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**THE WAL-MARTIZATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN RELIGION
T.D. JAKES AND WOMAN THOU ART LOOSED**

BY

PAULA L. MCGEE

**A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED
TO THE FACULTY
OF
CLAREMONT GRADUATE UNIVERSITY**

**IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**CLAREMONT, CALIFORNIA
2012**

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APPROVAL OF THE REVIEW COMMITTEE

This dissertation has been duly read, reviewed, and critiqued by the Committee listed below, which hereby approves the manuscript of Paula L. McGee as fulfilling the scope and quality requirements for meriting the degree of doctor of philosophy (Ph.D.) in Women's Studies in Religion with a concentration in Theology, Ethics and Culture.

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

THE WAL-MARTIZATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN RELIGION T.D. JAKES AND WOMAN THOU ART LOOSED

BY

PAULA L. MCGEE CLAREMONT GRADUATE UNIVERSITY 2012

This dissertation is an ideological critique of the New Black Church model of ministry, with T.D. Jakes and Woman Thou Art Loosed (WTAL) as a case study. T.D. Jakes is an African American televangelist who pastors The Potter's House, a supermegachurch in Dallas, Texas. He is the quintessential example of a New Black Church pastor—a religious entrepreneur with several successful faith brands. WTAL is by far his most successful brand. Unashamed of his capitalist success, with an empire estimated to be worth \$100 million dollars, Jakes says that it is occupational discrimination for him not to reap the benefits of the American dream. This dissertation identifies what has happened to the brand and Jakes's ministry as “the Wal-Martization of African American Religion.” As a theoretical concept, Wal-Martization speaks to both the ideology and process that explains the generational differences between the New Black Church and the Black Church. It also is indicative of the branding and storytelling at every level of representation of the New Black Church.

Jakes and New Black Church pastors are successful because they blur the lines between sacred and secular when they combine their vocations of pastor and entrepreneur. In this dissertation, I propose a cultural studies approach and a two-fold theological method for scholars to study these popular preachers. The method combines James McClendon's

Biography as Theology and Paul Tillich's definitions of theology and theological norm from *Systematic Theology*. The method is a collaborative effort between the academic theologian and preacher. The scholar uses *Biography as Theology* to study the preacher (Jakes), and the second part of the method, *Brand as Theology and Theological Norm*, is where the scholar uses qualitative research methods to study the brand (WTAL).

I define theologies of prosperity as *contextual theologies of empire on a continuum that affirm it is God's will and a believer's right to obtain health and wealth by using Scripture and rituals like seed-faith giving and positive confession*. Because these popular preachers offer adherents existential explanations for suffering (health and wealth), and prescriptions for liberation, I describe theologies of prosperity as theodicy and contemporary liberation theology. However, unlike traditional liberation theologies, these theologies do not have a *preferential option for the poor*. Instead, Jakes and other New Black Church pastors only offer adherents a pseudo-liberation. In essence, the stories of liberation that Bishop Jakes tells in his brands do not actually empower women, ideologically these stories only encourage women to stay loyal to his brand, become covenant ministry partners, and to buy more products. Jakes and New Black Church pastors are from the Second Gilded Age, they encourage women to pursue individual success within an oppressive system. Similar to Russell Conwell and other celebrity clerics from the First Gilded Age, Jakes and these pastors inadvertently blame the victims for their poverty and for not reaping the benefits of the American Dream, which according to prosperity preachers is available to all.

DEDICATION

To (Dr.) Dianne Marie McGee, my mother, who was my best teacher and always administered life's toughest qualifying exams. Not only was she beautiful, smart, and prophetic—she dared to dream a bigger dream for her daughters than she dreamed for herself.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project at times was overwhelmingly painful. Unexpectedly, it violently ventured into too many of my tender places. However, I am thankful for the many prayers and conversations with preachers, scholars, professors, and classmates. I am especially grateful to the CGU Writing Center and the dissertation boot camps. I would like to especially thank my friend Paula McGhee, with the “h,” who partnered with me and vigilantly became a sponsor, when the dissertation process felt like I needed a twelve-step program.

Cara Pfeiffer made the scripture, “beware of those who have entertained angels unaware,”—real. She appeared at the very end of the process and worked diligently to get the final submission completed. Most importantly, I would like to thank my “dream team,” to pull a basketball metaphor from my past life. Rosemary, Zayn, Dr. Phil, and Dr. Baldwin—your work was definitely interdisciplinary and revolutionary. I look forward to the work that we will do in the future.

Thank God! This station on my journey is finally over. I place my Ph.D. and these words on the altar. We anxiously await with tip-toe anticipation, to see what God will do with Reverend Doctor Paula.

PREFACE

In this work I converse with some scholars more than others because their pioneering contributions unlocked new pathways and new academic discourses. Authors like Shayne Lee with his work on Jakes and Milmon Harrison's *Righteous Riches* were food for the soul. Marla Frederick's *Between Sundays* is an impeccable treatise. Marla writes as an anthropologist, but tells her stories like a woman of faith. Marla Einstein's *Brands of Faith* gave me permission to tell the story of my own brands. Finally, Paul Tillich's classic, *Systematic Theology*, and Paul Gifford's critical commentary on prosperity Pentecostalism, especially in Africa, are mentioned in almost every chapter.

One of the challenges of a truly interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary project is that you must teach scholars the terminology and philosophy of their neighboring scholars—and you must teach them well. As a result, this dissertation overflows with footnotes. Long explanatory notes fill the bottom of almost three hundred formatted pages. A long bibliography directs future scholars into the conversation and acts as the final benediction for scholarly worship with confession, repentance, and celebration.

I give myself permission to write as me—a religious woman of color and scholar—not behold to sexist, racist, androcentric, and patriarchal language. Women's Studies and Cultural Studies provide the framework to dance on the pages with many clever words and symbols. [Brackets] encompass the words that replace God as Him, and the phrases that historically decided to only speak to brothers and the brotherhood. Most times, the words are changed to [God], [him or her], or [s/he]. Some statements remain intact because the alteration changes the author's intent or style. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza strategically uses an “*” for G*d and the*logy; however, for such a lengthy project the insertions are too cumbersome for a friendly

read. My invitation to the womanist, feminist, queer, *resisting readers* illuminates the challenge and reminds the faithful that regardless of our vigilance, the literary voice of the white straight male American Christian still oppresses and silences many. At a minimum, I converse with those writers and scholars that want to be like Moses, who according to the writer of Hebrews, refused to be known as the [child] of Pharoah's daughter. Instead he chose to suffer with the people of God. Maybe we too, by faith, can choose to suffer with the people of our God/desses and refuse those words that seek to control us and our stories.

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CHAPTER 1

T.D. JAKES, WOMAN THOU ART LOOSED, AND THE NEW BLACK CHURCH

*And, behold, there was a woman which had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years, and was bowed together, and could in no wise lift up herself. And when Jesus saw her, he called her to him, and said unto her, **Woman, thou art loosed** from thine infirmity. And he laid his hands on her: and immediately she was made straight, and glorified God. — Luke 13:11-13 KJV*

This dissertation is about T.D. Jakes and his most popular brand,¹ *Woman Thou Art Loosed* (WTAL). Bishop Jakes is a popular televangelist and the pastor of *The Potter's House*—a supermegachurch in Dallas, Texas.² I suggest that his success with *Woman Thou Art Loosed* is a vivid example of the *Wal-Martization of African American religion*. I examine Jakes and the WTAL brand as a case study in order to offer an ideological critique of the New Black Church, which I define as an ideological/socio-cultural model of ministry represented mainly by independent churches founded in the 1980s and 1990s. The New Black Church model is a combination of televangelism and the mega/supermegachurch movements,³ and represents a definite paradigm shift from what has traditionally been recognized and understood as the Black Church refuge model.⁴ I am interested in the theology endorsed by the New Black Church in the preaching of pastors like Jakes. More importantly, this dissertation investigates the meaning-

¹ For a definition of “brand” and “branding,” see Mara Einstein, *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

² The official name of T.D. Jakes’s church is now, The Potter’s House of Dallas. Throughout the dissertation I will simply use “The Potter’s House.”

³ The term “megachurch” usually refers to churches with 2000 or more Sunday morning worshippers. However, I am using the term “supermegachurch” to reference churches that boast memberships of 10,000 members or more. The language is similar to the differences between a Wal-Mart and a Super-Wal-Mart. Because of the marketing nature and combination of television and local church ministries, the actual membership numbers are difficult to empirically verify. Additionally, the number of members and the size of the churches serve as part of the branding.

⁴ Archie Smith Jr., *The Relational Self: Ethics & Therapy from a Black Church Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982).

making, or the social construction of collective and individual identities, as articulated in the representations of the institutions, the pastors, and the women who attend these churches.

In Mara Einstein's book, *Brands of Faith*, she defines brands as "commodity products that have been given a name, an identifying icon or logo, and usually a tagline as a means to differentiate them from other products."⁵ Accordingly, T.D. Jakes has several successful brands. Yet, none of these brands have so greatly impacted the lives of African American Christian women, nor have any of them been as successful and profitable, as WTAL.

The phrase, "Woman thou art loosed!," is adapted from Luke 13:11-13 KJV. The brand began in 1992 as a six-week Sunday school lesson and a sermon when Jakes pastored a small church in West Virginia.⁶ The WTAL brand has since expanded into a myriad of products, including a non-fiction book that sold millions of copies, a novel, annual conferences (with a record breaking 83,500 women in attendance at the Georgia Dome), a stage play, and a 2004 motion picture that not only had box office success, but also sold over a million DVDs.⁷ Jakes even leveraged the WTAL movie success into a nine-picture first-look deal with Sony Pictures.⁸ He is now the pastor of a church with four locations and more than 30,000 members. Jakes is also the CEO of an international television and conference ministry and several for-profit businesses.⁹ Moreover, he has become "the broker with the power to make or break others'

⁵ Einstein, *Brands of Faith*, 12.

⁶ Jonathan L. Walton, *Watch This: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University, 2009), 106; Shayne Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America's New Preacher* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 67. T.D. Jakes moved his family and 50 families from West Virginia to Dallas, Texas to found The Potter's House in 1996.

⁷ Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America's New Preacher*, 82.

⁸ Tatiana Siegel, "Author Jakes Lands Inspiring Deal with SPE," *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 18, 2006.

⁹ The not-for-profit is *T.D. Jakes Ministries*, while *TDJ Enterprises* is the for-profit entity.

careers, or at least enhance them by giving them an appearance at a well attended conference.”¹⁰ Bishop T.D. Jakes has almost single-handedly launched the careers of several women televangelists and megachurch pastors.¹¹ Without a doubt, he is a celebrity and a multi-millionaire. His financial empire is estimated to be worth 100 million dollars.¹² Unashamed of his success, Jakes proudly touts the trinkets or signifiers of American success: a Bentley, a private jet, expensive suits, and a mansion.¹³

Ordinarily the investigation of one preacher and one brand would not be an adequate representation for an entire model. Jakes, however, is an excellent choice because this study is an ideological critique. Choosing Jakes to study New Black Church pastors and their churches is very much like choosing Sam Walton and Wal-Mart to study CEOs and American businesses. It is inappropriate to study Sam Walton and Wal-Mart if you are trying to describe the average American business and CEO. But, from an ideological perspective, we can comfortably argue that no CEO and company has changed the way Americans do business more than Sam Walton and Wal-Mart. The same applies for T.D. Jakes with T.D. Jakes Ministries and The Potter’s House. Jakes is the quintessential example of a successful pastor in the New Black Church. He is an exceptional orator with a distinctive black preaching aesthetic. Shayne Lee and Phillip Sinitiere write that Jakes “tactically blends biblical teaching with psychological theories, folk

¹⁰ Sarah Posner, *God’s Profits: Faith, Fraud, and the Republican Crusade for Values Voters* (Sausalito, CA: PoliPoint Press, 2008), 58.

¹¹ Speaking at a WTAL conference is great exposure for women preachers. However, Paula White and Juanita Bynum are two televangelists and megachurch pastors that have benefitted greatly from their relationships with Jakes. Marla Frederick-McGlathery, “But It’s Bible:” *African American Women and Television Preachers in Women and Religion in the African Diaspora: Knowledge, Power, and Performance*, eds. R. Marie Griffith and Barbara Dianne Savage (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 277.

¹² Jim Haskins and Kathleen Benson, *African American Religious Leaders: Black Stars* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2008), 150.

¹³ Walton, “*Watch This!*,” 117; Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America’s New Preacher*, 109-110.

wisdom, pop culture, and American idealism.”¹⁴ Lee also argues in his book, *T.D. Jakes: America’s New Preacher*, that Jakes represents something very American. The complexity of this Americanness, combined with a black preacher and black church identity, is what makes the New Black Church a phenomenon worth investigating. In past generations, a black preacher that fits so comfortably with what it means to be American would have been unimaginable.¹⁵ However, in the current economic and social configurations of America, with the socio-religious identities of African Americans (especially for African American Protestants), a figure like T.D. Jakes as a black preacher not only exists, but flourishes, with a host of black church pastors that aspire to be just like him.¹⁶

Jakes is a celebrity who is often branded as the twenty-first century example of not only a successful minister, but also a successful African American Christian. He is comfortable with his success as a pastor and entrepreneur.¹⁷ Both “pastor” and “entrepreneur” are cultural signifiers that carry weight in American secular and black church mythologies of success. They are also leadership roles of two important organizations in American culture—the church or faith community, and the corporation. How Jakes describes and brands himself is a blending of what many consider to be two different worldviews with different values—one sacred and one secular. He is the only black preacher who is compared to Billy Graham on the one hand,¹⁸ and to

¹⁴ Shayne Lee and Phillip Luke Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks; Evangelical Innovators and the Spiritual Marketplace* (New York; New York University Press, 2009), 4.

¹⁵ Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 55.

¹⁶ John Blake writes that Jakes has “spawned a new generation of imitators. The religious landscape is now full of Junior Jakeses.” John Blake, “Therapy and Theology: Atlanta’s Megafest Shows Many Sides of T.D. Jakes Ministry,” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 23, 2004, home edition.

¹⁷ Walton, *Watch This!*, 116.

¹⁸ David Van Biema, “Spirit Raiser: America’s Best,” *Time* 158, no. 12 (September 17, 2001): 52-56; Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 61-62.

Donald Trump and Michael Dell on the other.¹⁹ Forbes.com describes Jakes and The Potter's House as *Christian Capitalism: Megachurches and Megabusinesses*.²⁰ For Jakes, and other New Black Church pastors, African American worship and its components: testimony, prayer, song, and sermon—so critical to the religious identity of black churches and their adherents—are also products to be packaged, marketed, and sold.

Jakes is not only prominent in church and business circles, but also in the political realm. He has garnered political relationships, receiving several invitations from Presidents to the White House. Some of these invitations controversial, he was the black preacher flanked at the side of President George Bush in Baton Rouge, LA after Bush's delayed response to Hurricane Katrina. Jakes continues to be the subject of discourse in religious, academic, and popular arenas. Features in the *Wall Street Journal* and cover stories in *Time Magazine* and *Black Enterprise* are just a few examples of his iconic presence.²¹ As one commentator put so aptly, Bishop Jakes's "brand of entrepreneurial spirituality has made him perhaps the most influential black leader in America today."²²

Without a doubt, Jakes's success and acclaim are directly tied to his relationships with African American women.²³ For instance, Sarah Jordan Powell, an African American woman, strategically introduced Jakes to the then power broker for Black Pentecostalism, Carlton

¹⁹ Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America's New Preacher*, 83.

²⁰ Luisa Kroll, "Christian Capitalism: Megachurches, Megabusinesses," *Forbes.com*, September 17, 2003, http://www.forbes.com/003/09/17/cz_lk_0917_megachurch_print.html (accessed February 23, 2006).

²¹ Lisa Miller, "Prophet Motives: Grammy Nomination, Book Deal, TV Spots A Holy Empire Is Born," *Wall Street Journal*, August 21, 1998 (Eastern Edition), A1; Nicole Marie Richardson, Krissah Williams, and Hamil Harris, "The Business Faith," *Black Enterprise* 36, no. 10 (May 2006): 102-114; Van Biema, "Spirit Raiser," 52-56.

²² Shridhar Pappu, "The Preacher," *Atlantic Monthly* 297, no. 2 (March 2006): 92.

²³ Johnetta Cole and Beverly Guy-Shetfall, *Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women's Equality in African American Communities* (New York: One World/Ballantine Books, 2003), 125.

Pearson.²⁴ Pearson's 1993 Azusa Conference is where Jakes received his first national exposure,²⁵ and Pearson shared Jakes's sermon with Paul Crouch of the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN).²⁶ Jakes also benefits financially because of the many women that attend his conferences. The success of WTAL also helped launch other brands and national conferences like ManPower,²⁷ God's Leading Lady,²⁸ and MegaFest.²⁹ Women say that Jakes tells their story—especially the stories about issues like domestic violence and sexual abuse—stories that are usually seen as taboo and silenced in other churches.³⁰ It is important, however, to note that Jakes profits from his relationship with these women and the telling of their story. This is where theology, ethics, and culture converge: What does this relationship, which is wedged somewhere between pastor/parishioner and CEO/customer, mean for African Americans—especially African American women—and their relationship to their God, their church, their pastor, and each other?

²⁴ Walton, *Watch This!*, 105; Posner, *God's Profits*, 54.

²⁵ Lee, T.D. Jakes: *America's New Preacher*, 67. Walton, *Watch This!*, 106.

²⁶ Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 64.

²⁷ Deborah Kovach Caldwell, "The Power at the Potter's House," *Dallas Morning News*, July 5, 1997, home final edition.

²⁸ T.D. Jakes, *God's Leading Lady: Out of the Shadows and into the Light* (New York: Putnam's Sons, 2002).

²⁹ *Megafest* is an international conference/festival that included several of Jake's conferences in one location at one time. The conference was first held in 2004 in Atlanta, GA. The festival met for several years. Jakes then cancelled the festival in 2007. He changed the brand to *Megafest International* and in 2008 MegaFest International was held in South Africa. Information is available at <http://www.megafest.org/about.php> (accessed January 25, 2011).

³⁰ Frederick, "But It's Bible," 266-292.

My Story as a Preacher and Scholar in the New Black Church³¹

Choosing to write about WTAL and T.D. Jakes for my dissertation is as much a personal endeavor as it is an academic one. What has happened over the last thirty years with T.D. Jakes as a pastor/entrepreneur, and with WTAL as a brand, is a perfect example of what I have begun to describe as “the Wal-Martization of African American religion.” I strategically chose Jakes and this brand as a case study so that the focus is not solely on a model of ministry and the churches of the New Black Church. This dissertation takes an intimate look at the relationship that plays out for African American churchwomen and their pastor in post–civil rights America. It is a relationship that extends far beyond just brick and mortar edifices and local congregations to include parishioners that are connected by mass communication, global networks, media, and a host of products. Many pastors, like Jakes, strategically take advantage of their pastoral relationship and the fact that women expect their church to be a therapeutic refuge and “safe space” to address personal pain and struggles. Jakes and other pastors are able to financially capitalize in a “faith industry”³²—a global consumer market of self–help spiritual products designed and marketed specifically to meet the psychological and social needs of African American women. As Shayne Lee argues, Jakes is successful because he quickly understood “that his capacity for soothing women’s pains and troubles could yield considerable

³¹ Ordinarily, this personal and biographical information would not be included in the body of an academic or scholarly work. It would be placed in the preface and not the actual dissertation. However, it is precisely the voice of a preacher, scholar, parishioner, and consumer that is often masked or not considered in the discourse about the Black Church. The various levels of power that vocations and social history garner in the various communities of meaning (church, academy, and popular audiences), are important to any ideological critique.

³² Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 63.

dividends.”³³ Jakes was able to corner a market that not only translated “into a worldwide ministry,” but also translated into “millions in revenue.”³⁴

My life story and vocational aspirations as a preacher and a scholar of African American religion inform this work. In many respects, because of my relationship with several New Black Church pastors and congregants, I am an insider and a primary source for this investigation. When I lived in Atlanta as a seminary student I was briefly a member of Eddie Long’s church—*New Birth* in Lithonia, Georgia.³⁵ This was before Eddie Long was a celebrity, and before his sex scandal.³⁶ *New Birth* was a megachurch, but not yet a supermegachurch. I also knew Bishop Noel Jones when he pastored a small Apostolic church in Longview, Texas, before he became a celebrity.³⁷ In fact, at the time, I was more of a celebrity as an All-American basketball player, and his sister Grace Jones was the celebrity of the family. This history, makes me too close to be the supposedly objective and value-neutral scholar. I agree with feminist theory which “has insisted that scholarship is not done from a disembodied, value-neutral position or a ‘god’s eye view,’ but is always perspectival and sociopolitically situated.”³⁸ As *mujerista* theologian Ada

³³ Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America’s New Preacher*, 124.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Eddie Long pastors *New Birth* Missionary Baptist Church in Lithonia, GA. He also has a television ministry and conference ministry. See http://www.newbirth.org/about/bishop_eddie_long (accessed January 25, 2011).

³⁶ In September 2010 four young men filed a lawsuit accusing Eddie Long of coercing them into improper sexual relationships when they were members of his church. See Sheila M. Poole, Megan Matteucci, and Katie Leslie, “Bishop Eddie Long Lawsuits Leader of Sexual Coercion; Long ‘adamantly denies,’” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, September 22, 2010, <http://www.ajc.com/news/dekalb/bishop-eddie-long-lawsuits-618573.html> (accessed January 25, 2011).

³⁷ Bishop Noel Jones now pastors *City of Refuge* in Los Angeles, CA and is often a guest speaker for T.D. Jakes’s conferences. Similar to Eddie Long and T.D. Jakes, he has a television ministry and travels internationally. See <http://noeljonesministries.org/whois.html> (accessed January 25, 2011).

³⁸ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, “Method in Women’s Studies in Religion: A Critical Feminist Hermeneutics,” in *Methodology in Religious Studies: The Interface with Women’s Studies*, ed. Arvind Sharma (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 207.

Maria Isasi–Diaz has argued, “What passes as objectivity in reality merely names the subjectivity of those who have authority and/or power to impose their point of view.” I agree with her that “as a theologian, I am obliged to reveal my concrete story within the framework of the social forces I have lived in.”³⁹

I enter this investigation as a preacher (not a pastor) in the Black Church and the New Black Church, a role that Rodney Stark and Roger Finke call a producer in the spiritual marketplace or religious economy.⁴⁰ But, I am also an adherent—a consumer. I am an African American woman who attended Jakes’s WTAL conferences and saw the movie he produced which bears the same name. Having occupied both the position of producer and consumer provides a unique lens through which to view the phenomenon of black supermegachurches, the preachers, the brands, and the subsequent power relationships.

Wal–Martization is a fitting term for describing the capitalistic dynamics of the New Black Church reality, namely, the social construction of identities expressed in the representations of the institution, the preacher as CEO, and the parishioner as consumer. Furthermore, the branding and storytelling at each level of the New Black Church is important for understanding the social construction of identity for African American women, especially for African American churchwomen in the twenty–first century. Ultimately, to understand the crucial differences between the New Black Church and the Black Church we first must understand how the supermegachurches in the New Black Church function as institutions, and the television and conference ministries as revival style crusades. Furthermore, we must include

³⁹ Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-first Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

⁴⁰ Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

the for-profit nature of the New Black Church with multi-million dollar revenues from movies, books, bibles, and other commodities.

Stylistically, the New Black Church is very similar to the Black Church with its rich tradition of gospel music, dynamic preaching, and a community of black people assembled for a common purpose. However, at other times, it resembles the revivals of a Billy Graham crusade. In most cases, however, these churches are a combination of both. As a result, the New Black Church often appears as a spiritual Wal-Mart, a one-stop big box shopping experience with celebrity preachers attempting to meet the needs of religious consumers by providing a variety of well-packaged, well-marketed spiritual products.

I also consider myself to be a product of the traditional Black Church, and the social and moral influence of that culture continues to shape and define who I am in the world. Edward Said, quoting Antonio Gramsci, states in his introduction to *Orientalism*, “The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is ‘knowing thyself’ as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory... therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory.”⁴¹ My academic pursuits, as well as my investment in black churches as a preacher and parishioner, have left “an infinity of traces.”

The catalyst for my interest in the New Black Church and what scholars and the media have identified as “prosperity theology,” was after I had started a national ministry (Paula McGee Ministries), a 501© 3 not-for-profit corporation with a small governing board. I created several products: conferences, lunch-time bible studies, t-shirts, bookmarks, and a website. I had also written several articles and published sermons that became the beginning of two faith

⁴¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 25.

brands: *Accepting Your Greatness* and *Divine Divas*. At the time, I saw no contradiction or any problem with branding and marketing as a significant component of the ministry.

Traveling and preaching around the country, I was often invited to churches that meet my criteria of both the Black Church and the New Black Church. At times I was concerned, and at other times close to embarrassed, by my association with many of the churches of the New Black Church. I was academically trained at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia, where my mentors had often painted a picture of these churches and their pastors (especially *Word of Faith*)⁴² as not worthy of even a visit, unless of course, my purpose was to observe and bring back a scathing scholarly critique. After leaving ITC, I attended Vanderbilt University and finished another Master's degree, this time in Hebrew Bible. My first full time position was as the Dean of Chapel at Fisk University. At Fisk we invited "The Godfather of Faith"—Dr. Frederick K. C. Price⁴³—as a speaker for a series of lectures. During that time I met his wife and daughters. With that introduction, I was often invited to preach and teach at their national women's conferences. What I learned through these experiences astonished me. Before visiting these churches I could not imagine that anyone could actually believe with authenticity the faith claims of Word of Faith. How could anyone believe that praying and confessing scripture could cure cancer or make you rich? The women that I encountered believed these propositions with conviction, and sometimes even to their own detriment.

Receiving more and more invitations to preach, I personally struggled with the combination of ministry and business. Attempting to respond to invitations from a marketplace of individuals and churches challenged me to examine my own ethics and definitions of the

⁴² Word of Faith is the name given to non-denominational churches that are a part of the faith movement, and are usually associated with prosperity theology.

⁴³ Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America's Preacher*, 103; Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 134.

sacred and secular. Where was I supposed to draw the line between business and ministry, or was there even a line to be drawn? Was there a contradiction in making a lot of money and doing ministry? Was the “bottom line” the final determination for my choices of churches and speaking invitations? Discerning which church invitations to accept became a challenge, especially when the Word of Faith churches (New Black Church) often paid 10 to 20 times the honorarium of traditional churches (Black Church). Was it ethical to eliminate the smaller churches with the smaller honorarium, when I felt just as compelled to speak to the women and parishioners attending those churches? Also, from a holistic stewardship standpoint, the constant travel made it difficult for me to maintain my physical health and to sustain significant personal relationships.

One of the most significant and revealing moments happened when I accepted an invitation from a traditional church to speak as the lecturer for a three-day revival with a young 30-something pastor/evangelist. Each night he would preach a sermon after my lecture. He was an amazing preacher. I compared his oratorical giftedness to that of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. We had several heartfelt conversations, but the discussion that surprised me and became a catalyst for my own scholarship and vocational discernment was his definition and vision for a successful ministry. I shared with him how impressed I was with his wonderful prophetic gift and that I saw a great future in ministry for him. He agreed with my assessment of his gifts. However, I quickly realized that his vision for a successful ministry was very different from my own. For him, the measurement and cultural signifier of success was a corporate plane. He declared, “One day I will own a plane.” His words became the epiphany, the anecdotal research moment, which hauntingly jarred me into understanding that something had happened—something had changed—there had been a paradigm shift. What it meant to be a preacher and to minister, or to pastor black people, had changed in some very profound ways.

Those few days with him and with the women in Word of Faith churches prompted me to return to the academy to cultivate more academic skills and tools. After several months of prayer and consultations with friends, I chose the Women’s Studies in Religion program at Claremont Graduate University—one of only two programs in the country that offers a Ph.D. in Women’s Studies and Religion.⁴⁴

Claremont is also the home of the Peter F. Drucker and Masatoshi Ito School of Management. Peter Drucker said in a 1998 *Forbes* Magazine article that “pastoral megachurches are the most significant social phenomenon in American society in the last 30 years.” Drucker’s commentary on why these churches were succeeding over traditional churches was “because they asked, ‘What is value?’ to a nonchurchgoer and came up with answers the older churches had neglected. They have found that value to the *consumer* [emphasis mine] of church services is very different from what churches traditionally were supplying.”⁴⁵ Drucker was not specifically looking at black megachurches. He was mainly referencing the white megachurches that have been identified as “seeker churches”—the Bill Hybel/Willowcreek and Rick Warren/Saddleback versions.⁴⁶ However, his observations became the foundation for my concerns about the changing face of religion, especially African American religion. No one raised the question of whether treating people as *consumers* was problematic for the overall Christian understanding of making disciples, and whether this fit with each church’s identity within the universal church—what Christians theologically identify as the Body of Christ.

⁴⁴ Other Ph.D. programs exist in Women’s Studies. However, there are only two programs that concentrate on Women’s Studies in Religion. The second program is at Harvard University.

⁴⁵ Peter F. Drucker, “Managements New Paradigms (Cover Story),” *Forbes* 162, no. 7 (October 5, 1998): 152-177.

⁴⁶ For details and a brief description of the churches and history of Bill Hybel at Willow Creek and Rick Warren at Saddleback, see Mara Einstein, *Brands of Faith*, 103-107.

At the time I was entering Claremont, many of my friends and many black churches were reading Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life* and *The Purpose Driven Church*.⁴⁷ More and more people were following televangelists: T.D. Jakes, Creflo Dollar, Joyce Meyer, and Fred Price. What did it mean culturally for Peter Drucker, a business guru and scholar, to consider churches and pastors as the exemplary model of business success? What are the ramifications when the great commission of making disciples becomes making customers?

T.D. Jakes was gaining greater prominence with his WTAL conferences. African Americans were talking about Jakes in the way that a previous generation spoke of Martin Luther King, Jr. Moreover, King's daughter had even proclaimed that prosperity preacher, Eddie Long was her father's successor; she was convinced that he would carry King's social justice agenda forward because of Long's controversial position on homosexuality.⁴⁸

More importantly, my existential financial concerns were always present in choosing to pursue yet one more expensive graduate degree, especially in Women's Studies and Religion. Both fields garner no guarantees for economic success. My working class, blue collar background, and being the first in my family to receive a bachelor's degree, also informs my worldview and approach. I grew up in Flint, Michigan, the struggling car-industry-city most famously explored in the films of activist filmmaker Michael Moore.⁴⁹ My parents and the majority of my family members worked for General Motors. So, I grew up fully immersed in the

⁴⁷ Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002); *The Purpose-Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Your Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995).

⁴⁸ Walton, *Watch This!*, 139.

⁴⁹ Michael Moore has done several independent films that mention Flint, Michigan. However, the film that made Flint, Michigan a setting for most of his films is *Roger and Me*. The 1989 film is about Michael Moore attempting to confront General Motor's CEO, Roger Moore, to explain the cultural devastation of the city after massive downsizing.

culture of UAW (United Automobile Workers) and the labor movement.⁵⁰ GM, at the time, was the standard for American businesses, the position that Wal-Mart now claims globally.⁵¹ GM did not always provide pleasant working experiences. However, GM provided a middle class lifestyle with excellent benefits. My father and mother, with eighth grade and high school educations respectively, could comfortably provide for our family of six. As a single woman, with several degrees of higher education, the fact that I struggle to afford that same middle class lifestyle is a constant reminder that something in the world has changed dramatically—not just in churches, but in the world as a whole.

In Flint, Michigan, at the Metropolitan Baptist Church, is also where I had my first introduction to black churches. I spent more days of my childhood than I can remember at Youth Mission, Youth Fellowship, Jr. Church, and Vacation Bible School. The church and its activities proved to be a safe place for my parents to send my sisters and me. The church of my childhood easily meets the criteria of the Black Church refuge model of ministry. It is a church that believed in caring for and nurturing children and young people. Nonetheless, it is a church that still does not allow women in ministry or in certain leadership positions. The complexity of this church and its impact on my life is why writing about black churches, with the categories established in the academy—even feminist, womanist, and postcolonial—are usually insufficient. In other words, inhibiting women’s participation in the pulpit and in other key leadership positions qualifies this church as undeniably sexist and patriarchal. However, I still credit this church with instilling the cultural values that continue to frame my social justice ethos

⁵⁰ For a history of UAW and the relationship to the Labor Movement, visit the website at <http://www.uaw.org>.

⁵¹ Erin Johansson, “Checking Out: The Rise of Wal-Mart and the Fall of Middle Class Retailing Jobs,” *Connecticut Law Review* 39, no. 4 (May 2007): 1463.

and commitment. The women that mentored me were never in formal positions of leadership, such as deacon, trustee, or pastor. Nevertheless, they were central to my spiritual formation and must be credited with having a lasting impact on my religious life. Furthermore, their contribution to my life ranks in ways that no male deacon or pastor could ever be able to claim.

The academic study of religion has often described these women as powerless and passive participants, thereby silencing their voices and making them invisible in the larger narratives of African American religion and black churches. As Daphne Wiggins notes, there is a “paucity of scholarship about the significance of faith practices among African American church women. Major studies on the Black Church conspicuously disregard these women’s religious contributions and experience.” She suggests that these works have missed it on several fronts because they “have relied upon male clerics to interpret contributions, activities, and ministry of the church.”⁵²

Along with other women scholars, feminists, and womanists, my attempt is as Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham states, “to rescue these women from invisibility.”⁵³ In other words, I do not see these women as powerless and passive participants. Instead, I know them to be the true protagonists in the stories of American black churches and faith communities. Julayne Dodson has effectively argued that these women, like many other black churchwomen, understand the communal importance of their churches. This means they use “their power without destroying the Black Church as a pivotal institution in the larger African American community.”⁵⁴ I

⁵² Daphne Wiggins, *Righteous Content: Black Women’s Perspectives of Church and Faith* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 6.

⁵³ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 2.

⁵⁴ Julayne E. Dodson, *Engendering Church: Women, Power, and the AME Church* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 5.

continue to write and preach as a small down payment towards a tremendous debt that I owe. This dissertation is simply one more installment.

Defining the Black Church and the New Black Church

The terminology of Black Church and even New Black Church is no longer adequate for the more nuanced discussions of African American religion. The terminology is left over from an earlier generation of theological discourse, and no longer adequate. As such, most contemporary scholars using the term, at a minimum, give a footnote, and at other times, they include a detailed explanation that African American religion is not monolithic.⁵⁵ Stephanie Mitchem writes that “the black church is neither a single institution nor a formal organization of all the churches to which African Americans belong.”⁵⁶ Eddie Glaude posts an essay on *The Huffington Post*, with the title, “The Black Church is Dead.”⁵⁷ Barbara Dianne Savage states, “Despite common usage, *there is no such thing as the ‘black church’* [emphasis mine]. It is an illusion[,] and a metaphor that has taken on a life of its own, implying existence of a powerful entity with organized power, but the promise of that also leaves it vulnerable to unrealistic expectations.”⁵⁸ Yet, Savage’s book begins with acknowledging the influence on her life of “the sacred space of a country

⁵⁵ Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer write that “while this concept [Black Church] may have a certain heuristic value, it is misleading in its implication that the religious experience among Blacks has been uniform or monolithic (xv). Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer, *African American Religion: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation*, First Edition (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), xv. Marla Frederick writes, “Black presence in majority black, yet white-pastored churches, participation in multicultural communities of faith, and the growing numbers of black churches in white denominations complicate the narrow definition.” Marla Frederick, *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 89.

⁵⁶ Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It?: Prosperity Preaching in the Black Church* (Cleveland, Pilgrim Press, 2007), 2.

⁵⁷ Eddie Glaude, Jr., “The Black Church is Dead,” *The Huffington Post.com*, posted February 24, 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eddie-glaude-jr-phd/the-black-church-is-dead_b_473815.html (accessed May 17, 2010). Also see Anthea Butler, Jonathan Walton, et al, “The Black Church is Dead—Long Live the Black Church,” posted March 9, 2010, *Religion Dispatches.org*, http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/atheologies/2331/updated_with_response%3A_the_black_church_is_dead%E2%80%94long_live_the_black_church (accessed May 21, 2010).

⁵⁸ Barbara Dianne Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 9.

church in Virginia,”⁵⁹ and her book ends with the admission that “black churches are still the strongest and most ubiquitous of black institutions.”⁶⁰ As Delores Williams concludes, “the black church does not exist as an institution...but we know it when we see it.”⁶¹

These definitional and descriptive challenges are outlined by Hans Baer and Merrill Singer in their text, *African American Religion: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation*. They explain that religious diversity has always existed for African Americans, but has not been acknowledged in the scholarship. They give three compelling reasons: lack of attention in the media, education, and the social sciences; majority institutions and their writers produced inadequate images of African Americans; and, the fact that until this century, most African American intellectuals were preachers who responded to the negative image promulgated by the dominant culture by presenting “unity and communality.”⁶² Baer and Singer remind us that “as a consequence, the myriad expressions of African American religiosity have been compressed in scholarly understanding into a number of major types and a few peripheral and largely unattended variants, a pattern that can be seen in the tendency to equate African American religion with the ‘Black Church.’”⁶³ With more African American scholars from a variety of disciplines now adding their voices to the discourse, I agree that better terminology and language are needed. However, I am interested in these ideological representations and significations. As

⁵⁹ Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us*, 1.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 283.

⁶¹ Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 204-205.

⁶² Baer and Singer, *African American Religion*, xv. For a further explanation of the terminology and its use, see Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 1.

⁶³ Baer and Singer, *African American Religion*, 1.

Evelyn Higginbotham has suggested, “The black church constitutes a complex body of shifting cultural, ideological, and political significations.”⁶⁴

I attempt to avoid the definitional dilemma by focusing on “models of ministry.” This terminology speaks to the claims of Christian identity, which is determined to some degree by how the Christian community defines “church,” “pastor,” and “member or disciple,” and its understanding of these relationships. Using the word “model” as a typology allows me to counter the idea of one distinguishable institution with a monovocality and a singular identity. I am able to define the model(s) and to describe particular characteristics with the expectation that a certain amount of variance exists whenever one attempts to describe any entity as diverse and complex as what we have recognized as the Black Church. Additionally, I intentionally include and honor many of the foundational works that use this terminology.⁶⁵ I also openly acknowledge that there are many possibilities for and configurations of contemporary African American churches. Throughout this dissertation, however, I submit that the Black Church⁶⁶ and the New Black Church⁶⁷ are the two models referenced by scholars in most contemporary religious and theological discourse.

⁶⁴ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 16.

⁶⁵ For a list of sources that use the terminology of “black church,” see Dolores C. Leffall, *The Black Church: An Annotated Bibliography* (Washington: Minority Research Center, 1973); Other examples include: C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Church Since Frazier* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974); Peter J. Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985); C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*; Anthony Pinn, *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2002).

⁶⁶ Throughout this dissertation I will use “the Black Church” to identify the traditional model. However, when I am quoting other scholars, it does not necessarily refer to the traditional model. Whenever possible, I will make a note. These issues are difficult to address because the use of the term does tend to create a monolithic view of the many kinds of churches in which African Americans make up the majority of their membership. I am using the terminology of new as in “neo-Black Church.” Similar to how neo-Pentecostalism is similar, yet different from Pentecostalism.

⁶⁷ The term “New Black Church” is taken from Shayne Lee. See the chapter, “The New Black Church,” in *T.D Jakes America’s Preacher* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 158-177. Marc Lamont Hill identifies “the New Black Church” as “the current configuration of mainline black Christianity, . . . which has taken

Eddie Long, in popular discourse, and Lewis Baldwin in academic discourse, both substantiate the prevalence of these two models. Long, in a statement to the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, states,

We're not just a church, we're an international corporation. We're not just a bumbling bunch of preachers who can't talk and all we're doing is baptizing babies. I deal with the White House. I deal with Tony Blair. I deal with presidents around the world. I pastor a multimillion dollar congregation. You got to put me on a different scale than the little black preacher sitting over there that supposed to be just getting by because the people are suffering.⁶⁸

Lewis Baldwin, a King scholar and Black Church historian, argues for Martin Luther King's "model of prophetic witness and mission, not the entrepreneurial spirituality of today's mega preachers." He critiques the megachurch phenomenon as "elitist, capitalistic, and materialistic."⁶⁹ It is important to note, however, that both Baldwin and Long inscribe the same two models: the New Black Church as the black megachurch with the CEO/pastor teaching a prosperity gospel and the Black Church as the small church with a prophetic pastor, teaching the social gospel. Furthermore, Baldwin shows in his book that Martin Luther King, Jr. and *Dexter Avenue*, or *Ebenezer* during the Civil Rights movement, are the iconic examples for the Black Church refuge model.⁷⁰ And for this generation, I suggest that T. D. Jakes and The Potter's House claim that iconic status for the New Black Church.

its current shape over the past two decades is the progeny of the civil rights movements but can be distinguished by its increased materialism, questionable theology, and dubious politics." Marc Lamont Hill, "The Barbershop Notebooks: "I Bling Because I'm Happy," Popmatters.com, August 5, 2005, <http://www.popmatters.com/columns/hill/050805.shtml> (accessed May 17, 2010).

⁶⁸ John Blake, "Bishop's Charity Generous to Bishop: New Birth's Long Received 3 Million," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, August 28, 2005.

⁶⁹ Lewis V. Baldwin, *The Voice of Conscience: The Church in the Mind of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 237.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 68-69.

I am not using the terminology of the New Black Church and the Black Church in the way that C. Eric Lincoln described the Negro Church and the Black Church. Lincoln declared that the “Negro Church accepted the death in order to be reborn. Out of the ashes of its funeral pyre there sprang the bold, strident, self-conscious phoenix that is the contemporary Black Church.”⁷¹ This is not the case for the two models that I describe. They do not represent sequential steps on a Black Church history timeline. Instead, they stand side by side in the current history of African American religion. I identify the New Black Church model as *new* to emphasize that its pastors exploit many of the *old* traditions of the Black Church: its ethos, mythology, and the ideological and iconic power of both the preacher and the institution. New Black Church pastors manipulate these traditions, or what has been described as “uplift ideology,”⁷² and germane to African American culture. These pastors make the most of the iconic power of the institution and the historical rhetorical power that preachers possess as the spokespersons of the community. They exploit this power to create new brands and brand communities.⁷³ As a result, the New Black Church congregations are a mixture of local congregants, brand communities, television viewers, and consumers. These unique faith communities are very different from those that represent the Black Church model.

Religious scholars have outlined the significance of black churches for understanding African American religion and thought, and especially for understanding African American

⁷¹ C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Church Since Frazier*, 105-106.

⁷² Melissa Harris-Lacewell, “From Liberation to Mutual Fund: Political Consequences of Differing Conceptions of Christ in the African American Church,” in *From Pews to Polling Places: Faith and Politics in the American Religious Mosaic*, ed. J. Matthew Wilson (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2007), 147.

⁷³ Mara Einstein, quoting Albert M. Muniz Jr. and Thomas C. O’Guinn, writes that brand communities are “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of the brand.” Einstein, *Brands of Faith*, 86.

Protestant Christian identity formation.⁷⁴ As social institutions black churches have been the most economically independent and the only institutions where African Americans have exercised leadership and power away from the purview of white control.⁷⁵ In this “surrogate world”⁷⁶ or “a nation within a nation,”⁷⁷ African Americans have claimed a unique kind of spirituality⁷⁸ and have understood the church as a place for prophetic preaching against racism and other injustices.⁷⁹ Manning Marable explains that “for many people, the black church became a way out, the forum in which each week’s mountain of frustrations and tragedies are eliminated from one’s consciousness, a holy place of peace in a world of utter madness and dark decay.”⁸⁰ Because of white supremacy, African Americans have had to respond to a negative identity forced upon them by the dominant culture,⁸¹ which Michael Battle suggests results in a kind of cultural identity crisis. He writes that the

struggle over human identity for African American Christian spirituality has been to make such a dominant understanding of negative identity obsolete, through mutual

⁷⁴ See Dale P. Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches: Bridging Black Theology and African American Folk Religion* (Louisville: Westminster Press, 2002), 40-49; Michael Battle, *The Black Church in America: African American Spirituality* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006); Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches*; Lee Butler, *Liberating Our Dignity, Saving Our Souls* (St. Louis, Chalice Press, 2006); and Cornel West, *Prophecy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 15.

⁷⁵ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 241; Katie Cannon, *Katie’s Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 115.

⁷⁶ Peter J. Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches*, 1-25.

⁷⁷ E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*, 44.

⁷⁸ Calvin E. Bruce, “Black Spirituality, Language and Faith,” *Religious Education* 71, no. 4 (July-August 1976): 363-376.

⁷⁹ David Howard-Pitney, “‘To Form a More Perfect Union;’ African Americans and American Civil Religion” in *New Day Begun; African American Churches and Civic Culture in Post-Civil Rights America*, ed. Drew Smith (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 93.

⁸⁰ Manning Marable, *Blackwater: Historical Studies in Race, Class Consciousness, and Revolution* (Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1981/1993), 43.

⁸¹ Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches*, 30.

and integral practices of what is now understood as the Black Church. In other words, the Black Church did not emerge because it wanted to; instead, it emerged out of the necessity to redefine African American identity—especially in the peculiar context of European identities.”⁸²

Battle is clear that spirituality plays a critical role in the identity-formation of African Americans.

Harold Dean Trulear affirms that in black churches “worship mediates meaning through symbol and ritual, it enables [African Americans] to not only make sense of their life–world, but even critiques its absurdity in light of ultimate meaning.” He argues for an African American “communal religious identity” with a distinctive “religious worldview” that is articulated through “testimony, prayer, song, and sermon.”⁸³ Cornel West defines this identity as “a sense of somebodiness.”⁸⁴ Similar to the definition that West proposes, Cheryl Gilkes Townsend defines the expression of this identity and spirituality as when African Americans are reminded “who they are and whose they are,” and this affirmation acts “as a counterforce to oppressive social, economic, and cultural circumstances that may make them want to forget.”⁸⁵ Flora Bridges adds that this spirituality is what has “empowered black people to form their own sense of identity, to protest the racism that sought to force upon them a false identity, and to create authentic community.”⁸⁶ The need for a unique spirituality and the communal self–identity challenges can

⁸² Battle, *The Black Church in America*, 28.

⁸³ Harold Dean Trulear, “The Lord Will Make a Way Somehow: Black Worship and the Afro-American Story,” *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 13, no. 1 (Fall 1985): 87-88. Also see Mary Pattillo-McCoy, “Church Culture as a Strategy of Action in the Black Community,” *American Sociological Association* 63, no. 6 (December 1998): 767-784.

⁸⁴ Cornel West, *Prophetic Fragments* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 43.

⁸⁵ Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, “Plenty Good Room: Adaptation in a Changing Black Church,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 558 (July 1998): 104.

⁸⁶ Flora Wilson Bridges, *Resurrection Song: African American Spirituality* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 5.

be traced with the naming and identity challenges of black churches. The collective socio-racial identity of “colored,” “Negro,” “black,” “Afro-American,” and now “African American,”⁸⁷ parallels the movement from “the invisible institution” of African slaves,⁸⁸ to “the Negro Church” of W.E.B. Dubois and Carter G. Woodson,⁸⁹ to the “Black Church” of the Black Power Movement,⁹⁰ and finally to the New Black Church of televangelists Creflo Dollar, Eddie Long, and T.D. Jakes.⁹¹

Both the Black Church and the New Black Church models continue in some form of uplift ideology, but they differ in profound ways. The ideological differences are similar to what Manning Marable argues is happening in black America as a whole: “We are in the midst of a major ideological realignment within black America with the demarcation of potentially antagonistic and confrontational formations and groups that will battle for the future of our people.”⁹² Both models consist of preachers, pastors, public figures, and theologians who are

⁸⁷ Betty Collier-Thomas and James Turner, "Race, Class and Color: The African American Discourse on Identity," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 14, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 5–31.

⁸⁸ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford Press, 1978).

⁸⁹ W.E.B. DuBois, ed., *The Negro Church* (Atlanta University Publications, 1903); Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church*, Third Edition (Washington D.C: The Associated Publishers, 1921, 1945, 1972); Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church* (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, 1945); Also see Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson, *The Negro’s Church* (New York: The Institute of Social and Religious Research, 1933).

⁹⁰ C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Church Since Frazier*; Hart Nelsen and Anne Nelsen, *The Black Church in the Sixties* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1975).

⁹¹ Milmon F. Harrison, *Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion* (New York: Oxford, 2005); Walton, *Watch This!*, 103-166; and Lee, *T.D. Jakes America’s Preacher*, 158-177.

⁹² Manning Marable, *Beyond Black and White: Transforming African American Politics*, Second Edition (New York: Verso, 2009), 213. Marable is speaking about the ideological differences between what he calls “inclusionist scholars” and “Afrocentric scholars.” But the same can be said about the differences between those that represent the Black Church and the New Black Church models.

battling for the future of a people, and for these important religious and sociocultural institutions, which we continue to identify as black churches.

Marla Frederick does not use the exact terminology of Black Church and New Black Church. She does, however, argue that contemporary black churches are pulled between “two different traditions” or “two polarities,” resulting from the fact that black churches historically have been both prophetic and priestly.⁹³ “Priestly” as used by C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, refer to those “activities concerned with worship and maintaining the spiritual life of members,” while “prophetic” refers to more radical activities involving “political concerns in the wider community ... [and churches] as networks of liberation.”⁹⁴ What I am calling the Black Church model, Frederick says “reflects the church’s more radical history of critiquing political and economic institutions and systems that repress social and economic progress.” The New Black Church model “reflects the more conservative integrationist approach to social problems, as it encourages radical changes solely in the individual desiring to advance swiftly in the American mainstream.”⁹⁵

A New Relationship between the Pastor/Preacher and the People

Historically, the Black Church model and its preachers have possessed an iconic presence in the larger African American community. At the turn of the century W.E.B. DuBois in *The Souls of Black Folk* stated that “the preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil. A leader, a politician, an orator, a ‘boss,’ an intriguer, and idealist.”⁹⁶ Aldon Morris, writing about the Civil Rights Movement, explains that “ministers of the 1950s

⁹³ Frederick, *Between Sundays*, 142.

⁹⁴ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 12.

⁹⁵ Frederick, *Between Sundays*, 142.

⁹⁶ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Signet Classic, 1969/1903), 211.

knew black people because they had shared their innermost secrets and turmoils.”⁹⁷ Charles Hamilton expressed similar sentiments in 1972. He writes that ‘pastor’ was a special designation for black people, and that the black preacher was an important “linkage figure” for the difficult transitions for African Americans: Africa to America, Emancipation, and the Great Migration. “The black preacher linked up things. And for a people who had had their lives and their cultures shattered, fragmented and torn asunder so often and abruptly, this linkage figure was important.”⁹⁸ Henry Mitchell describes the black preacher as being “ear deep in the condition of the people.” He affirms that the lives of people and preacher are “intimately close together—so close together that the themes which invade the consciousness of the one also invade the other.”⁹⁹ C. Eric Lincoln, writing about black religion, asserts that the black preacher was “more than leader and pastor, he was the projection of the people themselves, coping with adversity, symbolizing their success, denouncing their oppressors.”¹⁰⁰ Each of these scholars affirms that the black preacher was empathetic and distinctively inseparable from the people. The black preacher was also comfortable with owning the racial identity of the people.

Unlike the pastors of the Black Church model, New Black Church pastors have substituted the racial identity for a branded consumer,¹⁰¹ or more precisely, a “celebrity identity.”¹⁰² Paul Gifford argues that Charismatic Christian churches as a whole “have

⁹⁷ Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 10.

⁹⁸ Charles Hamilton, *The Black Preacher in America* (New York: Morrow, 1972), 35-36.

⁹⁹ Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 6.

¹⁰⁰ C. Eric Lincoln, ed., *The Black Experience in Religion: A Book of Readings* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1974), 67.

¹⁰¹ For an explanation of “branded identity,” see Mara Einstein, *Brands of Faith*, 72-74.

undergone a shift [to] enhancing the personal status of the pastor.” New Black Churches have also participated in this shift. Gifford explains that “these great ‘men of God’ [sic] ... have become famous figures, who draw crowds to consult them. It is obvious that people flock to them for their gifts, not to form communities with other believers.”¹⁰³ New Black Church pastors seldom identify their churches as “black.” Instead, they prefer a kind of multiculturalism.¹⁰⁴

Because of the disestablishment of religion in America, with no state-sponsored church, these preachers and pastors are best described as “creative religious entrepreneurs,” who have “reframed” the mythology and ethos of the Black Church. Roof explains that

reframing occurs when religious speech and symbols are used not to convey some transcendent truth or reality as traditionally understood, but as a means of *creating* truth or *provoking* [emphasis in original] confrontation with it. Rather than looking upon symbols as fixed realities in some objectivist manner, they become negotiated and situational, used to construct a set of meanings in the face of serious human dilemmas and existential concerns.¹⁰⁵

Roof points out that this is “a reflexive act designed to force interpretation by dislodging the old meanings and/or provoking new ones.”¹⁰⁶ New Black Church pastors have taken the old meanings of black suffering and struggle and created new meanings for a younger generation of American Americans attempting to negotiate their personal economic visions of middle class American success.

