

**ABRIDGED "Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel"**

Dr. Kate Bowler  
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May 2017

**Disclaimer:** *The following transcript has been edited from its original form to reduce length and improve clarity.*

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** It's wonderful now to have Dr. Kate Bowler with us this morning. She's an Assistant Professor of History of Christianity at Duke Divinity School and she did her doctorate on the subject of which became this book published by Oxford University Press called, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*. We're privileged to have the leading expert on prosperity gospel in the country, if not the world. So, Kate, it's wonderful to have you. Thank you for coming.

**KATE BOWLER:** When I first wrote *Blessed*, I thought that my job primarily was to explain why one of the most derided Christian movements in American history was not just a punch line. I wanted them to be taken seriously, as we historians like to say, despite its reputation for being maudlin and smarmy. To be sure I understood people's deep antipathy toward its preachers and its theology, I once saw a prosperity preacher, the late Jan Crouch of TBN fame, transform this lovely little theme park in Orlando in her own image by bedazzling it with a fleet of golden lions and cardboard cutouts of her face. But I was deeply sympathetic and I am deeply sympathetic, if not a little defensive of the movement and its ability to keep its finger on the pulse of people's deepest desires.

The movement seemed to understand something profound about the American religious imagination that the wider culture was too quick to dismiss. For all the riches gained from their best sellers and their 24-hour Christian programming and their packed mega churches, the prosperity movement has always coveted what it did not have. At best, prosperity teachers smelled like new money and there was nothing terribly respectable about the movement's public image. No one championed their causes in the halls of power, until now. Donald Trump is the first American President whose only religious impulses arise from the American prosperity gospel. It is well known that the Trump family attended Marble Collegiate Church in New York City, a variable reformed church in America pulpit whose entrepreneurial pastor, Norman Vincent Peale, preached a theology which also became his personal brand. Peale's runaway best seller, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, was a sunny mix of new thought mind power, which we'll talk a little bit about in a minute, combined with a high anthropology, which is to say a high view of the capacity of human nature. That was a fixture of mainline Protestantism.

The result was a simple recipe for successful living. Quote, "As you think, so shall you be." Or in other words, quote, "think positively and you set in motion positive forces which bring positive results to pass," unquote. So what this does is it casts the vision of a mind as a powerful spiritual incubator, something that could achieve health and wealth and all around happiness, a high-flying optimism that seems to have

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shaped Trump's youthful outlook. When he was married for the first time, it was Reverend Peale who performed the wedding ceremony in the sacred birthplace of positive thinking.

But there are two other strands woven into Trump's sparse religious biography; the businessman who relentlessly promoted himself as a self-made man, found spiritual solace in a young televangelist from Florida named Paula White. Her perky twist on the Pentecostal prosperity gospel led to books with titles like *Deal With It!* and her own workout videos. She was the sexy embodiment of the supernatural bootstrapping of prosperity theology, a self-proclaimed messed-up Mississippi girl whose life, once marred by abuse and neglect, was reborn to success by living according to the divine laws of faith. Of the scores of prosperity preachers in the public eye, White was famous as the "queen of second chances" as she had remade her own ministry several times after living many lives; first, as the former protégé of African American superstar, T.D. Jakes; then as a one-time televangelist, now online personality and also as the pastor of a mega church without walls international church whose fortunes rose and fell with her. And if you're interested, we can talk a bit more about her time being married and divorced and being one of the only women who has ever successfully run a mega church post-divorce.

Along with a virtually unknown prosperity pastor named Mark Burns, White became a cheerful stumper for Trump on the campaign trail and joined Texas televangelists, Gloria and Kenneth Copeland, on his religious board of advisors.

For the first time in American history, a president-elect instinctively turned toward prosperity thinkers to shape his religious views about what might "Make America Great Again." As Trump's connections to positive thinking and the Pentecostal prosperity gospel are combined with his blatant American exceptionalism, we can see that the three strands of what constitutes historically the prosperity gospel have been woven together. Trump is, in short, the prosperity gospel's religious trifecta.

