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## The Megachurch, its Critics and The Prosperity Gospel

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The Megachurch, its Critics and The Prosperity Gospel

Ronic Ngambwe

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## Introduction

Hurricane Harvey hit Houston, Texas on Friday, August 25, 2017, displacing 39,000 people from their homes.<sup>1</sup> Two days later, one of the largest and most famous churches in America, Lakewood, posted an announcement on Facebook informing the public that the church was flooded, encouraging displaced residents to go to local shelters.<sup>2</sup> It was not long before the famous megachurch pastor, Joel Osteen, became inundated with critical tweets.

The critics did not believe the claims about the church being flooded. They had seen pictures of the streets around the church that told quite a different story.<sup>3</sup> And so the tweet storm began. “Joel Osteen won’t open his church that holds 16,000 to hurricane victims because it only provides shelter from taxes. #HoustonStrong.”<sup>4</sup> Another tweet read, “Shame on Joel Osteen. Jesus would open the doors and care for the needy. What a disgrace for the needy. What a disgrace to #houston and #LakewoodChurch!”<sup>5</sup>

A few days later, the following week on Tuesday, Osteen tweeted letting people know that the church was gathering the necessary supplies such as food, water, and diapers for hurricane victims.<sup>6</sup> Of course this did not appease the critics, because even a few days after the church began to welcome evacuees, people were still criticising the megachurch pastor. A twitter account by the name of Stop Global Warming tweeted a meme of an individual handing bread and fish to someone else, presumably referring to the Biblical passage where Jesus fed a large

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<sup>1</sup> kimberly Amadeo, “Hurricane Harvey Facts, Damage and Costs,” *The Balance*, June 25, 2019

<sup>2</sup> John Bacon, “Joel Osteen: 'We never turned away' Hurricane Harvey flooding victims,” *USA Today*, August 30, 2017

<sup>3</sup> Amadeo, “Hurricane Harvey Facts, Damage and Costs.”

<sup>4</sup> Alan Spencer (@MrAlanSpencer), “Joel Osteen won't open his church that holds 16,000 to hurricane victims because it only provides shelter from taxes. #HoustonStrong,” Twitter, August 28, 2017, <https://twitter.com/MrAlanSpencer/status/902287854440562688>

<sup>5</sup> RuneK (@RuneK\_15), “Shame on Joel Osteen. Jesus would open the doors and care for the needy. What a disgrace to #houston and #LakewoodChurch!” Twitter, August 28, 2017, [https://twitter.com/RuneK\\_15/status/902342206626959360](https://twitter.com/RuneK_15/status/902342206626959360)

<sup>6</sup> Bacon, “Joel Osteen: 'We never turned away' Hurricane Harvey flooding victims.”

crowd, with the line, “And, lo, Jesus fed the needy only after receiving a massive public shaming on Twitter.” The caption read, “Joel Osteen and the rest of the “prosperity gospel” peddlers are parasites!#JoelOsteen.”<sup>7</sup> The Lakewood preacher defended himself, telling CNN, “the church has always been open.”<sup>8</sup>

In a Washington Post article titled, “Here’s why people hate Joel Osteen,” associate professor of the history of Christianity in North America at Duke Divinity School and author of *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, Kate Bowler argues that the primary reason that people dislike Osteen is because of the theology he preaches: the prosperity gospel.<sup>9</sup> It’s a theology that promises wealth, health and victory through faith in Christ,<sup>10</sup> all of which Osteen appears to have in abundance. Bowler argues that Osteen has generally always been disliked because of this. She goes on to list the issues with prosperity megachurches and the prosperity gospel in general that have garnered so much hate for pastors of these churches.<sup>11</sup> The prosperity gospel is a fairly limited theology that promises things that aren’t always guaranteed to every Christian. It additionally fails to address “the problem of evil”<sup>12</sup> and explain the times in life when one may not be prosperous despite how much they might “name it” and “claim it.”