¹⁰² For information on celebrity preachers, see Lee, T.D. *Jakes: America’s New Preacher*, 168-172. For celebrity in general, see P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

¹⁰³ Paul Gifford, *Ghana’s New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing African Economy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 108.

¹⁰⁴ For a discussion on the New Black Church’s position on race relations and multiculturalism, see Fredrick, *Between Sundays*, 153-159. Also see Lee, T.D. *Jakes: America’s New Preacher*; and Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It?*, 108.

¹⁰⁵ Wade Clark Roof, *The Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 169.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

New Black Church pastors reap the benefits from the technology (television, radio, print, and internet) and the cultural influences (secularization and globalization) in America. Similar to the Pentecostal–fundamentalist churches in Africa, these churches have out–distanced traditional churches because they place an emphasis on all means of mass communication.¹⁰⁷ Black churches and preachers now have unprecedented access to black consumers and their financial resources—especially black consumers with substantial financial resources.¹⁰⁸ These pastors market their own vision of faith to religious consumers in “the spiritual marketplace”¹⁰⁹ through their local congregations, brands, and brand communities. Shayne Lee describes these pastors best: “These celebrity preachers are CEOs of international ministries that reach millions of people through television, radio, and Internet, and by satellite technology, and their churches have resources rivaling denominations. These pastors, take advantage of our media age by marketing their books, videos, and tapes to secure personal fortunes.”¹¹⁰ This celebrity identity, is created through well–developed marketing and public relations,¹¹¹ and transcends the conventional identity markers of race, gender, and class in the capitalist global marketplace. In

¹⁰⁷ Paul Gifford argues that Pentecostal-fundamentalist churches expanded in Africa more so than mainline churches because the former placed an “emphasis on all means of mass communication.” Paul Gifford, *The New Crusaders: Christianity and the New Right in Southern Africa* (London: Pluto Press, 1991), 100. There is not a study that shows the major differences between traditional churches and New Black Churches in terms of mass communication. However, in terms of exposure the television ministries, access to the internet, and other mass communication mediums are definitely an advantage for New Black Churches.

¹⁰⁸ There is not adequate space to develop an argument around key issues such as: integration, Affirmative Action, slavery, Jim Crow, and others that have affected the earning potential of African Americans. As more African Americans make up the middle class and have gained some wealth, their buying power and access to services, events, and products have also expanded in ways that were not available in a segregated America. There have been other prosperity preachers and megachurches in the past. However, we must acknowledge the many market changes in the culture such as television, the internet, and print media. Although there are discussions of Father Divine and Reverend Ike who accumulated wealth, these preachers did not have access and exposure to mainstream outlets now available to the preachers of the New Black Church.

¹⁰⁹ Wade Clark Roof, *The Spiritual Marketplace*, 80.

¹¹⁰ Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America’s Preacher*, 159.

¹¹¹ Walton, *Watch This!*, 5.

the virtual, technological, media-driven, product world of the New Black Church, celebrity has more rhetorical and world-making power in the social construction of collective and individual identities.¹¹² Identified as both pastors and CEOs, these preachers have epistemic privilege, epistemic authority, and social capital that blurs more than ever before the sacred and secular and the public and private, giving them unprecedented access and status in the religious world as well as in the secular and corporate world.

A New Theology and a New Prosperity

Wesley Kort argues that “difference and conflict...are unavoidable and central to the theological enterprise.”¹¹³ He suggests that theological discourses, including those tied to institutions like black churches, are “oppositionally related to one another but also that their meaning and power are generated by such oppositions.”¹¹⁴ He explains that

Discursive situations, including those that are recognizably theological, include force as well as significance, and power produces and legitimates inequalities, repressions, and exclusions. Any theological situation, therefore favors some participants over others; discourse is always going on in some way already, and some discourses are likely to be dominating the field at the expense of others.¹¹⁵

This opposition and conflict is exactly the way theological discourses operate for the Black Church and the New Black Church models. Traditional churches of the Black Church model are often critical of the theology represented by the supermegachurches of the New Black Church.

¹¹² In respect to subjectivity in the global marketplace, when I say that the branded identity or *celebrity identity* transcends traditional identity markers of race, gender, and class, I am suggesting that celebrity allows access to resources, privilege, and discourse that may not ordinarily be available because of race, gender, and class. However, this does not imply that within the identity category of celebrity there are no hierarchical relationships based on race, gender, and class. Within the ranks of celebrity there will be greater access and privilege based on race, gender, and class.

¹¹³ Wesley A. Kort, *Bound to Differ: The Dynamics of Theological Discourses* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 2.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 23.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 4.

The pastors of the New Black Church present similar criticisms of traditional churches. In other words, pastors and churches from both models produce meaning and power based on their differences and the oppositional relationship.

Many scholars and theologians of the Black Church model¹¹⁶ disagree with the churches representing the New Black Church because they proffer a new definition for prosperity, salvation, and liberation. New Black Churches not only offer salvation from sin, they offer adherents an economic and secular salvation—a *Promised Land* of financial blessings and rewards. Preachers of the Black Church model have often been accused of being other-worldly, however the New Black Church preachers escape such accusations because they consistently promote and support a liberation and material salvation very much in the here and now. Their theology is defined as what many scholars pejoratively identify as *prosperity theology*, *prosperity gospel*, or the *gospel of prosperity*.

Like other New Black Church pastors, T.D. Jakes uses God-talk within a religious community to make claims about God and the world. As Gordon Kaufman affirms, “Every attempt to discover and reflect upon the real meaning of the Gospel, of a passage in the Bible, of Jesus Christ, is theologizing.”¹¹⁷ Jakes theologizes with a large community of African American women; for me, and for the purposes of this dissertation, that makes him a theologian. Moreover, I identify him as a prosperity theologian or a “theologian of prosperity.”¹¹⁸ Most scholars associate the prosperity gospel primarily with Word of Faith or the faith movement.¹¹⁹ Because

¹¹⁶ James H. Evans Jr., *We Have Been Believers: An African American Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

¹¹⁷ Gordon Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968), 57.

¹¹⁸ Although the terms “prosperity theologian” and “theologian of prosperity” can be synonymous, I prefer “theologian of prosperity” and “theologies of prosperity.”

The Potter's House is not a Word of Faith church or directly part of the faith movement, some scholars do not consider Jakes to be a prosperity theologian.¹²⁰ However, because of the expanding acceptance of theologies of prosperity, the worldview, and the related ritual practices such as seed–faith giving and positive confession, a much broader definition is needed. The definition must include other kinds of churches—in other words, more mainstream churches and their pastors, and congregants. I suggest a more expansive approach and define *theologies of prosperity* as “*contextual theologies of empire on a continuum that affirm it is God's will and a believer's right to obtain prosperity, or health and wealth, by using Scripture and rituals such as seed–faith giving and positive confession.*” These churches promote a secular and material salvation that fits well with the values and worldview espoused by advanced capitalism.

The theologies that T.D. Jakes and other New Black Church pastors teach and practice are not academic, ivory tower theologies. Theologies of prosperity are *folk* theologies. As Joe Barnhart argues, folk theologies are not intended to be “systematic” or “scholarly theology.” They are “deliberately devotional, motivational, and inspirational.”¹²¹ Because of this non-academic, motivational and popular appeal, the force and influence of the theologies are greater than other theologies that are at least in dialogue with, and open to scholarly critique.¹²²

¹¹⁹ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*; Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It?*; and Frederick, *Between Sundays*, 146.

¹²⁰ Walton, *Watch This!*, 117; Anthony Pinn, *The Black Church Since the Civil Rights Movement*, 139. Shayne Lee changes his position from his early book, *T.D. Jakes: America's New Preacher*. Lee writes, “More recently Jakes has been critical of the excesses of prosperity theology.” Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 59.

¹²¹ Joe E. Barnhart, “Prosperity Gospel: A New Folk Theology,” in *Religious Television*, eds. Robert Abelman and Stewart M. Hoover (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1990), 159.

¹²² Barnhart writes that “big time television charismatics appear to have avoided testing out their new theology in scholarly give-and-take exchanges” (160). The same applies for many black church pastors. Feminist, Mujerista, Black, and Womanist theologies are all theologies that seek legitimacy in the academy. However, because they are written by academic theologians they are open for critique and further scholarship.

The theology of the New Black Church may be what concerns many academic theologians and religious Black Church scholars the most.¹²³ James Cone, the father of black theology, refused to even sit on the podium at a seminary graduation because of a New Black Church pastor. Cone felt it necessary to take a stand, not against the preacher, but against the preacher's theology.¹²⁴ Robert Franklin, in his book *Crisis in the Village*, sees many problems. The prosperity gospel, however, tops his list. He goes so far as to say that the New Black Church's prosperity theology may be the "single greatest threat to the historical legacy and core values of the contemporary black church tradition."¹²⁵ The idea that the theology of these churches poses a threat to a historical legacy and its values is exactly why an antagonistic relationship exists between churches and pastors who represent the Black Church and New Black Church models.¹²⁶ As Shayne Lee states, "The New Black Church has a fondness for challenging everything it perceives as wrong with Grandma's religion and positions itself as the antipode to the old religious establishment."¹²⁷

A New Ethos and Mythology

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz defines a people's ethos "as the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood; it is the underlying attitude toward

¹²³ Religion and Ethics Newsweekly, "The Prosperity Gospel," episode 1051, August 17, 2007 <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week1051/feature.html> (accessed May 25, 2010).

¹²⁴ Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It?*, 48.

¹²⁵ Robert M. Franklin, *Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 112.

¹²⁶ Benjamin K. Watts, "Social Justice and Church Growth in the African-American Church," in *Why Liberal Churches Are Growing*, eds. Martyn Percy and Ian Markham (New York: T&T Clark International), 96. Lawrence Mamiya, *River of Struggle, River of Freedom: Trends among Black Churches and Black Pastoral Leadership: Pulpit and Pew Research on Pastoral Leadership Reports* (Durham, NC: Duke Divinity School), 12-14.

¹²⁷ Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America's Preacher*, 162.

themselves and their world that life reflects.”¹²⁸ Peter Paris defines a moral ethos as a “society’s most basic set of shared values that find significant expression in various communal symbols, rituals, pronouncements, celebrations, and the like. These values comprise the basic cultural paradigm in which the people find their sense of personal identity and group solidarity.”¹²⁹ Much of the scholarship suggests a certain liberation or freedom ethos for black churches as a whole. This freedom ethos differs from “the Euro-American notion of freedom as the individual’s free choice or the individual’s freedom from the actions or beliefs of others. In the black Christian view, freedom is an explicitly collective endeavor signifying both spiritual deliverance into God’s kingdom and worldly deliverance from the material realities of racial oppression.”¹³⁰

Gayraud Wilmore is adamant that “we must insist that in its basic theology, as well as its liturgical style, African American Christianity was a religion of freedom; the church was the center of a partly religious, partly secular movement the basic intention of which was to bring about the total abolition of slavery and overall improvement in the lives of the freed people.”¹³¹ However, this does not mean that we should romanticize or suggest a kind of essentialism for all black churches and African Americans throughout their history in America. Wilmore also chronicles what he calls “the deradicalization of the black church,” from the end of nineteenth century until the end of World War II (1925 to 1950), as when African Americans “retreated into

¹²⁸ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Essays by Clifford Geertz* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 127.

¹²⁹ Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches*, 57.

¹³⁰ Pattillo-McCoy, “Church Culture as a Strategy of Action in the Black Community,” 770.

¹³¹ Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Pragmatic Spirituality: The Christian Faith through an Africentric Lens* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 93.

a folk religiosity that lacked the social protest emphasis.”¹³² Wilmore writes that in the 1920s and 1930s “most black churches were too other-worldly, apathetic, or caught up in institutional maintenance.”¹³³ James Cone, in his chapter on the Black Church in *Black Theology and Black Power*, writes that “early black churches [were] the center of protest against slavery.”¹³⁴ But after the Civil War, “the black church lost its zeal for freedom in the midst of the new structures of white power,” and, he concludes, the “black church gradually became an instrument of escape instead of, as formerly, an instrument of protest.”¹³⁵ This retreat position that Wilmore and Cone outline is often identified as accommodation, suggesting that at times, African Americans in black churches have responded to white domination by becoming “the major cultural brokers of the norms, values, and expectations of white society.”¹³⁶ However, it is also critically important that the history of these retreat positions not be divorced from the increase in violence from the larger culture. African Americans, in order to cope with a plethora of existential concerns, have often succumbed to a kind of gradualism represented by the conservative politics of leaders like Booker T. Washington.

Darryl Trimiew and Michael Green in their article, “How We Got Over: The Moral Teachings of The African–American Churches on Business Ethics,” expound on this ethos. They see African American churches in “a conflicted moral system ... that oscillates along a

¹³² Lewis Baldwin, “Revisiting the ‘All-Comprehending Institution;’ Historical Reflections on the Public Roles of Black Churches,” in *New Day Begun: African American Churches and Civic Culture in Post-Civil Rights America*, ed. R. Drew Smith (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 28.

¹³³ Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People*, Second Edition (Maryknoll: Orbis Books), 161.

¹³⁴ James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 103.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹³⁶ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 15. Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 18.

continuum” with “two distinctive streams of ethical thought.”¹³⁷ Both streams are committed to liberation and freedom, but differ based on their relationship to and their confidence in whether liberation can occur within the capitalist system. The first is Booker T. Washington’s gradualism with an acceptance of capitalism, and the other is what Manning Marable calls the “blackwater” tradition that “calls capitalism into question.”¹³⁸ Marable explains that “there were the conservative tendencies within black faith [that] reach for a Spirit which liberates the soul, but not the body. On the other hand, the radical consciousness within black faith was concerned with the immediate conditions of black people.” He suggests that this meant “if the rituals of the church conveyed a message of long tolerance of suffering and acceptance of secular oppression, *blackwater* [emphasis mine] was the impetus toward political activism and the use of religious rhetoric to promote the destruction of the white status quo.”¹³⁹

Higginbotham, writing about African American women in the National Baptist Convention from 1880–1920, expresses this ethos as “racial doctrines of self help, uplift, black pride, economic solidarity, and other forms of collective action.”¹⁴⁰ Lincoln and Mamiya in their study speak of an economic ethic of self–help in a dialectical tension between both survival and liberation traditions. For many African Americans, survival “meant to eke out a living by whatever means possible” which was “marked by extreme dependency, uncertainty, and insecurity.”¹⁴¹ In order to lift the race, emphasis was placed on virtues and moral values like

¹³⁷ Darryl M. Trimiew and Michael Greene, “HOW WE GOT OVER: The Moral Teachings of the African-American Church on Business Ethics,” *Business Ethics Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (1997): 133-134.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Marable, *Blackwater*, 40-41.

¹⁴⁰ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 48.

¹⁴¹ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 240-241.

“industry” and “discipline” and “long term sublimation rather than immediate gratification.”¹⁴²

This economic liberation strategy “focused on gaining upward mobility from poverty and eventual economic independence.”¹⁴³ Lincoln and Mamiya explain the phenomenon in terms of the relationship to the economic system as a whole: “Rather than challenging the basis of American capitalism, most black people and their churches wanted to be a part of it.”¹⁴⁴ In other words, “black churches have accepted the American political economy of capitalism ‘as is.’”¹⁴⁵

However, the desire for upward mobility was not just about becoming middle class:

Upward mobility or becoming middle class *was not an end in itself* [emphasis mine], but it was important because it allowed for the possibility of devising strategies for a greater economic independence in the future. The liberation view also emphasized self-determination, dignity, and pride in the African and African American heritage and institutions. This liberation perspective *tended to be critical of those economic aspects of the capitalist system that tend to dehumanize and oppress people* [emphasis mine].¹⁴⁶

Some pastors, although not the dominant voices, were at least critical of the dehumanizing nature of capitalism. James Cone states that “apart from the racist practices of social, economic, and political institutions, most blacks have assumed that American society is essentially just and consequently has the best of all possible political systems.” He adds that “black criticism has been almost exclusively limited to racism, with little or no reference to class oppression.”¹⁴⁷

¹⁴² Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 243.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 241.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 247.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 271.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 241. Also see Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1982), 35.

¹⁴⁷ James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church Where Have We Been and Where Are We Going?* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 176.

An important aspect of this liberation ethos was the ability to delay gratification. Worship, sermons, songs, and testimonies were opportunities to reinforce and communicate this ethos. Biblical texts like the Exodus narrative and New Testament texts that present Jesus as co-sufferer and liberator were foundational to how churches lived out or practiced this ethos.¹⁴⁸ Albert J. Raboteau contends “that no single story captures more clearly the distinctiveness of African–American Christianity than that of the Exodus.”¹⁴⁹ Slaves identified with Israel and saw themselves with “a communal identity as special, divinely favored people.”¹⁵⁰ The most famous example of the Exodus story supporting this ethos is Martin Luther King, Jr.’s speech when he evocatively tells the community, “I’ve seen the Promised Land. And I may not get there with you. But...we as a people will get to the Promised Land.”¹⁵¹ Exodus is the story of the Old Testament, and in the New Testament, the churches of the Black Church model claimed Jesus as the suffering servant or co-sufferer.

In her foundational text on womanist theology, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus*, Jackie Grant explains that for African American women and African Americans as a whole, “‘Jesus was all things.’ Chief among these however was the belief in Jesus as the *divine co-sufferer* [emphasis mine] who empowered them in situations of oppression....Jesus means freedom from the sociopsychological, psychocultural, economic and political

¹⁴⁸ Lewis V. Baldwin, “Revisiting the ‘All-Comprehending Institution’; Historical Reflections on the Public Roles of Black Churches,” 17; Christopher Buck, *Religious Myths and Visions of America: How Minority Faiths Redefined America’s World Role* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2009), 40-44.

¹⁴⁹ Albert J. Raboteau, “African Americans, Exodus, and the American Israel,” in *Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 28.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 35 quoting “Sermon of April 3, 1968 delivered at Mason Temple, Memphis, TN; reprinted in James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 286.

oppression.”¹⁵² She affirms that African Americans believed that “Jesus identified with the lowly of his day, [therefore] he now identifies with the lowly of this day.”¹⁵³

Some stark changes exist when comparing this freedom ethos of past generations and the ethos of black churches that emerge in the 1980s and 1990s as the New Black Church.¹⁵⁴ “African–American churches have struggled with how to inspire constituents who have been moving into the middle class and away from social–justice issues,” writes a journalist from the *Wall Street Journal*. She sees this reality as a result of “the rise of black ‘megachurches,’ huge, middleclass congregations whose pastors preach a ‘prosperity gospel’—an optimistic message that glorifies personal and economic success while shunning the role of victim.”¹⁵⁵

New Black Church pastors exploit the liberation and economic ethos of the Black Church and rework these historic familiar stories and mythologies for their own capitalist purposes. Through their teaching and preaching they simply tell a different story—a story and mythology that makes sense to many African Americans in a post–civil rights, post–baby–boomer, post–Reaganomics America. This different story rings true for them because it resonates with the values of an overall expanding American global capitalist culture. Media and religion scholar Quentin Schultze reminds us “that human nature is linked closely to story, for we are not merely storytellers, story listeners, and story watchers, but story interpreters and most importantly story doers.”¹⁵⁶ He suggests that “storytelling, in its myriad of media and forms, still anchors cultures

¹⁵² Jacqueline Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 212-215.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 215.

¹⁵⁴ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 150.

¹⁵⁵ Miller, “Prophet Motives,” A1.

¹⁵⁶ Quentin J. Schultze, “Television Drama as a Sacred Text,” in *Channels of Belief: Religion and American Commercial Television*, edited by John P. Ferre (Ames: Iowa State University), 4.

and communities to their common beliefs and highlights their differences.”¹⁵⁷ Flip Schutte adds that “the spiritual vitality of a religion depends on the continuity of myth, and this can be preserved only if each age translates the myth into its own language and makes it an essential container of its view of the world.”¹⁵⁸ New Black Church pastors like Jakes have taken the mythology and translated it for a new generation of African Americans. These pastors tell a more believable and applicable story for African Americans who are far removed from the stories and sufferings of slavery, and Jim Crow, and much more comfortable with their middle class existence in America.

These pastors reframe the Exodus narrative and Jesus and sacralize the American secular myths of Horatio Alger¹⁵⁹ and Exceptionalism.¹⁶⁰ These secular myths are given divine importance and framed as God’s will. New Black Church pastors often present their personal testimonies of ministry beginnings as rags-to-riches stories. The exceptionalism is no longer the ideology of America being the “city on a hill” and Manifest Destiny.¹⁶¹ It is now the ideology represented by the branded identities of *Loosed Women*, *God’s Leading Ladies*, and *World Changers*—black Christian consumers who consider themselves to be “blessed” and “anointed,” and living out their individual financial and economic destinies. This ‘theomythology’ is

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 7.

¹⁵⁸ Flip Schutte, “Myth as Paradigm to Read a Text,” in *Psalms and Mythology*, edited by Dirk J. Human (New York, 2007), 5.

¹⁵⁹ For the Horatio Alger Myth also identified as the Self-Made man/woman, see Richard Weiss, *The American Myth of Success from Horatio Alger to Norman Vincent Peale* (New York: Basic Books, 1969). For references to the New Black Church and the mythology, see Franklin, *Crisis in the Village*, 118; and Walton, *Watch This!*, 179-183.

¹⁶⁰ For the Exceptionalism Myth, see Godfrey Hodgson, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 2009.

¹⁶¹ The most famous example is John Winthrop’s sermon, “A Model of Christian Charity,” 1630, where he states that America will be like a “city on a hill” from the New Testament text Matthew 5:14. Also see Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).

attractive to many African Americans who “seek material advancement [and] also appreciate the message because it does not suggest that a Christ-like existence entails a vow of poverty. Rather, these churches argue that God desires all Christians to have material comfort and individual salvation.”¹⁶² Michael Eric Dyson suggests that this provides “a way to justify [their] upward mobility and middle class existence without feeling guilty.”¹⁶³

Systematic theologian James H. Evans, emphasizes that for the churches representing the Black Church model, “liberation involves the liberation of the self and the liberation of the community.” The ecclesiology has not just been about individual liberation, but has also supported the African notion of “self in community.”¹⁶⁴ The New Black Church, however, stresses prosperity for “the individual over community.”¹⁶⁵ Furthermore, these churches are rarely critical of America and advanced capitalism,¹⁶⁶ and they do not advocate virtues of delayed gratification and sublimation. The pastors promote economic and material liberation in the here and now—immediate gratification by encouraging middle and upper class aspirations and wealth as a goal in itself. The adherents are very comfortable with America and her dream. With a sense of entitlement, they claim a God-given right to pursue the dream and to reap all of its financial and material benefits.¹⁶⁷ Harrison describes the philosophy of New Black Churches and their understanding of this economic exceptionalism; he writes that they believe in a divine “redistribution of wealth out of the hands of ‘sinners’ into the hands of born-again Christians,

¹⁶² Pinn, *The Black Church*, 138.

¹⁶³ “The Prosperity Gospel,” *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*.

¹⁶⁴ James H. Evans Jr., *We Have Been Believers: An African American Systematic Theology*, 135.

¹⁶⁵ Mithchem, *Name It and Claim It?*, 108.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 71. Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 74.

¹⁶⁷ Harrison, “Prosperity in African American Religion,” in *Righteous Riches*, 131-146; Lee, “A Message of Prosperity,” in *America’s New Preacher*, 98-122. Mithchem, *Name It and Claim It?*, 49.

while preserving the [capitalist] system intact....those believers who have prospered within the existing economic system have the reassurance that it is God's will."¹⁶⁸ The Promised Land in the New Black Church is about individual salvation and prosperity.¹⁶⁹ Jesus is no longer the co-sufferer. Jesus is presented as closer to a corporate CEO responsible for twelve staff (his disciples).¹⁷⁰ Any reference to suffering, including symbols like the cross, in many New Black Churches—especially Word of Faith churches—are virtually eliminated. Jakes is one New Black Church pastor who often speaks of suffering.¹⁷¹ However, he is still tied to the worldview and practices of prosperity preachers. Like other pastors in the New Black Church, he promulgates this very different ethos and mythology, with its capitalist values.

¹⁶⁸ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 150.

¹⁶⁹ Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us*, 274.

¹⁷⁰ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 12. Shayne Lee gives a specific example about T.D. Jakes. He writes, "Jakes contended that soldiers gambled for Jesus Christ's cloak while he was on the cross, so he must have had great wealth, and therefore Christ's followers should emulate him by being wealthy." Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America's New Preacher*, 109.

¹⁷¹ Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 70-71.

CHAPTER 2 THEOLOGIES OF PROSPERITY AND THE NEW BLACK CHURCH

Any investigation of the New Black Church is incomplete without an adequate discussion of the “prosperity gospel,” “prosperity theology”—or what I think is a more accurate description, “theologies of prosperity.”¹⁷² Not all the churches represented by the New Black Church model preach this form of theology and gospel. At a minimum, many churches, because of their size and the need to fund their ministries, participate in some of the rituals and practices, like seed-faith giving, which are often associated with these theologies.¹⁷³

In this chapter I describe the general tenets of theologies of prosperity and propose a new definition that identifies them as *contextual theologies of empire* on a continuum. The continuum is not limited to Word of Faith churches, but also includes other denominational churches and those adherents that follow the prosperity teachings in one form or another. I also argue that because these churches emerge in the 1980s and 1990s, African American adherents in the New Black Church are responding to the cultural or ideological influences of advanced capitalism and the secular realities identified as the gospel of wealth and the American Way of Life. These secular influences are a critical factor in understanding the religious and theological differences between the New Black Church and the Black Church. Finally, I close the chapter by arguing that because these theologies provide existential explanations for economic and physical suffering (health and wealth), and because the preachers prescribe paths to liberation, that we should see these theologies as theodicy and as contemporary liberation theologies. Although I identify these theologies as contemporary liberation theologies, I also adamantly argue that

¹⁷² Stephanie Mitchem also uses the terminology “theologies of prosperity.” Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It*, x.

¹⁷³ Barnhart writes that “when televangelists elect to go on television daily, they wittingly or unwittingly commit themselves to becoming disciples of the Gospel of Prosperity. The financial needs of the daily program virtually require that they embrace the new folk-theology.” Barnhart, “Prosperity Gospel,” 162.

because these theologies do not address the prevalent systemic issues of advanced capitalism, the liberation that these preachers proffer is only a pseudo or false liberation.

My intentional use of the term “theology,” instead of the more commonly used term “gospel,” is to underscore that it is no longer just a gospel; without a doubt, it is now a *theology*. Because academic theologians and religious scholars have struggled with an artificial demarcation between the faith of elites and the faith of the masses, prosperity theology gets categorized as a popular or folk theology. It does not meet the elitist criteria of classical theology—as a theology in the ivory tower with an academic systematic treatment. As a popular theology “it is communicated directly to the laypeople in their own language”¹⁷⁴ in large stadiums, the living rooms of television viewers, movie theatres, books, and church pulpits. Prosperity preachers and theologians now have a substantial number of books, sermons, and products that cover almost every aspect and subject of the believer’s life.¹⁷⁵ Moreover, because the theology is contextual, the plural “theologies” is a better description to represent the global, racial, geographical, and ecclesial differences that exist from preacher to preacher and church to church.¹⁷⁶ These popular theologies are what Kathryn Tanner names as “theologies of the people.” They are “theologies of ordinary people, who run the gamut of degrees of marginalization according to their distance from the legitimation that the complex intersection of a number of different factors such as ordination, academic degree, or privileged social location

¹⁷⁴ Barnhart, “Prosperity Gospel,” 159.

¹⁷⁵ Deji Isaac Ayeboyin, “A Rethinking of Prosperity Teaching in The New Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria,” *Black Theology* 4, no. 1 (2006): 73.

¹⁷⁶ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 158. Jonathan Walton also advises that we should not impose “a fictitious uniformity on the widely theological, ecclesial, and social views of African American televangelists and megachurch pastors.” Walton, *Watch This!*, 12-13.

might confer.”¹⁷⁷ Whether it is the African American women attending a WTAL conference, evangelical Christians in the Bible Belt, or poor people in Two-Thirds World countries, these theologies speak to the needs of those who feel marginalized. If it is not the marginalization from race, gender, or class oppression, then it is the oppression from demonic and cosmic evil, or the assumed threat of forces like secularization and humanism.¹⁷⁸

Prosperity churches are Pentecostal, neo-Pentecostal, Evangelical, Charismatic, Sanctified, and Fundamentalist.¹⁷⁹ They are difficult to define because definitions or descriptions like Pentecostal, neo-Pentecostal, or Charismatic vary worldwide, both historically and geographically.¹⁸⁰ Additionally, the pastors and adherents in these churches rarely use this social

¹⁷⁷ Kathryn Tanner, “Theology and Popular Culture” in *Changing Conversations: Religious Reflections & Cultural Analysis*, eds. Dwight N. Hopkins and Sheila Greeve Davaney (New York: Routledge, 1996), 101.

¹⁷⁸ Paul Gifford, *Ghana’s New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing African Economy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 61. For a discussion on how the fundamentalist versions of theologies of prosperity focus on spiritual warfare to fight evil forces, demons, communism, Islam, and secular humanism, see Steve Brouwer, Paul Gifford, and Susan D. Rose, *Exporting the American Gospel: Global Christian Fundamentalism* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 198.

¹⁷⁹ Stephen Hunt explains how the theologies of the faith movement are both Pentecostal and fundamentalist: “It shares with other Pentecostal groups an emphasis on the ‘second baptism’ (of the spirit), the charismata (glossolalia, prophecy, words of knowledge, etc.), and revivalism. It also tends to be fundamentalist in that it places great stress on preaching the uncompromised word of God and through prophetic revelation, it claims a greater articulation of the divine ‘truth’ of the ‘End times.’” B. Bannon, *The Health and Wealth Gospel* (Illinois, InterVarsity Press, 1987), 44, quoted in Stephen Hunt, “‘Winning Ways:’ Globalisation and the Impact of the Health and Wealth Gospel,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 15 no. 3 (2000): 332. For definitions and the histories of Charismatics, Pentecostals, and Fundamentalists, see Simon Coleman, *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity: Spreading the Gospel of Prosperity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 20-25; Paul Gifford, “Prosperity: A New and Foreign Element in African Christianity,” *Religion* 20 (1990): 373-374. Also see Gifford’s distinctions within the Religious Right in *The New Crusaders: Christianity and the New Right in Southern Africa* (London: Pluto Press, 1991), 3-5. For how these categories play out among televangelists, see Jeffrey K. Hadden and Anson Shupe, *Televangelism: Power and Politics on God’s Frontier* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1988), 79-81. For general definitions of *Evangelical*, *Pentecostal*, and *Fundamentalist*, see Randall Balmer, “A Word about Words” in *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*, Third Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), xv-xvi.

¹⁸⁰ Steven Brouwer, Paul Gifford, and Susan D. Rose, *Exporting the American Gospel: Global Christian Fundamentalism* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 29, 266; Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 14. In Nigeria, Deji Isaac Ayegboyin defines two different groups. *Charismatic Pentecostals* are those influenced by *Classical Pentecostals* that “focused on holiness and righteousness as its hallmark” (72). The second group he identifies are *New Pentecostals*, the term used for prosperity preachers. He also footnotes that some of the preachers prefer the term *New Pentecostals* to distance themselves from Neo-Pentecostal churches in America. Deji Isaac Ayegboyin, “A

scientific vocabulary to describe themselves.¹⁸¹ A general inclusive term would be that these churches and their pastors practice what R. Andrew Chesnut calls “pneumacentric” or “spirit-centered” religion or religiosity.¹⁸² In other words, the pastors and adherents in these churches as Lee and Sinitiere suggest, “place an emphasis on the power of the Holy Spirit for healing, prophetic utterances, vibrant worship and music, and prosperity.”¹⁸³

The United States is the official birthplace of these theologies.¹⁸⁴ Because of television and print media, Bible schools, conferences and crusades, North American preachers continue to have great influence both internationally and locally.¹⁸⁵ These theologies, however, are also indigenous to their particular context and community.¹⁸⁶ Paul Gifford, writing about Africa, contends that prosperity Pentecostalism “is a thoroughly contextualized Christianity that directly addresses pressing needs. But *the way* [emphasis mine] it is expressed is heavily influenced by North Americans.”¹⁸⁷ As such, North American pastors and televangelists like T.D. Jakes have

Rethinking of Prosperity Teaching,” 73, n 9. Also, for the differences between *Charismatic*, and *New Pentecostals* in Ghana, Africa, see Gifford, *Ghana’s New Christianity*, 23, 26.

¹⁸¹ Simon Coleman, *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity*, 5. Also see James Barr, “The Problem of Fundamentalism Today,” in *Explorations of Theology* 7, ed. James Barr (London: SCM Press LTD, 1980), 67-68.

¹⁸² For a definition of pneumacentric religion, see R. Andrew Chesnut, “Pragmatic Consumers and Practical Products: The Success of Pneumacentric Religion among Women in Latin America’s New Religious Economy,” *Review of Religious Research* 45, no. 1 (September 2003), 20-31.

¹⁸³ Lee and Sintere, *Holy Mavericks*, 63. Also see Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America’s New Preacher*, 164; Gifford, “Prosperity: A New and Foreign Element,” 379.

¹⁸⁴ The faith movement is attributed to Kenneth E. Hagin Sr., in Tulsa, OK. Tulsa is a part of the area of the U.S. that is often called the Bible Belt.

¹⁸⁵ Asonah Ukah, “African Christianities: Features, Promises and Problems,” p. 13 n. 51, 52. Brouwer, Gifford, and Rose point to Kenneth Hagin’s Rhema Bible Institute as responsible for “exporting the faith to all parts of the world (26).

¹⁸⁶ Perriman, *Faith, Health, and Prosperity*, 6; Paul Gifford, *Ghana’s New Christianity*, 61.

¹⁸⁷ T.D. Jakes is included on Gifford’s list of North American prosperity preachers: “Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, John Avanzini, Creflo Dollar, T.D. Jakes, Joel Osteen and Mike Murdock.” Paul Gifford, “Expecting Miracles: The Prosperity Gospel in Africa,” *Christian Century* 124, no. 14 (July 10, 2007), 24.

many imitators.¹⁸⁸ Those who are imitating Jakes and others may have their own contextualized theology, but they are, at a minimum, emulating an American version of a successful neo-Pentecostal church and pastor: “a modern building, a large ever-growing congregation, a charismatic pastor (in the Weberian sense) and plenty of funds.”¹⁸⁹ Stephen Hunt emphasizes that Kenneth Hagin, the founder of the faith movement,¹⁹⁰ and other prosperity theologians like Kenneth Copeland, “have served as a source of inspiration and as catalysts for the global dissemination of similar ministries which are identified by their vast scale of organisational structure and financial resources.”¹⁹¹ I would also add New Black Church pastors: T.D. Jakes, Creflo Dollar, and Fredrick K. C. Price to his list of preachers who are an inspirational source and catalyst for other ministries.

These contextual theologies are “represented by hundreds of independent ministries which might depart, to one degree or another, in both practice and doctrine, from the core teachings.”¹⁹² Yet, the “doctrines of health and wealth are discernible in whatever the cultural context in which they are adopted.”¹⁹³ Gifford notes that “[t]his stream of Christianity is also constantly mutating.”¹⁹⁴ As a result, the theology in the later works of Kenneth Hagin and other

¹⁸⁸ Gifford documents that T.D. Jakes had over one million people to attend three events in Nairobi in 2005. Because of his success, many pastors imitate the American success that Jakes presents. Gifford, “Expecting Miracles: The Prosperity Gospel in Africa,” 24.

¹⁸⁹ Hunt, “Winning Ways,” 337. Also see 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), 272.

¹⁹⁰ D.R. McConnell in *A Different Gospel* provides evidence to show that Hagin actually plagiarized from an early positive thinker named E.W. Kenyon. For another discussion of the origins including the connection to New Thought, see George E. Hummel, *The Prosperity Gospel: Health and Wealth and the Faith Movement* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991).

¹⁹¹ Hunt, “Winning Ways,” 332.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Hunt, “Winning Ways,” 343.

¹⁹⁴ Gifford, “Expecting Miracles: The Prosperity Gospel in Africa,” 21.

preachers may differ from their earlier writings.¹⁹⁵ In addition, Hagin's theology will differ from the theologies of African American New Black Church pastors like T.D. Jakes. Furthermore, one should not expect the theology of Jakes as a supermegachurch pastor to be the same as that of pastor David Oyedepo, who has several satellite churches and a 50,400-seat supermegachurch in Lagos, Nigeria.¹⁹⁶

There are many popular works on these theologies and recently more scholars and theologians have started doing research—including projects that specifically look at black churches and African Americans.¹⁹⁷ These theologies do not fit comfortably within the confines and categories of any one academic discipline.¹⁹⁸ Moreover, instead of offering scholarly critique, academic theologians have had a tendency to be dismissive and have presented prosperity preachers as charlatans and mere caricatures, rather than as theologians.¹⁹⁹ Andrew

¹⁹⁵ Hollinger, "Enjoying God Forever," 16. Also, for the changes in the theology of T.D. Jakes, see Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 59; Posner, *God's Profits*, 58.

¹⁹⁶ In 2000, Gifford records that David Oyedepo's church, *Winners' Chapel* could be found in 38 African countries with 400 branches in Nigeria. Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*, 56. Also see Gifford, "Expecting Miracles," 21.

¹⁹⁷ Andrew Perriman's 2003 book, *Faith, Health and Prosperity* states: "There is not a comprehensive account of the development and spread of the modern Word of Faith movement" (1). He also acknowledges that while "there have been a number of published investigations of Word of Faith teaching, they have been aimed largely at a popular market"(15). Milmon Harrison, writing in 2005, states that Word of Faith "is a contemporary religious movement that has received a considerable amount of attention in the popular Christian press while for some reason, scholars of religion have left it relatively untouched" (vii). Harrison's book is the first full scholarly treatment of Word of Faith and African Americans. For a few books, book sections, and articles that discuss black Word of Faith or that focus on black churches, see: Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America's Preacher*, 98-122; Frederick, *Between Sundays*, 146-153; Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It?*; Melissa Harris Lacewell, "From Liberation to Mutual Fund"; Walton, *Watch This!*, 93-101; and Mamiya, *River of Struggle, River of Freedom*, 10-14.

¹⁹⁸ An exhaustive treatment of prosperity theology would require a combination of several disciplines: economics, church history, theology, biblical studies, and sociology. The scholars that study these theologies usually do not have the expertise to explore the intersecting cultural perspectives and disciplines. Each theology happens in a particular historical period, but the historian would miss the nuances of how the theologies are applied and why. The theologian does not have the sociological background, and the sociologist is unable to seriously examine the theological implications of the social. The social relationships and actions of adherents are often based on theological propositions or God-talk. Additionally, these theologies are based on Scripture, so biblical studies and biblical hermeneutics would also need to be included for an exhaustive study.

¹⁹⁹ Walton, *Watch This!*, xiv. Also see Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America's New Preacher*, 125.

Perriman, writing about the faith movement in the UK, points out that “there is still a widespread tendency to condemn the movement on the basis of an ingrained and largely unexamined moral revulsion . . . [that] is often little more than spiritual snobbery and disdain for what appears to be the uneducated, status-seeking vulgarity of Word of Faith religion.”²⁰⁰

Like the academy as a whole, black and womanist academic theologians have written very little about these preachers.²⁰¹ Jonathan Walton contends that when they do write about these popular preachers, the preachers “are too easily deemed anomalous, aberrant, and/or nonblack when measured against black theology’s constructed norms.”²⁰² Both womanist and black theologians affirm their allegiance to black churches and with the poor.²⁰³ However, the challenge remains that most African American Christians, including those who are poor, are usually not familiar with the God-talk and worldview of academic liberation theologians.²⁰⁴ Prosperity preachers like Creflo Dollar, Fred Price, Eddie Long, Paula White and T.D. Jakes have limited or no academic training.²⁰⁵ Yet, this limited training has not inhibited them from

²⁰⁰ Perriman, *Faith, Health, and Prosperity*, 231.

²⁰¹ Theologians may mention prosperity preachers; however, currently there are no theological works by academically trained theologians that specifically look at these preachers. The closest would be Stephanie Mitchem’s text, *Name It and Claim It?*. For a discussion of womanist and feminist perspectives on T.D. Jakes, see Lee, *T.D. Jakes America’s Preacher*, 125. Also see note 26 above.

²⁰² Walton, *Watch This!*, 32.

²⁰³ James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church, Where Have We Been and Where Are We Going?* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984); Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*.

²⁰⁴ Harris-Lacewell, “From Liberation to Mutual Fund,” 140; Cecil W. Cone, *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology* (Nashville, TN: AMEC, 1975); Katie G. Cannon, “Structured Academic Amnesia: As if the Womanist Story Never Happened,” in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, ed. Stacey Floyd-Thomas (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 19-28.

²⁰⁵ I should clarify that I am privileging accredited seminaries. Many prosperity preachers have been trained in Bible institutes, colleges, or schools. Some also have non-religious degrees. However, many of the schools do not have accreditation supported by the Department of Education. According to Jonathan Walton, T.D. Jakes has a GED and completed one year at West Virginia State College. Walton, *Watch This!*, 105. T.D. Jakes also has a Doctor of Ministry degree in Religious Studies from Friends International Christian University (FICU), see <http://www.ficu.edu/alumni/Jakes.html> (accessed January 22, 2011). My point is that the degrees or credentials of

gaining entrée into the lives of black Christians across the globe.²⁰⁶ Many African Americans are not only familiar with their theologies, but they are actually repeating and attempting to live out the God-talk of these popular preachers.²⁰⁷ The rituals, religious practices, and worldview reinforced by their theologies are changing the face of African American religion. The serious scholar of religion cannot ignore this reality. Consequently, any viable critique requires that these prosperity preachers be taken seriously and treated as contemporary theologians.

Defining Theologies of Prosperity

Defining theologies of prosperity depends on how one defines culture, religion, and theology, as well as where one places the border or division between the secular and the sacred. Theologies of prosperity are considered to be both popular culture and popular religion, and at other times a form of civil religion.²⁰⁸ As a result, David Machacek's definition of "prosperity theology," in the edited volume of *Contemporary American Religion*,²⁰⁹ does not make a distinction between what I am defining as "theologies of prosperity" and the American secular ideology often referred to as "the gospel of wealth," "the gospel of success," and "the gospel of prosperity." Robert Franklin, on the other hand, intentionally makes a distinction between the two. He defines "the gospel of prosperity" as an ideology that differs from what he describes as

these prosperity preachers would not qualify for admission or acceptance into the seminaries and institutions to which academically trained theologians give epistemic privilege.

²⁰⁶ Walton, *Watch This!*, 214.

²⁰⁷ Harris-Lacewell, "From Liberation to Mutual Fund," 142, 147.

²⁰⁸ Simon Coleman, "America Loves Sweden: Prosperity Theology and the Cultures of Capitalism" in *Religion and the Transformations of Capitalism: Comparative Approaches*, ed. Richard H. Roberts (New York: Routledge, 1995), 171.

²⁰⁹ David W. Machacek, "Prosperity Theology," *Contemporary American Religion*, Vol. 2, ed. Wade Clarke Roof (New York: Macmillian Reference USA, 1999), 560-562.

“the prosperity gospel” of Christian faith.²¹⁰ Because of America’s socio-religious beginnings in Puritanism and Calvinism, definitions are at times confusing because they are both secular and religious. What Franklin names as “the gospel of prosperity,” and presents as secular, David Bromley and Ansom Shupe describe as religious—or probably should be designated as religious because it includes references to God and Christianity. Bromley and Shupe explain that what they identify as the [g]ospel of [p]rosperity

is based on the belief that Americans have a special covenant with God—that in return for obeying [God’s] mandates and creating a Christian nation that will eventually carry [God’s] message and the American Way of Life to the entire world, God will raise up Americans, individually and collectively, as [God’s] most favored people.²¹¹

Their definition includes religio-economic corporations like Amway and Mary Kay because these organizations incorporate themes like transcendent purpose, service, and achievement, and culturally integrate work, family, and religion.²¹² Machacek’s definition is the most expansive; it not only includes religio-economic corporations, but also “think-tanks affiliated with the new Religious Right, and a growing abundance of self-help guides in print, video, and television media” as examples of “prosperity theology.”²¹³ These writers demonstrate the difficulty of presenting an adequate definition that is not only consistent, but can also be applied across disciplines.

²¹⁰ Robert Franklin, *Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 116.

²¹¹ David G. Bromley and Anson Shupe, “Rebottling the Elixir: The Gospel of Prosperity in America’s Religioeconomic Corporations,” in *In Gods We Trust: New Patterns of Religious Pluralism in America*, Second Edition Revised, eds. Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1996), 233.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 234.

²¹³ Machacek, “Prosperity Theology,” 561.

To better situate my case study of T.D. Jakes, *Woman Thou Art Loosed*, and the theologies of the New Black Church, I focus on the descriptions and definitions related to churches and adherents in faith communities. Consequently, like Robert Franklin, I treat the gospel of prosperity, or the gospel of wealth, as a secular ideology. A strong history and relationship exists between theologies of prosperity and this ideology, but it is important to first clarify and define the theologies that are purposefully religious and applicable to the many adherents in churches and faith communities.

The voluntary prosperity fellowships and networks have grown to the size of denominations, but the local churches continue to classify themselves as non-denominational and independent.²¹⁴ As a result, there are faith or belief statements from individual churches and organizations, but no denominational doctrinal statements from governing bodies.²¹⁵ Hence, no one conclusive definition exists for prosperity theology, or in the vernacular I have chosen to canonize: theologies of prosperity. The majority of definitions describe the churches and theologies that are associated with Word of Faith or “the faith movement.” Additional names for Word of Faith are “‘Positive Confession,’ the ‘message of Prevailing Word,’ the ‘prosperity gospel,’ ‘health and wealth gospel,’ or in more derogatory fashion, the ‘name it and claim it’ or ‘blab it and grab it’ gospel.”²¹⁶ Most definitions are similar to the one presented by the Lausanne Theology Working Group:²¹⁷ “We define prosperity gospel as the teaching that believers have a

²¹⁴ For a list of these fellowships see: Gifford, *Christianity and Politics*, 147; Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 15-17; and Simon Coleman, “Prosperity Theology,” in *Encyclopedia of New Religious Movements*, ed. Peter B. Clarke (New York: Routledge, 2005), 455.

²¹⁵ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 14; Harris-Lacewell, “From Liberation to Mutual Fund,” 142.

²¹⁶ Perriman, *Faith, Health and Prosperity*, xviii.

²¹⁷ The Lausanne Theology Working Group is an evangelical group of theologians that are committed to missions. “Theology Working Group,” <http://www.lausanne.org/issue-theology/theology-working-group.html> (accessed August 25, 2011).

right to the blessings of health and wealth and that they can obtain these blessings through positive confessions of faith and the ‘sowing of seeds’ through the faithful payments of tithes and offerings.”²¹⁸

Milmon Harrison outlines three basic points that characterize most of these theologies: “the principal of knowing who you are in Christ; the practice of positive confession (and positive mental attitude); and a worldview that emphasizes material prosperity and physical health as the divine right of every Christian.”²¹⁹ Joe Barnhart observes that these theologies perceive the death of Jesus on the cross or the atonement as providing several “victories for true believers: [d]eliverance of the soul from sin and hell, deliverance of the body from Satan and disease, and deliverance from poverty and economic hardship in this life.”²²⁰ Believers are taught that contemporary Christians should expect and are entitled to the blessings of Abraham (financial, spiritual, and physical) that are guaranteed in the Abrahamic Covenant of the Old Testament.²²¹ The Bible is treated as “a record of covenants, promises, pledges, and commitments between God and [God’s] people.”²²² George Hummel explains how adherents are able to put this into practice: “The believer claims a divine promise (usually in a Scripture verse), demands God to

²¹⁸ “Lausanne Theology Working Group Statement on the Prosperity Gospel: From the Africa Chapter of the Lausanne Theology Working Group at its Consultation in Akripong, Ghana, 8-9 October, 2008 and 1-4 September 2009,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 34, no. 2 (2010), 99.

²¹⁹ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 8.

²²⁰ Barnhart, “Prosperity Gospel,” 159.

²²¹ Ken L. Sarles, “A Theological Evaluation of the Prosperity Gospel,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143, no. 572 (October-December 1986): 334. Prosperity preachers interpret the NT text Galatians 3:14: “In order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles” to support their position that the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant are now available to contemporary Christians.

²²² Gifford, “Expecting Miracles: The Prosperity Gospel in Africa,” 20.

do what [God] has promised, then gives thanks for receiving it. Faith is [then] released through prayer to activate God to do something.”²²³

Believers are encouraged to get into *the Word* to find their own answers to life’s problems.²²⁴ Consequently, adherents are offered (through church bookstores, websites, television, and direct mail) a variety of products to help them develop their faith. Although they are exposed to a myriad of prosperity products in various mediums, the sermon—especially for adherents in African American churches—continues to be the primary vehicle for dissemination of the prosperity message.²²⁵ Because of the rhetorical influence of preaching, the words that are shared in a sermon have greater power than what is presented in any other faith medium or product. Olin P. Moyd asserts that in African American churches preaching is where adherents receive their theology. He explains that in these unique worship experiences, “preaching is still the most sacred element of the liturgy,” and it is the “medium for communicating, elucidating, and illuminating God’s revelation for God’s people.”²²⁶

Many prosperity preachers, including those who are African American, have a different preaching style than traditional and denominational churches, where one pericope, story, or text is taken and expounded upon. In “word churches,”²²⁷ preachers pride themselves on

²²³ George E. Hummel, *The Prosperity Gospel: Health and Wealth and the Faith Movement* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 13.

²²⁴ Gifford, “Prosperity: A New and Foreign Element,” 379.

²²⁵ Because of the position that the sermon has in the Protestant worship experience, and the rhetoric or persuasive power of preaching, the sermon continues to be the primary vehicle for disseminating theology. However, the worship service is only one of many mediums. The sermon can be reproduced in a television broadcast and also in book form. *Woman Thou Art Loosed* is an example of one sermon being reproduced into many other products.

²²⁶ Olin P. Moyd, *The Sacred Art: Preaching and Theology in the African American Tradition* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1995), 10-11.

²²⁷ Harrison describes a Word church as one in which “a church’s minister specializes in teaching, as opposed to preaching, what the Bible ‘really’ says, the implication being that other churches do not do this.”

“teaching.”²²⁸ A very common image is that of the prosperity preacher standing in front of the congregation with members searching through their highlighted Bibles to follow the verses expounded upon in the sermon.²²⁹ In black word churches, like traditional black churches, there is still the call and response between congregation and preacher.²³⁰ Yet, the presentation of the sermon, intentionally resembles more of an organized lecture. Prosperity preachers want to present a middle class decorum to make sure that they differentiate themselves from “the emotional hooping” of traditional black preachers and churches.²³¹

The sermons may include verses from all over the Bible, but prosperity preachers selectively use only a small cadre of verses to theologically substantiate their controversial positions on health and wealth.²³² Gifford identifies prosperity preachers’ use of the Bible as “classically fundamentalist,” which means adherents are taught that “everything necessary is contained in the Bible.”²³³ As biblical scholar James Barr explains, “For fundamentalists, Scripture, comes from God and is inspired in all its parts. It provides the basis for preaching and

Righteous Riches, 86. Robert Franklin writes that black word churches emerge “from the predominantly white evangelical community.” Robert M. Franklin, *Another Day’s Journey: Black Churches Confronting the American Crisis* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 69.

²²⁸ Franklin, *Another Day’s Journey*, 70. Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 89; Walton, *Watch This!*, 157.

²²⁹ Gifford, *Ghana’s Charismatic Christianity*, 28.

²³⁰ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 102.

²³¹ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 89, 157. Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America’s Preacher*, 102.

²³² Perriman, *Faith, Health and Prosperity*, 84. Paul Gifford identifies several biblical texts used by prosperity preachers: Ps 35: 27; Gen 13: 2-17; Gen 14: 22f; Gen 17: 5ff; Gen 26: 12ff, Gen 30: 43; Gen 39: 2f; Ex 3: 7f; Dt 8:18; Dt 28: 11; Is 1: 19; Josh 1:8; Dt 29: 9; Is 55: 11; Ps 37: 25f; Prov 10: 22; Prov 22: 7; Prov 19: 17; Lk 12: 15; Lk 12: 21; Prov 28: 13; Ps 1:3; Prov 13: 22; Heb 11: 6; Mk 4:19 ; Lk 6: 38; 2 Cor 9: 6; Prov 3: 9f; Mal 3: 10ff; Heb 7: 8; 2 Cor 9: 8-11; Eccles 11: 1; 3 John 2; Mt 6: 25-33; 1 Cor 13: 3; Rom 13: 7f; I Tim 6: 17ff; Mt 6: 19ff; Lk 16: 10ff; Phil 4:19; Mk 10:29f; Mk 4: 23-29; 2 Chr 26: 5; 2 Chr 31: 21; 2 Kings 18: 7; Is 48: 15ff; Dt 30: 19f; 2 Cor 8: 9; Dt 28: 1f; Gal 3: 13f; Eph 4: 28; Lk 7: 23; Hag 2: 7-9; Mk 4: 20-25; Josh 1:5.” Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, *Prosperity Promises* (Tulsa, OK: Kenneth Copeland Ministries, 1985), quoted in Gifford, “Prosperity: A New and Foreign Element,” 384, n. 6.