Since understanding the nature of the prosperity gospel has never meant more, politically, I would like to propose three things to keep in mind. The first thing I'd like to talk about is the scale of the movement; the second is about the coherence of the message; and the last is about the "Americanness" of the gospel and what it says about this country's tolerance for inequality. Let's talk a little bit about the scale. The prosperity gospel is vastly more widespread than people typically imagine that it is. It's preached in many of the largest churches on every continent. So the largest church on the planet, I'm sure many of you know, is the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, South Korea; claims a million members and their now unfortunately criminally convicted pastor, David Yonggi Cho -- what's lesser known is that in the '70s and '80s, he used to tour the states with other up and coming prosperity pastors, him as the grand authority of how to grow churches in America. He, I think, is out of jail but he was convicted of embezzlement, something like \$12 million dollars. I didn't follow the details.

A lot of the biggest churches in every African nation are famous for their prosperity preaching. Nigeria's largest church, The Redeemed Nigerian Church of God is also a denomination with megachurches that span the globe. Don't imagine then that this is something far away. These are aggressively expansive denominations that are here in many forms. It's not also just a message of hope for the poor. It's heard in

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some of the largest churches in First World Nations. So the largest or one of the largest churches in London, for example, is a prosperity church, Kings Way International Christian Center. And if you look in Singapore, their English-dominant professional class -- many of them go to one of Singapore's largest church, City Harvest Church. You can see Singaporean pop stars that are also prosperity princesses that inherit enormous prosperity kingdoms. These are just a vast global enterprise if you have eyes to see.

It's also found in kind of unusual forms. There is a lay Catholic movement in the Philippines called the "El Shaddai movement" that is largely a Catholic prosperity gospel with direct ties to American prosperity preachers, has upwards of 10 million participants according to some accounts. Its unusual forms, also in some predictable forms; pastors with capitalistic names like Creflo Dollar or Frederick Price or Guatemala's favorite, Cash Luna.

It is present in a lot of megachurches and also in small churches alike. A lot of the most famous Christian music albums come out of prosperity megachurches, both in the States but most famously in Australia's largest church, Hillsong. So it blankets television networks; TBN, CBN, DayStar as some of the most watched religious programs in the world; it has many different forms, many different preachers but it has a consistent message, "God wants to bless you."

People usually say "televangelist" as a kind of shorthand and what I would love to tell you all about someday, the history of why people think that, but just remember it's one of many hubs, sort of saturation points of where this message resides. I calculated that among the about 1650 megachurches today, among those megachurches, I calculated that roughly 40 percent of churches, over 10,000 preach a prosperity message. The prosperity gospel holds a significant share of Protestant churches with the largest market reach, so highest number of Twitter followers and social media saturation and television and internet streaming viewers and conference attendees.

In my new book, *The Preacher's Wife: Women in Power in American Megaministry*, which I am submitting next week, praise be, I had to invent this term "megaministry" to try to describe this phenomenon that I first encountered in the prosperity gospel. The heights of spiritual superstardom in America, what I call megaministry, is a tangled series of networks of the largest churches, denominations, para church organizations, Christian publishing companies, music producers, and television networks. Size is the most dominant feature of modern ministry. There are more large churches now than ever before. Christian television programming is now measured by its potential broadcast audiences by the billions. Secular media conglomerates own and acquire evangelical imprints in order to launch their own Christian non-fiction onto the bestseller list. Size becomes one of the most important angles of vision into understanding how influence circulates religiously.

For my women's book, I found that one of the most interesting consequences of big church life is the commercialization of the entire pastor's family. In the women book, the 120 or so interviews I did with pastors' wives from across theological traditions, I saw how wives then became commodified, became celebrities in their own right with a niche market all her own.

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All that to say, when the prosperity gospel mastered big with their natural language of fundraising and growth, they achieved a national presence and a market dominance that was often disproportionate to their actual numbers. They dominated the top churches and so they dominated the aisles of the inspirational section at Barnes & Noble. That's the scope of the movement.

