

## Glendale News Press

### Thoughts on preaching the Prosperity Gospel

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Q. A recent Senate investigation into spending by high-profile televangelists found no actual wrongdoing, but raises interesting issues about the lifestyles of such people. The inquiry targeted six televangelists and examined how they used the funds raised by their respective churches, and whether they were breaking the rules pertaining to the tax-free status they enjoy as religious nonprofits. All six investigated preach some form of the so-called Prosperity Gospel, which says that paying tithes or donations to the ministries will result in God favoring the donors.

The investigation found that between them, the six churches take in tens of millions of dollars a year, none of which has to be reported to the Internal Revenue Service and for which no financial records are required to be passed on to anyone. The pastors of each church, and in many cases their spouses and families, live lavish lifestyles, travel in private jets and expensive cars, live in multi-million-dollar homes and stay in hotels costing thousands of dollars a night when traveling the country.

The Prosperity Gospel — which preaches the idea that God will reward the faithful with health and wealth — and its adherents are derided by many mainstream Christians for preaching what could be described as a message of greed masquerading as God's word, but those who preach it claim that it works and that they're living proof that God rewards the well-off.

What are your thoughts on the Prosperity Gospel? Is it a suitable subject for a church to base its religious mission on? And how does the Prosperity Gospel shape up when compared to what Jesus' words, "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!" (Luke 18:24), or the sins of avarice and pride?

Answer:

Considering the so-called Prosperity Gospel extolled by some televangelists and faith healers, I am struck by the contrast between that "theology" and one of the best-known references to wealth in the three synoptic gospels of the Christian Scriptures. In the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, there are similar stories about a rich young man asking Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. To his query, Jesus responds that it is difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. He says: "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

It is difficult to understand how some of these Christian preachers can justify their lavish lifestyles and lack of accountability as gifts from God for their "inspired" work. It seems they believe they are somehow exempt from Jesus' directive to give all they have to the poor to gain treasures in heaven, but expect their followers to live that lesson by giving up their money to support these preachers extravagantly in this world.

In contrast, a story that exemplifies the message of Jesus most clearly to me is that of the "Good Samaritan," a story in which a man from the despised Samaritan people stops by the side of the road to minister to a Jew who has been attacked by robbers. He then takes the injured man to an inn and leaves money for him to be further cared for. And the Samaritan is not expecting that he would gain wealth by helping the injured man, offering to bring yet more money to the innkeeper for the care of the man when he returns.

I do not believe that the men and women cited in this question are examples that most Christians would find laudable. And I am sad that so many people have been taken in by their tactics. It is sad when people use religion to justify their own avarice. They give all people of faith a bad name.

The Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford  
Unitarian Universalist Church of the Verdugo Hills  
La Crescenta

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I believe the Prosperity Gospel is just one piece of the Bible. As such, it should not be focused on single-handedly. The main scripture I see that supports our tithing back to the Lord is in Malachi, which states, “‘Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,’ says the Lord Almighty, ‘and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it’” (Malachi 3:10). This has to do with tithing to your home church, not offering to other ministries.

This is a part of what God asks His children to participate in, trust Him in, and see the blessings he pours upon us in response. It is not the only command and it does not bring with it a hyperfocus to the promised blessing. The Bible is full of commands with God’s promises to his people.

With that said, to put hyperfocus on this topic can lead to sin. Ministers are human beings. Human beings are sinful beings. I am not pointing to any one ministry, but often when there is a focus on one aspect of the Bible, things can become unbalanced. With that, what is legal is often covered and not addressed as immoral. Once we give birth to sin, it breeds like a fire. To focus on any one aspect of the Bible does not take into consideration the whole by which we are to base all Biblical truths, how they integrate, and not taking them out of context. This is something for us all to ponder, not judge.

The Rev. Kimberlie Zakarian

La Vie Counseling Center

Pasadena

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Jesus taught that how you spend your money is an accurate indicator of where your heart truly is. If you value luxury and comfort, you’ll spend your money on them. If you value charity and getting the gospel message to as many people as possible, you’ll spend your money on those things. So whether it’s legal or not, the true values of any ministry are revealed by how it uses its money. Let the giver beware.

The fascinating thing about Prosperity Gospel preachers is that at least part of their message is true. God in fact does promise to bless those who tithe (give a tenth) from their income (see Malachi 3:10). “He who sows bountifully shall also reap bountifully,” says 2 Corinthians 9:6. It may not occur exactly the way some preachers promise, but God is true to his promise to bless those who give.