²³³ Gifford, “Expecting Miracles,” 20.

for practical impact upon personal life. The typical assertion of the evangelist is ‘The Bible says’ (not so often ‘The Bible means’).”²³⁴ Barr also states that because of this fundamentalist appropriation of Scripture, these preachers or leaders actually have “greater influence in their constituency than bishops, theologians or biblical scholars in non-fundamentalist Christianity.”²³⁵

Certain verses of Scripture become the foundation to justify the prosperity *worldview* (concepts of God and the world), *ethos* (“the underlying attitude toward themselves and their world that life reflects,”²³⁶ which includes the ethical expectations of the believer and God), and the *rituals or religious practices* (prayer, positive confession, and tithing). As Clifford Geertz has argued,

Religious belief and ritual confront and mutually confirm one another; the ethos is made intellectually reasonable by the actual state of affairs which the [worldview] describes, and the [worldview] is made emotionally acceptable by being presented as an image of an actual state of affairs of which such a way of life is an authentic experience.²³⁷

God, in the prosperity worldview, meets adherents in this world and provides them with the knowledge to obtain wealth and to be healthy. But, the believer has certain ethical requirements in order to achieve this wealth and health. The ethos and unique worldview are reinforced or authenticated in the rituals of prayer, tithing, and testimony. Stephen Hunt suggests that for

²³⁴ James Barr, “The Fundamentalist Understanding of Scripture,” in *Conflicting Ways of Interpreting the Bible*, eds. Hans Kung and Jurgen Moltmann (New York: T. & T. Clark Ltd., 1980), 70.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

²³⁶ Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz* (New York: Basis Books, 1973), 127. I also include the ethical position of God in the ethos. Many preachers argue that God is obligated to respond to the prayer petitions of believers. In the prosperity worldview God is also obligated to follow certain laws. Perriman writes that “proponents of the Word of Faith doctrine hold that faith is effective, in the final analysis, because God is powerful and because [God] has put [God’s self] under an absolute obligation to do for [God’s] children what [God] has promised in [God’s] Word.” Perriman, *Health and Wealth*, 45. In other words, it is a “duty of God to follow through on [God’s] side of the bargain.” Brouwer, Gifford, and Rose, *Exporting the American Gospel*, 197.

²³⁷ Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 127.

prosperity churches and preachers, the worship experiences become a kind of “status confirmation ritual,”²³⁸ that supports a sense of belonging. When adherents belong to “the religious collective,” they also “reflect the lifestyles and materialist orientations of its membership.”²³⁹ Generally speaking, this means that God has blessed other believers—especially the prosperity preachers who present themselves as exemplars of prosperity. Hence, the preachers themselves are the tangible proof that the worldview and practices work. Thousands of believers assembled together ready to give their tithes and offerings reinforces the adherent’s expectation that God has and will continue to bless those who are faithful. The most popular verses used to justify the worldview are:

Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers (3 John 2 NKJV);

My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:19);

The wealth of the sinner is stored up for the righteous (Proverbs 13:22 NKJV);

It is [God] who gives you power to get wealth (Deuteronomy 8:18 NKJV).

In the prosperity worldview, Satan is the one that steals and keeps believers from health and wealth, and Jesus provides the abundance:

The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I [Jesus] have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly (John 10:10 NKJV).

The verses that justify tithing and giving are:

Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, . . . ‘If I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it (Malachi 3:10 NKJV);

²³⁸ Hunt, “Dramatizing the Health and Wealth Gospel,” 76.

²³⁹ Ibid.

Give and it will be given to you . . . (Luke 6:38 NKJV).

The most used verse that supports positive confession and prayer is:

. . . Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them (Mark 11: 23-24 NKJV).

It is not only the selection of scriptures, but how they are interpreted that is unique to these theologies.²⁴⁰ The form of interpretation used by the majority of prosperity preachers is often identified as proof-texting.²⁴¹ Proof-texting, positive confession, and seed-faith giving, with its extreme emphasis on tithing, have become synonymous with theologies of prosperity.²⁴²

Proof-texting is the form of biblical interpretation where individual texts or pericopes are extracted from their literary and historical context and used as “proof” for a particular position.²⁴³ In other words, “taking a statement out of its original context to support a teaching we desire to affirm.”²⁴⁴ This type of interpretation is difficult to define adequately without a full history of biblical interpretation in mainline Christianity. However, Gifford articulates it well when he says that this form of interpretation “is the diametrical opposite of liberal Protestantism” and that “narratives are assumed to be historically factual, texts are understood atomistically, and there is a presumption that all texts agree and adhere.”²⁴⁵ Other scholars describe the use of

²⁴⁰ For an example of how prosperity preachers use biblical texts and stories to promote health and wealth, see Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*, 73-79.

²⁴¹ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 8.

²⁴² Gifford, “Expecting Miracles: The Prosperity Gospel in Africa,” 20.

²⁴³ Gordon D. Fee, *The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels* (Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College Publishing, 2006), 9-10; Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 87.

²⁴⁴ Hummel, *The Prosperity Gospel*, 7.

²⁴⁵ Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*, 79.

Scripture by prosperity preachers as “seriously distorted, selective, and manipulative,”²⁴⁶ and “purely subjective and arbitrary.”²⁴⁷ A couple of phrases or words can frame an entire position or philosophical argument. Perriman points out that many of the “doctrines are built around texts plucked from obscurity rather than central biblical arguments.”²⁴⁸ The verses chosen are rarely situated within the larger biblical canon for a more holistic biblical hermeneutic. Instead, preachers avoid “hundreds of texts that stand squarely in opposition to their teaching.”²⁴⁹

For the extremists of prosperity preachers, “whatever you ask in prayer” is taken literally to mean “whatever you ask.” The believer can ask to be a millionaire with cars, money, and divine healing, with the expectation that not only will God respond, but God is “obligated” to those believers who have enough faith. The founder Kenneth Hagin is definitive about what God wants and will provide for true believers: “[God] wants [God’s] children to eat the best, [God] wants them to wear the best clothing. [God] wants them to drive the best cars, and [God] wants them to have the best of everything.”²⁵⁰ “Above all prosper” is interpreted to mean that adherents have a divine right to achieve not only American prosperity—but wealth and affluence, which is why these theologies are often named as “prosperity” or “health and wealth” gospels.

Positive confession is based on an interpretation of the scripture Mark 11:23-24:

Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it

²⁴⁶ “Lausanne Theology Working Group Statement on the Prosperity Gospel,” 101.

²⁴⁷ Fee, *The Disease of the Health and Wealth*, 9.

²⁴⁸ Perriman, *Faith, Health and Prosperity*, 86.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁵⁰ Kenneth Hagin, *New Thresholds* (Tulsa: Faith Library, 1980), 54-55, quoted in McConnell, *A Different Gospel*, 175. Hagin’s statement in the original uses the pronoun “He.” For inclusive language purposes, I have inserted “God” in place of the pronoun “He.” For New Thought origins, see Coleman, *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity*, 42-47.

will be done for them. Therefore I tell you whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them.

When believers fully understand the power they have, they must then *confess the Word* and think the right thoughts. The positive confession and thinking good thoughts is why these theologies are often linked to New Thought. People like Phineas Quimby and Essek William Kenyon are mentioned, along with the American positive thinking movement that began in the nineteenth century.²⁵¹ Kenyon is a prominent figure. Some writers suggest that Kenneth Hagin plagiarized his writings.²⁵² The connection to positive thinking is attributed to cultural influences from books by American popular writers like Napoleon Hill's *Think and Grow Rich* in the 1930s and Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* written in 1952.²⁵³

Prosperity preachers promote a world that is based on two realms, one spiritual and one material, with the latter being ruled by Satan.²⁵⁴ Positive confession is what gives the confessor legitimate access to spiritual or divine laws that produce the miraculous answers to prayer.²⁵⁵ For believers, "the law of faith' in the spiritual realm is like 'the law of gravity' in the physical realm; whenever the law is set in motion it works."²⁵⁶ Stephen Hunt argues that the act of confession has a kind of "metaphysical causation: [because] what is spoken by the believer in

²⁵¹ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 134; Coleman, *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity*, 42-45; Frederick, *Between Sundays*, 146. Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*, 47. Hunt, *Dramatising Health and Wealth*, 74. Perriman, *Health and Wealth*, 69.

²⁵² Many scholars show that Hagin plagiarized much of his teachings from the works of Essek William Kenyon. For details on Kenneth Hagin and Kenyon, see D.R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel*, Revised Edition (Peabody, MA:Hendrickson, 1995), 3-14; Walton, *Watch This!*, 97; Paul Gifford, *Christianity and Politics in Doe's Liberia*, 146; Gifford, *Christianity and Politics*, 148; and Hummel, *The Prosperity Gospel*, 10-16.

²⁵³ Frederick, *Between Sundays*, 146-147.

²⁵⁴ Hummel, *The Prosperity Gospel*, 10; R. Jackson, "Prosperity Theology and the Faith Movement," *Themelios* 15, (October 1989), 20.

²⁵⁵ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 10; Brouwer, et al., *Exporting the American Gospel*, 193; Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It?*, 69; Perriman, *Health and Prosperity*, 33.

²⁵⁶ Hummel, *The Prosperity Gospel*, 12.

faith operates a spiritual force and brings what is ‘confessed’ by the spoken word into reality.”²⁵⁷ Jonathan Walton defines the relationship of believers to positive confession and faith as *metaphysical physicality*, which he describes as a “pseudo-Platonic understanding of reality.” In other words, when believers are “properly in tune with the Word of God,” they see themselves as being able “to live a metaphysical existence in a physical world.” With access to this special spiritual realm, or “this higher life [,] people are no longer bound to the laws of the carnal realm. Laws of nature no longer apply to the believer.”²⁵⁸

Seed-faith giving and *tithing* as religious practices are the most challenging aspect of these theologies, especially in the way that believers are taught to use these practices in order to access and obtain wealth. This particular teaching is why many prosperity preachers are seen as charlatans. Moreover, it is during the offering of a worship service or the financial appeal of a broadcast, that prosperity preachers can be quite manipulative and exploitative. For the majority of Protestants and African American Christians, tithing as a ritual is not unusual or rare. Many Christians see God as the giver of all gifts. As an act of worship, giving a tithe (ten percent) of one’s income to a church or ministry is returning a portion back to God to help do God’s work on earth. This is based on an interpretation of the Old Testament text: “Will anyone rob God? ...”(Malachi 3:8-10). Not giving tithes to a local church is sometimes considered as robbing God.²⁵⁹ However, in Word of Faith and the majority of these related theologies, tithing is taken to a completely different level.²⁶⁰ Tithing is considered as the minimum spiritual commitment for

²⁵⁷ Hunt, “Winning Ways,” 339.

²⁵⁸ Walton, *Watch This!*, 95.

²⁵⁹ For an excellent discussion on tithing in African American churches, see Frederick, “Financial Priorities,” in *Between Sundays*, 166-185.

²⁶⁰ Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It?*, 80.

the believer if he or she expects to have access to God's blessings. If believers do not tithe, then they cannot expect God to honor God's end of the bargain.

The idea of seed-giving, also called "seed faith," was made famous by Oral Roberts.²⁶¹ Christians are encouraged to plant spiritual seeds that function very much like natural seeds, in that they produce a harvest from God. Roberts emphasized that seed-faith giving was very different from what most Christians had been taught about tithing:

In tithing you give one tenth AFTER you have made the income. In seed-giving, ... you give BEFORE the expected return.... "Jesus wants to show you how your SEED-GIVING [all caps emphasis in original] makes possible two very necessary things: (1) that there may be "meat in [God's] house,"... and (2) that [God] can take what you give and multiply back that there may be "meat in your house," or enough for your personal needs today.²⁶²

Seed-faith giving is not only supposed to bless the church, but the giver as well. The ritual is presented to adherents as an opportunity to consummate a special contract with God that guarantees reciprocity from God for financial wealth and success. Shayne Lee elaborates, "Prosperity preachers claim that by making a contribution to a church or ministry, Christians are planting a seed to which God will respond with a supernatural harvest of financial blessings."²⁶³ Prosperity preachers often suggest that the harvest will be a one-hundred fold increase on the believer's initial investment.²⁶⁴ In other words, as one prosperity preacher expresses, "You give

²⁶¹ Brouwer, Gifford, and Rose, *Exploring the American Gospel*, 25. Paul Gifford also attributes the fundraising and seed-giving concept to A.A. Allen. See Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*, 62 n. 27. Also see Oral Roberts, *Miracle of Seed Faith* (Tulsa, OK: Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association, 1970).

²⁶² Roberts, *Miracle of Seed-Faith*, 27-29.

²⁶³ Lee, *T. D. Jakes: America's Preacher*, 111.

²⁶⁴ Brouwer, Gifford, and Rose, *Exporting the Gospel*, 197-198.

\$1 for the gospel's sake and \$100 belongs to you. You give \$10 and you receive \$1000. Give \$1000 and receive \$100,000.”²⁶⁵

Because of its success in fundraising, seed-faith giving has flourished and evolved into more creative forms. A good example of a seed-faith appeal is Juanita Bynum at the 1998 WTAL conference. Bynum declared to conference participants, “The Lord just told me that every woman in this building is supposed to give a \$98 seed offering! ... God told me that there are twenty people in here that are to give \$1000 offerings.”²⁶⁶ Cindy Trimm, one of the preachers at the 2009 WTAL conference, went as far as telling adherents that she has a spiritual money tree growing in her backyard. She stated, “You can't see it because it is spiritual, only I can see it. Plant seeds, you get a tree! Whenever I need money, I don't pray for it—I create it! Seed! Seed! Seed! Get the revelation of the seed.”²⁶⁷ She also told adherents that she plants her seeds in \$1000 increments. The larger dollar amount of her seeds was used as evidence to show that she had advanced to a higher level of spirituality in her giving.²⁶⁸ These kinds of requests and testimonies are not unusual for many prosperity preachers.

Another example of how seed-faith giving has evolved is that during the worship service congregants no longer wait until the offering to give their money. They are encouraged to walk in the middle of the sermon and throw money on the altar or pulpit.²⁶⁹ In some churches, they not

²⁶⁵ Gloria Copeland, *God's Will is Prosperity* (Fort Worth, TX: Kenneth Copeland Ministries, 1978), 48, quoted in Gifford, *Christianity and Politics in Doe's Liberia*, 150 n 10.

²⁶⁶ Frederick, *Between Sundays*, 163.

²⁶⁷ Cindy Trim, CD of 2009 *Woman Thou Art Loosed Conference* (Dallas, TX: T.D. Jakes Ministries, 2009).

²⁶⁹ Mamiya, *River of Struggle, River of Freedom*, 11.

only place money on the altar, but their gifts include “jewelry, car titles, and other valuables.”²⁷⁰ Prosperity preachers make quite a few appeals and adherents are often encouraged to give money before they have actually earned it. As a result, believers can find themselves “in a very precarious position, threatening their ability to actually realize the promise of financial abundance.”²⁷¹ Seed-faith giving along with the religious practices of proof-texting, and positive confession are prominent in theologies of prosperity, but they are usually identified with Word of Faith and the faith movement.

Although Word of Faith churches and their preachers continue to make up the largest group of theologies of prosperity practitioners, Harrison admits that “it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish Faith Message teachings and practices from those commonly associated with some of the denominational churches.”²⁷² He explains that “[f]or believers in the United States and in a host of nations abroad, the belief that it is God’s will for them to be healthy and wealthy and to enjoy all the best this present world has to offer before they die and go to heaven serves as the core of their understanding of their relationship to the sacred.”²⁷³ *The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life* conducted an international survey of ten countries on Pentecostalism. The survey documented that the majority of Christians believed that “God will grant good health and material prosperity” and “relief from sickness to those who have enough faith.”²⁷⁴ The research suggests that these theologies and their practices have expanded far beyond the Word of

²⁷⁰ Tim Grant, “Collections Take New Form after Plates are Passed.” *St Petersburg Times*, February 13, 2000, late Tampa edition.

²⁷¹ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 71.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 160.

²⁷³ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 19

²⁷⁴ The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *Spirit and Power: A 10-Country Survey of Pentecostals* (Washington D.C.: The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life), 31, http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedfiles/Orphan_Migrated_Content/pentecostals-08.pdf (accessed July 4, 2012).

Faith and the faith movement. As a result, a more detailed definition is needed to reflect the number of churches and adherents not only in America, but also abroad.

A New Definition for Prosperity Theology

I propose a new definition for theologies of prosperity. Theologies of prosperity are: *contextual theologies of empire on a continuum, that affirm it is God's will and a believer's right to obtain prosperity or health and wealth by using Scripture, and rituals like seed-faith giving and positive confession.* Describing these theologies as *contextual* supports what Stephen Bevans deems is imperative in today's global context. His approach veers away from classical theology, which "conceived theology as an objective science of faith."²⁷⁵ For classical theologians, theology was supposed to be above culture and unaffected by history. The contextual approach takes seriously "cultural identity, social change, and popular religiosity."²⁷⁶ Simply put, "cultural and historical context plays a part in the construction of the reality in which we live, so our context influences our understanding of God and the expression of our faith."²⁷⁷ Additionally, placing the theologies on a continuum helps to embrace the wide variety of theologies in their crudest and more subtle forms. As Melissa Harris-Lacewell explains, the crudest forms claim "that followers who tithe regularly and maintain positive faithful attitudes and language will reap financial gains in the form of higher incomes and nicer homes and cars." The more subtle forms of theologies of prosperity simply connect "God's mission for [God's] people to financial freedom and security for individual Christians."²⁷⁸

²⁷⁵ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 1.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 21. For a history and evangelical approach to contextual theologies, see Allan Anderson, "The Contribution of David Yonggi Cho to a Contextual Theology in Korea" *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 12, no. 1 (2003): 85-105.

²⁷⁷ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 2.

²⁷⁸ Harris-Lacewell, "From Liberation to Mutual Fund," 140.

Theologies of prosperity, including those of the New Black Church have also expanded with American imperialism and advanced capitalism.²⁷⁹ Stephanie Mitchem in her study of black prosperity churches states that “theologies of prosperity are firmly wedded to a view of America’s world dominance and to capitalism.”²⁸⁰ In his study of contemporary black churches in the *Pulpit & Pew Research on Pastoral Leadership*, Mamiya contends, that “[t]he current versions of the prosperity gospel have their foundations in American Puritanism, capitalism, and the value of individualism.”²⁸¹ Stephen Hunt is even more specific. He is not talking about black churches, but theologies of prosperity in general. He writes that these theologies “should be interpreted as justification of the western economic free market. Indeed, the principal doctrines espoused can be understood as the cultural and ideological underpinning of both components of capitalism: the ethic of consumerism and the entrepreneurial spirit.”²⁸²

Cornel West also discusses a kind of imperialism in his book *Democracy Matters*. He identifies what he calls *Constantinian Christianity*²⁸³ as “the prevailing voice of American Christianity.” West describes it as: “Imperial Christianity, market spirituality, money-obsessed churches, gospels of prosperity, prayers of let’s-make-a-deal with God or help me turn my wheel of fortune.”²⁸⁴ Religious scholars and theologians both assert that “[i]n the last two centuries, Christianity has proved to be the modernizing and Westernising religion which has spread over the globe in concert with the mercantile and industrial expansion of capitalism and the

²⁷⁹ Hunt, “Winning Ways,” 333.

²⁸⁰ Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It?*, 71.

²⁸¹ Larry Mamiya, *River of Struggle, River of Freedom*, 10.

²⁸² Hunt, “Winning Ways,” 334.

²⁸³ Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 147.

²⁸⁴ West, *Democracy Matters*, 167.

establishment of colonial empires.”²⁸⁵ Because of this history and the fact that the ideology or essence of these theologies can be traced back to America’s beginnings, they should also be classified as *theologies of empire*.

The use of the term *empire* is not to suggest the old forms of colonialism. As Joerg Rieger argues, we now live in an age where these former types of empires have almost disappeared. Empire “has to do with the massive concentrations of power that permeate all aspects of life and that cannot be controlled by any one actor alone.... Empire seeks to extend its control as far as possible; not only geographically, politically, and economically ... but also intellectually, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, culturally, and religiously.”²⁸⁶ This control is often presented in “forms of top down control that are established on the back of the empire’s subjects and that do not allow those within its reach to pursue alternative purposes.”²⁸⁷

Jim Wallis popularized the phrase *theologies of empire* in his book *God’s Politics: Why The Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It*, when he describes George W. Bush’s theology as “dangerous religion,” because it “confuses the identity of a nation with the church, and God’s purposes with the mission of American empire.”²⁸⁸ Wallis joins many people who think that the Christian Right and others are using evangelical Christianity to justify a contemporary form of American empire and imperialism.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁵ Brouwer, Gifford, and Rose, *Exporting the American Gospel*, 1-3, quoted in Hunt, “Winning Ways,” 333.

²⁸⁶ Joerg Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 2-3.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁸⁸ Jim Wallis, *God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 49.

²⁸⁹ David Ray Griffin, John B. Cobb Jr., Richard A. Falk, and Catherine Keller, *The American Empire and the Commonwealth of God: A Political, Economic, Religious Statement* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006); Mark Lewis Taylor, *Religion, Politics, and the Christian Right: Post 9/11 Powers and American Empire*

At times this means, as Simon Coleman writes, “that American themes like democracy, free enterprise, individual liberty, a strong dollar, and American military superiority acquire almost divine status.”²⁹⁰ In his research on the faith movement in Sweden, Coleman observes that theologies of prosperity give sacred status to countries in a form of globalized nationhood. They consider them to be “divinely appointed nation-states.”²⁹¹ Rosemary Ruether suggests that in respect to American religious nationalism these positions get interpreted to mean that “America is God’s new Israel, God’s elect nation. America is uniquely righteous and divinely favored. Those whom America rebukes, God rebukes.”²⁹² Additionally, the particular faith communities and their adherents who are connected through global networks also claim special divine status.²⁹³ Prosperity preachers often believe in an “American-inspired spiritual imperialism.”²⁹⁴ Therefore, it is not rare for prosperity preachers to take a position like that “of Pat Robertson, who claims that Christians are the true custodians of the world and have the right to reassert the Lord’s dominion over the nation.”²⁹⁵ Other forms of empire are expressed in the very structure and organization of the churches. The pastors attempt to model themselves as the head of financial empires by imitating the CEOs of international corporations.

(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005); Wes Avram, ed. *Anxious About Empire: Theological Essays on the New Global Realities* (Grand Rapids, Brazos Press, 2004).

²⁹⁰ Paul Gifford, “‘Africa Shall Be Saved:’ An Appraisal of Reinhard Bonnke’s Pan-African Crusade,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 17 (1987):85, quoted in Simon Coleman, *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity*, 31.

²⁹¹ Coleman, “Charismatic Christianity and the Dilemmas of Globalization,” 250.

²⁹² Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Religion and Society: Sacred Canopy vs. Prophetic Critique,” in *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutierrez*, eds. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 174.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 249.

²⁹⁴ Coleman, “Charismatic Christianity and the Dilemmas of Globalization,” 246.

²⁹⁵ Gary Wills, *Under God: Religion and American Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 175, quoted in Simon Coleman, “Conservative Protestantism and the World Order,” 356.

Jonathan Walton and Peter Paris describe the images of empire in both the architecture and the organizational structure of New Black Churches. Peter Paris states that New Black Churches embody images of empire because “their architectural designs exude a spirit of economic triumphalism.”²⁹⁶ Walton adds that the church campuses are intentionally designed to look like “secular businesses” with sanctuaries that are “configured like an auditorium or convention center.” Also, the pastors participate in these images of empire by wearing “tailored made three-piece suits,” instead of clerical robes “to appear aesthetically as the business moguls they understand themselves to be.”²⁹⁷ Paris suggests that “by analogy the pastor, as chief executive officer, is unquestionably at the helm of the corporation with various numbers of loyal subordinates carrying out his/her wishes.” However, “since the African American pastor, by virtue of his ordination, is thought to be vested with special grace from the divine, his/her executive authority and status are considered greater than [that of] ordinary corporate executives.”²⁹⁸ Ruether agrees that what is ideologically communicated is “the corporate church [is] the counterpart to the business corporation. The millionaire evangelist becomes the living proof of divine favor upon those that ‘get right’ with God.”²⁹⁹

Along with celebrating these images of empire, prosperity preachers emphasize transformation solely in the individual, and not transformation in the larger cultural, political and economic systems. Gifford gives an excellent example of how these theologies affect the individual adherent and his or her understanding of their social responsibility. In discussing

²⁹⁶ Peter J. Paris, “African American Religion and Public Life: An Assessment,” *Cross Currents* (Fall 2008): 487.

²⁹⁷ Walton, *Watch This!*, 96.

²⁹⁸ Paris, “African American Religion and Public Life,” 487.

²⁹⁹ Ruether, “Religion and Society,” 174.

Word of Faith churches in Africa, he explains why believers do not see a need to help people that are not Christian. Similar to many of the adherents in New Black Churches, congregants feel no social responsibility to deal with issues of social justice and political issues. He writes that “there is no wider social responsibility in this Christianity, . . . [because] only Christians matter. Christians will have jobs, food, and education and be successful. Non-Christians will not have these, neither should they . . . because the fruits of Jesus’ sacrifice belong only to believers.” Moreover, “the Christian’s sole duty to deprived unbelievers is merely to convert them so that they can prosper miraculously as well.”³⁰⁰

Whether discussing churches in Africa or the New Black Church, these contextual theologies of empire resonate with not only religious and spiritual empire, but they also promote an ideology that supports economic empires. Prosperity preachers often claim to be prophetic and countercultural to secular interests, since the secular realm is often considered to be demonic or under the control of Satan. However, upon closer investigation these pastors promote and represent a secular ideology—the gospel of wealth—that throughout American history continues to reemerge—especially in popular culture.

Theologies of Prosperity and the Ideology of the Gospel of Wealth

Brouwer et al. in *Exporting the American Gospel: Global Christian Fundamentalism*, convincingly argue that theologies of prosperity³⁰¹ are simply an improvement upon the American gospel of wealth.³⁰² The gospel of wealth as an ideology is usually defined as secular, because its most prominent advocate was Andrew Carnegie, a professed atheist.³⁰³ Carnegie was

³⁰⁰ Gifford, “Christian Fundamentalism,” 13.

³⁰¹ Brouwer, Gifford, and Rose, use the term “prosperity theology” instead of theologies of prosperity.

³⁰² Brouwer, Gifford, and Rose, *Exporting the American Gospel*, 20.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 22.

a millionaire industrialist who wrote a famous essay, entitled, “The Gospel of Wealth,” that equated the accumulation of personal wealth with virtue, and the absence of wealth with sin.³⁰⁴

Vinson Synan writes that, “After the Civil War, a time of great prosperity blossomed in the Northern states because of the rising age of big industry, big railroads and big banks. Historians call this period from the Civil War to 1900 the ‘Gilded Age’ of rich ‘robber barons’ such as Cornelius Vanderbilt (railroads), John D. Rockefeller (oil), Andrew Carnegie (steel), James Duke (tobacco) and J.P. Morgan (banking).” Synan states that this earlier generation of “enormously rich protest capitalists built monumental churches and hired preachers who would give a biblical rationale for their gigantic wealth.” At the same time, “[a] new genre of get-rich books became wildly popular, such as the books of Horatio Alger telling stories of poor, young people who became rich through hard work and smart business deals.”³⁰⁵

Norton Garfinkle summarizes that the contemporary form of the ideology of the gospel of wealth is based on “laissez-faire economic philosophy,” and “a celebration of the successful entrepreneur and investor as the source of prosperity and wealth.” It promotes the idea “that people get what they deserve out of the economy and that government has no business stepping in to even the odds.”³⁰⁶ Brouwer, et al., posit that new Christian fundamentalists are able to appropriate the ideology of the gospel of wealth because the “fixation with material gain” is an “indispensable part of the American faith.”³⁰⁷

³⁰⁴ Andrew Carnegie, “The Gospel of Wealth,” *The North American Review* 183, no. 599 (September 21, 1903): 526.

³⁰⁵ Vinson Synan, “Word of Faith Movement has Deep Roots in American History,” http://www.believersstandunited.com/word_of_faith_movement.html (accessed January 11, 2011).

³⁰⁶ Norton Garfinkle, *The American Dream vs. The Gospel of Wealth: The Fight for a Productive Middle Class Economy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 17.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

No matter which era of history, Americans have negotiated as well as justified the vast economic inequalities between the rich and the poor—not only locally, but globally. As in the words of Andrew Carnegie at the turn of the nineteenth century, “The problem of our age is the proper administration of wealth, so that the ties of brotherhood [sic] may still bind together the rich and the poor in harmonious relationship.”³⁰⁸ Garfinkle remarks that ideologically Americans need to “believe that America operates on the principle of fairness ... [for] all citizens, and not hopelessly skewed to those who, by dint of their wealth, can command greatest control.”³⁰⁹

American history boasts of many public figures and clerics who have promoted the gospel of wealth in order to promote the illusion of fairness. One of the most famous of these clerics was Russel H. Conwell. As a Baptist preacher in Philadelphia during the Gilded Age, Conwell built the largest church in America. He traveled the country preaching his famous *Acres of Diamonds* sermon over 6000 times.³¹⁰ “Conwell’s gospel of wealth focused on the Christian’s duty to become rich.”³¹¹ Gifford stresses that today’s theologies of prosperity are not identical to the gospel of wealth expressed by clerics like Conwell. “The older version was not nearly as theological; it did not claim that Jesus saved us from the burden of law which included poverty. Nor did the older gospel stress that we use our wealth for the evangelization of others.”³¹² For today’s theologies of prosperity “this is almost the central point.” Also, the gospel of wealth

³⁰⁸ Carnegie, “The Gospel of Wealth,” 526.

³⁰⁹ Garfinkle, *The American Dream vs. The Gospel of Wealth*, 193-194.

³¹⁰ Brouwer, Gifford, and Rose, *Exporting the American Gospel*, 22.

³¹¹ Sean McCloud, *Divine Hierarchies: Class in American Religion and Religious Studies* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 114.

³¹² Gifford, *Christianity and Politics in Doe’s Liberia*, 185.

“gave no emphasis to tithing,” whereas for the celebrity preachers of the present generation, tithing “is almost the central point.”³¹³

Martin Marty explains that the ideology of the gospel of wealth is so familiar to Americans that even at the time of Carnegie and Conwell, it did not appear as something new. “In order to attract attention, representatives might often term it as new and it certainly was successfully adaptive to new circumstances. But an examination of the rhetoric reveals how regularly old familiar injunctions ... were being rephrased in the new cities and in the audience of new classes of people.”³¹⁴ These preachers or celebrity clerics were also much more effective than the secular public figures like Carnegie in promoting the ideology. As “transformers of symbols,” Marty shows that “[t]he pulpiter[s] offered symbols that suggested a ‘halo of antiquity’ and ultimate motivations and justifications, and these were needed in a time of such dramatic changes.”³¹⁵

Not many African American clerics and public figures have been able to amass widespread public appeal and also present themselves as advocates for the gospel of wealth. Booker T. Washington is by far the most famous African American supporter of this ideology.³¹⁶ According to Lincoln and Mamiya, Washington felt that “‘economic accumulation’ and the ‘cultivation of morality’ were the major means of black acceptance in American society.” T.D. Jakes is similar to both Conwell and Washington. He resembles Conwell because he is a celebrity cleric that has built one of the nation’s largest churches; he is similar to Booker T.

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ Martin E. Marty, *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America* (New York: The Dial Press, 1970), 150-151.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 153.

³¹⁶ Franklin, *Crisis in the Village*, 118.

Washington because he is not interested in political protests, but instead has a “deep desire to be part of the American mainstream.”³¹⁷ T.D. Jakes is representative of the majority of New Black Church preachers who are fully invested in and supportive of the ideological philosophy of the gospel of wealth.

Just like the clerics from earlier generations, the prosperity preachers of the New Black Church experienced dramatic cultural changes. They responded to these changes by transforming deeply rooted symbols from both American secular culture and African American religious culture. As Marty explains, “[t]he doctrines and ideals” used a century ago like “Providence, election, working out one’s salvation, proving God’s favor, sharing [God’s] benefits”³¹⁸ are always able to find fertile ground. Surprisingly, in today’s religious context, the classes of people being influenced by these cultural changes and the gospel of wealth are black adherents.

As a secular ideology, the gospel of wealth promotes “the worship of the exceptional individual, the millionaire, the industrial magnate as prosperity’s engine.”³¹⁹ As long as these exceptional individuals are philanthropic, then the acquisition of their wealth is sanctioned or sacralized. As a result, even “robber barons” like Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller can be celebrated. Similar to their gospel of wealth counterparts, theologies of prosperity also encourage giving as a sign of God’s favor. The difference is that individuals are not just encouraged to be philanthropic. Instead, they are supposed to give tithes and offerings for the purpose of evangelism.

³¹⁷ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 247.

³¹⁸ Marty, *Righteous Empire*, 151.

³¹⁹ Garfinkle, *The American Dream vs. The Gospel of Wealth*, 15.

The nineteenth-century gospel of wealth relied on Social Darwinism—a secular theory of the time. It promoted a kind of social *survival of the fittest*,³²⁰ a phrase often attributed to Darwin, but actually coined by a philosopher named Herbert Spencer.³²¹ Contemporary twentieth century theologies of prosperity also endorse a type of survival of the fittest that is based on a laissez-faire economic philosophy or a neoclassical economic paradigm. Accordingly, both the gospel of wealth and theologies of prosperity promote an economic survival of the fittest by blaming the poor for their poverty, rather than blaming the inequities that exist in the cultural and economic system.

Brouwer, et al. provide a summary of key historical figures that are precursors or representatives of this culture and ideology. Each of the persons they highlight ideologically support or justify the economic inequalities of their particular tenure and historical moment. The list includes Governor George Winthrop, Andrew Carnegie, Russell H. Conwell, and Dwight Moody.³²² In Winthrop's 1631 sermon, he boasts that "God Almighty in his most holy and wise providence hath disposed of the condition of mankind [sic], as all times some must be rich some poor, some high and eminent in power and dignity; others mean and in subjection."³²³ Russell Conwell preached, "I say that you ought to get rich, and it is your duty to get rich."³²⁴ He also identified poverty as the fault of the individual: "Let us remember there is not a poor person in the United States who was not made poor by his own short comings, or the short comings of

³²⁰ Garfinkle, *The American Dream vs. The Gospel of Wealth*, 65.

³²¹ Gifford, *Christianity and Politics in Doe's Liberia*, 182.

³²² Brouwer, Gifford, and Rose, *Exploring the American Gospel*, 20-23.

³²³ Steve Brouwer, *Conquest and Capitalism, 1492-1992* (Carlisle: Big Books, 1992), 12.

³²⁴ Russell H. Conwell, "Acres of Diamonds," <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/rconwellacresofdiamonds.htm> (accessed January 14, 2001).

someone else. It is all wrong to be poor, anyhow.”³²⁵ Dwight Moody is significant, because according to Brouwer, et al., he was able to fuse “American civil religion, with its beliefs in the superiority of the United States, and the importance of the individual pursuit of wealth.”³²⁶ Not only did Moody elicit the support of some of America’s richest businessmen, but he was also able to inspire “the average American, who was suffering from declining earnings, to believe in a conservative social message and [their] own financial success.”³²⁷ Each of these individuals, as preachers and public figures, demonstrate the power of this ideology and America’s blending of the sacred and secular to justify historic economic inequalities.

Theologies of Prosperity and the American Way of Life

It is not only the gospel of wealth that proves to be a key factor in explaining the changes and generational differences between the Black Church and the New Black Church. Another factor is what most historians and sociologists have described as *the American Way of Life*. African American women and adherents in the New Black Church have taken a position on prosperity and wealth that is very different from the positions usually associated with the adherents in the Black Church. I suggest that the different positions are a result of the historical context in which these churches have emerged. These cultural differences are secular and also generational; moreover, these changes are not just specific to black churches, but rather reflect changes occurring in the culture at large. These secular realities have had a much greater impact than any specific religious or theological differences between the Black Church and the New Black Church. As one commentator states,

³²⁵ Conwell, “Acres of Diamonds.”

³²⁶ Brouwer, Gifford, and Rose, *Exporting the American Gospel*, 23.

³²⁷ Ibid.

the traditional faith understandings of African Americans passed down from generation to generation may be losing their impact. One root cause may be the breakdown of communication between generations, causing a lack of kinship and solidarity. Therefore the context of liberation in an increasingly capitalistic society, more than ever is linked to individual economic advancement and opportunity.³²⁸

Additionally, “this shift can be seen across all racial and cultural demographics in America, postmodern influences on individual thought and destiny find fertile ground with modern Black churches that are filled with the young, educated, and financially independent.”³²⁹ I have already outlined how the ideology of the gospel of wealth has impacted the New Black Church and its adherents. I have also highlighted that only a few African Americans, like Booker T. Washington, have publicly endorsed this secular ideology. Identifying this ideology as secular rather than religious is always a challenge.

The secular distinction in American religion is always a bit ambiguous.³³⁰ Eddie Glaude has explained it well, that as Americans “[w]e tend to understand ourselves in religious terms despite the so-called secular nature of our social and political organization.”³³¹ In some respects, the terms, “American civil religion,”³³² “public theology,” or “fundamentalist Americanism,”³³³

³²⁸ TheoSyst Group, “Re-Defining Struggle: The Challenge to Black Theology in the Post-Post-Civil Rights Era,” *TheoSyst Journal* no. 1 (October 2003): 4, <http://www.theosyst.com/PDFs/Issue001/Investigation—Redefining%20Struggle%20Part%20I.pdf> (accessed March 31, 2012).

³²⁹ “Re-Defining Struggle,” 4.

³³⁰ Joerg Rieger, writing about Christ, theological categories, and empire, suggests that “we are beginning to realize, the modern dichotomies of *religious* and *secular* no longer apply without reservation; such dichotomies limit our understanding of the powerful impact of theological categories both in support of empire and in resistance to it.” Joerg Rieger, *Christ and Empire*, 6.

³³¹ Glaude, “Myth and African American Self-Identity,” 32.

³³² Larry Mamiya, explaining American Civil Religion, writes: Whether one calls it “the American way of life,” ‘American patriotism,’ or ‘Americanism,’ there is an accommodation to the core values and beliefs of American society.” For the relationship with black churches, see the section, “American Civil Religion and Black Churches,” in *River of Struggle, River of Freedom*, 5-6. For a review of early history and competing claims of this term, see John H. Cartwright, *An Affirmative Exposition of American Civil Religion* (Evanston: Bureau of Social and Religious Research, Garret Evangelical Seminary, 1976).

also apply. I am using the term “secular” to refer to cultural realities that at times are both political and economic, but are not presented as intentionally theological, spiritual, and religious. In other words, those activities “that are outside the realm of institutionalized activities associated with religion.”³³⁴

Robert Jackson highlights that even when compared with an industrialized nation like Britain, any discussion of faith and wealth is culturally more significant for Americans because of the unique history of America. He explains that “for a nation made up of individuals who believed that they had been elected by God, it was natural to assume that God would bless the nation in a special way, raising her up to dominate world politics.” Jackson reminds us that, “‘In God we trust’ is therefore not so much a statement of fact as a claim to God’s blessing. Thus, national and personal wealth *have always been* [emphasis mine] acknowledged as signs of God’s blessing in America.”³³⁵ This history cannot and should not be ignored.

Milmon Harrison’s study of African Americans and Word of Faith is sufficient evidence that the theologies of New Black Churches resonate with this particular American secular history and culture. He writes,

Above all, the Faith Message, for all its apparent excesses and eccentricities, represents *a particular American way of thinking ... what we believe is our nation’s favored relationship with God, and our privileged status relative to the rest of the world.* The doctrine is another contemporary, Christianized version of

³³³ Brouwer, et al., in *Exporting the American Gospel*, define *fundamentalist Americanism* as “the faith that God’s plan for the United States and its individual citizens is one of superiority, unending growth, and prosperity” (13). They write that it is the belief peculiar to U.S. Christianity that simultaneously sanctifies American nationalism and the American gospel of success, wealth and prosperity” (13). They also suggest that this ideology is so tied to Christianity that it should not be considered a “secular religion”(14). I am describing the same culture, but for our purposes “secular” is a better description.

³³⁴ Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*, Revised Edition (New York: Anchor Books, 1960), 146.

³³⁵ Jackson, “Prosperity Theology and the Faith Movement,” 22.

secular, civil religious currents present in *the American worldview from its earliest days as a nation* [emphasis mine].³³⁶

In his 1955 book, *Protest, Catholic, Jew*, Will Herberg discussed these “secular civil religious currents.” Herberg’s writing is a predecessor to Robert Bellah’s famous essay about American Civil Religion. Bellah argued for “an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America . . . with its own seriousness and integrity,” and admonished scholars that this religion required “the same care in understanding that any other religion does.”³³⁷ However, it is Herberg who argued for “the religious community as the primary context of self-identification and social location, and Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism as three diverse representations of the same ‘spiritual values.’”³³⁸ Moreover, he introduced *the American Way of Life* as the true religion of Americans. Shaped by American Protestantism, this religion is “a kind of secularized Puritanism . . . without transcendence, without sense of sin or judgment.”³³⁹ Herberg expounds that, “The American Way of Life is individualistic, dynamic, pragmatic. It affirms the supreme value and dignity of the individual; it stresses incessant activity on his [or her] part, for he [or she] is never to rest but is always striving to ‘get ahead’; it defines an ethic of self-reliance, merit, and character, and judges by achievement; ‘deeds not creeds’ are what count.”³⁴⁰ He also argues that Americans have a different understanding of redemption: “Of course, religious Americans speak of God and Christ, but what they seem to regard as really redemptive is primarily religion, the ‘positive’ attitude of *believing* [emphasis in original]. It is this faith in

³³⁶ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 158.

³³⁷ Robert Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 117, no. 3 (Summer 1988), 97 first published in *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (Winter 1967): 1-21.

³³⁸ Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, 39.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

³⁴⁰ Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, 79.

faith, this religion that makes religion its own object, that is the outstanding characteristic of contemporary American religiosity.”³⁴¹

This kind of religion is problematic because of its imperialism and because it often serves a national purpose. Herberg writes, “In its crudest form, ... it generates a kind of national messianism which sees it as the vocation of America to bring the American Way of Life, compounded almost equally of democracy and free enterprise, to every corner of the globe.”³⁴² Almost prophetic because of its similarities to what we see in today’s realities, he writes that “[p]rosperity, success, and advancement in business are the obvious ends for which religion, or rather the religious attitude of ‘believing,’ is held to be useful.”³⁴³ It is as if Herberg is speaking specifically about theologies of prosperity in the New Black Church, when he explains that, “In this kind of religion it is not man [sic] who serves God, but God who is mobilized and made to serve man and his [sic] purposes—whether these purposes be economic prosperity, free enterprise, social reform, democracy, happiness, security, or ‘peace of mind.’ God is conceived as man’s [sic] ‘omnipotent servant.’”³⁴⁴

Writing in 1955 and 1960, he names only three groups as the true “holdouts” as non-participants in this common religion. He understands their exclusion as either because of their unique traditions or because of specific theological concerns. The three groups were identified as churches of “immigrant-ethnic background,” “liberals,” and the “religions of the disinherited”

³⁴¹Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, 265.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 264.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 266.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 268.

(holiness, Pentecostals, millenarian sects).³⁴⁵ African Americans are one of the ethnic groups that Herberg suggests did not participate in the American Way of Life: “The Negro Churches [sic], entirely American to start with, still stand outside the general system, just as the Negro [sic] still stands largely outside the general pattern of American life.”³⁴⁶ This was 1955. Today, African Americans in the New Black Church, as well as many Pentecostals, can no longer be considered as the “hold outs” to the American Way of Life.

According to Harrison, churches like those in the New Black Church are successful because they “combine elements from various realms of culture in order to attract new members by providing something they recognize as familiar but repackaged and redefined as ‘new and improved’ form of black Christianity.”³⁴⁷ I contend that the “familiar” for African Americans in these churches are the similarities to the traditions and ‘uplift ideology’ of the Black Church model, which includes call and response, worship, uplift, and self-help.³⁴⁸ As Harrison has stated, even black Word of Faith churches do not really represent something new, because they draw upon “a long tradition in African American religion.”³⁴⁹ Black churches continue to be influential in the identity-formation of African Americans. What has traditionally been considered to be black church culture is combined, and in many ways co-opted, by Herberg’s

³⁴⁵ Herberg writes: “Not for all Americans is this American religion, this ‘common religion’ of American society, ... First, there are the churches of immigrant-ethnic background that still cherish their traditional creeds and confessions as a sign of their distinctive origin and are unwilling to let these be dissolved not an overall ‘American religion’; ... Then there are groups, not large but increasing, that have an explicit conscious theological concern, whether it be ‘orthodox,’ ‘neo-orthodox,’ or ‘liberal’; ... Finally, there are the ill-defined, though by all accounts numerous and influential, ‘religions of the disinherited,’ the many ‘holiness,’ Pentecostal, and millenarian sects of the socially and culturally submerged segments of our society” (77-78).

³⁴⁶ Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, 114.

³⁴⁷ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 159.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 146.

³⁴⁹ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 153.

American Way of Life. In other words, the religious is co-opted by this dominant secular culture.³⁵⁰ Whereas African Americans and Pentecostals were previously considered to be outside of this secular culture—those Pentecostals and African Americans participating in the New Black Church are now fully immersed in it and right at home.

Just like all aspects of culture, theology is always shaped by a particular historical context.³⁵¹ The majority of black prosperity theologians and their supermegachurches are a result of cultural changes in the 1980s and 1990s. This is a unique historical period for African Americans. As Kevin Phillips explains, the 1980s represented “the triumph of upper America, as ostentatious celebration of wealth, the political ascendancy of the richest third of the population and the glorification of capitalism, free markets and finance.”³⁵² Sarah Posner calls it “the greed decade.”³⁵³ This period marks the beginning of unprecedented black middle class ascendancy. As Mamiya states, today the black middle class is no longer “the ‘talented tenth’ of W.E.B. Du Bois in the early 20th century, but has become “the ‘talented one third’ of the present era.”³⁵⁴

Through the media, African Americans in the 1980s and 1990s were exposed to different appropriations of blackness and black affluence. Popular television shows like *The Cosby Show* “presented a picture of a middle-class lifestyle and made it appear attainable to all, even African

³⁵⁰ Loy, “The Religion of the Market,” 275; Cox, “Mammon and the Culture of the Market,” 124. Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 13.

³⁵¹ Geoffrey Grogan, “Liberation and Prosperity Theologies,” *The Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 9 (September 1991): 121.

³⁵² Kevin Phillips, *The Politics of Rich and Poor: Wealth and the American Electorate in the Reagan Aftermath* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990), xvii.

³⁵³ Posner, *God’s Profits*, 16.

³⁵⁴ Mamiya, *River of Struggle, River of Freedom*, 10.

Americans.”³⁵⁵ Post–civil rights with some access to financial and political resources, many African Americans began to no longer see themselves as occupying the margins of American society. In 1982, Archie Smith lamented, “Some middle class blacks may no longer see themselves as members of an oppressed group and accept uncritically an exploitative, profit-centered economic and political system which nevertheless, continues to deny them full humanity.”³⁵⁶ Far removed from the traditional stories of suffering and America’s segregated past, African Americans became comfortable in their middle class American identity. In generations prior to this period, theologies of prosperity would have been considered on the fringe, illogical, and unorthodox.³⁵⁷ Because they were no longer excluded from accepting this American Way of Life, many black adherents could comfortably consider these theologies as not only credible, but also as a more rational faith alternative than the faith practiced in traditional churches. For theologies of prosperity, “the construction of the individual in relation to the divine is parallel with neoliberal assumptions of individual ‘choice.’”³⁵⁸ As a result, you have a “combination of both rationality and the possibility of a miracle in its notions of economic activity and means to prosperity.”³⁵⁹

Prosperity preachers are able to capture the attention of many African Americans by resembling the worship and cultural traditions of the traditional Black Church. Yet, they are able

³⁵⁵ Harrision, *Righteous Riches*, 151. For an exhaustive treatment of blackness on television, see Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

³⁵⁶ Archie Smith, Jr., *The Relational Self: Ethics & Therapy from a Black Church Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982).

³⁵⁷ Brouwer, Gifford, and Rose, *Exporting the American Gospel*, 27. Lee, T.D. *Jakes America’s Preacher*, 110. Frederick, *Between Sundays*, 145-146.

³⁵⁸ Paivi Hasu, “World Bank & Heavenly Bank & Prosperity: The Case of Tanzanian Faith Gospel,” *Review of African Political Economy* 33, no. 110 (Sept 2006): 680.

³⁵⁹ Hasu, “World Bank & Heavenly Bank & Prosperity,” 680.

to position themselves as “outsiders to the religious establishment, as enemies of religion and tradition, and as iconoclasts offering a new and vibrant religious experience”³⁶⁰ These popular preachers convince adherents that their theologies are not only new, but different, and better.³⁶¹

For African Americans, the historical period of 1980s and 1990s with prominent religious figures like T.D. Jakes, Creflo Dollar, and Fred Price is similar to other periods of great economic and cultural change and unrest in American society. The historical contexts of George Winthrop, Carnegie, and Russell Conwell, like the 1980s and 1990s, not only represents a time of social and economic inequality, but also a time when the disparity is tangibly visible. Each period calls for some ideological and cultural justification of these disparities. Winthrop is speaking during the time when Americans needed to justify the economic expansion of land taken from Native Americans. Carnegie and Conwell are writing and speaking during the period after the Civil War, during the time of industrialization, when personal fortunes multiplied extravagantly with government help.³⁶² In sum, each of these periods is emblematic of a time when “the rich got richer and the poor got poorer.”

One of the reasons these theologies continue to be successful and expand is because they are able to provide existential explanations and justification for economic inequalities for those who benefit, as well as for those that suffer—both the rich and the poor. As popular theologies, they are much more malleable to new social and political contexts, and more adaptable to cultural changes, than traditional theologies. Because these theologies provide existential explanations for social and cultural inequities, I contend that they merit the classification of what theologians and philosophers identify as “theodicy.”

³⁶⁰ Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America's New Preacher*, 163.

³⁶¹ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 83-84.

³⁶² Brouwer, Gifford, and Rose, *Exporting the American Gospel*, 22.

Theologies of Prosperity as Theodicy

“Theodicy,” in theological and philosophical circles, is often defined as “the problem of evil.” Katie Cannon, in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, explains how the problem of evil is usually communicated by the dominant tradition: “If God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent, then God would prevent evil if God wanted to. And if God is a perfectly good God, then of course God would want to prevent evil if God could. Thus, if God is all-powerful, all-knowing and ever-present and is also perfectly good, then God *could* prevent evil if God *wanted to*, and God would *want to* prevent evil if God *could*.³⁶³ Secular theodicy or “sociodicy” also exists. Instead of seeking “to reconcile the problem of evil with belief in an omnipotent God, ‘sociodicy’ or secular theodicies seek to reconcile normative expectations of social life with adversities and forms of human suffering which appear intractable to reason, justice, or even hope.”³⁶⁴ Although sociodicy and theodicy differ at “the level of cosmology, both theodicy and sociodicy share in the attempt to defend an ideal conception of the world against those experiences which threaten to destroy or destabilize the frailty of human existence.”³⁶⁵

Several African American scholars have approached the question of theodicy and its intimate relationship to black religion. Cornel West has argued that “Christianity is first and foremost a *theodicy* [emphasis mine], a triumphant account of good over evil.” He believes that Christianity is a religion particularly “fitted to the oppressed,” and that the intellectual lives of

³⁶³ Katie Geneva Cannon, “‘The Wound of Jesus’: Justification of Goodness in the Face of Manifold Evil,” in *Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Marynoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 220.

³⁶⁴ David Morgan and Iain Wilkinson, “The Problem of Suffering and the Sociological Task of Theodicy,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 4, no. 2 (2001): 199-200.