Hence this is the biggest issue critics of the megachurch have with its leadership: the prosperity gospel. Megachurches are accused of using this gospel to take from attendees while promising prosperity that is simply not guaranteed. Why is this the prominent belief about megachurches? What does the megachurch have to say about such accusations?

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<sup>7</sup> Stop Global Warming (@protestcards), “Joel Osteen and the rest of the “prosperity gospel” peddlers are parasites!#JoelOsteen,” Twitter, August 29, 2017, <https://twitter.com/protestcards/status/902641835067232256>

<sup>8</sup> Bacon, “Joel Osteen: ‘We never turned away’ Hurricane Harvey flooding victims.”

<sup>9</sup> Kate Bowler, “Here’s why people hate Joel Osteen,” *The Washington Post*, August 29, 2017

<sup>10</sup> Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 7.

<sup>11</sup> Bowler, “Here’s why people hate Joel Osteen.”

<sup>12</sup> Bowler, “Here’s why people hate Joel Osteen.”

## Literature Review

Contrary to popular belief, megachurches are not a product of the 1970s and 80s but have been around since the Reformation period.<sup>13</sup> They emerged from the Protestant tradition with the aim of achieving cultural significance by offering a variety of programs tailored to people's needs.<sup>14</sup> In that regard, they've always been big, with the first megachurch designed to hold nearly 10,000 people.<sup>15</sup> Some of the earlier churches were equipped with gyms, bowling alleys and even swimming pools.<sup>16</sup> For a long time, the megachurch was only defined by its denomination, protestant, and size of 1,500-2,000<sup>17</sup> <sup>18</sup> regular attendees, but I would argue that that definition expanded to include other characteristics in the 1970s and 80s when "the megachurch burst into the American consciousness."<sup>19</sup>

It was around this time that people began to notice the megachurch, when it really had come about in the 19th and 20th centuries as a result of revivalism and the Institutional Church Movement.<sup>20</sup> This mistaken perception of the megachurch as a new phenomenon can be attributed to megachurch leaders and supporters marketing their churches as new social movements. And the media, which strives on novelty, took this and ran with it, further reinforcing this myth about the megachurch. But what made the megachurch stand out in the 70s and 80s other than the way it was being presented by its promoters was televangelism.

Televangelism refers to religious broadcasting. While an elementary version of it started in 1906

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<sup>13</sup> David E. Eagle, "Historicizing the Megachurch", *Journal of Social History* (Spring 2015)

<sup>14</sup> Eagle, "Historicizing the Megachurch."

<sup>15</sup> Eagle, "Historicizing the Megachurch," 592.

<sup>16</sup> Eagle, "Historicizing the Megachurch," 596-597.

<sup>17</sup> Eagle, "Historicizing the Megachurch," 591.

<sup>18</sup> Scott Thumma and David Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America's Largest Churches* (Leadership Network Publication, 2007), 5.

<sup>19</sup> Eagle, "Historicizing the Megachurch," 589.

<sup>20</sup> Eagle, "Historicizing the Megachurch," 590

with the advent of wireless communication,<sup>21</sup> televangelism really took off in the 1960s.<sup>22</sup> “The average number of Americans viewing a religious television program soared from approximately 5 million in the late 1960s to almost 25 million by the mid-1980s,”<sup>23</sup> writes Jeffrey K. Hadden, former professor of sociology at the University of Virginia.

