”³² Leroy S. Thompson extends Dollar’s argument: “The devil has lied to us and has told us that money is evil...How does the devil label wealthy people as worldly? *With church people’s words!*”³³

The analogical extensions involved are sensible enough.³⁴ The struggles of life serve to break down the faith of the people in God's goodness. Therefore, because those struggles hurt the faith, they must be tools of Satan. God enables persons to overcome or attain "victory" over those struggles. Dollar: "Jesus...obtained absolute victory in every trial, temptation and test He faced. Therefore, when you enter into the fellowship of his sufferings...you can take anything the Devil throws at you and toss it right back in his face...But be prepared. The Devil doesn't take kindly to your digging into the source of his defeat."³⁵ Since the Scriptures are replete with occasions of healing and physical miracles—there is no reason that miracles should cease today. Thompson's argument that "a wealthy Christian is a person the Lord is blessing" is not unusual—centuries of Christians drew the same conclusion.³⁶

Indeed the *least* notable feature of the CPG may be that it links Christianity with material affluence. While many marvel over the crassness of the CPG's "moralizing of class,"³⁷ such efforts are truly a part of the American religious tradition. More than a century ago, Weber observed that Puritans imagined that God engaged humans in an essentially business-like rationality. Quakers and Puritans alike believed that God intervened in business affairs to deliver prosperity (of varying degrees) as "visible blessings."³⁸ Russell Conwell encouraged Christians to believe they had a duty to become wealthy. While religion is not an outgrowth of economic activity, as economic concerns become more predominant, religious processes serve the purpose of legitimizing them.³⁹ G.H. Mead noted that religion has the remarkable ability to "adjust itself to conflict"⁴⁰ to fit society's needs and desires. If society demands prosperity, religion will acquiesce; "If...prosperity was central to the American way of life, so was religion. For it could be seen as following God's design, and America as a nation was especially founded to realize this design."⁴¹

Collusion between American Christianity and American capitalism is not limited to historical events. William E. Connolly reports that even now, “[American] Christianity and capitalism have formed multiple assemblages, composed partly of elements that impinge *upon* one another, partly of those that are differently incorporated or infused *into* each other, and partly of those that *exceed the reach* of such connections.”⁴² Many sects of Christianity have long since adapted themselves to both the deep social structures of capitalism and to its more surface marketing elements.⁴³ If you want to find the links between Christianity and capitalism or Christianity and class politics, one need hardly look to the CPG preachers. The links between capitalism and Christianity run far deeper than a few preachers arguing that prayer = money.⁴⁴ What stands out about the CPG is not its endorsement of capitalism, but its position stands as a particular symbolic entelechial outgrowth not of capitalism writ large but of American dreams of affluence.⁴⁵

More important is the CPG’s lack of “good taste.” Burke remarks that mystics—among whom prosperity gospelists may be counted—“often outraged the people of good taste precisely because they stress the metaphorical nature of all speech.”⁴⁶ The CPG extends the victory trope beyond its normal bounds in sin/salvation talk into the material world, its advocates emphasizing that all they are doing is taking Scripture at its literal meaning, in line with the fundamentalist Protestant tradition.⁴⁷ Of course, metaphorical extension and application is the nature of all language and particularly vital to religious/scriptural language, though it is often denied or minimized by fundamentalist parties in all religions. The materialist boundary is one that has been crossed before in Calvinist beliefs about the material triumph of the Christian church and its Elect, but never in so mundane or garish terms. If the Puritans believed that prosperity was vaguely a sign of God’s blessing or that commercial processes were the essential logic of God,

the CPG preachers bypass that “logical” process by a reliance on the miraculous, charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit. In the Puritan world, the laws of nature and the laws of God were essentially the same and they added up, in roundabout ways, to prosperity. In the world of the CPG, the rules of “the natural” are quite separate from God’s rules of the “supernatural.” As Osteen delineates:

Maybe God has told you something, and in the natural, it seems totally impossible...The Bible says, “The things which are impossible with men are possible with God:...You don’t have to figure out how God is going to solve your problems...That’s His responsibility...Just turn that situation over to God and trust Him to take care of it. God is a supernatural God...God can do what human beings cannot or will not do. He is not limited to the laws of nature.”⁴⁸

And, perhaps more commercially to the point, “When you encounter tough times, don’t expect to stay there...Expect God to supernaturally turn it around. When business gets a bit slow, don’t expect to go bankrupt...Pray and expect God to bring you customers.”⁴⁹

In the CPG, there is no governing commercial logic to dignify or naturalize Christian prosperity. There is no system to make God’s prosperous blessings seem like anything less than just arbitrary disbursement of goods. Instead, there is just God’s direct intervention. Thus the vital point, the mystic interpretation of the Gospel *fits* and *extends* the anti-modern orientation of more traditional fundamentalist and evangelical Christianities, but does not buy into fundamentalism’s anti-materialism. Graham preached a battle against materialism and affluence: “We are so taken up with our money-making, so taken up with the amusements and places and comforts of modern American life, that we don’t realize that the forces of evil are closing in round about us. Unless we can turn to God and have His help, we are done for as a nation and as

a people.”⁵⁰ In contrast, Joel Osteen testifies that his wife Victoria Osteen’s “words of faith and victory” helped the Osteens obtain an “elegant home” because “God could bring it pass.”⁵¹ Using the victory trope, embedded in the deeper “war” metaphor, the CPG re-orientes the concept of “evil” to be a force arrayed *against* the prosperity of God’s Christians. Graham’s preaching implicitly endorses the idea that godliness is related to the course of worldly events. The CPG merely builds upon that idea and recategorizes prosperity as *aligned* with God.

The CPG preachers can even agree with Graham’s point about obsession with money. Jakes laments that, “Millionaires and billionaires live miserable lives and even end their lives... Why? Because their wealth consisted of temporal things, not eternal.” So, Jakes agrees with Graham—being overconcerned with money is destructive. But, “Material wealth is not evil in and of itself... The Bible says it is the *love* of money that is the root of all evil. Mankind must connect to God of all riches to truly enjoy—and to avoid being controlled and owned by – material wealth.”⁵² The solution to the problem of Mammon is not to eschew material gain, but to appreciate it as a victory of Christ.

The CPG is thus a re-assembly, of familiar Christian war terminology set to new purposes. The broader “war” metaphor utilized in the “victory” trope, also manifested in the terms “defeat,” “battle(field),” “strategy,” “tactic,” “win,” “lose,” “triumph,” and supported by Biblical citations of epic victories of the Israelites over their enemies (and most especially that of David over Goliath) matches the discourse of militancy that undergirds most fundamentalist rhetoric.⁵³ The “war” in the CPG interpretation is organized less around the epic culture war that pits the Good Fundamentalist American Protestants against the Evil of Secular Humanism than around the Good of happiness and prosperity against the Evil of anything that is a barrier to that.

“Victory,” in this symbolic scheme, is very different—but very much the same—as it is in the traditional evangelical/fundamentalist schematic. “Victory” is stripped and reduced to its essence--“Good versus Evil”--and then coded along different lines; victory is no longer limited to salvation or escape from damnation, but extends to escape from poverty or illness or obesity. It utilizes some symbolic liabilities of past metaphoric associations, such as the tendency to declare “victory” over addiction and the use of Biblical literalism and militancy, to create new meanings that are sometimes fully at odds with older interpretations. The grotesque extension of some Puritan ideas about material affluence to their logical and mundane end, combined with the mystic recategorization of the epic scale of the cosmic struggle down to the level of weight loss, car loans, and credit cards, and job promotions creates “victory” as a strange symbolic beast indeed.

Sowing and Reaping

A second core trope of the CPG is the metaphor of “sowing and reaping.” A staple in American Protestant Christianity, in this section I examine the CPG’s elimination of the traditional barrier between the spiritual and material worlds. By transforming the “sowing and reaping” metaphor into a trope that posits that physical events (the reaping) find their origin in spiritual actions (the sowing), the CPG res-shapes the mechanics of the cause and effect in the universe. I argue that the CPG’s transformation of the harvest metaphor reveals how gargoyles deconstruct and re-assemble traditional (metaphoric) symbols in the period of the grotesque, stripping those symbols of their ‘essential’ meanings, and confounding traditional evangelicalism’s demand for a fixed basis for interpretation.

The “Law of Reaping Sowing” is a familiar figure of American evangelicalism. Dwight L. Moody wrote a long sermon titled “Sowing and Reaping,”⁵⁴ in which he encourages his

audience to understand that in the spiritual world, the scriptural emphasis on sowing and reaping is an analog to the cause and effect in the physical world: “Life is to be regarded as a seed-time. Everyone has his field to sow, to cultivate, and finally, to reap...Just as we cannot reap a good harvest unless we have sown good seed, so we cannot reap eternal life unless we have sown to the Spirit.”⁵⁵ In the CPG the trope takes on a less spiritual turn; Leroy Thompson writes: “God intends for you to reap a harvest from your giving... **Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.** You see, money cometh by giving!”⁵⁶

Sowing and reaping are intimately related to the idea of “living in victory.” Osteen: “Words are similar to seeds...they will take on a life of their own...If we speak positive words, our lives will move in that direction. Similarly, negative words will produce poor results. We can’t speak words of defeat and yet expect to live in victory. We will reap exactly what we sow.”⁵⁷ Similarly, Creflo Dollar argues that, “Whatever you are right now is the result of what you have sowed in the past.”⁵⁸

The metaphor extends easily enough—sins are weeds, easy to grow and hard to kill but result in a poor harvest. A righteous life is hard to cultivate but bears a great harvest. Other preachers used the same metaphor. John Wilbur Chapman, an associate of Moody and one of Billy Sunday’s mentors, wrote a sermon on sowing and reaping that warned, “So many young men seem to think they can sow their wild oats with impunity...but hear when I say, if you sow your wild oats you will reap the same harvest, the same harvest! Just so surely as God lives and you do not repent, hear me, one day the reaping time will come.”⁵⁹

When Moody, Beecher, and Chapman speak of sowing, they solely mean to speak of our spiritual life. The question of sowing and reaping is one of eternity. “It is a solemn thing to think that the future will be the harvest of the present--that my condition in my dying hour may depend

upon my actions to-day!”⁶⁰ There was no connection between the spiritual sowing of the soul and the physical, material investments of worldly life. In fact, in a section titled “No Bridge Between,” Moody specifically rejects the idea that spiritual worthiness can manifest itself in the material world:

Now, men make this mistake--they sow to the flesh, and they think they will reap the harvest of the spirit; and on the other hand, they sow to the spirit and are disappointed when they do not reap a temporal harvest... That cannot be: it is flesh and corruption, or, Spirit and everlasting life. There is no bridge from one to the other. "Seed which is sown for a spiritual harvest has no tendency whatever to procure temporal well-being.”⁶¹

The CPG makes good use of the “harvest” trope, but does not follow its implicit limit between the physical and spiritual world. In fact, it declares the opposite, arguing that spiritual faith has direct physical effects. Hagin argues, “Faith works identically in every realm and in every sphere.”⁶² T.D. Jakes relies on the connection between the spiritual and physical, insisting that viewers must sow the wealth of the world (money), to gain back money by faith: “Because if you will obey the Lord and just sow what you have. Don’t argue with that figure He spoke, just sow it by faith—because what you need God to do, that amount of money won’t pay for.”⁶³

True to the nature of the gargoyle, the CPG stretches the agricultural trope to new limits. In some cases, the term “sow” is a substitution for a “faith donation.” In other cases, it is merely an exhortation to have faith in material outcomes. Like the “victory” trope, sowing and reaping is attached to a variety of other discursive formations, now redeployed on behalf of the prosperity preacher. When Moody declares that sowing and reaping were universal, he means the law of cause and effect was universal and that the harvest trope meets a test of similarity across unlike

cases. Meyer takes the trope at full literal value, ignoring the dividing line, and argues that what is true of health is true of relationships and financially, “If we sow good seeds by respecting our bodies...we can expect to reap a harvest of good health. If we sow mercy, we will reap mercy...If we are generous, we will experience generosity returned...It is not God’s will for wicked people to have all the money in the world while His people are constantly needy. We should be good stewards of what God gives us, and good investors.”⁶⁴ Meyer does not take the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25 to be a metaphor for *spiritual* investment, as does Moody, but as a literal consideration for investing. She concludes, “Money is only a small portion of prosperity, but we do need it and it is not wrong to ask God to supply it abundantly.”⁶⁵

At times, the CPG’s call for the sowing of good seeds sounds like nothing more than a call for generosity. Osteen’s version, which involves none of the trite calls for donation to his own ministry, urges his audience, “Have an attitude that says, *Who can I bless today?* Rather than *How can I get blessed today?*”⁶⁶ However, the call is made with an eye toward the believer’s own benefit: “When you do good for other people, that’s when God is going to make sure that His abundant blessings overtake you.”⁶⁷ A sub-section of Thompson’s book is titled, “Give Away Much and Get More.”⁶⁸

Living abundantly or appropriately sowing sometimes simply means conspicuous consumption. For example, directly matched with Meyer’s urging that each person needs to wisely invest and ask God for abundant money is her point that “Many people...are constantly afraid they won’t have enough of whatever resources they need...that fear causes them to think they will never have enough, so they may even begin to live narrow, stingy lives.”⁶⁹ Stinginess is clearly a devil-term for Meyer, who elsewhere argues that, “Jesus said He came so we could have and enjoy life in abundance and to the full.”⁷⁰ To emphasize the point Meyer adds a

personal testimony about sowing a positive mentality and reaping financial benefits in the purchase of an automobile:

We needed a new car. I wanted a certain kind, but...I was afraid to purchase what I really wanted...I felt we should purchase a cheaper model. Dave felt strongly that I should get the car I really wanted because we could afford it...Dave won out and we got the more expensive model. To my amazement, about two weeks after we purchased it, I received an unexpected raise and what I cleared after taxes was almost exactly fifty dollars per month [the payment difference]...The “cheap” attitude I described in this story affected every area of my life...I believe God used this situation to help me break my unhealthy thought pattern. *I firmly believe now that had I settled for the one I thought I could get by with, that I would have never gotten that raise.*⁷¹

Thus, to some extent, when Joyce Meyer declares, “When we do sow good seeds, we should indeed expect good results...in every area of our lives, including health, finances, abilities, relationships,” we know that “sowing” includes simply being willing to spend.⁷²

Even when preachers explicitly demand contributions as “seed” money for the congregations’ financial harvest, they are only building upon a series of symbolic concepts (tithing, sowing, reaping) that exist in more conventional Christianities.⁷³ Creflo Dollar is hardly in unknown territory when he explains that, “The application of these principles causes abundance to overflow in our lives. When spiritual and natural laws come together, they create a force that rearranges and changes things.”⁷⁴ But Dollar explicitly crosses Moody’s line between the spiritual and material world when he argues that “Basically, Jesus uses the parable of the sower to compare the kingdom to farming...The manufacturing center of prosperity requires a

sower, sowing the Word...It is common for most believers to automatically think of sowing a financial seed (giving an offering). However, our money seed will not have a future unless we have first planted the Word in our heart.”⁷⁵ For some preachers, sowing is not merely spending, but direct contributions to a ministry. Thompson tells readers, “Don’t get the money then forget about the preacher. He may believe ‘money cometh’ *too*. I know *I* believe it.”⁷⁶ This may seem crass but that is consistent with the harvest trope at large.

The tropic range of the sowing/reaping metaphor is great. Once the Rubicon of spiritual/material has been crossed, there are few limits on to what sowing and reaping may extend. Of those selected here, Thompson is perhaps the most adamant that tithing to the minister is required for a good harvest. In fact, Thompson calls it an *opportunity*. He maintains that the purchases-on-credit of his own ministry are to be founded in the creation of seed money



Figure 6. Leroy S. Thompson with the *Weapon of Prosperity II (Falcon 900B)*.⁷⁷

opportunities. Recently, Thompson claimed God directed him to purchase a new, larger jet as a reward for suffering through smaller personal jets:

God: ***“This plane will be a DIVINE MARK in your ministry! You have been patient, so now your time has come!”***

Me: *“God, I’ll go anywhere you want me to go!”*

God: ***“REALIZE THIS: I am sending you to the nations with a special Word from me. Get Ready! Big doors are about to open supernaturally. All that you have preached is about to begin to start manifesting. You’ve been faithful over your small jets. Now I am about to give you a bigger one. So receive it as a “Gift With A Mission!” GET READY TO RECEIVE!***

Immediately, I knew that plane was now a part of the Kingdom of God.⁷⁸

Thompson’s dialogue is an enactment of the sowing/reaping trope. In receiving the new jet, a Dassault Falcon 900 B named the *Weapon of Prosperity II* (in figure 6), Thompson is merely reaping what he has sowed in faithfully stewarding the smaller jets (a Citation III). Yet Thompson confesses that he is confused, because God also commands him to loan part of the money for the *Weapon of Prosperity II*, rather than purchasing it outright with funds he has on hand, plus the proceeds from the sale of the *Weapon of Prosperity I*:

God told me what amount to put down on the loan. I had more than that but I have learned to obey God...I didn’t know why God didn’t want me to put more money down on the aircraft until spending time with Him in prayer about it. Now I know why God wanted me to put down a certain amount. With the economy in the condition that it’s in, those that know the laws of sowing and reaping are

looking for good soil to plant seed. The mission of the *Weapon of Prosperity II* makes taking part in this debt cancellation a good place to sow seed.⁷⁹



Figure 7. Leroy S. and Carolyn A. Thompson in the *Weapon of Prosperity II*.⁸⁰

The tropic reach of the harvest metaphor, therefore, even reaches to explaining the particular financing of personal luxury jets (in figure 7). Thompson did not have to spend any free capital on the purchase because a lot of his parishioners are in dire straits because of the economy. Therefore, they *need* the opportunity to “sow” money into Thompson’s ministry. By donating, they can identify with God—money being the key means of reaching that symbol of authority. Of course, space is limited—missing out means missing out on the cause and effect nature of sowing and reaping:

There was a balance of \$8.5 million dollars on the loan. If 8500 people give \$1000, that would pay the loan off. There are 6760 spots (This number will

change daily!) left to get in on this opportunity to sow into the debt cancellation of the *Weapon of Prosperity II*. If you are one of the 8500, you will have seed in good ground ready to receive a harvest.⁸¹

The CPG ministers also invert Moody's use of the harvest trope as a lesson of the rewards of hard work. According to Moody, the weeds of sin grow easily and naturally but deliver no harvest. The cultivation of faith is difficult, but delivers salvation. Yet, by mere extension of tropic range of the "harvest," the CPG proclaims that the harvest of faith is easy, not difficult. One of Joseph Prince's books is subtitled *The Secret to Effortless Success, Wholeness and Victorious Living*.⁸² Jakes announces that all we need to do to gain harvest is to sow our seeds and "reach in and grab it."⁸³ When Osteen declares that God is "'*El Shaddai*,' the God of more than enough...not 'El Cheapo' the God of barely enough!" Osteen is setting out the blueprint of a God that is not just generally interested in the material prosperity of His followers but is specifically interested in fulfilling the psychological and physical well-being and material desires of his people.⁸⁴ Osteen's Christian seeks not a life engaged in a *work ethic*, like Weber's, but a life of leisure.⁸⁵ Thompson makes harvest as simple as making a donation to the financing of the *Weapon of Prosperity II*. The appeal is perfect because it bypasses the actual logic of business or economics—systems that many people feel left out of--and instead explains prosperity as miraculous, something that also conveniently provides a moral stamp upon the success of the already rich. Thus, the CPG's harvest metaphor is not grotesque because of its materialism, but rather because it amalgamates a series of traditional cultural and religious beliefs into a form that is suited to the transition.

McConnell, speaking for "orthodox" evangelism, complains that people become trapped in the CPG because "both sides use the very same terms with radically different meanings. Until

the terms are defined, any differentiation between cultic teaching and orthodox Christianity is an exercise in futility.”⁸⁶ McConnell demands a *proper* understanding of Scripture and a return to the “plain meaning of the text.”⁸⁷ It is not hard to imagine that McConnell’s desire for the plain meaning of sowing and reaping would be something like Moody and Chapman’s view of a wall between the spiritual and material. Unfortunately, metaphor is not limited by quite these methods. Metaphor is, of course, a kind of hermeneutics—a way of reading a situation. It enables the hearer/reader to substitute one set of knowledge (the agriculture process of reaping/sowing) for a foreign, unknown area (God’s economy of sin/salvation or faith/prosperity).

McConnell’s demand for definitions is thus a demand for a certain kind of understanding of metaphor. To demand a “proper” metaphor or to demand definitions of terms across a metaphoric economy is to demand a proper name for one of part of the metaphor. To the opponent of the CPG, or those who proclaim such things to be heresies, they exhibit that the “harvest” metaphor is *not* constitutive of the meaning of the theological economy of reaping-sowing, but rather that it is a mere illustrative substitution. A metaphor, of course, is always a revealing of one thing by comparison to another—hence, the analogical process. But the “good” understanding of the metaphor serves to illuminate or illustrate the truth of the concept already present. As Derrida remarks of this scheme, “Metaphor, when well trained, must work in the service of truth.”⁸⁸ The truth, of course, is *already present*. The metaphor is a tool of understanding—the substitution of one epistemological relationship for another.

As Burke’s remarks on “Perspective by Incongruity” make clear, the fundamental basis of the metaphor is that one side of the metaphor is *not* like the other; an argument is *not* a weapon, business is not a war, time does not *flow*.⁸⁹ Yet something about argument is revealed, particularly its *violence*, by the comparison of argument to a weapon. Likewise, conceptualizing

business as war reveals something similar about the moves of commercial activity to military conflict. Moreover, the cognitive process is *enthymematic*; i.e., the audience is expected to do the work of uncovering and then processing the similarity between the compared terms. However, in the conventional understanding of metaphor, the revealing is not just anything the audience thinks of at the moment, but should be a particular, factual attribute of the dominant term that is illuminated by the comparison. Hence, analogizing “time” and “water (flow)” reveals what is *always already so* about time. Time does *not* flow, of course, but what time *does* do can be imagined as such, as least temporarily.

Hence the question of similarity—the test of a standard metaphor—has to do with the ana-logic process involved. The metaphor, as heuristic, allows us insight into one knowledge-set via the other knowledge-set. As Langer notes, metaphor has the advantage of enabling a person to understand a new experience via the vocabulary of a previous experience—at least until we have an appropriate vocabulary for the new experience itself.⁹⁰ Sometimes the metaphor settles down into the language, which *is* proper to a concept. When metaphors die, or become unthought-of as comparison, they have lost the unique elements of expanding metaphor (at least according to Ricoeur).⁹¹ In that sense, they can become part of the discursive/denotative function of language around a concept.

Thus, when one objects to the grotesque excess of the CPG’s use of the trope of sowing/reaping, or draws lines by declaring there is no relationship between spiritual and physical, or even (ironically) argues that the empirical record distinctly rejects the idea that faith → material benefits, one is demanding that the metaphor be tested by the fixed referent—i.e., by the *real*, *actual*, or *true* function of the spiritual-material economy. The metaphor must not be delimited because what will emerge will be conclusions and comparisons that are not consonant

with the governing “prime mover of the metaphor”—the *truth* of the matter, revealed in the proper language (epistemological structure) around the term. Hence McConnell says that the harvest trope cannot, in fact, be extended to jobs, jets or donations because that is not the revealed truth (*aletheia*) of economic systems/business logics/faith systems when properly understood.

What else is a “proper” hermeneutic of a metaphor other than a frame of acceptance? An accepted way of reading? From this frame, the harvest trope, like the CPG’s use of the victory trope, appears grotesque because it applies new logics and assemblies to old symbolic structures. “Victory” and “sowing/reaping” are no longer constrained by a dividing line that sees the spiritual as walled off from the material—indeed, the claim that they should be divided is somewhat disingenuous considering the long cooperation of the spiritual and material in American theology. The real problem is that when the metaphors are taken ‘too far’ they turn back on themselves. To wit, the idea that, broadly, ‘America’ may be blessed or cursed because of its adherence to certain religious mandates is acceptable, especially since the rules of economics are taken to be dictated/guided by God. However, the idea that the person next door may be blessed or cursed for the same reason is the metaphor of sowing/reaping taken too far, perhaps partially because it now violates the economic rationality that was previously assumed to be the realm of the divine, or at least a natural fact. Indeed, McConnell complains that the CPG is “anti-rational” and that what the CPG fails to understand is that “Reason is not the enemy of faith and God is not an irrational being.”⁹² The evangelical Christian is thereby placed in the awkward position of attacking exhortations of faith by appeals to rationality and reason.⁹³

The operation of metaphor in the grotesque of the CPG—the twist in its gargoyle heart—involves a play upon the problem of metaphor. Undergirding the objection against the over-

extended harvest trope lies the assumption that there is language—or at least knowledge—proper to the term. The metaphor is heuristic, not constitutive. The ornament of the harvest trope exists to help the audience better understand the sin-judgment economy. As Chapman’s sermon demonstrates, extensive use of the metaphor enlivens the action, as Aristotle would approvingly note, and may help the audience to grasp the basic terms and relationships involved in a theological system. Of course, the sin-judgment economy is not *really* like agriculture; it merely has some similar relationships. In an ideal world there would be an understood language that could more properly explain the sin-judgment economy on its own.

But what is the proper name of the sin-judgment economy? How might we describe the cause-effect relationship of action-reaction in a way that explicates the situation at all? We may say, as does Chapman, that God records our actions in a “book,” but what is that but another layer of metaphor? Other than to say that our actions will be taken into account (another metaphor), how can we find a language which describes the truth of theological action-reaction or cause-effect? By what means can we understand what is proper to the divine when all of our terms are anthropomorphic? Of course, some fundamentalists claim that all dictates of the Scriptures are to be taken literally. But what could this mean? Even if the Scriptures were taken as historical fact, the *rules* of theology are extrapolated out of *stories*. The Old Testament lays out some specific rules (most of which no one takes seriously), but the New Testament consists almost entirely of parahistorical accounts and parables. That’s hardly helpful for “Parable is ‘expanded metaphor,’ ‘the linguistic incarnation.’”⁹⁴

In what sense, then, does the harvest trope add to our proper understanding of the sin-judgment economy? What is the test of similarity, the test of an accurate revealing? What is the scientific, discursive description of that economy? What series of signs indicates that there is a

wall between the spiritual and material, already oft-ignored? There are appeals to empirical evidence and appeals to rationality, yet those do not have much currency within the symbolic economy in which both CPG and its polemic opponents operate. The danger of de-moored metaphor, grounded only by other metaphors, is described by Derrida:

This procedure can be pursued and complicated infinitely, although Aristotle does not say so. No reference being properly named in such a metaphor, the figure is carried off into the adventure of a long, implicit sentence, a secret narrative which nothing assures us will lead us back to the proper name. The metaphORIZATION of metaphor, its bottomless overdeterminability, seems to be inscribed in the structure of metaphor.⁹⁵

The relationship is now adrift for lack of a proper name for the governing portion. The grounded “truth” or “accuracy” of the metaphor is now always already effaced by the absence of a *lexis* for the term in-and-of-itself. All of what is *essential* in the metaphor is in doubt. We are left wondering if the harvest trope was ever about the sin-judgment economy at all. In fact, the CPG preachers, with their emphasis on “positive confession,” would likely deny that the harvest metaphor is tied to or meant as a representation of sin or judgment. For the prosperity gospelists, the harvest metaphor is a metaphor of potential *gain*, not a metaphor warning against the loss of salvation.⁹⁶

Thus, a feature of the symbolic gargoyle emerges in the “sow/reap” metaphor. In the CPG, a series of signs, which was once distinctly understood as a contained metaphor for a sin-judgment economy, is redeployed in a new way, as a metaphor that is no longer limited by old standards that are based upon decent limits to spirituality. The new interpretation of sowing and reaping is parasitic on the liabilities of the old. The belief in the “laws of sowing and reaping” in

a material sense, trades on the calls for “faith” against empirical evidence common in fundamentalist, evangelistic, and Pentecostal churches. It allows preachers like Thompson and Hagin to castigate those who oppose the CPG as *lacking* faith. In addition, the idea that the fate of the world is related to its conduct—or at least the fate or fortune of particular nations and communities—is one core to American Christianity, extending back to John Winthrop. The particularization of the relationship between faith/conduct and prosperity is hardly out of line. Indeed, the *mimesis* involved not just in the CPG, but the history of American Christianity, holds a great deal of responsibility for the *lexicon* that the CPG utilizes.

Metaphor is vital to religious language because God is “a mysterious Presence-in-Absence. God is not an object in view.”⁹⁷ Analogical processes, therefore, cannot be tied to the *proper* description of God or God’s law because those laws are always hidden from direct observation. In the case of the harvest metaphor, the essential link between “sow/ reap” and divine judgment is difficult to establish because our ideas about sin and judgments are almost entirely derived from metaphors like the harvest trope itself. Instead, the audience and the preachers are left to speculate and interpret what the metaphor means without access to the proper name of the sin-judgment economy or even any certainty that the harvest metaphor is linked to that theological concept. Considering metaphors serve not only to link two concepts together but to mediate between the text and the audience, the prosperity preacher’s interpretation of the metaphor as a way to link the Scriptures to the lived world and immediate needs/desires of a contemporary audience is hardly surprising. One key *raison d’être* of the CPG is a desire to put to faith to work for the material benefit of believers. It is a doctrine of transition, filled with a desire for change and attempt to escape the alienation of less-than-perfect conditions of the present world, not for another world but for a better version of this world. De-moored

from a proper language, the claim for an *essential* link between the harvest trope and sin-judgment economy now deconstructed, the harvest metaphor is put into that service.

Predestination, Covenant and God's Plan

The third cluster of tropes I examine deals with the overarching superstructure of the CPG's belief 'system,' to use the term loosely. I argue CPG transfers the predestination trope away from a trope about the sorting of God's Elect or damned and into description of their covenant theology and distribution of goods within their spiritual-materialist economy. This section is intended to show how the CPG deconstructs and re-deploys key Christian symbolic forms; it does not *attack* those structures but rather radically *extends* them.

Burke remarks, via anecdote, that the grotesque sometimes emerges when the public resorts to appealing to the most supernatural and powerful forces for the most mundane of purposes. In our case, a great law of "sowing and reaping" constrains the universe in such a way that it delivers individuals from credit card debt and gives Christian ministers jet aircraft. The contrast between the commonness of the event and the superstructure of belief required to explain and hence take action (praying) toward that event has a sense of absurdity to it. It is an absurdity which reveals some of the liabilities and weaknesses, though still utilized, of the prior frame of acceptance.⁹⁸ How much more absurd is the idea of personal financial blessing than the idea that America is a world leader, not because of resources, economics, military power, or any particular terrestrial force (for those are just the means, not the cause), but because Providence has rewarded American faithfulness? Perhaps it is grotesque to believe that department store clerks give you sale prices because of your godliness, but the concept of faith-reward is not at all out of line with traditional American theologies.⁹⁹ The CPG is merely that general principle

brought to its grotesque, *entelechi*al end; a *reductio ad absurdum* that does not see itself as absurd at all.

The “laws” and contractual rules of God’s plan for prosperity compose the superstructure of this belief system. In this section, I analyze the trope used to familiarize the audience with this superstructure—in particular, the description of prosperity and God’s plan for individuals are a kind of “predestination.”

“Predestination” is significant in Christianity. In American culture, which still suffers a significant hang-over from the Puritan tradition, it carries particular weight. Although there are few true Calvinists in existence, the terminology is familiar to those schooled in the Protestant tradition. One of the founding experiences of the American religious tradition, The Great Awakening, was based in a call for greater adherence to the doctrine of total depravity and the belief that only God could deliver the salvation of the predestined Elect.¹⁰⁰ As American Protestantism developed, however, the total blindness of individuals toward God’s plan (and hence individuals’ inability to aid in their own salvation) was reduced to a “slight astigmatism,” allowing individuals to participate in their own salvation. The doctrines of total depravity and determinism of the Elect, at odds with the American concept of individual freedom, faded.¹⁰¹ The concept of predestination was not abandoned; it altered to include that idea that *all* are part of the Elect, if they so choose.¹⁰² But the idea that America is part of God’s overall plan for the universe remains a strong element of Christianity, particularly in the current prophetic tradition that sees the United States as a unique nation and American cultural dominance as linked to the overall plan.¹⁰³

The remnant of a kind of social predestination most clearly shows up in the common slogan that “God is in control.” Most fundamentalists and evangelicals, of course, do not entirely

believe that God is in control. God doesn't control the individual's choice to be born again. But the plan of history unfolds according to God's plan and daily events, particularly those that impact believers, are a part of God's plan. Like Israel, God's plan includes a *covenantal* relationship to communities. Actions of the community are related to outcomes within God's plan and rules.¹⁰⁴ The tension between a determined history/future and the free will of a society and the individuals within the society is never entirely resolved, yet the idea of a preordained plan remains a strong belief.

The CPG makes significant use of the "predestination" trope in its theological proclamations. Meyer assures readers that if they follow her plan of disciplining the mind, they'll soon "be enjoying the good life God has predestined for you."¹⁰⁵ Jakes argues that the universe and each person is "predestined...the outcome of history is fixed." Yet he does not mean, like the Puritans, that God has determined an Elect to be saved from the fires of Hell.¹⁰⁶ Despite Jakes' assertion that "God's plan is fixed. It cannot and will not be edited or changed," he reports later that we must "choose what God has chosen for us."¹⁰⁷ As a part of this fixed plan, Jakes argues that our material blessings have already been given to us. Most persons have simply failed to make the withdrawal:

Faith is a catalyst that accelerates the divine transfer of wealth to us as believers in Christ Jesus. Faith is what motivates God to release His resources on our behalf, and faith conditions us to receive them...All the blessings we can ever receive from God have already been created, established, and are, in a "holding pattern," waiting for us to possess them.¹⁰⁸

This quotation may explain Jakes' declaration to TBN viewers that, "If you will just reach in and receive it...the blessing is yours! The business is yours! The property—I said, the property—I

said the property—is yours! I don't care what they say on the title-deed. God said, 'The property is already yours.'"¹⁰⁹

The implication is strange to the outsider. God's plan means that every item in the universe that can be possessed by an individual has already been earmarked for some person. For example, although you may legally own a house, it is possible that God has predestined that house for someone else. Not only that, but the house, in ecclesiastical terms *always-already* belongs to that other person and never has or will belong to you.

Osteen, for his part, declares, "God has a specific purpose for your life."¹¹⁰ It is a deception of the Enemy to accept your current circumstance. Like Jakes, Osteen argues that faith is the catalyst for accessing God's plan: "We receive what we believe... Understand this: God will help you, but you cast the deciding vote."¹¹¹ In this form of "predestination," each person is also a free agent, able to accept or reject God's blessing. It is important to remember here that accepting Jesus Christ as an individual's Savior, the key to being "born again" and avoiding damnation, is not the same as accepting God's material blessings. There is a doubled ritual of re-birth. Most prosperity preachers distinguish between being a "saved" Christian—which all traditional denominations succeed in creating—and being a "victorious" Christian who obtains God's blessings in this world.¹¹² The truly prosperous Christian is both saved and living a "victorious" life.

The covenantal relationship of God's plan is evident in Osteen's description of the process. "Blessings will not happen automatically. You have to do your part, believing that you are blessed, seeing yourself as blessed, acting as though you are blessed. When you do, the promise will become a reality in your life."¹¹³ Osteen's description of God's plan, although it is declared fixed and immovable, is actually layered. For example, Osteen declares, "Before the

foundation of the world, [God] laid out an exact plan for our lives.”¹¹⁴ Yet he also notes that you can miss out on blessings because “you were not praying boldly.”¹¹⁵ So why can God’s fixed plan be altered by individual choices? Because God’s plan is based in a series of contingencies:

We all have missed opportunities... Whatever the reason, when things don’t go our way, it’s tempting to think, *Too bad for me, I’ll never have that chance again. I’ve missed my season.* But the good news is that God always has another season. He said in the book of Joel 2:25 that He will restore the years that have been stolen... God can make the rest of your life so rewarding and so fulfilling that it makes up for the lost opportunities of the past.¹¹⁶

Failing to live up to God’s promise can cause problems, of course. “Too many times... we delay God’s promise. We delay His favor because of our limited thinking... We’re filled with doubt and unbelief.”¹¹⁷ Note that it is not action, conduct, or sin that blocks God’s favor—it is unbelief in His promise.

Gloria Copeland declares at the opening of *God’s Master Plan for Your Life*, “*God always has a plan.* His plan isn’t just some haphazard scheme thrown together at the last minute, either. His plan is a Master Plan—a plan uniquely designed for every person in every situation on the face of the earth.”¹¹⁸ Similar to Osteen, Copeland believes God’s plan is layered. For example, she argues that God had already planned for Adam and Eve’s betrayal in the Garden of Eden, although she implies that Adam and Eve did have a choice. Copeland cites God’s relationship to Israel as the evidence of God’s plan. After all, she remarks, the OT is, at its core, a set of examples for us to learn and understand.

Copeland says we must understand that God's plan is created out of love, a desire to comfort his people, to give them *things*. The realization of this, she testifies, is what made her born again. She puts it this way:

He cares about me! That was great news...But, according to this passage [Matthew 6:24-34, NEB] God not only cared for me, He had promised that if I'd seek him first, He would add all other things to me. The very idea was shocking—wonderful, but shocking—and I was thrilled by it. After all, I didn't have a job. I didn't have a refrigerator. I didn't have a stove...I definitely needed some *things* in my life. And the Bible itself had promised I could have them! Immediately, I responded. Without fully understanding what I was doing, I prayed very simply, "Lord take my life and do something with it." I believe I was born again that day.¹¹⁹

God's Master Plan, though it is perfect, does require a "connection" with God. Part of that connection involves making a *choice* to be born-again in Christ, in the traditional evangelical sense: "God won't force you to do it. He has given you free will."¹²⁰ But being born-again isn't enough—and receiving gifts of the Holy Spirit (a thematic idea recollecting the Pentecostal tradition) also isn't enough. You must believe in the fullness of not just eternal life (which saves one from hell), but an abundant life, in this world: "If you research God's Word, believe it, and obey it, it will revolutionize your life from the inside out. It will take you from poverty to prosperity, from sickness to health. It will take you from failure to success in every area of life."¹²¹

Thompson also believes in the covenantal idea of predestination, particularly when it comes to prosperity. Thompson doesn't want his audience to be confused about what he means about his use of the trope "covenant," so he clarifies:

Now, we know from Deuteronomy 8:1 that if you want God's covenant blessing, you have to do what the Lord tells you to do. Then, when "money cometh" to you, a son or daughter of God...your "stuff"...is going to be taken care of too!..Yes, I'm talking about *money*! I'm not talking about grace or prayer. I'm talking about *money*. *Money cometh!*¹²²

Thompson indicates the covenant with God means wealth—the righteous will directly receive monetary benefit from God. Why? Because with wealth come tithes and therefore money for Bibles and churches. If you give one-tenth to God, Thompson argues, you may keep the remainder as a part of the covenant.¹²³ "To get blessed by God, you have to favor His righteous cause...especially in the area of tithing and giving."¹²⁴ Moreover, Thompson notes, because money is the blessing of God, complaining that believers are getting rich or driving nice cars or buying new houses is *verboten*. "Stop criticizing others' blessing if you want to be blessed too. God doesn't give nosy people money."¹²⁵ In Thompson's case, the covenant trope not only serves the purpose of laying out precisely why God gives people material riches (to build the church). It also indicates the formula for getting it (tithing) and prohibits complaining about it. Thompson argues, "Don't let the devil hold you back. Now we're not to be in covetousness, but we are in *covenant*. We are to be controlling this financial system instead of this financial system controlling us."¹²⁶

Although each preacher utilizing the "predestination" trope also emphasizes the free choice of individuals, tensions between the fixity of God's plan and free will are everywhere.¹²⁷

Gloria Copeland relates a story about how in receiving the blessing of a job for Oral Roberts, God spoke to Kenneth Copeland and told him that the people at Oral Roberts University “worked for him.”¹²⁸ Osteen repeatedly relates stories where individuals do him favors or give him special consideration and attributes the favors to the blessings of the Lord. Jakes’ assertion that all property has been earmarked for one person or another certainly seems to undermine the idea that anyone is engaged in a free transaction at any time. Thompson argues that when he is financially blessed by his congregation above his salary, it’s not the congregation who is blessing him, it is God, presumably because God controls their actions.¹²⁹

These problems of free will, contradictory as they are, are dismissed as mysteries by all parties. Osteen repeatedly emphasizes that what seems impossible in the natural is always possible in the supernatural: “You don’t have to figure out how God is going to solve your problems...that’s not your job.”¹³⁰ Faith solves the problem (by mystical means, as Burke might say).

The link between faith and the covenantal spiritual economy is a critical one in the CPG. It crosses the boundary between the spiritual and the material. Copeland describes faith as the “currency of the spiritual realm...Faith makes tangible the things God has promised us in His Word...Hope is good, but it takes faith to give substance. Substance is something you can see, touch, and experience in this natural world. Substance is earthly materiality.”¹³¹ The primary way to achieve faith, to gain currency in the spiritual economy, is to remember that covenant that establishes the theological superstructure that changes spiritual faith to material substance.¹³²

The predestination trope, also manifested as “God’s plan” and the contractualism of the covenant relationship, is common to Christian language and to rhetorical studies. To some extent, it serves as a symbol of God’s authority. The theological structure of covenant theology

was vital to the ancient jeremiadic prophets, the Puritans culture's belief in their own exceptionalism, and has become secularized as a key part of American political culture.¹³³ For the Puritans, their errand into the North American wilderness was part of an effort to set an example for the entire world. So long as the Puritans obeyed the covenant of grace, they would increase wealth and political power. The contemporary statements of Falwell and the doom-oriented prophecies of Pat Robertson, who believe that various disasters and ever-impending American decline are a product of American unbelief, reflect the influence of covenant theology and jeremiadic form.

The symbolic debris of the Puritan "external covenant" and "internal covenant" also reappear when Thompson argues that the purpose of prosperity is the spread of the God's Word. In the Puritan external covenant the church and land would be blessed for obeying God's word.¹³⁴ Profitability was set to the purpose of the true Christianity. Yet except for brief moments the idea of a world-conquering faith is largely deleted from the CPG's repertoire. The CPG's cosmic superstructure of the prosperity covenant, in which cars, jobs, and shopping discounts are planned out since *before the beginning*, is almost completely individualistic. Embracing the individualist focus of contemporary fundamentalism, the CPG has shed the radical economic and communal implications of the Puritan trope of the "covenant."

Using similar language, Joseph Prince employs the "covenant of grace" in his interpretation of the CPG. He equates self-reliance for prosperity to a rejection of God's grace. He explains, "When a believer rejects God's grace and depends on his own works to be blessed, he falls back under the curse of the law," implying that God rewards and punishes those based upon their adherence to the 10 commandments. Presumably, under the "Law of Moses," God will not do things for those who have lost grace such as warn them of the 2008 stock market

collapse, which God did for Prince.¹³⁵ The term “covenant of grace” was familiar to Puritans; it referred to “internal covenant” in which the (predestined) Elect would be saved from damnation if they believed in Christ’s saving power.¹³⁶ Yet, in Prince’s system, the “covenant of grace” achieves God’s grace in material or psychological rewards, not salvation, and becomes unified with the external covenant.

The CPG has also re-interpreted the notion of “predestination” away from relating who is specifically designated for salvation and damnation (called “double predestination” in Calvinistic terms) toward describing a specific, set, unchangeable, yet simultaneously contingent blueprint for a materially prosperous life. The emphasis of “predestination” here is meant to emphasize that God pays particular attention to each person. As Gloria Copeland’s testimony makes clear, the CPG understands “predestination” as simply indicating that God has thought out each person’s life, has provided a specific economy in which faith can be exchanged for individual material benefit, and has thought through the infinite contingencies that are possible. “Predestination” no longer involves thoughts about the destiny of the soul, but instead describes the course of one’s life, or even the true, divinely recognized ownership of particular items.

The therapeutic purposes of the CPG tropic reinterpretation are manifest. By creating a spiritual economy in which God has “predestined” a plan which can be accessed by the commission of certain, specific actions (faith, tithing), the CPG re-assures its adherents (like Copeland) that God cares individually about them and cares about their immediate well-being. The course of the future is clear because of a kind of “bureaucratization of the imagination.” The non-specific, ambiguous plans of God are transferred into a particular, clear, universal system of exchange that creates immediate benefits.¹³⁷ If a person has faith God will repay him or her materially and spiritually. In fact, God is contractually obligated to do so. What can be earned—

material bonuses, spiritual bonuses, and emotional bonuses—vary between different prosperity gospelists. But with a symbolic gargoyle, we should expect nothing else. The CPG is *individually* attenuated. It gives precisely what the receiver wants to receive—“name it” and “claim it.” Although this chapter has focused on *money* because it is generally the lead issue, prosperity gospels also preach that believers will benefit with emotional well-being, the gain of attractive spouses, advantageous parking spots, well-behaved children, relief and inoculation against illness, and more. The economic logic of the CPG permits the outputs of faith to be individually tailored.

The covenantal trope, combined with the concept of predestination, erects precisely the supernatural superstructure set to mundane purposes that characterize the grotesque. The CPG takes familiar, cosmic tropes of the most essential, eternal sort and reduces them to the most trite level. As Harrison notes, those that adhere to the CPG believe that God is intimately interested in and participating in every detail of each person’s life.¹³⁸ All events in life are explained as divine favor of God or its absence. The core question of salvation/damnation is set as simply a precursor to living an “abundant life” or ignored altogether. The individual tailoring of God’s perspective makes it easy to dismiss the implication of the CPG that the billion people or so living in poverty around the world must simply lack faith in God’s Word of prosperity. The contradiction between the idea of free will and the idea that God manages all affairs either for or against each individual (by controlling or directing other individuals) is ignored or dismissed as a mystery.¹³⁹

Strange as it is, the “seed” (if the pun can be excused) for this theology is found in the long tradition of American Christian belief. The CPG does not abandon, destroy, or revolutionize the predestination and covenant tropes, it simply bends them. It re-reads the gospel, re-interprets

its meaning by deconstructing the *necessity* of the terms' relation to their old meanings. The audience, of course, may not even be fully aware of their prior meaning and may instead just have a vague notion that the terms are part of the American Christian tradition. Indeed, the tropes of predestination and covenant are just dropped, like the harvest trope, from the cosmic or national level down to the individual. Or, conversely, one might say that it is a process of transcending mundane material concerns upward. It is only when we remove the terms from the epic level of eternal destinies (heaven/hell) or national missions and reduce them (*reductio ad absurdum*) to the individual level and extend them to their logical (*entelechial*) end that symbolic liabilities of the previous frame become clear. The old frame has difficulty defending itself, for its own terms—deconstructed and reinterpreted—are now deployed against it.

Family, Favor, and Blessing

The idea that there is a personage of God that is both Jesus Christ's biological father and the figurative/literal father of the all humanity is a core Christian Trinitarian precept and trope. In examining this fourth and final cluster of tropes that I have selected from the prosperity gospel, I examine the way that the CPG uses the family trope to explain God's motive for lavishing material blessing on believers. I intend such an examination to reveal that the CPG's reading of the gospels is significant based in core malleability intrinsic to ascribing characteristics to God.