³⁶⁵ Morgan and Wilkinson, “The Problem of Suffering,” 211, n. 1.

oppressed peoples consist “primarily of reckoning with the dominant form of evil in their lives.”³⁶⁶ Anthony Pinn and William R. Jones have written the most extensive works on theodicy and black religion.³⁶⁷ In *Is God a White Racist?* Jones contends that theodicy is the heart of theology and a necessity for any viable liberation theology. It is the “perennial issue in black religion: what is the meaning, the cause, and the ‘why’ of black suffering?”³⁶⁸ For Jones, “the theodicy question must control the entire theological enterprise and be its ultimate foundation.”³⁶⁹ Moreover, theodicy is not just an abstract and theoretical position. He suggests that all of us have “a functional theodicy; there is an aspect of [our] over-all [worldview] that treats the issue of suffering and relates it to [our] prevailing beliefs about the ultimate reality and [humanity].” Jones and Pinn both argue for black humanism as an alternative to the theodicies of redemptive suffering traditionally attributed to black theology.³⁷⁰ Pinn advocates against the redemptive suffering theodicies because he finds them problematic for the “sustaining of social transformation activities and agendas.” He queries, “[H]ow does one maintain a commitment to destroying oppression if suffering is seen as having secondary benefit?”³⁷¹

In a larger discussion of theodicy and religion, Peter Berger in *Sacred Canopy* writes that a plausible theodicy with a plausible structure permits individuals to incorporate painful

³⁶⁶ West, *Prophesy Deliverance*, 35.

³⁶⁷ Anthony Pinn, *Why Lord: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1995); *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003); *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering: A History of Theodicy in African-American Religious Thought*, ed. Anthony Pinn, (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2002); William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist?: A Preamble to Black Theology*, Second Edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998).

³⁶⁸ William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, xx.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, xxvi.

³⁷⁰ Jones actually argues for what he calls “humanocentric theism” (xxviii).

³⁷¹ Pinn, *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering*, 16.

experiences of suffering into their personal biography. His position is that, “If a theodicy answers, in whatever manner, this question of meaning, it serves an important purpose.”³⁷² Berger also writes that “one of the very important social functions of theodicies is, indeed, their explanation of the socially prevailing inequalities of power and privilege. In this function, of course, theodicies directly legitimate the particular institutional order in question.”³⁷³ As theodicy, theologies of prosperity are partly successful because they are attractive to both the rich and the poor. “Put simply, theodicies provide the poor with a meaning for their poverty, but may also provide the rich with a meaning for their wealth.”³⁷⁴

Additionally, these theologies also promote the ideology of the gospel of wealth. This ideology has been consistently used to explain the continual economic inequalities inherent in the political economy of advanced capitalism. Therefore, we can argue that the gospel of wealth should be considered a secular theodicy. Whereas the earlier versions were supported by the philosophy of Social Darwinism, the contemporary forms support neoliberal economics or laissez-faire economic philosophy. This philosophy “fulfills the social function of strengthening the belief in a just world, that one will finally receive what one deserves, while relieving the anxiety and uncertainty surrounding market activity itself and theorizing away the obvious inequalities created by the market.”³⁷⁵ Similar to what Martin Marty argued about the rhetorical advantage of celebrity clerics in nineteenth century over their secular counterparts, Berger suggests that religious theodicies have more power or influence than secular ones. He explains

³⁷² Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: 1967), 58.

³⁷³ Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 59.

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

³⁷⁵ Martha E. Terrie, “Social Constructions and Cultural Contradictions: A Look at a Christian Perspective on Economics,” in *The Journal of American Culture* 17, no. 3 (September 1994): 59.

that secular theodicies alone “clearly work for some people. It appears, however, that they are much weaker than the religious ‘theodicies’ in offering both meaning and consolation to individuals in pain, sorrow, or doubt.”³⁷⁶

Theologies of prosperity in black churches in America fit both the secular and religious definitions of theodicy. The gospel of wealth as an ideology addresses the secular concerns for black adherents who want to advance in the political economy. And theologies of prosperity address their religious or spiritual needs and desires. Together they create a religious reality that is both this-worldly and other-worldly. Stephen Hunt argues that “in the materialist culture of western societies, religion acclimatizes itself to what it can do for the believer in the here and now and towards this-worldly concerns. Many expressions of religiosity, therefore, produce innovating and simplistic theodicies that explain how material interests and personal requirements might be achieved.”³⁷⁷ As theodicy, theologies of prosperity with their positions on health and wealth provide explanations that address both economic and physical suffering. Whether consciously or unconsciously, prosperity preachers through their theologies provide adherents with answers to an existential question, “Why are the rich prosperous and healthy and others are not?” Moreover, the question might be better framed as, “How can a just God, who is all-powerful and all-seeing, allow some to be wealthy and healthy, while others (especially righteous, bible-believing, church-going, tithing Christians) are not?”

The religiosity and ritual practices (tithing, seed-faith giving, prayer, and thinking positive thoughts) become a simplistic remedy and answer to the theodical questions of economic and physical suffering. Prosperity preachers are able to offer explanations for “why so

³⁷⁶ Peter Berger, *Facing Up to Modernity* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 79.

³⁷⁷ Hunt, “Dramatising the ‘Health and Wealth’ Gospel,” 76.

many faithful Christians who tithe, give offerings, and financially support ministries in other forms do not prosper financially.”³⁷⁸ The answer given is that “they [adherents] just have to be taught *what the Bible really says* [emphasis mine] about wealth and who should possess it.”³⁷⁹ The blame oftentimes is placed on the believer and his or her lack of faith, as well as the teachings of traditional churches. Word churches, especially, often admonish that too many “Christians have been taught in traditional, denominational churches that Jesus was poor and that they should also be poor in order to identify with him. These people will never be able to receive prosperity from God until their subconscious minds have been relieved of their misconceptions about who Jesus was financially.”³⁸⁰

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes mentions theodicy in her sociological study of black churches after civil rights. She explains that African Americans have “traditionally felt a deep anxiety over social class divisions,” which is one of the “negative interpersonal consequences of social mobility.” Because of the quick ascendancy of many African Americans to the middle class “[a] culturally relevant religious explanation of one's good fortune in the face of so many who had been left behind became necessary. The nature of black social mobility is so precarious (‘one paycheck away from poverty’) that prosperity is both a blessing and a problem in *theodicy* [emphasis mine].”³⁸¹ This social mobility was exacerbated during the period when “Reagan-Bush economics of the 1980s and the smoke and mirrors of Clinton policies of the 1990s both contributed to making poor blacks even poorer, despite significant numbers of black Americans

³⁷⁸ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 11.

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

³⁸⁰ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 12.

³⁸¹ Gilkes, “Plenty Good Room,” 108.

who prospered during these two decades.”³⁸² Black prosperity churches emerged in this cultural context. Gilkes explains that prosperity preaching “was a departure from more traditional liberationist and perseverance themes.” However, the difference in the preaching had a purpose for the new black middle class. It “facilitated psychological relocation and integration in the world of affluence.”³⁸³

Identifying theologies of prosperity as theodicy helps to explain why these theologies are growing in Two-Thirds World³⁸⁴ countries such as Latin America and Africa. Cultural conditions similar to those experienced by African Americans were also occurring in other marginalized communities around the world. The 1980s and 1990s were the decades during which structural adjustment programs were introduced in many developing societies as conditionalities attached to World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans. “These programs, aimed at privatization and increased global competitiveness, were meant to create stability . . . But they have often had the reverse effect by removing job security from the middle and lower-middle classes in many societies, thus aggravating social tension.”³⁸⁵ For example, Deji Isaac Ayegboyin, writing about prosperity teachings in Nigerian Pentecostal churches, states that in the 1980s a “new form of Pentecostalism grew at tremendous speed.” This was more than likely connected to “the country’s adoption of a structural adjustment programme.” The result was a “massive devaluation of the national currency by more than a thousand percent ... [and] the

³⁸² “The Black Church and Black Elitism: Too Blessed to Be Stressed?,” *TheoSyst Journal*, no. 2 (July 2004): 2, <http://www.theosyst.com/PDFs/Issue001/Investigation—Redefining%20Struggle%20Part%20I.pdf> (accessed January 25, 2011).

³⁸³ Gilkes, “*Plenty Good Room*,” 108.

³⁸⁴ *Two-Thirds World* is used instead of *Third World*.

³⁸⁵ Caterina Kinnvall, “Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security,” *Political Psychology* 25, no. 5 (October 2004): 743.

quality of life of the majority of Nigerians was altered for the worse the increase in levels of unemployment and stagnation in wages.”³⁸⁶ In another example, in Tanzania, Paivi Hasu writes that “the structural adjustment programme and liberalisation of the economy driven by the World Bank and IMF has provided opportunities for some, but increased unemployment and a lowered quality and availability of social services for many others.”³⁸⁷ Both scholars explain why adherents, who both profited from these situations, and those who were the victims, are drawn to these churches and the theologies of prosperity. Ayegboyin writes, “It was at this time, more than ever before, that many seemed to have found in religious institutions, especially Charismatics, an oasis in the midst of economic turmoil and spiritual drought that seemed to prevail everywhere.”³⁸⁸ Hasu chimes in that “a paradoxical situation where a few who have profited turn to religion for approval and justification, while those who remain poor also refer to God to rescue their aspirations and hopes.”³⁸⁹ Theologies of prosperity fulfill a need for certainty in response to the anxiety and fear that advanced capitalism generates for marginalized communities around the globe.

Equally important, these churches and pastors offer what Cornel West suggests is lacking in the black liberation theology project—“a sketch of what liberation would actually mean in the everyday lives of Black people, what power they would possess, and what resources they would have access to.”³⁹⁰ Theologies of prosperity offer a vivid picture of liberation that is not other-worldly, but rather is a liberation that resonates with the economic realities of African

³⁸⁶ Deji Isaac Ayegboyin, “A Rethinking of Prosperity Teaching,” 72.

³⁸⁷ Paivi Hasu, “World Bank & Heavenly Bank & Prosperity, 681.

³⁸⁸ Ayegboyin, “A Rethinking of Prosperity Teaching,” 72.

³⁸⁹ Hasu, “World Bank & Heavenly Bank,” 681.

³⁹⁰ Cornel West, “Black Theology and Marxist Thought” in *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology*, eds. Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude Jr. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 878.

Americans who are comfortable with seeking what they consider to be their rightful place within the American dream. The New Black Church's vision of liberation looks and feels attainable. It is reinforced in each broadcast and worship service. State of the art facilities, thousands of adherents in seats, expensive cars, tailored suits worn by preachers, and mansions become the tangible and visible examples of American success. Moreover, it communicates to African American adherents that success and liberation is available and attainable for people that look just like them. Prosperity preachers know the value in letting people know that they too, used to be poor. This may serve their purposes of fundraising, but it also reinforces for adherents that success and liberation is possible for people just like them.

Theologies of Prosperity as Pseudo-Liberation Theologies

Most liberation theologians would be appalled at the mention of theologies of prosperity in the same vein as liberation theology. Gustavo Gutierrez coined the term and describes liberation theology "as theological reflection based on the gospel and the experiences of men and women committed to the process of liberation."³⁹¹ Geoffrey Grogan suggests that liberation theology has an "application to any group which might consider itself to be socially, economically, or politically oppressed or exploited or otherwise disadvantaged."³⁹² His understanding of the communities represented by liberation theologies is similar to those defined by Tanner as theologies of the people.³⁹³

Cornel West has argued that "the major enemy of black survival in America has been and is neither oppression nor exploitation but rather the nihilistic threat—that is, loss of hope and

³⁹¹ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Marynoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1973), 209, quoted in Geoffrey Grogan, "Liberation and Prosperity Theologies," 119.

³⁹² *Ibid.*, 118.

³⁹³ Tanner, "Theology and Popular Culture," 101.

absence of meaning. For as long as hope remains and meaning is preserved, the possibility of overcoming oppression stays alive.”³⁹⁴ If nothing else, these theologies offer hope. Through these theologies, prosperity theologians offer the meaning that Berger explains is fulfilled by theodicy. They also offer what adherents consider to be rational prescriptions to economic liberation. As Jonathan Walton contends, prosperity preachers and “[t]elevangelists are ingeniously able to create a liminal space where the unjust realities of race, class, and gender are suspended long enough for viewers to imagine themselves living and thriving in such a world.”³⁹⁵ As such, from the perspective of the adherents and their understanding of the faith, these theologies have to be considered as a contemporary form of liberation theology.

In the prosperity worldview, God is now miraculously working on behalf of adherents. The miracle power of the faith message “can be utilized for any positive purpose whatsoever, so that it might overcome any and all material obstacles that the Christian encounters. There is nothing wrong with “calling upon God’s power through prayer in order to meet material needs.”³⁹⁶ Harrison shows that many of the adherents actually consider these theologies to be a kind of “poor people’s movement.”³⁹⁷ The Faith Message in its own way calls for “*a redistribution of wealth*” [emphasis mine] when adherents quote the passages in Deuteronomy about the wealth of the wicked that is laid up for the righteous. Wealth is being transferred “out of the hands of ‘sinners’ into the hands of born-again *Christians*.”³⁹⁸ When adherents identify themselves as chosen, anointed, and when they are taking authority over Satan and their

³⁹⁴ Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vantage Books, 1994), 23.

³⁹⁵ Walton, *Watch This!*, 198.

³⁹⁶ Brouwer, Gifford, and Rose, *Exporting the American Gospel*, 197.

³⁹⁷ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 148.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 150.

circumstances, they are essentially no longer being treated as “the Other.” Instead, they claim subjectivity and agency in their own spiritual narratives.

Marla Frederick points out that the women who watch televangelists and attend WTAL conferences “see themselves as moving from the margins of society, from a place of ‘being bound’ to a place of freedom.” They credit Jakes’s teaching as “liberating them from destructive and abusive relationships, low self-esteem, and financial instability.” More importantly, Frederick explains that this discourse “provides them with a subversive, even feminist discourse that confronts the conundrums of their personal lives.”³⁹⁹ In no way do these women see themselves as passive participants and victims in the global economic and spiritual marketplace. Without a doubt, adherents are not participating in the kind of liberation practices that academic theologians would claim as normative for liberation theology. However, these religious practices should not be so easily dismissed, but should be seen as what James C. Scott describes as “everyday forms of resistance.”⁴⁰⁰ Frederick is correct again when she reminds us that “[g]iven the obstacles that women must overcome ... these acts, though not always protest-oriented, are nonetheless agentive.”⁴⁰¹

The liberation promoted by theologies of prosperity represents a paradigm shift in the lives of African Americans and other marginalized communities. These theologies speak to the fact that more and more black Christians are concerned with “a new kind of liberationist agenda that can address the challenges people face in the twenty-first century.”⁴⁰² This agenda differs from the expectations of those who participated in the social justice movements of the past, and

³⁹⁹ Frederick, “But, It’s Bible,” 277.

⁴⁰⁰ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 20.

⁴⁰¹ Frederick, *Between Sundays*, 7.

⁴⁰² Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America’s New Preacher*, 118.

clearly understood the need for a communal response. This new agenda focuses on the financial freedom of the individual as the path to liberation. As a result, theologies of prosperity differ greatly from what liberation theologians name as “a preferential option for the poor.” These theologies clearly do not form any real allegiances with the poor, because poverty is often considered as a curse or a lack of faith, rather than a systemic problem.⁴⁰³ “The best thing you can do for the poor is not become one of them,” is an example of the position taken by some prosperity preachers.⁴⁰⁴ One could argue that these theologies support “a preferential option for the rich,” in that they encourage people to aspire for riches and affluence. From an ideological standpoint, however these theologies offer subjectivity and agency to the poor in ways that American versions of liberation theology do not. One of the ongoing critiques of American liberation theologies is that unlike Latin American versions, they do not have base communities as their foundation. Additionally, American versions of liberation theology are often seen as too committed to only academic discourses.

Peter Berger, in an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, makes an important observation about theologies of prosperity: “There is no sentimentality about poverty in the prosperity gospel. There is an appeal to people not as victims but as responsible actors. There is also the confidence that generally people know what is best for themselves, better than any well-meaning outsiders.”⁴⁰⁵ Berger points out the syntax, that “the option is for the poor. That is, it is an option to be taken by those who are *not* poor.” The preferential option for the poor is well-intentioned by liberation theologians. However, Berger states that he understands why the poor, and I would

⁴⁰³ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 97-98; Walton, *Watch This*, 95; Frederick, *Between Sundays*, 150.

⁴⁰⁴ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 136.

⁴⁰⁵ Peter Berger, “Pennies from Heaven,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 28, 2008, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122479455028963963.html> (accessed January 15, 2010).

add, the adherents of the New Black Church, “are opting for a less patronizing message.” Many poor people are drawn to the messages of prosperity preachers and not to the messages of liberal Christians and academic theologians.

Poor people are almost non-existent as subjects in public discourse, both academic and popular. Gustavo Gutierrez correctly states that the poor person is “‘insignificant,’ and a ‘nonperson,’ someone whose full rights as a human being are not recognized.”⁴⁰⁶ As Elisabeth Stuart has argued, “liberation is almost always about finding a voice, breaking the silence, [and] being able to speak for oneself[,] rather than being spoken about.”⁴⁰⁷ Prosperity preachers provide their adherents with a kind of agency and subjectivity. The poor are given a voice in the choices that they make in their own lives. Theologies of prosperity offer more “agential” and “bottom-up” solutions for the poor.⁴⁰⁸ T.D. Jakes, more than anyone, appears to give voice to the sufferings and concerns of African American women. He may not necessarily be empowering women in a mode that most feminists and womanists would identify as liberating. Yet, for many women and the poor, Jakes and other prosperity preachers place these groups in the center of the discourse, often, in ways much more desirable than how these groups are generally situated and presented in the discourses of academic theologians and scholars.

Although prosperity preachers like Jakes offer a contemporary form of liberation, it is at its best only a pseudo-liberation theology. It is true that they place women and the poor in the center of their discourse. However, the hope that prosperity preachers offer is only for change in the individual, and is not for systemic or communal change. As Paul Gifford articulates,

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁷ Elisabeth Stuart, et al, *Religion is a Queer Thing: A Guide to the Christian Faith for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered People* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1997), 22.

⁴⁰⁸ Bradley A. Koch, “The Prosperity Gospel and Economic Prosperity: Race, Giving, and Voting” (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2009), 4.

theologies of prosperity “dissuade adherents from evaluating the present economic order, merely persuading them to try to be amongst those who benefit from it.” Consequently, where these preachers place their emphasis “all but eliminates any interest in systemic or institutional injustice.”⁴⁰⁹ When prosperity preachers convince adherents that financial wealth is not only attainable, but a right, they essentially are removing any possibility that adherents will ever critique advanced capitalism and its many levels of exploitation. “The idea of material accumulation as a sign of God’s favor distracts attention from the very real problems of exploitation and exclusion within a free market society.”⁴¹⁰ The truth of the matter is that the majority of women that support these ministries will never enjoy the lifestyles of their pastors. These churches and their pastors present a different version of liberation and liberation theology. However, especially for the African American women, the liberation they offer is only a pseudo-liberation.

⁴⁰⁹ Gifford, *The New Crusaders*, 65-66.

⁴¹⁰ Frederick, *Between Sundays*, 152.

CHAPTER 3 STUDYING WOMEN IN THE NEW BLACK CHURCH

Disciplinary divisions and methodological challenges have always been a problem for anyone that wishes to study black churches and the faith of African American women. In this chapter, I outline these challenges by laying out the scholarly terrain. A cultural studies approach is the best way to address these issues and study New Black Church preachers and their adherents. I also discuss *gift economy* in this chapter because sociologists have used *religious economy* and *spiritual marketplace* to theorize and study New Black Churches and their preachers. These theories or frameworks do not take seriously the theology of these preachers and their churches. Gift economy as a theoretical framework expands these theories by including the theological implications of “gift.” Actions performed by churches or pastors are seldom simply social or easily explained by economic theories; they are usually tied to the expectations or values of a theological worldview. A gift economy analysis provides a better way to interpret the sociological actions performed by churches, pastors, and adherents—including the production and consumption of religious and spiritual products.

I also argue that New Black Church pastors present a worldview with religious rituals and practices that fit more comfortably within the neoliberal economic ideology of advanced capitalism. In other words, the values and worldview of the New Black Church are more favorable to the perpetuation of capitalism than those of the Black Church. Consequently, in this chapter, I also include a more detailed description of Wal-Martization to demonstrate that the term is an excellent metaphorical concept to explain the cultural differences between the Black Church and the New Black Church. Finally, I close the chapter with actual information about Wal-Mart and Sam Walton to demonstrate that Wal-Martization is both an ideology and a process that affects real women in real situations.

WHY CULTURAL STUDIES?

A cultural studies approach takes seriously the layered methodological and disciplinary challenges of any scholarly attempt to study black popular preachers and the faith of the women in black churches, who follow them. A host of scholars have chronicled the issues that call for a different approach. For instance, Curtis Evans writes about “the burden of black religion,” which he defines as the “burden of a multiplicity of interpreters’ demands ranging from uplift of the race to bring an ambiguous quality of ‘spiritual softness’ to a materialistic and racist white culture.”⁴¹¹ Victor Anderson raises a similar issue of “ontological blackness.” He argues that black scholars have used “heroic genius” and promoted a “blackness that whiteness created.”⁴¹² Cornel West explains the dilemma in *Prophesy Deliverance* when he candidly states that “the notion that black people are human beings is a relatively new discovery in the modern West.”⁴¹³ More importantly, black feminists and womanists have repeatedly articulated these methodological challenges. Womanist theologians challenged both black and feminist theologians about the exclusion of black women’s experiences.⁴¹⁴ Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins identifies black women as “outsiders within” with “subjugated knowledges,” because their ideas are excluded not only from mainstream academic discourse, but from both feminist and black thought.⁴¹⁵ Deborah King articulates it as “multiple jeopardy.”⁴¹⁶ Kimberlé Crenshaw,

⁴¹¹ Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5.

⁴¹² Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York, Continuum, 1995).

⁴¹³ Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance*, 47.

⁴¹⁴ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-talk* (Marynoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1993), xiv-xv; and Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 3.

⁴¹⁵ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 12-13.

a black feminist, argues for “intersectionality.”⁴¹⁷ These scholars argue that black women face oppression(s) that cannot be simply added together, but instead are multiplicative, structurally intersectional, and with multidimensional levels of subordination.

Cultural studies provides the best perspective or methodology, because, as Susan Mizruchi outlines, “Cultural studies, by whatever program or practice, involves a commitment to elaborate the mutual constitution of cultural forms and historical forces, to articulate relationships between cultural practices and relations of power, to challenge divisions between elite and popular culture, and to maintain a skeptical if not critical view of academic disciplines as such.”⁴¹⁸

Bishop T.D. Jakes is a Pentecostal, and is not formally educated like academic theologians. Although he has a master’s and a doctorate degree, his credentials would not be considered as credible for academic theologians. His theology is definitely a popular or folk theology. Moreover, he theologizes with African American women that have been marginalized and historically silenced within academic discourses. Therefore, his theology represents non-elite discourses on many levels. Yet, because of his celebrity status, framing Jakes’s discourse as only marginalized or non-elite obscures the truth of his discursive power. P. David Marshall, writing about celebrity and power, argues that “within society, the celebrity is a voice above others, a voice that is channeled into the media systems as being legitimately significant.”⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁶ Deborah K. King, “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of Black Feminist Ideology,” *Signs* 14 no. 1 (1988): 42-72.

⁴¹⁷ Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1241-1299.

⁴¹⁸ Susan L. Mizruchi, ed., *Religion and Cultural Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2001), xii.

⁴¹⁹ P. D. Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), xx.

When you want to represent the perspectives and voices of the African American churchwomen that follow Jakes, providing an ideological critique of his theology is even more complicated. We seldom hear the voices of women in these faith communities in academic discourses, especially for the women who are also Pentecostals and Charismatics. Not only have they been excluded from academic discourses as women, but also because researchers have neglected their denominations because of the ecstatic worship styles. Most of the research on black churches has tended to focus on mainline black denominations like Baptists and Methodists. In other words, the women that follow Jakes are “the marginalized of the marginalized,”⁴²⁰ or what Gayatri Spivak theorizes as the “subaltern of the subaltern,” when she raises the question, “Can the subaltern speak?”⁴²¹ Several women scholars in their studies on black churches have also challenged the academy’s androcentricism and the continued invisibility of women.

“If it Wasn’t for the Women ...” Androcentricism and Invisibility

“If it wasn’t for the women ...” is the phrase that Gilkes uses to summarize black women’s participation in churches. She affirms that “[a]t every level of social interaction and cultural production women are present, and at the same time they are conscious of the way the dominant white society disrespects and rejects their presence.”⁴²² Barbara Savage, in her evaluation of past scholarship on black churches, states, “Black women, then and now, constituted the majority of black church members and were among the most devoted supporters of churches.” Yet, in the

⁴²⁰ Cathy J. Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 27.

⁴²¹ Spivak has queried if academic discourses are ever really able to present the true voices of the subaltern. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1988), 271-316.

⁴²² Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, “*If It Wasn’t for the Women...*”: *Black Women’s Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001), 7.

works of black male scholars, “women and their work were rendered irrelevant to the larger political and intellectual questions at hand.”⁴²³ African American women in black churches have often been presented as passive and docile participants.⁴²⁴ Daphne Wiggins, in *Righteous Content*, highlights the lack of scholarship on the laity and women: “Laity in general, and women in particular, have been treated as *passive followers* [emphasis mine], rather than creative agents who think independent of the pastor or as persons who contribute to the genius of the church.”⁴²⁵ Higginbotham also argues that too often, “‘minister’ functions as a metonym for church as the embodiment of the church’s public identity and influence. Such an interpretation fails to capture the collective character” of the institution.⁴²⁶ African American women have had to contend with the patriarchal “values of the larger American society” and also maintain a commitment to racial uplift. As a result, black churches have often “sought to provide men with full manhood rights while offering women a separate and unequal status.”⁴²⁷ In no way does this mean that women have ever “passively accepted their own subordination in the struggle of their people.”⁴²⁸ Gilkes explains that “when blocked from the most visible leadership positions,

⁴²³ Barbara Dianne Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 23.

⁴²⁴ For example, Jualynne Dodson writes about the inadequacies of C. Eric Lincoln’s research. She writes, “Black women [at the time of Lincoln’s research] challenged the idea that black women were relatively passive in contesting exclusion from church leadership and acquiesced to, even if they did not support, the patriarchy of Christian Churches. Sociologist Cheryl Townsend Gilkes and I have consistently reminded the academic community of the erroneous omission of women.” Jualynne E. Dodson, “The Lincoln Legacy: Challenges and Considerations,” in *How Long This Road: Race, Religion and the Legacy of C. Eric Lincoln* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2003), 82.

⁴²⁵ Wiggins, *Righteous Content*, 6-7.

⁴²⁶ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 49. Also see Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 23.

⁴²⁷ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 3.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

women find ways to make their voices heard and their power felt in alternative spaces of their own creation.”⁴²⁹

Jualynne Dodson, in her work on African Methodist Episcopal (AME) women, presents a normative explanation for how many women exercise power in black churches. Citing both Gilkes and Higginbotham, she surmises that because black women understand the significance of black churches, they intentionally use their power without destroying their churches. They understand how pivotal these institutions are for the larger African American community.⁴³⁰ Instead of seeking ordination and using other formal strategies, they often use methods like “membership, organization, and resources to assert themselves into the decision-making relationships of the Church.”⁴³¹ As Anthea Butler affirms, “there is power in ordination, but there is a greater power in controlling the ordained.”⁴³² Regardless of their leadership position, Dodson contends that women in churches find creative ways to “implement their will.”⁴³³ On the rare occasions that we actually have access to the non-elite discourses of women in churches, because they are religious discourses they often represent what Higginbotham defines as “the politics of respectability,”⁴³⁴ or what James C. Scott defines as “infrapolitics.”

The Politics of Respectability and Infrapolitics

Higginbotham’s book *Righteous Discontent* is one of the few scholarly projects that specifically explores the lives of women in the Black Church. She coined the concept of “the

⁴²⁹ Gilkes, *If it Wasn’t for the Women*, 7.

⁴³⁰ Dodson, *Engendering Church*, 3.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁴³² Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ*, 6.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴³⁴ For a detailed history of the works on “the politics of respectability,” see Paisley Harris, “Gatekeeping and Remaking: The Politics of Respectability in African American Women’s History and Black Feminism,” *Journal of Women’s History* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 212-220.

politics of respectability” to describe their “opposition to the social structures and symbolic representations of white supremacy.”⁴³⁵ “Historically, as [a] form of resistance to the negative stigmas and caricatures about their morality African Americans adopted a ‘politics of respectability.’ Claiming respectability through manners and morality furnished an avenue for African Americans to assert their will and agency to redefine themselves outside the prevailing racist discourses.”⁴³⁶ Virginia Wolcott shows that “[r]espectability encompassed a set of ideas and normative values that had tremendous power ... and was particularly open to competing definitions, inflections, and meanings. Individual black women understood respectability in very different ways depending on the social, political and cultural context.”⁴³⁷ As a communal strategy, “[r]espectability demanded that every individual in the black community assume responsibility for behavioral self-regulation and self-improvement along moral, educational, and economic lines.”⁴³⁸ Higginbotham posits that black women appealed to these politics because they were always “ever-cognizant of the gaze of white America, which in panoptic fashion focused perpetually upon each and every black person and recorded his or her transgressions in an overall accounting of black inferiority.”⁴³⁹ Yet, “it was in the church, more than any other institution, where black women of all ages and classes found a site for “signifying practice”—for coming into their own voice.”⁴⁴⁰ The church was “a safe space for self-definition,”⁴⁴¹ where they

⁴³⁵ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 186.

⁴³⁶ Kali N. Gross, “Examining the Politics of Respectability in African American Studies,” in *Almanac* 43 no. 28, <http://www.upenm.edu/almanac/v43/n28/benchmark.html> (accessed May 11, 2011).

⁴³⁷ Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 4.

⁴³⁸ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 196.

⁴³⁹ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 196.

asserted “agency in the construction and representation of themselves as new subjectivities—as Americans as well as blacks and women.”⁴⁴² Higginbotham adamantly states that the politics of respectability “assumed a fluid and shifting position along a continuum of African American resistance.” These politics however “did not reduce to an accommodationist stance toward racism, or a compensatory ideology in the face of powerlessness.”⁴⁴³

The challenge with the politics of respectability is that because it focuses on individual behavior as a remedy to the race problem, it inevitably creates a discourse that places much of the responsibility and blame on black women, not just for the failures of the black family, but also for the problems of the entire race.⁴⁴⁴ For example, in African American clubwomen’s attempt to present the “respectable African American,” they appealed to “Victorian ideals and assimilationist goals.”⁴⁴⁵ As a result, they inadvertently reinforced stereotypes and created “negative black Others.”⁴⁴⁶ Higginbotham also archives the prevalence of negative stereotypes about black women’s sexuality. In order to defend their sexual identities, black women adopted what Darlene Clark Hine defines as “a culture of dissemblance—a self-imposed secrecy and invisibility—in order to shield themselves emotionally and physically.”⁴⁴⁷ Their “adherence to

⁴⁴⁰ I am not suggesting that black women and churches have not changed since 1880-1920, but I am inferring that for black women the church more than any other institution of power is still considered a safe space for self-representation.

⁴⁴¹ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 95, quoted in Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 196.

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*, 186.

⁴⁴³ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 187.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁴⁴⁶ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 204.

⁴⁴⁷ Darlene Clarke Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance,” *Signs* 14 (Summer 1989): 912-920, quoted in Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 194.

Victorian ideology, as well as their self-representation as ‘super moral,’... was perceived as crucial not only to the protection and upward mobility of black women but also to the attainment of respect, justice, and opportunity for all black Americans”⁴⁴⁸ Kevin Gaines suggests that not only women, but African Americans in general “dissemble to survive in a racialized world not of their own making.” He argues that this dissemblance can also be “seen as a weapon, indeed a source of strength . . . as the psychic armor enabling the survival of the powerless.”⁴⁴⁹

Scholars like Higginbotham and Clark Hine provide a glimpse into the complexity of the *hidden transcripts* and the *infrapolitics* of African American women’s lives.⁴⁵⁰ The terminology of *hidden* and *public transcripts* is what political anthropologist James C. Scott uses to describe the discursive relationship between dominant and subordinate social groups. The term *public transcript* is “a shorthand way of describing the open interaction between subordinates and those that dominate.”⁴⁵¹ On the other hand, the term *hidden transcript* refers to the interactions or hidden behaviors and discourses that happen off-stage. “One also finds the hidden transcript emerging ‘on stage’ in spaces controlled by the powerful, though almost always in disguised forms.”⁴⁵² Scott concludes that subaltern and oppressed groups, those who are often identified as

⁴⁴⁸ Hine, “Rape and Inner Lives,” 915, quoted in Higginbotham, “Metalanguage of Race,” 266.

⁴⁴⁹ Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 5.

⁴⁵⁰ Higginbotham writes, “James Scott’s work on the politics of everyday resistance confirms the subversive role of the discourse of respectability.” Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 221.

⁴⁵¹ Scott explains that “[b]y definition, the hidden transcript represents discourse—gesture, speech, practices—that is ordinarily excluded from the public transcript of subordinates by the exercise of power” (27). He questions the ability of social scientists and scholars to adequately “study power relations when the powerless are often obliged to adopt a strategic pose in the presence of the powerful, and when the powerful may have an interest in overdramatizing their reputation and mastery” (xii). As a result, power has often been recorded only “in official or formal relations” or in the few heroic occasions when subordinates “speak truth to power” (1). James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

⁴⁵² Robin D. Kelly, “‘We Are Not What We Seem:’ Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” *The Journal of American History* 80, no. 1 (June 1993): 77.

“the powerless,” get re-inscribed into historical narratives that favor the powerful and dominant groups. He proposes a better theoretical understanding to capture the everyday resistance of subordinate and subaltern groups; Scott uses the term “infrapolitics.” Patricia Hill Collins, in her book *Black Sexual Politics*, describes infrapolitics in black communities as “the hidden behaviors of everyday resistance. Despite appearances of consent, people challenge inequalities of race, class, gender, and sexuality through conversations, jokes, songs, folklore, theft, foot-dragging, and a multitude of behaviors.”⁴⁵³

The hidden transcripts of the Black Church and the New Black Church, especially for lay women, have only recently been explored by scholars. Additionally, Scott’s description of infrapolitics, although important, only partially addresses the complexity of the power relationships women encounter in black churches and the larger society. For example, black working-class Pentecostal women do not fit comfortably in the discourses of respectability, nor in the binary categories of subordinate and dominant. Intersectionality, or the multiple jeopardy of black women, suggests that black women are performing respectability by negotiating power relationships on many levels (religious, social, political), and this negotiation happens simultaneously in several different social contexts—work, home, and church—with each context often requiring its own unique performance.

Contemporary Tropes of Respectability in the Second Gilded Age

Contemporary African American women in black churches, and the women that attend the WTAL conferences, also participate in discourses of respectability and the culture of

⁴⁵³ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 49.

dissemblance.⁴⁵⁴ They are similar to the clubwomen of late nineteenth and early twentieth century in that they are responding to the technologies of power⁴⁵⁵ and oppressive theories of the dominant culture. In what is now referred to as the second Gilded Age,⁴⁵⁶ black women still do not control the technologies of power and must respond to the same kind of negative stereotypes and sexual images. Instead of the hegemonic theory of Social Darwinism in the first Gilded Age, in the current context, the hegemonic theory is neo-liberal economic theory. The women-only gatherings are the hidden transcripts—with emphasis on the plural. The women that attend the conferences are not monolithic; they come from a variety of economic, denominational, and geographical backgrounds. The conferences, for many women, are a reprieve from their more oppressive home churches.⁴⁵⁷ The social influence of black churches is not as prevalent as it was in the segregated America of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. However, black churches still influence normative values of respectable and non-respectable behavior. I contend that the church is also still the safest gathering place for black churchwomen to construct identity and to create new subjectivities that counter racist stereotypes and negative sexual images.

The WTAL brand is unquestionably about issues of sexuality. The politics of respectability and a culture of dissemblance help explain the religious and gendered identity expressed in the rhetoric, “Woman thou art loosed!” The brand is yet another “discursive effort

⁴⁵⁴ For a discussion on contemporary black women and the politics of respectability, see Ayana Weekley, “Why Can't We Flip the Script: The Politics of Respectability in Pearl Cleage's *What Looks Like Crazy* on an Ordinary Day,” *Michigan Feminist Studies* 21, no.1(Fall 2008): 24-42. Also see Elsa Barkley Brown, “What has Happened Here: The Politics of Difference in Women’s History and Feminist Politics,” *Feminist Studies* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 295-312.

⁴⁵⁵ Higginbotham uses Foucault’s term of “technologies of power.” She describes “the technologies of power at the everyday level—films, newspapers, school textbooks.” *Righteous Discontent*, 189.

⁴⁵⁶ Gray, *Watching Blackness*, 28. Also see Janet R. Nelson, “Walter Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel: A Hopeful Theology for the Twenty-First Century Economy,” *Crosscurrents* 59, no. 4 (December 2009): 455 n. 6.

⁴⁵⁷ Marla Frederick-McGlathery, “‘But, It’s Bible:’ African American Women and Television Preachers,” in *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora*, eds. R. Marie Griffith and Barbara Dianne Savage (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 280.

of self-representation” of black women “re-figuring themselves individually and collectively.”⁴⁵⁸ As a man with the vocational privilege of pastor, T.D. Jakes is not bound by the culture of dissemblance. There are no moral gendered reprisals when he speaks about the sexuality or sexual abuse of black women. Rather, Jakes is presented as a heroic figure, who is providing liberation and empowering black women. He has done quite well with his products that focus on sexuality and sexual themes.⁴⁵⁹ Jakes is able to raise concerns in religious communities that would be unsafe or “unlady-like” for black women to raise for themselves. Higginbotham reminds us that respectability is always “a process[,] a dialogue with oneself and with one’s fellows, never a fixed position.”⁴⁶⁰ The dialogue and process is determined by which group or people one wishes to appear respectable. “The norms of respectability in our society are associated specifically with professional culture. Professional dress, speech, tastes, and demeanor all connote respectability.”⁴⁶¹ What this means is that the women are not the only ones performing respectability. Jakes also participates in a politics of respectability.

As a celebrity T.D. Jakes presents what Henry Louis Gates calls the “Public Negro Self,” or the “New Negro.”⁴⁶² At various times in history in order to counter racial oppression and offensive negative images in popular and political culture, African American intellectuals, writers, and public figures like Fredrick Douglass “sought to re-present their public selves in

⁴⁵⁸ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 186.

⁴⁵⁹ Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 67; Walton, *Watch This!*, 114.

⁴⁶⁰ Brian Harrison, *Peaceable Kingdom: Stability and Change in Modern Britain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 161, quoted in Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 67; Walton, *Watch This!*, 195.

⁴⁶¹ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990), 57.

⁴⁶² Henry Louis Gates, Jr. “The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of Black,” Special Issue: America Reconstructed, 1840-1940 *Representations* 24 (Autumn 1988), 133. Also see Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gene Andrew Jarrett, *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2007).

order to reconstruct their reproducible images.”⁴⁶³ Gates explains that the image or trope of the New Negro was constructed to counter racist images like Sambo and other stereotypes. He stresses, however, that this image never existed; it was only “a metaphor,”⁴⁶⁴ “a fictitious black archetype,”⁴⁶⁵ or “a coded system of signs complete with masks and mythology.”⁴⁶⁶ In historical periods like the Harlem Renaissance and Reconstruction, the images were supposed to “marshall the masses of the race”⁴⁶⁷ to “pattern themselves after the prototype”⁴⁶⁸ of the New Negro. These honorary individuals were recognized and celebrated because of their “education, refinement, and money.”⁴⁶⁹ T.D. Jakes, as a celebrity, participates in the same metaphorical myth-making by branding and performing respectability that transcends the black community and even the religious community. Seeking respectability in the global marketplace, he performs the ultimate trope of empire—the CEO. His expensive suits, Bentley, and private plane are mimicry, or a performance, of the trope. Jakes is for our generation a contemporary New Negro.

The majority of New Black Churches emerge during the 1980s and 90s.⁴⁷⁰ Sociologist Herman Gray describes this period as “rich with struggles, debates, and transformations in race relations, electronic media, cultural politics and economic life.”⁴⁷¹ Michael Battle in his

⁴⁶³ Gates, “The Trope of a New Negro,” 129.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 132.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 131.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., 134-135.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., 140.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., 141.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., 136.

⁴⁷⁰ Kevin Phillips, *The Politics of Rich and Poor: Wealth and the American Electorate in the Regan Aftermath* (New York: Random House, 1990).

⁴⁷¹ Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for “Blackness”* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 2.

discussion about the spirituality of black churches writes that black identity was politically inscribed through several tropes. The Reagan policy makers associated black identity with “welfare queens, drug dealers, criminals, school dropouts, teenage pregnancy, and single-mother households to justify as assault upon the liberal welfare establishment.”⁴⁷² He explains that many did not see this discourse as “ostensibly racist” because television shows like *The Cosby Show* presented several images of black achievement. However, the truth is that “[t]he harsh realities of the Reagan era economic policies for the nation’s most vulnerable were very different from what was being portrayed of American life by the mass entertainment media.”⁴⁷³ It is easy to see how the tropes of the second Gilded Age are not that different than those of the first.

The tropes of welfare queen, teenage mother, and single mother are gendered inscriptions that place the majority of the blame for America’s ills on the backs and bodies of black women.

Vivian Adair explains that the trope of welfare queen or

stories of the welfare mother intersect with, draw from, reify, and reproduce myriad mythic American narratives associated with a constellation of beliefs about capitalism, male authority, the ‘nature’ of humans, and the sphere of human freedom, opportunity, and responsibility. These narratives purport to write the story of poor women in an arena in which only their bodies have been positioned to ‘speak.’⁴⁷⁴

In what she describes as a “meaning-making economy” of “politicians, welfare historians, social scientists, [and] policy analysts ... the bodies of poor women and their children continue to be the site and operation of ideology.” She emphasizes that these women do not

⁴⁷² Battle, *The Black Church in America*, 25.

⁴⁷³ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 150.

⁴⁷⁴ Vivyan C. Adair, “Branded with Infamy: Inscriptions of Poverty and Class in the United States,” *Signs* 27, no. 2 (Winter 2002): 455.

speak for themselves as subjects, but instead “they are written and read as dangerous and then erased and rendered mute in venues of authority and power.”⁴⁷⁵

Vivyan Adair and Michael Battle paint a vivid picture of the world or social reality that many black women are experiencing when T.D. Jakes gets his first national exposure and introduces the WTAL brand. Thousands of black women around the country begin to attend his conferences and buy his products. Instead of being labeled as Welfare Queens, black women are *Loosed Women*. At the conferences they are not presented as victims, nor are they positioned as the cause of all of society’s ills. Instead, they are encouraged to reach for all the privileges supposedly afforded to them by the American Dream—a dream sanctioned by a God who answers prayers, if only they live right by giving their offerings, praying correctly, and believing. Furthermore, Jakes becomes the celebrity and prototype that success is possible. He is the New Negro of a post-civil rights America, and in a religious evangelical subculture, like the public figures in the past, Jakes is recognized as someone who has money, education, and refinement.

The Gift Economy vs. The Religious Economy

Rodney Starke, Laurence Iannaccone, and Roger Finke have argued for the theory of *religious economy* as a valuable tool for understanding religion, where religion is studied by looking at the supply side of religion rather than the demand side.⁴⁷⁶ Several scholars have used religious economy to explain megachurches and many of the preachers in the New Black Church.⁴⁷⁷ Lee and Sinitiere in a bibliographic essay summarize, “The theory of religious

⁴⁷⁵ Adair, “Branded with Infamy,” 455.

⁴⁷⁶ Starke and Finke have chosen “an overall conceptual and theoretical model,” which they identify as religious economies. For details on their model, see Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, “The Religious Economy” in *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 193-217.

⁴⁷⁷ Shayne Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America’s New Preacher*; Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*; Scott Billingsley, *It’s A New Day: Race and Gender in the Modern Charismatic Movement* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2008).

economy views churches as firms, pastors as marketers and producers, and church members or attendees as consumers whose tastes and preferences shape the goods and services ministers and firms offer.”⁴⁷⁸ T.D. Jakes is one of the preachers profiled in their study. Lee and Sinitiere conclude “that religious suppliers thrive in a competitive spiritual marketplace because they are quick, decisive, and flexible in reacting to changing conditions, savvy at packaging and marketing their ministries, and resourceful at offering spiritual rewards that resonate with existential needs and cultural tastes of the public.”⁴⁷⁹ However, I suggest that sociologists have missed the most critical aspect of any analysis of churches and preachers—the theological implications of gift. Because of the size of megachurches and the television ministries, the religious economy and spiritual marketplace theories work well. What is missed is that the purchases, consumer preferences, and tastes are usually based on the interpretation of biblical or theological propositions. Understanding the theological implications of gift or sacrifice cannot be ignored or easily dismissed. As such, instead of religious economy, a better analytical theory is *gift economy*.

A gift economy is not that different from sociological theories of the spiritual marketplace, rational choice, and religious economies—it only enhances them. As Eric Schmidt argues, the gift economy “is not narrowly beholden to the values of salesmanship, growth, and market share.”⁴⁸⁰ The theory of a gift economy fits better with Christian theology—especially conservative evangelical theology. The language of gifts (material, spiritual, and religious) is critical to understanding prosperity churches and preachers. Theologically, for evangelical, and

⁴⁷⁸ Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 160.

⁴⁷⁹ Starke and Finke, “The Religious Economy,” 193-217.

⁴⁸⁰ Eric Leigh Schmidt, “Practices of Exchange: From Market Culture to Gift Economy in the Interpretation of American Religion,” in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 72.

especially for fundamentalist churches, the interpretation of John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that God *gave* God’s only son,” is why the appeals for offerings and evangelism can be so easily co-opted into consumption and market language. In his classic text *The Gift*, Mauss explains the moral and social function of gifts in gift exchange.⁴⁸¹ “A [person] can maintain his [or her] status and standing as a moral person only if [s/he] gives. Accumulation of wealth is not evil as such but a person who has possessions is considered moral depending on the way [s/he] uses his [or her] wealth. Failure to give or receive, like failure to make return gifts, means a loss of dignity.”⁴⁸²

Most of the consumer products exchanged in the New Black Church are rarely directly sold just as products. Many of the financial exchanges are framed in an evangelistic appeal—in the form of a request for an offering, ministry partnership, or a financial gift. Steve Bruce explains:

The pitch is not a straightforward commercial transaction. The theme is always one of an exchange of *gifts*. God has *given* us the *gift* of salvation. We should *give* God our *gifts*. As we cannot *give* them directly to God, we should *give* [emphasis mine] them to the televangelist [or preacher]. When items are offered, they are always worth considerably less than the asked-for donation, gift, or ‘love offering.’⁴⁸³

More importantly, because Jesus gave sacrificially, adherents should not only give, but they should give their very best. The best gifts are those that reach the level of sacrifice and are above and beyond what is reasonably expected. Schmidt describes what the gift economy looks like in faith communities: “Ministers and congregants, vendors and consumers, men and women,

⁴⁸¹ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: the Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W.D. Halls (New York: Routledge, 1990).

⁴⁸² Paivi Hasu, “World Bank & Heavenly Bank in Poverty and Prosperity: The Case of Tanzanian Faith Gospel,” *Review of African Political Economy* 33, no. 110 (September 2006), 688.

⁴⁸³ Steve Bruce, *Pray TV: Televangelism in America* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 145.

parents and children, as well as God and worshippers are embedded in intricate webs of relationship and exchange, give and take, bestowal and resistance, gratitude and resentment.”⁴⁸⁴

Prosperity preachers often justify their wealth or affluence by telling people how much money they give away. It reinforces the idea that their wealth is a reciprocal response to their giving. They also often testify that God moved on the hearts of their congregants and special friends to give them a car or private plane. In the secular world, the same applies for CEOs of multinational corporations. The CEOs often justify their personal wealth and the wealth of their corporations by publicizing their foundations or other forms of gift giving. In both situations, ideologically, this suggests that as long as these individuals are philanthropic and the preachers give offerings, then their accumulation of wealth is justified and moral. Moreover, there is no need to challenge or question the political and economic systems in which they may have exploited others to obtain their wealth.

For the women that attend the conferences and send monthly gifts to T.D. Jakes Ministries, their time, talents, and gifts (spiritual and financial) are exchanged ultimately in what they consider to be a spiritual or faith realm—a kind of divine gift economy. Their religious practices like prayer and tithing are gifts given in an exchange between themselves, their God, and their pastors. Similar to other faithful Christians, “[t]heir gifts of money, like their gifts of words or habits, do not go to any man or ministry, but go directly to God and represent obedience to [God].”⁴⁸⁵ The New Black Church is where they exercise their individual agency,⁴⁸⁶ and where they feel they have access to a divine power that empowers them. They are able,

⁴⁸⁴ Schmidt, “Practices of Exchange,” 72.

⁴⁸⁵ Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2000), 122.

⁴⁸⁶ For an example of how women exercise personal power and agency, see Harrison’s discussion of a woman named Cassandra in *Righteous Riches*, 27.

perhaps for the first time, to treat as “the Other” those who are ordinarily considered to be more powerful. It is through the giving of their gifts (offering, prayer, and praise) that they claim a power to not only liberate themselves, but also to liberate others. As *Loosed Women* their gifts provide them the opportunity to evangelize and exercise power over Satan, “the wicked,” and others.⁴⁸⁷ In many cases, the financial exchange of a tithe or sacrificial offering as a special gift is expected to unleash a power that obligates even God to act on their behalf.

The Wal-Martization of African American Religion

Wal-Mart as a brand, and as a global organization made up of institutions all over the world with consumers and workers, has many similarities to black churches. Individual churches make up the global church (Body of Christ) with pastors and volunteers, both providing a service and receiving a service. David Bosshart explains some of the reasons why Wal-Martization as a metaphorical concept works: “Wal-Mart is a symbol ... which has become such a part of our consciousness that we intuitively and ritualistically call it up whenever we go shopping. Wal-Martization is the dominant model of the rationalization of consumer living today. It is the most consistent embodiment of the philosophy ‘faster, better, cheaper’ and ‘bigger, more global, standardized.’”⁴⁸⁸ The term captures what is happening in religion as a whole, but especially the differences between the Black Church and the New Black Church. Other terms like McDonaldization⁴⁸⁹ and Disneyization⁴⁹⁰ might speak to similar realities, but Wal-Martization is much more descriptive and applicable to the realities that black women experience in black

⁴⁸⁷ “The wealth of the wicked is laid up for the righteous.” Proverbs 13:22b KJV is one of the many scriptures often cited by New Black Church pastors as an example of how women exercise their power to gain wealth.

⁴⁸⁸ David Bosshart, *Cheap: The Real Cost of the Global Trend for Bargains, Discounts, and Consumer Choice* (Philadelphia: Kogan Page, 2006), 61.

⁴⁸⁹ George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2004).

⁴⁹⁰ Alan Bryman, *The Disneyization of Society* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004).

churches. New Black Church pastors with their supermegachurches have the same iconic and celebrity presence and relationship that founder Sam Walton has with Wal-Mart. Many people see both Wal-Mart and black churches as places to socialize and find community, and the size of the megachurches and the brand communities provide a host of similarities.

Wal-Mart has created an entire culture often referenced as “the Wal-Mart way” or “the Wal-Mart effect.”⁴⁹¹ Liza Featherstone in her book, *Selling Women Short*, asserts that “Sam Walton and his successors are geniuses at myth production.”⁴⁹² She adds that “Wal-Mart’s professed values, are for many workers, the most compelling aspect of the Wal-Mart culture, because they are the professed values of the United States itself. Wal-Mart rhetoric is adamantly populist.”⁴⁹³ In other words, many people believe that the Wal-Mart rhetoric is representative of who we say we are as Americans. The story rehearsed in the brand mythology is that Sam Walton and Wal-Mart best represent the concerns of the poor and marginalized against the rich and powerful. “Wal-Mart culture constantly emphasizes a commitment to the common man,”⁴⁹⁴ or “ordinary folk.”⁴⁹⁵ Take, for instance, Wal-Mart’s early mission statement: “To give ordinary folk the chance to buy the same thing as rich people.”⁴⁹⁶

⁴⁹¹ Charles Fishman, *The Wal-Mart Effect: How the World’s Most Powerful Company Really Works—and How It’s Transforming the American Economy* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

⁴⁹² Liza Featherstone, *Selling Women Short: The Landmark Battle for Worker’s Rights at Wal-Mart* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 53.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁹⁶ Einstein, *Brands of Faith*, 96.

The 1980s and 90s mark the expansion of black megachurches as well as the beginning of Wal-Mart's growth and expansion.⁴⁹⁷ Today, Wal-Mart is not only the largest corporation in America, but in the world—the “template industry,” setting the bar for its competitors. However, rather than raising the bar, Wal-Mart, Inc. is lowering it, pulling competitors' operating standards down to dangerously low levels.”⁴⁹⁸ Wal-Mart is without a doubt the GM of this generation. However, the company's practices and values are very different than the cultural milieu of GM, in that GM is recognized for having helped build a solid middle class.⁴⁹⁹ GM was unionized and Wal-Mart is anti-union. GM paradigmatically represented the ideology of the economic vision of the American Dream, and Wal-Mart represents the ideology of the gospel of wealth. Norton Garfinkle asserts one vision is about “universality and equality of opportunity,” and the other is about “exceptional rewards for exceptional achievement” of a few individuals.⁵⁰⁰ The American Dream ideology seeks to create a “middle-class society.” The ideology of the gospel of wealth “is content with a society sharply divided between the rich and the poor.”⁵⁰¹ The most glaring example of the changes and the cultural influences of empire can be summed up with a comparison of the compensation packages of the CEO of GM in 1950 during its prominence as a template industry, and the CEO of Wal-Mart in 2003. In 1950, the CEO of GM earned 135 times

⁴⁹⁷ Wal-Mart, Inc. not only grew in stature from a mere “276 stores to 1528, but also in sales from 1.2 to 26 billion dollars.” Justin R. Watkins, “Always Low Prices, Always at a Cost: A Call to Arms Against the Wal-Martization of America,” *J. Marshall Law Review* 40 (2006-2007): 274.