As the megachurch grew, so did its critics who redefined it to include many critical descriptions. It was no longer characterized only by denomination, size and a long list of amenities. A Megachurch was now too big, narcissistic, a combination of “cults of personalities,”<sup>24</sup> detrimental to the impact of the local church, homogeneous in terms of demographic with its growth dependent on how big a “show” they could put on, and the biggest criticism of all, which is now what the megachurch is synonymous with, is that they offer watered-down teaching in the form of the prosperity gospel.<sup>25</sup>

Scott Thumma, professor of sociology of religion at Hartford Seminary and author, Dave Travis, embarked on a journey to debunk these myths using data and statistics in a book titled, *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What we can learn from America’s Largest Churches*. On the claim of megachurches being too big, Thumma and Travis present statistical research showing that “of the 320,000 Christian churches, 60% of them have fewer than 100 participating adults and children (p. 45). And when surveyed, 64% of megachurch attendees knew as many or more people in the megachurch than they did at smaller churches (p. 46).” The argument that megachurches are narcissistic is grounded in the belief that they only care about themselves and their attendees and that everything they do is essentially done to benefit them. However,

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<sup>21</sup> Jeffrey K. Hadden, “The Rise and Fall of American Televangelism,” *Sage Publications, Inc. (May 1993)*, p. 114

<sup>22</sup> Hadden, “Historicizing the Megachurch,” 120.

<sup>23</sup> Hadden, “Historicizing the Megachurch,” 120.

<sup>24</sup> ED Stetzer, “Debunking Megachurch Myths: Especially the One About Sheep Swapping,” *Christianity Today*, February 22, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Stetzer, “Debunking Megachurch Myths: Especially the One About Sheep Swapping.”

according to statistics, “72% of megachurches have partnered with other congregations to do international missions (p. 80). Because membership is spread across an expansive region and over multiple communities, megachurch social ministry may also be dispersed over a large area (p. 82).”

On the claim of megachurches being “cults of personalities,” Thumma argues that “pastors are often the center of attention whether the church is large or small...It is not surprising that megachurches are often identified by the names of their senior pastors (p. 55). Thumma and Travis address the claim that big churches might be detrimental to the local church in following statement, “individuals will always have disagreements with the actions and theology of certain megachurches and their pastors, but do smaller churches have reason to fear a megachurch the way a mom-and-pop general store might when rumors of Wal-Mart arise? (p.119).

Megachurches do not pose a threat to local churches. This criticism in particular comes from the belief that megachurches grow by “swapping sheep” from local churches but according to statistics, only about 44% new megachurch members are from local churches contrary to the 60-95% claim.<sup>26</sup> On the criticism of homogeneity, the authors argue that “many megachurches have intentionally adopted an inclusive vision that the church is for all people no matter what race or socioeconomic group. The leadership of these churches has a strong desire to cultivate an atmosphere of inclusion and embrace a wide diversity of people. This message is translated to the people in the pews.” (p. 138). In terms of worship and growth, Thumma and Travis argue that while worship is important to growth, it’s the pastor and leaders’s passion for evangelism that has the greatest impact (p.160). Lastly, in responding to critics that megachurches preach almost exclusively the prosperity gospel, the authors do acknowledge that that is the practice of

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<sup>26</sup> Stetzer, “Debunking Megachurch Myths: Especially the One About Sheep Swapping.”

some churches “however, the vast majority of megachurches have belief statements on paper and in practice that are clearly in line with orthodox Christian doctrines” (p.98).

Authors Kate Stockly, Katie Corcoran and James Wellman also spring to the defense of the megachurch in their newly released book, *High On God: How Megachurches Won the Heart of America*. They argue that the megachurch satisfies the human desire for community and individual validation through an energetic atmosphere that evokes and meets six human desires: acceptance, awe and spiritual stimulation, reliable leadership, deliverance, purpose, and solidarity in a community of like-minded others. These desires make church members feel known and a part of a community. This argument falls apart when one considers churches that would not necessarily be considered megachurches manage to offer such energetic atmospheres.