The concept of God-as-Father over a family has been a particular emphasis when Christian doctrines are being softened, when there is an emphasis on the loving nature of God. In American religious history, the reference to God as "Father" emerges when there is focus on the wise benevolence of God toward his people.¹⁴⁰ In 1748, Gilbert Tennent cited God's position as Father when noting that God "bids all the world love him with all their hearts...and love one another as brethren because they are all children of the same common father, having the same

nature.”¹⁴¹ Charles Spurgeon argued that believers have been adopted in the family of God and regenerated in God.¹⁴²

With membership in God’s family comes divine favor. Spurgeon preached, “There are high privileges of which you are possessors even now; there are divine joys which even this day you may taste.”¹⁴³ Echoing Spurgeon, Graham proclaimed, “As citizens of Heaven, we also share in Heaven’s glory...even the angels are our servants. The great saints...are our companions. Christ is our Brother. God is our Father. And we will receive immortality.”¹⁴⁴

Puritans, as I have noted, viewed that favor in terms of the covenant. God’s favor would manifest itself externally in the prosperity of the community via obedience to God’s will and internally as salvation in the covenant of grace. Spurgeon’s words reflect the Calvinist vision of covenantal relationships. The “family,” literal and/or figurative, serves as a symbol unifying God’s affection and favor toward the Christian people, as well as God’s authority over them.

Combined with the predestination, covenant, and harvest tropes, the family tropes serve to flesh out the structure of God’s cosmos. The cosmos is pre-set for eternity, it relies upon a compact with the people, and if you are faithful you will receive favor and reward because God and the believer are a part of the same family. Metaphors, of course, always have organizational components. Lakoff and Johnson note, “Metaphors may create certain realities for us, especially social realities.”¹⁴⁵ However, as my analysis so far has hopefully made clear, metaphors do not just *produce*, but are themselves *produced*. Further, because they are always ambiguous, always located in a place where a *proper* language is not quite known, they are constantly being re-interpreted and re-produced. Every metaphor is subject to deconstruction and re-interpretation, but this is even more true of the particular metaphors in which the analogical target is beyond direct knowledge—i.e., ones about the eternal, the divine, or God. Yet, the structuring nature of

metaphors remains intact—there is always a familiarity in the metaphor that is transferred to the target. Just because a metaphor can be deconstructed, does not mean it’s innocent.¹⁴⁶ The particular structure that the metaphor imbues can be deconstructed, but re-interpretation can and does occur, unless care is taken. Unless the metaphoric structure is held perpetually in doubt, new meanings will be fixed.¹⁴⁷

The Christian family trope, and the blessing and favor tropes that come with membership in that family, have never entirely collapsed in public discourse, at least partly because the source material for the metaphor—the family—remains a key symbol of social harmony in American culture.¹⁴⁸ The CPG makes good use of the tropic structure. Osteen, encouraging his audience members of their power, preaches: “You have the DNA of Almighty God... Your heavenly father spoke galaxies into existence. Your elder brother defeated the enemy... You are not ordinary.”¹⁴⁹ Osteen, in his own style, tends to shy away from direct cause-effect claims about what the familial relationship means. He notes, in line with the Christian tradition, that “you are one of your Father’s children... and He loves you.”¹⁵⁰ However, there is a causal relationship implied. Osteen encourages his listeners to invoke God as their “Father” when, in prosperity gospel style, they thank him in advance for benefits they desire, like a payday or the finding of a lost item. Indeed, the idea that God is a person’s *real* father (the spiritual being more “real” than the biological) is at the core of why Osteen encourages each person to believe in his or her own abilities and God’s favor rather than family destiny.

For Jakes, predestination and family are related, “God has predestined us to be His children and this gives Him the greatest pleasure—our only obligation is to choose what God has chosen for us. We must say yes to all that He has designed—our purpose, our relationship with Him and other people, our destiny, our ministry.”¹⁵¹ Each person is not “double predestined” to

salvation or damnation; instead, Jakes implies a kind of Pelagianism. Each person has the ability to choose good or evil within the covenant for himself or herself, as a privilege of being a child of God. The *plan* for each person in the covenant is predestined, but inclusion within the covenant is not.

The family trope helps explain God's material favor. Why is God interested in giving things to people? Jakes explains, "You are a child of God, you have the awesome power of gazing upon the riches of your Father's wealth...My children expect that when they come to me and ask me for money, I will give it to them. They never question if I have it, how I'm going to get it or where it comes from-they just know I'll give it to them...And that is how God is to us."¹⁵² Jakes does note that, like God, he tries to exercise some restraint to teach lessons and imbue value in his children, but the idea is that God gives out material benefits because he loves his children. "Any resource that is related to value or wealth belongs to, comes from, and is controlled by God, our Father, who desires to bless *us*."¹⁵³

Unlike the Puritans, Tennent, Spurgeon, or Graham, God's blessings to his children, provided out of love, are not simply spiritual blessings; they are material. Osteen explains how this favor might manifest itself:

You will often receive preferential treatment simply because your Father is the King of kings, and His glory and honor spill over onto you...A young, successful businessman asked me to pray with him about a job interview...A few months later, I saw him at church...I could tell by his expression that he had gotten the job. Later, in describing his interview with the company executives, he said something extremely interesting. He said, "When I went in front of that board of directors, they were literally scratching their heads. They said, "We don't really

know why we're hiring you. You were not the most qualified. You were not the most experienced. You don't have the best resume...but there's something about you that makes you shine above the rest." That is the favor of God.¹⁵⁴

Again the problem of free will arises. However, more significantly for this scenario, the family metaphor provides the explanation and justifications for God's covenantal relationship and the faith-material exchange. God favors believers because God loves believers as His children. In fact, Osteen and Jakes both argue that God loves all people. But only believers have the faith to ask God the Father for what they need; "It sounds like paradox to say, "It's yours" and then to say, "Go take it" but that's the position God put us in. The problem many people have is that they don't *know* what is already theirs. And even when they know, they don't believe it or act on it."¹⁵⁵ Like a car given to a favored son, Jakes indicates, a parent may give the child a gift but the child must take possession of it and drive it before it becomes truly hers. To both Jakes and Osteen, it's a contractual part of salvation. Belief gives salvation, as everyone knows, but also written into the contract is material and emotional prosperity. The echoes of the "external" covenant of the Puritans are clear.

Meyer, for her part, argues that God loves His children "unconditionally" (despite a number of conditions she herself records). She notes, using the language of fundamentalist opposition to worldly concerns, that the modern culture has the goal of making people feel "wrong" or negative.¹⁵⁶ Meyer posits that this "worldly" thinking (itself a strange reversal of the term 'worldly') is a plot of the Enemy. Further, she notes that we must not think that God is withholding anything from us because God loves and wants to provide for His children: "We must never see God as a stingy God who would withhold anything we need...That thought simply isn't consistent with who He is...God wants to bless you."¹⁵⁷ Meyer even interprets the

“mercy” of God—a term usually associated with relief from original and immediate sin—with the relief of material want and having to settle for inferior products: “We don’t deserve anything from God, but in His mercy He wants to us live in holy expectancy so we can receive His best. Expect bargains, but don’t settle for something you don’t like just to get it for less money if you are able to pay more and get what you truly desire.”¹⁵⁸ Meyer emphasizes the point by relating an anecdote about a time she settled for cheap shoes and felt “deprived” by the compromise. It is Satan that wants people to feel deprived, not a loving God that favors his children.

Prince furthers the family tropic range into the arena of faith-healing and material prosperity:

Let’s focus on a **relationship**. As a parent, how would you teach your child character and patience? With sicknesses and disease?..When you start to think along the lines of a relationship, everything will converge and you will begin to see things from God’s perspective...He does not operate on the frequency of religion, where you build character through sickness, and humility through poverty. Our heavenly Father operates on the frequency of relationship, and through His unmerited favor in our lives, we learn character, patience, humility, as we rest from our self-efforts and depend on Him...As parents, we always seek the best things for our children. How much more would our Father in heaven want the best things for us. His precious children?..God wants you to enjoy His supernatural provision. When He provides, get ready for a net-breaking, boat-sinking load.¹⁵⁹

It is the nature of metaphor that it relates the familiar to the unfamiliar, substituting the language of the known for the unknown. In the family trope the polysemy of metaphor becomes

clear. In the passage above, Prince directly attacks traditional Christian interpretation of pious asceticism via an associative process that relies on the following: As parents we always seek the best things for their children, including health and material prosperity; God the Father is a parent to us the way we are parents to our children; therefore, God the Father wants health and material prosperity for us.

Of course, the metaphor—and its descendent alterations on the idea of “favor” and “blessing”—relies upon the audience’s enthymematic understanding of the proper relations of a family. That trope is organized around the cultural context of the late 20th and early 21st century.¹⁶⁰ Certainly Puritans, for example, might have had a much different interpretation of the family trope and hence might have interpreted the metaphor of family quite differently; the Father’s position indicating Supremacy, perhaps, rather than affection. For their part critics dismiss these efforts as “postmodernist” cultural accommodation—a re-arrangement of terms in a new science. Rather than standing as a corrective to culture, Wells charges, these ideas are efforts to reconcile God with the times.¹⁶¹ They act as though religious doctrines and beliefs were a marketplace, accommodating the consumers’ feelings about them rather than dictating truth. Spirituality is stripped of theology and structure. Popularity is taken as evidence of truth.

Yet, has it not always been so? The metaphoric language of religion is formulated in critical high periods of religious piety and when such language loses efficacy, new languages must emerge.¹⁶² The strangeness of the CPG’s gargoyle--its grotesque, indulgent conception of the Christian God-Father--is not so unpredictable. It re-aligns and promotes the family trope concept familiar (pun) to Christian preaching to a governing term, a way of explaining the CPG. The concept of God as “loving” has often been associated with the Fatherhood of God. God’s relationship to humans has, in the symbolic environment of preaching, regularly been described

in terms of the metaphor of family. After all, the subservience of Christ (one personage of God) to Yahweh (another personage of the same God) is based at least partially in the trope of Father and Son. Is not the sacrifice of the Father based in the concept of familial love for the Son? Is not the Son's fear, frustration and pleading, then eventual obedience, to the Father in Gethsemane a structuring story about love and parental roles—a child pleading with a parent?¹⁶³ Like the other tropes reviewed here, is not the CPG's version of the loving Father trope, with its promise of blessings and favor, just a standard interpretation of a loving God reduced to the radically mundane and individual level and imbued with a materialism that has always lurked below the surface of the external covenant?

The gargoyle, which emerges in times of transition, is born in the ambiguity of language and possibility of interpretation itself. The language used to preach God is always in a state of tension. It must fight through layers of metaphor, synecdoche, and simile. The Scriptures, of course, are not the words of God. They are human words—mostly stories—about God. They are not the denotative language of God or by God itself. Even if Divine inspiration directly prescribed the exact words of the Bible in Hebrew or Greek, translation has long since insulated us from that “true” language. And even if that were not so, if we had the exact words of God, words themselves are polysemous, changing meanings over time, subject to cultural adjustments. Whatever was written two or more millennia ago may not be completely understood today. The First Preface to *The Revised Standard Version*, for example, notes that the *King James Version* (1611) uses archaic language in which “let” means “hinder” and “demand” means “ask” in contemporary terms.¹⁶⁴ And even beyond all that, if we had a text, written by God, in familiar language, and with a perfect translation, then language—that purely human construction—would still inspire doubt of meaning and interpretation because language itself is always already

steeped in ambiguity. The possibility of the gargoyle would still emerge in that ambiguity and strange familiarity would appear to challenge orthodoxy.

The family metaphor is, once deconstructed then re-interpreted and re-deployed in the CPG, a key structuring metaphor. It establishes the relationship between God (indulgent, loving Father) and Christians (desirous but faithful children). It helps further explain the bureaucratized economy of faith-material exchanges. True, God is covenantally required to give the children prosperity in return for faith, and covenant was established before the beginning of time. But the covenant exists because God loves the Christian people. The covenant spells out what belongs to each person, though it requires faith to obtain what has been set aside. To engage in the covenant, to fully believe in God, is to live in “victory.” To live in victory does not only mean victory over sin and death, but an overcoming of all material and emotional challenges, which themselves are snares of Satan. What you will receive from God the Father, in terms of material benefit, relies upon what your faith (and money) will sow into God. God’s loving harvest for each person depends upon what will be put into it.

McConnell and Wells’ frustration with the CPG derives from the fact that these are all already familiar and structural metaphors within “orthodox” evangelical Christianity.¹⁶⁵ Grounded definitions, which McConnell demands for the sake of orthodoxy, are devilishly tricky to establish and maintain. Not only does God’s absent nature mean that a similarity test for each trope is likely pointless, but the roots of the CPG’s grotesque excess lie within the traditions of American Christianity itself. The CPG is not the first to suggest that God provides material rewards for obedience nor is it the first to suggest that God intervenes in the material world to save persons from disease or poverty. And the CPG is certainly not the first to posit that God’s love for “His” chosen children will cause him to act for their general benefit. Indeed, if the

“orthodox” objection is that the CPG has taken all of these ideas a bit too far, it will have trouble defining exactly what constitutes “too far.” In his introduction, McConnell notes that he himself believes in the veracity of some of the Pentecostal notion of spiritual gifts—why, exactly, he opposes each one of the “gifts” the Word of Faith preachers promise is likely to be lost in theological distinctions that belie the idea of “plain” meaning in Scripture. Even an opponent of Pentecostalism itself, like Falwell, at least broadly believes that the fortune of the nation is covenantally related to its conduct. Why God would act in the world in a way that benefits the nation, but not in a way that benefits individual believers, is a bit hard to explain beyond a sense of religious “propriety.” The ambiguity of language, the liabilities (and advantages) of metaphoric tropology, the intrinsic nature of deconstruction, and the already faith-based means of “orthodox” interpretation make it very hard for opponents of the CPG to distinguish the rightness of their own doctrine to the exclusion of the prosperity theology. Resilience, then, is built into these gargoyles.

Conclusion

This chapter has contended that the CPG is a symbolic gargoyle existing in a period of symbolic and cultural transition. In a culture that is facing rapid changes and erosions in fundamental beliefs, it is somewhat unsurprising that at least some of the gargoyles will take on religious forms—or, following the analogy, that whatever parts of other intellectual animals are attached to it, its face remains religious. Cassirer knew that when rationality fails—when science of one kind or another can explain all the world except the fractured, lost self adrift—religion steps in to fill the gaps in meaning with “inscrutable acts of divine grace.”¹⁶⁶ Langer, for her part, believed the renewal of myth and religion will correlate to the triumph of the modern:

There is the silly conflict of religion and science, in which science must triumph... because religion rests on a young and provisional form of thought, to which philosophy of nature—proudly called “science,” or “knowledge,” must succeed if thinking is to go on. There must be a rationalistic period from this point onward. Some day, when the vision is totally rationalized, the ideas exploited and exhausted, there be another vision, a new mythology.¹⁶⁷

The CPG is an attempt at that new mythology—a series of discursive formations which attempt to reassemble the debris of previous Christian poetics into new forms. It merges modernism with myth. These “gargoyles” do not follow our conventional notions—a new Christianity will not match old ones, although it will appear to follow similar patterns in some ways. They appear, in some ways, ridiculous, blasphemous, or heretical; but like all poetics, they are attempts to deal with the events and conditions of our times. The CPG, as a kind of televangelist charismatic Christianity, schmaltzy and strange to outsiders and deeply contradicted in its mixture of the sacred-spiritual (God) and the profane-material (money), seems an unlikely religion. But it is not only the logical outgrowth of an American Christianity, whose narrative has always promised material prosperity (at least on a grand scale), but also the embodiment of logical contradictions of fragmented, contemporary life. It is “anti-modernist, but in some respects strikingly modern.”¹⁶⁸ It is anti-modern, because it favors faith over scientific or rational explanations, but uses and promotes modern values and embraces cultural plurality and technological and material advancement.

These conventional discourses seem incongruent. But preaching is a kind of poetry and the CPG is a kind of mystic resolution of contradictory terms. It is a symbolic, lyrical intervention into standard discourses of religion *and* business. Christian preaching is based in a

literary text of narratives and verse, not a deductive book.¹⁶⁹ It largely exists to give us metaphors for our own living, to give disclosures to its interpreters.¹⁷⁰ In the period of the grotesque, those disclosures will sometimes be gargoyles. They will be strange mixes of prior symbols and values—attempts to restore a system of authority, identification, rituals of rebirth, terms of acceptance and rejection, and explanations of the socio-economic arrangements.

Burke noted that money, in the modern period, had come to serve as replacement for God. It was a universal symbol, one that could serve as ground for all future action, motivating all efforts. God was no longer the object of all effort; instead profit became the core public motive.¹⁷¹ In the gargoyle of the CPG, these two competitors (God, money) have been formally assembled into the same process. Money is a sign of God's universal favor, a scorecard on which one can measure God's love. It is a belief in a unified world of spiritual and material.

Four tropes (with some subsidiary terms) were presented in this chapter as a way of elucidating precisely how the debris of prior symbolic frames of acceptance can be re-arranged in new ways. Suffering Christianity, with its emphasis on asceticism and other-worldliness, finds many of its key terms, "victory," "sowing reaping," "predestination," "covenant," "family," "blessing" and more re-assembled into a Christianity that is very this-worldly. Secular economic and business structures of wealth gaining have been broken down, exploited, and put to new uses. Contractual language, economic terms, languages of business and exchange all find themselves integrated in the language of the CPG, though now with a mystic turn. These redeployments, still based in the metaphors, parables, allegories, and anecdotes of the prior frames of acceptance, work together to structure both the CPG's theology and its function and hermeneutic for its adherent. One should take care, however, to acknowledge that the structuring

function of these metaphors in the CPG is no less subject to deconstruction, re-interpretation, and re-use than those interpretations prior to it.

As I hope this chapter has demonstrated, the possibility of the gargoyle lies within the language and more particularly within the language about God. It is always subject to re-interpretation. The metaphors used in religious talk can never be measured against the proper language of God because that language is never within reach—the claim to an essential meaning of any metaphor or parable is subject to deconstruction because of its own ambiguity. If God is a King, He is an absent King, *Deus absconditus*, never issuing precise dictates.¹⁷² God must be spoken of constantly precisely because God does not speak for Him- or Herself. If God did speak, there would be no need for tropes and metaphors and theologies—each of us could simply obey. Instead, our conceptions of God and God's place are always being mediated by our times and circumstances. Critics may say that the CPG, grotesque and “schmaltzy” as it is, reflects more about our culture than it does about God, but it's likely true of all our attempts at interpreting metaphors—we can do nothing but understand from our own perspective. Our poetics are constantly attempts to read our times, to understand them in the context of the eternal, to sort through the *Erlebnisstorm* and assemble into them a believable, desirable cosmos. Durkeim remarked, “Religion is, first and foremost, a system of ideas by means of which individuals can envisage the society of which they are members and the relations, obscure yet intimate, which they have to it. That is the primordial task of faith.”¹⁷³

The CPG, with its strange covenants and material rewards, may not be sustainable and may never move from gargoyle to frame of acceptance, but it demonstrates the accuracy of Durkheim's observation that religion is about our own vision, our own symbolic structures. In these strange times, times of transition, we should not be surprised to see many strange things, especially not gargoyles.

¹ D.R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel*, Updated edition (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), xix.

² George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1991), 106-107.

³It is not irrelevant to note that three of these preachers are African-American. As several scholars have noted, the prosperity gospel has made substantial in-roads into the Black Christian church because of its Pentecostal similarity to traditional black churches and its mystical similarity to non-Christian religious traditions in the African diaspora. Harrison explains that the prosperity gospel appeals to the African-American community's desire for economic and social justice; see Milmon F. Harrison, *Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 159. Lee and Sinitiere praise Jakes's "brand of personal empowerment" and "bourgeois conservatism for the new black church;" see Shayne Lee and Phillip Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and the Spiritual Marketplace* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 59. Mitchem, while conceding that some prosperity preaching can help empower members of the black community, suggests that the shallow theology of the prosperity gospel and its emphasis on faith solutions may distract from richer belief systems and material solutions to problems of poverty and social decay; see Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It? Prosperity Preaching in the Black Church* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007), 122-123.

⁴ Carolyn Tuft and Bill Smith, "From Fenton to fortune in the name of God," *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November, 13, 2003, <http://more.stltoday.com/stltoday/news/special/joycemeyer.nsf/story/c5099399d2fcc5fa86256ddf00661c5f?OpenDo>

[cument](#), accessed April 3, 2011; Patrick Rogers and Vicky Bane, "Joel Osteen Counts His Blessings," *People*, December 17, 2007, <http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20170936,00.html>, accessed April 3, 2011; Annette John-Hall, "Building an empire to empower," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 22, 2005, http://articles.philly.com/2005-08-22/news/25425345_1_jakes-mega-church-preacher, accessed April 3, 2011; Creflo Dollar's most recent jet, The Weapon of Prosperity II, is pictured on his website <https://www.eiwm.org>;

⁵ Hayden White, *The Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 72.

⁶ Burke, *Attitudes*, 229

⁷ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 504-506.

⁸ Joel Osteen, in "Joel Osteen - Program Your Mind For Victory 1 of 3" [video]. Retrieved April 5, 2011, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bitbvKmzEzQ>.

⁹ Joyce Meyer, *Power Thoughts: 12 Strategies to Win the Battle of the Mind* (New York: Faith Words, 2010), 7.

¹⁰ T.D. Jakes in *Bishop T.D. Jakes - Free Your Mind* [video]. Retrieved April 5, 2011 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5MZpatXx4V8&feature=related>.

¹¹ Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential* (New York: Faith Words, 2004), 98; George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 37.

¹² Jonathan Edwards, "The Excellency of Christ," *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1 (London: F. Westley and A.H. Davis, 1845), 685

¹³ Billy Graham, *Peace with God*, 1st ed. [book on-line] (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1953, accessed 5 April 2011), 154; available from Questia, <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=157265>; Internet.

¹⁴ Graham, *Peace*, 158.

¹⁵ Graham, *Peace*, 148.

¹⁶ Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1995), 256-257. Cox is actually discussing African Pentecostalism, but his analysis applies perfectly to American Pentecostalism as well.

¹⁷ My analysis of metaphor is at least partially indebted to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, "The Coherent Structuring of Experience," *The Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 77-86.

¹⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, Trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 62-63.

¹⁹ Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism*, 43.

²⁰ Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism*, 79; Noll, *A History*, 450.

²¹ Osteen, *Osteen - Program Your Mind For Victory 1 of 3*.

²² Osteen, *Your Best Life*, 79.

²³ Graham, *Peace*, 105. My emphasis.

²⁴ Joyce Meyer, *Eat and Stay Thin: Simple, Spiritual, Satisfying Weight Control* (New York: Warner Books, 1999), 19. My emphasis. Meyer is particularly attached to the number twelve. In different books she posits there are twelve reasons people are overweight, twelve key power thoughts, and twelve keys to the battlefield of the mind. One begins to believe that Meyer is didactically following a formula rather than authentically discovering twelve—not eleven or thirteen—reasons for weight-loss.

²⁵ Meyer, *Eat and Stay Thin*, 146.

²⁶ Joseph Prince, *Unmerited Favor* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2010), 52.

²⁷ Image obtained from xlyrics.net, <http://www.xlyrics.de/joseph-prince-images.html> (accessed August 19, 2011).

²⁸ Prince, *Unmerited Favor*, 307.

²⁹ Creflo Dollar, *Winning in Troubled Times* (New York: Faith Words, 2010), 221.

³⁰ Dollar, *Winning*, 142.

³¹ Meyer, *Power Thoughts*, 71.

³² Dollar, *Winning*, 2.

³³ Leroy S. Thompson, *Money Cometh! To the Body of Christ* (Tulsa: Harrison House, 1999), 10.

³⁴ I'm referring here to Burke's concept of analogical extension as a part of the interpretive process. Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 107-109.

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- ³⁵ Creflo Dollar, *Claim Your Victory Today* (New York: Warner Faith, 2006), 20.
- ³⁶ Thompson, *Money Cometh!*, 10.
- ³⁷ Luke Winslow, "Classy Morality: The Rhetoric of Joel Osteen," in *Uncovering Hidden Rhetorics*, ed. Barry Brummet (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008), 136.
- ³⁸ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, and Other Writings*, Trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 85, 209.
- ³⁹ Raschke, et al, *Religion*, 22.
- ⁴⁰ George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, ed. Charles W. Morris (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934/1962), 295-297.
- ⁴¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 505-506.
- ⁴² William E. Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 13.
- ⁴³ James B. Twitchell, *Branded Nation: The Marketing of Megachurch, College, Inc., and Museumworld* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).
- ⁴⁴ John D. Caputo refers to the Christian Right as a kind of pro-capitalist "industry." *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 31.
- ⁴⁵ Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*, 16-17; 390-391.
- ⁴⁶ Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 110.
- ⁴⁷ Marsden, *Fundamentalism*, 323, n.8.
- ⁴⁸ Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential* (New York: Faith Words, 2004), 51.
- ⁴⁹ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 74.
- ⁵⁰ Billy Graham, "Christ's Answer to the World," Preached at the Charlotte Crusade. September 21 – 1958. Retrieved April 1, 2010 from <http://www.jesuschristonly.com/sermons/billy-graham/christs-answer-to-the-world.html>.
- ⁵¹ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 7-8.
- ⁵² T.D. Jakes, *Life Overflowing: 6 Pillars for Abundant Living* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2008), 11.
- ⁵³ Marsden, *Fundamentalism*, 250.

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- ⁵⁴ D.L. Moody, "Sowing and Reaping" in *One Hundred Revival Sermons and Outlines*, ed. Frederick Barton [internet book] (New York: Houghton & Stoughton, 1906), 210-224.
- ⁵⁵ Moody, "Sowing," 212.
- ⁵⁶ Thompson, *Money Cometh!*, 50. Original emphasis.
- ⁵⁷ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 122.
- ⁵⁸ Dollar, *Claim Your Victory*, 157.
- ⁵⁹ John Wilbur Chapman, "Sowing and Reaping," *Evangelical Sermons*, ed. Edgar Whitaker Work (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1922), 53.
- ⁶⁰ Moody, "Sowing," 213.
- ⁶¹ Moody, "Sowing," 216-217.
- ⁶² Kenneth Hagin, *How God Taught Me About Prosperity* (Tulsa, OK: RHEMA Bible Church, 1991), 10.
- ⁶³ T.D. Jakes in: TBN Revival Praise-a-thon [video] (April 8, 2007). Retrieved January 13, 2011 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tBdKy2E3duI&feature=related>.
- ⁶⁴ Meyer, *Power Thoughts*, 192-193.
- ⁶⁵ Meyer, *Power Thoughts*, 194.
- ⁶⁶ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 227.
- ⁶⁷ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 227.
- ⁶⁸ Thompson, *Money Cometh!*, 160.
- ⁶⁹ Meyer, *Power Thoughts*, 194.
- ⁷⁰ Meyer, *Power Thoughts*, 193.
- ⁷¹ Meyer, *Power Thoughts*, 201-202.
- ⁷² Meyer, *Power Thoughts*, 192.
- ⁷³ Meyer, *Power Thought*, 192; Jakes in "TBN Revival."
- ⁷⁴ Dollar, *Winning*, 8.
- ⁷⁵ Dollar, *Winning*, 9-10.
- ⁷⁶ Thompson, *Money Cometh!*, 12.
- ⁷⁷ From slideshow from Ever Increasing Word Ministries [Adobe Flash Player],

<https://www.eiwm.org/index.cfm/pageid/1940/index.html> (Accessed August 9, 2011, copyrighted 2011).

⁷⁸ Leroy Thompson, “Be One of the 8500!!!!!!!,” Ever Increasing Word Ministries, <https://www.eiwm.org/index.cfm/pageid/1940/index.html> (Accessed March 31, 2011, copyrighted 2011). Emphasis and italics original.

⁷⁹ Thompson, “Be One of the 8500!!!!!!!” Ironically, Creflo Dollar deplores all debt as the “bait” of Satan, see Dollar, *Winning*, 46.

⁸⁰ See n. 76.

⁸¹ Thompson, “Be One of the 8500!!!!!!!.”

⁸² Joseph Prince, *Destined to Reign: The Secret to Effortless Success, Wholeness and Victorious Living* (Tulsa, OK: Harrison House, 2007).

⁸³ Jakes in TBN Revival Praise-a-thon.

⁸⁴ Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential* (New York: Faith Words, 2004), 33. This proclamation is common for prosperity preachers. Thompson’s version is, “What’s your Daddy’s Name? My Daddy’s name is El Shaddai. He’s the God who’s more than enough! His name is Jehovah Jireh; He is my provider!” See, *Money Cometh!*, 122.

⁸⁵ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 90.

⁸⁶ McConnell, *A Different Gospel*, xvii.

⁸⁷ McConnell, *A Different Gospel*, 78.

⁸⁸ Jacques Derrida, “White Mythology: The Ellipsis of the Sun,” *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 238.

⁸⁹ Burke, *Permanence*, 90.

⁹⁰ Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1941), 141.

⁹¹ Ricoeur, *The Rule*, 98-99. I am skeptical of the claim that metaphors ever entirely “die.” Charles Kaufman and Donn W. Parson argue that even when metaphors are “dead” they have conservatory and structuring power on discourse. See Charles Kaufman and Donn W. Parson, “Metaphor and Presence in Argument,” in *Argumentation Theory and the Rhetoric of Assent*, eds. David Cratis Williams and Michael David Hazen (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990), 91-102.

⁹² McConnell, *A Different Gospel*, 109.

⁹³ This moment is a strange throwback to the theologies of the Old Light Puritans, who defended Christianity as a rationally revealed plan for the universe and salvation.

⁹⁴ Mark C. Taylor, *Deconstructing Theology* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1982), 120.

⁹⁵ Derrida, "White Mythology," 243.

⁹⁶ Prince argues, "Many of the sermons we hear build 'sin consciousness'...but the Bible says you have no more consciousness of sins." Joseph Prince, "Once by the Blood, Again and Again by Water," preached February 27th, 2011 [video]. Retrieved April 10, 2011, from http://wn.com/Joseph_Prince.

⁹⁷ David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 116.

⁹⁸ Burke, *Attitudes*, 59-62.

⁹⁹ Osteen attributes the discounts he and his wife received on clothing to "the favor of God." See, Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 45.

¹⁰⁰ Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 37; Eugene E. White, *Puritan Rhetoric: The Issue of Emotion in Religion* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 50-52.

¹⁰¹ Marsden, *Fundamentalism*, 16.

¹⁰² Stephen D. Crocco, "Whose Calvin, Which Calvinism? John Calvin and the Development of Twentieth-Century American Theology," in *John Calvin's American Legacy*, ed. Thomas J. Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 184.

¹⁰³ Marsden, *Fundamentalism*, 247-251; Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism*, 115-117.

¹⁰⁴ Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism*, 116-117. I should note that the generalizations I am making regarding theologies are not everywhere true. I am just noting, as does Marsden, some trends in American fundamentalist and evangelical thought.

¹⁰⁵ Meyer, *Power Thoughts*, 66.

¹⁰⁶ Jakes, *Life*, 34-35.

¹⁰⁷ Jakes, *Life*, 35, 40.

¹⁰⁸ Jakes, *Life*, 15.

¹⁰⁹ Jakes, in "TBN Revival."

¹¹⁰ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 62.

¹¹¹ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 72, 74.

¹¹² Osteen, for example, states that many persons “may be on their way to heaven, but they don’t know what has been included in the price of their ticket.” See Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 84.

¹¹³ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 83. In Burkean terms, this is clearly a delineation of Osteen’s ritual of rebirth. See, Burke, *Attitudes*, 202.

¹¹⁴ Osteen, *It’s Your Time*, 31.

¹¹⁵ Osteen, *It’s Your Time*, 75. Osteen seems to believe that a “blessing” is a discrete event, asking “What if you missed out on *five* blessings last week?,” my emphasis.

¹¹⁶ Osteen, *It’s Your Time*, 131. Joel 2:25, “And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten, the cankerworm, and the caterpillar, and the palmerworm, my great army which I sent among you” (KJV).

¹¹⁷ Osteen, *Your Best Life*, 81.

¹¹⁸ Gloria Copeland, *God’s Master Plan for Your Life* (New York: Putnam Praise, 2008), 1.

¹¹⁹ Copeland, *God’s Master Plan*, 9.

¹²⁰ Copeland, *God’s Master Plan*, 58.

¹²¹ Copeland, *God’s Master Plan*, 56.

¹²² Thompson, *Money Cometh!*, 20; Deut. 8:1, “All the commandments which I command thee this day shall ye observe to do, that ye may live, and multiply, and go in and possess the land which the LORD sware unto your fathers” (KJV).

¹²³ One-tenth of gross income, most prosperity preachers argue, is correct. Giving one-tenth of net income (after taxes, say), is often characterized as stealing from God.

¹²⁴ Thompson, *Money Cometh!*, 21.

¹²⁵ Thompson, *Money Cometh!*, 21

¹²⁶ Thompson, *Money Cometh!*, 14.

¹²⁷ Copeland, *God’s Master Plan*, 4, 5, 127.

¹²⁸ Copeland, *God’s Master Plan*, 86.

¹²⁹ Thompson, *Money Cometh!*, 22.

¹³⁰ Osteen, *Your Best Life*, 81.

¹³¹ Copeland, *God’s Master Plan*, 89.

¹³² Copeland, *God's Master Plan*, 65, 137.

¹³³ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 1978), 47-48.

James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* (New York: New York University, 1997).

The concept of covenant is also a key element of contemporary postmillennial Christianity.

¹³⁴ White, *Puritan Rhetoric*, 9.

¹³⁵ Prince, *Unmerited*, 221-223.

¹³⁶ White, *Puritan Rhetoric*, 9.

¹³⁷ Burke, *Attitudes*, 225-226.

¹³⁸ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 162.

¹³⁹ Such contradictions are hardly new to Christianity, of course. As White notes, the early Calvinist interpretation of God included a god who was “completely powerful, utterly inscrutable, implacably unforgiving, perfectly merciful.” The contradictions were dismissed as part of God’s mystery or God’s plan. The method of solving the problem came in the innovation of covenant theology; see White, *Puritan Rhetoric*, 7.

¹⁴⁰ Heimert, *Religion*, 289.

¹⁴¹ Gilbert Tennant, *The Late Association for Defence, Farther Encourag'd* (Philadelphia, 1748), 2, qtd. in Heimert, *Religion*, 134.

¹⁴² Charles Spurgeon, “The Fatherhood of God,” in *The Essential Works of Charles Spurgeon*, ed. Daniel Partner (Urichsville, OH: Barbour Publishing, 2009). Spurgeon did not believe that God was a “universal” father. He believed that God’s status as Father only applied to believers.

¹⁴³ Charles Spurgeon, “The Sons of God,” A Sermon (No. 339) Delivered on Sabbath Morning, October 7th, 1860, by the REV. C. H. Spurgeon [online]. Accessed April 15, 2011 at <http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/0339.htm>. At Exeter Hall, Strand.

¹⁴⁴ Billy Graham, *The Faithful Christian: An Anthology of Billy Graham*, ed. William Griffin and Ruth Graham Dienert (New York: McCracken Press, 1994), 178.

¹⁴⁵ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors*, 156.

¹⁴⁶ Derrida, “Force and Signification,” *Writing and Difference*, 17.

¹⁴⁷ John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 27.

¹⁴⁸ Whether the family trope was ingrained in secular discourse by Christian rhetoric and theology or not, or how much so, is probably one of those questions that can never quite escape the hermeneutic circle.

¹⁴⁹ Osteen, *Become a Better You*, 34.

¹⁵⁰ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, xii.

¹⁵¹ Jakes, *Life Overflowing*, 40.

¹⁵² Jakes, *Life Overflowing*, 13.

¹⁵³ Jakes, *Life Overflowing*, 14.

¹⁵⁴ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 41.

¹⁵⁵ Jakes, *Life Overflowing*, 16; original emphasis.

¹⁵⁶ Meyer, *Power Thoughts*, 98.

¹⁵⁷ Meyer, *Power Thoughts*, 199.

¹⁵⁸ Meyer, *Power Thoughts*, 204.

¹⁵⁹ Prince, *Unmerited Favor*, 30-31; original emphasis.

¹⁶⁰ David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 295-296.

¹⁶¹ Wells, *Above All*, 280-303.

¹⁶² Paul Ricoeur, "The Language of Faith," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, eds. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 223.

¹⁶³ Matt. 26:36-50.

¹⁶⁴ "Revised Standard Version: First Preface," in *The Layman's Parallel New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1970), xiv.

¹⁶⁵ Orthodox is the term McConnell and Wells both use.

¹⁶⁶ Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 12

¹⁶⁷ Langer, *Philosophy*, 202.

¹⁶⁸ Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism*, 121.

¹⁶⁹ Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 11-13.

¹⁷⁰ Paul Ricoeur, "The Critique of Religion," in Regan and Stewart, 213; "Metaphor and the Main Problem of Hermeneutics," in Regan and Stewart, 146-148.

¹⁷¹ Burke, *Grammar*, 108-113.

¹⁷² Cassirer, *An Essay*, 12.

¹⁷³ Emile Durkeim, qtd. in Langer, *Philosophy*, 165.

CHAPTER 6:
THE RHETORIC OF (PROFITABLE) LIBERATION:
THE PROPHETIC IMAGINATION AND THE “FREEDOM” OF THE PROSPERITY
GOSPEL

“The time may be ripe in the church for serious consideration of prophecy as a crucial element in the ministry.”¹

In the four preceding chapters, I’ve emphasized the hermeneutic and rhetorical techniques of the Christian Prosperity Gospel in the relation to traditional evangelical Christianity, paying particular attention to the attunement of the CPG to the changing times. I concluded the previous chapter by noting that the CPG can serve micro-political purposes; that is to say, that it can act as a means for those alienated from the abstract forces of modernity to resist modernism’s hegemonic world-view. In some ways, then, the reader might get the impression that the CPG is a kind of liberating rhetoric, though a convoluted and grotesque one. In that vein, this chapter takes up the question of the politics of the CPG, and particularly its use of the liberation idiom.

The CPG is indeed striking in its prominent use of the language of liberation. Each prosperity minister explains to the audience at length that that what he or she wants for the audience is a kind of *freedom*—an escape from an enslaved status. Creflo Dollar (figure 8) recalls that before he heard the prosperity message, he was in “bondage” and that he now seeks “freedom” for the audience—freedom from debt.² Joel Osteen declares in a sermon that in God, “Our chains are broken, we are set free...I’m free from poverty, I’m free from sickness, I’m free

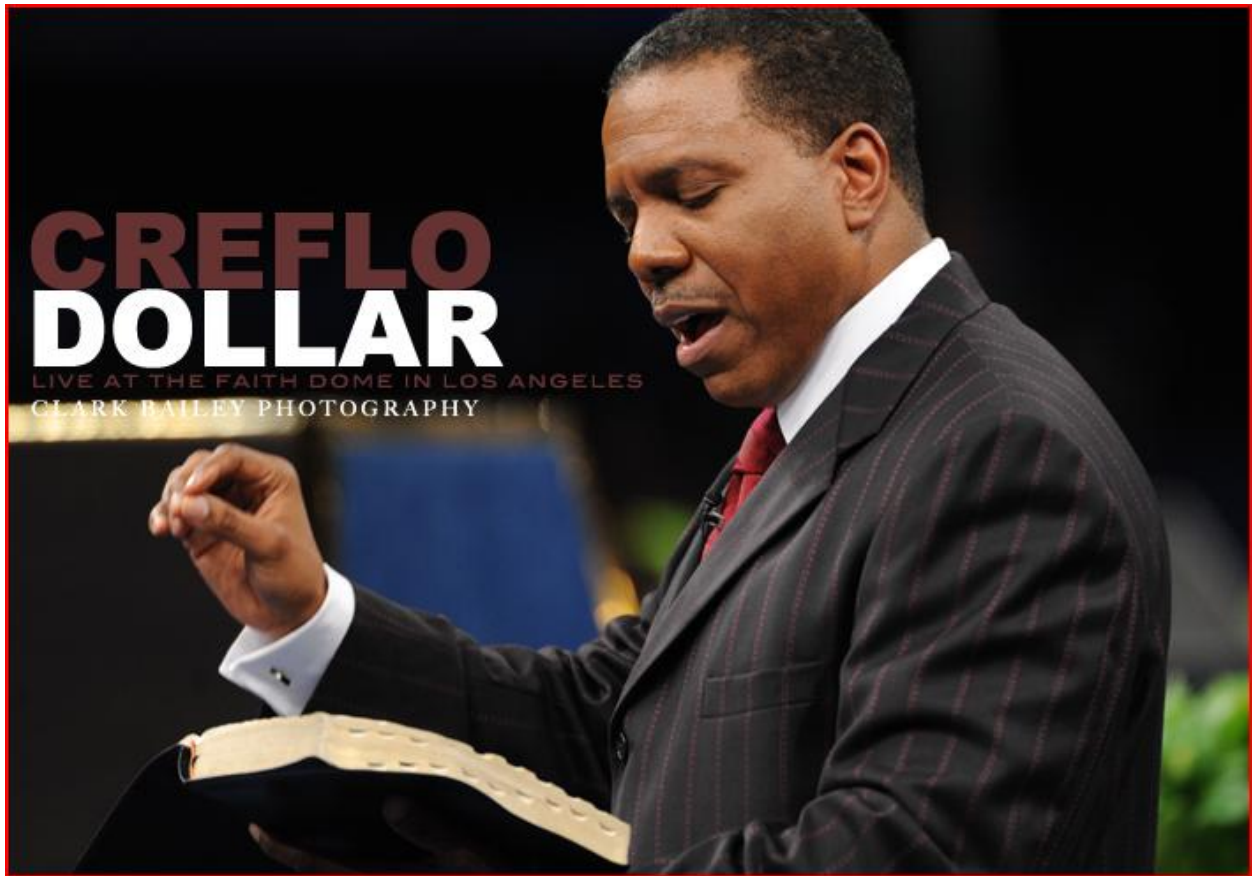


Figure 8. Creflo Dollar preaching at the Fellowship of International Christian Word of Faith Ministries Conference in Los Angeles in 2011.³

from depression, I'm free from anxiety, I'm free from every negative thing that is trying to pull me down."⁴

These declarations are not ordinary religious cries or supplications. Many of these proclamations of "freedom" in health and wealth come from direct divine revelation or even theophanic visitations. Leroy Thompson proclaims that, "More than a year ago, the Lord gave me this revelation of 'Money cometh'... This truth can change the life of every believer who wants to be free."⁵ Dollar also claims that he received his message of financial freedom through direct communication with God. More examples of Dollar's direct communication with God

appear on his website. Prince proclaims God warned him of coming global financial problems. Kenneth Hagin says he has conversed and even argued with Jesus Christ over prosperity. Kenneth Copeland preaches that when he realized the laws of prosperity, God spoke to him and told him, “‘Looks like you’ve got it made!’ And that’s what I’d been wantin’ to hear Him say. That’s what every Christian wants to hear him say... There’s victory in this thing someplace!”⁶

What is happening here? What is this idiom that combines the idea of (profitable) freedom with direct revelation from God?

This chapter’s epigram, written by Walter Brueggemann, gives a clue as to what may be occurring. In his book *The Prophetic Imagination*, Brueggemann suggests that in times of oppression, loss, and fear there is a need for radical, prophetic criticism—a criticism that focuses on “God’s odd freedom, his strange justice, and his peculiar power.”⁷ Prophecy and revelation from God, engaged in criticism of the status quo, have the ability to create a new history—and with new histories come new identities.⁸ It is an effort “to create an alternative consciousness with its own rhetoric and field of perception.”⁹ It is freedom in re-birth.

Brueggemann, however, was suggesting a new prophetic imagination that would be able to combat the deep injustices of the late 20th century. As the chapters in this dissertation have demonstrated, the CPG has little interest in concepts of social justice, beyond some basic charity work, and little interest in political change. Instead, in the CPG’s prophecy the language of bondage/freedom—native to the Biblical story because of the OT’s chronicling of the travails of Israel and the NT’s promise of an individuated, messianistic freedom—the prophetic imagination is put to a different and far less radical use. In this chapter, I argue that the prosperity gospel, as a symbolic gargoyle, is a provisional exercise of rhetorical bonding, a loose attempt to pick up the debris of capitalism, crumbling Christian traditions, and class yearning and links them in the

radical language of prophecy to maintain status quo social arrangements. It does so by disposing of the radical collectivist, community focus of the prophetic form and positing that ‘liberation’ is an individual event that comes when faith in God is considered more powerful than the predictions, determinations, and limits of systems of politics, economics, commerce, or biology. It is a message suited to its audience and the times.

In this chapter I first observe that the Christian Prosperity Gospel has already tapped significantly into the liberation idiom, particularly in the African-American community. Second, I outline James Darsey work on the prophetic and Brueggemann’s concept of “radical, prophetic criticism,” and explain John Caputo’s concept of liberatory faith. Finally, I examine the language of the CPG itself and analyze how it utilizes the radical liberation idiom to convey a not-so radical message.

Liberation in the Sociology of the Prosperity Gospel

The CPG is not entirely about liberation, of course. It can serve the pragmatic purpose of enabling those who are already wealthy to feel comfortable with their wealth and, indeed, to feel blessed by it. The prosperity gospelists can, with frequency, sound like apologists for grotesque accumulation.¹⁰ But that’s hardly the whole story. Many of those who come to the CPG are distinctly lacking in material wealth. Its message of wealth gaining has substantial appeal for those who have not yet prospered. In this section I show that the liberation idiom is alive and well in the CPG, particularly in the African-American community. By examining the CPG’s appeal in the black community, where the idiom of liberation is particularly poignant, I am able to highlight the way the CPG has altered the traditional understanding of socio-economic struggle.

Liberation in the African-American Church

Prior research has shown that the message of material prosperity through faith has played particularly well in African-American populations. Several works have noted the long history of intense prosperity preaching and Word-of-Faith movements in African-American churches and communities.¹¹ Though there has also been a long presence of such preaching in non-black institutions, the appearance of prosperity preaching has been disproportionately prominent in African-American religious traditions, at least until the past few decades. Thus, although Harrison indicates that it would be inaccurate to characterize the Word-of-Faith movement as a “*Black* religious movement,” African-Americans constitute a significant part of and have been disproportionately influenced by the CPG.¹²

Part of the influence might have to do with cultural links. As I noted in “The Secret,” and “Christian Prosperity,” a significant portion of the Prosperity Gospel is based in the solipsistic perspectives of New Thought and Unity metaphysics. Stephanie Y. Mitchem argues that the mysticism of these perspectives might find a particular home in the black community because it coincides with the holistic perspectives of African medicinal and magical traditions, which have never entirely vanished from the African-American community.¹³ Moreover, the form of Word-of-Faith services, even when conducted by non-black pastors, tends to mirror the dramatic sermonizing and vocal participation by the audience in some African-American churches. Lee and Sinitiere, admirers of T.D. Jakes, note that his particular theatrical style was nurtured in the African-American preaching tradition.¹⁴

As a later chapter will discuss, affect and style have a significant influence on the appeal of the CPG in all communities. But there is more at work than enthusiasm. One core precept of the anthropology and sociology of religion is that religions tend to exhibit a world as its believers

think it *ought* to be, rather than how it is. This is particularly so in the CPG, which directly addresses the question of wealth distribution and believes that *effort* and *faith* are the key factors to earning wealth, rather than advantage, intelligence, resources, background, knowledge, etc.¹⁵ Indeed, research on the African-American community seems to indicate that a great deal of the appeal of the prosperity gospel has to do with the desire for justice, a sense of which is provided by the CPG's claim that the righteous will be materially award.