⁴⁹⁸ Watkins, “Always Low Prices,” 299.

⁴⁹⁹ Erin Johannsson, “Checking Out: The Rise of Wal-Mart and the Fall of Middle Class Retailing Jobs,” *Connecticut Law Review* 39, no. 4 (May 2007): 1464.

⁵⁰⁰ Norton Garfinkle, *The American Dream Vs. the Gospel of Wealth: The Fight for a Productive Middle Class Economy* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2006), 15.

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*

what an average assembly worker earned. In 2003, the CEO of Wal-Mart, in contrast, earned 1450 times that of a full-time employee.⁵⁰²

In both Wal-Mart and black churches, women are the majority of workers and consumers, but not really represented in the leadership. Black churches, like Wal-Mart, carry this ideological mythology of representing the concerns of the marginalized. However, in both instances the economic disparities do not always match the storytelling in the brand mythology. At Wal-Mart, cashiers are the lowest paid workers and 92.5 percent of them are women.⁵⁰³ The majority of these women make an annual salary of less than \$14,000 a year,⁵⁰⁴ which places these women near or below the poverty line. These numbers have to be placed in perspective with the socio-economic status of the Wal-Mart leadership. If Sam Walton were living he would be the richest man in the world. According to a *Forbes* magazine list, Sam Walton's children, who inherited his wealth, are 5 of the 10 richest individuals in the world.⁵⁰⁵ This is the economic disparity and real world reality for many of the women that work at Wal-Mart. Most of these women were promised advancement and believed the Wal-Mart brand mythology. In other words, they believed the story-telling and myth-making that promotes an ideology of empire.

It is not just the actual disparity, but what happens when women raise concerns about these inequities. In spring of 2000, Betty Dukes filed against Wal-Mart the largest gender discrimination class action suit against a private employer in the history of the United States.⁵⁰⁶ Along with legal action, Wal-Mart responded to the lawsuit with an advertising campaign. In

⁵⁰² Johannsson, "Checking Out," 1464-65.

⁵⁰³ Featherstone, *Selling Women Short*, 97.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁵⁰⁵ Featherstone, *Selling Women Short*, 57.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 154.

2003, they began running advertisements with women and minorities that sang the praises of working at Wal-Mart.⁵⁰⁷ In other words, they told a different story; they created more brand mythology through the media and other outlets. Wal-Mart also used its power to prolong the suit and eventually had the lawsuit dismantled as a class action in a decision by the Supreme Court.⁵⁰⁸

In an interview with the *New York Times*, Bill Leonard a religious scholar, suggests that just as Wal-Mart sets the agenda for businesses, “megachurches are setting the agenda for every religious community in the country.” He was talking about their one-stop shopping model of ministry and their “consumerist approach to religion.”⁵⁰⁹ Leonard used the phrase pejoratively to suggest that these churches represent “the Wal-Martization of American religion.”⁵¹⁰ Other theologians and scholars have concerns similar to Leonard’s.

Several religious scholars and theologians argue that in America, the Market and capitalism are functioning more and more like a religion and faith. David Loy writes that “[t]he Market is becoming the first truly world religion, binding all corners of the globe more and more tightly into a world view and set of values whose religious role we overlook because we insist on seeing them as ‘secular.’”⁵¹¹ Harvey Cox echoes Loy, affirming that “the market is construed not as a creation of culture ... but, as the ‘natural’ way things happen.” For Cox, this means that “a

⁵⁰⁷ Featherstone, *Selling Women Short*, 1.

⁵⁰⁸ The Supreme Court ruled against Betty Dukes as a class action suit in October 2011. See “Walmart Stores, Inc. v. Dukes, et al.” <http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/10pdf/10-277.pdf>.

⁵⁰⁹ Gustav Niebuhr, “Where Religion Gets a Big Dose of Shopping-Mall Culture,” *The New York Times*, April 16, 1995.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹¹ David Loy, “The Religion of the Market,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 275.

global market culture ... is generating an identifiable value-laden, 'religious' worldview.'"⁵¹² Philosopher and theologian John Cobb uses the term "economism." He defines economism as "that organization of society that is intentionally in the service of economic growth. All other values, including national sovereignty, are subordinated to this end, with the sincere expectation that sufficient prosperity will enable the world to meet its noneconomic needs as well."⁵¹³ He explains that "the ideology of today's economism is neoliberal economics."⁵¹⁴ Economism creates "a society oriented to the increase of economic activity through the market."⁵¹⁵ I am using the term "Wal-Martization" to express Cobb's economism and the critiques of Cox and Loy. I prefer my term because it speaks to the branding, as well as to the ideological influence of the branding on both the individual and the collective identities of people and institutions.

Finally, Bob Ortega's summary of Sam Walton's faith highlights both the ideology and process of Wal-Martization. Ortega writes:

He [Sam Walton] was a man who unrelentingly remolded himself into a merchant first and last. Selling eventually would squeeze almost everything else out of his life. The man who had led Bible classes in college ultimately would write an autobiography with no mention of God and only the most passing reference to any kind of faith—except his faith in free enterprise and the market economy. He might sit in church every Sunday—but he worshipped six days a week (and often seven) at the altar of commerce.⁵¹⁶

In both popular and academic vernacular, Wal-Martization captures the realities of what is happening to black churches and summarizes the differences between the Black Church and

⁵¹² Harvey Cox, "Mammon and the Culture of the Market: A Socio-Theological Critique," in *Meaning and Modernity: Religion, Polity, and Self*, eds. Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, and Steven M. Tipton (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 124.

⁵¹³ John Cobb, "Economic Aspects of Social and Environmental Violence," *Buddhist and Christian Studies* 22 (2002): 4.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁵¹⁶ Bob Ortega, *In Sam We Trust; The Untold Story of Sam Walton and How Wal-Mart Is Devouring America* (New York: Time Business Random House, 1998), xii.

the New Black Church. Pastors are relentlessly molding themselves into merchants and CEOs, and they are selling themselves and anything else that is marketable or able to be sold in the global marketplace.

With the many methodological challenges, how do we examine a theology of preachers and churches that have been impacted by Wal-Martization? Both the Black Church and the New Black Church participate in the politics of respectability and uplift ideology, but the real challenges are in the theology and in being able to critically assess this theology. How do we adequately study the women of WTAL and T.D. Jakes when both Jakes and the many women attending his conferences are also participating in a broader performance in the global economy and marketplace?

CHAPTER 4
A THEOLOGICAL METHOD FOR STUDYING
NEW BLACK CHURCH PREACHERS/(FOLK) THEOLOGIANS

In this chapter I propose an interdisciplinary approach as a theological method by which to study and interpret the theological systems of prosperity preachers like T.D. Jakes. The interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary methodology is best described as what feminists and womanists call *ideological critique*. Both the New Black Church and the Black Church continue to participate in uplift ideologies, and both models have often relied on a politics of respectability. The goals and strategies of uplift however are very different, and the most prominent differences are in the theology. Jakes and many of the preachers of the New Black Church are theologians of prosperity. These preachers offer their adherents prescriptions for liberation. As a result, whether we like it or not, for many African Americans T.D. Jakes and other prosperity preachers are the new liberation theologians. Their folk theologies are much more pervasive, as well as more rhetorically and ideologically influential to the masses than any academic, liberation, or classical theology. More importantly, these preachers and their theologies merit a critical response from academic liberation theologians and scholars.

These folk theologians present theological systems with a worldview or faith-world that they encourage adherents to emulate. Accordingly, I propose a two-fold theological method using Paul Tillich's description of *systematic theology* and *theological norm* combined with James McClendon's method of *Biography as Theology* to critique their theologies and theological systems. The method is a collaborative effort between the professional or academic theologian and the folk theologian/preacher. The professional theologian uses biography or ethnography to answer the critical or existential questions pertaining to the popular preacher and the preacher's theology. Tillich suggests that the theologian must answer a series of questions

about any theological system: What are the sources? What is the medium in which those sources are received? And what is the norm that determines the use of those sources?⁵¹⁷ He summarizes that theology is always “*from the sources, through the medium, under the norm.*”⁵¹⁸ For Tillich the *theological norm* is the most important defining aspect of any theological system.

The theological systems of New Black Church preachers are expressed through many brands. Each brand presents its own story with a product line and target audience. Hence, I see the brand as what Tillich defines as a theological norm. Because the brand is a theological norm, the second step of the method is to examine the theology presented within the brand. Tillich also identifies religious experience as the *medium* in which the sources for theology are received. In the past, Protestant theologians would use the tradition and sources from their denomination—“its liturgy and hymns, its sermons and sacraments.”⁵¹⁹ In today’s context, religious experiences like worship no longer take place only in denominational brick and mortar edifices. Religious experiences often happen in the consumption of packaged and marketed versions of religious practices. These branded products and events are also the *sources* for the academic theologian to evaluate and critique the theology of the preacher and the faith community. The academic theologian then uses qualitative research methods in order to access, or study the religious experiences within the brand of the adherents and the preacher. In other words, the theologian participates and becomes an insider in the brand community. The qualitative research methods chosen by the theologian are those that best answer his or her critical questions and will best facilitate obtaining the necessary data for an appropriate ideological critique.

⁵¹⁷ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 34.

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

IDEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

The overarching methodological framework is an *ideological critique*,⁵²⁰ or more precisely, a *socio-theological critique*.⁵²¹ Many liberation theologians consider their work to be an ideological critique because the religious experiences and perspectives of the faith communities they represent have not been included in theological discourses.⁵²² Discourses labeled as “ideological criticism” usually focus on the inequities in power and power relations, and the representations of these relationships. The ideology of theological discourses also contributes “to the distorted self-understanding of oppressed people who have internalized the belief in the legitimacy of their own subordination and innate status as inferior.”⁵²³ As a result, an ideological critique is needed whenever religious traditions and texts represent and mystify oppressive sacred texts and structures of domination as revealed truth.⁵²⁴

⁵²⁰ For a detailed explanation of *ideological critique*, see Marsha Aileen Hewitt, “Ideology Critique, Feminism, and the Study of Religion,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 11, no. 1 (1999): 47-63. Also see Elizabeth A. Castelli, Stephen D. Moore, Gary A. Phillips, and Regina M. Schwartz, “Ideological Criticism,” in *The Postmodern Bible: The Bible and Culture Collective*, eds. Elizabeth A. Castelli, Stephen D. Moore, Gary A. Phillips, and Regina M. Schwartz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 272-301; Schussler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies*, 150-154; and Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 24.

⁵²¹ Harvey Cox’s article, “Mammon in the Market,” is an example of a socio-theological critique. He writes that “a truly critical theology should make people aware of these religious values [of the global market culture] and how they coincide with or contradict Christian values.” Harvey Cox, “Mammon in the Market: A Socio-Theological Critique,” in *Meaning and Modernity: Religion, Polity, and Self*, eds. Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton (Berkeley: University California Press, 2002), 124.

⁵²² Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 13.

⁵²³ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, “Method in Women’s Studies in Religion: A Critical Feminist Hermeneutics,” in *Methodology in Religious Studies: The Interface with Women’s Studies*, ed. Arvind Sharma (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 220.

⁵²⁴ *Ibid.*

There are many definitions of ideology by Karl Marx and other scholars and theorists.⁵²⁵ I am not using the term “ideology” in the pejorative sense of Marx, as simply a form of false consciousness. Ideology for our purposes is defined as “meaning in the service of power”⁵²⁶ or “a deeply held, comprehensive, and interlocking set of beliefs about the nature of the world and how the world works.”⁵²⁷ It is what feminist Michele Barrett names as a “generic term for the processes by which meaning is produced, challenged, reproduced, and transformed.”⁵²⁸ Furthermore, “ideology produces what can be seen, heard, spoken, thought, believed, valued—in other words, what counts as socially made [or socially constructed] ‘reality.’”⁵²⁹ An ideological critique must begin with the admission that “all ideologies are socially constructed and reconstructed within a particular social, economic, and political context,”⁵³⁰ including the ideology or ideological position of the critic.

Literary critic Catherine Belsey argues that ideology is “the sum of the ways in which people both live and represent to themselves their relationship to the conditions of their existence. Ideology is *inscribed in signifying practices* [emphasis in original]—in discourses, myths, presentations, and re-presentations of the way ‘things’ are—and to this extent it is

⁵²⁵ For definitions and approaches to *ideology*, see Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991); John B. Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass Communication* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

⁵²⁶ Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture*, 7.

⁵²⁷ Mary Proctor Engel and Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, “Introduction: Making the Connections Among Liberation Theologies Around the World,” in *Life Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, eds. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel (New York: Harper and Row Publishers-San Francisco, 1990), 6.

⁵²⁸ Michelle Barrett, *Women’s Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis* (London: NLB, 1980), 97.

⁵²⁹ Rosemary Hennessy, *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 75.

⁵³⁰ Michael C. Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 7.

inscribed in language.”⁵³¹ She expounds on Louis Althusser’s definition of ideology and his use of the term *interpellation*. For Althusser, ideology is not just ideas or false consciousness, like Marx, but it has a material existence.⁵³² It is a “system of representations located in the everyday practices (especially rituals) of a society.”⁵³³ Ideology functions to “interpellate individuals as subjects.”⁵³⁴ Interpellation is defined as the act or function of ideology as it “recruits,” “transforms,” or “hails” the individual.⁵³⁵ Through ideologies, “concrete individuals are made concrete subjects.”⁵³⁶ Belsey argues that this subjectivity is presented as obvious and common sense. It is “linguistically and discursively constructed and displaced across the range of discourses in which the concrete individual participates.”⁵³⁷ Hence, she uses Althusser to contend that

Ideology suppresses the role of language in the construction of the subject. As a result, people ‘recognize’ (misrecognize) themselves in the ways in which ideology ‘interpellates’ them, or in other words, addresses them as subjects, calls them by their names ... As a result, [the subjects] ‘work by themselves’ they willingly adopt the subject-positions necessary to their participation in the social formation.⁵³⁸

In the social formation,⁵³⁹ the subject is also a *subjected being* who submits to the authority endorsed in the ideology (the boss, God, a king, a husband, etc.).⁵⁴⁰ Within the system of

⁵³¹ Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (Florence, KY: Routledge, 1980), 61.

⁵³² Louis Althusser, *Essays on Ideology* (London: Verso, 1984), 39.

⁵³³ Castelli, et al., “Ideological Criticism,” 273..

⁵³⁴ Belsey, *Critical Practice*, 47.

⁵³⁵ Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1971), 174.

⁵³⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵³⁷ Belsey, *Critical Practice*, 61.

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵³⁹ *Social formation* for Althusser is the same as what is usually identified as *society*.

capitalism, a good example is when individuals see themselves as autonomous agents who “‘freely’ exchange their labor-power for wages, and they ‘voluntarily’ purchase the commodities produced.”⁵⁴¹

Belsey contends that ideology is often reproduced and represented in the telling of stories, everyday talk, and in how people relate those stories to their lives.⁵⁴² The authors of *The Postmodern Bible* agree with Belsey; they argue that “[t]o learn what is ideologically important about a community and culture, we need only listen to the stories it tells and how it tells them.” Moreover, the authors conclude that “[i]n Western culture, the stories most influential in shaping and producing its ideolog[ies] are found in the Bible.”⁵⁴³ According to several scholars and theologians African Americans have used biblical stories in support of an uplift ideology and as models for liberation.⁵⁴⁴

Thousands of African American churchwomen say that T.D. Jakes’s preaching and his interpretation of a biblical story from the gospel of Luke is empowering. They affirm that his branding of that story resonates with their personal life-stories. I argue that Jakes provides these women with access to a kind of subjectivity that black, womanist, and feminist theologians have yet been able to provide. Black women claim this subjectivity when they voluntarily participate in the worship experiences at the WTAL conferences and when they purchase the many branded products. In other words, Jakes’s ideology—to use Althusser’s terminology—interpellates, or

⁵⁴⁰ Belsey, *Critical Practice*, 62.

⁵⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁵⁴² Castelli, et al., “Ideological Criticism,” 276.

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁴ Eddie S. Glaude Jr., “Myth and African American Identity,” in *Religion and the Creation of Race and Ethnicity*, ed. Craig R. Prentiss (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 28-30; Dolan Hubbard, *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination* (Columbia: University Of Missouri Press, 1994), 3.

hails these women when they are called by their collective branded identity or by their name as *Loosed Women*.⁵⁴⁵ However, an ideological critique must consider the suppression of language in the construction of the subject that Belsey identifies. Moreover, the critique must approach the subjectivity that Jakes provides for these women with “a hermeneutic of suspicion, as well as [make] an attempt to deconstruct the prevailing ideology in order to reveal the interests that sustain it and the societal realities which it conceals.”⁵⁴⁶ Jakes providing subjectivity for women is not enough to qualify his ideology or his theology as liberating, especially since the women are rarely the producers that profit financially from these products; they are overwhelmingly usually the consumers buying them. Ideology works best, as Althusser argues, when it compels its subjects “to work by themselves” in accepting their positions in the social formation. How these women use these branded products to socially construct their identities and how they claim this consumer subjectivity has ideological implications for our contemporary understandings of race, gender, and class in the global marketplace.

Lee Butler, writing about theology and psychology, states that within the context of the United States, “the critical ideologies for African American identity are race, sex, gender, religion, and spirituality,” and that “sex and gender ideologies are most often negotiated by spirituality while being maintained by the social-political-religious systems that created them.”⁵⁴⁷

Exposing the ideology presented by T.D. Jakes as a pastor means evaluating the meaning reproduced and represented by the significant power relationships in the many stories that he

⁵⁴⁵ For a discussion of how ideology works in worship, see Christian Scharen, “Ideology, Ritual, and Christian Subjectivity,” *Worship* 70, no. 5 (Summer 1996): 406-422.

⁵⁴⁶ Gibson Winter, *Liberating Creation: Foundations of Religious Social Ethics* (New York, Crossroad, 1981), 129, quoted in Archie Smith Jr., *The Relational Self: Ethics and Therapy from a Black Church Perspective* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1982), 175.

⁵⁴⁷ Butler, *Liberating Our Dignity*, 7.

tells about God, the world, faith, and more importantly, about women. These stories make up the core of his contextual theology of empire. As Richard Horsley, writing about the ideology of empire suggests, ideology is “the justification for power relationships,” because it “‘explains’ how and why ‘things are as they are.’”⁵⁴⁸ Thus, following Butler, in order to conduct an ideological critique of the stories that Jakes presents, we must ask, “Who has power, and who does not, with respect to gender, race, and class”? To this list, I would also add the category of “vocation.”

Interrogating vocation includes investigating the power embedded in the relationship between CEO and consumer, as well as what Michel Foucault defines as “pastoral power.”⁵⁴⁹ Foucault contends that pastoral power has “ceased or lost its vitality since the eighteenth century” in terms of “ecclesiastical institutionalization,” but “its function ... has spread and multiplied outside the ecclesiastical institution.”⁵⁵⁰ As practitioners of Christian capitalism, Jakes and other New Black Church preachers successfully blur the cultural and political boundaries defined by the sacred and the secular, or the ecclesiastical and corporate. Whether defined as sacred or secular, do the power relationships that he promotes in the stories that he tells support an ideology of empire? The discourses that answer these important questions about power, and about how we delineate or decide the most significant power relationships in Black Christianity are expressed in the theology—in the God-talk.

Charles Long, a historian of religions, affirms that as “specific modes of religious discourse ... [t]heologies are about power, the power of God, but equally about the power of

⁵⁴⁸ Richard A. Horsley, ed., *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 11.

⁵⁴⁹ Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (Summer 1982): 782-786.

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 783.

specific forms of discourses about power. These discourses are about the hegemony of power—the distribution and economy of power in heaven and on earth.”⁵⁵¹ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, in a study of the “Greek word (*the*legin*),”⁵⁵² defines “[t]he*logos as ‘speaking about G*d’ or ‘G*d speaking. *The*legein* is a rhetorical activity or practice.” She argues that “the*logos is best understood, therefore, not as a system but as a rhetorical practice that does not conceive of language as clear transmission of meaning, but rather as a form of action and power that affects actual people and situations.”⁵⁵³ Accepting theology as a rhetorical practice presupposes that all theological language is “speech that constructs and shapes reality rather than [actually] reflecting it.”⁵⁵⁴

Gordon Kaufman has argued effectively that all theologians use the theological method of *imaginative construction*. He contends that theology is primarily about defining the concepts of *God* and *world*,⁵⁵⁵ because God and world are very complex concepts, the theologian can only imagine them. Kaufman explains that although both concepts are imaginatively constructed, they are important human constructs or images, “which hold together the whole fabric of a culture’s understanding of life and reality.”⁵⁵⁶ They are key cultural concepts that are passed down through generations and are always being reshaped and remade.⁵⁵⁷

⁵⁵¹ Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group Publishers, 1995), 209.

⁵⁵² Fiorenza uses “*” for words like “God” and “theology” as a strategy to emphasize the limitations of all human language that attempts to express or “name the Divine.” Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 1 n. 6.

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁵ Gordon Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method*, Third Edition (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 34.

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Whereas other theologians often deem theology to be abstract logical talk and confined to just the dogmas or doctrines of the church, Kaufman posits that this understanding of theology ignores “that the entire vocabulary of the church ... consists of ordinary words from the everyday language of people.”⁵⁵⁸ He further elaborates that “actual human speech about God, thus, is not abstract logical talk ... but rather talk about life and the world, about our deepest problems, about catastrophe and triumph, about human misery and human glory. It is about what is really important in life, how we are to live, how we comport ourselves, which styles of life are genuinely human and which dehumanizing.”⁵⁵⁹

I argue that the black preacher, in his or her imaginative construction of the concepts of God and the world, uses the language of everyday speech and creates what Kaufman describes as “world-pictures and stories.”⁵⁶⁰ Homiletics professor Cleophus LaRue writes that black preaching requires something more from the preacher. LaRue says that “the sociocultural context of marginalization and struggle has required the enunciation of a God and a gospel that spoke in a meaningful, practical, and concrete way.”⁵⁶¹ The imaginative construction of the black preacher is undeniably much more effective or ideologically powerful than that of the systematic, academic, or literary theologian—including black and womanist theologians.⁵⁶² As Dolan Hubbard asserts in his book, *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination*, “The authoritative word of the preacher’s discourse does not recognize any other discourse as its

⁵⁵⁸ Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method*, 3.

⁵⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁵⁶¹ Cleophus J. La Rue, *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 15.

⁵⁶² Olin Moyd uses the term “literary theology.” Olin P. Moyd, *The Sacred Art: Preaching and Theology in the African American Tradition* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1995), 13-32.

equal. The values that the preacher awakens in the people's imagination demand their 'unconditional allegiance.'"⁵⁶³

Wilmore describes the theology of the black preacher as "the folk theology of the religion of the people." He warns that black folk theology is not "any less or more true, any less or more faithful to Scripture and Christian tradition, nor any less or more reasonable than the theology of scholars among us."⁵⁶⁴ Thus, it is the preacher, not the academic theologian, that builds what homiletics scholar David Buttrick describes as "a faith-world, in consciousness, made from images, metaphors, illustrations and examples."⁵⁶⁵ Preachers teach their "congregations to interpret experience in the light of scripture and scripture in view of experience."⁵⁶⁶ How the preacher "names God with the world will tend to determine how people understand scripture, its meaning, message, and application to life."⁵⁶⁷ During each worship experience the preacher-as-creator⁵⁶⁸ within the communal call and response of black preaching is constructing a local or contextual theology.⁵⁶⁹ For example, at funerals the community is offered a theological position on death; at weddings, they are given theological reflections about love and whom God deems worthy of the sacred union.

⁵⁶³ M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 342-343, quoted in Dolan Hubbard, *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 10.

⁵⁶⁴ Gayraud Wilmore, *Pragmatic Spirituality: The Christian Faith through an Africentric Lens* (New York University Press, 2004), 160.

⁵⁶⁵ David G. Buttrick, *Homiletic Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 168-169.

⁵⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁸ Hubbard, *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination*, 4.

⁵⁶⁹ For discussions and definitions of *local* and *contextual theologies*, see Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Revised and Expanded Edition (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002); Robert J. Schreiter *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1985); Clemens Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity* (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 2002).

Ron Howard asserts that “[b]y means of the images chosen—and the interrelationship with each sermon and cumulatively over time—every preacher, *wittingly* or *unwittingly*, constructs ‘a lens of faith,’” and solicits the hearers “to appropriate this lens and use it as their own.”⁵⁷⁰ This lens of faith tells us “*how* God acts and *through whom*,” [emphasis in original] and how “to view the worlds in which we live.... Thus, the images used in sermons are indeed a powerful means for ‘defining reality.’”⁵⁷¹ Moreover, I argue that it is the preacher who is able to convincingly define *who are* the people of God and *who they are not*, thereby rhetorically delineating the power relationships with all the other people that populate that world. With any social construction of the people of God, there is also the construction of the margins—the outsiders—or those identified as “the Other.”⁵⁷² Religious identity, like all identity, is unfortunately “usually established as ‘us’ against ‘them.’”⁵⁷³

People are often placed in what Fernando Segovia names as “binomial opposition” with “other secondary and subordinate binominals.” Segovia explains that in “the structural binomial reality of empire ... The political, economic, and cultural center also functions as the religious center.”⁵⁷⁴ The people of God are often framed as those in the center against those in the margins: “believers/unbelievers-pagans,” “godly/ungodly,” “worshippers of the true

⁵⁷⁰ Ron R. Howard, “Gender and the Point of View in the Imagery of Preaching,” *Homiletic* 24, no 1 (Summer 1999): 1.

⁵⁷¹ Dale Spender, “Defining Reality: A Powerful Tool,” in *Language and Power*, eds. Cheris Kramarae, Muriel Schulz, and William M. O’Barr (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1984), 194-205, quoted in Howard, “Gender and the Point of View in the Imagery of Preaching,” 1.

⁵⁷² For examples of “othering” along the lines of gender, see Sandra Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 180-184.

⁵⁷³ Battle, *The Black Church in America*, 43.

⁵⁷⁴ Fernando F. Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000), 128.

God/worshippers of false gods,” and “religious/idolatrous-superstitious.”⁵⁷⁵ I suggest that this cultural imperialism is also expressed in other binomials in terms of gender, race, and class: male/female, whiteness/blackness, and rich/poor—with those in the center demanding submission and conformity from those in the margins. And to complicate matters even further, we also find that “[t]he media are becoming the new discursive site in the representation of Self and Other.”⁵⁷⁶ In both local and global contexts, the construction of the Self (nation, gender, class, and religion) and the Other is “almost always a way to define superior and inferior beings.”⁵⁷⁷

Historically, in black churches and in many faith communities, the people of God have been interpreted as biblical Israel in a covenant community, and the Other is interpreted as Egypt.⁵⁷⁸ For many churches and adherents in the New Black Church this is problematic because the covenanted and chosen people of God are often characterized as the wealthy and healthy, or those who are “blessed,” “anointed,” and “have favor.” The other side of the binomial, by default, becomes those who are not. Oftentimes, this means the poor and the sick. Because of the influx and prevalence of media, these New Black Church preachers’ messages, visions, and constructions of the world are shared on a global scale. Moreover, “[t]he visuality of the electronic media has added a sense of credulity ... as pictures are taken to be more real and

⁵⁷⁵ Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies*, 128.

⁵⁷⁶ Rosalind I. J. Hackett, “Charismatic/Pentecostal Appropriation of Media Technologies in Nigeria and Ghana,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28, no. 3 (August 1998): 259.

⁵⁷⁷ Caterina Kinnvall, “Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security,” *Political Psychology* 25, no. 5 (October 2004), 763.

⁵⁷⁸ Castelli, et al., “Ideological Criticism,” 280-284. Also see Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). Here she describes as violence, communities using the Bible to create these oppositional relationships.

credible than oral or written accounts.”⁵⁷⁹ As a result, the discourses of New Black Church preachers have greater influence and appear as more credible than those of traditional preachers and academic theologians.

In the past, to study or critique theologians and their discourses one could excavate the theology of malestream⁵⁸⁰ theologians like Paul Tillich and Karl Barth, or black theologian James Cone and womanist theologian Jacqueline Grant, by simply perusing a host of academic published texts and articles. Today, however, the theological discourses of T.D. Jakes and New Black Church preachers require an examination far beyond published literary texts. Their books are often self-published or published by non-academic and popular presses. The very structure of these books with their inspirational appeal would rarely qualify as worthy of the collections of seminary libraries. Additionally, these preachers have created their own academic institutions and independent networks for ecclesial credentialing—which they and their adherents consider as more authoritative. To investigate their theologies we must study a wide variety of cultural texts or cultural productions—films, books, televised sermons, social media, and music. We must also study these materials across different historical periods, because the preachers often alter their texts to accommodate market changes.

These *texts* encompass a variety of cultural productions and mediums. As Segovia explains about biblical texts, each text is a “rhetorical, and ideological product in its own right; an artistic construction with underlying strategic concerns and goals in the light of its own point of view, its

⁵⁷⁹ Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 239.

⁵⁸⁰ *Malestream* is a term used by feminists to explain *mainstream* theologians. Since the theology is usually about “male” experience and excludes women’s experience or the experiences of “females.”

own vision of the world and reality, within a given historical and cultural matrix.”⁵⁸¹ Likewise, each film, book, or conference is created to reach a particular audience within a particular historical moment. The majority of these texts are produced as popular culture or consumer culture.⁵⁸² These New Black Church texts are not just popular culture in a general sense, but as Rosalind Hackett posits, they are popular culture that has been Christianized “so that it is safe for consumption by ‘born again’ Christians.”⁵⁸³ Hence, to do an adequate investigation of the theologies of these preachers, we cannot avoid including popular culture in its many mass-mediated forms.⁵⁸⁴

Media scholar Stewart Hoover asserts that “[m]edia and commodity culture are now integrated into the practices of meaning and identity in profound and irreversible ways.”⁵⁸⁵ David Lyon adds that in modern societies identities are constructed through the consumption of products. We buy products that tell the story of who we are and who we are becoming.⁵⁸⁶ “[W]e shape our malleable image by what we buy.”⁵⁸⁷ Furthermore, mass media ideologically have great influence in this identity construction. “[S]ince the 1950s the mass media can be recognized as the fastest, most pervasive, and most homogenizing socializing machine. No longer simply organs of communication, media have become efficient marketing devices that not

⁵⁸¹ Fernando F. Segovia, “Toward a Hermeneutics of Diaspora: A Hermeneutics of Otherness and Engagement,” in *Reading from this Place, Vol.1: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, eds. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1991), 69.

⁵⁸² For a definition of consumer culture, see Vincent Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

⁵⁸³ Hackett, “Charismatic/Pentecostal Appropriation of Media Technologies in Nigeria and Ghana,” 258.

⁵⁸⁴ For a discussion on religion and popular culture, see Richard W. Santana and Gregory Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture: Rescripting the Sacred* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Publishers, 2008).

⁵⁸⁵ Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age*, 3.

⁵⁸⁶ David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 12.

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

only sell consumer goods and a consumer oriented way of life but also create the image required for the continued survival in [advanced] capitalism.”⁵⁸⁸

The theologies presented in the cultural texts of T.D. Jakes and other theologians of prosperity are often classified as *popular theologies*, or sometimes as *lived religion*⁵⁸⁹ and *popular religion*.⁵⁹⁰ Because of the independent and non-denominational nature of these churches, their crusades, and their television ministries, each of these categories may apply. Lived or popular religion, “however defined, has to do with what ordinary people believe and practice and how they incorporate such into their lives.”⁵⁹¹ In the academy, popular or folk theologies are studied even less frequently than liberation theologies. Because these cultural texts are considered to be popular literature, they are rarely recognized in the same way as classic theological or scholarly texts. However, if we are concerned about liberation and contextual theologies that meet people where they are, these popular theologies provide an opportunity for what Wilmore affirms as a more “praxiological approach.”⁵⁹² Tanner states that the theologies fashioned in popular religious practices possess a common trait in that they “serve the needs of people. They help make sense of, or better, serve as psychological and even hoped for real remedies for everyday distresses which tend to multiply in degree and severity with the extent of

⁵⁸⁸ Tom Moylan, “Ideology in the Age of Reagan: Four Texts,” *The Crane Bag* 9, no. 2 (1985): 117.

⁵⁸⁹ For a definition and essays on *lived religion*, see David D. Hall, ed. *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997); also see Wade Clarke Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 41.

⁵⁹⁰ For a definition of *popular religion*, see Charles H. Lippy, *Modern American Popular Religion: A Critical Assessment and Annotated Bibliography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996).

⁵⁹¹ Charles H. Lippy, *Being Religious American Style: A History of Popular Religiosity in the United States* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 2.

⁵⁹² Gayraud Wilmore celebrates the work of womanist theologians, but feels that “the weapons they have chosen to engage issues of justice have primarily been literary.” He urges for womanists to choose “a praxiological approach that brings them into more direct contact with poor black women to engage issues.” Wilmore, *Pragmatic Spirituality*, 69.

one's marginalization."⁵⁹³ These popular theologies give us a different look at liberation practices that are often missed in academic theological discourses. I propose a cultural studies approach to examine theologies of prosperity. Cultural studies as a discipline is better suited to bridge the chasm within the academic study of religion between academic and popular theological discourses. This is especially important for any critique of theologians of prosperity and their contextual theologies.⁵⁹⁴

THEOLOGICAL METHOD

My proposal for a theological method is only one of many possibilities; we start with Tillich's proposal for systematic theology. He defines theology and its function in his three volume work, *Systematic Theology*. His work and his understanding of theology have been used as a kind of standard for many theologians. Many reflect on the famous quote that opens the text:

Theology, as a function of the church, must serve the needs of the church. A theological system is supposed to satisfy two basic needs: the statement of truth of the Christian message and the interpretation of that truth for a new generation. Theology moves back and forth between the two poles, the eternal truth of its foundation and the temporal situation in which the eternal truth is received.⁵⁹⁵

Tillich writes from his socio-historical context when much of Protestant Christianity was practiced predominantly in denominational churches with a modernist view of truth. At that time, theology as a discourse was even more positioned for only professional theologians in seminaries

⁵⁹³ Kathryn Tanner, "Theology and Popular Culture," in *Changing Conversations: Religious Reflection and Cultural Analysis*, eds. Dwight N. Hopkins and Sheila Greeve Davaney (New York: Routledge, 1996), 102.

⁵⁹⁴ For works on cultural studies and theology, see: Dwight N. Hopkins and Sheila Greeve Davaney, eds., *Changing Conversations: Religious Reflection and Cultural Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Delvin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney, and Kathryn Tanner, eds., *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Kelton Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 53-71. Also see Jonathan Walton, "A Cultural Analysis of the Black Electronic Church Phenomenon," (PhD Dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 2006), 18-58. For a general discussion of cultural studies, see Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms," *Media, Culture, and Society* 2, no. 1 (January 1980): 57-82; and Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler, *Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

⁵⁹⁵ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3.

than it is now.⁵⁹⁶ I am interested in his discussion about theology because his work speaks to my concerns about the Black Church and the New Black Church. I see the major difference between these two models being *the truth of the Christian message and the interpretation of that truth for a new generation*. The generational issues are what Manning Marable in his book *Beyond Black and White* sees as “a cultural clash” between African Americans born before 1964—or “the ‘We Shall Overcome’ generation and the ‘hip-hop’ generation.”⁵⁹⁷ I have described the ideology and process as Wal-Maritization to explain the impact on our current religious situation from the 1980s to the present.

Tillich describes his theological method as “a method of correlation.” Christian theology happens between two distinct inseparable poles, what he calls “the human situation” and the eternal message of God’s saving work in Christ.⁵⁹⁸ The situation is essentially the entire cultural context in which the theologian finds him or herself at a particular moment in history. Systematic theology for Tillich is an apologetic or answering theology, and not just a kerygmatic theology. The *kerygma*, what he considers to be “the immovable truth” of the Christian message, is important.⁵⁹⁹ However, Tillich wants theologians to be as serious about the situation in which they live, as they are about the kerygma of the Christian message. If not, theologians may find themselves giving answers to questions that the world is not asking.⁶⁰⁰ “Kerygmatic theology

⁵⁹⁶ For Tillich’s discussion of the structure and types of theology, see Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 28-34.

⁵⁹⁷ Manning Marable, *Beyond Black and White: Transforming African-American Politics*, Second Edition (New York: Verso, 2009), 206.

⁵⁹⁸ Donald Mark Davis, “Paul Tillich’s Theological Method and the Globalization of Capitalism,” (Ph.D. Diss., University of Iowa, 1999), 11.

⁵⁹⁹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 7.

⁶⁰⁰ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Second Edition (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1989), 21-22.

must give up its exclusive transcendence and take seriously the attempt of apologetic theology to answer the questions put before it by the contemporary situation.”⁶⁰¹

Two formal criteria must be present for all theology according to Tillich. The first criterion is that “the object of theology is what concerns us ultimately,” and the second is that the “ultimate concern is that which determines our being and non-being for us.”⁶⁰² The work of the systematic theologian begins by first making an analysis of the human situation. This entails “a principled attempt to interpret one’s particular milieu in order to raise questions of ultimacy that are implied in the situation.”⁶⁰³ The theologian “employs materials made available by [humanity’s] self-interpretation in all realms of culture. Philosophy contributes, but so do poetry, drama, the novel, therapeutic psychology and sociology. The theologian organizes these materials in relation to the answer given by the Christian message.”⁶⁰⁴ The goal for the systematic theologian is to craft a theological system that “demonstrates that the symbols used in the Christian message are the appropriate answers to the questions.”⁶⁰⁵ Tillich argues that systematic theology has always used the method of correlation “sometimes more, sometimes less, ... The method of correlation explains the contents of the Christian faith through existential questions and theological answers in mutual interdependence.”⁶⁰⁶

⁶⁰¹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 7.

⁶⁰² *Ibid.*, 12, 14.

⁶⁰³ Davis, “Paul Tillich’s Theological Method,” 11.

⁶⁰⁴ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 63.

⁶⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁶⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

Although Tillich calls his work a systematic theology, he does not privilege systematic theology over exegesis, homiletics, or any other theology,⁶⁰⁷ nor does he think that that which we call theology should be reserved only for the professional theologian doing systematic theology. His “criterion of every theological discipline is whether or not it deals with the Christian message as a matter or ultimate concern.”⁶⁰⁸ His definition of theology is “the “methodological explanation of the contents of the Christian faith. This definition is valid for all theological disciplines.”⁶⁰⁹

Method, for Tillich, is merely a tool. As such, he warns against methodological imperialism. The method that a theologian chooses is “a theological assertion” that is “made with passion and risk; ... System and method belong to each other and are to be judged with each other.”⁶¹⁰ “Methodological awareness always follows application of a method; it never precedes it.” Tillich warns that the type of method “is unimportant as long as it proves adequate to its subject.”⁶¹¹ His three-volume text acts as an example of his method and his proposal for both a systematic theology and a theological system. The validity of any theological system—including his own—is to be judged by the response of others. “It will be a positive judgment if the theologians of the coming generations acknowledge that it has helped them, and non-theological thinkers as well, to understand the Christian message as the answer to the questions implied in their own and in every human situation.”⁶¹²

⁶⁰⁷ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 28.

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid., 8.

⁶¹¹ Ibid., 34.

⁶¹² Ibid.

As a constructive theologian, the method that I propose must also be measured by that same judgment. My intention is that this method will allow future black and womanist theologians to better examine and understand popular theologies of preachers and their theological systems. More importantly, it is critical that liberation theology speak to the existential questions that appear to be very important to a large number of African Americans who support and follow these preachers. Dwight Hopkins reminds us that “[t]he theologian is called by God to raise critical and self-critical questions about what the church and the community are called by God to preach, say, and do. And the theologian’s role is to see if the called church, community, and theologian are practicing their vocations.”⁶¹³

T.D. Jakes’s theology and the theological system he creates through his preaching and his many texts is not a systematic theology. Nor do I consider my discussion of Jakes a systematic theology, at least not a systematic theology that takes the various doctrines of the church and discusses them in detail like the three volumes of Tillich’s *Systematic Theology*. However, because of the number of sermons, books, and products that Jakes has produced, I do believe that he presents both a theology and a theological system. It is systematic in ways that Serene Jones defines “systematic.” It is “internally coherent and practically viable,” and he tells “the Christian story in a language and with images and doctrines that hold together as a whole.”⁶¹⁴ I have made it clear that his theology and system will not meet the standards of an academy theology. However, as Max Weber has argued: “All theology represents an intellectual *rationalization* of the possession of sacred values. Each theology “presupposes that the world must have a *meaning*, [emphasis in original] and the question is how to interpret this meaning so that it is

⁶¹³ Dwight N. Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology* (Marynoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 213.

⁶¹⁴ Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 18.

intellectually conceivable.”⁶¹⁵In other words, the doctrines would not hold together or be considered as internally coherent and practically viable for the academic theologian. Jakes’s system and theology, however, meet both Tillich’s formal criteria of ultimate concern. More importantly, adherents consider Jakes’s theology as “intellectually conceivable” with a rationality and logic that they perceive as viable. Moreover, many of the adherents are often critical, and at times in direct opposition to the rationalization and values of traditional preachers and academic liberation theologians. ⁶¹⁶

Jakes’s theology, as Tillich spells it out, is “a rational interpretation of the religious substance of rites, symbols, and myths.”⁶¹⁷ Like black liberation theologians, Jakes rationally interprets the most significant rites, symbols, and myths of Black Christianity: God, Jesus, Exodus, and the Promised Land. Tillich stresses, “Theology must interpret the totality of symbols, institutions, and ideas in which an ultimate concern has embodied itself ... It works on the basis, in the material and for the purpose of an actual religion.”⁶¹⁸ The theology of T.D. Jakes and other popular preachers is just one more location where the ultimate concern of black religion presents itself.

A Collaborative Effort between Professional Theologian and Folk Theologian

The method I propose is a collaborative effort between the professional theologian and the preacher as a folk theologian. Tillich argues that the church or the faith community is the “place of work” of the systematic or professional theologian, “even if [s/he] lives and works in

⁶¹⁵ H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 153.

⁶¹⁶ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 149.

⁶¹⁷ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 16.

⁶¹⁸ Paul Tillich, “Problem of Theological Method II,” *Journal of Religion* 27, no. 1 (January 1947): 18.

protest against it.”⁶¹⁹ Tillich defines two types of reason. “Ecstatic reason” of faith is different than the “technical or formal reason” of the professional theologian. Ecstatic reason “has a completely existential, self-determining, and self-surrendering character,” the kind of “reason grasped by an ultimate concern.”⁶²⁰ The defining aspect of any theological system is the theological norm. The formulation of the norm is a “matter of personal and communal religious experience and, at the same time, a matter of methodological judgment of the theologian. It is simultaneously received by ecstatic reason and conceived through technical reason.”⁶²¹ The collaboration with the preacher and professional theologian is an excellent way to bring together both the ecstatic and formal reason, as well as what Tillich describes as the “historical-critical” and the “devotional-interpretative.”⁶²²

I also suggest that the professional theologian include his or her social location and historical context in their work. This is a common practice for many liberation theologians. Liberation theology is always contextual, never static, but dynamic. As such, there will always be a need for new theological responses and new voices from different communities. As professional theologians and scholars we are also participating in the social construction of reality. The methodological strategy of including the theologian’s identity (his or her story) is to avoid the mistakes that liberation theologians have made in the past, when they advocated “liberation from one oppression” while remaining “blind to other forms of oppression.”⁶²³ I am

⁶¹⁹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 48.

⁶²⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁶²¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁶²² *Ibid.*, 36.

⁶²³ Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel, eds., *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, rev. and exp. ed. (Maryknoll,: Orbis Books, 1998), 5.

not just interested in the cultural significance of the socio-historical location of the theologian. I am much more interested in the theologian's privilege—which includes professional or vocational privilege. From a cultural studies perspective, acknowledging who and where you are allows the reader to determine the impact (positive or negative) of your story and social location on your research and social constructions.⁶²⁴

For instance, the theology of James Cone cannot be understood outside of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement, along with his academic training as a scholar and his ordination in the A.M.E. church. Equally important is Ruether's location as a lay Catholic woman and a scholar writing during the Women's Movement. Both the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement are popular movements that were critical to what Tillich would describe as the situation. The stories, identities, and the history of the writings of Cone and Ruether are vital to understanding their critiques and their theologies. Just as there is diversity among liberation theologians from various social, geographical, and historical contexts,⁶²⁵ the same diversity exists for prosperity preachers or theologians of prosperity. The collaboration between the professional theologian and the preacher fosters dialogue and creates a more likely possibility for the theologian to *speak with* instead of *speaking for*.⁶²⁶

I have already shared my socio-historical location as well as my particular vocational interests. As a professional theologian and preacher my existential questions are about the ideological influence of advanced capitalism as manifested in theologies of prosperity.

⁶²⁴ For a discussion on autobiographical expression or the scholars' inclusion of social location, see Victor Anderson, *Creative Exchange: A Constructive Theology of African American Religious Experience* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 4-7. I have given detailed information about my social location in the Introduction.

⁶²⁵ For an example of this diversity among liberation theologians, see Thistlethwaite and Engle, *Lift Every Voice*, Revised Edition, 4-5.

⁶²⁶ For a discussion on the ethical responsibilities of scholars in terms of speaking for and speaking with, see Linda Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," *Cultural Critique* 20 (Winter 1991-92): 5-32.

Moreover, I question how these theologies are changing the religious and cultural landscape of black religion in black Protestant churches. Global Wal-Martization is increasingly creating two groups of people (the haves and the have nots)—or two communities made up of the rich and less rich, and the poor and more poor. The theological questions of our historical situation have to be about issues of justice and power as expressed in the ideas of liberation. As Schussler Fiorenza asserts, “[t]he central the*logical question today is ... the ethical question of what kind of G*d religious communities and their scriptures proclaim. Is it a G*d legitimating the inequality, exploitation, and injustice of empire or is it a G*d inspiring liberation and well-being?”⁶²⁷

I am especially concerned with the ideas of liberation communicated in both American and African American religious mythologies of success. These stories help frame our ethical positions and ideas about justice in terms of wealth and poverty. Time Magazine’s question on its cover is relevant for most theological and ethical discussions: “Does God want you to be rich?”⁶²⁸ For my investigation, I have narrowed “the situation” to black religion as communicated in the theological discourses of the Black Church and the New Black Church.

Liberation theology cannot afford to be confined to the academy and thus not seriously consider the existential questions of liberation presented in popular culture by these popular preachers. My questions center on what is happening to the relationship of pastor and parishioner in black churches. Using T.D. Jakes as a case study, I am interested in articulating his theology and his theological system in order to better understand the relationship of the pastor/CEO and the women who are parishioners/customers. I am attempting to collaboratively work with T.D.

⁶²⁷ Schussler Fiorenza, *The Power of the Word*, 54.

⁶²⁸ David Van Biema and Jeff Chu, “Does God Want You to be Rich?,” *Time*, September 18, 2006, 48–56.

Jakes as a preacher to articulate the worldview and faith-world that he presents to African American women.

The methodology that I propose is two-fold.⁶²⁹ First, the professional theologian, after a cultural analysis of the situation, determines his or her critical or existential questions. He or she then uses Biography as Theology to examine the life story of the preacher to answer those questions. Second, the professional theologian examines the brand itself for the theology and ideology presented in it. The brand, which always has a story, is treated as the theological norm. The brand becomes what James Cone defines as “the hermeneutical principle which is decisive in specifying how sources are to be used by rating their importance and by distinguishing the relevant data from the irrelevant.”⁶³⁰

Biography/Ethnography as Theology (T.D. Jakes)

To study T.D. Jakes or any other popular preacher, I propose using James William McClendon Jr.’s method of *Biography as Theology*⁶³¹ or Theophus Smith’s expansion of the method, *Ethnography as Theology*.⁶³² McClendon’s method can be summed up as doing theology by excavating the “image-governed experience” from life stories.⁶³³ He understands

⁶²⁹ I am using this method to study T.D. Jakes, however I think the method can be applied to a variety of popular preachers, including preachers like Norman Vincent Peale with *The Power of Positive Thinking* or Rick Warren’s *Purpose Driven Life*.

⁶³⁰ James H. Cone, “The Sources and Norm of Black Theology,” in *The Black Experience in Religion: A Book of Readings*, ed. C. Eric Lincoln (New York: Anchor Books, 1974), 123.

⁶³¹ James Wm. McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today’s Theology* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1974). For an example of this methodology, see J. Deotis Roberts, *Bonhoeffer and King: Speaking Truth to Power* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

⁶³² Theophus Smith, “Ethnography-As-Theology: Inscribing the African American Sacred Story,” in *Theology Without Foundations: Religious Practice and the Future of Theological Truth*, eds. Stanley Hauerwas, Nancey Murphy, and Mark Nation (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 117-139.

⁶³³ McClendon, *Biography as Theology*, 92.

Christian faith as comprised of “images applied to life.”⁶³⁴ He argues that life stories, or biographies, provide the images that epitomize the life perspective of a person. The professional theologian must find “the dominant or controlling *images*”⁶³⁵ by which the biographical subject “understood [themselves], faced the critical situations in [their] life, and chiseled out their own destiny.”⁶³⁶ By “images” he means “traditional or canonical metaphors” that have been applied in real life circumstances; as such they “bear the content of faith itself.”⁶³⁷ By examining these important images and how they are used, the professional theologian is able to understand the worldview or vision of the person studied.⁶³⁸ McClendon’s discussion of Martin Luther King is a good example of his method:

King understands his work under the image of Exodus; he is leading his people on a new crossing of the Red Sea; he is Moses who goes to the mountaintop, but who is not privileged to enter with his people into the [P]romised [L]and. These are major images,...*such images are of the very substance of religion* [emphasis in original]; that these sacred images are not ... peripheral to faith; that images, while not constituent of religion, are of central importance to it.⁶³⁹

Along with the biblical images like Exodus and Moses, McClendon also includes secular images. In his biographical sketch of King, he points to King’s use of “Satyagraha, the truth-warrior and the American ‘dream.’”⁶⁴⁰

Biography is also important because many Americans have shifted from what sociologist Robert Wuthnow describes as a “dwelling-oriented spirituality” to a “seeking-oriented

⁶³⁴ McClendon, *Biography as Theology*, 99.

⁶³⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁶³⁶ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁶³⁷ McClendon, *Biography as Theology*, 97.

⁶³⁸ *Ibid.*, 96

⁶³⁹ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁶⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 96.

spirituality.”⁶⁴¹ Before the 1950s institutions like churches and individuals were viewed differently. Social status in faith communities was both ascribed and achieved. Identity was ascribed by the community and a person then achieved their status by “expending effort to attain a position.”⁶⁴² In today’s context, however, “[a] person does not have an ascribed identity or attain an achieved identity but creates identity by negotiating a wide range of materials. Each person’s identity is thus understandable only through biography.”⁶⁴³ The professional theologian uses Biography as Theology to explore the identity or life story of the preacher and to show how that life story and these images shape the preacher’s theology.

Tillich argues that the systematic theologian, and I would include the preacher as a folk theologian, is impacted by his or her religion and culture. The “impact on the [theologian] ... begins with the language he [or she] uses and the cultural education that he [or she] has received. His [or her] spiritual life is shaped by both social and individual encounters with reality.”⁶⁴⁴ Biography as Theology is how the professional theologian explores the social encounter of the preacher in his or her faith community, or brand community, as well as the preacher’s encounter with secular reality. This information becomes the data by which to answer the critical questions raised by the professional theologian in his or her analysis of the human situation.

For our investigation of T.D. Jakes, these questions must be asked: How does Jakes make use of the rites, symbols, and myths that have defined black Christianity? How does Jakes describe liberation as expressed in his interpretations of the Exodus and Promised Land? Is it

⁶⁴¹Robert Wuthow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 9.

⁶⁴²Ibid.

⁶⁴³Ibid., 10.

⁶⁴⁴Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 38.

individual liberation or the communal liberation of black theology? These questions are important because how preachers and theologians use these concepts is the litmus test for exposing theologians of prosperity. Along with the traditional biblical images and concepts, the secular image of CEO/entrepreneur is also critical to understanding T.D. Jakes. Is Jakes's definition of entrepreneur/CEO supportive of an ideology of empire? Does his explanation of his role as a CEO or entrepreneur promote a contextual theology of empire? In order to adequately answer these questions we have to navigate our way through thousands of branded products and events. For the purposes of this study we are interested in the theology communicated in the WTAL brand—the brand that is specifically marketed to women, and the one that is Jakes's most successful brand.