While these authors offer sound arguments in defense of the megachurch, they’re not very convincing. They are reactionary responses to disapproving critics. There is now a label that almost exclusively defines the megachurch of the 21st century (a label born in the 19th ce.) whose significant impact, the promoters of the megachurch appear to downplay and critics appear to magnify. This is the role of the prosperity gospel in the identity of the megachurch. I believe it’s come to redefine the megachurch as a church whose motives for evangelism are questioned because of the theology of health, wealth and victory that is synonymous with such large churches. A fair amount of research on the megachurch either focuses exclusively on its theology, the prosperity gospel<sup>27</sup> or addresses it at great length.<sup>28</sup> I would argue that critics have observed issues with the theology that characterizes the megachurch that leaders and promoters of the megachurch don’t see a problem with. The question then becomes less about the

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<sup>27</sup> Robert Falconer, “Blessed are the Consumerists: The Ideology of Contemporary Mega Church Architecture,” *South African Theological Seminary*, 2017

<sup>28</sup> James Wellman, Katie Corcoran, and Kate Stockly, *High on God: How Megachurches Won the Heart of America*, (Oxford University Press, 2020)



megachurch and more about its theology, its biggest identifier. What is so wrong with the prosperity gospel according to critics, what do leaders and promoters of the megachurch have to say about this and why does this matter?

### **Megachurches and The Prosperity Gospel**

As previously noted, the theology found in the megachurch has been the biggest source of its criticism. In her book, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, Kate Bowler writes, “the prosperity gospel guaranteed a special form of Christian power to reach into God’s treasure trove and pull out a miracle. It represented a triumph of American optimism over the realities of a fickle economy, entrenched racism, pervasive poverty and theological pessimism that foretold the future as dangling by a thread.”<sup>29</sup> The prosperity gospel emerged at a time when Christians were starting to think differently about spiritual power. They were imagining ways to necessitate the move of the supernatural in their lives to yield a desired outcome instead of just presenting their requests to God and hoping that he gave them what they wanted.<sup>30</sup>

Hence megachurches are often accused of using the gospel to obtain their own personal desires which come in the form of wealth, fame, and recognition, while promising their congregations that they too can do the same by preaching prosperity to them. The vast majority of the literature that currently exists on megachurches focus on their use of the prosperity gospel. Stockly, Corcoran and Wellman (2020), sum up the common perception of megachurches in regard to their use of such theology “...they tend to be havens of commerce and exploitation, and purveyors of the prosperity gospel. That is, most of these megachurch pastors are in it for fame and fortune. Perhaps they begin with the genuine intention to serve their people, but in the end, they transmute into manipulative marketing agents of their own fame who exploit their

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<sup>29</sup> Bowler, *Blessed*, 7.

<sup>30</sup> Bowler, *Blessed*, 11-12.

parishioners, selling whatever it takes to get the group to make them rich.”<sup>31</sup> Megachurches use the prosperity gospel to fulfill their own selfish desires by not only preaching wealth, health, and victory but by embodying these promises as well.<sup>32</sup>

As a matter of fact, megachurch preachers do not appear to have a shortage of wealth. Take televangelists Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, for example. They had a 2,200-acre Christian resort and theme park in their backyard that earned third place on the nation’s most visited attractions. Their luxurious lifestyles was accompanied by a mansion, designer apparel and two Mercedes cars.<sup>33</sup> The couple’s lifestyle was evidence of the gospel they preached. Brenda and Mack Timberlake, another preaching couple, owned an “80,000-square foot church of steel and concrete in the cornflower blue of Mack’s trademark suits.”<sup>34</sup> Joel Osteen, one of the most popular preacher today, enjoys a 17, 000 square foot mansion worth approximately, 10.5 million dollars, complete with 6 bedrooms, 5 bedrooms and 3 elevators.<sup>35</sup> The seven times New York Times Bestselling author has his fame and extreme wealth to prove that God provided for those who “name it” and “claim it.” Dallas, Texas, preacher, Bishop T.D. Jakes has also amassed incredible wealth preaching at his church, The Potter’s House. Like Osteen, he’s also a New York Times Bestseller, 15 times<sup>36</sup>, a Grammy Award winner, the owner of a mansion and has been featured on Time Magazine.<sup>37</sup> Costi Hinn, Benny Hinn’s nephew, tells about the lavish life he lived working for his uncle as the catcher: the person who would catch those who fell from

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<sup>31</sup> Thumma and Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths*.