Many prosperity preachers tell inspiring personal stories about class mobility. Hagin and several others were born poor or served in poor ministries before ascribing to the CPG. All (claim) to have been faithful, even when poor, but failed to prosper because they did not know about prosperity. Most experienced a meteoric rise to wealth, though they had none of the traditional advantages of inherited social or economic status nor any particular educational acumen. The message is that if believers are faithful in what *really* matters and attain holiness, there are material benefits.¹⁶ Such narratives appeal to middle-class aspirationalism. The idea that there are rewards for conduct and that material comfort is within reach are core motivational concepts. Indeed, while most prosperity preachers emphasize the *ease* of prosperity (sow it in faith and reap, the harvest trope), there is also a middle-class emphasis on "hard work." God appreciates hard work, according to almost every prosperity gospelist—especially hard work done with faith in God in mind. The prosperity gospel's message that categories such as race and class are largely irrelevant if a person possesses faith and motivation tends to make a strong impression on believers. Those middle-class and working-class individuals who ascribe to the prosperity gospel often emphasize their exceptional work ethic while simultaneously looking forward to God's blessings that will make such work unnecessary.¹⁷ The theme of divine

empowerment makes such considerations irrelevant—God has liberated them from constrictions of economic and social logics of inequality.¹⁸

In “Christian Prosperity and the Magic World-view” and “Gospels and Gargoyles, Part II”, I documented how CPG functions mystically and magically to bypass the normal rules of socio-economic organization. This appeal has particular resonance for African-American members of the lower middle- or lower-class. The CPG offers the opportunity to bypass the arcane social networks, capitalist networks, structural barriers, internal colonization and the overt and covert racisms that have helped block their inclusion in middle-class prosperity. These CPG efforts reflect traditional preaching themes in the black church. Mitchem describes a “spirituality of longing” underlying the black community—a result of centuries of oppression and failed promises of post-Reconstruction and post-Civil Rights America. Spirituality, including prayer, laments and pleas, was long a refuge for enslaved blacks and is a part of the black community’s heritage. Today, when inadequate education, cultural exclusion (whiteness), internal community norms, and economic structures continue to prevent Black American success, the desire for redress, *justice*, again reappears. Black preachers in predominantly black churches often preach on these subjects, demanding social justice while indicating true justice is in God as a part of the covenant.¹⁹

The CPG has the advantage of forwarding a covenantal relationship with the direct *realness* of the OT. Rather than demanding political, social justice and arguing for economic justice, the CPG makes economic and social justice an issue of the direct favor of God, resonant with the OT. As James Darsey remarks, “the God of the Old Testament made Himself manifest in the affairs as the perpetual author of events, the ceaseless creator; military victory and defeats, well-being and plagues, bountiful harvests and natural disasters, all were meaningful in terms of

the covenant as evidence of Yahweh's mercies toward and judgments against His people."²⁰ The circumstances facing the Hebrews were not overcome by strategy, connection, education or anything else (as Brueggemann notes, the Hebrews were inferior in all those areas compared to, say, the Egyptians) but because of God's Providential favor. It is a theology of immediate hope and respite for those facing significant pain and suffering.²¹

The Broader Appeal for Liberation

The particular appeal of the CPG to the African-American community can broadly be applied to the middle and lower classes, although perhaps with less of the same historical resonance. Osteen, for example, appeals to those in the doldrums and the nihilist environment of lower middle-class and lower class life.²² His message is tailored to those facing problems—addiction, abuse, poverty, debt—that strongly afflict those who are economically disadvantaged. Although Osteen's message is a much softer and more ambiguous version of prosperity than those preached by many black preachers, the general message is the same: the events of the world are premised on the Providential Will of God—not social, political, or economic structures—and faith is materially rewarded.²³

The narratives of personal progress and overcoming—for example, Gloria Copeland's narrative of being born-again when, destitute, she realized that God would provide her with material necessities—are oriented toward those struggling in lower social and economic strata and are not specific to race. James K.A. Smith, while remaining skeptical of the basic claims of the prosperity gospel, lauds the CPG for recalling the possibility of goodness and hope for God's people within the world. Smith recognizes that in more traditional evangelical Christianity, the celebration of God's rule sometimes obscures the problems of the world. Those suffering in life

are not given any hope of escaping their material ills.²⁴ The prosperity gospel, in line with the OT and with some Calvinisms of this millennium, promises God's providential blessing for faith.

In some sense, then, the sociology of the prosperity gospel recognizes the extant problems of economic and political inequality and provides a means of individual liberation. It resonates with the particular fears and concerns of those occupying the lower and middle classes. And, while it also serves as a theological *apologia* for wealth accumulation, it provides hope for individuals to progress and alleviate their sources of inequality without having to re-envision a titanic structural change or wait for the slow process of legislating political change, the results of which have been on balance positive, but also very mixed.

Prophecies and Theologies of Liberation

We have already seen that the CPG's message of prosperity often comes in the form of prophetic revelation. Such a form is appropriate for the rhetoric of liberation because prophecy is widely understood to have radical implications, though precisely in what *way* it is radical is not agreed upon. In this section, I examine several key scholars' accounts of the radical political-social implications of prophecy as a community-oriented rhetoric and consider whether prophecy is, as some claim, radically *conservative* or radically *liberationist*. I conclude by noting that as a radical form of rhetoric, prophecy is always subject to cooption by forces of the status quo.

Prophecy as Radically Conservative

James Darsey has argued that as far as rhetoric goes, prophecy and revelation remain one of the most radical forms discourse can take.²⁵ Those who prophesize speak directly from God, receive their credibility from that same source, and—in the jeremiad, at least—proclaim messages of warning and doom, urging a community to return to a covenant of right action in order to receive once more the favor or fortune that has previously benefitted them.

In the OT prophecy serves the purpose of not only calling a community back to order, but also re-emphasizing God's presence in the world and His attention to the matters at hand.²⁶ It re-inscribes the covenant between God and His people—the idea that the favor or wrath of God depends upon the adherence of the believers to His rule, as laid out in a specific agreement. Those who speak the prophecy are set apart, having a core charismatic connection with God and thus possessing supernatural power.²⁷

Americans are well acquainted with the radical community focus of the prophetic tradition. Not only are the original 'Founding Fathers' and the documents they authored viewed within the prophetic tradition, but the history of American religion is intimately tied to those who proclaim that they hold a special connection with God.²⁸ The Great Awakenings as well as the Burned-Over period in New York are times in which charismatic prophecy and visions played significant roles in American social, political and religious developments. The famous case of the Millerites and the now ubiquitous Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are the result of specific divine revelation and prophecy within the American tradition.

Traditionally, prophecy is a call for *radical community action*. Darsey argues that in being intrinsically *radical*, prophecies stand in opposition to the culturally accepted norms of the community rather than adapting to those norms. Prophecy demands the community change. Those demands are rooted in *justice*, i.e., the judgments of God or Providence on the people based upon their actions in relation to the covenant. Hence, we can understand the Declaration of Independence's reliance upon God's rule and concept of justice as a justification for separation. Consequences will be dealt as per the requirements of God's agreed-upon covenant with His people rather than the capricious manner of natural causes or events.

Because of the calls for order, Darsey believes such rhetorics are intrinsically *conservative*, in the sense that they call the community's attention to principles which are already known and do not invent new ones.²⁹ Such a rhetoric is radically conservative for several reasons. First, it is conservative because the prophet has no power of *inventio* and instead relies completely upon the authority of God for material, credibility and epistemological import. Second, because the prophecy is always a radical attack on the core values of a community, it is constantly calling the community to heel, forcing even kings to obedience.³⁰ Third, the prophet can never compromise. Compromise is reasonable and the prophetic is not interested in reason or pragmatics. Prophecy is the rhetoric of the unwavering Will of God and hence cannot be met by half-way measures.³¹ Thus, concludes Darsey, it is a rhetoric that challenges the idea that it should attempt to transcend difference; that the rhetoric should *identify* with the audience.³²

Prophecy as Radically Liberatory

In another sense prophetic rhetorics are not at all conservative in terms of the of the community's prevailing social and political structures. Though he agrees that prophetic rhetorics are radical calls to the community, Walter Brueggemann argues that the key power of prophecy in the OT was its ability to *overturn* conservative religious and political orders, creating a new community ethic or arrangement. Through the direct disclosure of an active, Providential God, what seemed to be true about the world could be turned inside-out. Brueggemann believes that this is precisely the message of Moses' triumph over the Egyptians:

The gods of Egypt are the immovable lords of order. They call for, sanction, and legitimate social order... There are no revolutions, no breaks for freedom. There were only the necessary political and economic arrangements to provide order, "naturally," the order of Pharaoh. Thus the religion of the static gods is not and

never was disinterested, but inevitably it served the interests of the people in change, presiding over and benefitting from the order. And the functioning of the society testified to the rightness of the religion because kings did prosper and bricks did get made.³³

The religion of Moses, however, was the “*religion of God’s freedom with the politics of human justice.*”³⁴ God’s direct disclosures to Moses broke the fixity of the Egyptian system. They demanded freedom for the Hebrew people, demanded recognition of God’s justice, and threatened judgment on all for their faithfulness or opposition to God’s demand for freedom. Indeed, far from being conservative, Brueggemann argues that the task of prophecy is to “*evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.*”³⁵ Prophecy, as a method of envisioning a new world, is an “*assault on the consciousness of the empire.*”³⁶ It is to be imagined as an alternative theology and sociology based around freedom because God has declared it so. The order of the Egyptian kingdom, considered the epitome of natural order, was demonstrated to be false, unnecessary, and contrary to God’s chosen course. God’s radical intervention was not a question of obedience and fixity. It was the establishment of a rhetoric based in criticism of the existing order and the creative movement of *energeia*. It was movement, of course, that Kierkegaard thought distinguished the Christian from the eternal, stagnant fixity of the Greek conception of the universe (one can see the Hellenic/Hebraic tension).³⁷

Fundamentally, the prophetic imagination is not conservative because God’s Will is for liberation and justice. Prophetic rhetoric gives out symbols that attack the hopelessness of oppressive situations—they hold out the possibility of the “*natural*” order being overturned and new a community established. It “*brings to public expression those very hopes and yearnings*

that have been denied so long.” It redefines the situation in a new light.³⁸ It is an attempt to create a new symbolic field and, therefore, a new rhetoric that can express significance and value within that new field. Brueggemann believes that this prophetic rhetoric, far from being conservative and a return to order, is in fact a radical, political and social call for change—a demand for a liberatory politics suitable to Marx’s claim that religion is linked, in some way, to the root of all oppressions.³⁹

Caputo leans toward Brueggemann in interpreting not just revelation and prophecy, but all genuine religious experience, as a radical *metanoia*, the changing of the heart that turns the existing social arrangements and perceptions inside out.⁴⁰ Agreeing with both Darsey and Brueggemann that the religious *event* is intrinsically radical, Caputo argues that belief in the radical justice of God to change the current circumstance is recognition of the inadequacy of all temporal justices of the Law. The Law is forever distant from justice and hence our talk about God’s justice is a deconstruction of the Law’s ability to provide justice in the truest sense.⁴¹ The prayer for God’s justice is the prayer for the impossible. God’s justice is the ultimate, radical justice that puts all of the current flaws of the social order (and its attempt at justice) into gritty context. The call for economic and social justice in God’s terms, Caputo remarks, deconstructs that so-called “justice” of current social arrangements—and, as Smith recognized—also deconstructs those current, static Christianities that are very concerned over vice and sin (drinking, abortion, gay marriage) and little concerned with the material conditions of the poor. God’s proclamations on these speaking on these matters—the core, prophetic religious *event*—are calls to liberation.

To put it a bit differently, God’s proclamations through His prophets and His ability to intervene and re-arrange the social order, mean that all the static, oppressive orders of the status

quo—orders that include economic injustice, racial discrimination, social habits, structural barriers to adequate education or even clean food and water—which may seem to be *necessary* or *acceptable* flaws in current political economies are haunted by the possibility of God’s judgment and new political order. Not only does the threat of judgment hang over the head of those who head up such orders, but another order is proclaimed possible and our ethical failures to work toward that better, more just order are exposed. While this world’s effort at justice may never be adequate to what the call of justice demands, the possibility of another, radical justice ensures that we never become fixed in place.⁴² Without another justice, a justice beyond the status quo, there is a risk that true justice becomes misunderstood as embodied in the juridical-moral rules of society, that those appear natural, as they did in the Egyptian empire.

Thus in the light of prophetic rhetoric one feels, as Derrida remarks, that our justice is *out-of-joint*, not quite right. In some sense, Darsey is right that prophets are the ones who are out of step with society, “set-apart” because of their refusal to attenuate their rhetoric to social expectations. However, for God, the prophet and the believer, it is the *community* that is out-of-step, outside the covenant. Moreover, because the *event* of revelation always hangs over a community, any static order is always subject to disruption. There is always the possibility of a more-perfect justice, a more liberated society.⁴³

Thus, in contrast to Darsey, the Will of God is not *conservative* but directed toward liberation because it not just a call to God’s order, but God’s order of freedom. The possibility of the direct intervention of God means every social order can be overturned. Any naturalized imperial order can be overthrown by an alternative consciousness of liberation, created by the prophetic imagination. A radical attack on a community’s values may not be a call to heel, or obedience to order, but a call to *justice* and freedom, economic, social and otherwise. The

submission of kings to God is not conservative, but radically liberatory because it is principled (another reading of the Founding Fathers is available here). The failure of prophetic rhetoric to identify with the audience, the identification of radical *différance* between the community's Law and God's Will for justice, is not a question of compromise, but a contextualization of our own flaws and a call toward ever-improved political and social justice. These are especially emphasized by the NT's focus on the poor and outcast rather than on the blessed national order of Israel or the hierarchy of priests. It is a strategic reversal of epic scale: Jesus is not wrathful avenger but powerless sacrifice who comes to save even the lowliest person. As Caputo remarks, it is nearly anarchic in its inversion of the political order.⁴⁴ God is not order, in the NT, but a disorder—a deconstruction of the value of the temporal; earthly efforts come off as vain and inadequate. Caputo imagines the Christian God haunting about, finding Christianity's compromises with the Platonic, Aristotelian, and imperial Latin conceptions of order and disturbing them, raising anxieties in them with visions of Jesus-as-beggar, as pacifist, as a Jesus preferring the illiterate and serving the poor to proclaiming to imperial governors and kings who never did anything but persecute Christ.⁴⁵

There are then at least two radical possibilities of prophetic rhetoric, conservative and liberatory. What we might expect of the rhetoric of God's messengers politically will depend on your reading. In both cases, we might expect a call to change the collective consciousness and action the community. We might expect attacks on core values. We might expect a failure to identify with the community—indeed, a radically conservative call to heel or a recognition of the radical *différance* between the Law and Justice in the light God's Will. We might expect strategic reversal, hauntings of disorder, or even strange preferences for the lowest over the

highest. Both interpretations contain sensible possibilities. But in either case, God speaks in terms of *justice*—reward to the faithful and woe to those who fail to obey.

However, there is another possibility: cooption. The dismal fate of liberals. The result of unbelief in radicality. An attempt to compromise with that which cannot be negotiated with. A rhetoric of mediation, a reasonable meeting point, a static, rational, graspable predestination:

It is the tendency of liberals to rail and polemicize, but in the lack of faith or bad faith of so many it is not believed that something is about to be given. Egypt was without energy precisely because it did not believe anything was promised or about to be given. Egypt, like every imperial and eternal now, believed everything was given, contained, and possessed. If there is any point at which most us are manifestly co-opted, it is in this way. We do not believe that there will be newness but only that there will be merely a moving of the pieces into a new pattern.⁴⁶

Such a rhetoric attempts to put symbolic pieces of a society back together in a way that solves the radical problems of *différance* without *radical action*; it attempts to make the Law the true justice. Rather than radically overturning structures; it believes the basic elements of the structures of the status quo are adequate, just, or natural and only in need of simple tuning or re-arrangement. The particular arrangements might need alteration; some who are excluded might need to be included. But on the whole the symbolic elements, as packets of meaning, represent what is right and just.

What would a prophetic rhetoric of that sort look like? How could prophecy *radically* intervene in the material world with God's revealed Word and yet remain relatively innocuous in relation to the conduct of the world? What sort of prophet announces to the world, 'Everything,

except a few minor things, is already acceptable'? Prophetic rhetoric, visions of doom, calls for action, and predictions of future disaster or deliverance are usually inspired by moments of intense social disorder or oppression. God intervenes into history to dramatically alter its course—what sort of God would intervene, only to say that Fukuyama's thesis on the End of History was basically correct?⁴⁷ That liberal, democratic capitalism was essentially the final political order, with only details to be worked out? I believe such a radical prophecy of the status quo would look very much like the revelations of the Christian Prosperity Gospel.

Liberating the Status Quo in the Prosperity Gospel

The CPG relies significantly on direct revelation. As the chapter on the Biblical hermeneutics of Kenneth Hagin revealed, part of that process serves the purpose of providing a certain reading of the Scriptures with a divine endorsement. But that's not the only purpose that is served. Prophecy also delivers information on the organization of the cosmos. In this section, I analyze how the CPG deconstructs the traditional radical role of prophecy and co-opts prophecy to affirm the political and economic status quo rather than promoting justice in the community or social structures or a return to a prior moral order. Instead, it blunts any collective action at all, ironically using the liberation idiom to achieve that purpose.

When Moses challenged the Egyptian order with his revealed Word of God toward Pharaoh, Moses was declaring the cosmology of the Egyptians defunct. The prosperity gospel, in its own way, has the same purpose. Its revelatory preaching declares old, otherworldly Christianity defunct and creates a new "faith world"—a communal organization of language set to create a new social consciousness.⁴⁸ It declares God's rulership over the world. It re-arranges the terms of the social order. It announces its superiority over the impersonal static laws of modernism. It declares the predictions of medical, biological, and chemical science to be

secondary to God's Will. It suspends the economic rules of supply and demand. It sets aside questions of free will in favor of an arrangement in which persons are always acting out a predestined material and social order, organized and planned for the benefit of the faithful. The predestined teleology of prosperity promises miracles that provide a way out of despair.⁴⁹ Like Moses, the prophets of the CPG declare that even the kings of modernism must heel to the Will of God and align themselves to His *pathos*. It relies on no source other than itself and pre-written Scriptures, although it challenges the interpretation of the Scriptures citing God's new authority. Its epistemology is one of faith and covenant. The faithful will be rewarded and the unfaithful will find themselves left out. That is *justice*.

But the radicalism of the CPG is very limited. The rules of modern sciences, physical, behavioral, or social, are not overthrown by God's Will. Political arrangements are not exposed by the deconstruction of God's justice. They are simply, as Brueggemann puts it, moved into new patterns—gargoyles, in the terminology of this study. If the *logos* of rationality and science are the “core values” of the modernist metanarrative, then the CPG is a radical challenge to that epistemological basis; but only insofar as the Word-of-Faith preachers temporarily suspend the rules of those systems and then replace them immediately after a miracle of health or prosperity occurs. Modernism is simply paused for a moment. Even events that clearly follow the rules of rationality and science are simply re-described in supernatural terms as “miracles.”

Kenneth Hagin has a penchant for long, direct conversation with God. In one of his founding conversations, one that helped lead him to preach prosperity, Hagin indicates God tells him a new Creation story, in which God created the entire world for the immediate benefit and possession of humans. Hagin embraces the format of prophecy in which the prophet declares he is only a messenger by announcing ‘Thus sayeth the Lord.’ Hagin writes his version, “*The Lord*

said, ‘The silver and gold are not all here for the devil and his crowd. I made it all for My man, Adam, but then he committed high treason.’”⁵⁰ Indeed, Hagin reports, God had actually created Adam as the god of the material world, since Adam was meant to have dominion over it. But Satan obtained ownership of the world by tricking Adam, making him “god of this world.”⁵¹

In *I Believe in Vision*, Hagin recounts how God saved him from hell in a near-death experience. In relation to that, he argues that the Holy Spirit and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit can emerge from any faithful person—visions and speaking in tongues included.⁵² In fact, most of *I Believe in Visions* read like a rather conventional, folk Pentecostal interpretation of charismatic gifts, the need to be born again, and faith healing. Perhaps most notably, Hagin describes how in 1962, while preaching, he fell into a trance and was called to be a prophet of God in a theophanic event: “The Lord continued, ‘You must play a part in this. You will work with these people in the various denominations. You will minister to Full Gospel people to help them be prepared for my coming [sic]. I will show you how and what to do.’”⁵³ It is in the process of preparing the people that Hagin learns about divine income. God tells Hagin that money is coming. Divine, ministering angels are sent to get it. The Lord says, “Not only will you have this money in four months’ time, but other money will come, for my angels are at work now to cause the money to come.”⁵⁴ Hagin further learns that all he need do to get more money is to proclaim aloud that the ministering spirits should find him funds. Why then, cannot any person obtain the material abundance of God? Because, God tells Hagin, “My people have wrong thinking.”⁵⁵

This, in the prophetic tradition, is the moment of radicalism; this is the moment when God intervenes in history to overturn all of the social order that has come before. It is the moment when Yahweh tells Moses to go before Pharaoh and declares the empire powerless before the freedom of God. It is the moment when Jeremiah announces the coming judgment on

Israel. It is the moment when John the Baptist proclaims the coming of the Christ. All that has been known will now become obsolete. And as the Lord's messenger, what did God command Hagin to say?

The Lord said, "I'll have to correct your theology a little"... The Lord said, "Now the world can build a dance hall, a honky tonk, a beer joint, or a theater, put neon lights all over the front of it, and dress it up nicely. But if you want to dress up the church, people say, 'Ohhh, nooo!' I expect people to have the best place in town to meet in!" (The Lord actually said that to me). The Lord said, "I'm not withholding adequate food and clothing from your little children—that's not Me! It's the devil. He's the god of this world."⁵⁶

So Hagin's revelation is one in favor of nicer churches and a vehicle for God to avoid blame for child poverty. Hardly on face radical, in the usual meaning of the term. But in a certain way, Hagin's revelation *is* radical. He posits a Manichean vision of the world—one in which the material world is dominated by a dualistically evil god, known as Satan.

As the Christian polemicists note, this is not orthodox Christianity. This Manichean God is not fully sovereign. God is not in control of all things. In fact, He needs the help of humans to reclaim material things.⁵⁷ But how does God phrase his change to Hagin? Not as a radical call to action. Not as an overthrow of the social order, but as a "little" adjustment—nothing big, nothing world changing. It is as if, in a way, Moses had appeared to Pharaoh and said, "Thus sayeth the Lord, 'My people need a bit better food and treatment and perhaps fifteen minute breaks for every four hours worked.'" Indeed, while the front matter of *I Believe in Visions* mentions that Hagin's life has been "dramatically" altered by his revelations, there is no indication that *society* is significantly altered. In fact, the later chapters of *The Midas Touch* are committed to

demonstrating that Hagin's prosperity gospel is *not* radical. It is, as he phrases it, "The Truth; The Middle of the Road" between extreme emphasis on gifts of the Holy Spirit and denials of those gifts. After all, he says, he isn't suggesting anyone abandon modern medicine or quit their job hoping for miraculous healing or income.⁵⁸

However, the goal of Hagin's revelations is *freedom*. The reason people are sick and poor, Hagin says, is that they are overcome by demons and evil spirits. They don't know that God has given them *authority* over those spirits and that they can overcome them.⁵⁹ Later prosperity preachers adopt the language much more emphatically. Osteen, following Hagin's prophecy of the need for new thinking, declares, "You gotta see yourself not [as] going to be free one day, you gotta tell yourself I am already free!"⁶⁰

In a powerful sermon (one that brings tears to the audience) T.D. Jakes shouts that God is about "liberation!" His sermon, "Dangerous Deliverance," embodies the drama of exodus: the flight from Pharaoh, the fear of the Hebrews that they have been delivered from bondage only to be slaughtered by Pharaoh's pursuing armies, the wonder of the escape through the parted Red Sea, and God's just vengeance on Pharaoh's charioteers as He closes the Red Sea upon them. Using the narrative, Jakes argues that God is searching to free the people, especially from doubt and fear. Jakes proclaims a variety of freedom but settles on emphasizing one unique aspect of God's freedom the Hebrews, noting that Egyptians were wealthy enough to get more slaves even after the exodus from Egypt. He preaches:

It was easy to get more slaves. The problem was that the slaves had taken the money!..It had gone from the hands of the Egyptians to the hands of the slaves. There was a transfer of wealth that the devil was so angry about that he done everything he could to stop it. The last had become first, the first had become last.

The head had become the tail, the tail had become the head. Get the kids out! Oh!..The Bible says that the children of Israel came out with so much gold and so much silver they had heaped it on the backs of their children. If you got a child here, touch it [and] say you're going to be blessed. Strengthen your back. Before I die I'm going [to] leave you loaded [laughing]. You gonna come outta this with more than you ever had in your life... You're going to grow up saddled down with blessings; houses you didn't build, vineyards you didn't grow... Who can receive this word?⁶¹

Jakes declares a change. He exclaims, "Tell your neighbor! A shift is coming! A shift is coming!..God will so deliver you that when you are out, you're completely out!"⁶² And so, it's liberation—total liberation—that Jakes is preaching. It is freedom. It is justice. It is *radical*. Like Brueggemann, Jakes employs the deconstructive strategic reversal of the Egyptian empire. In God, and in the material world, the last shall be first. But the result is not a radical *social* change. It is not the overturning of the structures of economic exclusion. Instead, Jakes's version of the Bible's radical potential is a sudden transfer of individual wealth—the Hebrews become personally wealthy.

That justice trope is not one of social justice. For Jakes, it is a trope of *personal* justice. Do not worry about your enemies, Jakes preaches, for God will deliver you from them, "Your enemies will become disheartened in the pursuit, for after they done everything they could to destroy you, God just keeps on blessing you anyway."⁶³ Jakes preaches that God will enact vengeance upon the congregation members' enemies: "All you have to do is give Him the sign. And when you give Him the sign, all of a sudden, the walls [of the Red Sea] that you were worried about falling on you are falling on them!"⁶⁴ What kind of vengeance will be enacted?

Jakes gives a hint, “That’s why the very one [pause] who was talking about *your* daughter when she got pregnant--[stops and walks away].”⁶⁵ Jakes lets the laughing, cheering audience complete the enthymeme. The implication, of course, is that God’s vengeance will be enacted upon the gossiper, probably in the form of an indiscrete pregnancy in the family.

Thus, while Jakes appeals to those “longing for a glimmer of hope” and might qualify as “postmodern” because of his doctrinal flexibility, his disinterest in theological consistency, and his ability to master a wide-range of non-theological cultural touchstones, Jakes remains an ideological and political conservative, invested in capitalist structures and enabling his congregation to see themselves succeed within that structure.⁶⁶ The radicality of Jakes’s gospel is its individualism—he preaches no overturning of the mechanisms of injustice, no overthrow of the empire, no call for social justice. Lee and Sinitiere understand Jakes perfectly when they say that his message is one “of economic empowerment...carefully calibrated to help African Americans adjust to a competitive post-industrialist world.”⁶⁷

The question of freedom always exists in a dialectical relationship with bondage and oppression. In the Christian schematic, freedom is related to “good” and bondage related to “evil.” Thus the conception of what is *good* and what *freedom* means is intimately related to the perception of *evil* and *bondage*. If evil is perceived to be structural, social, and enacted by the dominating levers of powers due to the inadequacy of The Law, then radical social action will be necessary. However, if evil is localized and individuated, no major change will be needed.

Creflo Dollar believes that each of his sermons is a revelation of freedom. Preaching on the subject “Freedom from Poverty,” Dollar identifies evil: “Imma tell you what’s evil [sic]. When your wife can’t get her hair fixed and she hasn’t been able to wash it and—that’s evil.

That's evil. Imma tell you what's evil. When you got children hungry and they ain't got nothin' to eat. I'm a tell you what's evil, when you ain't got no soles on your shoes and you have to walk on the hard concrete when it's rainin' and wet—that's an evil thing when those calluses come up. That's evil!"⁶⁸ The moment is meant to be comic but it also must be taken seriously. In one way, Dollar is embodying Smith's observation that the CPG is uniquely aware of the suffering and relative deprivation of its audience. But the way it structures good and evil is significant. Evil is not structural, in Dollar's view. It is the trial of the individual. Why are people poor? "Most of us are poor not because we've honored God. Most of us are poor because we have dishonored God." In Dollar's view the core explanation for poverty is not socioeconomic systems of oppression but individual failings that can be resolved by an individual's actions.⁶⁹ Freedom from poverty is a question exterior to social inequality.

How does this freedom from poverty come about? Dollar urges his audience to announce, "I have been redeemed from the curse of poverty!...Abraham's blessings belong to me!"⁷⁰ How? By Christ's death on the cross. How does each person access these blessings? By tithing, Dollar declares, by giving. Dollar supports his position by a prophetic anecdote. He recounts how his wife Taffi Dollar, when considering an insufficient building fund, was told by God to donate her whole paycheck to the fund—and she would be rewarded, mystically repaid. By this process, through faith in God, Dollar argues that his congregation—and all true Christian believers--have achieved freedom from need: "To be redeemed from the curse means that the curse no longer holds you in bondage. You've been delivered; you've been set free...Christ has purchased our freedom."⁷¹ Liberation exists. Christ has liberated each person from individual poverty. The curse is the lack of individual success. Christ died on the cross so that the blessing might come

on the Gentiles instead of a curse of poverty, sickness, and death.⁷² The escape from those oppressions, individuated, is the escape from slavery into freedom.⁷³

Thompson more directly communicates his discussions with God and the liberation that God promises. He declares his prophecy, “After the Lord gave me the words ‘Money cometh,’ He told me *why* He wanted the Body of Christ to have money...Someone may ask, ‘What exactly does that mean?’ The Lord said, ‘I want to fulfill My covenant and take care of my children well’” (the family trope).⁷⁴ He sermonizes, “That yoke is broken tonight! You are going to receive your money tonight in Jesus’ name! Listen to the Holy Ghost! Listen to the Holy Ghost! He’s going to set you free tonight!...Money cometh to me *now!*”⁷⁵ Freedom, in this sense, exists *inside* the current economic and social structure. The link is tithing, not structural change. Tithing and faith are the mechanisms of freedom. Thompson remarks, “I tell you, a freedom came to me when I started to tithe—when I started to give God the money that already belonged to him...God would supply my need.”⁷⁶

Thompson even declares himself a prophet, delineating the difference between the true and false prophets of prosperity: “Get all the false prophets out of your mind. Some of them have your money because you put your faith in them rather than in God and His Word...When the real thing comes along, you’re leery...We’re going to take a little ‘side trip’ together as I tell you the story of my coming into prosperity.”⁷⁷

The language of liberation and coming authority is not limited to African American preachers. Hagin declares an inversion of the normal, arguing that those moving in faith have “authority” over their circumstances because negative events are products of the intervention of inferior demons. These preternatural forces are subject to the will of believers once they understand their authority in God. Hagin argues, “God’s plan for us is that we rule and reign in

life as kings: to rule and reign over circumstances, poverty, disease, and everything else that would hinder us.”⁷⁸ Osteen preaches that “living in victory” means having freedom from personal sickness and poverty.⁷⁹ Osteen even utilizes the Exodus account of God’s selection of Moses to confront Pharaoh as a message of personal empowerment, rather than as a sign of social or political imperative.⁸⁰ In *Become a Better You*, Osteen describes the freedom that Christ purchased on the cross as “personal.”⁸¹ It is a supernatural freedom with great individual advantages—one can overcome addiction, health problems, poverty, cycles of abuse—but is ultimately limited to personal empowerment. “Living in freedom” is living in the individual blessing of God.⁸²

Osteen’s focus on personal growth within the prevailing economic and political structures underlines the sense that the current arrangement is ultimately acceptable. Individuals seek respect, promotion, economic prosperity, material gain, the acquisition of property, and good familial relations in terms of the status quo. Godliness leads to advancements within corporations, the obtainment of property for oneself, without any sense of broader justice for those who may have been systemically excluded from prosperity.

At a base level, Osteen and his fellow prosperity preachers do so much to explain each person’s negative situation as either a result of a lack of individual faith (Hagin, Dollar, Thompson) or an unfortunate accident that can be resolved by personal empowerment and the assistance of a supernatural God (Copeland, Jakes, Meyer, Osteen, Prince) that there is hardly any need for a concept of structural change. God can resolve all problems, if a person has faith. When God is declared more powerful than all barriers, or when Osteen declares that what seems impossible is possible in God, it is an indication that radical political and social changes are fundamentally unnecessary—possibly even impossible. In Hagin’s account, for example, any

secular structural change would be retarded by the fact that Satan is the god of this world and thus will corrupt all things within it. In Thompson and Dollar's account, economic and social adjustments that resolved the problems of the people would in some sense be unjust because it would reward the unbelievers. In Jakes' and Osteen's version, the problems of evil are so personal that there is almost no sense in which the problems of poverty, unemployment, disease, mental illness, and addiction are embedded in any sort of social, political, or economic environment. For these preachers, the narrative of Exodus is reduced to the most local terms. The Hebrews' escape from Pharaoh and bondage is reduced to a metaphor for a variety of personal challenges. While each preacher encourages all faithful to work for personal improvement as well as supernatural blessing, such work is nearly always for improvement within current existing circumstances. Poverty is a problem each person faces alone, or nearly alone, not a problem built into capitalist economics.

The closest any of these preachers comes to structural criticism of the status quo is in the idea of getting out the "family mindset," i.e., the idea that because one's parents were poor, they should not seek a better life. While that level of casual micro-sociology is significant, it does not come close to the style of radical community change that Brueggemann demands a contemporary prophetic rhetoric embody. In the prosperity gospel the term "radical" is reduced to a personal change, "liberation" and "freedom" are about the individual struggle, and "bondage and "slavery" are socio-economic metaphors for personal challenges, not physical, systemic realities. It is a prophetic rhetoric that focuses on personal profit in the areas of material wealth, physical health, mental wellness, and relationship effectiveness.

The reliance on an activation of the supernatural at a personal level is not uncontested in the political environment. Jeremiah Camara, a critic of the African-American church and the

prosperity gospel in particular, has argued that these mechanisms of giving which rely on activating supernatural power in order to achieve change stagnate the progress of Black Americans. In particular, they obscure the deep, social attitudes and related structural and economic disadvantages both internally and externally in African-American communities.⁸³

Camara believes that religion's use of liberation language traps liberation, freedom, and justice within the supernatural and creates an ever-over-the-horizon faith where promised divine interventions never arrive and certainly never elevate the community. Even when Jakes recognizes the problem that other-worldliness can create, and thinks of the way that religion has failed to address material oppression, he considers the solution to be the empowerment of individuals within the African-American community, not broad based solutions.⁸⁴

Camara's argument can be generalized to the prosperity gospel as whole. The language of bondage and freedom, for cultural reasons, is likely to resonate at a deeper level in the African-American community but the result is the same. Osteen's focus on personal empowerment does nothing to change overall structures. The ambitions and dreams that Meyer argues can be fulfilled through personal empowerment with God are all attenuated to life within a neoliberal, democratic society. What constitutes "good" within Dollar's schemes are all desires for the outward signs of material prosperity rather than any sort of justice or liberation from the barriers of racist attitudes, gender barriers, or growing economic accumulation at the top.

Although it is banal to observe that the prosperity gospel is invested in the perpetuation of bourgeois values, it is important to examine the less obvious way that the CPG has, as Brueggemann fears, co-opted the radical political potential of prophecy and revelation. In fact, by mystifying the process of wealth attainment and reducing it to a process of faith, access to the critical mindset that Brueggemann seeks is denied. Freedom is viewed in terms of personal

achievement and the alleviation of specific challenges. The gaining of that freedom is a process of merely coming to faith, believing, speaking words of faith, and possibly tithing. The magical process discussed in prior chapters becomes politically disempowering. The status quo is criticized only in personal terms—and, if Dollar is to be believed, the true failure of the status quo is the lack of faith exemplified by the individual. If the cause of poverty is disbelief, there is not any sort of discriminatory logic at work.

What is lost is the social focus on the Scriptures that draws Brueggemann's attention. Whereas Brueggemann focuses on the future of Israel, as a community, the prosperity preachers see Israel merely as metonymic substitution for the individual believer. It is a deviation that is particular to the CPG. Despite a basis in an essentially covenantal theology, the CPG sees that covenant as only existing between God and individuals. Even where the Puritans and many contemporary evangelicals interpret the covenant as societal, believing that social conduct is related to God's favor, the CPG has little to say about the future of society in relation to God. Where fundamentalists blunt socio-economic criticism by arguing that capitalist freedoms are God's chosen method of exchange, the prosperity gospel simply says nothing at all regarding questions of systemic inequality. In the prophetic tradition, Darsey notes, the prophet is concerned with the future of the people of God. But for the prophets of the Prosperity God, revelations are directed toward individual conduct, not social change. It is critically silent.

Without an assault on the "*dominant social consciousness*," the *energeia* that Brueggemann desires is thwarted. The concept of liberation is, ironically, drawn into the service of the status quo. Prophecy is stultifying rather than radical or progressive. Caputo imagines a critical mindset that deconstructs the inadequacy of the Law in light of God's demand for justice. True justice, the ultimate justice, is always reserved for God, but our desire to align ourselves

with the Will of God ensures that we always seek a society that is ever-more-just. The idea of the justice-to-come should motivate us to change our society for the better, to see the failures of our juridical and socio-economic structures in the light of God's urgent call for justice. Yet, if "justice" is attainable simply by individual faith—as it is in the CPG—the *energeia*, the urgency for change, is absent. Society is not called, as it was by the OT prophets, to re-align itself to God's Will. Individuals must merely change their mind and wait for "transfers" of wealth. The *metanoia*—the radical change of heart—is emphatically not one that puts one into the service of the most under-served. Those persons are at fault for their own predicament. One may preach to them, but one can hardly help them. Those who did not receive such transfers can be dismissed as simply lacking faith.

The result is predictable. Harrison reports that those who are members of prosperity churches but fail to receive "blessings" feel anxiety and often blame themselves for their lack of faith. Rather than interpreting the feeling of being "out-of-joint" as a signal of problems of social injustice, each person is encouraged to understand them as a personal failing.⁸⁵ God's new revelation, His new message to the believers is that they could succeed *within* the current structure if only they had enough faith. The Empire is never overthrown, the systems of exclusion are never exposed, and the *politics of freedom* are never engaged. It is no wonder that Camara is skeptical of the benefit of this message for Black Americans.

The "middle road" of prosperity is set, then, to the purpose of *not* interrupting the flow of normal events. "Radical" faith in the CPG should not, as every preacher indicates, stop any person from going to work, seeking advancement, saving money, going to the doctor, seeking mental health assistance, or any other mundane task of normal life. It might, however, ask you to give your last twenty dollars to the church instead of your bills, in hope of reaping a harvest of

multiplication. After all (Thompson says), that twenty dollars could never fulfill your needs anyway—best to give it to God in faith. The prosperity gospel does not require any interruption in the flow of events. It only, as Brueggemann notes, believes in a modest re-arrangement of the current pieces into a new form—a form that might benefit the believers within the current social arrangement.

Though faith in the frames of acceptance pushed by capitalism and traditional evangelical Christianity have crumbled, a quick re-assemblage ensures the symbols of both can re-used and gain new life, mostly by eliminating systematic critical analysis. The gap between our current structures and God’s vision is blurred by putting a microscope on the conduct and faith of the individual. Indeed, the entire world outside of American society, for example, is almost entirely ignored. Hagin merely notes that he doesn’t know why other countries are so poor. The revelations of the Christian Prosperity Gospel are a bold declaration that, “Everything is basically sufficient.”

Conclusion

The dialectical angles of this dissertation are no more apparent than in my examinations of the social implications of the Christianity Prosperity Gospel. In prior chapters, I suggested that the CPG serves as a means of individual tactical resistance to modernist technological rationality. In the chapter following this one, I return to the question of how the CPG provides the individuals in the audience with a sense of *possibility* by altering their sense of time. Such themes are fitting, since part of the purpose of this dissertation is to explain why the CPG has such appeal.

But in this chapter, I have widened the lens to explore the deeply socially disempowering implications of the CPG; specifically the possibility of un-radical prophecies, or, at the very

least, the possibility of a prophetic rhetoric that is neither radically conservative nor radically liberatory but a “radical” affirmation of the status quo. In the more conventional account, the prophetic form of rhetoric holds out the possibility of radical social change. It demands, without reference to the cultural mores of the audience, absolute adherence to the Will of God. The prophet, subservient to the Will of God, engages in a rhetoric confrontation. The prophetic imagination, in Brueggemann’s scheme, declares the overthrow of the powers-that-be. It overthrows that static nature of the imperial gods and signals God’s radical intervention in the course of history. Relying on Exodus, Brueggemann describes the prophetic form as a rhetoric of freedom, undoing all the “naturalness” that is usually ascribed to oppressive structures. God declares the old Egyptian gods dead and rejects the sovereignty of Baal and the golden calf. The prophet creates an alternative consciousness of freedom. Caputo and Derrida argue that the idea of God and justice serve to put our own insufficient efforts at justice in the proper context—God’s revelations toward justice call out our “justices” as out-of-joint with His will and in need of constant address.

Many prosperity preachers claim to have received personal revelations from God, and several proclaim that they are engaged in a divinely ordered mission from God to preach the prosperity message. Those that do not claim regular conversation with God still rely on the idea that they have been ‘divinely called’ to preach a new reading of the Scriptures and a new message to the Christian people. In the process of disseminating that message, prosperity preachers proclaim that it will release the people from the “bondage” of poverty, bring them out of the “slavery” of their enemies, give them “freedom” in their lives and “liberate” them from the forces which hold them back. These forces of oppression, however, are not the structural inequalities of the political, social, and economic realm. Instead, they are proclaimed to be either

demons and devils or a manifestation of the listener's lack of faith. The "freedom" that any person receives in the prosperity gospel is personal wealth and well-being. It is not an overturning of the social order, as Darsey and Brueggemann imagine, but mere achievement within that order. It is a revelation of success within the status quo. It is as if God agreed that the historical contest between competing systems of economic and political order was, indeed, over and that it was settled that a nation-state based democratic capitalism was the proper arrangement. Any injustice within that arrangement is merely a result of a lack of faith. All that remains is for believers to have faith and receive God's favor.

The prosperity preachers' co-option of the power of prophecy and the rhetoric of liberation for the purposes of personal profit and the status quo is precisely the trap Brueggemann worried about. The effort to create an oppositional politics organized around an alternative consciousness of liberation is disabled by the capture of liberatory rhetoric by the status quo. Social change is unnecessary in the prophecies of the prosperity preachers, because God has revealed that all can succeed within the current system. Indeed, it is only to be expected that justice will not come to those who do not have faith in the supernatural favor of God. Beyond indicating the social function of prophecy within the CPG, this analysis should serve as an indicator that another prophecy exists and that not all revelation is radical. Indeed, it can serve uniquely conservatory purposes, sometimes to the detriment of those most seeking a justice beyond what faith can provide or what the world makes available to them.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 9.

² Creflo Dollar, *Winning in Troubled Times* (New York: Faith Words, 2010), 2, 47.

³ Image from Clark Bailey Photography, "REDEFINING A PURPOSE | FICWFM LOS ANGELES,"

August 1, 2011, <http://www.clarkbaileyblog.com/events/redefining-a-purpose-ficwfm-los-angeles/> (accessed August 19, 2011).

⁴ Joel Osteen in “Joel Osteen - Did Jesus die for your freedom?” [video]. Youtube.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WhuKoT1jY_c (accessed April 18, 2011).

⁵ Leroy S. Thompson, *Money Cometh! To The Body of Christ* (Tulsa: Harrison House, 1999), 7.

⁶ Kenneth Copeland, *Kenneth Copeland - The Rock of Revealed Knowledge (3/5)* [video]. Retrieved April 18, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zwn0AdRzL4&feature=related>.

⁷ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic*, 94-95.

⁸ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic*, 108.

⁹ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic*, 95.

¹⁰ Luke Winslow, “Classy Morality: The Rhetoric of Joel Osteen,” in *Uncovering Hidden Rhetorics*, ed. Barry Brummet (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008).

¹¹ Milmon F. Harrison, *Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 152-153; Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It? Prosperity Preaching and the Black Church* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2007), 52-67.

¹² Harrison, *Righteous*, 133.

¹³ Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It?*, 121-122.

¹⁴ Shayne Lee and Phillip Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and the Spiritual Marketplace* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 68-69. Lee and Sinitiere argue that Jakes no longer qualifies as a ‘Prosperity Preacher’ after 2007, but as recently as his 2006 book *Life Overflowing*, he makes clear that the concepts of faith and prosperity are still a core part of his ministry (11-26). Even in *Reposition Yourself*, the book that Lee argues indicates that Jakes has rejected the prosperity message, still indicates that Jakes believes God ordains particular material items for people (116). However, Jakes also claims in *Reposition Yourself* that he has been “falsely labeled” as a prosperity gospelist by academics simply because he mentions prosperity, and compares his experience to the false labels given to Christ (217). Simultaneously, he denies that prosperity gospel even exists and that all such preachers have been incorrectly described (220). I hope this dissertation and a variety of other books are adequate responses to those claims. Jakes may have significantly softened and nuanced his position on prosperity but he has not abandoned it; see Shayne Lee, “Prosperity Theology: T.D. Jakes and the Gospel of the Almighty Dollar,” *Cross-Currents* (Summer, 2007), 233; T.D. Jakes, *Reposition Yourself* (New York: Atria Books, 2007).

¹⁵ Jill Dubisch and Raymond Michalowski, “Blessed Are the Rich: The New Gospel of Wealth in Contemporary Evangelism,” in Eds. Marshall Fishwick and Ray B. Browne, *The God Pumpers: Religion in the Electronic Age* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987), 41.

¹⁶ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 148.

¹⁷ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 56-58; 101.

¹⁸ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 25-26.

¹⁹ Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It?*, 30-36.

²⁰ James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 17-18.

²¹ Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It?*, 33.

²² Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 49.

²³ The softer message might, in part, reflect the lower structural and social barriers faced by a white preacher and a congregation with a plurality of white members—although Osteen has a diverse congregation.

²⁴ James K. Smith, “What’s Right with the Prosperity Gospel?” *Forum* (Fall, 2009), 8-9.

²⁵ Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition*, 31.

²⁶ Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition*, 17.

²⁷ Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition*, 32.

²⁸ Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition*, 39.

²⁹ In terms of OT prophecy, this may be true. However, in the “prophecies” of the American Puritans, the jeremiad was put to far more progressive social uses; Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 27-28.

³⁰ Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition*, 20.

³¹ Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition*, 21-22.

³² Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition*, 21-22.

³³ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 17.

³⁴ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 17. Emphasis original.

³⁵ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 13. Emphasis original.

³⁶ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 19.

³⁷ John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 15-16.

³⁸ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 66, quotation from 67, 69.

³⁹ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 17. Brueggemann and Marx do not mean religion causes all oppression, but religion, and religious criticism, are linked to all core elements of law, economics, and politics.

⁴⁰ John Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 27.

⁴¹ Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 63-69.

⁴² Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, The Work of Mourning, and The New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 27-31.

⁴³ I like the grammatical contradiction of the term “more-perfect” as a representation of the progressive, rather than formal, concept of a “perfect” justice at work.

⁴⁴ Caputo, *What Would Jesus Do?*, 81-88.

⁴⁵ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 33.

⁴⁶ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 23.

⁴⁷ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, 2nd edition (New York: Free Press, 2006). It is not entirely without basis, of course, for a prophecy to declare the end of history. Apocalyptic rhetorics and jeremiads of all sorts look forward to the settling of social, economic, political, and religious orders into static form.

⁴⁸ David M. Greenhaw, “The Formation of Consciousness,” in *Preaching as a Theological Task*, ed. Thomas G. Long and Edward Farley (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 7. There is always something suspicious in the structuralism posited by Buttrick (and thereby Greenshaw) in terms of reality creation. However, while it is true that it’s not possible to draw a strong line between language, meaning, and mind, it remains true that discourse does, as Kenneth Burke indicates, draw the attention.