The major problem with Prosperity Gospel preaching is its over-emphasis on personal financial gain. Jesus taught, “Seek first [God’s] kingdom and his righteousness; and all these things (food, clothing, etc) shall be added to you” (Matthew 6:33). The proper priorities are to love God with all our hearts and to love others as ourselves. Our mission is to make disciples of Christ through proclaiming as of first importance the gospel Paul preached, that “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). Financial prosperity doesn’t save people’s souls and gain them access to Heaven. Faith in Jesus Christ does.

Pastor Jon Barta

Valley Baptist Church

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I do believe that God rewards the faithful. A basic principle of Judaism is that God looks out for those who are committed to truth and morality.

Every day of the year, and specifically on the holy day of Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), Jewish people pray and ask for the blessings of a good life both spiritually and physically. We hope that our prayers will translate into health and prosperity in a real and tangible manner, but not always is that the case.

With this in mind, even if a house of worship does base its religious mission on the Prosperity Gospel, I fail to understand how that justifies its clergy members indulging themselves with an ostentatious lifestyle. Representatives of a religious group are given a sacred trust to protect and uphold their respective religion's beliefs. They are also expected to guarantee that the organization's resources are correctly appropriated by maximizing the positive effect on the community and assisting those in need.

Of course employees of a religious organization should be properly compensated for their time and commitment, and should be able to lead a respectable, comfortable lifestyle. However, clergy members who live large by buying expensive cars, flying on private jets, and surrounding themselves with extravagant luxury are essentially violating their commitment to serve their communities. In my opinion, these types of expenditures are a misappropriation of contribution dollars which should be directed toward improving communal life and aiding the less fortunate.

Although it is only a minute portion of the clergy that abuses fiduciary duties, I truly hope that this government inquiry will shine a spotlight on the need for accountability and true commitment to the core ideals of our spiritual institutions. Under the current laws, the actions of such pastors may not be technically criminal, but they are certainly shameful — and such examples of corruption could cause great damage if they lead good people to become disillusioned during their quest for spirituality.

Rabbi Simcha Backman

Chabad Jewish Center

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I've been preaching the Sermon on the Mount during January and February. It starts with the Beatitudes in the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 5 (Matthew is one of the four books in the Bible that tell about Jesus' life). "Blessed are..." begins Jesus, and he goes on to surprise his listeners not by naming the rich and the powerful, but the poor, the lost, the grieving and the merciful. And as the people crowd around to hear, both in first-century Galilee and 21st-century Montrose, I am more and more aware of how much we long for a sense of blessing in our lives. It's just too easy to feel cursed sometimes – broken, isolated, poor, overcome by circumstances beyond our control. So when Jesus starts blessing people who are at their lowest point, telling us all that God wants something better for us, we wake up to the possibilities, saying, "yes, I want that, whatever it is!"

It's not such a leap to hope that the blessing will come in the form of personal financial prosperity. We tend to

think that money will make us happy, so what else could Jesus mean? I get why great crowds follow Prosperity Gospel preachers – it's not so much about avarice or greed as it is about moving beyond brokenness into a life more fully lived. And to be fair, some of those preachers do offer fuller messages of hope and healing. I know people whose lives have been transformed by Joyce Meyer and Joel Osteen, so I hesitate to be overly judgmental.

But I do not hesitate to caution all blessing-seekers. Blessings come in many forms, so we don't want to miss out on what comes our way simply because it is not green and foldable. Jesus said that you can't worship both God and money, because you'll love one and despise the other. The high-living prosperity preachers confuse us because we can't always tell where their worship is directed.

The Rev. Paige Eaves

Crescenta Valley United Methodist Church

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The Bible often warns against false prophets. Those rich televangelists are modern examples. Did Jesus associate with the rich or the prostitutes and the dregs of society? Was Jesus born in a stable or at the fancy Bethlehem Hilton? (No offense, Hilton. You have wonderful hotels, I'm sure.) The Bible also warns against idol worship. Those rich televangelists are modern examples of idol worshipers, and their idol is wealth.

In the Beatitudes (Matthew 5), Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," and there are some commentators who say he meant to say, "Blessed are you poor." There is no way on God's green earth that those who preach the so-called Prosperity Gospel are right; they are flat-out wrong. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church in the 18th century, said one time that if he died with anything in his bank account, we should consider him a thief. Now that's a little extreme, to be sure, but you get the point.