<sup>32</sup> Bowler, “Here’s why people hate Joel Osteen.”

<sup>33</sup> Bowler, *Blessed*, 77.

<sup>34</sup> Bowler, *Blessed*, 79.

<sup>35</sup> “Wow! Joel Osteen House Photos, Net Worth & Books,” Kten, May 16, 2019, <http://www.kten.com/story/40490669/wow-joel-osteen-house-photos-net-worth-books>.

<sup>36</sup> T.D. Jakes, “Oprah’s Next Chapter with Bishop T.D. Jakes,” interview by Oprah Winfrey, *Oprah’s Next Chapter*, OWN, December 30, 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Darlinton Omeh, “Top 10 Richest Pastors In The World And Their Net Worth,” *Constative*, n.d

Hinn's touch. At just 21 years old, Costi owned an H2 black Hummer with a TV, chrome package and 22 inch rims and a \$1,000 monthly payment, "just because we could afford it"<sup>38</sup> he said. Their home on the northern side of the United States was 10,000 square feet and the second one in Southern California came with an ocean side view that was worth \$2 million. They stayed at hotels worth upwards of \$20, 000 a night.

The issue with the prosperity gospel is that what it promises is not guaranteed for every Christian and can be harmful. Wealth doesn't always come to those who "claim it" and having "enough faith" doesn't guarantee healing or whatever else we'd like. Thus, "the most controversial aspect of the movement was its radical claim to transform invisible faith into financial rewards. Its prophets proclaimed a palpable gospel, one that could be clearly seen and measured in the financial well-being of its participants."<sup>39</sup> But not every participant's faith results in financial rewards. Constance Troutman, blogger at truthandfire.com, quit her job because her megachurch pastor said that God told him that someone in the congregation needed to quit their job. It only took two months for her to fall into what she called, "financial ruin."<sup>40</sup> Sure one could argue that Troutman already had a predisposition to do so; perhaps she already disliked her job and had even considered quitting. However, it was the pastor's "prophecy" as she calls it that moved her to action. The decision was made out of faith, encouraged by the pastor, that God always provides when one has faith.

Another profound marker of the prosperity gospel, Bowler writes, is healing through faith. "The drama of healing and health is a defining feature of the American prosperity

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<sup>38</sup> *American Gospel: Christ Alone*, directed by Brandon Kimber (2018; Transition Studios, n.d.), [https://www.amazon.com/American-Gospel-Christ-Russell-Berger/dp/B07MDLBZ4J/ref=sr\\_1\\_2?ascsubtag=1ba00-01000-a0049-win81-other-smile-us000-pcomp-feature-scomp-wm-5&dchild=1&keywords=american+gospel&pldnSite=1&qid=1587740136&sr=8-2](https://www.amazon.com/American-Gospel-Christ-Russell-Berger/dp/B07MDLBZ4J/ref=sr_1_2?ascsubtag=1ba00-01000-a0049-win81-other-smile-us000-pcomp-feature-scomp-wm-5&dchild=1&keywords=american+gospel&pldnSite=1&qid=1587740136&sr=8-2)

<sup>39</sup> Bowler, *Blessed*, 77.