⁴⁹ Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 31: “It may be...that Jeremiah’s emphasis on miracle provided him with a way out despair—that his reliance on ‘the unique divine initiative at the end of history’ grew in proportion to what seemed to him the nation’s irreversible moral deterioration.”

⁵⁰ Kenneth Hagin, *The Midas Touch: A Balanced Approach to Biblical Prosperity* (Tulsa, OK: RHEMA Bible Church, 2000), 20. My emphasis.

⁵¹ Hagin, *The Midas Touch*, 20-21.

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- ⁵² Kenneth Hagin, *I Believe in Visions* (Tulsa, OK: RHEMA Bible Institute, 1984), 35.
- ⁵³ Hagin, *I Believe*, 127.
- ⁵⁴ Hagin, *I Believe*, 131.
- ⁵⁵ Hagin, *The Midas Touch*, 19.
- ⁵⁶ Kenneth Hagin, *How God Taught Me About Prosperity* (Tulsa, OK: RHEMA Bible Church, 1985), 13-16.
- ⁵⁷ Hagin, *How God*, 16-17.
- ⁵⁸ Hagin, *The Midas Touch*, 179.
- ⁵⁹ Hagin, *The Midas Touch*, 28-29.
- ⁶⁰ Osteen, *Joel Osteen—Did Jesus*.
- ⁶¹ T.D. Jakes in “TD Jakes - A DANGEROUS DELIVERANCE - 4 of 7” [video]. Youtube. Retrieved April 18, 2011 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g7R-1EFqHAs&feature=related>.
- ⁶² T.D. Jakes in “TD Jakes - A DANGEROUS DELIVERANCE - 5 of 7” [video]. Youtube. Retrieved April 18, 2011 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9HIwm0wwmz8&feature=related>.
- ⁶³ T.D. Jakes in “TD Jakes - A DANGEROUS DELIVERANCE - 6 of 7” [video]. Youtube. Retrieved April 18, 2011 from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4OfL_B9o1Is
- ⁶⁴ T.D. Jakes, *T.D. Jakes...6 of 7*.
- ⁶⁵ T.D. Jakes, *T.D. Jakes...6 of 7*.
- ⁶⁶ Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 71, 62. “Postmodern” is their description.
- ⁶⁷ Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 75.
- ⁶⁸ Creflo Dollar in “Pastor Creflo Dollar-Freedom from Poverty 5” [video]. Youtube. Retrieved April 20, 2011 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jscmGVCFRY&feature=autoplay&list=PL7798B13FC4590AE0&index=15&playnext=2>.
- ⁶⁹ Creflo Dollar, “Pastor Creflo Dollar-Freedom from Poverty 9” [video]. Youtube. Retrieved April 20, 2011 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jJoNW2GOD5c&feature=related>.
- ⁷⁰ Creflo Dollar, “Pastor Creflo Dollar-Freedom from Poverty 8” [video]. Youtube. Retrieved April 20, 2011 from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jk_n3Kj0iQ&feature=related.

⁷¹ Creflo Dollar in “Pastor Creflo Dollar-Freedom from Poverty” [video]. Youtube. Retrieved April 20, 2011 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=buVPHsLR88U&playnext=1&list=PL5CCC7B3FC29EB384>; Creflo Dollar, “Pastor Creflo Dollar-Freedom from Poverty 2” [video]. Youtube. Retrieved April 20, 2011 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ovGYiLHyGKI&feature=autoplay&list=PL5CCC7B3FC29EB384&index=2&playnext=2>.

⁷² Dollar in “Pastor Creflo Dollar-Freedom from Poverty 2.”

⁷³ Dollar, *Winning*, 227.

⁷⁴ Thompson, *Money Cometh!*, 46.

⁷⁵ Leroy Thompson in “Leroy Thompson - MONEY COMETH TO ME NOW!” [video]. Youtube. Retrieved April 20, 2011 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8oXhYVm2MW8>.

⁷⁶ Thompson, *Money Cometh*, 125-126.

⁷⁷ Thompson, *Money Cometh*, 59.

⁷⁸ Kenneth Hagin, *The Believer's Authority* (Tulsa, OK: RHEMA Bible Church, 1984), 39.

⁷⁹ Joel Osteen, *It's Your Time* (New York: Free Press, 2009), 227.

⁸⁰ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 226.

⁸¹ Osteen, *Become a Better You* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 199.

⁸² Osteen, *Become a Better You*, 251.

⁸³ Jeremiah Camara, *Holy Lockdown: Does the Church Limit Black Progress* (Lilburn, GA: Twelfth House Publishing, 2004), 12-15.

⁸⁴ T.D. Jakes in “T.D. Jakes on HBO's "The Black List" [video]. Youtube. Retrieved April 22, 2011 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N5kyqnniHew>.

⁸⁵ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 72-76.

CHAPTER 7:
THE RHETORIC OF TIME, POSSIBILITY, AND THE EVENT

Da-sein is always what it can be and how it is its possibility...The being possible...is...distinguished from the empty, logical possibility and from the contingency of something objectively present, where this or that can “happen” to it.

-Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 143.

To bring up Joel Osteen’s most recent work *It’s Your Time* in relation to the rhetorical concept of *kairos*, or right timing, is to invite the snarky observation that the economic crisis is precisely the “right time” to write a profitable book on the economic crisis.¹ When Osteen remarks that he “wanted to get this book out there to give them hope and aspiration,” one is tempted to say that, as far as economic concerns go, Osteen has an impeccable sense of the “opportune moment.”² At the same time, Osteen’s book embodies the Christian pre-occupation with time. The premise of the book is that believers should think of time different. It is invested in the concept of both secular and sacred notions of *kairos*, a belief that the current *chronological* period of economic hardship is not sign of God’s *kairo-logical* season of favor.³ Osteen declares, “God is a faithful God...no matter how impossible it looks, if you’ll stay in faith, your time is coming.”⁴ Osteen insists that though you may appear to be a “victim” in this life, if you stay in faith, “you will enter a new season of victory.”⁵

Of course, Osteen is a prosperity preacher, so this “new season” is not one beyond the limits of this world but instead exists in this world and comes with material benefits. Osteen urges the reader to declare, “My time is coming...I will not die until I see it come to pass.”⁶

What is this time? “*It’s time to believe!*”⁷ And what, precisely, shall ye receive in this time? You will, like Job, receive “twice what [you] had before.”⁸ According to Osteen, once you alter you sense of time anything is possible.⁹ For Osteen recognition of a current rhetorical *kairos* and the inspiration of the “event” of a religious *kairos* in the audience are vital to achieving his goal of inspiring hope.

But *kairos* doesn’t tell the whole story.

The concept of *kairos* is familiar to rhetoricians and theologians alike. For rhetoricians, *kairos*, a special sense of timing, has been noted as one of the key elements of Sophistic, Burkean, and even Platonic rhetorical theory.¹⁰ It is also not unusual to speak of the various concepts of “time” in Christian *kerygma* (proclamation). In their fields, theologians and religious studies scholars are likely to encounter *kairos* as the concept of time that differentiates the divine structure of time from the standard chronological time, particularly when it relates to the *when* of religiously significant events.¹¹ So definitions of *kairos* vary widely.¹² But at least we can say that *kairos* is not the normal progression events—it is chronological time set aside, it is a particular opportunity or situation that is differentiated from the norm.

The rhetorical significance of recognizing the “right time” for certain kinds of speech or action is obvious. Far less explored are the purposes *kairos* serves. Indeed, current literature emphasizes the recognition and creation of *kairotic* or *kairic* moments, religious and secular, but rarely discusses perhaps the key facet of *kairos*: its ability expand the rhetor and hearer’s *dynamis*—the rhetor or hearer’s vision of the potential and/or possibilities available in the world. *Kairos* is mere *techne* if we do not attend to the way it functions to expand possibilities—not just *opportunities*, but whole worlds that seemed unavailable in normal circumstances. It is a question of deep significance. As Heidegger observed, emerging possibility is the watch-term of

the reflective being.¹³ In religious contexts a rhetor's effort to inspire recognition of the *kairos* of God only matters insofar as it changes what the audience views as possible or potential in the universe.¹⁴ It is how God breaks out of the limits of the normal, rational bounds of the world.

Given the lack of attention to possibility, this chapter argues that an examination of the use of *kairos* in the connection with *dynamis* and in the context of a variety of key features of the *event* adds significantly to our understanding of rhetoric. Prior studies have often isolated *kairos* as concept on its own. I examine it as a part of a larger process of altering the audience's perception of the universe. As this chapter will discuss, *kairos* has the goal of inspiring belief (*pistis*) rather than rational judgment (*krisis*). The Christian rhetor focused in *kairos* isn't just looking for credulity. *Kairos* is a radical attack on the limits of chronological, historical possibility; *kairos* pushes the hearer to undergo a deep change of heart, *metanoia*. The revelation of a particular truth in *kairos* changes the heart of the hearer and opens a new world of possibility (*dynamis*). The moment of insight is an *event*—a moment of deep revelation that sets off a series of deconstructive transformations that are unforeseeable or even impossible under normal circumstances.¹⁵

By reading Osteen's *It's Your Time* in the light of the *kairos* of the *event*, one fleshed out by the concepts of *pistis* (belief), *aletheia* (revealed truth), *metanoia* (the change of heart) and, most of all, *dynamis* (potential/possibility), I intend to demonstrate that *kairos* is not merely about an adjustment of time but is part of the process of adjusting what Kenneth Burke would call the audience's framework of interpretation—the hermeneutic structure the audience uses to read the signs of the world to determine their conclusion about what rules constitute reality.¹⁶ The rhetor seeks to adjust the audience's hermeneutic lens. These adjustments to the audience's frame of interpretation are not limited to simply tinkering with the audience's

interpretation, however. As Osteen—my representative anecdote—illustrates, altering one’s perception of our “time,” “season,” or “moment” can deconstruct the limited possibilities of a conventional interpretation of a lifeworld and bring forth a reality that is radically different, even nearly opposite, the interpretation that existed before—a world filled with power and possibility instead of limits and demobilization.

In Osteen’s case, he is urging that audience to read the current economic hardships in the United States not as a reason to give up on their dreams of material prosperity but as a reason to expect and work toward material prosperity. The goal of this chapter is three-fold: first, to deepen our understanding of *kairos* and its associated concepts as rhetorical and hermeneutic devices; second, to illustrate the way the prosperity gospel hands the audience hermeneutic tools that, when employed, will support its position that Christians will be materially blessed; third, to provide support for this dissertation’s argument that deconstructive interpretative moves are a part of everyday life.

I proceed in three steps. First, I review the concept of *kairos* and its use in rhetorical and theological contexts, noting its limited deployment as a matter of timing. Second, I examine Osteen’s *It’s Your Time* to demonstrate the way he uses a variety of concepts of *kairos* to alter the audience’s perceptions of the structure of the universe. Third, I discuss the way that my suggested altered perception of *kairos* can contribute to areas of rhetorical theory that already exist and can open new avenues of discussion.

The Limits of Kairos

Contemporary theories of *kairos* tend to either treat *kairos* as recognition of “right timing” or as a kind otherworldly state in which the rhetor transport the audience to another world where the perceived limits of what is possible are broken down. In this section, I argue

that a more effective understanding of *kairos* sees *kairos* both the rhetor's "right timing" but also rhetor's effort to invoke the sense of a "time set-apart" in which the normal rules of the progression of events according to natural rules are suspended. To effectively grasped, *kairos* must be seen in connection to the concept of "the event," the state of madness in which what seemed impossible becomes possible. It is sense of time in the event that serves to deconstruct the audience's reading of what is possible from their subject-position, expanding *dynamis*, i.e., the audience's perception of what is possible.

Rhetoric and Kairos

An effective theory of *kairos* needs to understand that the term "*kairos*," has multiple, useful meanings and yet provide the most effective use of the term for analysis.¹⁷ In this subsection, I examine extant rhetorical literature on *kairos* in order to note how definitional heterogeneity has led to difficulty in the use of *kairos* an analytical tool. I argue for an understanding of *kairos* that acknowledges its significance as the "knack" for recognizing "right timing" in rhetoric but privileges its role as an active rhetorical tool which seeks to alter the audience's field of perception by inspiring it to feel or envision a unique time period in which unthought-of truths and possibilities are revealed. *Kairos* is not simply the appropriate recognition of a rhetorical situation; it is an attempt by the rhetor to radically alter the audience's perception of their own rhetorical situation.

In a recent study on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s use of *kairos*, Richard Benjamin Crosby notes that the field of rhetoric's use of *kairos* is often "oversimplified."¹⁸ Too often *kairos* descends into a functional definition that is synonymous with rhetoric itself, i.e., 'saying the right thing, at the right time.' Crosby argues that *kairos* is far more than just a recognition of the right situation. The rhetor's use of particular rhetorical figures develops *kairos* as "an independent

philosophical standard into which rhetoric may enter and be reframed according to different needs and expectations.”¹⁹ *Kairos* is a state that rhetoric seeks to inspire that allows the rhetor to adjust the audience’s sense of “right timing.” *Kairos* is not just the recognition of “right-timing” by the rhetor or the audience but the creation of a “new realm” of seeing—a state of seeing what Crosby calls arational “revelation” or *alethiea* that depends upon and facilitates belief rather than reasoned judgment.²⁰

Crosby’s interpretation of *kairos* is not without limits of its own, but it is certainly a development over some past interpretations of *kairos*. James L. Kinneavy emphasized that *kairos* was a dynamic understanding of the situation, noting that “*kairos* has much in common to the situation context.”²¹ Thompson remarks that, “Kinneavy makes it clear that *kairos* is central...because it accounts for certain elements of the rhetorical act that are ultimately beyond the rhetor’s control.”²² The strength of that statement is vital. *Kairos* is the recognition of the situational elements that are “*ultimately*” beyond the rhetor’s control. In the interview, Kinneavy summarizes *kairos* as “the right time and due measure.”²³

It is crucial to note that Kinneavy’s perspective on *kairos* is a fundamentally reactive posture—the rhetor is *reacting* to a situation, adapting to it, not creating it. Certainly, Kinneavy allows that the rhetor might have some control; by choosing the right time to speak the rhetor is, in some sense, creating the right time. But *kairos* remains mostly a question of adaptation rather than invocation.²⁴ Recognition of the “right time” is important, of course. A lack of understanding of context related to the timing of speech and events can create serious misunderstanding or errors while a correct understanding can lead to speech, judgments and actions that are far more successful both in terms of persuasion and in terms of ethics.

Furthermore, Kinneavy's *kairos* indicates that what we *know* is situational; what is true, or right, or just is not absolute but should "be judged by the situation."²⁵

Yet Kinneavy's argument on behalf of *kairos* ultimately ignores that rhetors possess much influence over the audience's sense of timing. While Kinneavy is arguing for a dynamic understanding of situation (he criticizes Bitzer), he does so on the basis that it is *more* rational to have a detailed understanding of the situation in order to account for it. As Kinneavy and Eskin note about Aristotle, an understanding of *kairos* is a technical capability that increases the efficacy of speech as well as the efficacy of policy.²⁶ This is distinctly different from Crosby's version of *kairos* in which the rhetor can transport the audience to a place where normal rules of rationality decline in significance because new rules (often God's rules). Kinneavy admits as much by acknowledging that despite his familiarity with Paul Tillich, he doesn't focus on Tillich's idea that *kairos* is the breaking-in of a preternatural force into ordinary time.²⁷

Sheard describes *kairos* as something that "contextualizes" human activity.²⁸ She recognizes the power of words as the *pharmakon*—the dual medicine/poison power of words born in their polysemous nature noted by Plato and discussed by Derrida.²⁹ Language is both potentially and sometimes simultaneously cure and poison because the intrinsic ambiguity of words—the lack of clarity in outcome prior to the exact moment of decision—is a product of their "radically contingent" nature. Words themselves are inherently deceptive because of their status as mere representation, always unclearly related to object. The *situational* flux (*kairos*) that surrounds the employment of rhetoric further ambiguates the status of words as cure or poison.³⁰ In Sheard's recognition of the "radical contingency" in words, she proposes that the kairotic power of words lies in their (Burkean) ability to create communities via identification and division. Crosby characterizes Sheard as merely saying that *kairos* constitutes "good

timing”;³¹ but Sheard remarks that the ambiguity of language “permits us to imagine possible worlds—conditions of life, states of being—and to create them for ourselves in order to solve problems and promote change.”³² Indeed, Sheard is quite active in concluding that Burke’s analysis of rhetoric is optimistic about the ability of particular recognitions of scene to allow rhetoric to expand the potential of the “will.” Sheard recognizes that *kairos* is not a thing itself, but matters insofar as it expands the audience’s perception of what is possible, i.e. *dynamis*.

Poulakos recognizes the relationship between *kairos*, *dynamis*, and *to prepon* (the appropriate), though his characterization of a “sophistic rhetoric” has been sharply contested.³³ It’s true that Poulakos’s description of these concepts turns *kairos* into a situational *techne*, a sophistic art to be mastered by the rhetorician. Yet Poulakos’s constellation of concepts, which come together in his argument that “*Rhetoric is an art which seeks to capture in opportune moments that which is appropriate and attempts to suggest that which is possible,*”³⁴ is key because it refuses to isolate *kairos* as a rhetorical concept. Poulakos accurately notes that a key function of is dictating, controlling, reducing, or expanding the possibilities of the audience: “In and through the speech of the rhetor, the seed of possibility is planted in the ground of actuality. However, its roots do not begin to form until the audience fails to see ‘why not,’ until they cannot find any reason to frustrate or repudiate.”³⁵ Still, Poulakos’s concept of *kairos* is fairly reactive and his conception of *dynamis* is limited. *Kairos* is “right timing” in a conventional sense. There is little hint in Poulakos of *kairos* as time set apart from chronological time. The power of the rhetor to transport the audience to a different place, to radically change the audience’s vision of their potential or possibility, remains intrinsically limited to very conventional notions of choice.

Sullivan's interpretation of *kairos* is likely the most dynamic available to date (pun intended). For Sullivan, *kairos* is more than just timing. It is the key to unlocking the *dynamis* of the Word—*logos*, in the sense of word-strength. For Sullivan, *kairos* can be the season in which another world—often the Christian God's world—breaks into our own with a new way of organizing the symbols afloat in the universe. Thus, Sullivan describes the process of temporal and spatial re-framing that Crosby finds in King. It is precisely that opening of possibility that Sheard argues was described by Burke.

As might be clear by now, assembling a coherent theory of *kairos* involves some difficulties. For example, Sullivan differentiates between kairotic and philosophical rhetoric because it makes it more convenient to draw distinctions between the Pre-Socratic and early Christian concepts of rhetoric and the Platonic versions.³⁶ Crosby, on the other hand, laments that “if *kairos* is considered intrinsic to...rhetoric, it is vulnerable to the same dilution and globalization that rhetoric itself must negotiate.”³⁷ Instead, Crosby suggests *kairos* has independent *philosophical* (or even theological) richness and that we must understand rhetoric as in service of *kairos*, rather than vice-versa.

I suggest they are arguing the same thing—both are arguing for a *contingent* state or *event* inspired by the rhetor. Sullivan contrasts the contingency of *kairos* to the traditional metaphysical and teleological concept of capital “P” Philosophy. In contrast, Crosby suggests that when we understand *kairos* as an independent “philosophical” principle, then rhetoric becomes a means of transporting persons into *kairos*. In this state, *aletheia* (the drawing out of hidden truth) becomes possible—a truth that is outside rational deliberation. The confusion comes from two different concepts of “philosophy” at work. When Crosby advocates understanding *kairos* as an *arational* (his term) “philosophical principle,” he is not talking about

the Platonic concept of philosophy opposed by Sullivan. Realistically, rhetoric is vital to philosophy, if not the traditional Platonic sort. Heidegger remarked, “*Rhetoric is no less than the elaboration of Dasein in its concreteness, the hermeneutic of Dasein itself.*”³⁸ Nietzsche famously concluded that “truth is a mobile army of metaphors.”³⁹

In attempting to see *kairos* as an analytical tool, it is useful to dispense with some unnecessary distinctions. Both rhetoric and non-Platonic philosophy are defined by disciplinary and situational contingency. Indeed, rhetoric *relies* upon the contingency of the situation. Heidegger himself noted that timefulness was the core idea that prevented rhetoric from being limited to pure technical discipline.⁴⁰ Making such distinctions, I believe, is not all that useful. Quite a few persons, from Nietzsche, to Heidegger, to Lyotard, to de Certeau, have already criticized the attempt to find to the “proper” role of rhetoric in relationship to “true” philosophy. Second, while the perspective of *kairos* as the technique of rhetorical timing has effaced and sometimes oversimplified the concept of *kairos* as an alternative measurement, the question is not a metaphysical one. It is not a question of fact—i.e., the question *not* if one is *really* in God’s *kairo-logical* time or just in normal, plodding, “relentless” *chrono-logical* time. The question for rhetoric is one of hermeneutic interpretation, as Heidegger acknowledged. The rhetor is attempting to, as King does in Crosby’s analysis, help the audience *read the situation* so that they interpret the world differently—not according to the normal, logical possibility, but in the light of a special time, a new season. The advantage of the new season is that it radically changes what is *possible*.

Thus, as I analyze *It’s Your Time* as a representative anecdote of CPG, I will focus on seeing *kairos* as deeply linked to the contingent, situational nature of rhetoric and, as an extension of this, as a *revealing* not just of timing, but also as a kind transport, an alternative

season in which the rules of the ordinary do not apply and in which new truths can be imagined. In addition, I will focus on examining *kairos* as part of wider set of phenomena linked together in *the event* that create new possibilities (*dynamis*) in the audience. It is part of an interpretive schema used by the rhetor or brought on by the rhetor in the audience, and they are meant to serve the rhetor's purposes.

Kairos and the Flux

Time is not an easy concept to conceptualize or analyze, partially because time can be interpreted many different ways. This sub-section examines the Christian development of *kairo-logical* time and argues that rhetoric invested in a *kairo-logical* understanding time animates life by focusing on forward movement and the lack of fixed eternal destinies. Christian time is time-set-apart precisely because what happens in time matters so much.

Søren Kierkegaard thought that Greeks had time all wrong, “for Kierkegaard the Greeks do not understand time, and they lack ‘the concept of temporality.’”⁴¹ Kierkegaard believed the movement of time was an inherently Judeo-Christian concept. Greeks tended to move in reference to an eternal—the universe has no beginning and no end. Christians, in contrast, appear in a world that could be interrupted at any moment by God's final judgment, by the universal Final Battle or the death of the individual. It is a judgment of unknown portent and filled with grim possibilities. For the Christian, physical life's perfections or imperfections, virtues or sins, have eternal consequences that can be cemented at any moment. Each life, though it passes down a *chrono-logical* tunnel, is being timed by God as well, in *kairo-logical* time. Falls into sins, redemption, sinning again, and redemption: these are a repetition of a pattern that is of vital importance because we do not know the next moment—which could well be our last!

It is telling that in the ancient Greek afterlife all generally went to a shadowy semi-existence Hades. In the Christian afterlife, however, people are separated in the most radical way into eternal and ultimate pleasure or pain. For Kierkegaard, the future is clouded in the flux. Our free will has significant influence on the outcome of our lives, we know the moments of our lives matter, but we don't quite know which moments matter the most.⁴² Our lives are *not* destiny. We press forward into time *not* knowing the plan of the future, without metaphysics as a guide—we move forward (*kinesis*) in faith and *belief* (*pistis*) not exercised judgment (*krisis*). Faith demands a repetition of ethical choice in recognition of new rules, rules that defy the normal hermeneutics of the ordinary world. The kind of rhetoric that is organized toward establishing faith seeks a change of heart (*metanoia*), not deliberation over individual choices. It must proclaim a new paradigm, a new Kingdom.

A rhetoric of belief in a new Kingdom, with all its *kairo-logical* implications, requires a certain madness.⁴³ Modern life, in contrast, is not characterized by madness. When facing the daily *Erlebnisstorm*—"the storm of conscious experiences" detailed by Husserl—a modernist perspective provides secular, rationalized accounts of what is and is not possible.⁴⁴ As Buttrick and Ricoeur, and Heidegger all remind us, the age of miracles seems long past, and our time is framed by logical, mundane structure where truth is revealed in very predictable, orderly ways.⁴⁵ The rejection of the normal hermeneutic technique thus requires a certain madness; it deviates from the rationally possible and begins to privilege the *impossible*.⁴⁶ This is the state in which the *aletheia* (revealing) occurs. The rhetoric of the belief is *inspired* in the rhetor; but as the great American preacher Henry Ward Beecher aptly noted in his *Yale Lectures*, the goal of the rhetor in these cases is to pass on the aesthetic ability of the preacher to the audience—to give the audience the tools to *feel out* the truth.⁴⁷ Despite attempts to describe the madness of *kairos*

(which is, of course, its *dynamis*) as a process, all that can be said in the end is that for religionists, it *is* madness and this madness is untroubling. As Caputo declares, “The kingdom is as mad as any hatter’s party, but it is divinely mad.”⁴⁸

Kairos, the Event, and Potential

What is this state of madness? Where does it occur? In rhetoric, the *kairo-logical* conditions—by which in this case I mean the “idiosyncratic and unique” characteristics of a particular time and place—are achieved via successful *kerymga*; a poetic cry or proclamation against the status quo.⁴⁹ The rhetor proclaims a new state, a new way of seeing; the rhetor takes on and seeks to inspire a new hermeneutic of the *Erlebnisstorm*. It emerges when the rhetor convinces the audience that they exist a moment of *kairo-logical* exception, when the audience does not *judge* possibility but *believes* the *impossible*. This sub-section argues that Osteen seeks precisely this process in his rhetoric on time.

The moment is the *event*—the moment when we break free of our normal hermeneutic straight-jacket. Events are times when our vision of the situation changes, radically, via a change of heart—via *metanoia*. I believe it is the *event*, not *kairos*, which Crosby is describing as the “time-space matrix” that is achieved by the rhetor.⁵⁰ In rhetorical terms, the *event* ensues when the audience experiences the rhetor’s “hermeneutical insight and approbiation” and that insight viscerally links the audience, the preacher, and God.⁵¹ The event has a *kairo-logical* nature. It alters how we understand the situation, changes what we believe is possible. The event’s *kairo-logical* nature frees us from the constraints of the present and opens the future. It deconstructs our conception of the orderly train of events limited by conventional rules.⁵²

As a moment of *deconstruction*, rhetoric as an artistic technology “comes to presence in the realm where revealing and unconcealment take place, where *aletheia*, truth, happens.”⁵³ The

names, words, or signs of the event—in our case, the terms used in the rhetoric—are not the *whole* truth of the event. A key point of the event's deconstruction of our normal grasp of the world is the fact that hermeneutics of the event cannot be fully described—they require the madness of faith, belief that we can pass over in understanding the limitations of language, the experience of which cannot substitute for experience itself.⁵⁴ Thus, echoes of Kierkegaard: We adapt a new, radical hermeneutic that rejects our normal interpretation of the flux with unknown portent. The rhetor can *deconstruct* our conventional hermeneutic, not rationally, but by proclamation and faith. But the rhetor cannot tell the audience the future—the reading technique leaves us looking through the glass, darkly. The rhetoric of belief cannot produce knowledge (*episteme*) in the strong sense. But the audience now looks through the glass with *dynamis* of *pistis*, rather than the Enframed *logos* of conventional rules of epistemology.

The fact that the event is a *kairo-logical* moment that can pass at any time, and not an eternal state is vital. The experience of time, of the uniqueness of *our* time, is a fundamental characteristic of human life. Possibility (*dynamis*) is precisely wrapped up in the conditions of temporality.⁵⁵ Kierkegaard's argument is that nothing was possible for the Greeks because everything was eternal—movement was irrelevant. Possibility is only relevant insofar as *kinesis* is a feature of the universe. The Christian event is divinely *kairo-logical* but still the meeting of the divine and human, not merely humans milling about in the eternal divine. *Kairos* requires human action—the human must act within the event, must grasp the time-set-apart.⁵⁶ The rhetor, in carving out the *kairo-logical* space of the event, delivers possibility for the audience. It is a change of our reading of the scene, a new situation with new rules, idiosyncratic from the norm—and changes in our read of the scene can change our actions and our interpretations of the

acts of others. In this new scene—fleeting as it is, lacking a fully formed language, in opposition to what is rational—the *impossible* becomes not just probable, but necessary.

Analogy, Metaphor, and The Event

Theory thus laid out, we might wonder how about the mechanics of the *kerygma* that proclaims the *kairo-logical* event. Any effort to map the process is fraught with danger. The inspired style resists analysis. Yet we can observe some things about it. Buttrick, echoing Burke, recognizes that the poetics of *kerygma* serves as an interpretative grid that highlights some ideas and screens out others; they direct the attention to particular ideas or feelings.⁵⁷ A theme of this dissertation has been that tropes and figures are the key to connecting the mytho-poetic past to the very stark present.⁵⁸ An effective poetic-rhetoric of religion uses those figures to de-construct our expectations of what is possible in our time.⁵⁹ Crosby’s analysis, for example, reveals that King uses metaphors that link time and space to re-locate the audience away from the constraints of *physis* (nature) and *chrono-logical* frameworks.⁶⁰

The traditional hermeneutic framework of the audience—one that is limited by *chronos*, *physis*, and suspicion of mystical perspectives—is the target of the *kerygma*.⁶¹ Religionist narratives carry major advantages. The poetic framework succeeds as a sociological tool when it gives the audience a way to coherently read the narrative of the times.⁶² As Cassirer observed, the primordial human mind is primarily organized synthetically, and although it possesses significant rational powers, the mind is holistic and does not break issues into component parts. Whereas “scientific thought wishes to describe and explain reality” using a general method and is tied to analytic process, the primordial mythic mind “depends much more upon unity of feeling than upon logical rules. This unity is one of the strongest and most profound impulses of primitive thought.”⁶³ This narrative paradigm has been well-analyzed by contemporary

scholars.⁶⁴ Yet, perhaps what has been missing in recent analysis has been the fact that these figures are not *arational*, as Cassirer's argument makes clear, but *supra*-rational discourse that exceeds, not eschews or rejects, the rational—it is a deconstruction that makes certain decisions possible, not a destruction that nihilistically destroys rational analysis.⁶⁵ Hence, what in previous chapters has seemed incoherent—belief in scientific *and* demonic explanations for illness—is in fact not necessarily so.

The use of figures like analogy and metaphors—terms that compare unlike things—often offends those who believe that all rhetoric should be deliberative (rationally) persuasive, not a poetic that transcends rational boundaries to develop new possibilities.⁶⁶ I return to Burke's remark that what offends persons about the mystics is that the matching of symbols and methods of determination lack “common sense” and hence constitute a kind of “bad taste.”⁶⁷

By relying upon analogical extensions and metaphoric comparisons, those who declare mythic and mystic frameworks for reading the world specialize in “deliberate cultivation of logical disorders.”⁶⁸ Yet, given the earlier chapters on the grotesque, what could be more appropriate? Analogies and metaphors that compare our times and our experience to the mythic, *kairic* history of mystic thought carry the advantage of being non-sensically sensical. For many people, the lack of imagination and possibility in normal, modernist accounts of time and place have been deeply disappointing.⁶⁹ To that, religion offers a secret wisdom—Paul's revelation that the “foolishness” of God is greater than the “wisdom” of humans.⁷⁰

Metaphors, analogies, and poetics of time—ones that seeks to shift our reading of our current place and time—serve the purpose of making and creating possibilities. Metaphors, working on the economy of tensions between resemblance and difference, set into motion a series of connective possibilities not available in analytics.⁷¹ These connective possibilities—the

spoken question of “likeness” of analogy and the ambiguous linkage of metaphor—are perfectly suited to the mythic imagination that is key to a poetic rhetoric of belief. While the ambiguity of metaphor might trouble the concept of concrete *episteme*, its employment is one that comes naturally to us, for it is rooted in language itself. “Language is, by its very nature, metaphorical. Unable to describe things directly, it resorts to indirect modes of description, to ambiguous and equivocal terms.”⁷²

The event of *kairic* rhetoric takes hold when the tropes of time (*kairos*) against time (*chronos*) take hold in the audience. The metaphor, with its unspoken elucidation of similarity and difference, and the analogy, with its silent, synthetic supra-logic, succeed when the audience imagines that the world those metaphors and analogies outlines is, in fact, so. It occurs when the sought rhetorical *mimesis* of life’s narrative, achieved by feel more than analysis, convinces the audience to believe that this season, this time, is no ordinary time and instead a *kairic* time of *metanoia*, which is “the time of the instant, of the *Augenblick*...a transforming change of heart, putting off the old and putting on the new.”⁷³ It is *chrono-logical* time deconstructed; the rhetor succeeds in making the audience believe in something beyond its limits. The deconstructed time is *kairo-poetic*—it connects us with the mytho-poetic possibility (*dynamis*) of God as disruption of the usual.⁷⁴

One advantage held by American religious rhetors is the fact that American religion is highly individual and infused with a concept of *kairos*. From the Puritan errand to current, individuated interpretation of religion found currently, Americans have associated their own religions with the development of a “new consciousness” of possibility. The poetics of Martin Luther King’s religiously themed speeches succeed precisely because they imagined a better future and new possibilities beyond the limits of current time.⁷⁵ It succeeded because it spoke of

messianic possibility—what Derrida calls the justice-to-come.⁷⁶ Now again we are engaged in a “new age of religious searching.”⁷⁷ It remains to be seen what will be made of it.

It's Your Time! as Kairo-logos

All of this theorizing for Joel Osteen and the CPG? It is one thing to speak of the *kairological* techniques of Martin Luther King, Jr., or Sts. Paul and Augustine, but it is quite another to speak of television evangelists. Perhaps so. But Osteen, no less than any of the others, is confronting the fact that modernity has “reduced all of life to a this-worldly reality.”⁷⁸ And Osteen, no less than Paul, is attempting to give his audience a new way to read the times and the flood of signs and events in the audiences’ experiences. In section, I argue Osteen attempts to give his audience a new way of reading the signs of the times by them to their lives *kairologically*, as a special season in which they receive the favor of God and its supernatural possibilities. Though the normal frame presents signs that foretell dismal things, if the audience can change its heart and read differently, it will see good things are coming.

Osteen and Theory

Osteen is quite specifically talking about the ways current signs are deceptive and must be read differently. His goal is to create a certain kind of folk hermeneut, if that isn't quite the language he'd choose. In the opening anecdote of *It's Your Time*, Osteen remarks on the fact that signs can be deceiving, if not interpreted correctly:

While on vacation in Colorado, I woke early for a hike...At the base a sign said it should take about three hours to reach the top...About forty-five minutes into my hike, the trail got extremely steep...my legs were burning and my chest was pounding...I thought: *If there's another two hours like this, I don't know if I can make it...*Suddenly, an older gentlemen heading down the mountain came around

a curve...he read me pretty well. As we passed, he said something that changed my whole perspective. He smiled kindly and said in a calm voice: "You are closer than you think." Though the climb was difficult, I felt rejuvenated, as if he'd breathed new life into my lungs...I repeated those words of encouragement, "I will make it. I'm closer than I think." Though the climb was difficult...just ten minutes later, I clambered over these big boulders and beheld a beautiful site: the summit. According to the sign at the base, it was supposed to be three-hour hike. But I'd made it under an hour! Without [that gentlemen's] encouraging words, I might have turned around...He knew more about the trail ahead of me, just as God knows more about what lies ahead for you.⁷⁹

Osteen's project in *It's Your Time* is thus proposed: there are two ways to read the signs of the world—by conventional means, trusting what you see, or in God. Our world's signs (literally a sign in Osteen's anecdote) indicate that time will pass one way, while God indicates that time will function in another, in a way that will make what seemed impossible very possible.

Of course, Osteen's vision of the "impossible" is not the soaring justice-to-come of Derrida or the world transformed of Paul. Osteen's impossible includes things like the flourishing of a small business, a new job, inheriting land, etc.⁸⁰ On the cosmic scale Osteen's vision of the impossible is rather banal—the gargoylic mixture of divine and mundane. And perhaps banality will be Osteen's downfall, eventually. Grotesque structures like the CPG are always subject to sudden foreclosure in the light of more appealing or effective frames of acceptance. Yet Osteen's "vision" of the impossible is appealing, at the moment, precisely because it engages with what is just beyond reach instead of a heavenly world of gauze and gold an infinite distance away. As has been remarked, the prosperity gospel is engaging to many

precisely because it engages the immediate, survival interests of the poor.⁸¹ And at this moment, in the summer of 2011, many, many more Americans perceive themselves as poor than in recent memory.

Further, this dissertation's study of the rhetoric of everydayness requires significant development and application of theory. No one may cite Osteen among the sophisticated oratorical ranks of King or the kerygmatic ranks of Paul. But Osteen may end up being a cultural icon of folk religion on a grand-scale—a preacher in touch with the needs and dreams of the masses. Explaining how and why is useful. But even if Osteen never becomes iconic, analyzing Osteen is valuable because he demonstrates the continuing vitality of *kairos*, *dynamis*, and the event to the everyday religious rhetoric of the grotesque. It is not only the zenith of rhetoric that deserves sophisticated rhetorical analysis. Osteen certainly exemplifies that in our everyday-ness, we seek ways to avoid thinking of ourselves as simply “everyday.”⁸²

Osteen's Confrontation of the Physis of Chronos with the Dynamis of Kairos

In Osteen's vision, times are not good. He assesses that readers are besieged with challenges. He remarks, “A global recession has forced many to postpone their dreams and cancel their plans. You may have lost your job. You have lost your savings, maybe even your home. It could be that you have health concerns or relationship problems.”⁸³ On and on, Osteen lists the kinds of problems his readers might have face: addiction, health problems, divorce, death, poverty, and more. It suffices to say that Osteen grasps that his readers are reading his book because they face challenges.

But, Osteen remarks, these are challenges that exist solely within *our* time, not God's time, and he urges the reader to see a different interpretation:

When you feel like dying, you should talk about living. When you feel like giving up, you should talk about pressing forward...When the bottom falls out and looks like you hit an all time low...when it just can't get any worse...you don't know what God has around the corner...That is the time to put shoulders back and boldly declare: "My time is coming. I am a victor and not a victim."⁸⁴

From previous chapters, we know that Osteen's focus on how you should talk is of no small significance. By encouraging his audience to talk differently, Osteen is urging the adoption of a *kairo-logical* framework—what he calls a “moment of favor” or “seasons in which supernatural doors will open.”⁸⁵ The believer takes on a fundamental change in these seasons.⁸⁶ It is a deep change that affects their very outlook on life. It is a place where the normal rules do not function. To be “victor” instead of a “victim” is to take on an ontological change of heart. In that change of heart you can sense what others cannot:

*I can hear the sound of abundance. I can hear the sound of health. I can hear the sound of restoration. I can hear the sound of promotion. I may not be able to see it, but that's okay. I can sense it down inside. I know my set time for favor is coming. I know my hour of deliverance is on its way.*⁸⁷

It doesn't matter that the past has functioned in one way or another. “You may have struggled for years” but “this is your season.”⁸⁸ The past may be overcome in the season of favor because the very identity of the believer is changed. It is part of God's plan. Osteen says, “My friend, God has your set times for deliverance. He has your set times for favor, your set times for increase...He has it all planned out.”⁸⁹

The possibilities in Osteen's *kairo-logical* season exceed normal limitations. Moving deeply in the Christian tradition, Osteen contrasts it to past experience, rejecting the normal,

empirical basis for establishing our expectations. Consider Osteen's use of antithesis to lay out the significance of this new time, near the end of Chapter Four, "New Seasons of Increase":

"Things are shifting. You may not see how it could happen in the natural. You may not be able to explain it. But deep down inside, the seed has taken root... You have may have been rejected in the past, but you will be accepted in the future."⁹⁰

Osteen's declaration is ripe with *kairic* import. Osteen is clear that what happens in God's time of favor is beyond what has happened in the past. Osteen doesn't reject or deny the truth of the past; rather, he argues that the future is a period of change, not dictated by the past. The reasons for the change are not within the realm of explanation, Osteen notes. That's not *arational*, but *supra-rational*. Osteen does not claim that miracles will fall from the sky; merely that "blessings and favor blow into your life in ways you have never seen before."⁹¹ The rules of the natural world (*physis*) have not changed; rather something has intervened or broken into the limits that *physis* imposes. The possibilities in the *kairic* season of God's favor mean that even those things which we would not normally hope for become possibilities. In Chapter 6, "Praying Bold Prayers," Osteen encourages the reader to be bold in prayer because the new season means nothing is off-limits:

*Supersize your prayers... God wants you to ask Him for big things. Ask him for those hidden dreams planted in your heart. Ask Him even for the unborn promises that might otherwise never come to pass in the natural. Ask him to restore your broken ties to family members and other loved ones. Ask him for a life free from illness. Ask him for a full blossoming of your talents. Ask Him to fulfill your highest hopes and dreams.*⁹²

“The natural” is again contrasted to God’s season. The natural is not bad, just limited. Osteen encourages his audience to use these “other times” to “get ready, to sharpen our skills, to deepen our knowledge, to prepare ourselves.”⁹³ But in the *kairic* season, all things are possible. Osteen encourages the reader to re-read the situation, to re-consider what God is capable of doing. Osteen laments that most persons fail to get the attention of God because they “don’t want to appear greedy.”⁹⁴ They limit God because their imagination is limited. Osteen remarks, “God is limited only by our thinking.”⁹⁵ Thus, most persons reach what they perceive to be their limits and stop, because that’s all they’ve come to expect—they negotiate their interpretations of the future based upon the past.⁹⁶

But Osteen is decrying a phenomenology of the future that is based in the limits of past experience. He opposes the naturalistic, empirical phenomenology that is based entirely in synthetic extrapolations of past events toward the future. That reading of events puts very little into the hands of human agency. As a rhetorical mode, it is weak in *dynamis*. This “natural” phenomenological scheme—the casual empirical phenomenology of life’s events—is connected to *chronos*. Osteen believes that as long as the audience members see themselves as existing in the normal flow of events, as long as they believe that past experience is a guideline for the future, they will be “stuck” in mediocrity. As long as *chronos* reigns, opportunities will be missed. That is the unfortunate limit of being creatures limited by “the natural” (*physis*). *Dynamis* is merely as it appears: conventional, predictable, and determined by the forces of history and chance.

For Osteen, it’s particularly poisoning because, in his vision, the individual has much control over God that is denied by the determinism of the natural world. For Osteen, as for the entire CPG, seeing is a kind of believing, and believing has strong control over the future. In

Chapter 11, “God Can Turn Back Time,” Osteen argues that in God’s season the basic limits of past, present, and future no longer apply: “God controls time. For every opportunity you’ve missed, every chance you’ve blown, God can turn back the clock and bring bigger and better things across your path.”⁹⁷ Of course, Osteen is not arguing for physical time travel. He is declaring that the lost opportunities in the past will re-appear in the future, that God can “reset the clock of your life” so that missed opportunities will not deplete the total opportunities of life.⁹⁸

There are at least two kinds of *kairos* at work for Osteen. *Kairos* is a “season” of favor and specific *kairic* opportunities. In God’s “season” of favor, there occur specific moments or opportunities that can be taken advantage of. What sorts of opportunities? What kind of possibilities does God’s *kairos* engender? Osteen’s illustrations of the power of *kairos* fit his health and prosperity model. In *It’s Your Time*, more than any of his previous books, Osteen uses examples from celebrity personalities, using their lives as models for believing that God can change the direction of a life. Osteen cites Colonel Harland Sanders, creator of *Kentucky Fried Chicken*, as a person who repeatedly faced struggles and overcame them, understanding that “God is a God of restoration.” Sanders’ success came late in life, and Osteen intones, “For a long time, life seemed to treat Harland Sanders harshly...But God knows how to turn back time.”⁹⁹

Some examples are clearly monetarily oriented. Early in the book, Osteen temptingly cites Mel Fisher’s 1985 discovery of a Spanish galleon filled with gold as an example of God’s *kairic* favor after much struggle.¹⁰⁰ He cites former NBA player Dikembe Mutumbo’s career and wealth as an indication of the way God enabled Mutumbo to fulfill his dream of using medicine to benefit his native country of Zaire, not as a doctor as Mutumbo originally imagined, but as the founder of a hospital there—to which Osteen notes Mutumbo donated \$15 million to build.¹⁰¹

Non-celebrity characters also serve to illustrate Osteen's point. John, a character cited in Chapter 12, "You Have Comeback Power," lands a job "for an even better salary," as a digital media manager after being laid off from the beleaguered newspaper industry because he recognizes the opportunities God gives him. In contrast, Osteen mentions that John's less hermeneutically-astute colleagues go on unemployment.¹⁰²

Osteen encourages his audience to "Be a Bounce-Back Person" (the title of chapter 13)—and he moves with a sense of urgency. The limits of the natural do not apply to those who have faith in God. Osteen urges his audience, "Now is the time to release your faith. *Right now*. God is working in your life. *Right now*. God is arranging things in your favor. *Right now*."¹⁰³ Seizing the moment of *kairos* releases another enduring *kairos*. Power is released when the audience releases reliance on conventional interpretative methods: "Maybe you do not understand how your life could be restored. 'Joel, I don't see how it could happen. I've been through too much.' Rest assured, you don't have to know how. Just know Him. All we have to do is believe."¹⁰⁴

Speaking directly of contemporary financial concerns, Osteen remarks:

Maybe you lost some when the stock market went down. I heard someone say, "Our 401(k)s were turned into 201(k)s." Listen, you need to start planning your coming-out-of-debt party. It may not look like it in the natural, but we serve a supernatural God.

"Well, Joel. Have you seen the stock market?"

"Yes, but have you seen our God? He is the Lord our Provider"...I'm happy to report the economy in Heaven is doing just fine. Don't plan on having a 201(k), but how about a 601(k), or a 1201(k)?..The Scripture says, "Lift up your head...that the King of glory will come in."¹⁰⁵

Other examples reflect the Christian Prosperity Gospel's concern with health. Osteen cites "Chris," who miraculously recovered from a third bout of cancer using an experimental drug at least partially, Osteen declares, because Chris refused to see the "dark" signs of a nearly untreatable cancer as a reason to break. Instead, Chris declared that God's season of favor meant you "will not be defeated or depressed. You will be stronger, healthier, increased and promoted!"¹⁰⁶ Kyle, also sick with cancer, creates a miraculous number of needed white blood cells for chemotherapy by declaring that God would cure him. In fact, instead of resting to prepare for chemotherapy, Kyle "worked out on the treadmill and with weights every day."¹⁰⁷

Most cases fit into these two categories—benefits that are gained in either terms of financial benefit or psychological or health benefits. In all these areas, whatever is possible in "the natural" is nothing compared to what Osteen asserts is easily possible in the supernatural. In this new *kairic* season, the *dynamis* of the believer is dramatically expanded, "This is a new day... You will get the breaks you may feel are undeserved. Problems you've dealt with for years will suddenly disappear... God... will bring you out laughing, full of joy, full of faith, full of victory! It's time to trust."¹⁰⁸

As I hope I have adequately demonstrated, the terms Osteen uses are not coincidental. Osteen is actively engaged in a critique of the limits of "the natural" (*physis*) and our attitude that this time is quite ordinary (*chrono-logical*). In its place, he engages a kerygmic rhetoric that declares that there is a new "supernatural" season of God (*kairos*) filled with opportunity (another form of *kairos*). In God's new season, the limits of *physis* on our health and on our financial *dynamis* fall away—the potential power of God exceeds all our normal interpretation. Those who benefit from this season are those who reject the normal reading of the "signs of the

times” and instead see things from a *kairic* perspective. As Osteen indicates, what *seems* like a “*setback* is really a *setup* for a great *comeback*.”