I would like to now address the coherence of the prosperity gospel and whether someone calls themselves a prosperity preacher. Let me assure you it is a completely unwinnable fight, not even Mike Murdoch, who on late night TV any night, will be selling seven keys to seven kingdoms to seven something something's does not consider himself a prosperity preacher.

I was obsessed with this for over 10 years in order to try to solve this problem primarily so that no one else has to. In my book, I developed an elaborate series of appendices just so that people could use it as a reference point. I identified 115 prosperity megachurches at the time of publication. I'm sure there are more. These are American. And then I attended all of the major spiritual conferences at least once. I spent a year-and-a-half doing a local ethnography in a storefront African American prosperity church, and I used conference advertisements for the most widely-circulated Pentecostal magazine and tracked it over 30 years to see which speakers shared a stage again and again, effectively mapping the associational network and watching how prosperity ideas grew and gained traction. In total, I tracked 4,267 speakers across 1,636 conferences over 3 decades.

I think it's more compelling to decide whether someone belongs to the movement by looking at their associates and their institutions but very little of it is as obvious as the pastor's self-identification or even what's on the church sign. If you ever think, "Is this person a prosperity preacher?", feel free to ship me an email; I'll put it in my little database and I will joyfully tell you who they are best friends with, that or the graphs I have in the back of my book.

May I propose instead that when determining whether somebody is a prosperity preacher, we look for four theological or ideational themes: faith, health, wealth, and victory. The prosperity gospel grew out of the Pentecostal healing revivals of the post-war period. After World War II, hundreds of ministers broke with their Pentecostal denominations. They left their homes and picked up their tents and traveled Canada and the United States as healers and preachers and miracle workers. They were playing around with a vocabulary of faith that had been developed much earlier. In the late 19th Century, the rise of the metaphysical movement called "new thought" had convinced a generation of Americans that their minds were potent incubators of their dreams, a powerful confidence that Christians first applied to health, trying to solve the problem of why some people are healed and some people are not -- that's very important when you are a faith healer -- and then later applied it to wealth.

In this view, you just have to remember when you're listening to them talk, faith is not a kind of innocuous word. Faith, I think, in regular Sunday school world, synonyms are like hope or trust. But in this world, faith is a spiritual power. It is a force that as if it reaches through the bounds of materiality and into the spiritual realm and is able to draw things back into time and space. It conceives of faith as an activator, a power given to all believers that binds and looses spiritual forces turning the spoken

word into reality. It has to be activated in your mind and then spoken out loud. Just as God said, "Let there be light" and so there is light, believers thought that if they speak words, it acts as a spiritual law guaranteeing that whatever we believe and confess, we possess. This is the reason why some people call it "name it, claim it".

What you have to hear here is that faith sounds more and more like a tool, an instrumentalizing ability. So you'll hear people say I have faith for or I'm believing God for as if faith propels the desired outcome but of course, it also describes the coming into being of negative spiritual forces like poverty or disease rather than God's abundance if you speak wrongly. So how do you then know that your faith is working? Fundamentally, you look at your body, so health. The prosperity gospel's promise of health followed well-established Christian traditions of healing but it went a step further, seeing healing as something guaranteed by what Jesus did on the cross. Instead, Jesus' death and resurrection doesn't just take on the penalties of sin but it breaks the powers of poverty, demonic interference, and sickness. Let's remember that before the prosperity gospel was called the prosperity gospel, it was a healing revival. Before Oral Roberts' magazine was called *Abundant Life*, it was called *Healing Waters*. They were healers at heart. God set up the laws of faith so believers could access the power of the cross wielding their faith as a power.

That's why I think it's inaccurate when people think of the prosperity gospel as a kind of get rich quick movement or cheap theology and I mean that even about the preachers. I loved Mark Oppenheimer's GQ piece on Peter Popoff, he's the worst of them in many people's views, as the kind of hardest-working man in spiritual business. It was an example of beautiful prosperity reporting.