<sup>40</sup> *American Gospel: Christ Alone*, directed by Brandon Kimber

movement, as believers use their bodies, and not just their finances, as a testing ground for their faith.”<sup>41</sup> Justin Peters found himself on this testing ground, at age 16 when he was told that he was going to be healed from the cerebral palsy he’d had since birth. He was introduced to faith healer, Nora Lam, who did pray for his healing but proceeded to tell his father that “the more money you give to the Lord’s work, the more likely it is, he’ll answer your prayers.”<sup>42</sup> Peters was prayed over and several years later, he still has cerebral palsy. Peters later remarked that most of the faith healers will really only “heal” those who do not have any obvious illnesses when he found himself in another similar situation. As part of his research, Peters visited a number of megachurches. As he was walking up to the altar, hoping to speak with Benny Hinn, Henry Hinn, his brother, whispered in a woman’s ear who was standing next to Benny. The woman turned to Peters and said, “sir, step aside and pray for your own healing.”<sup>43</sup>

While most prosperity preachers came to perceive medical intervention in a positive light, “a minority, however, shunned hospitals and doctors and nurtured divine health only by spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, and deliverance.”<sup>44</sup> Sean Demars, pastor at 6th Ave Church of God in Decatur, Alabama, still sided with this minority when he got mercury poisoning and was convinced that seeing the doctor reflected a lack of faith in God. As his illness got progressively worse, his mother had to force him to go see a doctor. A relative of Dr. Robert M. Bowman Jr., author of *The Word-Faith Controversy*, responded to an illness in the same way Demars did and lost his life. Certainly, these faith preachers aren’t wrong in their claims and one could argue that people like Demars and Bowman’s relative misunderstood their teaching and perhaps took it too literally but this attitude and response to illness and finances is far too

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<sup>41</sup> Bowler, *Blessed*, 140.

<sup>42</sup> *American Gospel: Christ Alone*, directed by Brandon Kimber

<sup>43</sup> *American Gospel: Christ Alone*, directed by Brandon Kimber

<sup>44</sup> Bowler, *Blessed*, 140.

common among adherents of the prosperity gospel. The issue is not just the promise of wealth and healing, it's the promise that these things are guaranteed for every believer every time and as reflected in the individual stories above, that is simply not true.

### **How and Why Prosperity Became a Gospel and Megachurch Leaders' Response**

In ancient times, the announcement of victory on the battlefield or any other good news, was referred to by the noun, "euangelion"<sup>45</sup> in Greek and "Besorah" in Hebrew (verb, "Bisser")<sup>46</sup>, which is where the word "gospel" comes from. As previously alluded to, it means "good news." The Christian New Testament begins with four books that are referred to as the gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These books tell of the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ which together, culminate to form the good news.<sup>47</sup> The gospel therefore centers on the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Christ and how through Him, Christians are saved. The prosperity gospel then, centers exclusively on health, wealth, and victory given by Christ then on Chris himself. This of course happened gradually. In tracing the development of new thinking about spiritual power, Bowler notes the influence of the "New Thought movement and its growth into more recognizably evangelical gospels of health and wealth."<sup>48</sup> New Thought emerged as many of the different ways of thinking about spiritual power and how to manipulate it in order to obtain a desired outcome. It has its conception in ideas of success literature, self-help, and positive thinking. It says, "adherents, acting in accordance with divine principles, relied on their minds to transform thought and speech into heaven-

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<sup>45</sup> *American Gospel: Christ Alone*, directed by Brandon Kimber

<sup>46</sup> "Word Study: Euangelion - "Gospel"", directed by The Bible Project, October 3, 2019

<sup>47</sup> J.D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, (Zondervan, 2011), 540.

<sup>48</sup> Bowler, *Blessed*, 11.

sent blessings.”<sup>49</sup> This new way of thinking placed the focus on the individual and the ability to use their mind to achieve and accomplish, putting power in the hands of the individual.