Brand as Theology and Theological Norm

James Twitchell in his book, *Branded Nation*, asserts that “[m]uch of our shared knowledge about ourselves and our culture comes to us through storytelling—the storytelling of marketers or “branding.”⁶⁴⁵ He explains that “in the modern world almost all consumer goods are marketed via stories.”⁶⁴⁶ This shared knowledge also includes theological knowledge that is communicated through consumer goods. Twitchell simplifies the term “branding” as the practice of “storifying things.”⁶⁴⁷ He suggests that branding is purposeful and has a goal. It is “[t]he telling of a story about a product to generate an emotion.”⁶⁴⁸ The story about the product “is told in many ways, such as through advertising, packaging, endorsements, PR, word of mouth, [and]

⁶⁴⁵ James B. Twitchell, *Branded Nation: The Marketing of Megachurch, College, Inc., and Museumworld* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 2.

⁶⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁶⁴⁸ James B. Twitchell, *Shopping for God: How Christianity Went from in Your Heart to in Your Face* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), 74.

logos.”⁶⁴⁹ This branding, or storyfying of things (products), explains many contemporary religious practices. Branding is ultimately about identity, including religious identity.⁶⁵⁰

Mara Einstein states that adherents “no longer practice their faith within the confines of a church or synagogue, but instead get their spiritual fulfillment through interacting with religious products and events.”⁶⁵¹ Her book shows how popular preachers use branding to create what she calls “faith brands” and “brand communities.” Faith brands are defined as “spiritual products that have been given popular meaning and awareness through marketing....These products may be books, religious courses, a spiritual practice, a pastor, or some combination.”⁶⁵² Brand communities are “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of the brand.”⁶⁵³ She says that faith brands have the same power as other brands in that they “communicate to other people who we are ...We use brands for identity creation.”⁶⁵⁴

T.D Jakes is an example of a faith brand.⁶⁵⁵ Subsequently, WTAL is one of his many brands with its own brand community. Because of the different brands and their different target audiences, I argue that each brand acts as a theological norm. More importantly, individual brands have different theological propositions and in some cases a different ideology. In other

⁶⁴⁹ Twitchell, *Shopping for God*, 74.

⁶⁵⁰ Phil Cooke, *Branding Faith: Why Some Churches and Non-profits Impact Culture and Others Don't* (Ventura, CA: Regal Publishing, 2008), 26.

⁶⁵¹ Einstein, *Brands of Faith*, 60.

⁶⁵² *Ibid.*, 93.

⁶⁵³ A. M. Muniz and T.C. Guinn, “Brand Community,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 27, no. 4 (March 2001): 412, quoted in Einstein, *Brands of Faith*, 86.

⁶⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶⁵⁵ Einstein also includes Joyce Meyer, Joel Olsteen, and Oprah Winfrey as examples of faith brands. *Faith Brands*, 93.

words, the stories that Jakes presents to women in WTAL are not the same as what he presents to the men in *Manpower*. Even the messages for women in WTAL may differ from the *God's Leading Ladies* brand. WTAL "targets women who desire to be 'loosed' from debilitating conceptions of the self or 'the past'; [God's Leading Ladies] is for women who have already dealt with their emotional past and pain. These 'leading ladies' know who they are and now want to be directed toward their destiny."⁶⁵⁶ Brands differ mainly because each brand is designed to meet the needs of a specific target audience.⁶⁵⁷

Paul Tillich argues that the norm in a theological system is not abstract like his two criteria about ultimate concern. "In contrast, the norm is positive, constructive, and concrete because it indicates the direction and content for the specific system."⁶⁵⁸ Brands, because they are stories that are communicated through advertising, cannot be abstract; rather, they have to communicate their messages in a few words and be easily comprehended by the target audience. Tillich also states that a true norm cannot be only true for the theologian, but must be understood and accepted by others. The norm is formed by "[c]ollective as well as individual experiences."⁶⁵⁹ Prosperity preachers often discontinue brands that are not successful or turn out to be not as profitable as they had expected.⁶⁶⁰ Some brands go through extensive market research. Thus, the brands that remain are those that have been accepted by adherents and the

⁶⁵⁶ Wiggins, *Righteous Content*, 91.

⁶⁵⁷ The preachers would assert that these are just the focus points of the ministry, and would not really identify them as brand communities. Identifying them as brand communities would expose them to be only consumer communities or target audiences and not faith communities.

⁶⁵⁸ Mary Ann Stenger, "Paul Tillich's Theory of Theological Norms and the Problems of Relativism and Subjectivism," *Journal of Religion* 62, no. 4 (October 1982): 363.

⁶⁵⁹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 52.

⁶⁶⁰ *Megafest* in 2006 was discontinued indefinitely in America, then re-established in South Africa. See Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 68.

brand communities. The consumption or participation in the brand communities is proof that adherents are buying into or accepting the story communicated through the brand. The fact that adherents continue to participate in the brand communities is why the brands that remain should be acknowledged as a theological norm that is accepted—as Tillich argues—by more than just the preacher.

Many of these brands, like WTAL, are tied to a biblical story or a particular biblical text. One could posit that the biblical text or the Bible is what is most important, and as such should be considered as the theological norm. However, the brand, like Tillich’s theological norm, is more significant than the Bible or a biblical text. Like many theologians, the Bible is seen as a source for doing theology. But, Tillich argues that the Bible has never “been the norm of systematic theology. The norm has been a principle derived from the Bible in an encounter between Bible and church.”⁶⁶¹ The norm is also more than a mere interpretation of a biblical passage. According to Tillich, the norm actually dictates the theologian’s use of the Bible. For example, Martin Luther’s theological norm is “justification through faith,” and is taken from the book of Romans. Although justification by faith is from the Bible, the power and significance of the norm is that it actually dictated which biblical books were included in what became the Protestant Bible.⁶⁶² Prosperity preachers often use the Bible or biblical texts for their brands. It is the brand, however—not the Bible—or any biblical text for that matter—that acts as the theological norm.

Tillich’s theological norm is not permanent; it changes. He explains that “[e]very period of church history ... unconsciously or consciously contributes through its special situation to the

⁶⁶¹Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 50-51.

⁶⁶² Ibid.

establishment of a theological norm”⁶⁶³ “The norm for a theological system is created in the process which considers past theological norms in the relation to the present culture and historical situation.”⁶⁶⁴ I argue that for our current religious situation, perhaps nothing has contributed to the distortion of the Christian message more than prosperity theology, especially for the theology that is practiced in black churches.

The theological norm for Word of Faith, as articulated by founder Kenneth Hagin and most theologians of prosperity, is taken from the scripture: “Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth (3 John 1:2 KJV).” The actual theological norm can be stated as, “God desires for all believers to be prosperous (healthy and wealthy).” Because it is the norm for all theologies of prosperity, the theological systems of prosperity preachers—their sermons, books, and conferences—are all guided by this general or global norm. In the same way that Protestants and Protestant theologians are guided by Luther’s “justification by faith,” prosperity adherents and their theologians are guided by the norm of prosperity for all believers.

So far in this chapter I have articulated the general theological norm for theologies of prosperity and have determined that because of the various brand communities and their particular target audiences, the brand acts as a theological norm. Now what remains is to ask the rest of the questions that Tillich deems important for every theological system: What are the sources? What is the medium in which those sources are received?⁶⁶⁵ Tillich writes that the “sources can be sources only for one who participates in them, that is through experience.

⁶⁶³ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 51.

⁶⁶⁴ Stenger, “Paul Tillich’s Theory of Theological Norms,” 361.

⁶⁶⁵ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 34.

Experience is the medium through which the sources ‘speak’ to us, through which we can receive them.”⁶⁶⁶ I propose using qualitative research methods to participate in or experience the theology presented in the brand. There are a wide range of events and products in each brand. The norm determines the sources; therefore, the branded products and events become the *sources*. The professional theologian decides which qualitative research methods (ethnography, content analysis, case study, etc.) and which products (sermons, music, books or films) based on the existential questions he or she raises, are appropriate for the ideological critique. Both the methods and choice of products and events are decided based on the theologian’s focus or what Tillich would define as the existential questions of the situation.

For this study, we are interested in the WTAL brand. T.D. Jakes and the WTAL brand are a *case study* for the New Black Church model of ministry. Through *participant observation* and *content analysis* or *close reading* of various branded products and events, I explore the theology presented in the WTAL brand as it relates to women. I am interested in the relationship of pastor and parishioner, so I attempt to examine both sides of the brand. I articulate the theology of the producer (preacher/CEO) as a folk theologian, as well as the experiences of the women purchasing the products (consumers/parishioners). Qualitative research methods provide the lens through which to view how the theology and worldview of Jakes is presented, as well as how it is received by women.

To summarize, in this chapter I have outlined the methodological challenges in any attempt to provide a scholarly critique of the theology of popular prosperity preachers as well as challenges implicit in any study of the faith of African American women. I have argued that prosperity preachers create theological systems that are expressed in many brands. The theologies of these preachers are ideologically more persuasive than those of academic

⁶⁶⁶ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 40.

theologians. Therefore, to provide a scholarly response we need an adequate theological method. The proposed interdisciplinary methodology is an ideological critique with a theological method that uses Biography as Theology and treats the brand as the theological norm. The method intentionally links the academic theologian with the popular preacher. Qualitative research methods provide access to the theology presented in the brand. The remainder of the dissertation will be the actual application of the proposed method.

CHAPTER 5
BIOGRAPHY (TELLING THE STORY) AS THEOLOGY
T.D. JAKES AS PASTOR AND CEO

“There are always two people competing in my head: Bill Gates and Mother Teresa.”
~T.D. Jakes

Scholars are divided on whether or not Jakes should be identified as a prosperity preacher. Although Jakes has distanced himself from Word of Faith, I contend that the theological system and the particular theology qualify as “a contextual theology of empire.” Jakes may be very different from the most extreme Word of Faith preacher, but he should still be included as one of the many theologians of prosperity on the continuum. My main argument is that his affluent lifestyle, religious practices, and use of Scripture are the same as that of prosperity preachers. In the previous chapter I presented a historical overview and the many definitions of prosperity theology. I also situated these theologies within the framework of the first Gilded Age, the American Way of Life, and the gospel of wealth. Jakes’s hypercapitalist and consumerist approach to faith is ideologically consistent with the cultural framework of the Second Gilded Age. His contextual theology of empire is consistent with Herberg’s conclusion about the American Way of Life as America’s true religion, and Garfinkle’s definition of the gospel of wealth.⁶⁶⁷ T.D. Jakes and his theology are aligned with the positions taken by an earlier generation of celebrity clerics like Russell Conwell, as well as the theological position of today’s prosperity preachers. He does not challenge the system of advanced capitalism; instead, Jakes encourages adherents to find success within it. As a result, adherents are interpellated (to use Althusser’s term) to ignore capitalism’s structural and systemic inequities.

This chapter is a demonstration of McClendon’s method of *Biography as Theology*. The goal is to present a methodology that treats these popular preachers as theologians so that their

⁶⁶⁷ Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*; Garfinkle, *The American Dream vs. The Gospel of Wealth*.

theologies are at least in dialogue with academic theologies. In some ways, treating these preachers as theologians privileges them, and also privileges their theologies. In other words, I acknowledge that it gives them the same status and respect as academic liberation theologians. As a constructive theologian and scholar, I am intentionally trying to give these preachers and their theologies a fair critique. By fair, I mean that I want to give them the same dignity and respect that womanist and black liberation theologians required of hegemonic white, European, and mainstream theologians.⁶⁶⁸ Moreover, a cultural studies approach is intentional to not privilege academic discourses over popular discourses. Instead, both kinds of discourses are placed in dialogue based on the assumption that each has scholarly and truth-telling value.

McClendon's method calls for the professional theologian to seek out the central image, or a cluster of images, that is representative of how the person studied understands him or herself. The professional theologian observes how the chosen biographical subject has applied these images to their life. For McClendon, the application of these images answers "a (preliminary) theological question, *What is religion?*"⁶⁶⁹ He defines religion as a "life lived out under the governance of a central vision."⁶⁷⁰ For that reason, my application of his method is for the professional theologian to determine the images that best represent the central vision of the preacher he or she is studying. The images chosen should be those that characterize the preacher's theological contribution to their faith community. McClendon considers these archetypal images to be the very substance of religion.⁶⁷¹ The preachers, like the biographical

⁶⁶⁸ See Glen R. Bucher, "Toward a Liberation Theology of 'the Oppressor,'" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 44, no. 3 (September 1976): 517-534.

⁶⁶⁹ McClendon, *Biography as Theology*, 96.

⁶⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁶⁷¹ McClendon, *Biography as Theology*, 96.

subjects that McClendon studied, are role models. Hence, by showing how the preachers and subjects have applied the images to their life circumstances, the scholar is also illuminating how the adherents of the preacher's faith community are expected to theologically use these images.

I argue that in the biographies of T.D. Jakes and the majority of theologians of prosperity, pastor and entrepreneur are the prominent images or metaphors.⁶⁷² Additionally, both images are critical to understanding the Wal-Martization of African American religion. Both pastor and entrepreneur (CEO) are cultural signifiers that define both the sacred and secular vocational identities of these preachers. Furthermore, the terms are important to our investigation because they both represent leadership roles and vocational identities that help define and justify success in American culture—especially economic success within advanced capitalism.

Pastors have pastoral power and CEOs have economic power, which means as leaders, both groups are able to use their discursive power to ideologically endorse the individuals that are considered to be deserving of wealth, as well as whether or not their wealth has been earned ethically. They are also positioned to make judgments about the deserving poor. Their judgments and endorsements are often presented in their many communications, and in the public discourses found in their books, interviews, or sermons. When pastors promote theologies of prosperity and CEOs promote the ideology of the gospel of wealth, both groups are affirming that their wealth is justified and ethical providing the rich are philanthropic and Christians give tithes and offerings.⁶⁷³ Additionally, prosperity pastors and celebrity CEOs are often presented as

⁶⁷² In this chapter, when I use the term “pastor” as an image, I am including terms like “preacher,” “evangelist,” “televangelist” and “minister.” Commentators and scholars use each of these terms to refer to Jakes’s vocational identity as a pastor. The same applies for the image “entrepreneur.” Whenever I use “entrepreneur,” I am also including terms like “businessman,” “CEO,” “producer,” “writer,” and “record label owner.”—in other words, any vocational identity that represents Jakes as a business owner or someone who is selling commercialized products.

⁶⁷³ I am not suggesting that prosperity preachers justify all the wealth of all entrepreneurs and CEOs. I assume that they are referring to the entrepreneurs that are earning their wealth by legal means.

role models for the poor. Ideologically, their stories sanction a worldview that implies that the poor merely need to work harder or apply prosperity principles in order to be wealthy. The end result is a cultural blaming of the victim(s). The poor are blamed for their poverty and attention is diverted away from placing blame on the political and economic systems of advanced capitalism.

How T.D. Jakes interprets and tells his life story as an entrepreneur and pastor (businessman and minister) is foundational to his worldview and theological system. T.D. Jakes, more than any other African American preacher, is an exemplar of our “free enterprise system [that] is driven by acquisition. Consumers must consume, capitalists must accumulate capital, and labor must sell its labor.”⁶⁷⁴ Jakes embodies his celebrity or branded identity in the performance of his vocational identities and leadership roles as the pastor of a supermegachurch, televangelist, and the CEO of several for-profit companies. He is consistently acquiring more companies and producing more products and events for African American churchwomen to consume. As a true capitalist, he is always accumulating capital by selling his labor and the labor of others.⁶⁷⁵ Shayne Lee summarizes that “Jakes’s commercialized spirituality” is a celebration of “hypercaptalist values” and that Jakes “often defends his extraordinary wealth by reminding critics that he is both a businessman and a minister and that God has bountifully blessed both missions, but his followers are often naïve about how the nexus of businessman and minister forms a strategic multimillion-dollar machine.”⁶⁷⁶ The methodology of an ideological critique is purposeful to expose this multi-million dollar machine for the supposed “naïve followers”—the

⁶⁷⁴ Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hollywood Dreams and Biblical Stories* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 143.

⁶⁷⁵ Jakes not only sells his own labor, which includes the selling of his image, story, and sermons, but he also sells the labor (writing, music, and preaching) of others.

⁶⁷⁶ Lee, *T. D Jakes: America’s New Preacher*, 182.

majority of whom are women. Just as important, the methodology is also for scholars and theologians.

Biography as Theology is the first step of my proposed theological method, which seeks to expose Jakes's contextual theology and worldview. Future liberation theologians and Black Church scholars should be aware that the churches in the New Black Church still possess characteristics of what Stephen Warner defines as ascribed religion,⁶⁷⁷ or religion-as-institution.⁶⁷⁸ But scholars must also be aware of how New Black Church preachers create a prosperity worldview and contextual theologies that represent more of the *achieved* religion that Warner identifies.⁶⁷⁹ In other words, adherents are expected to *achieve* their prosperity and branded identity. Adherents are often responding to the manipulation of Scripture and the traditions and rituals of the Black Church by prosperity preachers. Billingsley affirms that these preachers effectively “[use] religious symbols, myths, and ideological rituals to reconcile new intellectual currents to traditional religious beliefs.”⁶⁸⁰

The folk theologies of these preachers are changing the way many African Americans do church. As a result, they are also changing the way we need to study and do theology. Along with televangelism and media exposure, how these popular preachers articulate their roles as pastor and entrepreneur is critical to why theologies of prosperity are now mainstream and no longer sequestered to the margins of Protestant Christianity. Television, more than any other medium, has provided mass exposure for these preachers and has contributed greatly to neo-

⁶⁷⁷ R. Stephen Warner, “Work in Progress Toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States,” *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 5 (March 1993): 1044-1093.

⁶⁷⁸ Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age*, 39.

⁶⁷⁹ Warner, “Work in Progress,” 1076.

⁶⁸⁰ Billingsley, *It's a New Day*, 13.

Pentecostalism's emergence into the religious mainstream.⁶⁸¹ These theologies are also very "American." Quentin Schultz has suggested that they are actually more "American than Christian."⁶⁸² Prosperity preachers present themselves as leaders—as pastors and entrepreneurs—which is also very American. T.D. Jakes and these preachers tap into a long history in America of pastors and entrepreneurs as leaders who embody the vision of success expressed in the Horatio Alger (meritocracy) and Exceptionalism mythologies.

Along with T.D. Jakes's appropriation of pastor and entrepreneur, I also investigate his interpretations of Jesus as the Christ and the Exodus biblical story. The first generation of liberation theologians produced new christologies, and their theologies were a counter-discourse to what they considered to be the oppressive "Western articulated theologies and christologies" that promoted "Western supremacist ideology."⁶⁸³ These early liberation theologians argued for doing theology from the context of the oppressed. More importantly, they argued that the suffering of the oppressed had to be the starting point for any viable liberation theology. Consequently, they presented new theological reflections on Jesus, Exodus, and the Promised Land.

According to the testimonies of adherents, Bishop Jakes is not only a theologian; he is a liberation theologian. Therefore, I investigate his interpretations of the Exodus narrative to show how his interpretations deviate from the theologies of the Black Church preachers and academic liberation theologians. In order to investigate his Christology, I look at Jakes's theological

⁶⁸¹ Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America's New Preacher*, 37.

⁶⁸² Schultz argues that many people are not drawn to what is Christian about these theologies. They are drawn to what is American about them. He explains that "[s]uperstitious and largely ignorant of the faith, millions of Americans are easily persuaded to believe many things that they want to believe and to hope for things that are obviously 'American.'"⁶⁸² Quentin J. Schultz, *Televangelism and American Culture: The Business of Popular Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 132.

⁶⁸³ Grant, *White Women's Christ, Black Women's Jesus*, 1.

reflections on Jesus. The appropriations of the Exodus narrative, Jesus, and the Christ image by the first generation of academic liberation theologians were counter-discourses. In similar fashion, the theological appropriations of prosperity preachers are also counter-discourses. However, their discourses are in opposition to those of the Black Church and those of academic theologians.

T.D. Jakes and other prosperity preachers argue that the theological discourses and interpretations by Black Church pastors and academics are oppressive and hegemonic.⁶⁸⁴ Therefore, in an attempt to liberate African Americans and the members of their congregations, they feel compelled to present new and more liberating interpretations. In other words, they must create new christologies. Consequently, in their interpretations, Jesus is no longer poor. He is not the co-sufferer of the Black Church tradition. Jesus is interpreted as a CEO with a national ministry. His disciples have also been transformed into antiquity's version of twelve executive staff. Prosperity preachers use their interpretations of Jesus and the traditional stories of Exodus and the Promised Land to construct theological systems that are ideologically more compatible with the values of advanced capitalism and a global culture of empire. A closer look at the life of T.D. Jakes as a pastor and entrepreneur tells the story.

BISHOP T.D. JAKES AS PASTOR

Jakes's ministry has both Baptist and Pentecostal roots. The ministry has always had some aspect of healing, seeking to address the hurts and pains of others. Jakes often points to the painful journey with his father's illness as the reason he has such compassion for others. "As a teenager, he watched his father slowly die of kidney disease. He had to shave, feed and clean his

⁶⁸⁴ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 149; Billingsley, *It's a New Day*, 107-108.

father every day for six years.”⁶⁸⁵ Jakes watched his father dwindle “from a tall strapping man of 280 pounds to a shadowy 130.”⁶⁸⁶ When Jakes’s father died in 1972, “Jakes found refuge in the Bible. He carried one to high school and preached to imaginary congregations, so much so that neighbors dubbed him ‘Bible Boy.’”⁶⁸⁷ The early years of his faith were spent at First Baptist Church of Vadalia, West Virginia. In his late teens he would become the church’s music director.⁶⁸⁸ However, he would eventually leave the Baptist Church to join a Pentecostal church. Jakes sarcastically says that he was “looking for a deeper, more passionate understanding of God that didn’t include discussions about whether the choir should sway during a song or march in before or after the congregation was seated.”⁶⁸⁹ Shayne Lee writes that Jakes liked the “Pentecostal experience where Christians thrive in power and holiness.”⁶⁹⁰

The call to ministry came when Jakes was just a teenager. An “inner illumination” is how Jakes describes it. He says the calling is knowing that “nothing would be as fulfilling or satisfying or meaningful than to do it.”⁶⁹¹ Similar to the call narratives of many preachers, Jakes says that at first he was terrified. He had dropped out of high school to help his mother and he did not think that anyone would believe he was called to preach.⁶⁹² Jakes later finished a GED and ran from his calling by going to West Virginia State College. While there, he was at a

⁶⁸⁵ Blake, “Theology and Therapy.”

⁶⁸⁶ Kaylois Henry, “Bishop Jakes is Ready. Are You? The Nation’s Hottest Preacher Brings His Message to Dallas,” *Dallas Observer*, June 20, 1996.

⁶⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁸ Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America’s New Preacher*, 17, 23.

⁶⁸⁹ Henry, “Bishop Jakes is Ready. Are You?”

⁶⁹⁰ Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 63.

⁶⁹¹ Henry, “Bishop Jakes is Ready. Are You?”

⁶⁹² Ibid.

nightclub and a miraculous event gave him the motivation to return and accept his calling. Jakes tells the story of a stranger sitting on the bar stool next him who said, “You know, I had a dream that I saw you preaching.”⁶⁹³ After completing one year with a few classes in psychology,⁶⁹⁴ Jakes returned to preach his first official sermon at Greater Emmanuel Gospel Tabernacle—an Apostolic church.⁶⁹⁵ Apostolic churches are different from most Pentecostal churches in that they believe in the gifts of the Spirit and speaking in tongues, but they do not believe in the traditional Trinitarian doctrine. Often called *Oneness Pentecostals*, they argue that the believer has to be baptized in the name of Jesus alone to be saved, and that the Godhead is only in Jesus. Because of this connection, Jakes still receives inquiries about his theology.⁶⁹⁶

Jakes’s bivocational identity has been present from the beginning. He worked at the Union Carbide Chemical Plant in Charleston and took on a few other odd jobs as an “assistant manager for a store and a delivery truck driver.”⁶⁹⁷ The early preaching rarely generated enough income to pay the bills. Jakes was mainly preaching in “garages, storefronts, and small churches” in the “small coal-mining towns” and the “backwoods” of West Virginia.⁶⁹⁸ In 1979 he organized his first church with just ten people.⁶⁹⁹ The chemical plant eventually closed, as did many manufacturing plants across the country in the 1980s. The plant closure was the impetus that thrust Jakes into full-time ministry. During these early years Jakes and his new wife Serita

⁶⁹³ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁴ Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America’s New Preacher*, 23.

⁶⁹⁵ Henry, “Bishop Jakes is Ready. Are You?”; Walton, *Watch This!*, 104.

⁶⁹⁶ Winner, “T.D. Jakes Feels Your Pain,” 55.

⁶⁹⁷ Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America’s New Preacher*, 23.

⁶⁹⁸ Ibid., 24.

⁶⁹⁹ Ibid.

often struggled with bouts of poverty. Jakes peppers his sermons and books with these stories of struggle. “I know also what it is to have my car repossessed, my children drinking milk provided by WIC,⁷⁰⁰ to make a game with my boys out of feeling our way through the house when the electricity had been cut off for nonpayment.”⁷⁰¹ These personal stories make his life appear as a true Horatio Alger, rags-to-riches, American story. The poor boy preacher from the Pentecostal storefront church in West Virginia with ten members makes good to become the CEO of a 30,000-member supermegachurch in Dallas, Texas. God has given the country boy from humble beginnings divine favor and has elevated him to be a man featured on the cover of magazines with a million-dollar mansion, a Bentley, and a private plane. The rags-to-riches story ideologically communicates that success is available to all. If a poor black boy from West Virginia can do it, so can everyone else.

Jakes has never been afraid to relocate and remake himself and his ministry. After starting Greater Temple of Faith in a storefront in Montgomery, West Virginia in 1980, he moved his membership to Smithers in 1986. In Smithers he converted a dilapidated movie theatre into a church and sanctuary.⁷⁰² After just five years he moved again to South Charleston, with a final move in 1992 to Cross Lanes where his membership grew to about 1000 members.⁷⁰³ The most adventurous of his moves was when he moved to Dallas, Texas in 1996. Jakes moved his staff and 50 families to start The Potter’s House. Although many have suggested that Jakes made the move because of pressure from local newspapers about his

⁷⁰⁰ WIC stands for *Women, Infants, Children*. It is a government program that provides supplemental nutrition for low-income families and mothers. The program is one of many programs run by the United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service. See http://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/about_wic.

⁷⁰¹ Jakes, *Reposition Yourself*, 6.

⁷⁰² Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America’s New Preacher*, 28.

⁷⁰³ Martha Jackson, “Jakes Hiked Long Road to Success,” *Charleston Daily Mail*, November 18, 1995; Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America’s New Preacher*, 29.

affluent lifestyle,⁷⁰⁴ Jakes says the move was about growth. “He had outgrown the Charleston facility, which lacked a studio, and that he needed to be in a city with better access to air and larger hotel facilities to accommodate conferences.”⁷⁰⁵ The church’s name, *The Potter’s House*, is taken from a passage in Jeremiah: “Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand. O house of Israel.”⁷⁰⁶ The brand and name match how Jakes defines himself and his ministry. The words of the popular gospel song of the same name, tell the story: “the Potter wants to put you back together again!”⁷⁰⁷ Jakes is someone that God as The Potter is molding and leading to a divine destiny. The Potter’s House is a church where people are invited to come and be healed from their hurts and pains; where they too can be molded by The Potter. They can, like Bishop Jakes, come and discover their individual divinely-led destinies.

Jakes purchased the first property in Dallas from a defamed televangelist, W.V. Grant.⁷⁰⁸ The campus had a 5000-seat sanctuary, television studio, and 28 acres of land. The entire purchase cost about 3.2 million dollars.⁷⁰⁹ The 1.9 million dollar mortgage was paid off in just six months.⁷¹⁰ Jakes did his market research and conducted worship services for several months so that by the time he moved the congregation, he doubled his membership to 2000 at the first service.⁷¹¹ After one year, the membership was up to 7000.⁷¹² Jakes eventually built another

⁷⁰⁴ Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America’s New Preacher*, 108.

⁷⁰⁵ Bill Broadway, “From His Pulpit, Messages on Prosperity, Pain,” *Washington Post*, July 26, 1997, B7.

⁷⁰⁶ Pappu, “The Preacher,” 100.

⁷⁰⁷ Walton, *Watch This!*, 111.

⁷⁰⁸ Broadway, “From His Pulpit, Messages on Prosperity, Pain,” B7.

⁷⁰⁹ Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America’s New Preacher*, 71.

⁷¹⁰ Broadway, “From His Pulpit, Messages on Prosperity, Pain,” B7.

⁷¹¹ William Martin, “American Idol,” *Texas Monthly* 34, no. 8 (August 2006): 208.

facility to accommodate the continuous growth. The current facility for The Potter's House is a state of the art facility that cost 45 million dollars and has 191,000 square feet that seats about 8200 people.⁷¹³ In just five years, The Potter's House was 30,000 members strong, and able to retire the entire debt.⁷¹⁴ Jakes does much of his entrepreneurial teaching and non-profit work through the Metroplex Economic Development Corporation (MEDC), which he founded in 1998. The mission of the 501c3 not-for-profit corporation is "to remedy social and economic disparities,...to bridge socio-economic voids existing in urban America."⁷¹⁵ Jakes has also expanded the campus to include the \$11 million Clay Academy, which is a private Christian school."⁷¹⁶ Eventually, the campus will also be home to "the \$150 million dollar Capella Park, a 1,500-unit single family residential development."⁷¹⁷

Jakes considers The Potter's House to be the "prototype church for the twenty-first century."⁷¹⁸ "For Jakes, the positive fruits of faith and initiative embodied in such a facility are a testimony, pointing to God's presence and favor."⁷¹⁹ Although The Potter's House has outdistanced most churches in church growth, Jakes continues to be entrepreneurial. He is still remaking and expanding himself and his ministries. In 2010 and 2011 Jakes expanded The

⁷¹² Broadway, "From His Pulpit, Messages on Prosperity, Pain," B7.

⁷¹³ "T.D. Jakes Biography," The Potter's House, <http://www.thepottershouse.org/Press/TPH-Press-Kit/TDJ-Biography.aspx> (accessed January 15, 2012).

⁷¹⁴ Hubert Morken, "Bishop T.D. Jakes: A Ministry of Empowerment," in *Religious Leaders and Faith-Based Politics: Ten Profiles*, ed. Jo Renee Formicola and Hubert Morken (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 29.

⁷¹⁵ "T.D. Jakes Biography," The Potter's House, <http://www.thepottershouse.org/Press/TPH-Press-Kit/TDJ-Biography.aspx> (accessed January 15, 2012).

⁷¹⁶ Walton, "Empowered," 26.

⁷¹⁷ Ibid.

⁷¹⁸ Morken, "Bishop T.D. Jakes: A Ministry of Empowerment," 37.

⁷¹⁹ Ibid.

Potter's House to include three more locations: North Dallas, Fort Worth, Texas, and Denver, Colorado. Many prosperity preachers have taken on the franchise model of one church in many locations.⁷²⁰ They have one organization with several smaller church locations, and the main church functions as the corporate headquarters.

Alongside his vocation as a local pastor, Jakes has also spent time on the road as a travelling evangelist, revivalist, and conference presenter. He keynotes at the conferences of other preachers, as well as presents his own local and international conferences. For many Protestant traditions, an evangelist or revivalist is a minister that does not pastor a local church. Although national preachers like Billy Graham and Martin Luther King gave up their pastorates when they started their national and evangelistic ministries, T.D. Jakes has always retained both clerical positions as an evangelist and local pastor. His first conference was a 1983 Back to Basics Bible Conference with about 80 attendees.⁷²¹ Of course, the most prominent conference is WTAL.

As a local pastor Jakes was counseling women and decided to start a Sunday School class with 40 women. Each week the class kept growing. After discussing the success of the class with a friend, his friend invited him to present his first conference in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.⁷²² At first, Jakes was not sure what to call the conference, so his friend suggested taking the name from the Lucan biblical text. Jakes was surprised that 1300 women registered for the conference. He moved it to a local hotel and the conference in Philadelphia became the first WTAL

⁷²⁰ Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America's New Preacher*, 41.

⁷²¹ Billingsley, *It's a New Day*, 117.

⁷²² Jakes, in an interview, identifies the friend as the late Reverend Archie Dennis, who is also responsible for giving Jakes the idea of naming the conference *Woman Thou Art Loosed*. Michael Dudit, "Preaching to Mend Broken Lives: An Interview with T.D. Jakes," <http://www.crosswalk.com/print/1154583/> (accessed July 9, 2012).

conference.⁷²³ Jakes then took the conference on the road. However, one invitation stands out in the history of his preaching at conferences. This invitation changed his life and the WTAL brand forever. Jakes was asked to be a keynote speaker at Azusa in 1993. Carlton Pearson had created the annual conference as a renewal or celebration of the 1906 Azusa fellowship that birthed Pentecostalism.⁷²⁴ The Azusa Conference was so popular in the 1990s that the keynote preacher could expect to “garner an extra \$200,000 in annual income” from new preaching engagements.⁷²⁵

Jakes had attended the conference in 1992 as just a member in the audience.⁷²⁶ The following year he preached two sermons—one on the main night and one session only for women. At the Azusa women’s session Jakes preached the famous WTAL sermon from Luke 13:11-13. According to Shayne Lee, the products sold at Azusa from Jakes’s appearance resulted in about \$20,000 in revenue.⁷²⁷ Consequently, Jakes quickly figured out how much income conferences like Azusa could generate. He returned to West Virginia and took \$15,000 of his savings and self-published the first non-fiction version of the WTAL book.⁷²⁸ Each book sold for about \$10. After just a couple of weeks, Jakes had sold over 5000 copies,⁷²⁹ which meant that he netted close to \$35,000. The content of the book was chiefly the material from the Sunday School lessons and the sermon.

⁷²³ Sam Wellman, “T.D. Jakes,” *Heroes of History: Sam Wellman’s Biography Site*, <http://www.heroesofhistory.com/page32.html> (accessed July 10, 2012).

⁷²⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁷²⁵ Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America’s New Preacher*, 43.

⁷²⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁷²⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁷²⁸ Miller, “Prophet Motives,” A1.

⁷²⁹ Billingsley, *It’s a New Day*, 118; Miller, “Prophet Motives,” A1.

In 1993 Jakes added the *ManPower* conferences for men⁷³⁰ and continued to conduct his WTAL conferences all over the country. In 2003 he expanded his products for women by creating a second brand entitled *God's Leading Ladies*. The new brand and conference was geared to attract more business-minded women who had advanced beyond the WTAL brand. In other words, they had already been *loosed* and were ready to be *God's leading ladies*. In 2004 he took all of the conferences—WTAL, ManPower, and God's Leading Ladies—and branded them into a four-day festival called *MegaFest*.⁷³¹ He added the *Mega Youth Experience* in 2005 with events presented in several sites: the Georgia Dome, World Congress Center, Phillips Arena, and International Plaza. MegaFest had an attendance of over 560,000 people.⁷³²

Just as Jakes remakes himself, he also remakes his brands. After cancelling MegaFest in 2007 he rebranded the festival as *MegaFest International* and moved it to Johannesburg, South Africa.⁷³³ The conference was promoted “as the next logical step in the evolution of the event.” Jakes is quoted as saying, “As I looked out, the feel was much more aligned to an international event, than a U.S. specific event ... I believe the true purpose of the ministry is to go beyond the traditional walls and minister to the world.”⁷³⁴ MegaFest had several corporate sponsors and also required registration fees for many of the individual events. In an interview with *Jet Magazine* Jakes said that the festival was too expensive. “Our overhead was unbelievable and when you

⁷³⁰ Billingsley, *It's a New Day*, 122.

⁷³¹ Walton, *Watch This!*, 114.

⁷³² Billingsley, *It's a New Day*, 123.

⁷³³ Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 68.

⁷³⁴“Megafest Press Release,” *Megafest International*, http://www.mega-fest.com/pdf/mfi_pr_08.pdf (accessed March 3, 2012).

add up the cost of the dome and all the various things it was just very costly.”⁷³⁵ For Jakes, ministry has to be profitable, or as Morken states, Jakes believes that all of life has to have “profitability.”⁷³⁶ “Jakes asserts that profitability means adding something of value to the Kingdom of God, to oneself, to one’s family, and to all humanity.”⁷³⁷ Another explanation for moving MegaFest and changing the brand is that as a capitalist and entrepreneur, Jakes understands the nature of markets. When the U.S. market was over-saturated, he needed a new market with new customers.

Along with his many vocational roles as preacher, conference presenter, evangelist, and speaker, Jakes has maintained a lucrative media ministry with radio, television, and internet. His first radio show in 1982 was called “The Master’s Plan.”⁷³⁸ The Azusa Conference appearance with Carlton Pearson was also T.D. Jakes’s first major television exposure. “Pearson arranged for TBN’s Paul Crouch to hear a seven-minute clip, after which the TV mogul helped Jakes land his own show.”⁷³⁹ His weekly television show, *Get Ready with T.D. Jakes*, was broadcast nationally on TBN and BET in 1993.⁷⁴⁰ Similar to most televangelists that pastor churches, Jakes established *T.D. Jakes Ministries* as his personal ministry, set apart from the church’s ministry. The leadership structure in such cases usually entails the church having one team of leadership and the personal ministry having another. According to *Ministrywatch.com*, after moving to The Potter’s House, Jakes made T.D. Jakes Ministries one of the ancillary ministries of The Potter’s

⁷³⁵ Dana Slagle, “The Personal Side of T.D. Jakes,” *Jet* 112, no. 4 (July 2007): 60.

⁷³⁶ Morken, “Bishop T.D. Jakes: A Ministry of Empowerment,” 35.

⁷³⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷³⁸ Billingsley, *It’s a New Day*, 117.

⁷³⁹ Posner, *God’s Profits*, 54.

⁷⁴⁰ Jadell Forman, “Taking Religion to the Masses,” *Texas Monthly* (September 1998): 121.

House.⁷⁴¹ Churches are not required to file the 990 income tax form that the Internal Revenue Service requires for non-profits. As a result, T.D. Jakes does not file taxes for T.D. Jakes Ministries. Therefore, there is no way to measure how much income he has generated with his personal ministry. Jakes also established *T.D. Jakes Enterprises* as “the for-profit corporation that markets the books Jakes writes and also produces and promotes the plays, records, and movies that Jakes directly or indirectly creates.”⁷⁴²

Almost all of his sermons from his own conferences, as well as when he keynotes for others, are edited and reproduced as commercial products. The sermons are broadcast through his multilayered media ministry on television, radio, and internet. The half-hour television spots usually include time for the core of the sermon as well as time to promote the next conference or book. More importantly, each media presentation will always include an appeal for members of the television audience to send an offering or to become monthly ministry partners.⁷⁴³ Because of the predominance of the media ministry, the physical space of The Potter’s House serves as both a sanctuary for worship and a television studio for media production.

Jakes provides two separate structures for not-for-profit organizations and the for-profit entity of T.D. Jakes Enterprises.⁷⁴⁴ He is vigilant to make sure that he maintains his not-for-profit status. According to *Black Enterprise* magazine, Jakes has a “carefully constructed firewall which separates his church responsibilities from his business enterprises,” with “two staffs” and

⁷⁴¹ “T.D. Ministries,” *Ministrywatch.com: Empowering and Educating Donors To Support Christian Ministries*, <http://www.ministrywatch.com/profile/td-jakes-ministries.aspx> (accessed January 15, 2012).

⁷⁴² Morken, “Bishop T.D. Jakes: A Ministry of Empowerment,” 40.

⁷⁴³ Frederick, *Between Sundays*, 145.

⁷⁴⁴ Nicole Marie Richardson, Krissah Williams, and Hamil Harris, “The Business of Faith,” *Black Enterprise* (May 2006): 103.

two “different accounting systems and financial institutions.”⁷⁴⁵ However, no matter how much effort is put into the separation, it is extremely difficult to distinguish the ministry from the business. Even more of a challenge is to separate his vocational identity as a preacher from his identity as an entrepreneur.

T.D. JAKES AS PASTOR/CEO

Many biographers, interviewers, and scholars acknowledge the centrality of entrepreneur and preacher in Jakes’s life story. Don Nori, the CEO of Destiny Image Publishers Inc., the company that published the WTAL non-fiction book, asserts that Jakes “is as good a businessman as he is a preacher....In fact, some might say he’s a better businessman than he is preacher.”⁷⁴⁶ *Forbes Magazine* describes Jakes as “fervent preacher, ferocious capitalist.”⁷⁴⁷ Scott Billingsley asserts, “The confluence of business and ministry [is] so seamless that it [is] difficult to determine where one end[s] and the other beg[ins].”⁷⁴⁸ Jonathan Walton writes that Jakes conflates “the ecclesial and the economic realms. In fact, he embraces equally his roles as a Christian minister, business entrepreneur, author, recording artist, playwright, and movie producer. The bishop is multivocational when it comes to the respective spheres of the church and corporate America.”⁷⁴⁹ Without apology, Jakes defines himself as both a businessman and a preacher. In many interviews, Jakes reminds his admirers that he “could have been happy to be a

⁷⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁶ Miller, “Prophet Motives,” A1.

⁷⁴⁷ Jason Storbakken, “God is in the T-Bills,” *Forbes* 179, no. 12 (June 2007): 58.

⁷⁴⁸ Billingsley, *It’s a New Day*, 109.

⁷⁴⁹ Walton, *Watch This!*, 116.

businessman and not a preacher,” but that the “[h]armonizing [of] those two things has been an exciting part of [his] life”⁷⁵⁰

Because of his Pentecostal roots, Jakes’s role as a bivocational or multivocational black church pastor is not that unusual. Pentecostals have often been characterized by their small storefront churches.⁷⁵¹ Many Pentecostal and black pastors are bivocational simply because their congregations are unable to financially support a full-time pastor.⁷⁵² However, Jakes’s commitment to his bivocational identity has deeper roots. Jakes wants to be a role model for both African Americans and Pentecostals. Subsequently, his bivocation is for the purpose of embodying economic achievement. According to Jakes, our contemporary context demands a different understanding of the black preacher. Jakes says that we need preachers to be “believable heroes” for working class black people. “We don’t need preachers who have taken vows of poverty or who, on the other extreme, are living out of the collection plate. We need a preacher who, through writing, or some other honest means, has made the American dream work for him.”⁷⁵³ Bishop Jakes presents himself as a role model, and like other prosperity preachers, he also embodies a kind of sacralized American exceptionalism.

Mark Hellstern outlines this exceptionalism. He says that the way prosperity preachers communicate their vocational identity is simply a new version of the Puritan idea of America’s calling to be “the City-on-a-hill,” or an “Elect Nation.”⁷⁵⁴ Lawrence Mamiya notes that black prosperity preachers use “the old Puritan rationalization that poverty is a sign of God’s curse and

⁷⁵⁰ David Whitford, “So Shall Ye Reap,” *FSB: Fortune Small Business* 15, no. 8 (October 2005): 32.

⁷⁵¹ Posner, *God’s Profits*, 58.

⁷⁵² Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church*, 146.

⁷⁵³ Winner, “T.D. Jakes Feels Your Pain,” 59.

⁷⁵⁴ Mark Hellstern, “The ‘ME GOSPEL’: An Examination of the Historical Roots of the Prosperity Emphasis within Current Charismatic Theology,” *Fides et Historia* 21, no. 3 (October 1989): 78-90.

wealth a sign of God's blessing."⁷⁵⁵ Whereas the Puritans were not supposed to enjoy their accumulation of wealth and material possessions, for prosperity preachers these things are the evidence of God's blessings. Jakes says, "Particularly in my culture we need to see some positive role models, who are not selling drugs, who are not pimping women, who honourably pursued some gifting or talent—and become successful."⁷⁵⁶ The role modeling is communicated to others as a form of spiritual exceptionalism. The argument is that if "worldly" people can have the finer things in life, then surely God wants God's people and servants to have that much more.⁷⁵⁷ Jakes's lifestyle and secular success become the evidence of his exceptionalism and giftedness: "Once they see a black man who is successful, . . . and he's not selling drugs, but he's driving the same kind of car the pimp or drug dealer is, and he's not illegal and he's not immoral, it encourages young men . . . They say, 'Hey, if God can do it for him.'"⁷⁵⁸

Jakes does not say that poverty is a curse, nor does he promote wealth as God's blessing to the same degree as other prosperity preachers. He does, however, promote the same cultural mythologies of success. Bishop Jakes is able to profit from his celebrity status by branding himself as a role model for those who have never been able to fully participate in the American dream. Accordingly, Jakes spends a great deal of energy and time justifying his success as both a preacher and an entrepreneur.

An excerpt from a speech at a two-day leadership conference at Southeastern University provides a vivid example of how Jakes interprets his identity as a pastor and entrepreneur. The theme of the conference was *Ignite the Flame of Servant Leadership*. Jakes's speech was

⁷⁵⁵ Mamiya, "Pulpit and Pew," 11.

⁷⁵⁶ "The Healers Due," *Economist* (May 31, 1997): 56.

⁷⁵⁷ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 63.

⁷⁵⁸ Broadway, "From His Pulpit, Messages on Prosperity, Pain," B7.

entitled, “Reposition Yourself for Service.” *Reposition Yourself* is one of his many brands. The forum included several well-known speakers like Jack Welch of General Electric and Dave Ramsey, a national speaker who specializes in helping Christians get out of debt. Jakes began his speech by inviting the audience to get to know him a little better:

It may help you to understand at least my thinking or to minister to my mentality and understanding. My brain probably breaks down in two parts. There are two people living in my head...I have a strong proclivity and interest in business. And I think that good business is in itself a ministry ... I have a passion for ministry. So I tell people sometimes half of my head is Bill Gates and the other half is Mother Teresa. The Mother Teresa in me wants to clothe the naked and feed the hungry, and do all sorts of good works around the world. And Bill and Mother argue all the time, because Bill says “Mother, you gonna need some money for all that.”⁷⁵⁹

Jakes comparing himself to Bill Gates and Mother Teresa illustrates how pastor and CEO are always blending, and at times, competing in his life-story. The merger of the two images is also why his life story, his theology, and his worldview are so controversial.

Critics argue “that with his exorbitant speaking fees and excessive entrepreneurialism, Jakes turns religion into his most valuable commodity.”⁷⁶⁰ His life represents what they consider to be the uniting of two worlds that have contradictory worldviews and values. As a result, sometimes he is viewed as “a marketing genius who exploits people’s pain, [and] a con artist who tells people what they want to hear—the ‘Velcro Bishop with a watered down gospel.”⁷⁶¹ Others may not see him as negatively, but they still question his integrity. William Martin, in an article in *Texas Monthly*, writes, “[Jakes] preaches and practices liberation of the poor and criticizes business and government for ignoring their plight, but he has gained great wealth by

⁷⁵⁹ T.D. Jakes, “Reposition Yourself for Service,” speech from The Forum When God Calls You to Lead, “Part 1 Reposition Yourself for Service,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oZpc-DedDX0> (accessed January 14, 2012).

⁷⁶⁰ Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America’s New Preacher*, 3.

⁷⁶¹ *Ibid.*

embracing and fully exploiting the free-market capitalism that exacerbates their plight. He encourages generosity, yet he cuts shrewd business deals and brooks resistance from those who challenge him.”⁷⁶² Many Christians are simply unable to reconcile Jakes as a spiritual or moral leader that flaunts an affluent capitalist lifestyle. In their view, Jakes’s “flashy affluence and relentless selling betray Christianity’s core values of poverty and humility.”⁷⁶³ Jakes contends that these Christians and critics are the very people that need his ministry. His mission is to help Christians by providing balance to the extreme teachings of the Church.⁷⁶⁴

Bishop Jakes argues that the extremists of prosperity preachers are not presenting a balanced gospel. “They believe that God’s blessing can be counted in dollars and cents, and one’s financial status is an indication of one’s status in the eyes of the Lord.”⁷⁶⁵ The other extreme is the one that teaches a “monastic philosophy of frugality.”⁷⁶⁶ So Jakes intends to preach to both extremes. He writes,

Certain extremists in the faith based community teach that faith is only a matter of dollars and cents. They quote scriptures that promise great wealth. They don’t emphasize the importance of a practical pragmatic plan of a faith-with-works ethic, education, and economic empowerment...Others teach piety and asceticism and promote the idea that poverty should be worn as a badge of superiority, that [it] is somehow more godly to barely be able to feed your children than to be wealthy.⁷⁶⁷

Jakes’s mission is to teach others by giving them the tools to become successful and prosperous like him. Morken states that what distinguishes Jakes’s ministry is that Jakes offers a

⁷⁶² William Martin, “American Idol,” *Texas Monthly* 34, no. 8 (August 2006): 124.

⁷⁶³ Miller, “Prophet Motives,” A1.

⁷⁶⁴ Jakes, *The Great Investment*, 4.

⁷⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶⁷ Jakes, *Reposition Yourself*, 7.

“prescription of rich and varied remedies.”⁷⁶⁸ Paraphrasing the words of Jesus, Morken says that Jakes’s life can be summed up as, “If you do not believe what I say, believe what I do.”⁷⁶⁹

The Bishop feels called to preach and teach a much-needed message of liberation and economic empowerment—especially to minority communities. “Economically empowering minorities is a critical part of my mission,”⁷⁷⁰ says Jakes. He sees his ministry as providing “African Americans with the life skills, emotional health, and psychological well-being to be successful.”⁷⁷¹ Jakes’s liberation is about “the renewing of the mind to conquer the victim mentality that precludes them from reaching their potential.”⁷⁷² African American Christians and others must be liberated from the supposed faulty teachings on poverty and wealth. Although Jakes has worked hard to distance himself from Word of Faith, in his book *The Lady, Her Lover, Her Lord*, he writes,

There seems to be a myth of poverty attached to Christianity. Many people, Christians and non-Christians alike, view accumulating wealth as un-Christian behavior. There’s a tendency to think that a Christian must dress like a monk and live in a monastery, or he or she is not sincere. Well I bring a message of liberation. The Lord does not mean for you to forsake all ambitions in order to serve him. He just wants to be your priority.⁷⁷³

No different than the strategy that is often practiced by prosperity preachers, Jakes discredits any theology or Pentecostal piety that suggests Christians should be poor. Furthermore, Jakes

⁷⁶⁸ Morken, “Bishop T.D. Jakes: A Ministry of Empowerment,” 36.

⁷⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁷⁷⁰ Richardson, Williams, and Harris, “The Business of Faith,” 103.

⁷⁷¹ Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 59.

⁷⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷⁷³ T.D. Jakes, *Her Lady, Her Lover, Her Lord* (New York: Berkley Books, 1998), 201.

disagrees with any doctrine that suggests that ministers have to live austere lives and take vows of poverty.

Bishop Jakes defends his God-given right to accumulate wealth as a pastor. He often accuses his critics of “occupational discrimination.”⁷⁷⁴ He argues that wealthy doctors and lawyers don’t receive the same criticism as wealthy pastors.⁷⁷⁵ At other times, he has hinted that criticism of his wealth is also a form of racial discrimination. In West Virginia Jakes received his first major public criticism from the local newspaper. The *Charleston Gazette* wrote an article about the extravagant purchase of a \$630,000, sixteen-room mansion that had seven bedrooms, a bowling alley, and an indoor swimming pool.⁷⁷⁶ Jakes also purchased the house next door, which meant the total purchase for both houses was close to a million dollars.⁷⁷⁷ Both homes were previously owned by white businessmen (a banker and motel owner).⁷⁷⁸ Jakes hinted that underneath the occupational discrimination was also a bit of racial discrimination, because the newspapers never wrote any articles about the white businessmen who owned the houses: “In a state that is only 3 to 4 percent black, it is more polite for critics to deal with the occupational aspect, but there is a degree of racial overtones.”⁷⁷⁹ To describe and convince others of this occupational discrimination, Jakes also talks about how society treats athletes and entertainers: “This society pays thousands upon millions of dollars to watch men get out on the field and run

⁷⁷⁴ Miller, “Prophet Motives,” A1.

⁷⁷⁵ Lib Copeland, “When Gifts From God: Bishop T.D. Jakes has Made Millions by Reaching Millions. Not that There’s Anything Wrong With That,” *Washington Post*, March 25, 2001.

⁷⁷⁶ Ken Ward, Jr., “Successful Books, TV Exposure Allow Kanwaha Minister to Live in Style,” *Charleston Gazette*, April 5, 1995; Billingsley, *It’s a New Day*, 121.

⁷⁷⁷ Billingsley, *It’s a New Day*, 120.

⁷⁷⁸ Ward, “Successful Books, TV Exposure.”

⁷⁷⁹ Miller, “Prophet Motives,” A1.

into each other with helmets on, and that is completely acceptable. You can put on a silver glove and moonwalk across the stage for millions, and that is acceptable. But to reach into the gutters and help hurting people and strengthen them, and then be blessed by that, is not acceptable.”⁷⁸⁰ In other words, his identity as a preacher who helps people, combined with his identity as an entrepreneur, justifies his affluent lifestyle, his ambition, and his personal wealth.