For a believer, especially a preacher, to be hanging on to wealth when someone else is in need must be an abomination to the Lord. It isn't for nothing that Jesus made his famous quote about it being easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. I personally have always been worried about having too much when others have so little. Such a worry has apparently never crossed the avaricious minds of the rich TV evangelists.

The Rev. Skip Lindeman

La Cañada Congregational Church

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Have a need? Plant a seed. If you can name it, you can claim it; confess and possess, believe and receive! Sheesh, I've heard such blab-and-grab jingles from prosperity preachers since the time before I first came to Christ, but like some pyramid scheme, it's always the prophets of profit that take home the treasure, and the simple saints get soaked.

Listening to them, you would think that the Gospel (good news) was not that hell-bound sinful humanity had a hope in the person of Jesus Christ with reconciliation to God and surety of heaven, but that joining the family of faith obligated the King of Kings to satisfy all the needs and greeds of his earthly princes and princesses.

While it is disturbing enough to have liberals simply dismiss unfavorable Scripture verses, the money ministers brazenly twist others to cajole conservative congregants into ungodly give-to-get schemes. It is one of the most obvious wolf-in-sheep's-clothing examples with which the church at large must contend. It is apparently obvious to unbelievers as well, or there wouldn't be investigations.

Like any organization, a ministry needs to adequately support its staff and pay for necessities like energy, communication, supplies, maintenance, etc. I don't disparage any group for being successful at their task or enlarging their financial capacity to extend their mission. Nor do I think it inappropriate for a celebrity to use that asset to increase their own family's security through speaking or books and such outside their primary obligation. But when the goal of every message is primarily to increase monetary intake rather than spiritual upkeep, something has gone south with the ministry and the minister.

We Christians are not given the task of rebuilding Eden here and now, especially a personal one, but to beckon our neighbors to return to the truth that lasts forever. Prosperity preachers are "people of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain" (1Ti 6:5 NIV).

The Rev. Bryan Griem

Montrose Community Church

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This week's question reminds me of an encounter that Jesus had with a ruler, which is recorded in three of the New Testament Gospels. The ruler asked Jesus what he should do to inherit eternal life and, in doing so, the ruler informed Jesus that he had kept all the commandments from his youth.

Jesus' response to the ruler was clear and simple, "... Yet lackest thou one thing: sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me. And when he heard this, he was very sorrowful: for he was very rich. And when Jesus saw that he was very sorrowful, he said, How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!" (Luke 18:22-24)

Based on my understanding of Jesus Christ's teachings, I'm not quite sure how to square the modern-day "Prosperity Gospel" with those teachings. So, I will leave that to those better versed in the scriptures.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints uses a lay, unpaid ministry for most ecclesiastical positions, including bishops and other local leaders. Individual members do not apply for positions within the Church. Rather they are called to serve and continue with their regular employment. After a period of time, those called are released from their ecclesiastical positions and again participate as regular members of their congregations.

An LDS friend of mine, who had a very successful business career as a senior executive in a Fortune 200 company, was asked by the Church at age 51 to become a full-time member of the Church's Quorum of the Seventy in Salt Lake City. The call was not expected or applied for and meant that he would have to resign his executive position. Economically, this was a tremendous sacrifice, and it would end his executive business career. He did resign and accepted the call to serve.

Faith, sacrifice and service, not riches, is what I believe Jesus Christ taught.

Rick Callister

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

La Cañada II Ward,

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The so-called prosperity gospel doesn't seem particularly Christ-like to me.

Beyond that, mission suitability is religion's core question, which religion is more than capable of answering without atheist kibitzing. My own rational and moral creed holds that the prosperity gospel profiteers are no worse than the bankers and other financiers who brought our economy to its knees, yet are prospering big-time now while the rest of us face recession's fallout -- continuing unemployment, foreclosures, pension fund losses, and government budget shortfalls.

In fact compared to those bigger Wall Street crooks there is a quaintly straight-forward, almost sweet, Reverend Ike-esque quality to these new generation money-grubbing ministers. At least they don't seem to be trying to attack our civil rights in our bedroom or physician's office. For those who consider buying into the prosperity gospel, I can only say caveat emptor.

Roberta Medford

Atheist Montrose