Such individual-centric philosophy quickly morphed into a gospel; it became the good news. The emphasis shifted from teaching about the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Christ to how an individual can obtain their desires. “Jesus bled and died for us so that we can lay claim to the promise of financial prosperity,”<sup>50</sup> Creflo Dollar tweeted.<sup>51</sup> Joel Osteen added that “Jesus died that we might have an abundant life.”<sup>52</sup> These claims are not false. “It’s true that God wants us to be happy...”<sup>53</sup> says Trevin Wax, author of *Counterfeit Gospel*. But when what is exclusively taught is the financial prosperity and abundant life that the death of Jesus affords, then that’s an incomplete message that can actually have a negative effect on people’s lives. “The Bible is not against wealth, it’s not against happiness. It’s really how we view those things,”<sup>54</sup> says David W. Jones, Professor of Christian Ethics, Associate Dean for Theological Studies and Director of Th.M. Program at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. A gospel that focuses on prosperity places more emphasis on what the individual gets from a relationship with Christ than Christ himself, which, I believe, is a reflection of the influence of the New Thought movement.

So how do megachurches view wealth and happiness? What do megachurch leaders have to say about these accusations? I’m choosing to focus on Joel Osteen and Bishop T.D. Jakes because their fame and notoriety has earned them a lot of media attention where they’ve had a

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<sup>49</sup> Bowler, *Blessed*, 11.

<sup>50</sup> Creflo A. Dollar (@Creflo\_Dollar), “Jesus bled and died for us so that we can lay claim to the promise of financial prosperity, #ProsperityInChrist #WealthyLiving #AbundantLife” Twitter, October 7, 2015, <https://twitter.com/pdxprogressiveX/status/652957374580305920/photo/1>

<sup>51</sup> Creflo later deleted the tweet

<sup>52</sup> Joel Osteen, “Pastor Joel Osteen Responds to Criticism,” interview by Oprah Winfrey, *Oprah’s Next Chapter*, OWN, January 8, 2012.

<sup>53</sup> *American Gospel: Christ Alone*, directed by Brandon Kimber

<sup>54</sup> *American Gospel: Christ Alone*, directed by Brandon Kimber

chance to talk about their teaching and respond to critics. Osteen views wealth as “God’s blessings”<sup>55</sup> and happiness as what God wants for all people. Yes all people because Osteen’s goal “is just to help anybody from every, any faith to improve their life.”<sup>56</sup> His congregation is made up of people from different worldviews including Muslim and even atheists.<sup>57</sup> Victoria Osteen, Joel’s wife, asserted to the congregation that, “God wants you to be happy. When you worship, you’re not really doing it for God, you’re doing it for yourself cuz that’s what makes you happy and God just wants you to be happy.”<sup>58</sup>

To Joel, wealth and happiness are rewards from God; they are intrinsic to a relationship with God. Furthermore, Osteen has admitted that he really just wants to preach a message of hope and “how to live a great life.”<sup>59</sup> It says on Lakewood’s website that the ministry is “committed to helping people from all walks of life experience the unconditional love and unending hope found only in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.”<sup>60</sup> Adding, “we are dedicated to helping people everywhere be inspired and rediscover their true purpose in life.” This mission is reflected in Osteen’s yearly program, Night of Hope, his teachings on abundant living and his books including, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential*, *The Power of I Am*, *Become a Better You*, and *Next Level Thinking: 10 Powerful Thoughts for a Successful and Abundant Life*, *Break Out: Five Keys to go Beyond your Barriers and Live an Extraordinary Life* many of which are New York Times Bestsellers.

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<sup>55</sup> Joel Osteen, “Pastor Joel Osteen Makes No Apologies for His Wealth,” interview by Oprah Winfrey, *Oprah’s Next Chapter*, OWN, January 8, 2012

<sup>56</sup> Joel Osteen, “Joel Osteen on Living Your Best Life,” Borders Media, December 31, 2008

<sup>57</sup> Joel Osteen, “Joel Osteen on “Larry King Now” - Full Episode Available in the U.S. on Ora.TV,” interview by Larry King, *Larry King Now*, Larry King, January 14, 2014

<sup>58</sup> “WHAT’S THE PROBLEM WITH JOEL OSTEEEN? 2017”, by CBC MEDIA, December 20, 2016