Jakes often asserts, in a way that seems contradictory, that his wealth should not be a problem because he makes the majority of his income from his entrepreneurial ventures and not from his preaching. “[T]he reality is [that] the majority of my income comes from my for-profit ventures. If I retired from preaching, I make enough to take care of my personal needs.”⁷⁸¹ In his mind, the expectation that he should live differently because he is a preacher is the equivalent of asking him to live in the world as a second-class citizen. He says, “Then, you lock me in coach, but you want me to preach to first-class. Not only do I personally believe that it is not biblical, I don’t think it is appropriate for these times.”⁷⁸² *Ebony Magazine* posed a direct question about his first-class lifestyle: “How do you respond to some commentators who have criticized you for living well and traveling first-class?”

As you know, T.D. Jakes Enterprises co-owns *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* the movie; no other movie producer or record label owner would be called upon to defend the quality of his clothes or the stature of his home or how much income he makes. Additionally, the vast majority of the well-informed realized that any author who has sold 7 million books to his credit need not justify his enjoyment of some level of success as a reflection of his life’s work.⁷⁸³

⁷⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁸¹ Kelly Starling, “Why People, Especially Women, are Talking about Bishop T.D. Jakes,” *Ebony* 56, no. 3 (January 2001): 114.

⁷⁸² “The Healer’s Due,” *The Economist*, May 31, 1997.

⁷⁸³ “Five Questions for Bishop T.D. Jakes,” *Ebony* 60, no. 2 (December 2004): 24.

Again, Jakes's rhetorical strategy is to remind his critics that he is not just a preacher, but an entrepreneur—a CEO. In this particular case, he emphasizes his entrepreneurial activities as a writer, movie producer, and record label owner. By far, the history and success of WTAL is most representative of the blending of his preaching and his entrepreneurialism.

As a preacher and teacher of the gospel, Jakes convinces his followers that the God who inspires his “preaching of the Word” is the same God who inspires his “business ideas.”⁷⁸⁴ Paul Gifford remarks that the personal testimonies and stories are more prominent in prosperity preaching than is biblical exposition.⁷⁸⁵ The preachers often share their life stories in order to impress upon congregants that their gospel works, and that they are the living proof. Jakes is no exception; he often presents his personal experiences as proof that he knows how to live as a successful Christian. In his book *The Great Investment*, Jakes testifies to how WTAL is an example of God inspiring him both as a minister and as a businessman. He claims that through WTAL God taught him how to maximize all of his gifts:

Years ago, God dropped an idea for a women's Bible class in my heart. The idea grew and became a book, a conference, a play, and a music CD. God gave the ability to take the idea and package it to reach a much larger audience than it would have reached if it had remained just a Bible class. As a businessman, I am successful because I see and understand the capacity God has given me and [I] am maximizing my moment. I am very blessed. I have my ministry, which is my passion, and I have business success, which is a result of my creativity and the source of my financial success.⁷⁸⁶

⁷⁸⁴ Jakes, *The Great Investment*, 43.

⁷⁸⁵ Paul Gifford, “Prosperity: A New and Foreign Element in African Christianity,” 376.

⁷⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 43-44.

WTAL as a brand is the first of many other brands that Jakes packaged to reach larger audiences and bigger markets. Along with new brands, it is not uncommon for Jakes to match the theme or brand of a conference with the title of new book or CD.⁷⁸⁷

Although Jakes is very open about his entrepreneurial success and the maximizing of his gifts, he is not as open about how much he has profited from this success. In other words, he does not provide financial information or details about how much money he makes.⁷⁸⁸ Writers and scholars can only estimate that he is worth about 100 million dollars.⁷⁸⁹ Also, he rarely reveals to his followers how the profits from his entrepreneurial successes are directly tied to his preaching and the relationships that he has garnered as a preacher and spiritual leader. Unlike popular secular motivational speakers and writers, Jakes's many brands and branded products almost always start with a sermon, ministry, or worship experience. Jakes's fame and wealth are not a result of his entrepreneurial ventures alone. Furthermore, what fuels his entrepreneurial activities is Jakes's identity as a pastor and preacher—not the other way around.

John Blake, a writer for *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, highlights that although Jakes wants to be “known as more than a preacher ... Jakes built his reputation, though, in the pulpit....He built his fortune by translating his preaching prowess into a multimillion dollar industry built on the marketing of his sermons, books, gospel plays, music and video tapes.”⁷⁹⁰

Martin, in his article on Jakes, describes the relationship as symbiotic:

⁷⁸⁷ Martin, “American Idol,” 208.

⁷⁸⁸ Jakes rarely gives any information on how much income he actually makes. He no longer takes a salary from The Potter's House. In 1998 he told *Jet* that 35% came from the church.

⁷⁸⁹ Walton, “Empowered,” 28.

⁷⁹⁰ John Blake, “Theology and Therapy: Atlanta's Mega Fest Shows Many Sides of T.D. Jakes' Ministry,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Home Edition, June 23, 2004.

T.D. Jakes Enterprises unquestionably benefits hugely from its symbiotic relationship with The Potter's House and T.D. Jakes Ministries. The church and the viewers who contribute to his ministry pay the tab for Jakes's telecasts, which in addition to carrying the message of the day and drawing people to The Potter's House, serve as infomercials for his books, CDs, DVDs, and other products. They also advertise at conferences in which these same products, including videos and tapes of conferences are sold.⁷⁹¹

Jakes takes full financial advantage of his role as a local pastor and international evangelist. He is well-versed about the significance and history that the black pastor has played in churches and the larger African American community.

Jakes has described the pastor's role in black churches as more important than that of the President of the United States. In an interview before Barack Obama became President, Jakes states that "ministry is completely different in the African-American community....The church is everything. We've never had a president, we've only had preachers. So when we look to the preacher, he's the president. Many of us have not had fathers, so he's the daddy we didn't have. We take pride in him in a way white people don't understand."⁷⁹² Jakes has been able to take his social capital as a pastor and convert it into financial capital. His secular and non-Christian business partners are also aware of his appeal and his stature in the African American community. Jakes lists several secular partners on the website of T.D. Jakes Enterprises. They include Sony Pictures, Putnam Books, Radio One, CodeBlack Entertainment, Universal Christian Music Group (Dexterity Sounds), and Atria Books.⁷⁹³ This list does not include other corporate sponsors like Coca Cola, and American Airlines, and the smaller vendors that sponsor the larger conferences like MegaFest, God's Leading Ladies, or WTAL.⁷⁹⁴

⁷⁹¹ Martin, "American Idol," 208.

⁷⁹² Winner, "T.D. Jakes Feels Your Pain," 59.

⁷⁹³ <http://www.tdjakes.com/our-partners/> (accessed July, 12 2012).

⁷⁹⁴ Richardson, Williams, and Harris, "The Business of Faith," 106.

Jakes would argue that his entrepreneurial and secular vocations are the impetus for these financial partnerships. However, I argue that his vocation as a pastor, more than as a writer, movie producer, or any other secular vocation, is the source for their involvement. Billingsley poses an excellent question: “[W]ithout the institutional structure” that the ministries provide, would the “for-profit ventures” be as successful?⁷⁹⁵

Jakes’s relationship with Putnam is a perfect example. Putnam is a division of Penguin Putnam, the second largest secular publisher in the country.⁷⁹⁶ Jakes’s first deal with Putnam was a two-book deal for 1.8 million dollars.⁷⁹⁷ An article in *Publisher’s Weekly* describes Putnam’s relationship with religious authors like Jakes. “Successful authors like T.D. Jakes have national and international ministries that reach millions of potential book-buyers through sold-out conferences, direct mailings, on-site and on-line bookstores, and various personal appearances. Jake’s publisher Putnam, considers a writer’s platform an important factor in the company’s decision to sign them”⁷⁹⁸ Destiny Image, a small Charismatic press, sold two million copies of the WTAL non-fiction book. Destiny is committed to evangelism and Christian mission. As Morken archives, “Jakes transitioned for self-publishing, to small Christian publishers, to large Christian publishers, to a large secular publisher.”⁷⁹⁹ The success of WTAL, which is a religious text, led to the Putnam deal. The religious or spiritual success is what has fueled the secular success.

⁷⁹⁵ Billingsley, *It’s a New Day*, 109.

⁷⁹⁶ Forman, “Taking Religion to the Masses,” 123.

⁷⁹⁷ Miller, “Prophet Motives,” A1.

⁷⁹⁸ Marcia Ford, “Beyond Handselling,” *Publisher’s Weekly* (Sept 23 2002): S2.

⁷⁹⁹ Morken, “Bishop T.D. Jakes: A Ministry of Empowerment,” 40.

Joel Fotinos, the religious director of Putnam, explains that “[p]ublishers *buy* [emphasis mine] authors as much as they buy their projects.”⁸⁰⁰ These companies are essentially buying Jakes and his relationship with his parishioners. In other words, it is not Jakes’s role as an entrepreneur, but his role as a pastor and evangelist that these corporate partners are buying. Like other prosperity preachers, Jakes unapologetically sells himself to the highest bidder in the global marketplace. He also sells his platform, which means that he profits from his relationship with his parishioners, ministry partners, and the thousands of adherents that attend the many conferences like WTAL. Bishop Jakes is able to accomplish this by capitalizing off of both vocational identities as a pastor and an entrepreneur.

JAKES’S CHRISTOLOGY (JESUS THE CEO) AND LIBERATION (EXODUS AND PROMISED LAND)

Although the archetypal images of pastor and entrepreneur are prominent in the life story of T.D. Jakes, to fully understand Jakes as a contemporary liberation theologian we must also investigate how he defines or explains liberation. What are the details of his contextual theology? What is his Christology? Because he is a black preacher, we want to know how he interprets the Exodus and the Promised Land narratives so that the contextual theology of Bishop T.D. Jakes can be compared to the theologies of other black preachers and liberation theologians. These biblical stories and their interpretation have been central to African American religious thought, identity, and spiritual formation.

In much of Jakes’s teaching, Jesus is God—and not only because of his history as a Oneness Pentecostal. Many black Christians see Jesus as synonymous with God.⁸⁰¹ Therefore,

⁸⁰⁰ Ford, “Beyond Handselling,” S2.

⁸⁰¹ Grant, *White Women’s Christ, Black Women’s Jesus*, 213. Anderson, *Creative Exchange*, 59.

most theological reflections are also Christological. The statements about Jesus are often synonymous with the statements about God. Jakes's images of Christ are important because first and foremost, Jakes is a preacher. As Buttrick warns, "We must never forget that Christian preaching is inescapably *Christian*; we speak *in Christ of Christ*." It is "the character of Jesus Christ" that "is a 'living symbol' to the Christian community."⁸⁰² McClendon adds that Jesus of Nazareth may be important for Christian theology, however it is the risen Christ that "is now the shared life of those whom he redeems. They are in Christ; Christ is in them."⁸⁰³ As such, McClendon asserts that to tell the story of someone like T.D. Jakes means that we are also telling the continuing story of the Christ.

In much of black preaching and black theology Jesus Christ is presented as God, and Jesus of Nazareth is presented as one who is poor and on the side of the oppressed. Because Jesus is presented as poor, womanist theologian Jackie Grant asserts that African Americans and black women especially believed that Jesus associated with the lowly of his day and *the least of these*.⁸⁰⁴ Women are able to believe that a poor Jesus understands that black women often suffer from triple oppression. Dwight Hopkins, as a representative of black theology, offers a reading of how most black and womanist liberation theologians interpret Jesus the Christ:

That is, Jesus Christ shows clear, conscious intent that God chose to manifest among specific oppressed groups in the real world. In Jesus, God publicly proclaims a heavenly mission on earth geared to freeing the poor and those victimized by discrimination....And God, through Jesus opted to die as a persecuted outlaw, a perceived threat to ruling powers and dominating church and theological authorities. Jesus Christ's funeral takes place with two thieves, lacking any resources, the Anointed One had to be buried in someone else's tomb.⁸⁰⁵

⁸⁰² Buttrick, *Homiletics*, 14.

⁸⁰³ McClendon, *Biography as Theology*, 201.

⁸⁰⁴ Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, 217.

⁸⁰⁵ Dwight N. Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1993), 213-214.

Liberation theologians argue that God chose to manifest in Jesus as one who is oppressed. This is why most liberation theologians argue for the *preferential option of the poor*.

Prosperity preachers tell a different story and have a different interpretation of the Christ narrative and event. The identity of Jesus has been transformed into one that fits well within the tropes of global capitalism and empire. Jesus is not only wealthy, but is also a business mogul or CEO. These preachers usually cite many examples from Scripture to justify their position. Oral Roberts gives seven reasons for believing Jesus was wealthy, from the kind of clothes Jesus wore, to the kind of house he had, to the fact that Jesus had a treasurer.⁸⁰⁶ Similarly, Fred Price in an interview with *Religion and Ethics* argues:

Jesus had plenty, and then he was always giving to people, always giving to the poor, and so he had plenty from a material point of view. He was responsible for twelve grown men—their housing, their transportation, their food, their clothing—for a three-and-a-half year period of time. He had to have something. This concept of Jesus being poor is not biblically true; it's traditionally true.⁸⁰⁷

These arguments and interpretations of Scripture are intended to counter other traditional interpretations—especially those familiar cultural expressions of the Black Church and black theologians that present Jesus of Nazareth as poor. T.D. Jakes uses many of the same arguments as other prosperity preachers. More importantly, Jakes interprets both Jesus and God as businessmen with the characteristics of cosmic Wall Street investment bankers and venture capitalists. In the stories that Jakes shares in his sermons and books, the images of Christ and of

⁸⁰⁶ Oral Roberts writes in his chapter entitled “Seven Ways We Know Jesus was Not Poor:” 1) Jesus has a house large enough for guests; 2) Jesus had money, enough to have a treasurer; 3) Jesus had a team, a large one that he had to support financially from city to city; 4) Jesus had a donor base, a faithful group of financial partners who ‘ministered’ to Him of their money. 5) Jesus wore good clothes, clothes that many people today might call designer clothes, clothes that were costly and unique to His needs. 6) Jesus was put in a rich man’s trust to insure He had a proper burial place—actually, so that He might be buried with the rich. 7) It is Jesus’ riches by which God said [God] would supply all your needs (see Philippians 4:19).” Oral Roberts, *How I Learned Jesus Was Not Poor* (Alamonte Springs, FL: Creation House, 1989), 11.

⁸⁰⁷ “Prosperity Gospel,” Episode no. 1051, *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, August 17, 2007, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week1051/p-feature.html> (accessed December 21, 2012).

God are very similar to images of empire. In Jakes's worldview, God's actions are just like those of a CEO at the helm of a multinational corporation.

Jakes argues that the atonement of Christ provides the believer with access to the blessings of God. The believer must first accept their covenant relationship with God and be a good steward of the gifts that God has given him or her. Only then, can the believer expect God to *invest* in them and to bless their giftedness. It is God that gives the believer gifts, so that he or she can obtain wealth. Jakes's Christ image and his interpretation of the life of Jesus of Nazareth are used to substantiate his contextual theology of empire and his prosperity worldview.

Jesus is Not Poor

Jesus is not poor. Jakes says that "Christ's poverty is a religious myth."⁸⁰⁸ Jakes provides several interpretations of Scripture as evidence that Jesus was rich and not poor. One interpretation is about the soldiers' gambling for Jesus's cloak at the crucifixion. For Jakes, the gambling means that the coat must have been valuable. Therefore, Jesus could not have been poor.⁸⁰⁹ Jakes also argues that Jesus was able to comfortably fund a three-year ministry with his disciples.⁸¹⁰ Since Jesus was able to fund a ministry and take care of his disciples, Jesus is not only wealthy—but he must also be a business mogul and CEO.⁸¹¹

On another occasion, Jakes interprets Matthew 19:23-24, which says that "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God." Jakes contends that the "eye of the needle" in the verse refers to "an opening in the wall of

⁸⁰⁸ Jackson, "Jakes Hiked Long Road to Success."

⁸⁰⁹ Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America's New Preacher*, 109.

⁸¹⁰ Henry, "Bishop Jakes is Ready. Are You?"

⁸¹¹ *Ibid.*

Jerusalem sufficiently small that to pass through it, a camel had to get down on its knees.”⁸¹² Jakes interprets the story as a lesson on humility: “We have a responsibility, like the camel, to humble ourselves, by giving back to people, by helping people who are less fortunate. I think God doesn’t mind you having things; [God] minds things having you.”⁸¹³ These are just a few examples. Jake’s reframing of Christ as rich is consistent with his reframing of God.

Most of his teachings that present God as the cosmic investment banker and businessman can be found in his book, *The Great Investment*. The book is an example of how Jakes takes scriptures and uses them to ideologically manipulate Black Church traditions to fit within the prosperity worldview and the gospel of wealth ideology.

As a self-help guide on life, business, and family, the book is supposed to teach the believer how to be successful in life. In the preface, Jakes says that he is writing the book as an offering to God. So, he includes a prayer. In the prayer he identifies God as his financial advisor: “I am certain that whatever I have accomplished was simply a matter of Your divine favor. You are the best financial advisor,...Thanks for giving me tips on stocks, bonds, annuities, people, places, and things. I have profited in every area through knowing You as my Lord.”⁸¹⁴ Later in the book, Jakes uses the prosperity scripture of Deuteronomy 8:18 to make his claim that God wants the believer to be prosperous. Jakes says, “God will give you the power to get wealth, but you will have to take the power and get a plan and work the plan to make it happen.”⁸¹⁵ Each believer is given “the capacity or means to get wealth. That power is in your will. It is in your

⁸¹² Martin, “American Idol,” 211.

⁸¹³ Ibid.

⁸¹⁴ Jakes, *The Great Investment*, xi.

⁸¹⁵ Ibid., 42.

talents. It is in your creativity.”⁸¹⁶ Moreover, Jakes says that believers are to utilize this power to its fullest. They are encouraged to live beyond their limits. They should not limit themselves; they should aspire to live an affluent and opulent lifestyle. Jakes argues that God “is not offended by opulence or [God] would never have created Heaven with gold streets.”⁸¹⁷

Jakes is committed to proving “that God is not against us being affluent.”⁸¹⁸ His proof is very much in line with the prosperity worldview that expects a hundredfold blessing from seed-faith giving. It is “[t]hrough our sacrifice and giving, [that God] honors with a hundredfold return,”⁸¹⁹ writes Jakes. Moreover, he asserts that this hundredfold blessing is not for some day later in Heaven. The return from God is for material blessings in the here and now. He says, “This return is not in Heaven; as Jesus plainly promised, a hundredfold return will be gained in this life! Why would I need a hundredfold return in Heaven? I need a return on my investment in this life while recognizing that the greater wealth is still, as [Jesus] so aptly puts it, eternal life. [Jesus] has promised that to those who sacrifice for [Jesus’] divine purpose.”⁸²⁰

In Jakes’s worldview, Christians are encouraged to use seed-faith giving and positive confession to access the divine power that is guaranteed through their covenant relationship. The more wealth that Christians possess, the more they will be able to further the Kingdom of God for evangelism. The ultimate goal of wealth is evangelism; therefore, Jakes is careful to stress that the focus should not be just about money or just wealth. Money is simply a tool and a

⁸¹⁶ Jakes, *The Great Investment*, 42.

⁸¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁸¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁸¹⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸²⁰ *Ibid.*

currency that God uses.⁸²¹ However, he often reminds believers that wealth is always supposed to come back to the ministry for evangelism. Moreover, in the prosperity worldview you give *to God* by giving *to ministries*. God wants “godly people” to have money “so that it might flow back to the ministry.”⁸²²

In contrast to some prosperity preachers, Jakes does not only encourage Christians to sow into the ministry. Instead, he also includes advice on how to invest and save with his prosperity prescriptions:

[God’s] covenant is established when we use [God’s] provision to bring glory to [God’s] name and establish [God’s] Kingdom among the nations. Supporting God’s work is why [God] gives us the power to get wealth. But we must also understand that sowing into ministry is only part of the plan. *Investing, saving*, [emphasis mine] thinking thoughts that are prosperous and progressive—these are the prerequisite for the next move of God.⁸²³

The God of Jakes’s worldview is a businessman who thinks and makes investments like an American CEO on Wall Street.

More importantly, Jakes’s God blesses *only* those individuals who are able to provide a profitable return on an investment. Like any good venture capitalist, God is not going to bless those individuals who are not going to guarantee a financial return. Jakes argues,

It is your wisdom and ability to handle success that causes God *to invest* in you even more. You have to attain the ability to be a good steward over every opportunity in order to have the good success that God has promised his people. *God is a businessman*. [God] *is not* going to do business with someone who shows no sign of potential return. [God] invests in people who demonstrate an ability to handle what [God] has given them [emphasis mine].⁸²⁴

⁸²¹ Ibid. 47.

⁸²² Jakes, *The Great Investment*, 48.

⁸²³ Ibid.

⁸²⁴ Ibid., 60.

The implication is that God rewards those that are able to accumulate more, and the more one accumulates, the more God will bless and give to that person. However, the converse is implied as well. For those who do not accumulate more wealth—those who have not been financially successful—God will not reward them with wealth. In other words, the individuals that are not wealthy have not received God’s reward because they show no sign for a potential return, or because they have not demonstrated to God that they can handle the wealth.

In order to ensure their access to divine power, the believer must give tithes and offerings. Jakes says that the tithe is the “key to releasing the blessings of God in our life.”⁸²⁵ The tithe is defined as “ten percent of our gross income given to support the work of the local church.” Jakes’s position is no different than many prosperity preachers; he argues that “[t]he tithe is seed-planted into the kingdom of God, and just like investments in the stock market, it will produce a harvest. The harvest may come soon or it may come later, but God will release blessing to those who faithfully, obediently, and generously give.”⁸²⁶ For the poor, or anyone for whom giving ten percent of their gross income might be difficult or a sacrifice, Jakes says not to worry. Jakes explains that they may not see their reward right away: “You may not see a check in the mail on Monday to compensate for the money you placed in the offering plate on Sunday, but in time you will see [God’s] blessing.”⁸²⁷ Nonetheless, Jakes expects them to keep tithing and to keep looking for their return. Ultimately, tithing and sacrificial giving is so fundamental to the prosperity worldview and to Jakes’s theological system, that it is also the ideological backdrop for how Jakes interprets the Exodus narrative.

⁸²⁵ Jakes, *The Great Investment*, 73.

⁸²⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁸²⁷ *Ibid.*

Exodus, the Promised Land, and Liberation

Images of Exodus and the Promised Land have been vital to Black Church identity and liberation. In his earlier writings, James Cone used the Exodus story to argue that God is on the side of the oppressed. Martin Luther King also interprets the Exodus story as God leading the people of Israel out of their bondage, but leading them as a community—not just as individuals. Pharaoh and Egypt, in Cone’s and King’s interpretations, represent systems of oppression. Jake’s interpretation of the Exodus narrative, in contrast, is quite different. His version of the story is about individual and personal salvation. The main focus is on financial freedom and liberation. More importantly, the entire narrative is interpreted into the language of *economic dependency*, which is a familiar ideological trope used to justify the gospel of wealth ideology.

Bishop Jakes writes, “I believe that one of the most damaging traits that subverts and impedes the progress of many people is dependency on others.”⁸²⁸ In his interpretation of the Exodus story, God had “to wean [the people of Israel] from the breast milk of dependency to the strong nutrition of self-reliance, and greater God reliance.”⁸²⁹ Furthermore, he contends,

Israel had a right to the wealth of Egypt...There is no other way to interpret this Exodus passage than to see that God was paying Israel back for her years of uncompensated labor and for the faithfulness of her father Joseph as a tithe of blessing to the Egyptian people. Joseph faithfully served God’s purpose, as did the Israelites for four hundred years, and the spoils of Egypt were the interest accrued from years of dedicated living.⁸³⁰

Jakes’s interpretation is ideologically consistent with the supposed redistribution of wealth promoted by prosperity preachers that claim that the wealth of the wicked is laid up for the

⁸²⁸ Jakes, *The Great Investment*, 33-34.

⁸²⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁸³⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

righteous.⁸³¹ Whereas, liberation theologians argue for liberation that eliminates communal and systemic oppression (gender, ethnic, and class). In contrast, Jakes argues for liberation that focuses only on financial and material oppression.

Additionally, in Jakes's interpretation, Joseph symbolically represents the sacrificial tithe. Joseph, as a character in the Exodus story, is sold into slavery by his brothers, falsely accused by Potiphar's wife, and then imprisoned. The systemic oppression of the Israelites by the Egyptians is also interpreted as a *voluntary* sacrificial gift. The God in Jakes's theological worldview is a cosmic venture capitalist and investment banker; this God must now return to Israel a financial return with accrued interest.

Jakes also argues that the Exodus story represents three levels of success. He says, "There are stages of success. No one achieves success without going through these stages."⁸³² The Exodus narrative with slavery, wilderness, and Promised Land correlate to three levels of economic striving: *not enough*, *just enough* and *more than enough*. Jakes writes, "When the people of Israel were living in Egypt, they were depending on Pharaoh. [Pharaoh] gave them not enough . . . God delivered them from scarcity. [God] led them out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and through the wilderness, and for forty years they depended on God.... [God] delivered them to the wilderness and delivered them from *not enough*."⁸³³ Bishop Jakes explains that "[God] delivered them through the wilderness and delivered them to *just enough*."⁸³⁴ There is a divine purpose according to Jakes for the just enough stage. He says that we have to experience this

⁸³¹ Jakes, *The Great Investment*, 11-12.

⁸³² *Ibid.*, 35.

⁸³³ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

⁸³⁴ *Ibid.*

stage so that God may “determine if we have the will and tenacity to go on to the final stage of success and rest comfortably in the stage of ‘*more than enough* [emphasis mine].”⁸³⁵

According to Jakes, Christians, who are supposed to be on their individual journeys, will be led by God in the same way that God led Israel to its final destination: “[God] delivered them [Israel] from the wilderness and delivered them to more than enough.” Therefore, the conclusion is that Christians should expect that their final destination will be like that of Israel: “[God] gives us the power to have ‘more than enough.’... God wants you to have more than enough. [God] wants you to be financially independent. [God] wants you to use your faith to unlock your finances.”⁸³⁶

Bishop Jakes’s interpretation of the Exodus passage is a perfect example of how stories, Scripture, and rituals are revamped by prosperity preachers to be resonate with the economic realities of advanced capitalism. Thus, God is not the same liberator as the God of black liberation theology. Jakes takes the historic Exodus narrative and the key characters and places of the story (the people of Israel, Exodus, Egypt, Pharaoh and Joseph), and transforms the story from one of *liberation* into one of *investment* and *return*. More importantly, his use of the story affirms the prosperity religious practices of tithing, seed-faith giving, and the endorsement of the constant pursuit of wealth.

In the prosperity worldview, Christians have a God-given right to the wealth of the wicked. Therefore, in Jakes’s interpretation, the people of Israel have a right to the wealth of the Egyptians. Israel, like the individual believer, receives a promise (the Abrahamic covenant), makes a financial investment or tithe, and is rewarded with the wealth of Egypt. Israel (and the

⁸³⁵ Ibid., 36.

⁸³⁶ Jakes, *The Great Investment*, 37.

individual believer) receives a return on their investment. Jakes echoes the same ideological position of Word of Faith: “When God makes a promise, [God] keeps [God’s] word. However, it is often required that we lay hold on the promise by acting on it in an aggressive way....The miracle begins when we remove the training wheels of dependency on others.”⁸³⁷ Not only does Jakes take the Exodus story and interpret it to fit the prosperity worldview, but he also places the story in the language and discourse of a very familiar trope in American neo-liberal political discourse—the rhetoric of *dependency*.

Dependency is a familiar trope in American discourse about the deserving poor and welfare reform. The term “carries strong emotive and visual associations and a powerful pejorative charge. In current debates, the expression ‘welfare dependency’ evokes the image of the welfare mother, often figured as a young, unmarried black woman (perhaps even a teenager) of uncontrolled sexuality.”⁸³⁸ I have argued that the branded identity of *Loosed Women* is a counter-expression to negative tropes like welfare queen. The gospel of wealth rhetoric about dependency often makes the welfare queen the main perpetrator in its neo-liberal discourse. I am suggesting that the Exodus story has been transformed to be consistent with the neo-liberal gospel of wealth rhetoric, which says that we should *not* provide safety nets for the poor, because doing so will only create a culture of dependency.⁸³⁹ Jakes’s interpretation, like much of his contextual theology, blames the poor for needing help and celebrates the individuals that are financially independent.

⁸³⁷Jakes, *The Great Investment*, 37.

⁸³⁸ Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, “A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State,” *Signs* 19, no. 2 (Winter 1994): 311.

⁸³⁹ Garfinkle, *The American Dream vs. The Gospel of Wealth*, 156.

The most disappointing aspect of Jakes's interpretation of the Exodus narrative is not only that it has been reframed into a story of individual economic salvation. The real tragedy is that by suggesting that Joseph and the four hundred years of oppression was a tithe and a sacrifice, Jakes places God *not* on the side of the oppressed, but on the side of the oppressors and empire. "God is weaning them from the breast milk of dependency to the strong nutrition of self-reliance, and greater God reliance."⁸⁴⁰ God, as the cosmic investment banker, requires the oppression of Israel as a gift in the heavenly gift economy. Then, this God rewards the people of Israel by essentially making them into oppressors, who now must claim the wealth of their oppressors.

Although Jakes works hard *not* to align himself with the extremists of Word of Faith preachers, ideologically he privileges the same tropes of the empire, with the CEO/rich entrepreneur as the model of economic and spiritual success. His worldview and interpretation interpellates adherents to believe that anyone who is still in an economically oppressive situation—the *not enough*, or the *just enough*—is not where Jakes's capitalist God expects them to be. "Financial success will come only to those who take what they have been given and invest it, plant it in good soil in hopes of a good harvest."⁸⁴¹ In Jakes's contextual theology of empire and the prosperity worldview, there is no room for the losers or victims of capitalism. Only the winners are welcomed—only those who are financially independent and are financial winners in the global marketplace. These believers have arrived; they have made it to their final destination, the Promised Land. God has blessed them because they are worthy of an investment. They have manifested their personal economic destinies and empires.

⁸⁴⁰ Jakes, *The Great Investment*, 34.

⁸⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

In sum, Jakes's Christ image and his interpretation of the Exodus story is similar to other prosperity preachers. In addition, how he shares his life story as a pastor and entrepreneur is also similar to the many contemporary preachers on the continuum. These two images are central to the life story of Bishop T.D. Jakes. There may be two people competing in his head, Bill Gates and Mother Teresa. However, his theological system, his contextual theology, the prosperity worldview, and his religious practices all suggest that it is Bill Gates that is winning, *not* Mother Teresa.

CHAPTER 6
BRAND AS THEOLOGY AND THEOLOGICAL NORM
WOMAN THOU ART LOOSED

In the previous chapter I presented the first part of the theological method using McClendon's *Biography as Theology*. I demonstrated how the two images of pastor and entrepreneur are significant in not only the life story of T.D. Jakes, but also in the Wal-Martization of African American religion. The manipulation of the iconic representations of pastor and CEO by popular preachers like Jakes is part of the core differences between the New Black Church and the Black Church. Because of the significance of black churches to African American identity, it is important to understand both sides of the pastor/parishioner or CEO/consumer relationship. In the last chapter I used *Biography as Theology* to explain the theology and ideology of T.D. Jakes who presents his life story as a supermegachurch pastor and the CEO of several businesses. This chapter, *Brand as Theology and Theological Norm*, is the second half of the overall theological method using WTAL as a case study.

Examining the brand provides an opportunity to explore what kind of theology is expressed through the brand and how it contributes to the social construction of identity. The method seeks to expose the various levels of social interaction between New Black Church pastors and the many women that participate in the brand in local churches and brand communities.

T.D. Jakes and New Black Church pastors actually pastor more than their local congregations. They also treat the members of their brand communities and their television ministry partners as congregants. Many of the pastors have the ecclesial title of "bishop," and have also branded themselves as bishop. T.D. Jakes is not only ordained as a bishop, but the title "bishop" is a part of his brand. As ecclesial and branded bishops they oversee local pastors in

various ministerial fellowships and networks.⁸⁴² Many of these local pastors also have their own churches with their own brands. Subsequently, the brands and the theology of New Black Church pastors like Bishop Jakes are impacting faith communities around the world.

In the previous chapters I have argued that the differences between the Black Church and the New Black Church are generational, as well as a result of the hegemonic cultural influences of advanced capitalism. I affirmed theologian Gordon Kaufman's position that academic theologians and preachers as folk-theologians use the theological method of *imaginative construction* to create their contextual theologies. Referencing Paul Tillich's definitions for *systematic theology* and *theological norm*, I outlined a theological method that is a collaborative project between the professional theologian and the preacher. The professional theologian uses *Biography as Theology* to study the preacher and qualitative research methods to study the brand as theology and a theological norm. The academic theologian's research methods provide a lens for evaluating the ideology of the brand by asking the question, "What stories, messages, and power relationships are communicated within the brand?" The theologian's choice of qualitative methods also determines which products, events, and religious experiences will best answer his or her existential and critical questions. As Tillich suggests, the method that a theologian chooses is also a theological assertion or proposition that is always made with passion and risk.⁸⁴³ In this chapter I will demonstrate the second half of my chosen method and will share the information obtained from using the qualitative research methods of case study and participant observation. The goal of this chapter is to provide future researchers with a thick description of the brands and

⁸⁴² According to Morken, T.D. Jakes leads the *Pater Alliance* which has over 231 churches and pastors from 13 denominations. Morken, "Bishop T.D. Jakes," 29.

⁸⁴³ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 8.

brand communities in the New Black Church, and to shed light on how individual women participants experience the theology and ideology of the brand.

The New Black Church, through its local churches, media, and conference/television ministries, commodifies almost every aspect of worship and religious experience. A live worship service is often edited and packaged into a variety of consumable goods. One brand can consist of movies, music CDs, books, devotionals, bibles, and a variety of other products. The churches, pastors, sermons, testimonies, scriptures, music, and worship can also be branded, marketed, packaged, and sold in the global marketplace. Consumers are not simply buying the products; they are also experiencing the brand theology and its ideology. As I have stated, because brands are designed to meet the spiritual, psychological, self-help, and therapeutic needs of a particular target audience, each individual brand acts as its own theological norm with its own particular theological and ideological perspective.

Tillich asserts that the content of a theological norm is the biblical message. The same applies for the brand as a theological norm. Brands are often derived from the biblical message. Yet, because of the blurring of the sacred and secular, the brands of the New Black Church can come from any aspect of popular culture. However, in order to make secular brands acceptable for evangelical and fundamentalist faith communities, secular brand-messages are sacralized or Christianized. Through strategic marketing and other rhetorical devices, the preachers often reinterpret traditional texts and symbols to strengthen and boost the content and messages of their brands.

Tillich also reminds us that “[c]ollective[,] as well as individual experiences are the medium through which the message is received, colored, and interpreted. The norm grows within the medium of experience. But it is, at the same time, the criterion of experience. The norm

judges the medium in which it grows.”⁸⁴⁴ For our case study the brand derives from a biblical message from the gospel of Luke. T.D. Jakes is the preacher and the brand is “Woman Thou Art Loosed!” As a theological norm, WTAL *judges* the collective and individual experiences of T.D. Jakes and the black women consumers participating in the brand.

Mara Einstein asserts that branding, or the making of a brand, “occurs through the creation of stories or myths surrounding a product or service. These stories are conveyed through the use of advertising and marketing and are meant to position a product in the mind of the consumer.”⁸⁴⁵ The brands and stories that T.D. Jakes and other New Black Church pastors create are communicated at every level of representation—at the church/conference level (The Potter’s House, WTAL), the pastor/preacher level (Bishop T.D. Jakes), and the consumer/parishioner level (*Loosed Women*). The final level of representation is the product (WTAL book, devotional, DVD, and movie), including the content.

Pastors usually start a brand by focusing on a particular biblical story or theme. Then, through a testimony or a series of sermons, they connect the brand story to their own personal story. In doing so, they brand themselves with the message of the brand. The brand as a theological norm and the preacher are connected in the same way that liberation theologian James Cone is linked to the norm of black theology and the message of books like *God of the Oppressed*.⁸⁴⁶ Once the preacher is successfully branded to the story of the brand, the next step is to make the brand story resonate with the life story of the individual consumer. The brand is

⁸⁴⁴ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 42.

⁸⁴⁵ Einstein, *Brands of Faith*, 12.

⁸⁴⁶ James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975). Also see Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*.

marketed in such a way that the products are seen as meeting the spiritual, social, emotional, and psychological needs of the consumer.

No preacher *brands* more effectively with African American churchwomen than Bishop T.D. Jakes—especially with the WTAL brand. Bishop Jakes takes a story from the biblical text in the gospel of Luke about an unnamed woman with an eighteen year infirmity, who was healed by Jesus in the synagogue. Jakes then teaches the story in a bible study, preaches several sermons about it, starts local conferences, and self-publishes a book based on the same biblical text. In so doing, he successfully creates the faith brand,⁸⁴⁷ *Woman Thou Art Loosed!* The branding creates the mythology that no matter how long they have suffered or no matter what kind of financial, physical, emotional, and spiritual infirmities churchwomen may have, Jesus through the Holy Spirit is able to *loose* them. Theologically, Jakes asserts that God can even liberate women from their oppressions and personal traumas like domestic violence and rape. Ultimately, Jakes brands himself as the one whom God has divinely ordained and anointed to share this message of liberation. Simply put, God has called and anointed him *to loose women*. Once Jakes brands himself to both the biblical story and the WTAL brand, through his preaching and through other religious experiences he convinces women of all rank that they need the brand. In essence, Jakes's message is that women need *to be loosed* and that they need *to be loosed by him*.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

Case Study and Participant Observation

The challenge of any investigation of the New Black Church is that religious scholars, social scientists, and academic theologians are usually not adequately trained nor prepared for interdisciplinary study, nor do their academic communities foster a favorable environment for interdisciplinary projects. Theologians are usually not trained as social scientists (in sociology,

⁸⁴⁷ Einstein, *Brands of Faith*, 93.

anthropology, cultural anthropology, or economics). Conversely, social scientists are not routinely trained as religious scholars and theologians. Thus, I propose a cultural studies approach in order to create an intersection of disciplines and to provide the language for scholars to dialogue about contextual theologies of empire.

As bell hooks affirms, cultural studies “makes a space for dialogue between intellectuals, critical thinkers, etc. who may have in the past stayed within narrow disciplinary concerns.” hooks adds that “[c]ultural studies can serve as an intervention, making a space for forms of intellectual discourse to emerge that have not been traditionally welcomed in the academy.”⁸⁴⁸ Any discussion of theologies of prosperity, prosperity preachers, and their cultural productions and popular texts demands a new methodology.

The contemporary academic theologian has to be both researcher and cultural critic. The qualitative research methods are determined by the professional theologian. Tillich affirms that the theologian interprets his or her historical context “in order to raise questions of ultimacy that are implied in the situation.”⁸⁴⁹ I have shared that for Tillich, systematic theology is an apologetic or answering theology. Therefore, “it must answer the questions implied in the general human and the special historical situation.”⁸⁵⁰ As such, the theologian/researcher collects answers from the qualitative research data and the Christian message to answer his or her questions of ultimacy. The researcher as a constructive theologian also observes the branding at the various levels of representation, as well as how the biblical text is appropriated throughout the brand and its products.

⁸⁴⁸ bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990), 125.

⁸⁴⁹ Davis, “Paul Tillich’s Theological Method,” 11.

⁸⁵⁰ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 31.

Bruce Berg, in *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, describes “seven primary ways to collect qualitative data: interviewing, focus groups, ethnography, sociometry, unobtrusive measures, historiography and case studies.”⁸⁵¹ In this work I have chosen to perform a case study because of the particularities of the New Black Church, theologians of prosperity, and the ideological impact of Wal-Martization on black churches. “Case study methods involve systematically gathering enough information about a particular person, social setting, event, or group to permit the researcher to effectively understand how the subject operates or functions.”⁸⁵² In addition, “the case study method tends to focus on holistic description and explanation.”⁸⁵³ T.D. Jakes and WTAL are the case study, because as I have argued, Jakes is the Sam Walton of the New Black Church, and the WTAL brand is marketed to women and Bishop Jakes’s most successful brand. Jakes, as a preacher and WTAL as a brand, are an example of how churches and pastors in the New Black Church use branding to create their contextual theologies of empire.

As part of this case study, participant observation is an attempt to bridge the gap between faith and academic communities. The academic community is not usually accepting of or familiar with the language and nature of prosperity churches and their brand communities. Additionally, the faith practiced in these communities is usually fundamentalist, evangelical, Pentecostal, and charismatic. Therefore, the adherents are often not interested in critical studies of their faith. Moreover, they are usually unfamiliar with black, womanist, and feminist theologies. In fact, they are often suspicious of most academic researchers, especially those

⁸⁵¹ Bruce L. Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences* (Boston, MA: Pearson Press, 2004), 4.

⁸⁵² *Ibid.*, 251

⁸⁵³ *Ibid.*

attempting to examine something as important as their worship and their faith.⁸⁵⁴ Conversely, the academic who is not a person of faith would miss the coded brand language, the nuances like the call and response of black preaching, and the prosperity rituals like throwing money on the altar. None of these core religious practices would make rational sense. The purpose of the proposed methodology is so that the academic theologian gains enough insider status to participate in what Tillich defines as both ecstatic and technical reason.⁸⁵⁵ I am calling for the theologian, whenever possible, to present an accurate description of the theology and worldview of prosperity preachers. In other words, the professional theologian does not abandon his or her academic training and critical reflection; but, as a scholar, he or she also does not paint a picture of these preachers as only caricatures and charlatans. Rightly studying theologies of prosperity requires the scholar to be fluent enough to speak both the language of the academy and that of the faith community.

The choice of participant observation as a methodology is also to ensure that Jakes as a preacher and his contextual theology are not only discussed from a top-down, minister-only perspective. The perspectives of both the pastor/CEO as well as the parishioner/customer are necessary to comprehend how black women are experiencing the theologies of the New Black Church.⁸⁵⁶ By participating in the brand as an insider, the academic theologian is able to observe the social construction of religious identity at the many levels of representation.

⁸⁵⁴ Frederick, *Between Sundays*, 18-23.

⁸⁵⁵ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 54.

⁸⁵⁶ I recognize that certain limitations exist with my method. Conducting interviews with women of the faith community would have also been a valuable methodology. However, because of my insider status in these prosperity faith communities as a preacher and adherent, I see myself as an insider. Furthermore, because of the space limitations of this project and the limited research on theologies of prosperity, I decided to not conduct interviews with individual women. I did attempt to interview T.D. Jakes. Wanting to interview Jakes was not simply a result of my decision to use the biography as theology methodology. I wanted an interview with the preacher so the voice of the preacher/pastor/CEO would be included. More importantly, as the scholar, I would be more likely to

The participant observer methodology is also necessary for exploring the ideological impact of branding. Therefore, for this study I have selectively chosen products and events that are representative of the branding and consistent with the ideological content of most items in the WTAL brand. The products and events also represent the typical religious experience of the average adherent. As I have argued, the professional theologian must decide which sources provide the appropriate data to answer his or her critical and/or existential questions. The chosen products and events for the WTAL brand include: the 1993 sermon at the Azusa Conference, the 1993 non-fiction book, the 2004 WTAL movie with screenplay, and the 2009 WTAL conference at The Potter's House.⁸⁵⁷

My rationale for including these products is as follows. First, I included the 1993 Azusa sermon because it marks the beginning of the brand and the sermon is a sample of the products and events that were sold during the early years of Jakes's ministry. Next, the 1993 non-fiction book is the first major revenue-generating product,⁸⁵⁸ as well as the first of many books that Jakes has authored. Jakes often references the non-fiction book as an example of when God gave him the power to get wealth.⁸⁵⁹ The next product, the 2004 WTAL film, is included because of the rhetorical and story-telling power of film. The film, by far, has given T.D. Jakes his greatest exposure as a celebrity preacher and CEO. Finally, the 2009 WTAL conference is critical to the investigation because one cannot really experience or comprehend the WTAL brand without

present a fair critique. However, even with several attempts, Bishop Jakes declined. I am not the only scholar to have been refused and interview by Jakes. I even attempted to use my relationship with Bishop Noel Jones. Whereas T.D. Jakes is always doing interviews with the popular press and media, he does not provide the same access to scholars. I can only assume that the critical questions of the scholar do not help with the promotion of any of his brands and products.

⁸⁵⁷ While Jakes produces music at each conference, and music is important to the brand, I did not include any music in my investigation because I did not feel adequately qualified to do so.

⁸⁵⁸ Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America's New Preacher*, 67-68.

⁸⁵⁹ Jakes, *The Great Investment*, 43-44.

attending a live conference. At the peak performance of the brand, the annual conferences had over 50,000 women. The conferences act as an international platform to launch the ministries of other prosperity preachers and for new brands.⁸⁶⁰ In this study we will trace the ways in which the conferences have evolved since the first sermon at Azusa and after Jakes cancelled MegaFest in 2007.⁸⁶¹ In sum, each of the chosen branded products and events are what Tillich identifies as sources, and act as the mediums for critiquing and evaluating Jakes's contextual theology of empire.

Woman Thou Art Loosed (WTAL)—the Brand

WTAL as a brand is very similar to what black women have to come to expect from black churches. As I have argued previously, the conferences, like all the worship experiences of the brand are “safe spaces” for black women’s self-definition.⁸⁶² The religious experiences promote a similar uplift ideology and politics of respectability to that of the Black Church tradition. The participation of black women in the conferences is also an example of what James Scott defines as *infrapolitics*.⁸⁶³ When women consume the WTAL products and attend the worship services, they are actively negotiating power relationships in respect to race, gender, and class.

Jakes strategically employs women preachers as keynote speakers. Because of the television and media exposure, the conferences become a major platform for these women. One appearance at a WTAL conference is sure to improve their personal brands and their earning

⁸⁶⁰ Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America's New Preacher*, 107.

⁸⁶¹ Christopher Quinn, “Megafest Takes an Indefinite Break,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution* July 3, 2007, Main Edition, 1C.

⁸⁶² Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 95.

⁸⁶³ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, xiii.

potential. To comprehend the full impact of having women preachers as speakers with an all-women audience, one has to know how women, especially women pastors, are usually treated in black churches. Many black churches do not allow women to pastor nor participate in leadership positions. Consequently, when women pastors are on such an international and global stage with an all-women audience, both the preachers and the adherents feel empowered. This in no way suggests that the messages that are preached, or those heard by the women in the pew, transcend traditional patriarchal and submissive roles.⁸⁶⁴ However, scholars that label these women as only victims and passive participants or diminish their participation to a form of false consciousness, miss the agentic power and the everyday forms of resistance of both the women preachers and the conference participants.

Based on the black women she interviewed, Frederick asserts that women consider the teaching of T.D. Jakes and preachers like him to be “liberating them from destructive and abusive relationships, low self-esteem, and financial instability.”⁸⁶⁵ As I have stated before, Frederick actually describes what the women experience as a “subversive, even feminist discourse that confronts the conundrums of their personal lives.”⁸⁶⁶ She writes that the women “come to respect themselves more deeply and to demand respect from men.”⁸⁶⁷ What I am suggesting is that a closer examination of the many layers of the brand and its ideological impact is needed in order to explain why most academic scholars and the adherents the follow Jakes have such diverse reactions. Moreover, to ignore the voices of the women who follow T.D. Jakes

⁸⁶⁴ See Victor Anderson, *Creative Exchange*, 158; Marcia Riggs, *Plenty Good Room: Women versus Male Power in the Black Church* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim, 2003), 80; and, Johnetta Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Gender Talk*, 125.

⁸⁶⁵ Frederick, “But It’s Bible,” 277.

⁸⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁷ Ibid.

and other preachers in the New Black Church, and to assume that the women are not making agentive decisions, gives T.D. Jakes and these preachers *too much* power. In other words, as Scott has argued with his hidden and public transcripts—it too easily reinscribes the preachers and T.D. Jakes as *powerful*, and the women as *powerless*.⁸⁶⁸

1993 Live at Azusa WTAL Sermon

The Sunday School class that Jakes taught in West Virginia and the subsequent sermon that he preached at Carlton Pearson's 1993 Azusa conference mark the start of the brand. I was able to secure a VHS version of the sermon. The conference was held at the Mabee Center at Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma.⁸⁶⁹ The tape begins with an introduction from T.D. Jakes and highlights what Jakes promises to the women consumers who purchase the video. The introduction was obviously added at a later date by T.D. Jakes Ministries. The content of the introduction illustrates how Jakes invites adherents to what they can expect, and how to participate in the religious experience. More importantly, the introduction show how the earlier products and events were marketed:

Jesus is speaking and healing women all over the country just as he did in the Bible. He saw a woman who was lost in the crowd who was wounded and twisted and fragmented, had been through 18 years of adversity that had left her a mere shadow of what she could have been. He saw her and called her. He spoke to her and he said "Woman thou art Loosed!" He spoke to her femininity. He spoke to her self-esteem. He spoke to the rose in her, the silk in her, the lace in her. He spoke to all of her dreams and all of her hopes and all of her goals and when he loosed her he loosed everything around her. Get ready for a word from God that's going to change everything in your life as he speaks to the silky issues in your life and touches you in your femininity. Jesus said "Woman thou art loosed!" Get ready for a miracle!⁸⁷⁰

⁸⁶⁸ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 4-5.

⁸⁶⁹ T.D. Jakes, *Woman Thou Art Loosed: Live at Azusa*, VHS (1993; Dallas, TX: T.D. Jakes Ministries, 1998).

⁸⁷⁰ *Woman Thou Art Loosed: Live at Azusa*.

Prosperity preachers often make promises to their adherents about the power or *anointing* present in their products. The Azusa sermon is the first of many of the overall brand. The gendered language is evident with calls to “her femininity, the rose, the silk, the lace in her.” Moreover, the product encourages the consumer and worshipper that she will get *a word from God that’s going to change everything*. She simply has to *get ready for a miracle*.

Following the introduction, the worship service begins. The video shows several thousand women participating in worship at the Azusa conference. The first thing that cannot be missed is the obvious differences in Jakes’s aesthetic. Jakes is wearing an inexpensive purple suit, a contrast to the three piece suits he now wears, and the majority of the women are dressed in white. An insider would immediately recognize that both fashions are hints of a black Pentecostal holiness tradition. The white dresses are worn by the women as one aspect of the politics of respectability and as an outward symbol of holiness. Jakes’s off-the-rack purple suit is a marker of the Bishop’s poor country roots. The holiness tradition and the ecstatic worship of Pentecostals have not always been celebrated by other denominations. Carlton Pearson asserts that Jakes “makes Pentecostalism pretty,”⁸⁷¹ and that his ability to do so is part of the reason he has been so successful. The video is a reminder that Jakes changes his attire and his physical appearance as his brand changes, especially because he wants to reach broader audiences beyond his Pentecostal roots. New Black Church pastors, and Jakes included, now wear expensive three piece suits in an attempt to look like and perform the trope of CEO. However, in 1993, Jakes had not yet retained consultants like Larry Ross, who works with clients like Billy Graham.⁸⁷² The preacher on the screen is a poor country Pentecostal preacher from West Virginia.

⁸⁷¹ Posner, *God’s Profits*, 58 quoting Carlton Pearson.

⁸⁷² Strawberry Saroyan, “Christianity, the Brand,” *The New York Times Magazine*, April 16, 2006.

As mentioned above, in the video recording Jakes's ill-fitting, purple, off-the-rack gabardine suit, purple loafers, unmanicured haircut, gold-plated watch, and inexpensive cuff-links—all signal his working-class background. Today, one will not see such vivid class distinctions. Jakes is seeking credibility beyond the poverty motif of West Virginia. With attention to his branding, Jakes has remade himself to fit the culture of the larger cross-over audiences. He has intentionally removed as many of those class signifiers as possible. Walton affirms that “[Jakes’s] personal aesthetic has become more conservative in recent years as he has traded in the purple and canary-yellow suits for navy blue, black, and gray.”⁸⁷³ It is obvious that like many prosperity preachers, Jakes has not only remade and repackaged his brands, he has also remade himself.

Before Jakes preaches the actual sermon, the video provides a glimpse of how Jakes prepares women for his preaching. With many of the women already in tears, Jakes rhetorically, in a baritone voice and sympathetic tone, invites the women to openly share their hurts and struggles:

Spirit of the living God, breath in this place. Release an anointing because somebody in this room is in trouble. Somebody's Mama is in trouble. Somebody's wife is in trouble. Some mother of the church, some first lady is in trouble; encumbered with duties and responsibilities. Functioning like a robot but bleeding like a wounded dog. . . that the Spirit of the Lord God would permeate this place and resurrect our evangelists and our missionaries and our ministers and raise up Mammams and raise up wives and raise up our sisters that have been slain by circumstances. I pray in the name of Jesus that the Holy Spirit would release a glory in this place.⁸⁷⁴

Jakes is the male preacher that understands the suffering of women. *Somebody's Mama is in trouble*. He speaks as the one with power from God to change their lives so that they might be resurrected to their vocational destinies as *missionaries* and *ministers*. After the initial prayer, he

⁸⁷³ Walton, “Watch This!,” 117.