Hermeneutics, Poetics and the Kairic Change of Heart

For non-religionists and religionists of more traditional theological persuasions, Osteen’s preaching is likely troubling. Osteen builds his case using deductive arguments from Scripture, inductive arguments from examples of faith succeeding, and analogical arguments from assembled anecdotes or accounts. But few of his arguments would pass many tests of evidence, and Osteen would win no accolades from argumentation scholars. Certainly, Osteen understands Craddock’s point that American religious audiences are well adapted to the poetic processes of analogical and inductive reasoning.¹⁰⁹ But even considering that point, given the surfeit of evidence against his points, it is sometimes hard to understand how Osteen’s positions are persuasive. In this section, I address the way Osteen argues that those who interpret the world in faith will receive a change of heart that will enable them to see the true *dynamis* of God’s plan.

It is useful to consider Osteen as a rhetor engaged in a particular poetic—an emotive, illustrative proclamation of a new season momentarily—rather than as a deliberative rhetor. These proclamations appeal to the yearning of the audience—they provide symbolic schemas that help the audience cope with their situations. Osteen’s poetics, engaged as they are in the gritty challenges of the middle- and lower-class and their dreams of happiness, health and material prosperity, provide the potential energy missing from the actualized events (*energiea*) of the ordinary world. As Caputo argues, a poetics is “an evocative discourse that articulates the event, while a logic is a normative discourse governing entities (real and possible), which can or do instantiate its propositions.”¹¹⁰ The logical tests of argument govern the possibility of the

world, a poetic explicates the belief that possibility exists beyond the world—i.e., that our impossible desires are possible despite signs to the contrary. Poetic interrupts the limits of the possible via the event, with its *kairo-logical* nature. It is the symbolic discourse of a supra-rational time.

Among such poets, Osteen may not be St. Augustine, another religionist who wanted his audience to view the signs of the universe very differently in *De civitate Dei* and whose cries in *Confessions* have captured imaginations in three millennia. But Osteen is no less a poet for being somewhat less transcendent in his appeal. Indeed, his “knack” derives from tapping into the particular frustrations with limitations of a certain place and time. Understanding his rhetoric requires that we understand the “foolishness” of Osteen’s arguments, the paradoxes that they constantly inveigh, the logical disorder that Osteen blithely lays all about his preaching.

Osteen does not emphasize rational or empirical argument. His deductive conclusions about what the Scriptures dictate, in establishing inductive cases, and even in analogics, understood literally as the one-to-one logical comparison power of analogy, are only sketches at best and downright dubious at times. But Osteen is strong in *metaphoricity*. Osteen’s analogical examples, his narratives, and even his descriptions of Scripture function less significantly as demonstrations of formal logical categories than as poetic disclosure, which, by the power of enthymeme and the comparison of likeness, draw out the character of the things. That’s the unique power of *logos* (understood as speech, not logic): disclosure. Heidegger remarks, “*Logos* does not mean judgment...*Logos* lets something be seen (*phainsethai*), names what is being talked about...Speech ‘lets us see.’”¹¹¹ David Halliburton, considering these very passages by Heidegger, describes how the poetic is a particular *logos* that reveals what is hidden, “Truth or *aletheia* consists in being brought forth from hiddenness...[now quoting Heidegger] ‘the entities

of which one is talking must be taken out of their hiddenness; one must let be seen as something unhidden (*alethes*); that is, they be *discovered*.”¹¹² Fred B. Craddock, applying Heidegger’s work to the preaching field, concludes that language is the building block of Being. The poetic language of preaching can be a discovery or revealing through which listeners constitute the world and themselves.¹¹³

Hence, Osteen’s examples, stories, etc. all serve the purpose of *drawing* out truth—allowing the audience to see themselves in the situation. Osteen’s techniques, from his citation of Hezekiah in the OT as an example someone who “entered a new season, a season of increase” by negotiating a longer, more profitable life from God to his assertion that all people carry the supernatural DNA of God, create a series of incidents, events, testimonies, accounts, analogies, parables, and more that work to flesh out his vision of the world.¹¹⁴ Each story is organized to argue that there are no coincidences—only God’s plan.¹¹⁵ Although normal analysis would find that Osteen’s ‘super natural’ events probably have natural explanations or are fictional entirely, the poetic format that he is engaged in is intrinsically deconstructive of that kind of rational analysis. The limits of a normal deliberative rhetoric of *krisis* lacks vital *pathotic* elements that Osteen exploits to full benefit. Osteen’s poetic speech thus seeks to assist the audience to *draw out* truth and seeks a very Aristotlean goal—the audience as Being-moved, not as a part of their rational psyches, but as visceral, emotional reaction to the speaker.¹¹⁶ Indeed, a modernist interpretative framework that would explain the safe landing of US Airways Flight 1549 in the Hudson River as a combination of dumb luck and pilot skill rather than as “living proof of God’s grace,” is hardly satisfying as an empowering or invigorating piece of equipment for living, especially when looking toward an economic future that is, under that modernist frame, largely determined by social, political and market forces outside the audience’s control.¹¹⁷

To that, Osteen offers an alternative: “Sometimes there is no logical solution. Sometimes there is no way out in the natural... Understand this: Just because you don’t see a way doesn’t mean that God doesn’t have a way.”¹¹⁸ The event of rhetoric occurs when the rhetor succeeds in the poetic attempts to help the audience to *discover* what is hidden. The metaphor that the poetic aids one to see, not judge, to *uncover and discover*, is apt. Osteen wants his audience to see with new eyes and discover a new truth, revealed via “hopeful messages” that will give you a “new vision” for a “new season.”¹¹⁹ “The goal is not simply to inspire and motivate you, but also to help you see that God’s plan is at work in your life.”¹²⁰ Osteen emphasizes that the power to change, to see things anew, lies with the individual, arguing frequently that the limits of life are created by *choices* to interpret events in limited ways. What it takes is a choice to “Believe that *today* God will do something great. *Today* God will open supernatural doors. Have a *now* mentality.”¹²¹

Augustine remarked that teaching was rooted in the proper interpretation of the meanings of signs.¹²² Not less for Osteen, who argues that the believer must “*Follow the signs to your best place.*”¹²³ Such a reading of signs is aesthetic for “if you don’t have peace about it, it’s not right for you.”¹²⁴ Yet, Osteen knows that there *is* a right thing out there for “God has already lined up your moments of favor.”¹²⁵ Grabbing these opportunities is a question of hermeneutics, being able to read the times. Referring to his own hermeneutic acuity, Osteen remarks, “For us, there is a window of opportunity to step out in faith. I recognize signs and patterns in my own life... I’ve caught the wings of God’s favor. I’m riding God’s own jet stream.”¹²⁶ Problems occur when we cannot read the signs; “Too often... we miss opportunities because we don’t recognize it’s our season. You need to recognize the winds in your life.”¹²⁷

The Being-moved sense of Osteen’s poetic rhetoric—his emphasis that each of us exists in a particular *kairic* period with *dynamic* implications—thus has the goal of teaching. Osteen would have us know the following: proper hermeneutic technique is vital to understand that we are in the vital season of God’s favor and to seize the particular super-natural opportunities that occur in that season. This hermeneutic technique is aesthetic, *pathos*-oriented—a matter of feeling, not logic.¹²⁸ Used properly, this hermeneutic will reveal God’s central plan. It’s poetically interpretive, in the sense that it is a question of interpreting the events around us in a way that is consistent with a particular worldview—like Burke, Osteen strongly indicates that a proper hermeneutic technique is a matter of *attitude*.

But teaching is not the only goal. The “topsy-turvy” theo-poetics of Osteen’s universe, in which God causes the wind to blow a little less so that Osteen gets a little less tired on a run, or gives a young farm girl a calf with her first initial written in its fur, or where stock portfolio performances, promotions, and sales revenues are directly dictated by God rather than by natural or human processes, is rooted in a desire to believe, to imagine that something besides the natural is possible. But desire isn’t enough. The event requires the change of heart, the *metanoia*, the mud of Christ that allows the blind to see. Osteen repeatedly emphasizes that God only blesses those who commit themselves—those who declare health despite being near death, those who declare verbal victory over illness, addiction, or poverty, those who find the victory of life in the death of a loved one, those who agree that “Weeping may endure for the night, but I know a secret: joy is coming in the morning.”¹²⁹ Repeatedly Osteen remarks that God “can’t move in your life” unless you have full faith.¹³⁰ Closing out the book, Osteen declares, “When you truly believe, it sets a series of events in motion...God...is directing your steps, causing you to be in the right place at the right time.”¹³¹ Being-moved, then, isn’t just being entertained by Osteen or

finding motivation. Instead, Being-moved is the moving forward, the faith that enables a vision, a “revelation,” a hermeneutics that the audience can use to draw out (*alethia*) a truth that can deconstruct the limits that prevent *kairic dynamis* of each person.¹³² That faith requires an understanding that *dynamis* is always potential, always to-come, as Derrida would say, or as Osteen would say no matter where you are your “best days are ahead.”¹³³

The Limited Dynamis of a Materialist Kairos

All religions serve the purpose of world-building, of serving to orient the person toward the world.¹³⁴ The question of religion’s deconstructive power has to do with its ability to interrupt the traditional interpretive schema of the world. Early in *De civitate dei*, Augustine declares, “The saints lose nothing by being deprived of temporal goods.”¹³⁵ With Rome sacked, the Empire crumbling, and the barbarians at the gates, Augustine argued that, “If those who lost their lost their earthly riches...had possessed them the spirit thus described to them by one who was outwardly poor but inwardly rich...he would be enriched in his mind by close attendance to God’s will; nor would he grieve if deprived in life of those possessions which he would soon have to leave behind in death.”¹³⁶ Augustine’s emphasis on the goods of heaven and the power of God’s will was an attack on the pagan charge that Rome’s material fall was a sign of divine displeasure. It changed the very meaning of signs and what it means to be “rich” in relation to God. God’s city existed outside of the *chronos* of a world ruled by *physis* and in its *kairo-logical* reckoning deconstructed pagans’ interpretation of the meaning of Rome’s decline.

In many ways, Osteen is facing a much smaller version of the same challenge facing Augustine. Osteen must convince his audience that the decline of material prosperity does not indicate anything about God’s favor. Unfortunately, despite all that I have said about the way Osteen’s hermeneutic vision changes the audience’s interpretative frame, Augustine’s

deconstructive poetic *dynamis* can hardly be ascribed to Osteen's vision of the universe in *It's a Better You*. Osteen may urge his audience to consider a world in which the current limitations do not apply, but his fundamental frame remains one of *material* profitability—wealth, health, happiness—something that it should be noted that Christ's Apostles sorely lacked. In fact, Osteen's task is, in one way, trickier than Augustine's task (bear with me). Whereas Augustine rejected material signs of God's favor, citing Paul, Osteen must simultaneously persuade his audience that current material signs indicate nothing about God's favor, yet instill the idea that belief will provide positive, material signs of God's favor.

It isn't that Osteen book isn't poetic or deconstructive. It is rather that the *metanoia* that Osteen calls for is only a challenge to the *process* of maintaining materialist goods. In "the natural" (*physis*), material prosperity is determined by forces of nature, chance, luck, with some input from persons. In Osteen's *kairo-logical* scheme, God rigs these machinations for those with favor. Osteen, as a representative of the loosely affiliated prosperity gospelists, alters this schema only by adding significantly to the degree of God's direct intervention in the process of material accumulation and decreasing the emphasis on hard work. Osteen, while perhaps mystifying the process of accumulation and profit, mostly serves to stabilize the fundamental goal of material and emotional security in modern life. The *dynamis* of Osteen's hermeneutics is trapped with the goals of modernism.

In a full *metanoia*, "another" truth is drawn forth—one that challenges our conventional methods of organizing the world. The *alethieaic* truth will cause "the belief or practices, the texts or institutions, that have been entrusted with that truth to tremble!"¹³⁷ This "other" truth challenges not just our vision of *physis* but the very controlling terms of our frames—it challenges what Kenneth Burke would call the "God-terms"—the ultimate motivations.¹³⁸

Osteen challenges few God-terms. His dialectical pairs (victor/victim, positive/negative attitudes, cursed/blessed, mediocrity/expectancy, natural/supernatural) all work toward the idea that God wants the audience to “prosper,” “increase,” to gain “promotion.” These terms are ambiguous enough for Osteen to plead that he means internal enrichment as well as material enrichments, but such transcendence by ambiguity is belied by his citations of financial gain and health miracles. Far too many of Osteen’s examples involve people gaining profitable jobs, business opportunities, backyard swimming pools, or sudden fortunes for Osteen to claim a focus on a challenging, spiritual enrichment. For Osteen, *dynamis* is mainly limited to the parameters of the American dream—a fact that has not gone unnoticed among either conservative or liberal religionists.¹³⁹ As Stephanie Y. Mitchem has noted, it is a pretty sharp limitation on the transformative power of religion to focus on satisfying the personal dreams of each individual.¹⁴⁰

That being said, all religions—perhaps even all worldviews, even the most deconstructive—carry the whiff of metaphysics. The powerful poetics of Augustine’s *Confessions* are followed up by some pretty raw metaphysics of the universe. The fact that Osteen’s hermeneutic follows up its deconstruction of the normal limits of *physis* and *chronos* with a vision of world rigged for the profit of the faithful should not undermine the significance of Osteen’s means. Even Osteen’s failure to challenge the core overarching goals of modernist, material accumulation and his movement within the Protestant tradition of the profitability of faith should not dissuade us of the value of studying his work. Indeed, it has been a theme of this dissertation to contrast the ways that the CPG simultaneously challenges and resists modernism while embracing its dream of a humanistic, material paradise.

Instead of focusing on Osteen’s rhetoric of metaphysics I’ve focused on the post-structural, deconstructive forces at work—efforts that provide strong challenges to conventional

notions of how the universe functions while simultaneously serving to secure the fundamental God-terms or core *entelechies* of modern capitalism. Osteen's work is a challenge to the grim, modernist realities of economic decline and the limits of the American dream. Osteen's hermeneutics of the event, *kairo-logical* and meant to provide the audience with new visions of *dynamis*, focuses on what God makes possible within very materialist dreams, rather than what socio-economic circumstances dictate. Osteen's work uses theological terms to deconstruct the science (*physis*) of capitalism while affirming its core profit motive.

Taken from a rational, deliberative perspective, such an interpretive framework might not be perceived as coherent. But rational coherence is not the goal of *kerygma*. The goal of such *kairo-logical* rhetorics is to change the rules, to create a poetic framework that focuses on belief (*pistis*), rather than judgment (*krisis*). The power of these rhetorics of belief should not be underestimated.

Conclusion: The Spirit of *Kairos* in Rhetorical Criticism

As I have hopefully demonstrated, *kairos* is both far more meaningful and also more limited than previous scholars have noted. It *does* mean "right-timing" and it is useful to interpret it that way. But it also means far more; its theological origins cannot be ignored. In my earlier review of extant theory on *kairos*, I noted a tendency by scholars to consider *kairos* or the *kairo-logical* season as end itself. Instead, I suggest that rhetorical scholars begin to see the relationship of *kairos* to a variety of other key concepts, including possibility/potential (*dynamis*), revealing (*aletheia*), and the radical change of heart (*metanoia*). I've tried to situate the function of *kairos*—always necessarily slippery—within hermeneutics, *kerygma*, and poetics and have contrasted its function in those areas to its function to the *kairos* of deliberative

rhetorics oriented toward judgment. By putting it in the context of these particular areas, I think I've addressed some of the concern that *kairos* might get spread too thin.

I have also attempted to demonstrate the depth of *kairos*. I've argued that it has radical power to shape the way individuals see and represent the world. *Kairos*'s ability to shift the interpretative frame, that is to say, to break into or even break apart our normal hermeneutic schema, is significant. *Kairos* can transport the audience to another place and help us reframe what's possible. While it perhaps has not been useful to conflate *kairos* or *kairo*-logical seasons with what *kairos* makes possible (*dynamis*, *aletheia*), that *kairos* is a critical intervention in our normal framework is extremely significant. To exploit this significance in rhetorical analysis, I suggest greater focus on the *dynamis* of various *kairo*-logical shifts. The immediate purpose of rhetoric might be strongly related to its ability to adapt to the situation in *kairos*, but an advantage of *kairos* is the potentialities it opens to the rhetor and the audience.

It's possible that the idea that *kairos* would be a "deconstructive" force in rhetoric will strike many as strange. *Kairos*, or the adjustable timeliness of any rhetoric or any hermeneutic interpretation of time, is such a fundamental part of rhetoric's adaptability that the concept of linking to the term "deconstruction" seems to confuse the conservative with the radical. In response, I can only say that Heidegger's insight into rhetoric, included in this analysis and extended by many theorists, seems to indicate that rhetoric has intrinsically deconstructive qualities. What serves the audience or the occasion is always in flux because the world itself is always in flux and each person's interpretation of that world is also in flux. Rhetoric resists disciplinary Laws precisely because it must be attuned to what resonates in the concrete moment, not in metaphysical absolutes. Despite our tendency to create rules and establish the laws of genre, rhetoric's immediacy demands that it invest itself in Being-there rather than in

abstractions. All our ideas of what constitutes good rhetoric are historically, culturally, temporally, and in other ways, contingent. Rhetoric is useful—yet what is “useful” is itself contingent, ensuring that “pragmatic” attempts to define metaphysics of good rhetoric (irony good deconstructionists can appreciate) are useless.¹⁴¹ Rhetoric, as art, is intrinsically pragmatic because it is always invested in the *right time*.

Joel Osteen’s *It’s Your Time* goes a long way to demonstrate the deconstructive forces in the function time. Osteen attempts to teach his audience—an audience of very average Americans—a hermeneutic technique that deconstructs the normal limitations of rationalist or empirical interpretation of the universe. It is *kerygma* in the truest sense. Utilizing a variety of concepts of time, and contrasting the future of a person in the natural (*physis*) and ordinary time (*chronos*) to the to-come possibilities (*dynamis*) of each person in God’s season (*kairos*), Osteen attempts to inspire a coming together of feeling that will draw out a certain truth (*aletheia*)—God’s truth—that has been hidden until now.

There is no doubt that Osteen’s poetics are sometimes trite, clichéd, and shallow. The deep limits of his deconstructive efforts are readily apparent. Yet Osteen’s work is clearly convincing to many. Perhaps what Smith indicates about the prosperity Gospels is true—their work appeals because it recalls that Christianity must be engaged in the daily struggles and hopes, including the very material hopes, of the people—a fact often forgotten in the theological speculations and pro-scriptions regarding a detached God living in an ethereal Heaven somewhere.¹⁴²

Perhaps most of all, Osteen’s work demonstrates that the most public of proclamatory rhetorics are well-steeped in deconstructive hermeneutics, an altered perception of time, radical changes of frame (the *metanoia*) and questions of expanded possibility through expanded

interpretation (*dynamis*) and the revealing of new, poetic truths. Though Osteen does not use post-structural academia's rarefied terms, he is certainly at work in its concepts, teaching them to his audience and attempting to convince them of the efficacy of his interpretive framework.

Earlier chapters addressed the prosperity gospel hermeneutics of the Scripture. For his part, Osteen demonstrates that the prosperity gospel is also about giving the audience a hermeneutics for the world. Heading toward the final chapter, which examines Osteen's use of the psychological idiom in his preaching, it is vital to consider Osteen's use of time as a part of that process. The idea that one can emerge into a new world if one only correctly reads the signs certainly has therapeutic benefits—and religion as therapy is a special focus of the Christian Prosperity Gospel.

¹ Osteen's advance for *It's Your Time* is rumored to be more than eight figures; Warren Cole Smith and Rusty Leonard, "Base Royalties," *WORLD Magazine*, December 5, 2009, accessed 11/20/2010. <http://www.worldmag.com/articles/16117>.

² Joel Osteen, *It's Your Time: Activate Your Faith, Achieve Your Dreams, and Increase in God's Favor* (New York: Free Press, 2009), vii. Opportunity is a definition of *kairos* provided by John Poulakos, "Toward a Sophistic Definition of Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 16 (1983), 39.

³ "Season" is just one of many translations of *kairos*. Since Osteen uses the term "season," it seems an apt choice for this immediate purpose; see Dale Sullivan, "Kairos and the Rhetoric of Belief," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 78 (1992): 317.

⁴ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 18.

⁵ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 27.

⁶ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 25.

⁷ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 18; italics and punctuation in original.

⁸ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 43.

⁹ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 168.

¹⁰ Poulakos, "Toward," 35-48; Cynthia Miecznikowski Sheard, "Kairos and Kenneth Burke's Psychology of Political and Social Communication," *College English* 55 no. 3 (1993): 291-310; James Kinneavy, "Kairos: A Neglected Concept in Classical Rhetoric," in *Rhetoric and Praxis*, edited by Jean Dietz Moss (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 85-87.

¹¹ James Kinneavy, qtd. in Roger Thompson, "Kairos Revisited: An Interview with James Kinneavy," *Rhetoric Review* 19 (2000): 80.

¹² Richard Benjamin Crosby, "Kairos as God's Time in Martin Luther King Jr.'s Last Sunday Sermon," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 39 (2009): 262-263.

¹³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 143.

¹⁴ Sullivan, "Kairos," 326.

¹⁵ "In deconstruction, our lives, our beliefs, and our practices are not destroyed but forced to reform and reconfigure...In the new Testament this is called *metanoia*...Our hearts are turned inside out not by a vandal but an angel or evangel of the *truth*." John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 27.

¹⁶ Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984): 33-34.

¹⁷ In this sense, *kairos* is much like other Greek terms. *Logos*, for example, is well known for its multiple, simultaneously useful meanings.

¹⁸ Crosby, "Kairos," 262.

¹⁹ Crosby, "Kairos," 277.

²⁰ Crosby, "Kairos," 277.

²¹ Kinneavy, *Kairos*, 104.

²² Thompson, "Kairos Revisited," 74.

²³ Kinneavy, qtd. by Thompson, "Kairos Revisited," 75.

²⁴ Kinneavy, qtd. by Thompson, "Kairos Revisited," 77-78.

²⁵ Kinneavy, *Kairos*, 87-89; Kinneavy, qtd. by Thompson, "Kairos Revisited," 84.

²⁶ James L. Kinneavy and Catherine R. Eskin, "Kairos in Aristotle's Rhetoric," *Written Communication* 17 (2000): 432-444.

²⁷ Kinneavy, qtd. by Thompson, “*Kairos* Revisited,” 78.

²⁸ Sheard, “*Kairos* and Kenneth Burke’s,” 292.

²⁹ Sheard, “*Kairos*,” 293; Jacques Derrida, *Plato’s Pharmacy*, in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 71-72.

³⁰ Sheard, “*Kairos*,” 293.

³¹ Crosby, “*Kairos*,” 262.

³² Sheard, “*Kairos*,” 300.

³³ Edward Schiappa, “Sophistic Rhetoric: Oasis or Mirage?” *Rhetoric Review* 10 (1991), 5-18. Schiappa argues that there was probably not a historical “sophistic rhetoric” or a coherent concept of ‘rhetoric’ at all prior to Plato. Schiappa believes the concept of coherent theory of sophistic rhetoric may, in fact, be an ex post facto scholarly construction.

³⁴ Poulakos, “Toward,” 36.

³⁵ Poulakos, “Toward,” 46.

³⁶ Sullivan, “*Kairos*,” 324.

³⁷ Crosby, “*Kairos*,” 264.

³⁸ Martin Heidegger, qtd. in Daniel Gross, “Being Moved: The Pathos of Heidegger’s Rhetorical Ontology,” in *Heidegger and Rhetoric*, ed. Daniel M. Gross and Angsar Kemman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 1.

³⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense,” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1976) 46-47.

⁴⁰ Nancy S. Struever, “Allgählichkeit, Timefulness, in the Heideggerian Program,” in *Heidegger and Rhetoric*, 106.

⁴¹ John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 15.

⁴² Caputo, *Radical*, 18.

⁴³ Sullivan, “*Kairos*,” 317.

⁴⁴ Caputo, *Radical*, 37.

⁴⁵ David Buttrick, *Preaching Jesus Christ: An Exercise in Homiletic Theology* (United States of America: Fortress Press, 1988), 20; Paul Ricoeur, "The Language of Faith," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, ed. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 227; Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper Perennial, 1977), 13-14,

⁴⁶ John D. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 220-221.

⁴⁷ Henry Ward Beecher, *Yale Lectures on Preaching* (New York: J.B. Ford and Co: 1872), 4. I examine this subject more closely in Michael Souders, "'Truthing it in love': Henry Ward Beecher's Homiletic Theories of Truth, Beauty, Love, and the Christian Faith," in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, forthcoming.

⁴⁸ John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 17. I ascribe "madness" to the supra-rational. And yet even the sober, skeptical Socrates knew that the power of the word, logos, had to be invented in a state of madness. Sullivan, "*Kairos*," 319.

⁴⁹ Robert R.N. Ross, "Hegel, Tillich, and the Theology of Culture: A Response to Prof. Thomas," in ed. John J. Carey, *Kairos and Logos: Studies in the Roots and Implications of Tillich's Theology* (United States: Mercer University Press, 1984), 207.

⁵⁰ Crosby, "*Kairos*," 277.

⁵¹ Robert Reid, Jeffrey Bullock, and David Fleer, "Preaching as the Creation of an Experience: The Not-So-Rational Revolution of the New Homiletic," *The Journal of Communication and Religion* 18 (1995), 2.

⁵² Caputo, *The Weakness*, 4.

⁵³ Heidegger, "The Question," 13.

⁵⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Force and Signification," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 9.

⁵⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 281.

⁵⁶ Raymond F. Bulman, "Theonomy and Technology: A Study in Tillich's Theology of Culture," in Carey, 229-230.

⁵⁷ David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 8; Kenneth Burke, "Terministic Screens," *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 44-45.

⁵⁸ Paul Ricoeur, "The Language of Faith," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, eds. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 223.

⁵⁹ Ricoeur, "The Language," 224-225. The historical distinction between the rhetoric, grammar, poetic, is found in many places, but is also found here: Burke, "Poetics in Particular, Language in General," *Language*, 28.

⁶⁰ Crosby, "*Kairos*," 272-273.

⁶¹ Paul Ricoeur, "The Critique of Religion," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, 213.

⁶² Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History* (Berkeley: University of California, 1984), 19-30.

⁶³ Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 81.

⁶⁴ Walter Fisher, "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument," *Communication Monographs* 51 (1984): 1-22.

⁶⁵ Sullivan, "*Kairos*," 317.

⁶⁶ Some might be offended by my bleeding together of rhetoric and poetics. In my defense, I can only refer to Burke's caution against trying to draw too sharp of a distinction between the two. See, Kenneth Burke, "Rhetoric and Poetics," *Language as Symbolic Action*, 306-307.

⁶⁷ Burke, *Permanence*, 110.

⁶⁸ Burke, *Permanence*, 110.

⁶⁹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 507.

⁷⁰ Caputo, *The Weakness*, 49.

⁷¹ Ricoeur, *The Rule*, 6.

⁷² Cassirer, *An Essay*, 109.

⁷³ Caputo, *The Weakness*, 150.

⁷⁴ Caputo, *The Weakness*, 156, 151.

⁷⁵ Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Updated Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 249.

⁷⁶ John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 178; Jacques Derrida. "For a Justice to Come: An Interview with Jacques Derrida." Interview with Lieven De Caeter, in *The Derrida-Habermas Reader*, ed. Lasse Thomassen (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 268-269.

⁷⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 535.

⁷⁸ David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 147.

⁷⁹ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 3-4.

⁸⁰ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 5, 88, 114.

⁸¹ James K.A. Smith, "What's Right with the Prosperity Gospel?" *Calvin Theological Seminary Forum* (Fall, 2009), 8-9. <http://www.calvinseminary.edu/pubs/forum/09fall.pdf#page=8>, accessed November 12, 2010.

⁸² Heidegger, *Being*, 287.

⁸³ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 5.

⁸⁴ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 23.

⁸⁵ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 32, 45.

⁸⁶ "God is limited by our beliefs. I'm asking you to believe things are shifting in your favor." Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 45.

⁸⁷ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 51-52.

⁸⁸ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 54.

⁸⁹ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 51.

⁹⁰ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 54.

⁹¹ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 54.

⁹² Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 70-71.

⁹³ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 33.

⁹⁴ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 70.

⁹⁵ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 88.

⁹⁶ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 43.

⁹⁷ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 131.

⁹⁸ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 133.

⁹⁹ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 135.

¹⁰⁰ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 7.

¹⁰¹ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 76-78.

¹⁰² Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 141.

¹⁰³ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 175.

¹⁰⁴ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 134.

¹⁰⁵ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 162.

¹⁰⁶ Osteen, 156-7.

¹⁰⁷ Osteen, 146.

¹⁰⁸ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 244.

¹⁰⁹ Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 134; see also, Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority: Essays on Inductive Preaching* (Enid: The Phillips University Press, 1974), 72-74.

¹¹⁰ Caputo, *The Weakness*, 103.

¹¹¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 32/28. Heidegger notes earlier that *logos* is usually understood as “judgment.”

¹¹² David Halliburton, *Poetic Thinking: An Approach to Heidegger* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1981), 12.

¹¹³ Craddock, *As One*, 37.

¹¹⁴ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 52-53, 56.

¹¹⁵ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 257.

¹¹⁶ Gross, “Introduction,” 13.

¹¹⁷ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 81.

¹¹⁸ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 299.

¹¹⁹ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, xi.

¹²⁰ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, xii.

¹²¹ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 175.

¹²² Saint Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R.P.H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 8-9.

¹²³ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 282.

¹²⁴ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 283.

¹²⁵ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 37.

¹²⁶ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 37-38.

¹²⁷ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 38.

¹²⁸ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 280.

¹²⁹ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 201.

¹³⁰ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 253.

¹³¹ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 298, 301.

¹³² "Revelation" is the word used by Osteen (301) as well as Caputo, Sullivan, and Crosby.

¹³³ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, xi, 120, 126, 174, 187.

¹³⁴ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967), 6.

¹³⁵ Augustine of Hippo, *Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth, Middlesex : Penguin Books, 1984): 17.

¹³⁶ Augustine, *The City of God*, 17-18.

¹³⁷ Caputo, *What Would Jesus*, 29.

¹³⁸ Burke, *A Grammar*, 355.

¹³⁹ David Platt's recent book, *Radical* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2010), is subtitled *Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream*, and constitutes a conservative rebuke to the prosperity theme in Christian preaching.

¹⁴⁰ Stephanie Y. Mitchen, *Name It and Claim It? Prosperity Preaching in the Black Church* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007), 122-123.

¹⁴¹ Jacques Derrida. "The Law of Genre," Trans. Avita Ronnell, *Critical Inquiry* 7, 1 (Autumn, 1980). Derrida notes that genres are often considered the disciplinary rules. Normal defenses of genres often include the caveat that that everyone knows a genre is provisional. While this is true, these "provisional" genres are often treated as metaphysics in analysis.

¹⁴² James K. Smith, "What's Right with the Prosperity Gospel?" *Forum* (Fall, 2009), 8-9.

CHAPTER 8:
IDENTIFICATION, NARRATIVE, AND AUDIENCE IN JOEL OSTEEN'S *BECOME A BETTER YOU*

Earlier chapters discussed the confused state of contemporary society. Whatever one wishes to call the broad rhetorical situation in late modernity, it is obvious that contemporary life is much less settled and filled with a nearly infinite number of perspectives and symbolic meanings. Yet while it might be true that much of preaching remains inappropriately trapped in the grotesque tropes of long ago high religious periods and that “we live ‘in between times’ in the midst of tumbling paradigms,” some preachers still go out and succeed—sometimes wildly so.¹ Indeed, at least one criterion for the inclusion of a preacher in this dissertation is the attainment of success despite trends of declining adherence to traditional religious structures. Clearly, many of the CPG preachers successfully evade the pitfalls that modernism, traditional preaching forms and the fluid audience conspire to set up. Joel Osteen (figure 9), as one of the most dramatically successful preachers of the past decade preaching in the massive Lakewood Church (figure 10), is clearly one these preachers. Somehow Osteen has managed to transcend the eons dividing The Word and the audience.

In this chapter, I intend to take a different tack in my treatment of preachers as figures reacting to and creating contemporary culture via radical interpretation. In this second chapter on Osteen I address him as a preacher strategically engaging the audience in a way that provides broad psychological appeal by adopting and adapting a secular idiom for religious purposes. The CPG, I have argued, is a gargoyle that will borrow from widely discourses and stitch them together to serve its purposes and I have already demonstrated the CPG’s propensity to co-opt



Figure 9. Joel Osteen preaching.

evangelical idioms and tropes. Here I further examine its use of familiar, psychological modes of discourse. For my purposes the dominant sociological consideration in evaluating the rhetorical situation for this chapter is constituted almost solely by the audience—constraints and exigency emanating mainly from there.² Relying heavily on Kenneth Burke’s idea that rhetoric lies most significantly in *identification*, I intend to scrutinize the way that Osteen uses the psychological idiom as a mode of identification and division that serves the key purposes of attending to the audience’s anxieties and fears. The object of examination is Osteen’s second book, *Become a Better You: 7 Keys to Improving Your Life Every Day*, a book that has sold 3 million copies and is intended to build on his first book *Your Best Life Now* by helping the reader to understand that



Figure 10. Osteen preaching in Lakewood Church.³

“God always wants to increase us, to do more in and through us” even if they already have read and completed the steps in the first book.⁴ I will argue that in the face of a heterogeneous audience, Osteen succeeds by providing the audience clear opportunities to see themselves in Osteen’s religious accounts both by connecting himself to the audience and by connecting the audience to the Scriptural narrative.

The Rhetoric of Psychological Pathology

This dissertation has already noted that religious belief and practice is declining.⁵ Explanations for the causes are diverse, but it’s likely that the pressures and sensibilities of modern society exceed the capacity of traditional structures of Christian religion. Yet religious symbolism and its associated power have not disappeared from the potential audience of

preaching. Reports of the death of religion—sometimes ominously implied here—have been greatly exaggerated. Giddens remarks, “Religious symbols and practices are not only residues from the past; a revival of religious or...spiritual concerns seems fairly widespread.”⁶ Taylor comments that “religious longing...remains a strong independent source of motivation in modernity.”⁷ Some of the revival is the fundamentalist kind—the defensive identity projects identified that reflect a desire for the return of a simple metaphysics of the cosmos and its ethics.⁸ However, as I’ve tried to establish and external evidence supports, there is another kind of revival occurring. Unlike fundamentalism, this new religious iteration reflects the “in between” state of religious belief rather than a deep nostalgia for old-timey belief.

Joel Osteen is the most popular preacher in America with a broad, diverse audience that attends church at Lakewood, listens to sermons online, reads his books, or tunes in on television or radio.⁹ Preliminary survey research on Osteen’s television audience reveals that gender and ethnicity play lesser roles in determining who has positive and negative opinions of his preaching. In contrast, many American churches remain ethnically segregated and female dominated. The most significant consistent factor in opinions of Osteen is level of education, with college educated persons less likely to have a positive opinion of Osteen.¹⁰ In fact, in sharp contrast to the buying patterns of most religious products, more men than women have purchased Osteen’s first book.¹¹ The broader potential audience for Osteen is also large and diverse. A full 17 percent of Americans report they adhere to the gospel of prosperity and 61 percent report believing that God wants to grant his people material wealth. Protestants are more likely than Catholics to believe in prosperity doctrines; however, surveys indicate that Latinos overwhelmingly believe that God grants financial benefits to the faithful.¹² Indeed, Osteen acknowledges that a high percentage of his congregation is Latino and estimates that a full

quarter of the Lakewood attendance consists of Catholics who attend Lakewood on Saturday and Catholic parishes on Sunday.¹³

But Osteen's diverse audience is one that he perceives is filled with religious longing and psychological angst. In *Become a Better You*, Osteen repeatedly lists a wide variety of problems he believes face his audience: negative thinking, depression, addiction, loneliness, bankruptcy, foreclosure, unemployment, and more. Osteen describes himself as a "life coach" and acknowledges that he draws significantly on cognitive therapy to respond to the audience's needs.¹⁴ Scholars concur with Osteen's assessment that the audience is filled with psychological trauma. Osteen's audience has been described by scholars as suffering a variety of psychological deficiencies organized around their desire for but lack of personal affirmation and a sense of loneliness compounded by an ingrained narcissistic belief that they are unique and special.¹⁵ As the previous chapter noted, they want a new beginning in a new time. In this sense, they are a microcosm of the larger socio-psychological affliction that is present across swaths of contemporary society.

Osteen's audience, in short, wants Osteen to "affirm" them and encourage them to be the best possible version of themselves.¹⁶ The audience wants the "possibility of refashioning one's identity and...spiritual accomplishment in the face of life's disappointments."¹⁷ Such desires in Osteen's audience's squares with the broader psychological angst and cultural *ennui* that is a feature of the grotesque. To this end, Christine Miller and Nathan Carlin describe Osteen as a "Kohutian psychoanalyst" who provides his troubled audience with therapeutic "uplift" and "self-worth"—in other words, they view Osteen just as he perceives himself: as a life coach.¹⁸ Such an approach is vital to attract the particular audiences of megachurches. Megachurches (of which Osteen's is the largest in the nation) are populated largely with "seekers," people who

have had no deep commitment to a particular church or denomination and have been shopping for a spiritual home.¹⁹ Condemnations, schismatics or heavily theological arguments will not play with an audience “seeking” acceptance and service.²⁰

Osteen’s affirming rhetoric, which scholars have referred to as a “rhetoric of hope,” is not just tailored to the already existing audience, but is meant to appeal to a broader social-psychological neurosis.²¹ Osteen keenly recognizes that the state of doubt in the self, its existence, and its “authenticity” is endemic in religious society. Osteen even acknowledges that one goal of his book is to help the reader find the “real” you.²²

Researchers have observed that this fragile state of self-esteem has led to the rejection of traditional pulpit admonitions. In an attempt to protect self-esteem, religious seekers have increasingly cast-off guilt and sin as psychological poisons. Optimistic beliefs in heaven remain high while belief in hell is declining. Fundamentalist Christianity has increased its public vocality but has lost adherents.²³ Instead religious and non-religious persons alike are increasingly seeking spiritual meaning that pushes them toward “hitherto unattainable levels of effectiveness” in life—possibly seeking a wholeness missing in the fragmentary, episodic conditions enforced by contemporary life.²⁴ This seeking and maintenance of the self, of identity, which ineffectually fills up a great deal of modern life is a kind of collective psychological disorder, as people seek to find their “authentic” selves in a grotesque, swirling field of fading social and religious symbology.²⁵ To compensate, audiences demand a God that is simultaneously pantheistic and particularly interested in their life and story.²⁶ Hence, religious institutions are sought by the audience at least as much for their ability to re-affirm the self and re-establish faith in the concept of community as they are for particular belief systems.²⁷

So far in this dissertation, I have emphasized the audience's CPG's effort to by-pass the systematic process of contemporary modernist economic, social, and scientific structures. Yet, the hegemony of modernist thinking is present in the audience. The audience, despite its sense of emptiness and loss, is still distinctly modern in its understanding and use of language. Even religious audiences are deeply deferential to the denotative rhetoric of science and the clinical-style of analysis.²⁸ The audience is unlikely to wholesale reject scientific thinking or modernist desire. The audience, as noted, often thinks of itself in psychological terms using language that is credible because of its roots in empirical study. In this sense, the audience's understanding of rhetoric operates in a *secular* psychological discourse. The audience has been taught that the world is not an inexplicable world of preternatural events but a physical system of action-reaction with fairly basic behavioral principles governing human conduct. One may not precisely understand the nature of the system in any detail, but explanatory discourses of secular sciences hold great power, from physics to psychology to economics and finance. Religion can by-pass that secular consciousness, to some extent, but it cannot completely obviate it. For the preacher seeking to gain new audience members the benefits of a particular church must be consistent with the seeker's secular consciousness.²⁹

Like so many other Christian Prosperity Gospelists, Osteen recognizes this fact and analogizes his theories or ideas to a variety of scientific studies. Osteen knows well that though the audience is frustrated at the limits of modernist systems, they also are conditioned to want the affluence and security that it affords. He doesn't attempt to disprove any secular mode by claim to theological expertise; he avoids placing secular and religious modes in zero-sum competition by avoiding any rigid doctrinal position. In *Become a Better You*, Osteen explicitly states that he does not believe himself qualified to explicate Christian doctrine.³⁰

Osteen also understands that he cannot simply presume authority over the audience. He often acknowledges that he is not a theologian or trained preacher: "That's just my message. There is scripture in there that backs it all up...I'm called to help people...how do we walk out the Christian life? How do we live it? And these are principles that can help you. I mean, there's a lot better people qualified to say, 'Here's a book that going to explain the scriptures to you.' I don't think that's my gifting."³¹ Osteen's conception of the audience coincides with broader research that indicates contemporary audiences, with their democratic sensibilities, skeptical natures, and desire to simply be affirmed rather than challenged, do not automatically give in to an assertion of authority.³² Instead, contemporary audiences have been conditioned to accept history and experience as the measure of legitimacy rather than any authoritorial structure or metaphysics.³³ Instead, as Taylor observed, "Many [people] are 'looking for a more direct experience of the sacred, for greater immediacy, spontaneity, and spiritual depth.'"³⁴ Sødal observes that Osteen's rhetorical authority is based in the audience's emotional and material belief that they are "experiencing" a religious moment.³⁵ One of Osteen's Lakewood parishioners explained how this standard led her to Lakewood: "The praise and worship brought me here...I was raised Catholic, but I don't feel the spirit there like I do here."³⁶ For a contemporary audience "shopping" for a church as a consumer, this "experience" is the church's vital selling point.³⁷

All of this might be summed up in Buttrick's enumeration of three features of the contemporary audience of religious rhetoric, which he calls the audience's "contemporary consciousness." First, the audience is secular and understands even the religious in terms of the non-religious. Second, the audience is transient; that is to say they live in mixed time when no single paradigm of mysticism, rationalism, Christianity or anything else is dominant. Questions

of, “Where are we going? Why are we going so fast? What can we hold onto?” grip the audience. Third, the contemporary consciousness is “radically aware of relativity,” leading to a rise in hermeneutic suspicion and deconstructive thinking in even the casual audience.³⁸ We might add one more idea to this—the audience is intrinsically market-oriented and materialist. The American audience expects its religious sects to compete against each other via the familiar mechanisms of public marketing.³⁹ Part of that includes an expectation that marketing might include displays of material and emotional evidence of faith and the promise of rewards—i.e., prosperity in physical, psychological and financial terms.⁴⁰ In fact, audiences for the prosperity message repeatedly affirm that they see the prosperity of the preacher as an example of what they might achieve, “You see that it’s real, it’s working in their lives, and it can work for you.”⁴¹

The evidence presented here makes three points: (1) Osteen considers his audience in psychological terms, (2) scholars analyze his appeal to his audience in psychological terms—i.e., they agree social psychology is useful for explaining his rhetorical appeal, and (3) the audience conceives *itself* in psychological terms. Of course, any description of the “shared moods, human institutions, and the non-chronological history these institutions compose;”⁴² will be at least partly psychological. However, in this case Osteen seems to have correctly assessed that large swaths of his viewing, reading, and listening audience either already view themselves in psychoanalytic terms or are familiar enough with its discourse that they are ready to embrace Osteen’s psychological framework. Indeed, like therapy, the audience wants empirical, inductive, emotional, material and experiential evidence that Osteen’s methods work.

Rhetoric and discourse are products of institutional settings, emotional connection, and hodge-podge experiential history—all engaged in the hermeneutic process of interpreting ourselves, our world, and our attempts to describe it using appropriate language.⁴³ The rhetor’s

ability to tap into that hermeneutic mode is vital to success. In this case, Osteen's rhetorical strategies are suited to the audience's psychological idiom.

Joel Osteen and the Rhetoric of Psychological Identification

Given the consistent characterization of the contemporary audience in terms of its strained psychology, it is unsurprising that Joel Osteen, currently the most popular preacher in America, has written his book *Become A Better You* in psychological terms. Osteen well represents what Buttrick calls the "therapeutic preaching" that "has linked psychological self-awareness to God."⁴⁴ Osteen's declaration that reading the book is "an inner journey through which you will explore parts of yourself that perhaps you've rarely or never previously tested" on the way to "a more productive use of your gifts and talents, and ultimately a totally better life," appeals to that contemporary audience absorbed with finding their true selves in order to pack more living into life.⁴⁵

Osteen's awareness of the contemporary audience and what it desires to hear is his particular gift. Rhetoric, of course, is always a kind of cultural awareness. It is a study in the audience so we might know what to say. Even Aristotle's *topoi* have been identified, fundamentally, as a very general psychological profile of potential audiences.⁴⁶ It is even more so with religious rhetoric, which must bridge Ricoeur's vast gap of eons and connect very different places and times.⁴⁷ Critical sophistic values are at work, much to the horror of Biblical literalists. It is a study in timing, cultural appropriateness, and possibility as much as it is a process of interpreting texts.⁴⁸ Those processes matter insofar as the rhetor, in this case Osteen, is attempting to *identify* with the audience; that is, to allow the readers of *Become a Better You* to, as Burke says, share "vicariously in the role of leader or spokesman."⁴⁹ The process is inherently psychological, involving precisely "one's way of seeing one's reflection in the social mirror."⁵⁰

Although I have tended to focus on the poetic elements of the CPG and last chapter focuses on Osteen’s poetic use of *kairos*, Osteen’s work is also a piece of deliberative rhetoric in the sense that he is trying to persuade the audience to adhere to his plan of action for their lives—hence, *Become a Better You* is divided into seven parts, each consisting of several chapters that encourage the reader to do things like “Be Positive About Yourself” and “Develop Your Inner Life.” At the end of each part is a series of “Action Points” that instruct the reader on how to implement the advice and conclusions reached in the preceding chapters. In this sense Osteen’s book strongly resembles therapy—the patients’ pathologies and traumas are identified, explained on the basis of his particular theories, and the patients are taught skills to overcome their obstacles.

The crux of Osteen’s procedure relies on convincing the audience of his diagnoses, which itself relies on his ability to describe the problems that face the readers in ways that make sense to them. Once the audience is convinced of the diagnosis, Osteen can apply his theories and suggest solutions. Marching down the path to a solution, however, begins long before the reader has completed the book. Osteen allows that the purchase of the book is itself the first major step in the process of overcoming the spiritual pathologies affecting the reader. Responding to the reader’s potential objection that s/he might not deserve to feel good because, “I’ve made a lot of mistakes,” Osteen responds, “Yes, but you’ve picked up this book and began reading, learning to change for the better. That’s a pretty great choice.”⁵¹ That “great choice” links the readers to the *process* of the Osteen’s solution, noting that they are already on their way. It allows the readers to begin associating themselves with achievement without completing a single item on his “Action Points.” In reality, the audience probably would enthymematically understand the symbolic achievement of success regardless of Osteen’s suggestion. As Burke remarks originally

in 1941, this most accommodating of identification strategies is old hat; “*The reading of a book on the attaining of success is in itself the symbolic attaining of that success. It is while they read that these readers are ‘succeeding.’*”⁵² Osteen’s affirmation, however, fits with the psychological adage that the therapist can only aid those who wish to help themselves.