But I think what we need to remember is that the prosperity gospel is costly in many ways to its believers. People worked extremely hard at generating positive expectations about the future, avoiding negative ideas and words about the past and the present and behaving as if their prayers had already come true, a practice known as acting faith. They move their bodies as if they're not sick; they thank God for financial payments that haven't yet come; they praise God for wayward kids that have not yet come home, "not yet" they would say "but soon." This is Weber's [VAY-BERS] Protestant work ethic folded entirely into a mental world. Believers scoured their minds of words and emotions and spirits that could inhibit them from seeing their lives confirm their faithfulness.

But see, this is always a reciprocal loop. They believe that the healing had already happened until it happened, so they would try to walk and talk and act healed. Their primary task was to apply their faith to their circumstances and then measure their own bodies for evidence of spiritual power. That's faith and that's health.

Its most controversial claim was its ability to transform invisible faith into financial rewards. Let's remember it blooms in the economic summer of the post war years. More and more people began to see all Christians perhaps possessing the God-given potential to sow and reap their own financial harvest. A lot of it comes from John 10:10, from Jesus' lips, that "He came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly."

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The problem is that honestly, it was a little bit awkward because all sorts of healing theologies are very predicated on Jesus' own body suffering on the cross and it was easy to kind of create an analog between your own experience and Jesus' own suffering. But it was hard when it came to money to say that there was a moment in the story that they could see that divine exchange take place. People really kind of had to go for it. Leroy Thompson was one of the defenders of the sort of divine exchange of suffering for glory, financial glory. He said, "He took your place in poverty so you could take his place in prosperity. In Jesus' resurrection, there's this moment where Jesus said he couldn't stand being broke any longer, he came up on the third day, he said, in effect, enough of this." And there's not that many that are that specific but there's a general sense that there's some kind of cosmic exchange going on in Jesus' own suffering.

People also looked for little clues, the Wisemen, you know, they didn't bring toys. They brought gold and incense. There's thoughts that maybe why the guards fought about the cloak is that it was really expensive. There's kind of attempts to do that but the truth is it was much easier in the old testament to find examples of covenant and promise and abundance and they used -- of course, not all Hebrew scriptures fit that model. Job sort of demonstrated a kind of canon within a canon which they're reinterpreting scripture through this lens.

So how is it that financial rewards come into the hands of believers? They differed on the kind of exact nature of how this takes place and I think it's important to see prosperity preachers along a spectrum. In this case, a very direct relationship between speaking and claiming and then financial reward. I like to call this "hard prosperity." Hard prosperity drew a straight line between life's circumstances and a believer's faith, so it operated as a perfect law and any irregularities meant that it was the believer who didn't play by the rules. Specificity is very clearly seen in a hard prosperity model when it comes to giving. Participants were instructed to name their pleas, so a house, a car, a raise out loud very often in prosperity services. Hard prosperity hammered their theology into rules --rigid rules, pay tithes. This is, for this reason, why some of them require bank W-2s. The church would ask believers to submit their W-2s so they could make sure that people are really hitting that 10 percent mark of tithes and then ones in addition for gifts on pastor's appreciation day, church anniversaries. There was any number of times in which that number would be insufficient.

Formulas for wealth grew increasingly precise. There's the doctoring of first fruits first introduced in the 1960s as a standard classification for donation. The first fruits is like if you get like a \$50.00 raise every week, then the first \$50.00 has to go to the church. Paula White loves her first fruits.

People began not to just donate their money but to instruct God of what they wanted, a practice Oral Roberts had dubbed "naming your seed." He has his *The Miracle of Seed Faith* book, published it in about 1963. It's an ingenuous metaphor for the spiritual work that they're doing; that they sew the money into the ground, the righteous ground which is the prosperity preacher, use all the agricultural metaphors for that incubation time in which they wait but it hasn't yet come to pass and then the

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harvest comes and when the harvest hasn't come, then you can sing Juanita Bynum's song, "I Don't Mind Waiting." There's a kind of ritualization of the patience required to wait for God to show up.