⁸⁷⁴ *Woman Thou Art Loosed, Live at Azusa*. See Lee, T.D. *Jakes: America's New Preacher*.

then reads the famous WTAL biblical text in Luke. Jakes preaches for almost an hour. At the close of the sermon he speaks to the women now standing and fully invested in ecstatic worship and praise. Jakes closes with his declaration to women at ORU and perhaps those watching the video:

Many thousands of women are going to be loosed in this place today. You're going to be loosed today. Suicide is going to be loosed from you today. Spirits of depression are going to be loosed from you today. Homosexuality is going to be loosed from you today. Right women in wrong relationships is going to be loosed today.⁸⁷⁵

Through the power of God by the Holy Spirit, Jakes declares to the women that they are loosed. He is able to loose them with his positive confession. Furthermore, like many Pentecostal, Charismatic, and Word of Faith preachers, Jakes is also able to loose demonic spirits, homosexuality [sic], and wrong relationships. Jakes affirms for the women that, "When you get loosed. Everything in your house is going to get loosed."⁸⁷⁶

The Woman Thou Art Loosed Non-Fiction Book

The product that Jakes says launched the brand and the start of his empire is the non-fiction book published by Treasure House, an imprint of Destiny Image. As Jakes says, "Years ago, God dropped an idea for a women's Bible class in my heart. That idea grew and became a book, a conference, a play and a music CD."⁸⁷⁷ Jakes cites God as the source of his success. God may have generated the idea; yet, Jakes's also highlights his own expertise as an exceptional individual. "I am successful because I see and understand the capacity God has given me."⁸⁷⁸

⁸⁷⁵ *Woman Thou Art Loosed, Live at Azusa*. Also see Frederick, *Between Sundays*, 163 for her rendering of the same passage.

⁸⁷⁶ *Woman Thou Art Loosed: Live at Azusa*.

⁸⁷⁷ T.D. Jakes, *The Great Investment*, 44.

⁸⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

Additionally, Jakes credits the book as launching his career as a writer,⁸⁷⁹ and providing the revenue to purchase his mansion in Charleston.

One of the reasons that the brand has been so successful is because Jakes interprets the biblical story of the infirmed woman to suggest that Jesus is the great physician and healer. “The Holy Spirit periodically lets us catch a glimpse of the personal testimony of one of the patients of the Divine Physician Himself...There are three major characters in this story. These characters are the person, the problem and the prescription.”⁸⁸⁰ Bishop Jakes interprets the story as story not only about physical healing, but healing from all emotional and spiritual issues. As a result, the WTAL brand is able to encompass a wide range of products and events that speak to the physical, psychological, and emotional healing of women.

Jakes presents himself as an expert who sympathizes with, and understands the problems of women. Moreover, he has real solutions to their real problems. Jakes writes that counseling may not be the ideal solution for women in need of healing: “What I want to make clear is that after you have analyzed the condition, after you have understood its origin, it will still take the authority of God’s Word to put the past under your feet!”⁸⁸¹ Similar to other prosperity preachers, Jakes is not an advocate for women to seek professional counseling. Instead, he points them to the Bible; all of life’s solutions are in *God’s Word*. For Jakes, natural problems are ultimately spiritual problems: “I realize that these are natural problems [child abuse, rape, wife abuse or divorce], but they are rooted in spiritual ailments.”⁸⁸²

⁸⁷⁹ Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America’s New Preacher*, 106.

⁸⁸⁰ T.D. Jakes, *Woman Thou Art Loosed: Healing the Wounds of the Past* (Shippensburg, PA: Treasure House, 1993), 1.

⁸⁸¹ Jakes, *Woman Thou Art Loosed*, 2.

⁸⁸² *Ibid.*, 5.

Excerpts from the book demonstrate that the WTAL brand is about spiritual healing, or spiritual infirmities. However, Jakes also includes prescriptions for his version of liberation. These prescriptions support my argument that for his adherents, Jakes speaks as a contemporary liberation theologian. In other words, *loosing women* is an act of liberation. Surprisingly, especially for academic liberation theologians—Jakes writes about oppression in terms of race, gender and class:

Jesus simply shared grace and truth with that hurting woman. He said, “Woman thou art loosed.” Believe the Word of God and be free. Jesus our Lord was a great *emancipator of the oppressed* [emphasis mine]. It does not matter whether someone has been oppressed socially, sexually, or racially; our Lord is eliminator of distinctions ...

... It is wonderful to teach prosperity as long as it is understood that the Church is not an elite organization for spiritual yuppies only, one that excludes other social classes.⁸⁸³

Although it is difficult to imagine or place these preachers in the same vein as other liberationists, the preachers in the New Black Church see themselves as bringing a much needed message of liberation.

Jakes’s type of liberation is modeled after the infirmed woman in Luke. As the story tied to the brand and the theological norm, even other scriptures are judged by this norm. For instance, chapter 10 in Jakes’s book is entitled *Daughter of Abraham*. Included in the chapter is the story of the daughters of Zelophehad (Numbers 27:1-3). Biblical characters from a different text are interpreted as women that are no different than the infirmed woman in Luke, and by extension, they no different than the women of WTAL brand community. Jakes’s use of the story illustrates what I have argued about the norm—that it *judges* all biblical scriptures, books, and sermons. The chapter also demonstrates how any passage can rhetorically be interpreted to fit the

⁸⁸³ Jakes, *Woman Thou Art Loosed: Healing the Wounds of the Past*, 11-12.

brand, the prosperity worldview, and the related practices of seed-faith and positive confession.

Jakes writes,

Like the infirm woman, you are a daughter of Abraham if you have faith....Why should you sit there and be in need when your Father has left you everything? Your Father [sic] is rich, and He left everything to you....There is no need to sit around waiting on someone else to get what is yours. Nobody else is coming. The One who needed to come has already come. Jesus said, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly" (John 10:10b). That is all you need.⁸⁸⁴

The identification with Abraham is a reference to the Abrahamic covenant that prosperity preachers say gives the believer access to God's promises. Furthermore, the suggestion that Jesus has provided everything through the atonement is also a familiar refrain. John 10:10 is a Word of Faith scripture that is often quoted by adherents. Jakes even encourages women to use positive confession as a means to get wealth. He writes, "The power to get wealth is in your tongue. You shall have whatever you say."⁸⁸⁵ He adds,

When you start speaking correctly, God will give you what you say. You say you want it. Jesus said, "And all things, whatsoever you shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive" (Matt. 21:22)....
... God will give you whatever you ask for (John 14:13). God will give you a business. God will give you a dream. He will make you the head and not the tail (Deut. 28:13).⁸⁸⁶

Through such words the women are encouraged to believe that they can have everything that they ask from God—including a business and a dream.

Jakes uses prosperity scriptures, offers prescriptions for liberation, and directs women to give seed-faith offerings and use positive confession. Ultimately, Jakes performs as the majority of New Black Church pastors like a theologian of prosperity. In other words, the non-fiction

⁸⁸⁴ Jakes, *Women Thou Art Loosed: Healing the Wounds of the Past*, 129-130.

⁸⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 130-131.

⁸⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

book like other products within the brand, interpellates women to believe that they need to be loosed and that Bishop Jakes is the one that God has anointed to loose them.

The Woman Thou Art Loosed Movie

In terms of mass appeal, revenues, and the medium itself, the WTAL movie is the most important cultural text within the overall brand, not just because of its financial success, but because as a medium, the film provides the greatest exposure. Jakes was able to leverage the success of the film into a nine picture deal with Sony Pictures. Tatiana Siegel in 2006 describes the deal as a “three year production and distribution deal with Sony Pictures Entertainment for theatrical releases and DVD exclusives generated by his production company TDJ Enterprises.”⁸⁸⁷ The second installment of the movie was released in April of 2012.⁸⁸⁸

The WTAL movie was advertised as being produced and written by Bishop T.D. Jakes. Like African American filmmakers Tyler Perry and Spike Lee, Jakes also stars in the movie. The difference is that Tyler Perry and Spike Lee play different characters in their movies; they do not play themselves. In WTAL, Jakes plays himself. In later movies like *Ties Not Easily Broken* and *Jumping the Broom*, he still plays a minister, but he doesn't play himself. However, WTAL is the first introduction and branding of himself as a pastor, who is also an actor and filmmaker. The WTAL film became “a cult hit” that grossed close to 6.9 million dollars and sold over one million DVDs.⁸⁸⁹ Jakes talks about his movie success and his work as a movie producer in the same way that he talks about his books and his vocation as an author. Both are evidence for his followers that he is also a secular success.

⁸⁸⁷ Siegel, “Author Jakes Lands Inspiring Deal with SPE,” April 19, 2006.

⁸⁸⁸ “Woman Thou Art Loosed the Seventh Day,” <http://www.tdjakeswtalmovie.com/> (accessed April 15, 2012).

⁸⁸⁹ Ibid.

As a theologian and religious scholar, it was difficult to assess and evaluate the WTAL film as a medium. Most scholars agree that film is a powerful medium and a great storytelling device, however very few scholars have the adequate academic training to evaluate film. Melanie J. Wright in her book on religion and film asserts “that reading a literary text is quite a different experience from ‘reading’ a film...film presents images and sounds, making different demands on its audience.”⁸⁹⁰ She also sees the need for a cultural studies approach in a project like this because it offers a “discursive space” for scholars in film studies, religion, and theology.⁸⁹¹ My approach is to treat the film as an important source for theology and to view it as a member of the brand community. As a consumer of black films, I had already seen the film when it was first released in 2004. I also watched it again on DVD. However, for research purposes, I purchased the WTAL Special Edition Gift Set,⁸⁹² and I then viewed the film from the perspective of a scholar, theologian, and ideological critic.

The movie tells the story of Michelle Jordan who is a victim of a childhood rape and molestation. She later has bouts with drug abuse and prostitution. As a result, she finds herself in prison. Her mother, Cassie, who has never admitted to the abuse, is a churchwoman with a chronically unemployed live-in boyfriend named Reggie. Reggie is the man that raped and molested Michelle when she was just a girl. At the end of the movie we discover that Reggie is also hooked on crack. Bishop Jakes is able to get Michelle out of prison on an early release from a three year sentence. One of the requirements of her early release is that Michelle must attend three nights of revival. On the last night of the revival, Michelle walks to the altar and finds that

⁸⁹⁰ Melanie J. Wright, *Religion and Film: An Introduction* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 27.

⁸⁹¹ Ibid.

⁸⁹² *Woman Thou Art Loosed*, DVD, directed by Michael Schultz (2004; Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment LLC, 2006).

Reggie, her perpetrator is also seeking redemption. He too has been moved by Bishop Jakes's altar call. Out of her rage she pulls a gun out of her purse and kills him.

Bishop Jakes then visits Michelle in prison on death row where she tells her painful story of rage and victimization. Eventually, Michelle is able to find forgiveness for herself and for her perpetrator. Bishop Jakes, through counseling and prayer, leads her to the path of forgiveness and reconciliation. In other words, Michelle is a woman that is *loosed* from her past. Moreover, she is loosed by Bishop T.D. Jakes.

Several scenes from Michelle's prison cell with T.D. Jakes as her counselor are strategically placed throughout the film and serve as defining moments in the film. The first scene where T.D. Jakes is identified as Bishop T.D. Jakes is when he is walking into the prison to meet Michelle. Jakes's outfit and his dialogue both signal how Jakes brands himself as a liberator in the stories and lives of African American women. The WTAL brand's target audience is to women like the character Michelle. The brand has always focused on reaching victims of domestic violence and incest. The first scenes, especially those of Jakes walking into the prison, give the audience an opportunity to see T.D. Jakes's branded identity as a celebrity preacher, the pastor of a supermegachurch, and a healer of women. Kimberle Elise, as the character Michelle, and T.D. Jakes as Bishop Jakes, are always visually positioned on the screen so that the audience quickly identifies Michelle as a woman that needs to be loosed, and Jakes and the one able to loose her.

When Jakes first walks down death row at the prison, he is wearing a dark suit with a clerical collar and he is carrying a big black bible. Michelle is in a cell in the orange two piece prison outfit. Bishop Jakes says, "You did request to see me?" Michelle responds, "I didn't think you'd really come. I saw you on the cover of Time Magazine. 'Is this man the next Billy

Graham?’ You don’t expect somebody like that to take a stroll down death row to preach to me.”⁸⁹³ This detailed information introduces Jakes as more than just a black Pentecostal preacher. Bishop T.D. Jakes is a preacher on the cover of major magazines. He is a preacher as important as Billy Graham. More importantly, the scene suggests to filmgoers that Jakes is a pastor that actually visits women on death row. T.D. Jakes pastors thirty thousand people but is still able to honor a member’s request to visit her daughter in prison. However, in reality, most celebrity megachurch pastors like Jakes rarely have intimate relationships with parishioners and are seldom able to schedule these kinds of personal prison visits. The dialogue is revealing, but so is the way that Michelle and Jakes are positioned in each of the counseling scenes.

For most of the film Michelle is on the floor of the prison cell, preoccupied with the construction of a small toothpick house. The screenplay describes the first scene and the character Michelle Jordan: “She’s in her early thirties, with her legs crossed and folded childlike, she trembles as she glues a matchstick onto the skeleton of a small matchstick house.”⁸⁹⁴ In the final scene the matchstick house is complete.

The last scenes of the movie are perhaps the most troubling. Michelle kills her perpetrator in a violent rage while he is walking towards her at the altar to ask for forgiveness. Reggie, her perpetrator, has decided during the alter call to come not only to seek his reconciliation with Michelle, but also to seek redemption. Reggie has admitted his mistake and is begging Michelle for forgiveness when she reaches into her purse and pulls out a gun, killing him in front of the

⁸⁹³ *Woman Thou Art Loosed*, special edition DVD, directed by Michael Schultz (2004; Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2006). Interestingly, many people missed Jakes on the cover of Time Magazine because his cover story was released on September 17, 2001, which was immediately following the events of 9-11.

⁸⁹⁴ *Woman Thou Art Loosed* screenplay by Stan Foster.

entire congregation. After the audience witnesses the tragic shooting in the church, the final scene shows Jakes's in his last counseling session with Michelle.

Michelle is now ready to release her anger and to seek forgiveness by taking full responsibility for what she has done. Visually, this is first time that Michelle stands up in these scenes. She then sits next to Bishop Jakes. Her dialogue and movement in the scene tell her story:

You can never get even. What I did was wrong. No matter what he did to me it was wrong. [She then stands and moves to sit next to Jakes]. When you talk to God again, ask him to forgive me. I know that I can't bring life back. Tell my mother that I love her and that I forgive her. I have always loved her. I hope that we can get to know each other. No matter what I felt I didn't have the right to take something from her. Just pray for me.⁸⁹⁵

In this scene Michelle cannot pray for herself, nor is she capable of having a conversation on her own with her mother. One of the theological positions of Protestants is the *priesthood of all believers*, and Bishop T.D. Jakes is a Protestant preacher. Both women (Cassie and Michelle) need Bishop Jakes to be the mediator, not only between the women themselves, but also between them and God. More disturbing is Bishop Jakes's response to her request for prayer:

I have been praying. I been praying for a little girl. I been praying that she wouldn't die. I been praying that she wouldn't give up and that somehow you would get through this. I been praying that you wouldn't allow these bars and this chaos and all this stuff to destroy your spirit. Now I know that she's alive and well and I know in my heart Michelle you're going to be O.K. I know it in my heart. Stay free! Stay free Michelle! You hear me. I am going to be praying for you and you know what you're going to make it.⁸⁹⁶

The fact that Jakes addresses Michelle, a grown woman, as if she is still a little girl, from a feminist perspective is only one small problem. Perhaps, one can assume that Jakes is speaking metaphorically to the little girl that remains a part of a grown woman's story of pain and

⁸⁹⁵ *Woman Thou Art Loosed*, special edition DVD.

⁸⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

suffering—the little girl who was never healed from the trauma. What is more troubling theologically, and from a gender perspective, is that Jakes is the male preacher that determines the liberation for Michelle—the female adherent. Instead of Michelle claiming her own subjectivity and defining her own liberation, Jakes declares what it means for her to be free: *Stay free! Stay free Michelle!* Moreover, Jakes speaks to God, and not Michelle herself.

Bishop Jakes boldly declares that Michelle is going to be okay. Unfortunately, what we see on the screen is that Jakes leaves the cell and the prison while Michelle remains behind bars. She is *free*. She is *loosed*. But, she is still incarcerated and still in prison. She is still oppressed. She is still on death row. In other words, no matter what Bishop Jakes declares and confesses, Michelle is not really liberated and she is not really free.

This is an example of the freedom and liberation that Jakes offers women. It is pseudo-liberation. It is a spiritual liberation that exists only in the individual. By ignoring the systemic inequities, it blames the victims. Furthermore, this liberation exonerates the systems that the movie identifies as having failed Michelle. More importantly, both scenes with their dialogue effectively serve to brand T.D. Jakes as the *priest, healer, counselor, pastor* and *liberator*. Jakes brands himself as the one that looses these women, including Cassie, the mother of Michelle. Women are those in need of liberation and Jakes is the one that provides the liberation. Furthermore, this liberation is usually from a product or experience that places him as the one in power and not the women themselves: his preaching, his counseling, and his contacting the warden. Ideologically, the WTAL brand repeatedly sends the message that it is T.D. Jakes that *looses* women, and not the women themselves.

The movie also demonstrates how Jakes is able to cloak his entrepreneurial ventures in theological language, and convince his followers that his capitalist ventures are more ministry

than business. In this particular case, Jakes ties the film to the church's mission to evangelize. He argues that movies are no longer just entertainment, but are a new medium for Christians to participate in the great commission. The film is not just about more revenues; Jakes insists that his work on the silver screen is about ministry.

In one of the interviews in the WTAL limited edition, Jakes says that "Jesus said go into the world and preach the gospel to every living creature. Well, the world is going to the movies so the best place to reach the world is to go where the world is going."⁸⁹⁷ Prosperity preachers often present a new product or medium as an opportunity to spread the gospel: "I think that WTAL is a great opportunity to define the fact that the pulpits of the twenty-first century are not hidden behind stained glass windows all the time. They're over the internet. They're on television and they are on the silver screen. Hence, *Woman Thou Art Loosed* the movie."⁸⁹⁸ The film is also supposed to correct the previous images of the Black Church as presented by secular filmmakers. His commentary about the WTAL movie can also be interpreted as a critique of what I have defined as the traditional Black Church. Jakes remarks, "I was excited to do it [WTAL] because most of things that I have seen Hollywood do were done in small churches with MLK fans and fat women in white."⁸⁹⁹

Jakes may say that the film is about women, but a more accurate reading is that the movie is really about T.D. Jakes and his ministry *to* women. Jakes successfully brands himself as Bishop T.D. Jakes, the megachurch celebrity preacher, who counsels and preaches to women. In the movie, T.D. Jakes as a personality, and Bishop Jakes as character is so prevalent that almost

⁸⁹⁷ "Making of the Featurette," Interview with T.D. Jakes, *Woman Thou Art Loosed*, DVD.

⁸⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹⁹ Ibid.

every character in the movie has to hear or go see him. However, he is not just a celebrity preacher; he is also a preacher that has the political power to change the decision of the white warden. Later in the movie he also gets the governor to consider giving Michelle a stay, and perhaps a new trial. Essentially, Jakes is presenting himself as what most black people have come to expect from the traditional Black Church preacher. He is performing the role of a Martin Luther King from the Birmingham Jail or in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Whereas King used his celebrity and power to join in the systemic struggles of African Americans, Jakes does not challenge systems like the prisons in which Michelle is incarcerated. Furthermore, for the viewing audience the film suggests that Jakes responds to the needs of an individual parishioner (Cassie, the mother of Michelle). But in the real world, like other prosperity celebrity preachers, Jakes and the women of The Potter's House and the customers in the WTAL brand community, rarely have face-to-face time with Jakes. Unless of course the women are Bishop Circle V.I.P.'s and have already given their seed-faith offering or a financial gift.

Another way that the movie brands T.D. Jakes as the looser of women is that no other character is able to bring healing and liberation to Michelle, who was sexually abused, raped, on drugs and working as a prostitute—not probation officers, not her supportive boyfriend, not a halfway house, not even her mother. Although Bishop Jakes recommends a three-day revival as a requirement of her early release, even the church fails Michelle since Michelle resorts to violence and shoots her perpetrator at the altar. Ultimately, the solution for her healing is facilitated by Bishop T.D. Jakes alone. This is powerful branding and Jakes accomplishes this branding by using the characters, visual images, and the dialogue in the script. Additionally, the many scenes of him preaching reinforce his vocational identity as a pastor for the audience.

The branding is throughout the film. The movie begins with ‘T.D. Jakes Enterprises LLP presents, Woman Thou Art Loosed.’ If that were not enough exposure, Jakes plays himself in the movie—Bishop T.D. Jakes. And, besides the sermons that are strategically placed throughout the film, as well as counseling sessions with the main character and voice-overs of sermons, the dialogue completely points to T.D. Jakes being the preacher who was on the cover of Time Magazine and who might be the next Billy Graham.

Finally, the role of T.D. Jakes is in stark contrast to the other characters in the film—a cast of victims—a long list of black people, especially women, who need to be loosed. Cassie, the mother, never admits to the molestation of her daughter and is in a relationship with a man who is not only chronically unemployed, but also addicted to crack. We also find out in Cassie’s confessional that she too was sexually molested as a child. Michelle, the main character, has not only been raped by her mother’s live-in boyfriend, but she is also a recovering addict who has a history of working in a strip club and finds herself on death row after shooting her perpetrator in church. Even Todd, who is supposed to be a positive character, is a victim. Todd, the handsome childhood sweetheart of Michelle is a single father who was abandoned by his wife when she left him and their daughter for a gangbanger. The remaining cast of characters is also made up of victims: recovering addicts, pimps, and drug dealers. The mother’s friend, who supports Michelle, is positive, but she too is unable to really help bring about reconciliation between the mother and the daughter. The only person who is able to provide any healing and to *loose women* is Bishop T.D. Jakes.

The 2009 WTAL Conference

I attended the 2009 WTAL conference in Dallas, Texas at The Potter’s House. The theme of the conference was “Thankful Women.” While a seminary student in Atlanta, Georgia, I

attended an earlier WTAL conference at the Georgia Dome when the conferences had close to 50,000 women in attendance. For the 2009 conference, approximately 8000 women were in attendance. Registration was available on-line for \$50. I received a badge at the onsite registration that identified for the ushers where I would be allowed to sit. The best seating was reserved for the ministry partners. Although thousands of women paid the registration fee, offerings were still raised at the general sessions—a perfect example of how Jakes blends worship and entertainment. Charging a registration fee makes the WTAL conference like secular conferences or similar to entertainment; yet, the offerings are what one expects in worship.

The conference was scheduled for three days—Thursday night through Saturday afternoon. Before each session conference participants were lined up at least 30 to 40 minutes outside the doors waiting in long lines. Ushers would direct people to special seating and would give early entrance to ministry partners based on the amount of their giving; these women partners were put into categories such as Aaron’s Army, Bishop Circle, and Bishop Circle V.I.P. The better seating, the seats closest to the stage, were reserved for women at the higher giving-level. After the ministry partners and registered conference participants, the general public would be seated. While we waited for the services to start, the large screens on the side of the pulpit played the trailers for Jakes’s latest movie.⁹⁰⁰ The Potter’s House often markets Bishop Jakes’s conferences and products. Jakes apparently takes advantage of every opportunity to promote his books and future events.

While at the conference I purchased one CD from one session.⁹⁰¹ I later ordered the entire six CD set of all of the sermons from the conference to evaluate the differences, if any, from the live worship services. I also needed to see the branding and marketing differences between the

⁹⁰⁰ In 2009 the movie being advertised was *Ties Not Easily Broken*, starring Morris Chestnut.

⁹⁰¹ *Woman Thou Art Loosed: Thankful Women*, CD, (Dallas, TX: T.D. Ministries, 2009).

products that were available immediately after a worship service, and their packaged edited version. The six CD set included edited versions of the longer live sermons of each speaker. However, each of the sermons by the women speakers were introduced on the CD with a short introductory message from T.D. Jakes. The CD that I purchased immediately after the conference, did not include the introduction. Obviously, the same day of the conference, there is not enough time to add the extra edits including the introduction from Jakes. All of the products have similar packaging—the same color, logo, and conference theme. From a marketing standpoint all products and events must be consistent with the brand. The packaging usually has a marketing hint or teaser that alerts the customer to what unique spiritual experience they can expect with the purchase. The back cover of 2009 WTAL conference CD package reads:

Have you ever felt broken or bound by your situations? If so, get ready to be loosed and restored as you hear the inspirational messages from eminent speakers including Bishop T.D. Jakes, First Lady Serita Jakes, Pastor Sheryl Brady, Dr. Cynthia James, Dr. Cindy Trimm and Mrs. Dodie Osteen. These explosive messages from the Woman Thou Art Loosed conference will transform your life forever!⁹⁰²

The caption is an example of how the WTAL brand works for T.D. Jakes, the women preachers, and the consumers. The consumer is first queried if she *feels broken or bound*. If yes, she is supposed to *get ready*, because the WTAL sermons will *loose* and *restore* her. The sermons are *explosive* and *inspirational* from *eminent* speakers. The woman that purchases the product and participates in the WTAL brand will live *transformed forever*.

The speakers for the conference included Bishop Jakes, his wife Serita Jakes, Pastor Sheryl Brady, Dr. Cynthia James, and Dr. Cyndy Trimm, and Mrs. Dodie Osteen, the mother of Joel Osteen. Her son is also a televangelist and the pastor of Lakewood, a supermegachurch located in Houston, Texas. Osteen is a prosperity preacher who is even more popular and famous

⁹⁰² *Woman Thou Art Loosed: Thankful Women.*

than T.D. Jakes.⁹⁰³ The 2011 WTAL conference was actually held at Osteen's church. Prosperity preachers often promote each other's brands by being guest speakers at each other's conferences. Pastor Sheryl Brady not only speaks at WTAL, but is the co-pastor of The Potters' House in North Dallas. One of the newer faces at the 2011 conference was Cindy Trimm, the speaker that most vividly represented the prosperity theology worldview and seed-faith giving. Trimm told adherents that she has a spiritual money tree in her back yard, and then asked everyone who wanted to be a millionaire to stand for a prayer.⁹⁰⁴

Trimm is a prime example of how the conferences allow women preachers to create their own brands. Since the 2009 conference Dr. Cindy Trimm has gained more prominence and has created her own brand with a book, *The 40 Day Soul Fast: Your Journey to Authentic Living*. The forward of the book is written by T.D. Jakes.⁹⁰⁵ The women whom Jakes promotes usually stay connected to his brand. Jakes writing the forward for Cindy Trimm's book is an illustration of the symbiotic financial relationships he maintains. However, the women preachers are rarely positioned or marketed as his equal or as his peer, nor do they share equally in the profits. Jakes always controls his brands. On other occasions, he controls the brands of the women as well. The women are not colleagues of equal status; rather, they remain his de facto daughters in ministry.

Shayne Lee records that Juanita Bynum was ostracized when she asked Jakes to let her share in the financial success of her own 1998 "No More Sheets" sermon. The sermon eventually became a book and one of her many brands.⁹⁰⁶ As a true capitalist, Jakes used his influence and

⁹⁰³ Einstein, *Brands of Faith*, 122.

⁹⁰⁴ See Chapter 2 on theologies of prosperity. I use Cindy Trimm as an example of how seed-giving has evolved in recent years.

⁹⁰⁵ Cindy Trimm, *The Forty Day Soul Fast: Journey to Authentic Living* (Shippenburg, PA: Destiny Image, 2011).

⁹⁰⁶ Juanita Bynum, *No More Sheets: The Truth about Sex* (Lanham, MD: Pneuma Life Publishing, 1998).

power to make sure that the larger black churches would no longer invite Bynum. She was not reinstated as a member of the WTAL brand until she returned in 2003. At the conference in front of thousands of women, she gave a public apology to Jakes. The entire legal dilemma was couched in a testimony where she repented and confessed that it was her pride that was the problem. According to Juanita, it was God, not T.D. Jakes, who removed her from her national platform. She proclaimed, “God said get your behind out there in exile. So the invitations start coming, and for two years God said ‘nope, nope.’ And for two years God only let me preach in storefront churches.”⁹⁰⁷ Presenting herself as a daughter who had betrayed her father in the ministry, Bynum told the audience, “The Holy Ghost said, ‘Ain’t nobody used you. He [Jakes] gave you a chance that nobody would give you. He platformed you when nobody else would touch you. Those were his tapes. That’s his stuff!’”⁹⁰⁸ This event confirms that Jakes controls his image and his brands, as well as the women who have a business or spiritual relationship with him; they must respond according to his terms.

After attending the live conference and in order to experience the brand as even more of an insider, I became an *Aaron’s Army* monthly ministry partner. Prosperity preachers encourage not only seed-faith giving, but covenanted partnering. Financially, a monthly commitment from the partners provides more income for the ministry than one seed offering at a worship service. More importantly, the adherents are placed on the mailing list that allows the ministry to send more appeals and offers.

⁹⁰⁷ “A Renewed Covenant 2–Juanita Bynum,” uploaded by matthew5and9 on January 12, 2008. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t0Ezp2cMvTY&feature=related> (accessed March 28, 2002).

⁹⁰⁸ Ibid.

T.D. Ministries has several levels of partnership. I signed up as a partner at the 2009 WTAL conference. However, via the website, adherents can have their monthly gift deducted by automatic debit.

Your convenient auto-debit gift of any amount is appreciated and establishes your growing covenant relationship with this ministry as a friend and regular supporter. Giving is an expression of love and commitment to advance the work of the Kingdom of God. Know that your monthly donations help us to continue and expand our reach and help proclaim the glorious Gospel of Jesus Christ.⁹⁰⁹

This appeal is a good example of the expectations of the relationship between the prosperity preacher and the adherent. Although the general appeal says, “any amount,” the website outlines three partnership levels (Aaron’s Army, Bishop Circle, and Bishop Circle V.I.P.). The bigger the financial commitment that the adherent makes, the more “partner benefits” that he or she receives. The Aaron’s Army requires an auto-debit gift of \$30/month. Bishop Circle requires \$50/month or one gift of \$500.⁹¹⁰ The highest level of membership is Bishop Circle V.I.P., the very important person (V.I.P.) designation is assigned to those partners that contribute a \$100 gift per month or a one-time advance gift of \$1000.⁹¹¹

One of the brochures outlines that “Bishop Circle VIP Partners receive all of the Bishop Circle’s benefits, plus a two-night stay at a scheduled partner’s event, and exclusive access to Bishop Circle VIP partner gatherings with Bishop and Mrs. T.D. Jakes.”⁹¹² Thus, the Bishop Circle partners receive face to face meetings with Jakes, special seating, and other privileges at the conference.

⁹⁰⁹ “Ministry Partners,” *T.D Jakes Ministries*, www.tdj.org. <http://www.tdjpartnerss.org/memberlevels.html> (accessed January 24, 2012).

⁹¹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹¹ “Ministry Partners,” *T.D Jakes Ministries*, www.tdj.org. <http://www.tdjpartnerss.org/memberlevels.html> (accessed January 24, 2012).

⁹¹² T.D. Jakes, Brochure, Donor Letter from T.D. Jakes Ministries, February 2010.

As only an Aaron's Army member, I received a start up package in the mail. The packet included a certificate, several CDs, and an Aaron's Army CD holder. The one-time donation of \$30 also placed me on the mailing list. I immediately began receiving monthly direct-mail letters from T. D. Jakes. Each letter always ended with an appeal to send more money or to purchase more products. I also signed up to be on the email list. Jakes often sends letters or e-blasts that encourage adherents to give money—as “unto God”—and to give sacrificially. The letters are part of the branding and become one more communication between the preacher and the adherent. The language and the messages usually include some of the familiar prosperity language. For example, a direct mail letter sent February 2010 reads:

Dear Ms. McGee:

Your love, your prayers, and your steadfast support have turned the dreams of many into a reality. God has taken the financial seeds you've sown and He [sic] has multiplied it to touch the hearts and lives of thousands all around the world....The heart of T.D. Jakes Ministries is to help the hurting people in all we do. Through the support of friends and partners like you, we have been able to bring hope to so many who otherwise might not have hope. We are so thankful for your partnership and for standing in covenant with this ministry.⁹¹³

The letter reveals how adherents are encouraged to plant financial seeds, with the implied expectation that God produces a spiritual harvest by multiplying the seed or gift of the adherent. In this particular instance, the promise is not that the seed will produce a direct financial return for the adherent. Rather, the return for the adherent is evangelism; the adherent will be reaching thousands of people around the world.

In the prosperity worldview, the covenant relationship is not simply a contractual agreement. Instead, the financial gift is the catalyst for a spiritual relationship between the preacher and the ministry partner. Covenants have theological implications that bind in ways that contracts do not. With one contribution, the adherent expects special access to Bishop Jakes and

⁹¹³ T.D. Jakes, Donor Letter from T.D. Jakes Ministry Partners, February 2010.

his ministry. More importantly, the partner is connected to his anointing. In terms of branding and marketing, the ministry partners become a recognizable way to measure how many people are loyal to Jakes's brand. Moreover, for his secular partners, these individuals represent verifiable numbers of potential customers. The secular business partners may not be interested in Christian discipleship, but they are very interested in Jakes's brand loyalty.

Conclusion

In sum, the movie, book, and conference show that Jakes is able to successfully brand himself as a pastor and contemporary liberation theologian. The women who attend these conferences and participate in the brand, although liberated spiritually, are not really loosed from more devastating systemic oppression. Einstein reminds us that brands, including faith brands, are about identity creation.⁹¹⁴ We communicate to those around us the brands that we buy. Hence, when black women purchase a book, go to the movie, or attend a WTAL conference, they are expressing to others who they are. During these conferences the women preachers and the adherents are constructing a counter-narrative to the negative identities promulgated about black women by the dominant culture. Moreover, they are also responding to the negative portrayals of them in their home churches.

Black churches and worship experiences like WTAL remain central to identity formation for African American Protestants. Jakes continues to convince women that they need to be loosed, and that they need to be loosed by him. Their participation in the brand may in fact be spiritually liberating. But, for most of these women, they are really only loosed to buy more products and to send more money to Bishop T.D. Jakes.

⁹¹⁴ Einstein, *Brands of Faith*, 13.

CONCLUSION: KEEPING IT REAL

Theology, as a function of the Christian church, must serve the needs of the church. A theological system is supposed to satisfy two basic needs: the statement of the truth of the Christian message and the interpretation of this truth for every new generation.

~Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*

I love my pastor because he let's people know, 'I'm Bishop Jakes but I go through things too.' He's just about being real.

~adult female attendee of The Potter's House

From this study it is clear that in today's context the majority of theological and religious discourses about black churches are framed around two models: the Black Church and the New Black Church. After completing a case-study of T. D. Jakes and WTAL it is apparent that Jakes's ministry is representative of the New Black Church. Furthermore, I have highlighted Jakes as a preacher, and WTAL as a brand, in order to display the pastor/CEO and parishioner/consumer relationship, and the subsequent levels of representation. In doing so, I found that Jakes's branded identity is successful because when he tells his life story he combines the cultural signifiers of pastor and entrepreneur. Additionally, as a practitioner of Christian capitalism he blurs the sacred and the secular. In other words, Jakes is as much a businessman as he is a pastor. As a result, it is almost impossible to discern where one vocation begins and the other ends.

The theological method I have proposed for this type of research is a combination of a cultural studies and an interdisciplinary approach using qualitative research methods. The method combines McClendon's *Biography as Theology* and *Brand as Theology and Theological Norm*, from Tillich's definitions of systematic theology and theological norm. Some scholars have argued that Jakes should not be considered a theologian of prosperity. Yet, I have defined theologies of prosperity as *contextual theologies of empire on a continuum that affirm it is God's*

blessing and a believer's right to obtain prosperity or health and wealth by using Scripture and rituals such as seed-faith giving and positive confession. Based on this definition, I contend that because of his theology, worldview, affluent lifestyle, and religious practices, Bishop Jakes should be considered a theologian of prosperity.

More importantly, this dissertation affirms that Jakes's brands are successful because of his relationship with African American churchwomen. These women believe that he tells their story and that he speaks to those intimate and painful issues that other churches often avoid. Furthermore, Jakes's branded identity is extremely profitable for him because people, especially African American women, believe him. As one woman stated, "I love my pastor. Because he let's people know, 'I'm Bishop Jakes, I go through things too.' He's just about keeping it real."⁹¹⁵ Many of the women that follow Jakes echo the same sentiments. Women, pastors, ministry partners, and brand-consumers in the New Black Church believe his story and the stories that make up his brand.

Perhaps secular entrepreneurs are only accountable to the Market and are *not* expected to tell the truth in the stories and myths that they present in their brands. However, for preachers and pastors, I assume that people expect honesty and a higher level of ethical behavior with the stories they preach and use in their brands. In other words, I think that we expect pastors and preachers to "keep it real." However, based on my study it is difficult to believe that Bishop T.D. Jakes is keeping it real, not only because of his lack of transparency,⁹¹⁶ but because much of what he brands is not always completely true. For instance, although he has a GED and only one

⁹¹⁵ Lee, *Holy Mavericks*, 71.

⁹¹⁶ Ministrywatch.com, an organization that posts information for donors about non-profits and Christian ministries, gives T.D. Jakes Ministries and The Potter's House of Dallas an "F" for its lack of transparency. "T.D. Jakes," Ministrywatch.com, <http://www.ministrywatch.com/pdf/donoralert2011.pdf> (accessed March 31, 2012).

year of college at an accredited institution of higher learning, he claims that he has completed both a master's and a doctoral degree. Several prosperity preachers have degrees from the same institution—Friends International Christian University (FICU) in Merced, California. Unfortunately, the majority of Jakes's followers do not know that his doctorate degree is not from an accredited institution. FICU is more of a correspondence school than an institution of higher learning. On the school's own website it admits that the school is not accredited by any agency that is recognized by the U. S. Department of Education.⁹¹⁷

We have also seen that Jakes promotes himself as a self-made man and an expert on successful Christian living in the twenty-first century. His main justification for his wealth is that God has given him the power to get wealth. Jakes asserts that he can effectively pastor thirty thousand members and boasts of being financially successful, but not as a result of his ministry. His success is supposedly from his entrepreneurial work as an author, speaker, playwright, and movie producer. Therefore, he claims he has a God-given right to his wealth and to his financial empire, which is estimated to be worth 100 million dollars.⁹¹⁸ Directly or indirectly, Jakes feigns a pseudo-Protestant ethic that undergirds the idea of American meritocracy—both the Horatio Alger and Exceptionalism mythologies. Bishop Jakes even argues that it is occupational discrimination for him to not earn as much income as possible in the global marketplace.

Moreover, Jakes intentionally brands himself as a role model. He often provides a long list of his accomplishments as evidence of just how hard he has worked. For example, he brags that he is a successful author who has written several books. He implies that all of the work and labor is his own. Therefore, he should be rewarded for both his labor and his impeccable work

⁹¹⁷ "Accreditation," Friends International Christian University, <http://www.ficu.edu/accreditation.htm> (accessed March 7, 2012).

⁹¹⁸ Haskins and Benson, *African American Religious Leaders: Black Stars*, 150.

ethic. However, Shayne Lee has documented that Jakes employs “talented researchers and ghostwriters to help produce his books,” and that he requires these writers “to sign waivers prohibiting them from discussing their contributions to his books.”⁹¹⁹ These co-authors do not receive any name recognition or acknowledgement for their work.

Similarly, the WTAL novel, which is an expanded version of the screenplay, is another example of Jakes responding like a true capitalist. The screenplay was written by Stan Foster. Just one glance at the screenplay next to the novel is proof positive that the two are almost identical.⁹²⁰ The WTAL movie was marketed and promoted as based on the best-selling novel by Bishop T.D. Jakes.⁹²¹ Yet, the cover of the novel says, “based on the award-winning motion picture.”⁹²² It cannot be both. Foster, the actual writer of the screenplay on his website writes, “People actually think that the story came from T.D. Jakes’s novel, or self- help book.” His position is clear, “the novel was actually based on my script, in many places word for word.”⁹²³ As a capitalist, Jakes presents the work as his own and reaps the full profits.

Bishop Jakes exploits the work and labor of others and does not always tell the whole truth. Consequently, it is difficult to assume that the model of Christianity he preaches to Christian women and their pastors is the whole truth. Jakes’s dishonesty and his lack of

⁹¹⁹ Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America’s New Preacher*, 148.

⁹²⁰ The screenplay reads, “Sounds of shoe heels klip-klopping in the distance. The sound grows louder and louder as the walker seems to becoming closer. FEMALE VOICE (O.S.) Black man walking. FEMALE VOICE #2 (O.S.) Is that him? The preacher on TV? Bishop T.D. Jakes. FEMALE VOICE (O.S.) *T.D. Jakes*, you ignorant.” Stan Foster, “*Woman Thou Art Loosed*.” screenplay, 1-2.

The similarities are obvious. The novel reads: “Klip klop . . . klip klop . . . klip klop . . . “Is that him” an inmate asked. “You know, that preacher on TV? Bishop T.D. Jakes?” Bishop T.D. Jakes, *Woman Thou Art Loosed* (New York, Berkley Publishing Group), 7.

⁹²¹ *Woman Thou Art Loosed*, DVD special edition, front cover.

⁹²² Jakes, *Woman Thou Art Loosed (the novel)*, cover.

⁹²³ Stan Foster, “*Woman Thou Art Loosed Movie*,” <http://www.stanfoster.com/movies.php> (accessed March 31, 2012).

transparency about the help that he receives from others deceives other Christians and pastors to think, that they too, can achieve what he has achieved. What I am suggesting is that ideologically all of his brands, as well as how Bishop Jakes shares his life story as a pastor and entrepreneur, serve to *interpellate* other pastors and churches to believe that the New Black Church is a credible model of ministry. Moreover, Jakes wants others to believe that the New Black Church is a better model, and the best model for contemporary black Christians to achieve liberation. However, the truth is that the majority of Christians and pastors do not have a team of marketers, publicists, co-authors, and others to create their brands and promote their branded identities, nor do these black church pastors have Bishop Jakes's multi-million dollar deals with corporate partners.

The ideological critique convincingly shows that Jakes's lifestyle and practices promote the values that undergird the gospel of wealth which blames the poor for their poverty and diverts attention from the systemic problems of capitalism. A prime example of his branding and promotion of this ideology is taken from his book, *The Great Investment*. Jakes gives a prescription to his readers for how to obtain wealth, explaining just how easy it is for Christians to become millionaires:

If you have a take-home pay of \$20,000 per year and spend it all on eating out at the finest restaurants and purchasing the latest designer clothes you will have a full stomach and a packed closet, but your pockets will be empty. If instead you invested even 10 percent—\$2000 per year—in, say, a mutual fund that averaged a 15 percent return per year, after ten years you would have over \$49,000. After twenty years that amount grows to just about \$267,000. And in thirty years you could retire a millionaire with more than \$1,200,000. Are you willing to give up a few dinners out and a couple pair of new shoes to be a millionaire? The choice is yours.⁹²⁴

⁹²⁴ Jakes, *The Great Investment*, 50.

He implies that someone who is netting \$20,000 a year can, with a little discipline and hard work, one day be a millionaire. However, he lays out a financial plan that does not adjust for inflation and the cost of living. Similarly, Jakes infers in this passage that someone living on less than \$20,000 per year has the luxury to irresponsibly spend money on fancy dinners and designer clothes. In a later chapter, he encourages the reader to tithe ten percent not off the *net*, but off of their *gross* income.⁹²⁵ As I have demonstrated, in the prosperity worldview tithing is mandatory for adherents if they want God to give them the power to get wealth. Therefore, the take home pay in his illustration is actually only about \$18,000. Moreover, most mutual funds do not guarantee a consistent 15 percent return on an investment. If we are keeping it real, most working class people, after living expenses, do not have money for expensive designer clothes, nor do they always have \$2000 per year in surplus to save consistently over a twenty or thirty year period. This is just one more example of how Jakes promotes this very familiar American gospel of wealth ideology, which says that everyone can be wealthy, if they just work hard.

The stories that Jakes presents to African American women are not much better. Beverly Guy-Sheftal and Johnetta Cole in their book, *Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women's Equality in African American Communities*, discuss T.D. Jakes in their chapter on the Black Church. The authors conclude, "While Black feminists would seriously challenge his analysis of gender issues and suggested cures, no one can challenge the fact that many of Bishop Jakes's messages and the core of his unique ministry include gender talk and race secrets."⁹²⁶ However, because of his "problematic, stereotypical gender attitudes," Guy-Sheftal and Cole caution us not to celebrate Jakes too quickly. They write, "Despite his helpful admonitions about the dangers of silence,

⁹²⁵Jakes, *The Great Investment*, 57.

⁹²⁶ Beverly Guy-Sheftal and Johnetta Betsch Cole, *Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women's Equality in African American Communities* (New York: One World, 1993), 125.

however, there is an attachment to traditional Christian gender norms that ultimately renders his healing philosophy suspect.”⁹²⁷

In sum, whether Jakes is seductively painting a picture of the godly man that is waiting to sweep black women off of their feet, or he is inspiring them to have financial dreams that look more like the Emerald City than the black and white farmland of Kansas, the stories and the brands that Bishop Jakes lifts up for women are not their reality. Jakes offers advice and tells women that they can achieve the same success that he has achieved. Skip Gates’s description is appropriate. Bishop Jakes is a contemporary *New Negro* seeking to marshall the masses of black people.⁹²⁸ He attempts to be the prototype of the successful African American Christian, and he invites others to pattern their lives after his.

As a theologian of prosperity he is also the archetype of John Cobb’s *Economism*,⁹²⁹ and he participates in what David Loy and Harvey Cox have named as the *Religion of the Market*.⁹³⁰ More importantly, this dissertation exposes T.D. Jakes as the cultural icon for the *Wal-Martization of African American Religion*. Jakes has little or no critique of the system of advanced capitalism. Rather than advocating for other possibilities, he only encourages individual success and more consumerism. With his contextual theology, he endorses the values that overwhelmingly encourage the perpetuation of the system.

The brands and stories that Jakes presents through his books, movies, and conferences, including the story of the infirmed woman in Luke 11, may preach, they may even entertain and encourage women, but, Jakes does not really empower or liberate women with these stories.

⁹²⁷ Guy-Sheftfall and Johnetta Betsch Cole, *Gender Talk*, 125.

⁹²⁸ Gates, “The Trope of the New Negro,” 140.

⁹²⁹ Cobb, “Economic Aspects of Social and Environmental Violence,” 4.

⁹³⁰ Loy, “Religion of the Market,” 275; Cox, “Mammon and the Culture of the Market,” 124.

What these women are primarily being empowered to do is to stay loyal to Jakes's brand and to remain *Loosed Women*. Essentially, they are empowered to attend more conferences, purchase more products, and become ministry partners. The stories promoted within the brand are mythological, and ideologically persuasive, but they are not the "truth" for most African American women. Jakes encourages women to seek individual success within an oppressive system.

The New Black Church model is also not liberating for the majority of women preachers and pastors that follow Jakes. The supermegachurch with ten thousand members and the television/conference ministry, will more than likely never happen for them. In addition, the affluent lifestyle that Jakes presents as what can be expected for the faithful, will also never be a reality, especially for African American women who are forced to deal with the real effects of racism, sexism, and classism.

I have hopefully demonstrated that these women are enticed or seduced by a very familiar politics of respectability and an uplift ideology—traditions from the traditional Black Church. Given the many negative tropes and stereotypes (like welfare queen) promoted by the dominant culture that continue to dehumanize African American women, we openly acknowledge and understand why the stories that Jakes tells may be so inviting—even intoxicating. As bell hooks has argued, "marginalized groups, deemed Other, who have been ignored, rendered invisible, can be seduced by the emphasis on Otherness, by its commodification, because it offers the promise of recognition and reconciliation."⁹³¹

Jakes presents the trope of CEO as if it is easily accessible to everyone, even African American women. However, most women will never have the opportunity to be a CEO. In other

⁹³¹ bell hooks, "Eating the Other," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), 26.

words, they will never be able to perform the ultimate trope of empire. Furthermore, the majority of women and men that attend Jakes's church and his conferences do not have, and never will have, the same celebrity access as Jakes. No different than the Waltons at the helm of Wal-Mart, only a few of the leaders or pastors in the New Black Church will participate within the same economic ranks that Jakes enjoys. Just like Wal-Mart, the financial success of these CEO/preachers is usually supported by the labor and purchasing power of women. Sadly, both the women preachers and the thousands of Pentecostal and charismatic women attendees who are poor or newly middle-class, no matter how hard they try, give offerings, and pray, will not have access to the top echelons of economic power. They will not be able to live like T.D. Jakes with a mansion, Bentley, and private plane.

Whether Jakes's theology and his brands communicate a message that meets the standards of an academic systematic theology or not, this dissertation lays out why we have to classify his theological discourses as a contemporary form of liberation theology. Feminist and womanist theologians demanded that the academy recognize them as liberation theologians, and to take seriously the God-talk of their faith communities. In the same vein, we must also respect the faith and brand communities that name Jakes as pastor, leader, and liberator.

Shayne Lee criticizes feminist theologians like Delores Williams, Jacquelyn Grant, and Kelly Brown Douglas. He says that they "have bigger fish to fry and thus do not exert time and energy toward forging a critical analysis of Jake's message to women."⁹³² Whatever the reason for what Lee depicts as their silence, it does not change the fact that for many African Americans, Creflo Dollar, Fred Price, Juanita Bynum, and T.D. Jakes are a new generation of liberation theologians. I am comfortable with naming Jakes's theology as a contemporary form

⁹³² Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America's New Preacher*, 125.

of liberation theology. But, I am also just as convinced that the liberation he offers and prescribes for other black pastors, ministry partners, and his brand communities, is only a pseudo-liberation. Jakes gives his followers what Jonathan Walton defines as “a liminal space where the unjust realities of race, class, and gender are suspended long enough for viewers [and brand participants] to imagine themselves living in the world and thriving in such a world.”⁹³³

Because of his lifestyle and contextual theology of empire, Jakes’s liberation theology endorses a “preferential option for the rich,” rather than a “preferential option for the poor.” Jakes encourages black women to pursue success and wealth within a system that has proven to be racist, sexist, and classist. As Walton queries, “Is it really possible to ‘be loosed’ from poverty and attain means of economic wealth when one turns a blind eye to unjust systems of America’s capitalist economy that is based on a patristic and exploitative relationship with the underclass?”⁹³⁴ My answer is “No!”

Liberation has to be more than a liminal space, a moment in worship, or freedom from spiritual infirmities. This is true about all forms of liberation—whether it is the woman in the gospel of Luke or the character Michelle Jordan from the WTAL movie, where Jakes prays for her and says, “Stay free!” Yet, Bishop Jakes exits and Michelle remains incarcerated. Liberation also must be resistance to, and liberation from, economic and political systems that keep black people and women oppressed. The prophetic call is to speak truth to power and facilitate the liberation of women from all situations of oppression.

This dissertation is a challenge and a call for academicians to speak and to offer more than a caricature or homily about these popular preachers. My goal has been to judge the model more than the man. No scholar or theologian can determine the integrity of any preacher, nor

⁹³³ Walton, *Watch This!*, 198.

⁹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 201.

whether that preacher actually believes his or her own brands and theological propositions. There is no way to know, or discern, when evangelism and ministry (not-for-profit) become only for profit. Consequently, because of its meganess, branding, consumerism, and the constant desire for pastors to accumulate wealth, I can only conclude that the New Black Church is a problematic model for African Americans and black churches. Much more research is needed by a community of scholars and theologians to understand this very complex model of ministry.

It may be that, like Sam Walton and Wal-Mart, good intentions and early theological or philosophical missions are no contest for the pervasive seductions and cultural influences of advanced capitalism. Perhaps it is like the emperor and the parade: any individual, institution, and its representatives may be systematically co-opted and seduced into the larger hegemonic framework. It is the call of the prophet to proclaim that the emperor is naked, and the call of the scholar to show the nakedness and to expose all those participating in the parade.

I have attempted to present a clear picture and definition of prosperity theology or theologies of prosperity. I have also presented a theological method for academicians so that these theologies will be in dialogue with other theologies and scholarly discourses. This is only the beginning of many more conversations about black churches. Finally, I hope that I have made a small contribution to my personal debt to those many women that nurtured the little girl in the black church across the street from my grandmother's house. Hopefully, as Tillich has argued, I have interpreted the truth of the Christian message for a new generation. Prayerfully, these words are truth for a new generation of black women who will continue to find a healing and liberating word in these places of worship we continue to recognize as black churches.

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