The Process of Identification

This chapter deals with symbols utilized by Osteen in a variety of ways; sometimes in terms of the essential grammatical function, i.e., what they might serve to represent or mean in substance (to speak metaphorically of things which have no substance but instead are meant to represent substance), and others in terms of rhetoric which serves the practical purpose of linking two things together, symbolically. Identification, primarily, is the second process of connecting or dividing ideas—it is linkage and separation.⁵³ Identification has persuasive qualities—in fact, it dominates persuasion in that successful attempts to persuade an audience involve a rhetor connecting with an audience’s concerns, managing them, overcoming them, or exploiting them, with the persuasive attempt completed by the audience choosing to identify or adhere to the rhetor’s position.⁵⁴ Distinctions of condition such as partisan interests or specialized efforts to single out a group’s uniqueness or quality as a chosen group is served by symbolically *disassociating* the audience from other, less preferred groups, who themselves are identified (associated) with negative qualities. Or a rhetor might urge an audience to change by identifying an audience’s current action or state with negative qualities, urging them to disassociate themselves as soon as possible from that set of actions or state and instead link themselves to another set of more positive descriptions.⁵⁵

As a tool of rhetoric, identification is a psychological process. Noted already is the way that our basic concept of audience analysis as a classic rhetorical technique is, in a basic sense, a

psychological profile. Yet Osteen's book, which is concerned with the "inner life" of the audience, does more. It persuades not just by appealing to psychological desires of the audience but also by intervening and navigating the individual's internal conflicts. We know that persons' identities are fragmented, not unitary, with a different version of the self appearing in different situations.⁵⁶ Osteen attempts to persuade his audience to believe more and do more by engaging these fragmented identities and providing a way to resolve their conflicts, by the invention of a new self, transformed from the errors of the past.

Osteen's approach is fitting in other ways. Scholars have remarked that the fractures in personal and social identity and dissolution of traditional symbolic structures have created deep doubt in the audience, which in turn has fueled a need for repeated narcissistic affirmation.⁵⁷ In the Olden Days, the great religious stress was on "Sin" and "Guilt," but now that's out. Osteen's audience has an allergy to being told about guilt or sin. An idea has emerged that the Biblical narrative of the generation of sin also had led to the idea that religion had, in fact, produced Guilt in the first place. Without a concept of religious sin, the thinking goes, we'd have no sense of guilt. Yet, guilt is *not* an exclusively religious phenomenon. It exists because we feel compelled to abide by social rules and feel a sense of "moral failure" when we do not. Guilt is therefore a social-psychological phenomenon.⁵⁸ In fact, the rejection of sin has not alleviated the psychological fact of guilt. We split between feeling guilty and denying that guilt matters.

Osteen's technique of navigating the fragmented self is a fitting method of persuasion. All rhetors, in appealing to the audience, are engaging in a kind of psychological warfare—pitting different parts of the audience's psyche against each other, picking sides, overcoming one set of objections or problems in the mind by appealing to (or suggesting) another position. Burke likens the engagement to an internal "parliamentary wrangle" in which there are a wide variety

of “fears and hopes, friendships and enmities, health and disease” that compete, jostle, and ask for interpretation and clarification.⁵⁹ The rhetor attempts to identify, in reality, not with a unified individual but a conflicted being struggling with confusing forces that exist outside and in. Homiletics, as a more specific application of rhetoric in preaching, must be structured to access this confused consciousness and help to identify with some version of a long-past religious message.⁶⁰ It is this difficult task that Osteen means to attempt.

Osteen’s Christian Depth Psychology as a Means of Identification

Osteen is adamant that *Become a Better You* is a book that anyone can read with benefit. Unlike his *Your Best Life Now*, Osteen does not begin by emphasizing the material wealth to be gained by living a better life. Instead, his conviction is one that is supported by his evaluation of the audience—his psychological analysis of who might be reading his book. “Whether life is going well for you or collapsing right before your eyes, we all want better. We want to know God better; we want to be better spouses and parents, better lovers, better encouragers, better community leaders, better employees, and better bosses and managers.” This desire to be better is a product of an innate behavioral drive—one implanted by God:

God put something deep down inside us that evokes a desire to be more like Him. In our inner being, we hear a voice saying, “You were born for better than this; you were meant to live at a higher level than you are currently. Don’t be satisfied with less. You can be better.”⁶¹

Osteen even acknowledges that some might believe that they had already reached their “best life” after the completion of the seven steps in his prior work. The difference is that this book goes *deeper*, “But even if you are living your best life now, it is important that you do not become stagnant...God...always wants to take us deeper into self discovery.”⁶² Osteen is

adamant that the goal of *Become a Better You* is a searching for depth, for the discovery of the “priceless seeds of greatness that God has placed within you.”⁶³ These seeds that lie deep within all individuals, Osteen remarks, must be released using the “seven keys” that he will “reveal” and will enable the reader to “burst forth in an abundantly blessed life. These keys are not complicated or difficult...their sheer simplicity often causes them to elude many people’s notice”⁶⁴

Osteen’s method of dealing with an audience plagued by doubt, confusion, fragmented identity, is to propose a *psychological* exploration—one that will reveal that a “better life” is a matter of simplicity. “Every step is about your head, your heart, and your soul.”⁶⁵ This exploration, Osteen explains, will reveal that most persons’ problem is that they “settle for mediocrity in their thoughts, attitudes, or actions. It’s time to put off those negative mind-sets and rise higher.”⁶⁶ God has implanted greatness in the individual, and Osteen is setting to the task of teaching the reader the techniques to “draw it out” (reveal, *aletheia* or perhaps invoke). It is an “inner journey” which will have spiritual benefits in terms of love, joy, and peace but will also lead the reader to be “more productive.” While Osteen demurs that he “can’t guarantee that you will become rich or famous”⁶⁷ he repeatedly emphasizes that completing his suggested steps of self-exploration and improvement will aid a person’s career and finances.

All of this just from the “Introduction” to *Become a Better You*. Already Osteen’s attunement to the contemporary audience is apparent. More than just “therapeutic” preaching, Osteen directly addresses the concepts at work in the contemporary crisis of social and individual psychology. He recognizes the distress of the audience, the insecurities of identity, the power of guilt (“negative mind-sets”), and the narcissistic desire to be singled out. Eschewing even a single Scriptural citation in the “Introduction,” Osteen asserts a very particular process that God

has used to create human psychology, identifies how it has gone wrong (“mediocrity in thoughts”) and attests to his method by citing his own success—a success the reader can readily observe.⁶⁸ Indeed, Osteen emphasizes that God has set out layers of destiny for members of the audience, with God continuously manipulating the course of history and world events for the benefit of the reader. More on that later. For now, I’ll turn to Osteen’s style and his ability to invite the audience into his psychotherapeutic conversation.

Osteen’s Rhetorical Tactics of Identification

Burke has remarked that “You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his.”⁶⁹ In *Become a Better You*, Osteen reaches out to the reader by treating the reader as a singular conversational partner, directly addressing a wide variety of contemporary material problems the reader might face, and supporting his theories of the mind with a wide variety of personal anecdotes, hypothetical narratives, historical examples, and re-interpreted Scriptural citation. He even associates his concepts with certain elements of medical science. His use of anecdotal evidence to appeal to the empirical nature of his audience may be unparalleled.

Casual Style as Psychological Identification

Modeling some forms of psychotherapy, Osteen treats the discourse of the book as conversation—a dialogue between two persons conversing on a subject. When Osteen exclaims, “[God] will continually expand your horizons, and you can become a better you!”⁷⁰ there is no sense that Osteen is speaking of a plural “you.” When he urges the reader to understand that “God accepts you. God approves you. And He has something better in store,”⁷¹ Osteen gives the sense that he is singling out one specific reader, as if he had written the book for one person alone. At the close of the book, as he declares, “Remember, friend, you have seeds of greatness

in you. You weren't made to be stagnant; rise out of complacency; keep growing, keep reaching for new heights. Your best days are still out in front you"⁷² Osteen's remarks to his 'friend' are built around a personal urging, a personal call for the reader to identify and respond to Osteen/God's plan for his or her life.

The conversational style is aided by Osteen's tactic of creating a direct dialogue between himself and the reader. He often reviews possible conversational objections the reader might make to his positions. In Chapter 3, "The Power of the Bloodline," Osteen attempts to convince his audience that they are spiritually descended from God and therefore have a strong "bloodline" that imbues them with power. After supporting his argument with a variety of anecdotes, he inserts the reader's objection: "Well, Joel, I don't know if that would happen for me. You don't know my circumstances." He responds, "You're right, it's not going to happen if you are negative and doubtful."⁷³ Later, in Chapter 7, "Stop Listening to Accusing Voices," Osteen anticipates the following reader response, "Well, Joel, I've got a lot of things to overcome." Dismissing the guilt he responds, "Who doesn't?..However, God does not focus on what's wrong with you. He focuses on what's right with you."⁷⁴ In all, nearly every chapter includes a direct, hypothetical exchange between the reader and Osteen. It's not always in quotations. Sometimes he simply speculates about the reader's thoughts, "At times, you may think, *I don't feel like I deserve it. I don't feel like I'm worthy.* But that's what grace is all about."⁷⁵

The effect of all these conversations is that Osteen strongly implies that he and the reader have a relationship—in particular, one of friendship. To the reader, Osteen doesn't act as the senior pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas but as the reader's own, local pastor. The effect is amplified by the similarity that Osteen's staged exchanges with the audience have with

the pastoral anecdotes he provides the audience. In Chapter 8, “Learning to Like Yourself,” Osteen recounts the circumstances of “Pete,” who tells Osteen, “I’m trying to live right but...I can’t control my temper.” Osteen explains, “‘Obviously, losing your temper never helps matters Pete,’ I told him. ‘But remember, God is still working in you...It’s okay to like yourself while God is in the process of changing you.’”⁷⁶ These accounts of Osteen’s counseling of his congregation match his technique of directly addressing the reader, giving the reader the opportunity to see him- or herself in a personal conversation with Osteen.

The second major effect of Osteen’s counseling is the feeling that Osteen has made the reader uniquely privy to the interesting and private information of his pastoral profession. In Chapter 9, “Making Your Words Work for You,” which is in Part Two, “Be Positive About Yourself,” Osteen supports his assertion that “Many people suffer a poor self-image because of their own words” by recounting the story of Catherine:

“Joel, I’ve made so many mistakes I don’t see how God could bless me,”

Catherine said through her tears. “I just don’t feel like I deserve it.”

“No, we don’t deserve God’s blessing,” I told her. “They are part of the free Gift of God’s salvation. The best thing you could do is to accept His offer, and all through the day start saying to yourself, ‘I am a new creation. I am forgiven. I am valuable to God. He has made me worthy.’”⁷⁷

Osteen’s disclosure of Catherine’s despair, like his use of his own family’s experience, act as a disclosure, a yielding or commitment to the audience, that enables Osteen to continue to treat the reader as a friend. Even when Osteen’s directions are downright stale and trite, such as when he suggests in Chapter 13, “Taking a Stand for Your Family,” “When you’re tempted to pop and say something hurtful...do yourself a favor. Take a deep breath, pause about ten

seconds, and think about what you're going to say before you speak,"⁷⁸ Osteen's use of familiar, conversational language enables him to position himself as someone reminding the reader of things the reader already knows.

In all, Osteen's stylistic moves throughout *Become a Better You* serve rhetorical, persuasive goals. Osteen's conversational matter and his disclosure of his experiences and conversations with his own families and congregation—many of whom are suffering the same problems and doubts as the reader—give the audience the means to interpret Osteen as trusted friend. Osteen speaks the language of the audience. As the next section shows, unlike other CPG preachers, he eschews anything beyond the simplest religious references; instead, he communicates via recounted experiences, designed to appeal to an audience's desire for inductive and narrative evidence.

The Application of the Anecdotal Narrative as an Identification Tactic

Few homiletic topics are more well-worn than that of "illustrations," by which most mean narratively-structured stories or anecdotes that help make the point of the sermon. There is a significant link between traditional rhetorical theory to sermonic narrative. Walter Fisher, for example, had homiletics in mind as he explicated his idea that the narrative paradigm is the crux of persuasion.⁷⁹ When preaching is most effective "stories or anecdotes...do not illustrate the point; rather they *are* the point."⁸⁰

For the preacher, these rhetorical devices are invaluable. Sermonic stories serve the purpose of placing the Scriptural message in specific contexts accessible to the audience, activating the imagination of the audience, aiding them in seeing themselves in what is being preached and how the prescriptions of preaching would look if enacted. If the Word is the Living Word, placing it in the context of life is vital. In addressing the various social psychopathologies

existing in current society, the traditional propositional preaching is as useful to the audience as a lecture on medicine is to the sick.⁸¹

In *Become a Better You*, Osteen puts the narrative to good use. His constant flow of anecdote is deeply reminiscent of Russell Conwell's "Acres of Diamonds." Like Conwell, some of Osteen's chapters are a string of anecdotes held together by the barest explication of various messages. Chapter 1, "Stretching to the Next Level," includes ten separate illustrative anecdotes in a mere eighteen pages. These include the account of Sherry, who had suffered in a verbally abusive relationship for many years, about whom Osteen says, "I told her what I'm telling you: 'Your value, your gifts, and talents have been put in you by Almighty God... Dwelling on negative thoughts... will keep you from becoming all God has created you to be.'" ⁸² Another anecdote recounts the way his father, John Osteen, was rejected by his congregation when he tried to preach a new reading of the Gospel. Instead of giving up, John Osteen formed Lakewood Church with ninety original members. Lakewood Church, of course, now has a congregation in the tens of thousands. Osteen concludes, "When one door closes, God is about to open up a bigger and better door." ⁸³

In some cases, Osteen is ambiguous about whether the anecdotes are real or fictional. In the case of Sam, a man who refuses to forgive himself for past mistakes, Osteen asserts what Sam should do but doesn't indicate that he has ever spoken with Sam, leaving it unclear if Sam is real. ⁸⁴ In still other cases, Osteen assumes the role of passing on folk wisdom he has heard elsewhere, such as when he says, "I heard a story about a little dog that had been kept on a twenty-foot leash for years... One day, the owner felt sorry for the dog, so he decided to let him off that leash... Much to the owner's surprise, when his dog got to where the leash would have ended, he stopped right where he always did." ⁸⁵ Osteen concludes that we act much the same.

“God has loosed the chains of addictions, of personal defeats, of bad attitudes. The problem is we’re not walking out of them.”⁸⁶

These narratives serve critical functions of identification. As is well-documented, narratives allow us to locate ourselves, to figure out our identity. All rhetoric exists in the shadow of history—narrative is the accounting of that history *and* the language game we use to locate ourselves in history and society.⁸⁷ Preaching is meant to change that identity, to adjust the audience’s native stories.⁸⁸ As a language game, the narrative allows the audience to connect the experiences of others to themselves. These narrative structures, unlike propositional structures, involve the speaker and audience coming together over particular meanings and create forums in which “the community’s relationship to itself and its environment is played out.”⁸⁹ The analogical nature of many of the narratives transcends the limits of propositional speaking, allowing Osteen to reach a wider audience—an audience that can read itself into the narratives. Specificity of meaning, although guided by Osteen, is ultimately determined by the reader with little need for denotative processes.⁹⁰ The audience of preaching, diverse as it is, is always imagining themselves within their own life narrative. Osteen simply utilizes narratives that match the audience’s own psychological plotting of their narrative.⁹¹

Addressing the Real Problems of the Audience

In *Preaching*, Fred B. Craddock laments that most dramatic attempts on the part of preachers to achieve identification, if set into actual plays, “would very soon empty the theater.”⁹² Part of the reason, Craddock explains, is that speakers discuss the general rather than the particular. Sermons addressing “modern society” or “today’s youth” leave the audience fully uninterested. The abstraction of such topics holds no particular interest for an audience that has trouble applying the deductive lessons to their own lives.

On the other hand, “Listeners are capable of generalizing appropriately once they have identified with specific persons involved in concrete events in certain places at certain times.”⁹³ As Burke has noted, “the extreme heterogeneity”⁹⁴ of modern audiences requires rhetors to work harder to reach specific audiences. Audiences are looking for speakers to address specific problems of contemporary life—their own contemporary lives—not for general statements on moral conduct. They want religion to provide some insight on “their lives, their marriages, their studies, their jobs, their world.”⁹⁵ They do not want expositions on THE WORLD; they want to learn how to deal with their individuated experience of the world.

Osteen’s outreach to the particular problems of his audience is remarkable. As discussed, the narrative techniques he employs facilitate the audience inductively applying his points to their own lives. But more than that, the problems Osteen addresses are the immediate problems faced by all persons in contemporary society. Osteen gamely engages the audience’s concerns about their careers, endemic poverty, marriage, divorce, physical and psychological abuse, drug and alcohol addiction, eating disorders, physical ugliness, and even suicide.

Osteen’s method of introducing very real, pressing topics varies. In some cases, he places it within one of his simulated dialogues with the reader. In Chapter 2, “Give Your Dreams a New Beginning,” Osteen plots the following dialogue:

If your thinking is limited, then your life is going to be limited.

“But, Joel, I’ve gone through bankruptcy, I’ve tried and failed.”

Well, let it go. This is a new day.

“My marriage didn’t work out. I’m so disappointed. I never thought I’d be in this situation at this point in my life.”

That's unfortunate, but it's not the end. When one door closes, God will always open another. If all the doors close, He'll open a window!⁹⁶

By quickly moving through more than one scenario, Osteen demonstrates how God's desire to give each person a new beginning applies to a variety of scenarios—scenarios the audience has experienced or can imagine experiencing. In other cases, he simply lists a series of problems that can be overcome with faith in Christ, “Every enemy in your life has already been defeated—enemies of worry, depression, addiction, financial lack—and you have the power over all of them. The same power that raised Christ from the dead is inside you.”⁹⁷

Sometimes Osteen addresses the topic as a series of hypothetical *if-then* statements. In Chapter 4, “Breaking Free from the Strongholds of Your Past,” Osteen remarks, “If you have an anger problem or a problem with alcohol, or some other kind of hidden addiction, don't try to beat that problem on your own...God will help you to overcome the negative patterns in your life.”⁹⁸ He supports the hypothetical using narratives. In this case, he recounts the circumstances of “Pastor Robert,” a preacher and minister who had a hidden a major anger problem but overcame it with the help of his wife and God. To address anorexia, he introduces the story of “Betsy,” whose whole family had suffered from the disorder, which she overcame by taking “authority” over her disease.⁹⁹ Similarly, in Chapter 6, “Discovering Your Destiny,” he lists a series of conditionals across two pages, “Maybe you love seeing things built or renovated...Maybe you don't like the field in which are working...If that sounds like you...”¹⁰⁰

Osteen's identification of specific audience concerns is not limited to negative descriptions of the audience's challenges. He also acknowledges the audience's desires. He notes, “We all want to be better...more effective in our lives.”¹⁰¹ He approvingly recounts the case of Peter and Becky, who refuse to acknowledge that living in a small house is their destiny,

“God has put bigger things in our hearts and we’re making preparations to rise higher,” exclaims Becky, referring to the future larger house.¹⁰² In another case, he recalls a man who refused to accept a supposedly permanent physical disability, eventually overcoming it in five years.¹⁰³

Osteen’s willingness to confront specific issues and his yielding and acknowledgement of the audience’s dreams serve as invitations to the reader to see themselves in Osteen’s message.¹⁰⁴ Each circumstance enables the audience multiple entry points into the “journey” that constitutes *Become a Better You*.

In sum, Osteen engages a complex slate of rhetorical tactics to facilitate audience identification, including employing a conversational style, an anecdotal approach, and a willingness to confront the specific problems of the audience. Osteen’s methods are such that even if specific examples do not apply to the audience, they can interpret them analogically as useful information. And the inductive, analogical approach is one that American society well understands. If the audience can identify a theme or pattern across analogical situations, the audience is well prepared to enthymematically apply it to their own situation. When they do, the application is “*their* conclusion” and “personally inescapable.”¹⁰⁵

Christian Myth as Psychotherapeutic Identification

So far we looked at some of the particulars of the style and tactics Osteen uses to reach an audience that is fragmented, lost, and is culturally and psychically dislocated.¹⁰⁶ Yet these tactics are not sufficient in themselves to address the deep-sense of doubt and contradictions that exist in the consciousness of the audience. While Osteen is a master at personally identifying with the audience, none of these efforts will link concerns of the contemporary audiences to the ancient narrative of the Scripture—the vital challenge to Christianity identified by Ricoeur, Buttrick, Craddock, and so many others. In this section, I examine the way that Osteen posits a theology

that serves the purposes of the audiences and reinterprets the traditional Scriptural message to fit the individuated, narcissistic psychological condition of the contemporary audience. It is a myth that, as Cassirer notes, serves to help explain the universe, its phenomena, and provide a poetic, epic narrative that includes the individual in its imagination.¹⁰⁷

A Theo-Psychological Theory of Sin and Reward

Long before there were ever systematic theologians like Karl Barth, who argue against adapting to the sensitivities of the audience, there was the narrative of the Gospel which attracted adherents.¹⁰⁸ Yet standing alone, the old interpretations, the “old metaphors may no longer speak powerfully to our age.”¹⁰⁹ Three overwhelming facts dominate the contemporary audience in relation to religion: (1) the audience is characterized by alienation and (2), the audience has a desire to be involved in a narrative that is larger than themselves, (3) the audience has a conditional sense of deconstructive relativity that applies skepticism toward traditional narratives and but provides an opening for new possibilities and explanations.¹¹⁰ For the preacher, interpreting the narrative of the Christian myth is the vital symbolic attempt at which s/he must connect to the audience that exists “in between” places.

Given these conditions, Osteen’s interpretation of the traditional Christian Scriptures adapts to the circumstances of the contemporary audience by treating the Biblical myth as series of anecdotes which explicate the psychological forces at war within the individual. According to Osteen, the Scriptures reveal that God has destined each individual in the world for material prosperity, physical health, and psychological well-being. Each person is “handpicked by Almighty God” to succeed.¹¹¹ However, negative thoughts or wrong mindsets or other pathologies of the mind or attitude prevent God from enacting His plan for each individual, “

The struggle of life, according to Osteen, is avoiding being “satisfied with far less than God’s best for their lives.”¹¹²

Defining of the Terms of the Pathology

I’ve already noted that Osteen treats problems and obstacles facing the audiences as problems of attitude or mindset. The goal of the book, Osteen indicates, is to escape a “defeated mind-set” and to increase in “happiness, success, and significance.”¹¹³ “Too many people,” according to Osteen, “learn to function in their dysfunction.”¹¹⁴ In this sense, Osteen acknowledges that the audience speaks in secular terms. Yet Osteen believes that key to overcoming all problems is to engage and win a psychological battle that extends beyond the material world:

Remember, this is a *spiritual battle*. You must take authority over all the strong holds that are keeping you in bondage. One of the first things you must do is recognize what it is, identify it, get it out in the open, and deal with it. As you do, you will see God’s blessings and favor in your life.¹¹⁵

Osteen is quite specific that you cannot overcome these neuroses on your own: “You can’t simply deal with such conditions medicinally, psychologically, or in any other physical sense. You can’t merely apply sheer willpower to overcome this condition; it is a spiritual battle.”¹¹⁶ Insecurity, Osteen notes, is a result of failing to love yourself, which is conditional upon God’s love for you.¹¹⁷ The reader can choose to have faith in God and employ His assistance in getting to the root of the problem: “God is knocking on the door...The only way He’ll get in is if we invite him.”¹¹⁸ Hence, while individuals cannot overcome the problem themselves, if they align themselves with God, acknowledge the problem, and follow His plan, these neurosis pathologies may evaporate.

Dramatis Personae

After establishing that the psychological forces at work in the maladies affecting the individual are beyond the material, Osteen redeploys the Christian Scriptural myth in a way that explains the forces at work in the universe. These forces are not mere chemical reactions in the mind or physiological conditions, but supernatural forces contending for the reader's mind. A quick review of the cast may be helpful.

The Reader/Audience

The Reader/audience is the hero of the story—the person on a journey or quest. The reader is the person in whom “God has deposited a part of Himself.”¹¹⁹ The Reader possesses, “the DNA of the Almighty,” and is the “seed of Almighty God.”¹²⁰ “There is no limit to what you [The Reader] can accomplish.”¹²¹ The Reader is the person who must learn to “discipline” their thoughts to stop dwelling on the past and stop listening to negative ideas.¹²² The Reader is God's “most prized possession.”¹²³

The Reader has a destiny, which includes being a “victor, not a victim.”¹²⁴ In Chapter 6, “Discovering Your Destiny,” Osteen declares that you have “a divine purpose installed by the Creator of the universe.”¹²⁵ That destiny, Osteen assures the reader, “is...who you really are.”¹²⁶ Discovering that destiny, which will lead to happiness and prosperity, is a process of learning “to like yourself and feel good about yourself”¹²⁷ and refusing to settle “for anything less than God's best”¹²⁸

The Enemy

The Enemy appears more than twenty times in *Become A Better You*. Unlike the Satan of more conventional Christianities, Osteen's Enemy is not a grotesque fiend of unspeakable evil, but a psychological manipulator. The Enemy is the source of all discord, negative thoughts, and

mediocrity. The Enemy is constantly seeking to thwart the reader by raising doubt within the audience, “The enemy knows something of what’s on the inside of you, as well. He knows the potential you’re carrying, so he does everything he can to keep that seed from taking root.”¹²⁹ Most of all, the enemy is always working to block the reader’s acknowledgement of God.¹³⁰ Linking the reader’s struggles to Biblical myth, Osteen notes that it was this same Enemy that nefariously made Adam and Eve feel inferior in the Garden of Eden.¹³¹

God, The Almighty Father

God is the literal genitive and spiritual father of the reader. God is immensely powerful but limited by human choices. God has a plan for each person—a destiny. Osteen states, “God is working behind the scenes in your life.”¹³² That is, Osteen believes God actively intervenes in the world in order to organize events to the benefit of The Reader.¹³³ As noted, God loves The Reader and gives The Reader every opportunity to come to Him. This God is infinitely forgiving and regularly performs miracles.

Jesus Christ

Jesus Christ is the direct Son of God and the spiritual brother of The Reader. Except for on the very last page of *Become a Better*, after the close of the main narrative of the book, in a section titled “We Care About You!” in which Osteen encourages the reader to develop a “relationship with your heavenly Father through His Son, Jesus Christ,”¹³⁴ most of Jesus’s contributions are past tense. Most significantly Jesus died to free the all persons from sin and guilt and defeat the power of the Enemy.¹³⁵

These *dramatis personae* play critical roles in Osteen’s homiletic theology, providing an external explanation for what thwarts the person’s flourishing, which in Osteenian terms means happiness, health, and profitability, viz., the fulfillment of the individual’s desires.

A Cosmology of Positive Attitude Free of Guilt and Sin

Osteen's purpose in *Become a Better You* turns on his ability to provide a coherent explanation of the Christian cosmic drama of good, evil, sin, and guilt and locate The Reader in that drama. Besides providing a functional structure for social organization, this is one of the key purposes of all religion. The metaphorical power of this narrative is expansive and, if it bridges the eons of time between the Christ-event and the contemporary audience, it "can change identity by incorporating all our stories into 'God's story.'" Effective "preaching constructs in the consciousness a 'faith-world' related to God."¹³⁶

By all accounts, Osteen understands that preaching must bond the socially understood world and the world of the Bible into a narrative of a cosmology.¹³⁷ Osteen is more than willing to confront the wide range of neuroses, psychoses, criminality, diseases, ambition and social and economic distress and ambition at work in the world. By a series of key theological re-interpretations, Osteen presents as the consequence of forces largely external to The Reader. He posits several theories that serve to free The Reader from the sins, guilt, and failures of the Reader's past but situate the individual's personal agency as vital to overcoming any particular challenge.¹³⁸

In Osteen's cosmology, God's is personally involved in the world, micro-managing the affairs of each individual. As Osteen says, "God deals with each of us individually... We should never compare ourselves to others."¹³⁹ God's plan for each person and institution was created before the beginning of time.¹⁴⁰ Osteen rejects the concept of coincidence or luck in no uncertain terms. Describing his own success, he says "Luck had nothing to do with it."¹⁴¹ Each person can fail to meet God's plan; but in this circumstance, God simply changes to contingency plans.¹⁴² In all cases, God is "a progressive God, and He wants every generation to be increasing in

happiness, success, and significance.”¹⁴³ All of The Reader’s current success, material or otherwise, can be attributed to God; but, God wants more for The Reader:

No doubt, God has already done a lot in your past...Maybe He’s given you a wonderful family and home. Perhaps He’s caused you to be promoted, given you favor with your employers...He may have done wonders in the past, but you haven’t seen anything yet!¹⁴⁴

All of the events that seem to be consequences of normal physical processes or social interactions are actually miracles:

Miracles are all around us. The people in your life, the doors God has opened...It was God’s favor that caused you to be at the right place the right time. You met someone and fell in love. Or you qualified for that home...Or you got that promotion...These are not coincidences. God was directing your steps, so don’t take it for granted.¹⁴⁵

These are the “contingency miracles” explicated by McCarron. Contingency miracles are seemingly ordinary events interpreted as signs from God and imbued with symbolic significance far beyond the normal understanding. These types of miracles serve the critical purpose of connecting the audience to the Divine cosmos and affirming their significance within that cosmos.¹⁴⁶ Osteen excels at fusing these interpretative miracles by democratizing them. Many preachers use these miracles as signs of faith, to signal the faithful audience that they are set apart. In line with his belief that all are already forgiven of sin, Osteen uses the miracles to affirm that ALL are worthy of God’s attention—contingency miracles occur even to those without faith (although more happen to those with faith).

However, God's power is not unlimited in Osteen's cosmology, despite his claim that God is unlimited. Osteen embraces the conditional covenant theology of the CPG. In particular, God is limited by the individual's attitude. God's ability to perform is somewhat conditional, "If you will be sensitive and maintain a clear conscience, there's no limit to what God will do in your life."¹⁴⁷ Believing is a condition of God's full intervention. In Chapter 24, "God is in Control," Osteen exclaims, "This promise is for believers! You must believe God is at work in your life, and then be on the lookout to see His hand shaping the events."¹⁴⁸ He explains later, "God works where there is an attitude of faith and expectancy, not attitudes of unbelief, worry, despair or discouragement."¹⁴⁹ Citing Scripture, Osteen concludes, "His power is activated only when we believe...Sure, you may get a break here or there, but when you really believe...you're going to see more of God's favor."¹⁵⁰

Osteen is firm advocate of Positive Confession. Osteen believes words are literally powerful. "Something supernatural happens when we speak out."¹⁵¹ Negative attitudes, which constitute a kind of unbelief, block God's intervention. We can all prophesy the future and negative words create negative futures: "Unfortunately, many predict defeat, failure, lack, and mediocrity."¹⁵² Instead, Osteen deploys the "victor" trope and tells The Reader to declare that he or she is "victor and not a victim." Once you "speak affirmatively...things will begin to change in your favor...you will be astounded by the results."¹⁵³ After all, positive growth and profitability are The Reader's destiny.

The assistance this vision of God gives to Osteen's process of identification hardly needs mention. As Burke has noted, the process of encouraging the audience to see itself as inherently noble and dignified permits it to escape responsibility for any problems that might have occurred in its life—indeed, the problems might only arise because of The Reader's *failure* to see himself

or herself as inherently noble, and specifically chosen by God.¹⁵⁴ After The Readers realize that they are the chosen of God with specific destinies, they can literally vote themselves a new identity—one that is more in line with God and provides internally coherent explanations for why they are unique in history and for why they are not responsible for the sins of the past.¹⁵⁵ Of course, someone has to be responsible for the bad in the world.

The Enemy and Negative Attitudes

If attitude is the core challenge The Reader faces in journeying through life, then it is The Enemy who has created negative attitudes, depression, and lack of belief. The Enemy serves Osteen’s purpose of unifying the audience against an Outsider who embodies everything The Reader and God are not. This is a key moment of consubstantiality via division.¹⁵⁶ It is The Enemy who is “trying to push you down, to keep your gifts, your creativity, your joy, your smile, your personality, and your dreams from ever seeing the light of day.”¹⁵⁷ The psychological well being of The Reader is a *spiritual* battle precisely because it is a contest between the source of happiness and success (God) and the source of negative thoughts and poor self-esteem (The Enemy). The goal of The Enemy is that “you live an average, mediocre life.” Indeed, “the adversities, the unfair situations are the results of the enemy’s efforts, attempting to discourage us and to deceive us into giving up on our dreams.”¹⁵⁸

Osteen deviates, here, from a great deal of traditional Christian belief. He begins conventionally enough, turning to the Scriptures to describe The Enemy as “the accuser of the brethren’ who would love for us to live our lives guilty and condemned.” But by guilty, Osteen *does not* mean the Enemy lures the individual into a state of guilt because of sin. While traditional Christianity thinks of guilt as a state of relationship to the law, i.e., you are guilty of

violating the law, Osteen uses the term “guilty” to describe an emotional state. Osteen means that by ‘living guilty’ the Enemy will “remind us of all our past mistakes and failures.”¹⁵⁹

Osteen also rejects the traditional Christian belief in the fallen state of humanity, considering it a doctrine of the Enemy. He declares, “The enemy loves to twist that around, insinuating there’s something wrong with you.”¹⁶⁰ Osteen blames the Enemy for taunting the audience into blaming themselves for mistakes. The Enemy tries to manipulate people into believing they are responsible for their past sins because they believe they are innately sinful, “The enemy doesn’t want you to understand that you have been made righteous. He much prefers you to have a sin consciousness...Start dwelling on the fact that you’ve been chosen, set part, approved and accepted into heaven—and that you’ve been made righteous on earth.”¹⁶¹ Osteen concludes that his audience is not fallen, but has only been convinced they are so by the Enemy.

Generational Theory and Cosmic Placement

Perhaps one of the more unusual ideas Osteen forwards is his belief in “generational blessings” and “generational curses” outlined in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 of *Become a Better You*. Osteen argues that the attitude of prior generations of a family can have an impact on The Reader’s current life, good and bad. He states:

The decisions we make today don’t simply affect ourselves; they affect our children and our children’s children for multiplied generations. The Bible talks about how the iniquity of the fathers can be passed down for three or four generations. That means bad habits, addictions, negativity, wrong mind-sets and other types of iniquities can be passed down.¹⁶²

Osteen recounts how patterns of poverty, anorexia, divorce, addictions, abuse, depression, and more can be passed down from generation to generation. These are “not just coincidence” but rather a “negative, destructive spirit that keeps getting passed down in that family.”¹⁶³ Thus, Osteen provides a further opportunity of externalizing responsibility for guilt and sin—if you cannot figure out why bad things happen to you, “Perhaps one of your ancestors opened the door to fear, anxiety, or worry, and everyone else has picked up on it for years.”¹⁶⁴ Osteen doesn’t dismiss circumstance entirely but argues, “Societal issues may have an impact, but these things don’t randomly happen in the spirit realm. Somebody, somewhere, opened the door to the enemy.”¹⁶⁵ The Enemy, already the vessel of responsibility for sin, can therefore work its way into The Reader’s life without any direct contact.

It’s important to separate Osteen’s version from other concepts of generation iniquity. Osteen is not saying that previous sins are exacted on subsequent generations, as occurs in the Old Testament. Instead, Osteen emphasizes that these are *patterns* or *spirits* that infect a family bloodline. These are not just punishment but instead the work of the Enemy.

Yet this generational iniquity is another opportunity for Osteen to emphasize The Reader’s place in the cosmic struggle. In Chapter 3, “The Power of Your Bloodline,” Osteen encourages The Reader to overcome these family patterns of negative behavior by embracing that, “Your spiritual bloodline is more powerful than your natural bloodline.”¹⁶⁶ Accordingly, Osteen argues that The Reader has a responsibility to stop the iniquity.¹⁶⁷ “One of the first steps to overcoming these generational curses is to recognize what you’re dealing with. Identify it.”¹⁶⁸ Osteen actively encourages The Reader to see his or her current problems as emanating from the sins of previous generations; while The Reader must recognize their own flaws, they are able to escape originary blame.

Strangely, Osteen does not mean “blood” simply as metaphor. Although he is relying on the archetypal power imbued in the symbol of “blood,” he also means that the blood somehow physically remembers curses and blessings.¹⁶⁹ In response to the question “Can [emotional, mental, and spiritual characteristics] be passed down as well?” he writes, “I read an interesting study done in 1993 by the United States military,”¹⁷⁰ that he says indicates that blood cells separated from the body react to circumstances in the body as if there were still some contact. While Osteen doesn’t precisely say that the study proves that sins can be passed down via blood, he does posit this study as a response to the question, allowing the audience to interpret the study as providing scientific support for his claim.

Generational iniquity also has a flip side; if The Readers can overcome negative spirits (with God’s help) they can set a pattern for “generational blessings” for their children, grandchildren, etc.¹⁷¹ In Chapter 4, “The Generational Blessing,” Osteen analogizes it to a bank account. The Readers can save up blessings for future generations—or they can overdraw it and leave future generations in a lurch.¹⁷² Osteen himself explains much of his current success by the work of previous generations: “My life is blessed today because somebody in my family line was praying, persevering even when times were tough, honoring God through it all.”¹⁷³ Osteen emphasizes that by working positively to create good patterns, The Reader can “run some important laps” in the family’s race, setting the stage for blessing that exceed The Reader’s life.¹⁷⁴

Osteen thereby locates the Reader as either the beneficiary of generations of blessings or, more likely, as a hero with the generational responsibility to overcome the negative spirits of the Enemy. If the Reader can succeed he or she can change the course of his or her family’s history. In terms of identification in a larger narrative, this placement is no small thing.

Jesus Christ and Freedom from Guilt

For a Christian preacher, Osteen has surprisingly little place for Jesus Christ. However, the hinge of his theo-psychological theory is on the Christ's role. I've already noted that in Osteen's version of the Christian myth, God is an active force in the universe, limited only by The Reader's willingness to identify with Him, who stands opposed by the Enemy, the creator of all psychological and social disease. Indeed, even Adam and Eve's Fall is interpreted as their failure to resist his negative influence on their self-esteem. Thus, the Enemy serves as the scapegoat. Osteen has enabled the audience to project their particular problems, problems of identity and culture particularly relevant to an audience living in the late modern world, onto a vessel outside themselves.

What is missing, though, is the transformative power of the killing—the *method* by which The Reader became forgiven and identified with God. A transformation serves the crucial purpose of differentiating the current identity from any previous interpretation.¹⁷⁵ While the Enemy serves the purposes of explaining neurosis and error, it does little to purge that guilt. As in the Christian narrative, Jesus Christ's death serves as Osteen's symbolic transformative sacrifice that frees humankind of guilt of Original Sin. But it does far more than that; it frees humankind from guilt and sin altogether. The Reader is so special to God that "God gave His very best for you, His only Son. So please don't go around thinking that you are worthless."¹⁷⁶ The result is that although the Reader must repent, he or she should not "beat yourself up for two weeks, or two months, or two years." Instead, Osteen proclaims, "Shake off guilt, condemnation, inadequacies, and sense that you can't measure up, and start feeling good about who you are."¹⁷⁷

Why should this be? Practically speaking, the reason is that self-esteem is the prerequisite to all other social success, "Jesus said, 'Love your neighbor as you love yourself.' Notice, the

prerequisite to loving others is to love yourself.”¹⁷⁸ But theologically speaking, it’s because Jesus has already defeated the Enemy.¹⁷⁹ Only the Enemy wants the Readers to think of themselves as sinful. Because of Christ’s sacrifice, God forgives every confessed sin instantly, “God not only forgives us, He chooses not to remember them anymore.”¹⁸⁰ In Osteen’s mind, “God has already made us worthy” of forgiveness and His gifts.¹⁸¹ He specifically rejects the idea that there is any recording of human sin:

A lot of people think God is mad at them, that He’s keeping a record of everything wrong they have ever done wrong... They assume they must pay for their mistakes. Unfortunately, the way most people attempt to do so is by giving up on their dreams; they perpetually feel disqualified, depressed, and defeated, thinking they are paying God back by living at a lower level than He intended... But the good news is that the debt has already been paid. Why not accept God’s mercy?¹⁸²

Osteen, therefore, also rejects the concepts of penance and atonement. Guilt, according to Osteen, is a product of the belief that the person is at any point unworthy of God. “Many people have a war going on inside themselves. They don’t like who they are... They focus on their weaknesses, not realizing that this negative introspection is a root cause of many of their difficulties.”¹⁸³ Instead, Osteen argues that God unconditionally and immediately forgives all weakness.¹⁸⁴

This is not a license to sin. Instead, Osteen says, all persons can sin at all times and “don’t need a license” to do it.¹⁸⁵ Instead, once people cease picking themselves apart and accept the forgiveness purchased by Christ’s sacrifice, then their identity will change so that they will not want to sin. The Reader’s acceptance of Christ’s sacrifice and God’s forgiveness results in a

transformation of the Reader into a person who wants “to live a life that’s pleasing to God.”¹⁸⁶ To achieve this, the Reader needs to “quit bringing up what God has forgotten,” i.e., the sins of the Reader. Thus, in Osteen’s Christian myth the Reader has been purified by Christ’s sacrifice and has already been forgiven. Failure to recognize this forgiveness is not God’s fault, but The Enemy’s influence over the Reader. Just as God declared Jesus his Chosen One at Christ’s baptism in the Jordan, God has declared the Reader his Chosen Child. To Osteen, the problem occurs when the Readers believe they need to earn forgiveness:

What a tragedy to go through life being against yourself, especially when there is no rational reason to do so. Understand that it is not that God will be pleased with you one of these days, when you get your stuff together. No, God is pleased with you right now. The war is over; God has won! That’s why it’s okay to feel good about who you are today, right now, this very moment.¹⁸⁷

Theo-Psychotherapeutic Advice

Osteen’s telling of the Christian myth serves the purpose of encouraging readers to see themselves as forgiven of all sins. Despite his claim that his goal is to make individuals responsible for their actions, Osteen’s cosmology serves the purpose of externalizing blame for psychology pathology and sin on a universal enemy.¹⁸⁸ The Enemy serves as a vessel that contains all responsibility for error, negative thinking, and ungodliness. Through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, the individual has been redeemed in God’s eyes. By recognizing and identifying with Christ’s sacrifice, the individual can be transformed to God’s favor—a favor that results in increases in psychological well-being, health, and profit. While this may not seem too far away from more traditional versions of the Christian myth, in Osteen’s version of the Peggalian doctrine, individuals are even freed from responsibility for their own actions. Osteen’s

version also rejects Augustine's account that humans are born sinful and in error. According to Osteen, The Reader does not even have to seek to be redeemed by God—instead, all have already been forgiven, it's merely a question of realizing it. Coming to God is not any kind of process or quest, but an instantaneous choice to identify with God and oppose the Enemy.

It is therefore unnecessary for Osteen to provide a particular Christian morphology. One simply chooses to acknowledge God's forgiveness and blessings, empowering God to act. But he does provide advice on how to confirm this instant "conversion" to a mentally stable and profitable Christianity. In his "Action Points" for "Part 2: Be Positive Toward Yourself," he advises readers to remind themselves, "1. I refuse to live guilty or condemned...I am forgiven by God." Osteen encourages the reader to embrace their new identity, transformed by their forgiven state, "2. Today I am choosing to refresh my self-image by speaking positive affirmations...such as: 'I am blessed, I am prosperous; I am healthy, I am continually growing wiser,'" and, "I am excelling in my career; God is helping me to succeed," and "I have a positive opinion about my myself because I not only know who I am, but I know *whose* I am—I belong to Almighty God." Finally, Osteen encourages introspection, "3. I am determined to keep my inner dialogue positive about myself. I will reject any negative thoughts...I will meditate on thoughts such as, "I am valuable." Other Parts of the book end in similar fashion, encouraging the reader to meditate on "overcom[ing] challenges" and affirming that "God accepts me."¹⁸⁹

Heavens, Ethereal and Material

Osteen has little place for heaven or the afterlife in *Become a Better You*. Osteen is clear that God lives in heaven, but doesn't have much discussion of salvation or being born again, outside the final page.¹⁹⁰ And while heaven *is* the place where people go when they die, often

regardless of their behavior,¹⁹¹ Osteen wants the Readers to realize, “You are not just taking up space, waiting to go to heaven.”¹⁹²

Heaven is always in the background as a safety net. Osteen declares that “Even in the worst case scenario—if we die—we go to heaven to be with the Lord!” However, Osteen generally sets the question of salvation and heaven aside in favor of material achievement:

I’ve had people tell me, “Joel...I know one day I’ll enjoy my life in the sweet by and by.” I appreciate what they’re saying, but God wants us to enjoy our lives right here in the nasty now and now. He wants us to have a little heaven on earth, right where we are...you can accomplish your dream before you go to heaven!¹⁹³

This material heaven-on-earth, the dreams that can be accomplished on earth rather in heaven, and the safety of the other-worldly heaven all serve Osteen’s purpose of reducing the anxiety of the audience by yielding to the audience’s need for affirmation that their current life does not exist in opposition to God’s will.

Summarizing Osteen’s Christian Myth and Symbolic Outlets

For an audience that exists in a constant state of doubt about their place in the world, Osteen has a clear understanding about what they want/need to hear. Osteen crosses the eons of time separating the Biblical myth and contemporary life by specifically addressing contemporary problems in specific terms and providing his audience forgiveness. He provides symbolic outlets for sin and guilt as well as a means of restoring one’s mental health and self-image. By providing new names for the sources of sadness and failure, Osteen strategically re-envision the Christian myth as a psychological drama played out in the mind and words of each person with the Enemy serving as the source of doubt, negative thinking, and sadness while God serves as a positive self

image, love, and well-being.¹⁹⁴ By identifying with God and His sacrifice, Jesus, the reader attains well-being and a privileged place among humans as one of God's "champions."

The Scripture of Psychological Self-Affirmation

As an act of homiletic theology, Osteen's theo-cosmology is vital to his ability to link the Christian myth to the current generation. His reinterpretation of the roles of God, Christ, the Enemy (Satan), and the roots of blessing and misfortune create new metaphors for understanding the Gospel. Yet for the Christian preacher, simply outlining a theology that grips the hearer or reader is not enough. The preacher must aid the audience in bonding the Scripture to their own life; a task that requires interpreting the Scriptures themselves for the benefit of the audience.¹⁹⁵

Osteen's use of Scripture overcomes the gap between modernity and the Christian narrative by enacting a psychotherapeutic Christianity. That psychotherapeutic Christianity links two different realms together so that the audience can identify the period of the Christian myth with their own lives.¹⁹⁶ There is a hierarchal relationship involved. The events of the Biblical period hold a superior position over contemporary events in the sense that we learn our ethical responsibilities now via the example set in the Biblical period. Osteen, like most preachers, uses Scripture as guidebook for conduct.

Osteen is explicit that his version of Christianity is a Christianity of "overcoming." The Reader needs to overcome negative history, generational curses, mental illness and neurosis, accusing voices, faith tests, and more.¹⁹⁷ Osteen supports this version of Christianity by inviting the reader to interpret each cited Scriptural account not as a theo-historical event in a religious or cultural history, but as examples of personal overcoming. Scripture is also not interpreted as a

narrative of sin or guilt, or as record of the faithful but instead as a series of anecdotal accounts of faithfulness and associated rewards.