<sup>59</sup> Joel Osteen, “Joel Osteen on “Larry King Now” - Full Episode Available in the U.S. on Ora.TV,” interview by Larry King, *Larry King Now*, Larry King, January 14, 2014

<sup>60</sup> “Our Ministry,” Joel Osteen Ministries, accessed April 6, 2020, <https://www.joelosteen.com/Pages/About.aspx>

When Bishop TD Jakes appeared on OWN, he echoed Osteen's sentiment about wealth, saying, "God allows your cup to run over."<sup>61</sup> He additionally argued that the issue with clergy is less about the material possessions they have and more about how they acquired them. He says the growth of his congregation and success are a product of a commitment to be better and effective. Jakes attributes his wealth to other streams of income such as his active involvement with film production in Hollywood. Both Osteen and Jakes are charismatic leaders who actively engage with culture and choose to focus helping the individual in their ministries. They've both revealed in interviews that their primary goal has never been to take from the congregation in the spirit of acquiring fame and fortune.

### **Why It All Matters**

Following a careful evaluation of the critic's claims and their evidence, it's clear that the prosperity theology does have some problematic elements. However, their criticism of modern-day prosperity preachers is ill informed. This research has revealed differences in how the prosperity gospel is preached today and how it was in the 80s. The primary conduit for such theology was televangelism. First, televangelists, focused on sensationalism, where immediate healing was emphasized and blessing in the form of wealth came from giving to the televangelists. They employed marketing strategies to get, which was reflected in their lavish lifestyles. I think the primary difference between prosperity in the 80s and today is the intention of megachurch leaders. Sure they too may simply be focused on getting but they've said in their own words that is not the intention behind their theology.

I believe that critics treat them like televangelists of the 20th ce. For two reasons. The first one being history. Historically, pastors who have taught prosperity have been the ones to

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<sup>61</sup> T.D. Jakes, "Oprah's Next Chapter with Bishop T.D. Jakes," interview by Oprah Winfrey, *Oprah's Next Chapter*, OWN, December 30, 2012.



grow and balloon into megachurches and have been embodiments of the prosperity they preach. Their ministries have been very sensational, focused on quick fixes. Therefore, history has tarnished the reputation of the megachurch. Second, is the luxurious lifestyle people like Osteen and Jakes have. The prominent prosperity preachers of modern-day are also embodiments of the prosperity they preach. Because of their history and luxurious lifestyle, critics still presume that prosperity preachers's intent is not to deceive. Maybe it is but there is not enough dialogue taking place between the critics of the megachurch and its leaders as well as promoters. Critics are not taking time to listen to what prosperity preachers have to say about their intentions, they are only listening to their sermons in which their theology sounds like that of televangelists. Hence those decade-old assumptions have been carried into the modern era. However, the onslaught of criticism of prosperity megachurches is a response to how some people have been hurt by their message over the decades.

Therefore, I would argue that the megachurch attracts people and has always attracted people in large part because of the message of positivity and hope delivered, oftentimes, by a very charismatic leader. In an individualistic society such as this, prosperity preachers adapt the biblical message to such an audience. Osteen says that, "people are already beaten down by life, they want to know God has a plan for them"<sup>62</sup> and that is why his ministry is focused on teaching a message of hope. Hence, those who criticize the megachurch for using the gospel for their own ends, should consider what its leaders have to say about their intent. At the same time, prosperity preachers need to consider the implications of only sharing the benefits of the gospel and not

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<sup>62</sup> Joel Osteen, "Pastor Joel Osteen Responds to Criticism," interview by Oprah Winfrey, *Oprah's Next Chapter*, OWN, January 8, 2012.

addressing other aspects of it. They ought to consider how this might hurt their congregations. There needs to be a balance on both sides of the aisle and productive conversations, that is not filled with accusations, where both sides take time to understand one another's motives and intent; because such quarrels over theology further divides the Christian church.

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