Paul is forwarded as an example of personal triumph: “When people attempted to discourage the Apostle Paul, trying to talk him out of his dreams, telling him what he couldn’t do, Paul responded, ‘What if they don’t believe? Will their unbelief make the promise of God of no effect in my life... That’s the attitude we need to have as well.’”¹⁹⁸ By citing Paul, Osteen makes Paul’s “dream” of converting the Gentiles a metaphor for the audiences’ dream of health and prosperity. Osteen cites Paul’s encouragement to Timothy to “Stir up the gift within you” as encouragement to overcome “depression and discouragement, negatives voices... failures and fears” so that the audience might overcome problems such as bankruptcy and divorce.¹⁹⁹ Later, Paul’s advice to Timothy to “Fan your flame,” is interpreted to mean, “Stay passionate about life. Stay enthusiastic about your dreams.”²⁰⁰ Later Osteen uses the language of Paul to encourage the reader to, “Fan your flame and go to work with new enthusiasm... Give your employer 100 percent.”²⁰¹

According to Osteen, Paul’s strength is his ability to “start pressing forward.” He encourages the readers to be like Paul and “take hold of everything God has in store for me,” which includes, “Promotion, favor, increase.”²⁰² Paul’s destitute life, his rejection by Peter at Antioch, his imprisonments at Ephesus and Caesarea, his shipwreck at Malta, the various assaults he suffered, and his probable martyrdom are not mentioned by Osteen. To support his theory of iniquity, Osteen cites the story of Cain, son of Adam and murderer of Abel. Osteen notes that Cain’s son Lamach was also a murderer. Osteen concludes, “That iniquity kept getting passed down.”²⁰³ Osteen fails to mention that it was not Cain who cursed himself with a negative attitude, but God who delivered the curse.²⁰⁴

Osteen particularly uses Scripture to emphasize the way Biblical characters overcome internal doubt. Illustrating how “God will never ask you for something without first depositing it within you,” Osteen cites two Scriptural events. First, he cites Moses’s reluctance to take a leadership position in freeing the Hebrews from the Pharaoh. God, of course, demonstrates to Moses that his lack of self-esteem is ill-founded. Osteen also cites the story of Gideon, who when called upon by the Lord is overwhelmed with “fear and insecurity.”²⁰⁵ Gideon, of course, accepts his role after God tells Gideon he is ready. Osteen concludes, “Don’t let the size of your dreams of the vastness of God’s calling on your life intimidate you,” thereby making Gideon’s reluctance to become God’s instrument of righteousness and military vengeance consubstantial with the audiences’ own personal challenges.²⁰⁶ Later, Osteen interprets the Israelites escape from Egypt as a matter of self-esteem, “God told the children of Israel in Joshua 5, verse 9, ‘This day have I rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.’ In other words, they didn’t feel good about themselves...they were discouraged...God came to them and said, “Stop doing that.”²⁰⁷

For Osteen dreams serve as a critical metaphor linking the audience to the Biblical narrative. Osteen frequently links the great religious ambitions and projects of various Scriptural characters and the daily more mundane hopes of contemporary persons for a better career, more money, a nicer house, or recovery from illness by describing them all as “dreams,” hence creating some equivalency between ancient Scriptural events and the daily challenges of contemporary life. In the same fashion the literal battles and violence recorded in the Old Testament are analogized to figurative “fights” facing individuals today. Thus, Nehemiah’s revelation to the Israelites that if the Israelites would fight to defend their families and Jerusalem, God would fight with them is analogized to the relationship challenges today: “God is saying

something similar today. If we will do our part and take a stand for our families, God will do his His part. He'll help us to have great marriages and great relationships.”²⁰⁸

Even Christ is recruited into the Gospel of overcoming doubt. While encouraging The Reader to “Surround yourself with people who encourage you,” Osteen provides two key examples. First, he recounts how David rejected the negative influences who attempted to tell him he couldn't overcome Goliath. Second, Osteen cites Jesus. “Isn't it interesting that even Jesus had to leave His hometown of Nazareth because the people were so filled with unbelief? Jesus knew that if he stayed in that negative environment, it would hold him back.”²⁰⁹ Later, when emphasizing the power of internal calm and well-being, Osteen recounts Jesus calming the storm threatening to drown the Apostles (. “The reason Jesus was able to bring peace to that situation was because He had peace inside Himself. He was in the storm but He didn't let the storm get in Him.”²¹⁰ Thus, the lessons Jesus teaches emphasize the value of positive, affirming environments and psychological calm.

Osteen's Homiletic Theology and Identification

The homiletic theology presented by Osteen in *Become a Better You* is organized around an effort to connect to contemporary audiences. Keenly aware that the late modern audience is plagued by doubt, dislocation, cultural confusion, and a sense of social isolation, Osteen's description of the cosmic narrative enables the audience to displace blame for their personal failures on psychological states planted and exploited by the figure of The Enemy, either in this generation or even in past generations. By externalizing responsibility for sin to the Enemy and purging that blame in the figure of Christ, Osteen enables and encourages the audience to give up guilt and doubt and embrace God's love (with all its material benefits). By emphasizing that

God's best is always "to come" Osteen encourages the audience to expect God's favor, to look continually forward, and hope for better.

Osteen's citation and interpretation of Scriptural texts in terms of the personal challenge is a key element of this act of identification. Osteen is well aware that contemporary audiences often feel disconnected from the ancient events of the Scriptural narrative, wondering how the mythic history of an ancient desert people applies to their lives. Osteen's homiletic theology employs Scriptural character to emphasize God's interest in the personal development and favor of God. If Osteen's unique talent is helping participants feel included in the "cosmic order" in a way that builds "self-worth,"²¹¹ it is through this process of identification that he achieves that goal.

Conclusion

This dissertation has focused on the CPG's use of homiletic theology—that idea of basing preaching on *what can be said to the congregation* in relation to the Scripture. Rather basing its preaching on anterior systematic theology based on a strict, foundational Biblical hermeneutics that pays no mind to an audience, the CPG is oriented toward what purpose it can serve for the audience.²¹²

In this chapter, Osteen's *Become a Better You* has served as representative anecdote for the preaching of the CPG. Osteen's style, as I noted earlier, is not universal among all CPG preachers. Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, Thompson and Dollar, for example, put far more explicit emphasis on the *prosperity* element of the CPG. Meyer emphasizes mental fitness, much like Osteen. Gloria Copeland focuses on planning. Osteen also utilizes far less Scriptural citation than other CPG preachers, perhaps because he has the widest and most diverse audience. Yet Osteen's book serves as a good example of the CPG both because his version (a) has the widest audience

and (b) demonstrates the CPG's emphasis on audience adaptation, i.e., providing a particular audience an immediate, psychological pay-off in their religious experience through the use of an alternative hermeneutic. Combined with Osteen's adjustment to the audience's conception of time and possibility examined in previous chapters, Osteen's rhetorical strategy belies the oft-made claim that the CPG consists of simplistic tropes and worn-out platitudes.

Still, Osteen's book is precisely the easy manual to faith and success that Wells finds so disturbing. Osteen makes no claim to being a theologian. But, in true gargoyle fashion, *Become a Better You* bonds a shrewd grasp of the audience's perception of itself and its deference to scientific language with an implicit theology that is vital to the audience's ability to cope with the psychological problems that plague it. Osteen attempts to persuade his readers to take certain actions in their lives is heavily invested in his description for of the dramatic action of the cosmos as a critical part of the audience's attempt to find themselves. Osteen's process of rhetorical therapy relies upon imbuing the audience with a sense of divine destiny and providing a cast of characters and descriptions which explain how certain pathologies of the mind prevent people from embracing their true place and potential in the world. Osteen's affirmation of God's love for the audience and God's desire to give good things to them serve as justifications for Osteen's demand for only positive thinking and positive self-confidence. In Osteen's theology, all of the hard work of salvation has been done, if only the audience would realize it. Fault for sin is externalized upon a vaguely unthreatening version of Satan. Christ's sacrifice has already served to free humanity from guilt and condemnation. All Osteen asks is that the audience acknowledge God's power and love and use it to overcome their doubts, fear, depression, addictions, and other neuroses and diseases of modern life.

Osteen's strategy for allowing the audience to identify with his version of Christianity involves significant *yielding* to the audience. Rather than challenge the audience's materialism or concern with worldly things, Osteen weaves them into his narrative, arguing that God wants good things for His faithful people. Osteen manages the materialist guilt of the audience by interpreting the Scriptures as instances of personal affirmation and the overcoming of psychological obstacles. Osteen asks his audience to read the Scripture differently. Rather than focusing directly on Scriptural passages, Osteen often re-describes Biblical events in his own terms, allowing him to produce something more akin to dramatic therapy than traditional preaching. Repeatedly Scriptural characters are confronted by obstacles of self-esteem, negative thinking, depression, negative influences or lack of confidence and overcome these problems with God's help. Osteen links these moments of overcoming with financial, social, physiological, and others form of manifest success.

Osteen combines his psycho-theology with a conversational style highly invested in the strength of anecdotes. Osteen puts the inductive, illustrative technique to good use, supporting his assertion of medical, psychological, and financial miracles with contemporary stories. Real or fiction, these narratives allow the audience to identify Osteen's message with the problems in their own lives. As Craddock, Buttrick, and others have noted, even when these illustrative narratives don't quite connect with the audience, the process itself accesses the audience's ability to analogically and enthymematically derive lessons for themselves. Osteen's conversational style permits the audience to imagine themselves in direct counseling with Osteen, enabling the audience to trust their guide on their "inner journey."

In sum, the conversational style, the anecdotal approach, and Osteen's willingness to confront the specific problems of the audience compose a complex slate of tactics of

identification such that the audience can conclude that even specific examples that do not apply to them directly function analogically as useful information. As Craddock has argued, the inductive approach is one that American society well understands. If the audience can identify a theme or pattern across analogical situations, the audience is well prepared to enthymematically apply it to their own situation.²¹³

Given the identification strategies examined here, it is perhaps less of a surprise that Osteen succeeds where other, more traditional preachers have not despite his unusual beliefs. Osteen “challenges” the audience to affirm their unique place in the universe, encourages them to succeed more and do more of what they already want to do, and does not ask the audience to sacrifice their existing or desired material comforts. He provides both spiritual and material returns on their faith investments.²¹⁴ To these audiences, Osteen offers a heaven that they can touch and feel right now, not off in the “sweet by and by.” Getting right with God, in Osteen’s interpretation, is no major challenge—it requires only an internal struggle with personal doubt. If the audience can overcome those inner struggles, they’ll experience immediate “outer” benefits.²¹⁵ In return, Osteen asks for no penance, no atonement, but offers God’s assistance in overcoming very real problems of addiction, divorce, disease, poverty, and more in the lives of the audience. He explains the universe in a way that allows the audience to escape crippling guilt and fault and move easily onto bigger and better things. In this sense, *Becom(ing) a Better You* is a process of identity transformation that is both a reaction to and made possible by the “chaos” of life in late modernity. Osteen’s audience can choose to alter its identity as it sees fit and, by grounding that new identity in God, can assert that this new identity is the “real” one, with great possibilities in store for its future. It may be the essence of what Buttrick calls the “therapeutic preaching,” but as equipment for living, it serves his audience’s purposes well.

¹ Paul Ricoeur, "The Language of Faith," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, ed. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 227; David Buttrick, *A Captive Voice: The Liberation of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 79.

² Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The rhetorical situation," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 1 (1968), 1-14.

³ Photograph from Paul Duron, "Lakewood Church (interior) – Houston," <http://www.panoramio.com/photo/2412866> (accessed August 19, 2011).

⁴ Joel Osteen, *Become a Better You: 7 Keys to Improving Life Every Day* (New York: Free Press, 2007); quote on xiii.

⁵ See prior chapters; see also, Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 530.

⁶ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 207.

⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 530.

⁸ Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 11-12; Giddens, *Modernity*, 142.

⁹ Daniel Kalder, "Joel Osteen: The New Face of Christianity," *The Observer*, March 7, 2010, accessed September 13, 2010. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/mar/07/joel-osteen-america-pastor>

¹⁰ Michael Jeffress, "A Study of Demographics, Exposure Levels, and Perceptions of Pastor Joel Osteen's Viewing Audience" (paper presented at the annual meeting for the National Communication Association, San Diego, CA, November 21, 2008).

¹¹ Christine Miller and Nathan Carlin, "Joel Osteen as Cultural Selfobject: Meeting the Needs of the Group Self and Its Individual Members in and from the Largest Church in America," *Pastoral Psychology* 59 (2010), 47.

¹² David Van Biema and Jeff Chu, "Does God Want You to Be Rich?" *Time* (Sept. 18, 2006), 48-56.

¹³ Joel Osteen, qtd. in Zack Quaintanc, "Our Interview with Joel Osteen," *The Monitor*, August 7, 2010, accessed September 15, 2010. <http://www.themonitor.com/articles/osteen-29332-joel-years.html>

¹⁴ Joel Osteen, qtd. in "Joel Osteen Answers His Critics," *60 Minutes*, October 14, 2007; updated June 5, 2008, accessed September 13, 2010.

<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/10/11/60minutes/main3358652.shtml?tag=contentMain;contentBodyJoe;> Osteen, qtd. in Linda Sheahen, "Expect God's Favor": Interview with Joel Osteen," *Beliefnet*, December 2004

<http://www.beliefnet.com/Inspiration/Christian-Inspiration/2004/12/Expect-Gods-Favor-Interview-With-Joel-Osteen.aspx> (accessed September 15, 2010).

¹⁵ Miller and Carlin, "Joel Osteen," 39-41.

¹⁶ Miller and Carlin, "Joel Osteen," 39, 41.

¹⁷ Shayne Lee and Phillip Sinitierre, *Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and the Spiritual Marketplace* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 37.

¹⁸ Miller and Carlin, "Joel Osteen," 39.

¹⁹ James B. Twitchell, *Branded Nation: The Marketing of Megachurch, College, Inc., and Museumworld* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 78-80.

²⁰ James B. Twitchell, *Shopping for God: How Christianity Went from In Your Heart to In Your Face* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2007), 202.

²¹ Helje Kringlebotn Sødal, "'Victor, not Victim': Joel Osteen's Rhetoric of Hope," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 25 (January, 2010), 42.

²² Osteen, *Become*, 74, 127, 207.

²³ Ann Swidler, "Saving the Self: Endowment versus Depletion in American Institutions," in *Meaning and Modernity: Religion, Polity, and Self*, eds. Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 41-42. The numbers of "Christian fundamentalism" can sometimes be confusing because the discursive economy at work in Christian marketing. A number of fairly moderate groups that are required to call themselves "biblically-based" as a matter of form.

²⁴ Swidler, "Saving the Self," 44-45.

²⁵ Swidler, "Saving the Self," 52, 54; Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 473-474.

²⁶ Twitchell, *Shopping*, 91.

²⁷ Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Updated Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 228-229; Miller and Carlin, "Joel Osteen," 39.

²⁸ David Buttrick, "Who is Listening?" in *Listening to the Word: Studies in Honor of Fred B. Craddock*, eds. Gail R. O'Day & Thomas G. Long (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 199.

²⁹ Carlin and Miller, "Joel Osteen," 31.

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- ³⁰ Osteen, *Become*, 236.
- ³¹ Osteen, "Joel Osteen Answers."
- ³² Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority: Essays on Inductive Preaching* (Enid: The Phillips University Press, 1974), 14-15.
- ³³ Craddock, *As One*, 12.
- ³⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 506.
- ³⁵ Sødal, "'Victor, not Victim,'" 39-40.
- ³⁶ Kalder, "Joel Osteen."
- ³⁷ Miller and Carlin, "Joel Osteen," 31.
- ³⁸ Buttrick, "Who Is Listening?," 199-200.
- ³⁹ John A. Coleman, SJ, "Selling God in America: American Commercial Culture as a Climate of Hospitality to Religion," in *Meaning and Modernity: Religion, Polity, and Self*, eds. Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 41-42; Twitchell, *Shopping for God*, 214.
- ⁴⁰ Jill Dubisch and Raymond Michalowski, "Blessed Are the Rich: The New Gospel of Wealth in Contemporary Evangelism," in Eds. Marshall Fishwick and Ray B. Browne, *The God Pumpers: Religion in the Electronic Age* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987).
- ⁴¹ Milmon F. Harrison, *Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 39; Osteen believes his audience sees it this way, John Heilpern, "Minister of Finance," *Vanity Fair*, April 2010, accessed September 13, 2010. <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2010/04/otl-osteen-201004>.
- ⁴² Daniel M. Gross, "Introduction: Being-Moved: The Pathos of Heidegger's Rhetorical Ontology," in *Heidegger and Rhetoric*, Eds. Daniel M. Gross and Ansgar Kemman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 3.
- ⁴³ Gross, "Introduction," 1.
- ⁴⁴ Buttrick, "Who is Listening?" 203.
- ⁴⁵ Osteen, *Become*, xv.
- ⁴⁶ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California, 1969), 38.

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- ⁴⁷ Buttrick, *Who Is Listening?*, 205.
- ⁴⁸ John Poulakos, "Toward a Sophistic Definition of Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 16 (1983), 35-48.
- ⁴⁹ Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, Third Edition (Berkeley: University of California, 1973), 227.
- ⁵⁰ Burke, *The Philosophy*, 227.
- ⁵¹ Osteen, *Become*, 103.
- ⁵² Burke, *Philosophy*, 299.
- ⁵³ Burke, *Rhetoric*, 21-22.
- ⁵⁴ Burke, *Rhetoric*, 46.
- ⁵⁵ Burke, *Rhetoric*, 21-46.
- ⁵⁶ Burke, *Rhetoric*, 38; Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, 186.
- ⁵⁷ Giddens, *Modernity*, 171.
- ⁵⁸ Buttrick, "Who is Listening?," 193-194.
- ⁵⁹ Burke, *Rhetoric*, 38.
- ⁶⁰ David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 320; Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 85.
- ⁶¹ Osteen, *Become*, xiii.
- ⁶² Osteen, *Become*, xiii.
- ⁶³ Osteen, *Become*, xiii.
- ⁶⁴ Osteen, *Become*, xiii-xiv.
- ⁶⁵ Osteen, *Become*, xv.
- ⁶⁶ Osteen, *Become*, xiv.
- ⁶⁷ Osteen, *Become*, xv.
- ⁶⁸ Osteen, *Become*, xiv.
- ⁶⁹ Burke, *Rhetoric*, 55.
- ⁷⁰ Osteen, *Become*, xv.
- ⁷¹ Osteen, *Become*, 18.
- ⁷² Osteen, *Become*, 375.

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- ⁷³ Osteen, *Become*, 46.
- ⁷⁴ Osteen, *Become*, 89.
- ⁷⁵ Osteen, *Become*, 89.
- ⁷⁶ Osteen, *Become*, 101.
- ⁷⁷ Osteen, *Become*, 110.
- ⁷⁸ Osteen, *Become*, 163.
- ⁷⁹ Walter Fisher, "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument," *Communication Monographs* 51 (1984), 3.
- ⁸⁰ Craddock, *Preaching*, 204.
- ⁸¹ Phillip Brooks, qtd. in Barbara Brown Taylor, "Preaching the Body," in *Listening to the Word: Studies in Honor of Fred B. Craddock*, ed. Gail R. O'Day & Thomas G. Long (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 214.
- ⁸² Osteen, *Become*, 7.
- ⁸³ Osteen, *Become*, 15.
- ⁸⁴ Osteen, *Become*, 89.
- ⁸⁵ Osteen, *Become*, 42.
- ⁸⁶ Osteen, *Become*, 42.
- ⁸⁷ Gross, "Introduction," 3; John D. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 107.
- ⁸⁸ Buttrick, "Who is Listening?" 201.
- ⁸⁹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 21.
- ⁹⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello, S.J. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 79.
- ⁹¹ Robert G. Hughes, "Narrative as Plot," in *Journeys Toward Narrative Preaching*, ed. Wayne Bradley Robinson (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1990), 58.
- ⁹² Craddock, *Preaching*, 162.
- ⁹³ Craddock, *Preaching*, 163.

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- ⁹⁴ Burke, *Rhetoric*, 64.
- ⁹⁵ Craddock, *Preaching*, 89.
- ⁹⁶ Osteen, *Become*, 21.
- ⁹⁷ Osteen, *Become*, 43.
- ⁹⁸ Osteen, *Become* 55.
- ⁹⁹ Osteen, *Become*, 50.
- ¹⁰⁰ Osteen, *Become*, 72-73.
- ¹⁰¹ Osteen, *Become*, xiii.
- ¹⁰² Osteen, *Become*, 355.
- ¹⁰³ Osteen, *Become*, 331.
- ¹⁰⁴ Yielding to the audience is a critical point of identification; Burke, *Rhetoric*, 56.
- ¹⁰⁵ Craddock, *As One*, 57-59; quote from 57.
- ¹⁰⁶ Giddens, *Modernity*, 187.
- ¹⁰⁷ Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 75.
- ¹⁰⁸ Taylor, "Preaching," 213.
- ¹⁰⁹ David Buttrick, *Preaching Jesus Christ: An Exercise in Homiletic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 17.
- ¹¹⁰ Buttrick, "Who is Listening," 193, 195, 199-200.
- ¹¹¹ Osteen, *Become*, 5.
- ¹¹² Osteen, *Become*, 5.
- ¹¹³ Osteen, *Become*, 3, 2.
- ¹¹⁴ Osteen, *Become*, 43.
- ¹¹⁵ Osteen, *Become*, 57; my emphasis.
- ¹¹⁶ Osteen, *Become*, 52.
- ¹¹⁷ Osteen, *Become*, 99-100.
- ¹¹⁸ Osteen, *Become*, 321.
- ¹¹⁹ Osteen, *Become*, 5.
- ¹²⁰ Osteen, *Become*, 34.

¹²¹ Osteen, *Become*, 5.

¹²² Osteen, *Become*, 25.

¹²³ Osteen, *Become*, 38.

¹²⁴ Osteen, *Become*, 40.

¹²⁵ Osteen, *Become*, 74.

¹²⁶ Osteen, *Become*, 74.

¹²⁷ Osteen, *Become*, 97.

¹²⁸ Osteen, *Become*, 47.

¹²⁹ Osteen, *Become*, 20.

¹³⁰ Osteen, *Become*, 102.

¹³¹ Osteen, *Become*, 9.

¹³² Osteen, *Become*, 290.

¹³³ In one interesting example, Osteen recounts how he believes God prompted people to build effective exits to the Compaq center almost four decades prior to Lakewood Church moving there, precisely to give his congregation easy access to parking; Osteen, *Become*, 293.

¹³⁴ Osteen, *Become*, 377.

¹³⁵ Osteen, *Become*, 34

¹³⁶ Buttrick, *Homiletic*, 11.

¹³⁷ Buttrick, “Who is Listening?,” 190.

¹³⁸ Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 32.

¹³⁹ Osteen, *Become*, 307.

¹⁴⁰ Osteen, *Become*, 36, 38.

¹⁴¹ Osteen, *Become*, 66; He also states, “there’s no such thing as coincidence when your life is directed by God,” 283.

¹⁴² Osteen, *Become*, 17, 18, 21, 23, 24.

¹⁴³ Osteen, *Become*, 3.

¹⁴⁴ Osteen, *Become*, 4.

¹⁴⁵ Osteen, *Become*, 373.

¹⁴⁶ Gary McCarron, "Lost Dogs and Financial Healing: Deconstructing Televangelist Miracles," in Eds. Marshall Fishwick and Ray B. Browne, *The God Pumpers: Religion in the Electronic Age* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987), 25.

¹⁴⁷ Osteen, *Become*, 314; my emphasis.

¹⁴⁸ Osteen, *Become*, 296.

¹⁴⁹ Osteen, *Become*, 274.

¹⁵⁰ Osteen, *Become*, 290.

¹⁵¹ Osteen, *Become*, 115.

¹⁵² Osteen, *Become*, 114.

¹⁵³ Osteen, *Become*, 115.

¹⁵⁴ Burke, *The Philosophy*, 202.

¹⁵⁵ Burke, *The Philosophy*, 215.

¹⁵⁶ Burke, *Rhetoric*, 21-22.

¹⁵⁷ Osteen, *Become*, 22.

¹⁵⁸ Osteen, *Become*, 20.

¹⁵⁹ Osteen, *Become*, 85.

¹⁶⁰ Osteen, *Become*, 91.

¹⁶¹ Osteen, *Become*, 102.

¹⁶² Osteen, *Become*, 49.

¹⁶³ Osteen, *Become*, 50.

¹⁶⁴ Osteen, *Become*, 51.

¹⁶⁵ Osteen, *Become*, 53.

¹⁶⁶ Osteen, *Become*, 37.

¹⁶⁷ Osteen, *Become*, 51.

¹⁶⁸ Osteen, *Become*, 53.

¹⁶⁹ Robert C. Rowland, "On Mythic Criticism," *Communication Studies* 41 (1990), 104.

¹⁷⁰ Osteen, *Become*, 60.

¹⁷¹ Osteen, *Become*, 56.

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- ¹⁷² Osteen, *Become*, 59-60.
- ¹⁷³ Osteen, *Become*, 66.
- ¹⁷⁴ Osteen, *Become*, 62.
- ¹⁷⁵ Burke, *Rhetoric*, 20.
- ¹⁷⁶ Osteen, *Become*, 35.
- ¹⁷⁷ Osteen, *Become*, 101.
- ¹⁷⁸ Osteen, *Become*, 99-100.
- ¹⁷⁹ Osteen, *Become*, 34.
- ¹⁸⁰ Osteen, *Become*, 24.
- ¹⁸¹ Osteen, *Become*, 89.
- ¹⁸² Osteen, *Become*, 94.
- ¹⁸³ Osteen, *Become*, 99.
- ¹⁸⁴ Osteen, *Become*, 101.
- ¹⁸⁵ Osteen, *Become*, 104.
- ¹⁸⁶ Osteen, *Become*, 104.
- ¹⁸⁷ Osteen, *Become*, 107.
- ¹⁸⁸ Osteen, *Become*, 56.
- ¹⁸⁹ Osteen, *Become*, 81.
- ¹⁹⁰ Osteen, *Become*, 67, 88, 104, 106.
- ¹⁹¹ Osteen, *Become*, 262, 296, 306, 334.
- ¹⁹² Osteen, *Become*, 334.
- ¹⁹³ Osteen, *Become*, 41.
- ¹⁹⁴ Burke, *The Philosophy*, 202-203.
- ¹⁹⁵ Buttrick, "Who is Listening?" 190.
- ¹⁹⁶ This process of identification is described by Burke, *The Philosophy*, 215.
- ¹⁹⁷ Osteen, *Become*, 25, 35, 37, 38, 40, 42, 43, 52, 53, 54, 55, 64, 68, 81, 109, 112, 121, 122, 138, 202, 206, 209, 213, 223, 231, 263, 270, 308, 324, 325, 326, 329, 341, 348, 351, 356, 365.
- ¹⁹⁸ Osteen, *Become*, 14.

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- ¹⁹⁹ Osteen, *Become*, 20-21.
- ²⁰⁰ Osteen, *Become*, 363.
- ²⁰¹ Osteen, *Become*, 364.
- ²⁰² Osteen, *Become*, 41.
- ²⁰³ Osteen, *Become*, 50.
- ²⁰⁴ Gen. 4:11-12.
- ²⁰⁵ Osteen, *Become*, 14.
- ²⁰⁶ Interestingly, Gideon ultimately fails to remain faithful to the Lord—a detail Osteen leaves out.
- ²⁰⁷ Osteen, *Become*, 129.
- ²⁰⁸ Osteen, *Become*, 161.
- ²⁰⁹ Osteen, *Become*, 30.
- ²¹⁰ Osteen, *Become*, 274-275.
- ²¹¹ Lee and Sinitierre, *Holy Mavericks*, 43.
- ²¹² David Buttrick, *Preaching Jesus Christ: An Exercise in Homiletic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 13.
- ²¹³ Craddock, *As One*, 57-59; quote from 57.
- ²¹⁴ Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 49.
- ²¹⁵ Osteen, *Become*, xv.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In the previous chapter I argued that Joel Osteen's use of the psychological idiom made his preaching effective by tapping into the audience's central concern about themselves. Osteen's psycho-cosmic drama, which provides exterior explanations for the problems that ail people and motivational solutions, appeals to the audience's desire to feel personally connected to a drama larger than them. The central appeal of the CPG is precisely that: it enables the audience to feel included, uniquely created and able to act in the world in meaningful ways. The CPG, as a kind of religious discourse adapted to these transitional times, serves to provide meaning, efficacy, and a route to an "anointing of ease."¹ Sociologically, this divine anointment of ease is part of the CPG effort to maintain and restore credulous religious belief in an increasingly secular America, all the while preserving and even encouraging the profit-oriented materialism of modernist culture. The discovery of the full story of how it attempts to achieve this goal has been the core of this dissertation.

Specifically, the purpose of this dissertation has been two-fold. First, it was intended to explore the strange phenomenon of the CPG, a version of evangelical Christianity that has defied the general decline of structured Christianity by adapting itself to the strange times we live in. More generally, this dissertation was intended to explore how preaching, as a rhetorical enactment, adapted itself to a post-structural world and how its methods reflected the deconstructive nature of interpretation itself. As David Buttrick remarks, preaching is the very difficult but essential social activity of adapting the universal to local terms.² Paul Ricoeur is rueful about the capacity of contemporary preaching, noting that contemporary religious language often fails to cross that divide, unable to discover a language that makes an ancient but

universal message resonate in contemporary cultural conditions and circumstances.³ Current statistics bear out Ricoeur's concern about Christianity's current lack of resonance. Yet despite these challenges and sociological trends, millions of persons tune in each week to hear CPG preachers like Joel Osteen, Kenneth Hagin, and Creflo Dollar preach. Such an aberration needs to some explanation.

Certainly, the CPG has undertaken a difficult task. It has taken on the work of restoring credulous religious belief in an era that is increasingly dominated by the debunking power of scientific and technological modernism. In this study, I defined the CPG as kind of evangelical Christianity that believes that God actively intends each believer to live a life that includes divinely ordained wealth and miraculous health. Thus, the CPG attempts to restore this credulous belief by leaving in place and even encouraging the materialist desires of the audience while exhorting the audience to put full faith and credit in the Will of God. Through the course of the previous eight chapters, I have examined techniques used by the preaching of the CPG to adapt its message to changing socio-cultural conditions. These techniques include the textual hermeneutics of the CPG preachers; the CPG's resurrection of occult world-views that empower their audience against the hegemony of cold modernism; the CPG's stitching together of the debunked symbols of previous Christian forms and the spiritually empty symbols of modernist Christianity into symbolic gargoyles; the politically disempowering focus of the CPG on individual promotion; its alteration of the audience's perception of time so that the audience will be inspired to believe more is possible in life; and finally, its effort to adopt secular psychological idioms to appeal to an audience stricken with anxiety about their own place in the world. Throughout my analysis, I have emphasized that the CPG has taken on a post-structural

turn, utilizing the intrinsic liabilities in the language of evangelistic Christianity and the problems of modernist interpretation to find a space to fit itself into the lives its believers.

This conclusion has the objective of tying together the threads of analysis and thought I have forwarded in this dissertation, elucidating the significance of this study for the field of rhetoric, and giving some direction for future research. To that end, this final chapter proceeds first by summarizing the findings of the dissertation in relation to research questions included in the first chapter. Second, I emphasize the relevance of this study to rhetorical theory. Third, I note some limitations of my study and provide some directions for future research. I wrap up by reflecting on the significance and meaning of the prominence of the CPG in the contemporary world.

Key Findings of Study

I began this dissertation by noting four key research questions: (1) How do CPG preachers adapt their message to social conditions and by what means? (2) What are the consequences of their interpretive choices? (3) Why is the CPG so appealing to audiences? (4) What do these techniques reflect about larger social-symbolic schemas? In this section, I summarize the key arguments and findings of the variety of studies that I conducted in my dissertation.

A New Reading of Christianity for a New Kind of Christian

The first research question asks how the CPG adapts its message to changing social conditions. I have argued that the CPG adapts to these times of transition by engaging in and teaching its audience new hermeneutic processes that enable it to see the Scriptures and the world differently. If a significant problem of contemporary religion—and contemporary culture as a whole—is the inability of individuals to assemble satisfactory frames of interpretation that

account for the social fragmentation, cultural *ennui*, and adriftness of late modern life, the CPG attempts to resolve the problem by assembling a new way of reading texts and interpreting symbols that creates an appealing outlook on events. It does so not by rejecting the methods or objectives of prior eras, but by entelechial extension—by casuistic stretching—of ideas already available in the symbolic environment.

A Fragmented Social-Symbolic Environment

The premise of this study has been that the social-symbolic environment has significantly changed, even “flown apart,” in the modern period.⁴ A wide range of theorists, from Anthony Giddens to Manuel Castells, has argued that there is little way for those in contemporary culture to develop the core symbolic foundations necessary for individuals to feel a strong sense of grounding and place in the universe.⁵ The psychologist Kenneth Gergen has remarked that the technological saturation has led to a sense of cultural loss, a feeling of lost identity, a loss of a sense of order that has made it difficult to sort out social organization and even moral choices.⁶ Philosophers like Martin Heidegger have noted the insidious impact of technological organization on the individual, noting that persons are now often categorized by their technical functions.⁷ Barrett noted that technological rationality has confronted humans with a vast, faceless, neutral universe in which the localized symbolic meanings are confronted by the denotative force of modern science and skepticism.⁸

These broad cultural premises have done significant damage to religious belief. As I observed in the “Introduction,” religious belief is either stagnant or declining throughout the Western world. Even as the total number of believers in the United States remains steady, the total proportion of those believing in a specific religion or attending church is on the decline. Religionists like Robert Bellah and his co-authors of *Habits of the Heart* and the contributors to

the volume *Meaning and Modernity* recognize that religious symbologies are losing their significance in contemporary culture.⁹ Religious symbols are everywhere but seem to have lost much of their force on society and in the minds of individuals. Charles Taylor argues that the modernist scientific worldview has lost its centuries-long partnership with religion.¹⁰ Now, as noted in “Gospels and Gargoyles, Part I,” scientific and technological world-views stand on their own, with no need for the blessing of religion. One can assemble a coherent view of the universe and society with no reference to God.

Religion is not dead, however. Religious motivations still exist. On the opposite end of the spectrum from the lack of efficacy of much of religious symbolism there is the sense of spiritual emptiness in modern, secular life. Taylor has noted that contemporary persons still seek spiritual fulfillment, just not within structural boundaries of traditional religious practices.¹¹ Others have observed that many persons still turn to religion seeking to return to some of the sense of whole-ness they’ve lost in the course of their fragmented, modern life. Many seek a way to achieve “more” in life, though they are unsure what that means.¹² These religious “seekers,” as they are sometimes known, often act commercially, functionally shopping for religious beliefs or churches that best suit their needs, often adopting what beliefs they can use and ignoring those they do not want to use.¹³ It is a telling fact of Chapter 8 that many nominal Catholics attend Osteen’s Word-of-Faith church on Saturday and Catholic mass on Sunday.¹⁴ Such fragmentation is the new normal of religious life in America. The CPG is uniquely adapted to managing that fragmentation.

A New Method of Textual Interpretation

At its most basic level, the CPG constitutes a new version of Christianity by reading the Scriptures differently. Unlike most contemporary Christian denominations that study and

establishes their beliefs and doctrines on anterior hermeneutics and theology, the CPG is at work *preaching* its Scriptural hermeneutics. I examined this thesis in Chapter 2, “The Absolute Hermeneutic and The Secret of Prosperity,” where I argue that the “Dad” of the CPG, Kenneth Hagin, attempts to by-pass the fragmentation and inherent instability of Scriptural interpretation by claiming unique access to the Hermeneut of Hermeneuts, i.e., God-himself.

Contemporary Christianity is plagued by textual ambiguity and difficulties of interpretation. Even contemporary evangelical exegetes, who claim to believe in a simple, literal version of the Scriptures, often must go to great lengths with complex techniques to distill the meaning of certain elements of Scriptures. The disjunction between the evangelical claim to *sola scriptura* and the complexity and contradictory nature of the Bible itself has served to make the claim that Christianity provides certainty in an uncertain world difficult to maintain.

In response, Hagin takes on the Christian evangelical emphasis on Scriptures and claims for himself the unique power of interpretation via revelation. Early in Hagin’s preaching career, he did not understand why it was that God’s preachers should be poor and suffer. Hagin’s reading of the Scriptures seemed to say that the faithful would receive all the good things of this earth, but he had been taught that poverty was Godly. So he prayed about it.

God responded, personally. In a series of visions, God provided Hagin with a new message revealed by a new hermeneutic technique and new interpretation of the Scriptures: the Christian people are supposed to be wealthy and it was the Devil, the “god” of this world, that had convinced people that Christians should live lives of poverty. By highlighting key passages of Scripture, God emphasized to Hagin that Christians have a final, divine, spiritual, and even material authority over this world that enables them to gather to themselves the good things of the world, including money and physical health. Focusing on interpreting existing Scriptures,

Hagin emphasizes that his revelations do not constitute *new* doctrines or a new Scriptural testament to God but are truths already contained in the Scriptures themselves. What God has taught Hagin in revelation is not information but a new way of reading—the Secret way of reading, given by God, that eliminates all hermeneutic doubt.

Hagin's grounding of the CPG in the Scriptural preaching and reading traditions of evangelical Christianity places the defenders of Christian evangelical orthodoxy in the difficult position of resorting to a kind of realist rationality to oppose Hagin's Christian Gnostic mysticism. What Hagin advocates for the CPG is an *extension* of these evangelical Christian traditions to their breaking point. Indeed, the evangelical critics of Hagin do not deny that God blesses the Christian people materially, or that God performs miracles in the present day, or that God can speak directly to individual.¹⁵ What the critics object to is what Burke calls the mystics' lack of good taste.¹⁶ By taking the evangelical/Pentecostal beliefs to indiscrete lengths, Hagin deconstructs the limits of good taste in the evangelical positions on revelation, gifts of healing, and material blessing by casuistically stretching them to a point where even the traditional advocates of God's power in the world object to the magic-like powers that Hagin advocates, in some ways embarrassing those religious factions by the possibilities native to their theologies.

Hagin's technique of Scriptural explication and his linkage of his own efforts to the charismatic traditions within American Christianity belie the critics' complaints that his doctrines are not grounded in Scripture and that he is instead bringing in non-Christian—occult—views into a Christian setting.¹⁷ This dissertation has revealed that formally the CPG does not read so differently from traditional evangelical Christianity. The CPG's procedures of reading, understanding, and then believing are the same process that orthodox evangelicals

advocate. Hagin repeatedly argues that all ideas must be checked against Scriptures, as his critics demand, even requiring a vision that God Himself justify himself in terms of the Scriptural text.

As Chapter 2 reveals, Hagin's "anti-technique" of using direct divine revelation to clarify the meaning of the text finds a home in Christian traditions themselves. Like the preachers of the Great Awakening, Hagin understands that theology consists of what can be preached and spends little time considering "good taste"—what I imagine is a kind of theology tinged by a certain rationalist limit. As a rhetor, Hagin's using God as the Ultimate Hermeneut gives him a valuable trump card against opponents who rely on complex technique and method to deliver the meaning of the Scriptures. Hagin's method is simple, accessible, and divinely blessed. By taking each belief or cultural features, from belief in *sola scriptura*, to belief in prophetic gifts, to belief in healing powers and God's material blessing, to a limit, Hagin undermines the doctrinal stability of orthodox evangelical Christianity and carves out a space for his own version of Christian faith.

Yet as "The Absolute Hermeneutic and The Secret of Prosperity" concludes, the CPG's resort to the Divine Absolute Hermeneutics, which has the goal of by-passing hermeneutics itself by establishing the ultimate Meaning of Scriptures, never has enough force to eliminate textual hermeneutics itself. At best, God's Divine revelation is certain for those prophets who hear it, not for us who merely hear the prophets. Those who hear the prophet must still *interpret* the prophet him- or herself. Even if we believe the prophet is neither a fraud or mad, the CPG's effort to use the revelation as the Absolute Hermeneutic (the secret key to reading that unlocks full, true meaning) fails in the face of the play of *différance*. God's Word to humans is still mediated by the ambiguity between sign and signified in the communication of humans *qua* humans. While Hagin's Gnosticism attempts to replace *faith* with the epistemological certainty of *knowledge* (divine knowledge, because God has told us the certain meaning of the text), we remain unsure.

Hagin's new techniques, his use of divine revelation, may serve to deconstruct the evangelical Christian tradition but it does not eliminate hermeneutics or the need to interpret.

New techniques, same as the old techniques, perhaps. All metaphysical hermeneutics believe they are delivering the Absolute Hermeneutics, The One True Way to read the text. Yet the reading of CPG is uniquely tailored to these transitional times. It utilizes the familiar techniques of Christianity in ways that produce a new reading of Christianity fit for a time when personal economic efficacy is low but personal desire for prosperity and health are high. The CPG, as Hagin demonstrates, does not conduct its reading in private, in studies in theological communities or schools, but in the process of preaching itself, where its observers can see it and, perhaps, believe it.

Christianity and the Mystically Efficacious World-View

Hermeneutics is not merely the method of reading the text on a page, but also the technique we use to read the signs and symbols of the world, i.e, how we sort out the *Erlebnisstorm*. The CPG proposes not only a new way of reading the Scriptures, but also a new way of reading the signs of the world. One of the key findings of this dissertation is that the CPG adapts to contemporary social conditions by attempting to radically alter the audiences' reading of the world and to re-consider their own ability to take action within it. In a number of different ways, the CPG proposes that the signs of the world are not what they seem, that there are "hidden" workings of the universe that are dictating the merely "natural" events of the contemporary world and that those with the right knowledge and right faith can access these secret workings and bring them together.

In "Christian Prosperity and the Magic World-View," I argued that the CPG reveals that the occult world-view is not dead. The CPG doctrine of "Positive Confession" provides evidence

that there is a living, breathing magic world-view. Positive Confession, which asserts that those who think, believe, and speak positively can obtain material benefits, is occult in the sense that it believes that supernatural powers can be called up for the immediate and practical (rather than the otherworldly or moral) benefit of the believer. Of course, the CPG is a theurgist version of the occult rather than diabolical one—that it is to say, its magical beliefs are premised upon the power of God rather than on the power of Satan or some ungodly power. But rather than something new or strange, I have argued that the CPG’s integration of the occult into Christianity is a renewal of a long heritage of occultism in the American Christian tradition.

Christianity is often primarily concerned with eternal and otherworldly; in the evangelical case, the destination of the soul for either salvation or damnation after death. What the CPG preachers restore to Christianity is a this-worldly, immediately beneficial element. The CPG maintains that God can not only save your soul, but can also solve practical problems, like lack of money, debt, the need for new appliances, colds, or even significant health problems. I have argued that this constitutes a “magic world-view”—a belief that the world is managed by spiritual, religio-magical forces that are the true origins of material outcomes. Magic, as a matter of technique, is the process of finding the proper method for invoking these otherworldly forces to provide immediate, utilitarian material outcomes.¹⁸ The CPG embraces this view, emphasizing the power of the spoken word to bring down both blessings and curses and to put angels and demons to work or flight. In the CPG’s view what each person says has an outcome on the material world, for good or for ill. Those that possess the proper formula for obtaining and applying God’s favor can obtain material favor in this world.

To support its view, the CPG preachers provide an entire cosmological narrative that describes why belief results in material outcomes. Hosts of characters acting in the universe

control how the universe works. In “The Rhetoric of (Profitable) Liberation,” I reviewed how various CPG preachers, including Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, and T.D. Jakes, structure the universe in a way that explains the efficacy of the magic world-view. Hagin preached that a varied cast of Satan, demons, angels, and other supernatural actors were all at work behind the scenes, engaged in a cosmological struggle to help or hurt the Christian believer. Christian rhetoric—words of authority and victory—have power over these forces, power that God has given believers. T.D. Jakes believes that God is contractually obligated to give believers certain benefits and that, in fact, the universe has been organized in a fashion in which God is holding in trust a great number of benefits that believers must simply speak out in order to access.

From the outside, such efforts might seem dubious. From the viewpoint of modernist, scientifically ordered thinking they are patently unreasonable. But a magic world-view is constituted as a form of resistance to modernist thinking. At the close of “Christian Prosperity and the Magic World-View,” I argue that the overarching hegemony of scientific thinking and modernist capitalist economics invites discourses of resistance.¹⁹ In a symbolic environment where the natural and social worlds seem to consist of a series of systems largely outside of individual control and where globalized economic forces seem beyond the scope of individuals to significantly impact, the magic world-view provides a mean of obtaining and restoring a self of personal efficacy. These tactical resistances tend not to challenge the overarching existence of the imperial frame—in this case, systemic modernist thinking. Instead, as a tactical resistance, CPG’s occult and mystical explanations exist in the same environment as the technical and scientific discourses of modernism, but provide an alternative way of reading cause and effect in the world. In “Gospels and Garyoles, Part II” I specifically examined the rhetorical process by which the CPG grounds its magical world-view in traditional Christian tropes, which are altered

to break down the traditional barriers between the spiritual and material, encourage to the audience to “live in victory” by obtaining power over the material world, and set up covenantal and familial languages that explain *why* the CPG’s Christianity is organized for the benefit of the believer.

The CPG’s *lack* of direct challenge to modernism is a vital point about the CPG reading of the world. The CPG challenges neither the tropes of traditional of Christianity nor the premises of scientific modernism. Instead, it employs the language of both prior frames to outline its own position. As “Gospels and Gargoyles, Part I” concludes, secular modernity and the religious world views now are seen by many as seriously deficient in their ability to provide a satisfactory world-view.²⁰ The unique power of the CPG is its ability to provide efficacy by adopting the discourses of both modernity and religious modes of thought and bonding them together in what I have termed a “gargoyle”—a discursive formation which assembles from the debris of now collapsed symbolic structures new, provisional modes of interpretation. The CPG does not reject modernism or evangelical Christianity—it uses both. The CPG has adopted the language of traditional evangelical preaching and put it to the service of its mystic world-view—a world-view that teaches that each person can obtain prosperity and physical health, i.e., the promises of modern social life. The CPG does not challenge medical science or capitalist economics. But it does suggest that behind the explanations and rules of capitalism and natural sciences, there are supernatural causes—the *real* root causes. As Joel Osteen responds to the person who asks Osteen if he has seen the state of the economy, “Yes, but have you seen our God? He is the Lord our Provider.”²¹

In these fragmented times, the symbolic gargoyle of the CPG means to make a series of contradictions cooperative: piety and profits, science and religion, resistance and cooperation,

destiny and free will, the spiritual and material. In the CPG, these contradictions come together. Religious piety delivers material profits. Science is merely one way to solve problems, faith is another, and scientific discourses are employed to bolster the credibility of the CPG's claims. The CPG tactically resists the hegemony of scientific modernism and orthodox evangelicalism but embraces both by adopting their goals of providing material prosperity and spiritual prosperity. The CPG emphasizes that God has destined all believers for promotion, wealth, and health but also emphasizes the key role of free will in choosing and enacting the words that unleash God's power.

Part of reading these times differently involves understanding time itself differently. In "The Rhetoric of Time, Possibility, and the Event" I examined how Osteen urges believers to read time differently as a way of restoring a sense of grounding, optimism and possibility to the audience. Osteen exhorts his audience that see that in God's time, the economically depressed material signs of the world reflect nothing about God's favor. Through faith, Osteen argues, the believers will enter not a time of distress but God's season of blessing through which they will have opportunities, happiness, and ease—all worldly signs of God's favor. To see time differently Osteen urges the audience to give up on the natural signs of the world and embrace their position in *kairos*, in God's time. In God's time, what seems impossible becomes possible. Those who see with eyes of faith in God's time, in God's season, will not see economic recession, illness, or humiliation but will see opportunities, profit, and health. Osteen preaches that looking at the world in God's time will help the audience escape and deconstruct the limits of *physis*, the natural, and jump into a special, blessed place where all is possible.

The CPG's magic world-view, its cosmological drama, the adjustment of Christian tropes to empower believers, and its altered sense of time are all structured to give the believers a

greater sense of efficacy. The CPG encourages believers to read the world differently because if they read the world differently, they will see their own efficacy, their own possibilities greatly expanded.

Summary

Through a wide variety of means, the CPG has adapted its preaching to these unique times. Rather than attacking or rejecting the symbolic structures of modernism or Christian evangelism, it has embraced those forms, stitching them together in a way that appeals to the audience's desire for material prosperity and security and for spiritual fulfillment. The CPG has challenged the reading techniques of contemporary Christianity, not by attacking its current reading technique but rather by deconstructing the rationalist limits that current American evangelicals place on their hermeneutic technique through radical, almost anti-rationalist faith. In some sense, the CPG claims to take the Bible more seriously and more literally than the most pious of Scriptural literalists. Where even the most literal of evangelical exegetes urges that we must understand the *metaphorical* nature of the Scriptures, the purveyors of the CPG choose to take each part of the Scriptural narrative as a promise—even a contract—that obligates God to care for and provide a happy, prosperous, healthy life for believers.

The CPG advocates reading the signs of the world anew. The world is not, as Christianity and modernism have agreed, divided between spiritual and material. Without denying that modernist sciences and economics are significant, CPG posits that behind the curtain, all is controlled by spiritual forces that can be possessed and controlled. The CPG posits there are no coincidences and there is no luck, there are simply acts of supernatural beings controlling the outcomes of the universe. Miraculous healings, deliverances of money, and career promotions, good deals on houses, avoidance of poor stock investments, these are all mystically

(and occultically) available to the believers if only they will *understand, believe, and speak* God's promise of prosperity and victory. As James K.A. Smith notes, where traditional evangelical Christianity limits itself with questions of salvation and heaven, the CPG appeals to many because it provides a sense that God will care for His faithful in the here-and-now.²²

This is a Christianity which is adapted to the changing social times because it is familiar and new. It deploys the symbols of traditional Christianity and modernist sciences, but promises a new vision and new positive personal empowerment for God's people. It is a rhetoric that builds upon that possibility of symbolic reinterpretation made available by the insufficiency of both modernism and contemporary Christianity. It speaks directly to material desires and psychological anxieties of the contemporary audience. If contemporary Christians feel left out, unblessed and have found most versions of Christianity distinctly unbeneficial, the CPG proclaims, as spelled out in "Identification, Narrative, and Audience in Joel Osteen's *Become A Better You*," that God is affirming them, wants them to lead happy, prosperous lives, and is encouraging them to become the best possible version of themselves. The CPG is not about condemning sin, it is about affirming possibility, material and spiritual, which are the same things in its thinking. It is, in sum, adapted to these times because it accepts and encourages the audience's desire for both material wealth and psychological well-being but also imbues those desires with a sense of spiritual meaning. Material concerns and desires are not the rejection of God's place in the universe but are instead the best manifestation of God's presence and love.

A Gospel of Empowerment and Disempowerment

The second research question asks about the consequences of the CPG's interpretive choices. Those scholars, like Shayne Lee and Philip Sinitiere, who have viewed the CPG as an improvement over previous manifestations of Christian belief, often cite that CPG's empowering

message. It encourages audiences to have hope, to take action for themselves, to be self-reliant, and to give up on the cultural baggage that might have convinced them they could not succeed in the contemporary culture, society, and economy.²³ Whether or not this characterization is accurate has been a core question of this dissertation. This study demonstrates that though the CPG can be individually empowering, it can also serve to disempower individuals and obviates the need for macro-level social and political change.

So much of prior research about the CPG is about its impact on the African-American community that it is impossible to avoid discussing the CPG's political impact in those terms. Lee and Sinitiere admire T.D. Jakes, for example, because his preaching helps encourage and empower his mostly black congregation to give up their cultural baggage and take action in the global economy.²⁴ Similarly, some of Osteen's parishioners report that they feel so encouraged by his preaching that they have started businesses or made career moves because of his inspiration.²⁵ Of course, the best advocate for the power of Osteen's preaching is himself—he litters his preaching with accounts of how members of his congregation have, through faith, gone on to achieve great things. Other scholars and critics have been more skeptical of the CPG's empowering. Addressing the African-American community specifically, critics like Jeremiah Camara, Milmon F. Harrison, and Stephanie Y. Mitchem argue that reliance on supernatural solutions often stagnates the need for social change and can leave those believers who do not reap the benefits of prosperity blaming themselves rather than examining political and social structures of inequality.²⁶

In "The Rhetoric of (Profitable) Liberation," I examined the CPG's use of prophetic rhetoric—a rhetoric that has been, until now, considered intrinsically political and community-oriented, and argued that the CPG has stripped that form of rhetoric of its radical essence and

mutated into advocacy for the status quo. Walter Brueggemann, the renowned Old Testament scholar, found prophecy fascinating because of its potential to radically overthrow the political structures of inequality in order to deliver God's justice to the community.²⁷ In contrast the CPG, by constructing a cosmos in which the economic and social systems of the world are secondary to spiritual causes, eliminates the need for collective social change. In the CPG's vision, God will deliver prosperity to any person who believes in the saving power of Christ and knows God's law of prosperity—and God can overcome all forms of social inequality, no revolution or reform necessary. Though prophecy is generally motivated by a call for *justice*, a call for a community to come to righteousness, the CPG considers justice an individual issue—something to be obtained by one person.

Such a perspective has unique appeal for those who have been left out of the American economic mainstream. Mitchem remarks that the CPG has unique appeal to African-Americans for precisely that reason.²⁸ But in terms of broad socio-political change, the CPG is conservative. Not “conservative” in the sense that Darsey uses the term to describe the prophetic mode in which the community is called back to God's order, but conservative in the sense that in the CPG there few or no problems that are a result of systemic socio-economic inequality.²⁹ In the vision of the CPG, persons are not excluded from prosperity because of the whims of global capitalism, class disparities, or racial or gender discrimination, but because they lack sufficient faith in God's law of prosperity.

In this prophetic mode, all events of the Scriptures are taken as evidence of God's blessing. Job's story is taken as evidence that the faithful will be rewarded. Christ is forwarded not as an impoverished, peripatetic preacher but as an affluent, inspiring leader of his apostles. The OT becomes a series of stories of perseverance toward prosperity, and the NT gospelists are

advocates of God's material blessings. Hagin, Dollar, and Thompson's direct theophanic revelations from God are not calls for radical reform and not radical interventions by God into history to change its course. Grandiose as a visit from God might seem, the revelations of the CPG are relatively mundane. Sticking to the tradition of a closed scriptural canon, the prophecies of the CPG are never radically new information; never new commandments or gospels. They are, instead, clarifications of texts or purpose, efforts to ground the CPG's message of prosperity. They are individual prophecies, ones where Thompson receives the message, "Money Cometh!" and is directed to give his congregation the "opportunity" to pay for his new jet. While perhaps less crass, Hagin's prophecies are little different. When God tells Hagin that angelic forces will find him money and God directs Hagin to preach the message of prosperity, there is no sense of radical community change.

It may be true that the preaching of the CPG, at its best, inspires individuals to take positive action in their lives. But the CPG's use of prophetic form reveals adherence to its tenets are broadly politically disempowering. As I argued in Chapter 6, in a world where people are able to achieve their dreams through *faith*, one can hardly justify the sacrifice of political or social struggle. One must only believe to achieve, as the saying goes. In this view it becomes nearly unjust and certainly seems impossible to work for the material benefit of unbelievers, since God has set His Will against it. Thus, where Brueggemann imagined prophecy radically overthrowing the status quo, upending the "lords of order" in favor of the anarchic justice of God, the CPG's version of prophecy merely encourages people to have more faith and donate to CPG churches in order to possess material blessings, no politics needed. The consequences for liberatory politics in that scheme are dire.

The Appeal of the Christian Prosperity Gospel

The third research question asks how the CPG appeals to audiences. For outsiders, the CPG must seem like the strangest of gargoyles. Given what has been noted about its materialism, crassness and political disempowerment, it might be hard to understand why an audience would have any interest in it. However, the empirical record is clear that the CPG churches are growing, even as mainline Protestant churches and evangelical churches stagnate.³⁰ The reason provided in this study seems clear: The CPG continues to grow because it *yields* to the audience's materialist and psychological desires and imbues them with a sense of spiritual wholeness and immediate psychological pay-off.

In some sense, every chapter of this study has dealt with the audience and the CPG's appeal—the nature of homiletic theology is that it is audience-based. The CPG preachers are constantly aware that their belief system is irrelevant if it cannot be preached. Hence, there is no anterior, secret, insider theology in the CPG. Its theological organization is based on what is preached to an audience.

In this study, Joel Osteen has been the paragon of audience appeal. It is Osteen, after all, who preaches to the largest congregation in the nation and has a television audience of 7 million viewers each week.³¹ Though other contemporary preachers lead large megachurches—T.D. Jakes's Potter's House is a franchise with several branch campuses—Osteen leads the current CPG preachers in audience numbers.

What my analysis of Osteen and CPG preachers reveals is that the CPG works by both yielding and adjusting the audience's way of reading. In the CPG, the reading of the gospel, the reading of the signs of the world, the structure of the cosmos, are all re-organized in a way that puts power in the hands of the believers. In Osteen's structure, discussed in "Identification,

Narrative, and Audience,” the cosmos is full of dramatic forces that contend to thwart and damage the believers. There are not unknown, unmanageable forces of global economics, viral pathologies, or genetics—there are just hidden, personified forces of good and evil at work. The Enemy (read: The Devil) and his forces are at work to make you make bad decisions, to keep you poor, and make you sick.

In some ways, the idea that there are supernatural forces manipulating the events of the world might seem terrifying, but in comparison to the “alien” nature of contemporary global social, economic, and political forces the idea of personified forces can seem comforting. As I reviewed in “Christian Prosperity and the Magic World View,” supernatural, mystic, and occult explanations are often more appealing than raw, cold modernist interpretation. With the correct understanding, faith, and method, supernatural forces can be managed. There is no such simple solution for the whims of global economics, which can leave well-qualified workers without jobs, or natural biological systems, which can give even children incurable cancer. But change the frame in the CPG, and the demons causing an “incurable” cancer can be overcome through faith.

But the CPG goes beyond the somewhat flippant observation that the CPG tells people what they want to hear. As Chapters 7 and 8 of this study indicate, what makes Osteen somewhat unique is his ability to identify and speak to the insecurities and fears of his audience. Like many CPG preachers, Osteen knows his audience faces challenges; real, gritty challenges like poverty, disease, drug addiction, teenage pregnancy, mental illness, abuse, and more. Compounded by a general societal sense of loneliness and isolation that is endemic in contemporary American society, Osteen perceives the audience’s psychological trauma. Even more, Osteen is aware that this audience is self-aware enough to think of themselves as psychologically traumatized.

The total individual focus on the CPG, though politically disempowering, is psychologically appealing to the audience. There is no collective identity in the CPG, only the individual who is affirmed and supported by Osteen's preaching. Osteen's preaching encourages his audience to feel worthy, to psychologically condition themselves toward believing in their own self-worth, in their own preferred status in the eyes of God. As Osteen says, "God does not focus on what's wrong with you. He focuses on what's right with you." Part of that psychological re-assurance derives from Osteen's re-assurance that life can always get better. In Chapter 7, "The Rhetoric of Time, Possibility, and the Event," I observed that Osteen reassures the audience that the universe is not ambiguously aligned against them, but is instead set up in their favor. Osteen encourages the audience to believe that their mistakes in the past do not mean they have missed out, but rather that God will ensure that no good thing is missed out on, "God can turn back the clock and bring bigger and better things across your path."

Vitality, the CPG speaks the language of the audience. If the challenge of contemporary preaching is the ability to transfer the tropes of the first century into the present day, the CPG at least succeeds in the making a version of Christianity appeal to today's audience. It is inevitable, in many ways, that the CPG's mashing together of scientific, mystic, magical, and Christian discourses will not satisfy everyone. The nature of the gargoyle is that it is an uncomfortable, strange bonding of a diverse, often contradictory set of eroded symbolic structures. Theologians and Christian scholars may scoff at the CPG's Christianity, noting that the CPG doesn't include hardly any of the first century Gospel message at all. Moderns may scoff at the CPG's magical beliefs and its hokey citations of scientific evidence. All sides can snort at the CPG's lack of good taste, its inability to recognize how much mysticism is reasonable, even to evangelical Christians. But a large audience, an audience that is desperately seeking affirmation and a

spiritualism that will help them believe that their lives are not fundamentally void of meaning, finds the gargoyle of the CPG appealing and has adopted its world-view.

The Christian Prosperity Gospel as Synecdoche

The final research question asks what the CPG represents about larger symbolic structures. One of the fundamental arguments of this study is that the CPG is not merely a phenomenon of the evangelical world but reflects a larger state of confusion in the symbolic framework of contemporary society. As Burke argued in *Attitudes Toward History*, our poetic interpretive frameworks are not merely ways of understanding our world. At different times, our symbolic frameworks serve to urge us to accept the events of the world, reject the social situation, or search for new frames of interpretation.³² The central argument of this study is that technological modernism has brought us to an elongated in-between time, a state in which no settled frame of acceptance should be expected, in which no coherent symbolic framework can take hold. The argument for this position was explicated in “Gospels and Gargoyles, Part I,” but the reason for its emergence can be summarized as this: the state of transition exists because no frame of interpretation can challenge the modernist, scientific and technological frame of interpretation for completeness, efficiency, rigor, accuracy or predictive power, yet that frame is fundamentally lacking in a sense of identity, spirituality or psychological wholeness. And in our time, the modernist will not compromise; it will not yield to permitting an auxiliary religious frame, as it once did. Its hegemony is total.

So what does the CPG say about this situation? This study of the CPG reveals the sorts of attempts that will be made to grapple with the contradictions of contemporary life, the desire for spiritual meaning in a society dominated by a modern, secular *Weltanschauung*. The CPG demonstrates that the sort of symbolic structures that will emerge from these strange, grotesque

times are ones that will mix up, bond, and tear apart the stolid, respected structures of the past. The CPG attempts to find the right combination, the new frame which can satisfy us. I have described, following Burke, the contemporary era as “grotesque,” a period of transition in which the prior symbols are over used, scrambled up, exploited and literalized beyond the boundaries of taste. The discursive formations that emerge in these times are called gargoyles—stitched together, patched up assemblages of symbolic debris left over from prior structures. The image recalls the medieval gargoyles—monstrous assemblies that appear to be made of the leftover spare parts of real and mythical beasts.³³ These assemblages are not incoherent, it should be noted, for they are held together by certain logics, certain ways of reasoning which bond them into at least temporary form. But neither are they entirely coherent, necessarily. They are experiments in form, efforts to find some kind of hermeneutic mode for satisfactorily interpreting these times.

The CPG is one of these gargoyles—a strange amalgam of Christianity, the occult, the scientific idiom, capitalism, psychology, and more. It bonds many different discourses into a single symbolic structure—a mode of interpretation which employs rather than rejects the symbols of modernism and religion. It is an attempt at the both/and of a religio-magical-scientific worldview. It is an attempt at a new *mythos*, one that is intended to give its adherents effective equipment for our living. Taylor remarks that our time, in this secular age, is not an atheistic one but one that is searching for a new spirituality. The CPG reflects that search.

As a transitional symbolic structure, the CPG is not guaranteed a long life. Indeed, it may collapse at any time, weighed down by internal contradictions that it cannot satisfactorily resolve. Many of these have been reviewed in this study. Other competitive modes of spirituality may become more appealing, especially if the CPG is unable to keep up with the changing

desires of the audience. Many of the provisional forms of the grotesque era will emerge, only to whither. But as an example of the kinds of strange, unusual structures which might emerge, it stands out.

For one, it reflects an emerging tactical resistance to the hegemony of the modernist world-view. To the rationalist, modernist eye, the CPG appears not only grotesque, but horrible, perhaps even laughable—an entelechial extension of the worst foibles of evangelical Christianity to their most ridiculous, self-serving ends or a return to the debunked occult studies of previous ages. Such conclusions are not entirely unwarranted. But the CPG signals that the modernist world-view is not satisfactory, that the natural and social scientific explanations for global phenomena cannot alone satisfy the audience. For all of its analytical and predictive force and organizational efficiency, the scientific and technological world-views fail to provide the audience with a sense of purpose, of place, and of mission. Because of that at least some parts of society are willing to dismiss its force.

The fundamental contradiction of modernism, its completeness, power and emptiness, make it difficult to anticipate an end to the era of transition. It is possible that this era of “transition” may never end. But if it ends, what must emerge to end it is a mode that has the same immediate explanatory power and more spiritual content than contemporary modernism. To borrow the language of Chapter 7, there must be a sense in which our time is sacred, *kairic*, something other than the infinite, relentless plod of infinite, faceless time.

The CPG probably isn't that structure. It's difficult to imagine that its emphasis on mystical profitability outside the bounds of what we know about contemporary modes of exchange can make sense for an entire society. While the ambiguous Puritan belief that God is organizing economic structures for the benefit of the faithful had some durability because God's

Will was considered to be synonymous with economics and because it was vague enough to permit a lot of leeway for non-conforming results, the CPG's grotesque, entelechial extension of the same belief into a direct, individual cause-effect form makes an unwieldy structure at any level beyond an immediate, personal world-view. But the CPG reflects the need, the desire, what Burke might even call the *motive* for that structure.

The CPG employs, as we might expect of all gargoyles, a significant measure of deconstruction. After all, in order to bond together two seemingly un-like symbols, the rhetor must first undermine the very meanings that keep them apart. To that end, the CPG is hard at work, re-interpreting, re-describing, and re-bonding the symbols of religion, the occult, and modernism. What the CPG recognizes is that what we know is a product of how we read and how we organize what we read. All our symbolic structures are subject to re-reading, to re-interpretation, and to re-organization. Our language is metaphorical, our histories are anecdotal and analogical, and our sense of self is mythic and narrative. There is no scientific history of our culture—its meaning demands we read into its meaning and significance. What the CPG demonstrates is that as we seek new, powerful, spiritually fulfilling frames, we will encounter interpretation and hence deconstruction, post-structural techniques deployed in the process of everyday life.

Summary

It is not going too far to say that the CPG preaches little else but hermeneutics. As I hope this study has revealed, the CPG is constantly in the trenches of homiletic theology, teaching its audience to read the signs of the Scriptures and the world differently. By both exploiting the liabilities and adopting the languages of the modernist, occult, and religious modes of discourse, the CPG has sought to assemble a form of religion that manages the uncertainty, fear, and doubt

of the contemporary era by preaching a gospel that teaches that all persons are affirmed in God, that manageable supernatural forces are in control of the inexplicable alien forces of modernist economics and social arrangements, and that despite all of the natural signs of the world, God is working for the favor, prosperity, and health of its believers. For at least a substantial part of the broad American audience stricken by a feeling of spiritual emptiness and loss, the psychological affirmation of the CPG's therapeutic mode strikes just the right note.

The CPG provides the audience with a vital sense of personal efficacy. Modernist socio-economic forces, as Barrett observed, are faceless and destroy the individual's sense of agency. In the Great Recession which began in 2008, even those who are excellent at their professions have found themselves out of work and now, after years of unemployment, marked as unemployable by many companies. Scientific explanations for disease, addiction, and other problems also can leave many feeling unable to do anything personally about their own fates. To this, the CPG's belief that God's Will can overcome all the limits of "the natural" provide its believers a way of managing problems that otherwise would seem beyond their limits. Through faith and by speaking words of victory and promotion, the CPG gives the audience a way to overcome all problems.

As a broader part of the broader social symbolic environment, the CPG reflects the strange times in which we live and constitutes the effort to find the frame of interpretation that can provide both the explanatory, rational power of modernism and the spiritual fulfillment of religious frames. Whether the CPG is that frame which resolves problems of current socio-symbolic chaos seems rather doubtful. But the CPG does reflect the kind of discursive formations—the gargoyles, I have called them—that might emerge as the search for new frames continues. These frames will be patched-together assemblages of the remains of prior symbolic

structures, often strange, odd, and lacking in coherence: strange creatures for these strange times. We should not be surprised to encounter more of them.

Advancement of Rhetorical Theory

Beyond its examination of the CPG, this study has attempted to make several significant contributions to our field's understanding of contemporary rhetorical theory. In this section, I review the most significant contributions, which I consider to be in three areas: (1) the relationship of homiletics and rhetoric, (2) the role of textual hermeneutics in rhetoric, and (3) the role of rhetoric as a kind of cultural hermeneutics.

Homiletics and Rhetoric

The field of rhetoric has not done justice to the significance of homiletics. Despite the vital role that homiletics has played in the rhetorical tradition, it has been subjected to a great deal of neglect in contemporary scholarship.³⁴ Despite the fact that a sermon is a likely way that Americans encounter direct public address, homiletics has been relegated to historical artifact, an object of study solely for its significance to the heritage of the rhetorical field, or to the subfield of “religious rhetoric.”

This dissertation has demonstrated that a great deal of contemporary rhetorical practice is being innovated in religious circles, in the preaching of emerging religious traditions. As the CPG demonstrates, religious discourses are not limited to the problems internal to religious belief, but are at work—as they always have been—dealing with the significant exigent forces of contemporary life. The preachers of the CPG, no less than Augustine in *De civitate Dei*, face a society confronted by significant doubt about its origin, direction, and place in the physical and spiritual cosmos.

Contemporary sociological and philosophical literature have revealed that a wide-ranging search for religious and metaphysical meaning is underway. The CPG is one response to that search. The CPG claims millions of believers and its preachers are engaging in imbuing those believers with hermeneutic techniques that have vast social and political implications. Its reach is not just national but global, with training and revivals around the world. In an era when religious language is growing in prominence in America, it behooves rhetoric to take a look at the way that religious discourses—including homiletic—answer the bell of the social symbolic breakdown noted in this study.

Rhetoric and Textual Hermeneutics

The early chapters of this study were deeply engaged in the questions of interpretations—questions core to rhetoric. By introducing the idea of rhetorical hermeneutics, textual hermeneutics that occur as matter of enactment rather than isolated techniques, I hope I have demonstrated that textual hermeneutics is not isolated to reader and text but is a question of the dissemination of the message of as well. Certainly, Kenneth Hagin did not engage his hermeneutic efforts merely for his own edification but did so in order to adjust the audience's perception of the key foundation of the Christian religions—the Bible.

Moreover, in the “The Absolute Hermeneutic and Secret of Prosperity,” I tried to make a broader point about hermeneutics—it is not only a metaphysical effort but also a rhetorical effort. Philosophical efforts as hermeneutics often make the broad assumption that the text contains an essential message which might be uncovered by the right technique. What I hope the CPG reveals, in its resort to the Ultimate Hermeneut and His Absolute Hermeneutic, is that even if we took such a divine technique at face value, it does little to remove the requirement for interpretation; for unless each one of us is struck by a lightning bolt of Meaning, we are always

left evaluating, weighing, analyzing, and criticizing texts. As John Caputo remarked, we should give up on the idea of Absolute Hermeneutic, of a true meaning of the text, of a Secret of Meaning locked up if only we had The Key.³⁵ Even a physical appearance of Christ requires the hermeneutics of savior recognition, lest we are deceived by demons, altered psychological states, or persuasive actors.

This point might be unsettling, but it is one that goes to the heart of rhetoric. Interpretation is not a science. There is no True philosophical Method that will cause Meaning to reveal itself in its entirety. Instead, we are all audience members, engaging in rhetorical criticisms of texts whose meanings are never fully disclosed. Given that we can only interpret, we must be about the work of interpreting for its own sake, not imagining that hermeneutics will deliver Meaning to us. Indeed, the evangelical Christian critics of the CPG have found that their hermeneutic certainly has done little to stop the defection to the seeker-sensitive churches headed by pastors with “heretical” interpretation of the text. This isn’t to say that just any old interpretation will do of course. We might still have remarks about which interpretations are a better fit than others or which interpretations we find more effective for our purposes. But the idea that we are looking for the True Way of Meaning is likely folly.

One last point on this subject. As I hope this dissertation has also made clear, hermeneutics is not only a source for rhetoric, the root of what we can say, in the sense that we must *read* before we can *speak* on a subject, but that hermeneutics *is* rhetoric. It is a process of *choosing* meaning, of thinking of what is most persuasive to us and to those who hear us, it is a process of creating bridges that allows us to identify with a text and find significance in that text. When we choose to read differently—or read the same—we are making rhetorical choices about

the text. Such choices are inescapable—it is the role of we who study rhetoric to examine the basis, quality, and implications of these choices.

Hermeneutics and the Signs of the World

This study has also attempted to make a significant contribution to our understanding of the cultural hermeneutics—the hermeneutics the audience uses to read the signs of the world, not just the signs of the text (Derrida, of course, would say they are one and the same). As such, I have argued that CPG shows that the imbuing of a new hermeneutics of the *Erlebnisstorm* is a rhetorical project. I have tried to make three basic arguments: (1) that as a matter of interpretation, the occult world-view is alive and well, (2) that contemporary culture is trapped in a period of symbolic disjunction that leaves us without a unified frame of interpretation, (3) and that an improved understanding of the rhetorical concept of *kairos* would improve our ability to analyze rhetors' attempts to alter the audience's reading of the their own situation.

Occult Rhetoric, Alive and Well

Theoretically, the chapter “Christian Prosperity and the Magic World View” was dedicated to making the point that despite claims to the contrary, occult rhetoric is present in contemporary discourse. Occult rhetoric, that rhetoric which claims to be based in a hidden, secret, or esoteric knowledge now revealed, is a regular part of contemporary life. Indeed, as a matter of hermeneutic interpretation, many in contemporary life take a magic world-view, believing that there are supernatural forces at work in the world.

Claims that occult rhetoric has died have generally been premised in the idea that the occult is diabolically based and once constituted a coherent, systematic structure.³⁶ This dissertation has contended both these points, arguing that both historically and contemporarily, most occult rhetoric, among which the CPG can be numbered, is actually theurgist, that is, it is

premised in the power of God rather than the power of the Devil or natural forces. This version of the occult is not simply religion immediately applied but matches the anthropological definition of the occult as a series of rituals meant to appeal to supernatural forces for immediate results. It applies procedures, texts, conducts, and words of power to activate powerful preternatural actors to alter their conduct.

Of course, the theurgy of the CPG can hardly be separated from its soteriological concerns. But as Durkheim, Levi-Strauss, Neusner, Vetter, and many others observe, it is likely impossible to separate religion and magic in the first place.³⁷ Religion and magic are very often parasitic on one another, to the extent that they might even be called symbiotic. At the very least, there is very little evidence that there has ever been a widespread, coherent, stand-alone occult tradition while there is a long history of Christianity and occult beliefs co-existing, mingling, and bonding with one another.

The occult has not been destroyed by the appearance of postmodern surveillance and commercialization but has been assisted by the erosion of the hegemonic force of modernism. Indeed, the occult does not rely upon actually being hidden, but the *perception* that it is hidden knowledge. When the CPG reveals the hidden wisdom of prosperity that delivers the believer incredible power over the physical world, it uses the rhetorical turn of “revealing” a hidden knowledge to build its credibility—it does not require that knowledge to have ever actually been hidden or remain hidden. Instead, the CPG relies upon the total hegemony of modernity, which has exhausted many persons with a sense of spirituality, to provide a credulous audience who is ready to believe in something other than scientific and technological rationality. The idea that the CPG’s occultism is an alternative revealing of the truth, in fact, reflects a postmodernist willingness to resist the foreclosures brought on by modernist discourses.

The Culture of Gargoyles

Chapters 4 and 5, “Gospels and Gargoyles, Part I” and “Part II,” are dedicated to examining the broad social conditions of contemporary society and American culture’s attempt to develop hermeneutic techniques to fill the gap left by the erosion of the modernist and Christian frames. My overall argument in the two chapters is that the relatively unified frame of acceptance that has dominated the recent past, constituted by the dominance of the modernist interpretation of reality bolstered by the endorsement of Christianity, has collapsed and left us in a state of interpretive chaos that shows no signs of ending in the near term. In this environment, we should expect to see strange, odd, sometimes half-baked frames of interpretation put together out the debris of these prior modes.

Drawing upon the socio-symbolic analysis of Kenneth Burke, I’ve argued that the traditional procession of poetic frames of interpretation from frame of acceptance, to frame of rejection, to frame of transition, back to acceptance has been interrupted by the cultural breakdown extant in contemporary on life. My goal in making this argument was to (a) restore Burke’s poetic frames to their broad sociological functions and (b) make the argument that much of the confounding confusion and inconsistency that many scholars may observe in the contemporary rhetorical environment—including in the interpretive modes of audiences—are not strange to these times, but native to these strange times, for we have entered a culture of gargoyles in which we cannot expect unified hegemonic discourses, but contingent, strange modes of speaking and reading.

It is perhaps too much to ask, but a full grasp of this point should significantly alter our study of rhetoric. Much of contemporary rhetorical criticism is engaged in pointing out the irrationality, silliness, or contradictions of certain rhetorical acts, including those of the CPG.

One could easily criticize Osteen, for example, for his attempt to integrate scientific research into his religious discourse or his idealist class aspirationalism. While it is important to criticize rhetorics that lack a certain empirical accuracy or veracity, it also is vital to understand the cultural conditions of these rhetorical attempts. To engage in more revealing rhetorical criticism, the confused symbolic environment should be grasped and understood. Not only would an improved understanding of the global rhetorical situation improve our specific studies of rhetoric, but it might also ask us to better understand and ask what frames of interpretation we deploy when we criticize the rhetors that we study. What are our expectations of rhetors and do those expectations match the symbolic environment that rhetor and audience are encountering? I suspect that many current critics have a sense of unity in their symbolic interpretations that broader society lacks. At the very least, knowing that we may exist in a culture of gargoyles, we can survey the symbolic environment and be less surprised to find strange, seemingly inconsistent modes of discourse appearing, building significant audiences, and perhaps disappearing without a trace while others emerge.

Further, if the CPG reveals anything, it demonstrates that the heterogeneous rhetorics that emerge in this culture of gargoyles are most certainly not politically radical on the basis of the difference from the overarching structures—indeed, these new structures might be easily co-opted by the status quo political structures. In a period of transition, it is easy to believe that those changes will dramatically alter the political or social landscape for the better. The CPG shows that simple heterogeneity in rhetoric, even in the period of the grotesque, is not a politically radical move.

Perhaps the best demonstration of this point that difference is not intrinsically radical comes in my analysis of the prophetic. Though they differed in their conclusion about the

implications, prior scholars agreed that prophecy in the Judeo-Christian tradition constituted a radical rhetoric that constituted God's intervention into history in a demand for broad societal change. The CPG demonstrates that in this grotesque era of gargoyles, even the most radical forms of rhetorics such as prophecy can be redeployed in ways that invert their normal potential.

Broadly speaking, in the culture of gargoyles, all of our expectations of what role certain rhetorical forms *necessarily* take on are drawn into question. It provides a strong warning to genre criticism. The standard defenses of genre criticism are that no one considers genre limits a rule, but rather a predictive guideline and genre criticism is merely a part of a complete criticism. Perhaps this is so, but in the culture of gargoyles cultural expectations for rhetorical acts—the premises of genre itself—are in flux. Rhetorical and symbolic forms are deconstructed, stripped down to parts and redeployed in new ways. To begin with a *type* of rhetoric, a form, could easily lead the critic down the wrong path. The culture of gargoyles calls us to a new attentiveness to the force of rhetoric itself, foregrounding the work itself instead of our expectations about its structure.

Kairos, an Integrated Concept

Finally, in terms of theoretical implications, the study in “The Rhetoric of Time, Possibility and the Event” was intended to clarify the use of the concept of *kairos* in rhetorical study. While the term *kairos* has a variety of legitimate uses in rhetoric, when *kairos* is used in the strongest sense, I intended my examination of Osteen's use of time to help connect the rhetorical employment of *kairos*—sacred time, God's time—to other vital rhetorical points so that it might become a part of a complete mode of analysis.

In contrast to prior scholars, I argue that *kairos* should not be seen as an independent concept but one concept in a constellation of interdependent rhetorical factors.³⁸ *Kairos* is not a

place or location to which the rhetor transports the audience; it is a different accounting of time in God's season, a different way of measuring the course of events. It is an effort to get the audience to read the situation differently. The invocation of *kairos* is a means to achieve a broader rhetorical effect—a means to change the audience's sense of their place in the course of historical events so they might see the world differently—it is a way of inspiring the audience to envisage the *event*, the moment in which the audience's perception of “the possible” (*dynamis*) is enlarged and the limits of normal, natural time are blown away to reveal new truths and new ideas. It calls the audience to a change of heart, to see the world with new eyes in God's season. In terms of analysis, we say that *kairos* is the sense of time, the sense of special time, that makes all this possible—but it does not do so alone, but in combination with phenomena that can be differentiated under separate labels (*dynamis*, *to prepon*, the event, *aletheia*, the *metanoia*) that serve the purpose of enabling us to more fully grasp the dynamic situation the rhetor seeks to invoke by altering the audience's sense of time.

Of course, though this version of *kairos* is rooted in a Christian tradition, there is no reason why it should be limited to rhetoric of the Christian sort. Many rhetors seek to inspire the audience with a sense that *this time* is vital, of a certain import, or singled out. They do so for the exact reasons named above—a sense that this time is set-apart can enable an audience to view what is possible differently, more positively, to see past the limits of the natural, to see new truths, or to have a radical change of heart. Constituting and analyzing the rhetoric of time with these sets of terms in mind can help achieve a greater level of specificity and understanding of what we mean when we say a rhetor utilized a *kairo-logical* mode of discourse.

Summary

The diverse theoretical contributions of this dissertation have been dictated by the material of the CPG. The CPG is a popular, wide-ranging rhetorical phenomenon that required a re-consideration of the number of core elements of rhetorical theory in order to be effectively examined. While I feel some dissatisfaction with the discontinuity of the “theory” of this full study, I feel some consolation that my diverse takes on homiletics, textual hermeneutics, and the hermeneutics of *Erlebnisstorm* fit with the chaotic rhetorical environment described herein. A unified rhetorical theory is not only not a project of this dissertation, but in the accounting of this dissertation, probably impossible. There is no Absolute Hermeneutic of rhetoric, only insightful revealing, which I hope the dissertation’s theoretical contributions may help facilitate in the future.

Limitations of Study

Although this study attempted a very complete examination of the CPG, the dissertation also contains some significant limitations that I will attempt to account for and acknowledge here.

First, this study was never intended to encompass or be the final dictate on those Christian preachers who preach prosperity or who is and is not a Christian Prosperity Gospelist. It is very likely that one person or another could dispute both my definition of the CPG and those who I have chosen to include and exclude from its ranks. I admit that at times, some seemingly significant characters were omitted because my analytical palette was already full (Fred Price comes to mind). There are certainly hundreds of preachers in America and around the world that fit my definition of the CPG preacher and thousands more exhibit at least some of the signs characteristic of the CPG. I have chosen those included because they best exemplified the core of

the CPG rather than its margins. Such choices, I believe, provided the greatest analytical contrast to other evangelical Christians but possibly did so to the neglect of those that exist at the margin.

Second, as a rhetorical study this dissertation was not intended to be a survey of theology, sociology, audiences or other elements of the CPG. Indeed, the appeal of the CPG to particularized audiences is dealt with in only the most cursory way. And though I have attempted to sketch each of those things, each one could be an entire volume in itself. The goal of my dissertation has been to answer the questions about rhetoric posed by the research questions.

Third, in an attempt to provide some sense of analytical unity, I have often glossed over the significant differences in the CPG preachers that have been analyzed here. Hopefully, my endnotes and caveats have given the reader the sense that each preacher has not only his or her own style of presenting the CPG message but also his or her own twists on doctrines. The most vital element of doctrine to one preacher may receive barely a mention by another. This problem is mostly manifest in my use of Osteen as the hinge point of my analysis. My reasons for doing so have already been explained and, hopefully, the personality and approach of the other preachers is evident in my citations of their work throughout dissertation. However, it true that Osteen is, in many ways, *not* like many of the other CPG preachers. I do not think that damages my conclusions very much, but future scholars may conclude differently.

Finally, it is my habit throughout this study to draw very broad conclusions about the state of symbolic interpretation in American culture from an examination of a few, select preachers of the CPG. An astute scholar might wonder about my ability to be so certain about contemporary symbolic chaos from an analysis of a couple dozen books and a handful of sermons. To some extent, I have to admit that at times I am probably stretching the extant evidence. My analysis cannot, for example, prove without a doubt that the growth of the CPG is

in part a result of the breakdown of the alliance between modernism and religion. Nor can I be sure that the CPG's watchers are each internally downtrodden by a spiritual emptiness that leads them to find Osteen, the Copelands, or Creflo Dollar appealing. In the broad strokes of my socio-symbolic analysis, some empirical analysis may be found wanting. I do believe, however, that my analysis holds up under scrutiny. The conclusions I've reached here are attempts to account for and explain the CPG and current social conditions, not provide the best possible empirical evidence for it. My conclusions about current social conditions are drawn from the best available sociological and psychological scholars and my accounts of CPG, drawn from analysis of the most popular, best representatives of the American prosperity gospel, provide strong insight in their rhetorical goals, tactics and motives of its preachers in those conditions.

Directions for Future Research

Certainly, this dissertation is not the final word either on the CPG or on the parts of the rhetorical theory taken up here. Given that fact, this section outlines some directions for future research both on the CPG and rhetorical theory.

One of the key limitations of this study is its lack of attention to the particular audiences of the CPG. There are several existing studies of the relationship of the CPG to predominantly white audiences (Osteen, in particular) and to African-American audiences, but there are few existing studies on the function of the CPG in relation to the largest growing segment of the CPG audiences, Hispanic populations. Indeed, in rhetoric overall there are few existing studies on the function of preaching in Hispanic audiences. Future research on the appeal of the CPG to particular audiences, particularly Hispanic audiences, would add significantly to the field of rhetoric studies' understanding of the CPG and religious rhetoric. Overall, the function of a

variety of religious discourses in particular ethnic communities would themselves add to our field.

Future research on the CPG could also take up the question of the function of the CPG in localized communities. My study of the CPG covers only most nationally prominent preachers of the CPG. There are many local congregations built in the Word-of-Faith format. An examination of these local churches might reveal how the CPG works itself out for specific audiences, away from the lights of the television camera and off the pages of bestselling books.

In theoretical terms, more investigation into my argument that we exist in a grotesque period would serve vital purposes for rhetoric. As I argued above, if we exist in the period of the grotesque, it could dramatically alter not only our use of Burke's poetic cycle, but a great deal of our studies of rhetoric. Given that significant implication, more specific research is warranted. As such, this study examines only the broadest strokes of sociological and social psychological research to draw its conclusions—more investigation into the premise would build better inductive evidence for the theories I've presented here.

Finally, future research should take up the question of textual and cultural hermeneutics as a question of rhetoric. Interpretation, often taken as a prior question of rhetoric, should be seen as a part of rhetoric, as a part of the process of identification with events in the world. After all, frames of interpretation are not simply things a rhetor pitches to an audience; they are processes of identification and sorting conducted by the rhetor. Rhetorical criticism, evaluation of the persuasiveness or identification of a text or series of signs, is a constant process even for those who are not themselves professional students of rhetoric.

These are just a few possible directions for future research into the CPG and rhetorical theory. Many others can probably be discerned by readers who thoughtfully consider the material

contained herein. Certainly, the threads of thought and argument I have taken up in this volume do not find their end in it. Much remains to be seen. And if I am right about this “culture of gargoyles” and its desire to hang about for a while, many of the things we see will be strange and interesting.

Closing Remarks

One of the driving forces of this dissertation has been my perception that we live in strange, jumbled times. It is with some trepidation that I made my vague sense the heart of a doctoral level study of Christian preaching. Hopefully, I have provided enough evidence to convince the reader that there is, in fact, a widespread crisis of symbolic interpretation occurring and that this study has not just been grounded in my own sense of cultural dystopia. That said, if there is a crisis of symbolic interpretation occurring, there are few better places to examine it than in the rhetoric of religion. As Burke knew, our words about God signify far more about our society than simply our religious belief. Our sense of ultimate terms structures our entire social interaction.

The story of the CPG is a story of oddity. As I hope the studies contained in the dissertation convey, the CPG is no mere flash-in-the-pan televangelism. Its vast popularity, resilience in the face of criticism, extensive financial base, and its television and publishing presence indicate that it is something far larger and more resilient than a simple fad. Creflo Dollar and Joel Osteen represent the third generation of prosperity preachers. The direct CPG tradition stretches back more than 50 years to the work of Kenneth Hagin and Oral Roberts. The American belief that pious religious belief should obtain the faithful material wealth stretches much farther back. Even ignoring the Puritans’ and the Quakers’ commercialistic Christianity,

Russell Conwell directly preached prosperity more than 100 years ago. Other pseudo-Christian occult prosperity rhetorics flourished throughout the early 20th century.

Yet something is different in contemporary culture. The influence of CPG preachers eclipses that of all prior prosperity advocates and it is unique in its development of a Christian cosmology of prosperity, its direct peddling of the prosperity message, and its integration of modernist, scientific, and occult rhetorics. Though religion, science, and the occult have always been mixed—often to the purpose of obtaining riches—the CPG represents a massive popular culture movement toward this particular brand of belief.

I have argued that it is no coincidence that the rise of the CPG has coincided with the symbolic chaos of contemporary culture, the decline of organized religious belief, a period of deep economic anxiety, and a growing frustration with the scientific and technocratic structures of contemporary society. In the face of significant dissatisfaction with contemporary life, the CPG is an attempt to find a solution that simultaneously remedies all of these sources of cultural unease. It is an attempt that is unlikely to succeed. Yet, studies of the CPG and similar such symbolic “gargoyles” are not valuable on their own terms alone, but because they are studies into our culture’s attempts to make sense of late modern society. Religion provides an ideal way to study these conflicts. Though many contemporary rhetorical scholars shy away from the study of religious rhetoric and many consider religious rhetoric its own sub-specialty, in a period of symbolic chaos, our religious institutions are precisely where scholars should look for attempts to grab hold of the transcendent, the foundationally true in contemporary life.

Studies of this type are no mere popular culture studies, though I do not mean that term pejoratively. Quite the opposite. They are studies into our culture’s most developed and influential attempts to develop discourses and frames of interpretation that provide a sense of

grounding. In a roiling sea of symbolic data and errant signs (literally, the *Erlebnisstorm*, the storm of conscious experiences), religion is the place that many go to find it. Such a fact is unsurprising; religious belief is often a defensive measure against the loss of identity. But for us in our time, many of these defensive measures lack the cultural isolation to avoid a quick debunking by the encounter with the Other. Those that do remain—innocuously or dangerously—deserve our attention.

The attentive reader may perceive dark overtones in my analysis, a sense in which my prose seems to indicate that we are headed for not just strange times, but possibly threatening ones as well. The grotesque is not merely odd, but the intrusion of the bizarre, the horrible, into the oddness of everyday life. A gargoyle is not merely unusual and amalgamated, but a terrifying and threatening monster, derived more from nightmares than from simple flights of fancy. I hope that it is not so. But it remains to be seen. Millions upon millions believe in the CPG, which though politically disempowering and somewhat incoherent, is relatively benign. But I wonder: If millions of Americans believe that there are supernatural creatures behind every action they take, manipulating and controlling even the most mundane events and which can be summoned and utilized by those with the right power, what more terrifying discourses might emerge? What more dangerous *mythos* might grab hold? Perhaps none at all. But we stand in the best tradition of American rhetorical criticism if we stay alert to this possibility and confront those gargoyles if they come.

¹ Joel Osteen, *It's Your Time: Activate Your Faith, Achieve Your Dreams, and Increase in God's Favor* (New York: Free Press, 2009), 235.

² David Buttrick. *A Captive Voice: The Liberation of Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 11.

³ Paul Ricoeur, "The Language of Faith," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, ed. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 227.

⁴ Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 245, note 1.

⁵ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 187; Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 427-428.

⁶ Kenneth Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*. (New York: Basic Books, 1991), xiv.

⁷ Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper Perennial, 1977); see also Ladelle McWhorter, "Guilt as Management Technology: A Call to Heideggerian Reflection," Heidegger and the Earth: Essays in Environmental Philosophy," in *Heidegger and the Earth: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, 2nd Edition, ed. Ladelle McWhorter and Gail Stenstad (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 11-12; see also Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Knopf, 1964).

⁸ William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1958), 35.

⁹ Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Updated Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

¹⁰ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 594.

¹¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 768-772.

¹² Ann Swidler, "Saving the Self: Endowment versus Depletion in American Institutions," in *Meaning and Modernity: Religion, Polity, and Self*, eds. Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 44-45.

¹³ James B. Twitchell, *Branded Nation: The Marketing of Megachurch, College, Inc., and Museumworld* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 78-80; James B. Twitchell, *Shopping for God: How Christianity Went from In Your Heart to In Your Face* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2007), 202; John A. Coleman, S.J., "Selling God in America: American Commercial Culture as a Climate of Hospitality to Religion," in *Meaning and Modernity:*

Religion, Polity, and Self, eds. Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002), 136-149.

¹⁴ Joel Osteen, qtd. in Zack Quaintanc, "Our Interview with Joel Osteen," *The Monitor*, August 7, 2010, accessed September 15, 2010. <http://www.themonitor.com/articles/osteen-29332-joel-years.html>.

¹⁵ D.R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995); Stephen Gibson, *Prosperity Prophets* (Salem, OH: Allegheny Publications, 2006); Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Old Testament Case for Material Blessings and the Contemporary Believer," in *The Gospel and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Douglas J. Moo (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1997), 27-41; Dave Hunt and T.A. McMahon, *The Seduction of Christianity: Spiritual Discernment in the Last Days* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1985), 12-21.

¹⁶ Burke, *Permanence*, 110.

¹⁷ **McConnell, *A Different Gospel*, XX.**

¹⁸ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (New York: The Free Press, 1915), 57; John Middleton, "Magic," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987), 9:82.

¹⁹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), xv.

²⁰ Barrett, *Irrational Man*, 35.

²¹ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 162.

²² James K. Smith, "What's Right with the Prosperity Gospel?" *Forum* (Fall, 2009), 8-9.

²³ Shayne Lee and Phillip Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and the Spiritual Marketplace* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 39.

²⁴ Lee and, *Holy Mavericks*, 58-59

²⁵ David Van Biema and Jeff Chu. "Does God Want You to Be Rich?" *Time*, 18 September 2006, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1533448,00.html>, (accessed 1 August 2010), in print 48-56.

²⁶ Jeremiah Camara, *Holy Lockdown: Does the Church Limit Black Progress* (Lilburn, GA: Twelfth House Publishing, 2004), 12-15; Milmon F. Harrison, *Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary*

African American Religion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It? Prosperity Preaching and the Black Church* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2007).

²⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 13.

²⁸ Mitchem, *Name It*, 49.

²⁹ James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* (New York: New York University, 1997), 20.

³⁰ Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar. "American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS 2008): Summary Report" (March 2009), http://www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org/reports/ARIS_Report_2008.pdf (accessed 4 December 2009).

³¹ Joel Osteen Ministries, "Joel Osteen," <http://www.joelosteen.com/About/JoelOsteen/Pages/JoelOsteen.aspx> (accessed 20 October 2009).

³² Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History* (Berkeley: University of California, 1984), 19-30.

³³ Burke, *Permanence*, 112.

³⁴ Margaret D. Zulick, "Rhetoric of Religion." *The Sage Handbook of Rhetorical Studies* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009), 132.

³⁵ John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1987), 189.

³⁶ Joshua Gunn, *Modern Occult Rhetoric: Mass Media and the Drama of Secrecy in the Twentieth* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama, 2005), xxii.

³⁷ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 57; Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), 221; Jacob Neusner, "Science and Magic, Miracle and Magic in Formative Judaism: The System and Difference," in *Religion, Science, and Magic*, eds. Jacob Neusner, Ernest S. Frerichs, and Paul Virgil McCracken Flesher (61-81) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 63; George B. Vetter, *Magic and Religion: Their Psychological Nature, Origin, and Function* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1958), 163, 168.

³⁸ Richard Benjamin Crosby, "Kairos as God's Time in Martin Luther King Jr.'s Last Sunday Sermon," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 39 (2009): 277.

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