People might order checks with bible verses on them. I saw that a lot. One really clever woman I always sat beside used to write "money cometh unto you" in the memo line so that when the bank teller would look at it, the teller would say "money cometh unto you" and then positively confess on her behalf, which she really liked. I also just spend a lot of time in parking lots just taking down vanity license plates, "prayed for," "blessed," "100-fold."

And let's talk lastly about victory. It took me a long time to kind of figure out exactly what this was and it's what [CATHERINE BREKUS] was talking about before about, a telos. It's an end, it's a horizon that they set, that they think of as victory. It's the sense that within a single human life, all things can be made right, which means that if we're given the really high percentage of African American churches, that any obstacle, institutional, personal, racial, all things will crumble before a righteous believer. And so you see that a lot in their symbolism, in the love of eagles or globes or in their titles, titles like "world changers," "victory," "world church to the champion center" that has an actual trophy as a church symbol. Church mottos were also another way to declare a victory. It promises total victory over crushing circumstances and guarantees that all people can be true conquerors.

Faith, health, wealth, victory--these are all visions of a certain kind of God. This is what I look for when I'm talking to somebody and I'm spending a lot of time at their church. Believers call this feeling the feeling that God is working things out for your favor. So someone ever has a prayer request and then it comes true, you might just hear people kind of chanting in the crowd. They'll be like "favor" and it's kind of a beautiful moment for people. Paula White explained "favor" as that feeling that, quote, "He's on your side, that He's making a way for you."

Let's now turn to the questions of Americanness and talk about its political arch. I've always argued that the message resonated with a set of national characteristics that are deeply embedded in the social imaginary. At times, the prosperity gospel hovered so close to its nationalistic alter ego, American civil religion that it looked like its Pentecostal twin, each offering an account of transcendent truth at the core of the American character. Rather than sacralizing the founding of the country or the manifest destiny, the prosperity gospel was constituted by the deification and ritualization of the American Dream, upward mobility, accumulation, hard work, moral fiber. The two shared an unshakably high anthropology studded with traits that inspire action and urgency and a sense of chosenness and a desire to shoulder it alone.

If this is a gauge of the nation's self-perception, then this is surely a country soaring with confidence in the possibility of human transformation. The movement's culture of God-men and conquerors rang true in a nation that embraced a mythology of righteous individuals bending circumstances to their vision of the good life. It didn't just give Americans a gospel worthy of a nation of self-made men, and they were usually men. It affirmed the basic economic structures on which individual enterprise stood.

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Until this election season, whenever I was asked about the politics, I always thought it was entirely plausible that it would always bend away from the political and toward the therapeutic. After all, the two most watched Christian televangelists in the world are Joel Osteen and Joyce Myer. They're prosperity preachers who built their entire ministerial empires on apolitical topics such as self-esteem and emotional management. In fact, it was this turn toward therapeutic paradigms that had saved the prosperity gospel from disgrace when, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, hard-sell prosperity preachers like Jim Bakker made the movement a laughingstock. Bakker's much-publicized sexual and financial misdeeds became synonymous with the image of the slick televangelist weeping and begging crowds for cold cash. And so the televangelists that took their places adopted a gentler approach. In keeping with the darker post-modern mood of the mid-1990s, they took up issues of psychological transformation promising to sell audiences tools to improve their self-esteem rather than simply asking for donations.

The giants of the 90s galvanized audiences with frank talks about difficult subjects like sexual abuse. The message of divine health and wealth was still clear but the therapeutic ministrations of what I call "soft prosperity" emphasized the spiritual and material benefits of a renewed mind. The battle was interior, not exterior to the self.

In the United States, the prosperity gospel's promise that right-thinking, right-believing Christians could triumph over any obstacle had always made the role of politics rather ambivalent. Its heavily individualistic nature leaned away from structural indictments or solutions because the answer always lay within. As such, the prosperity gospel could always take the end run around systems to promise that God would always provide a solution to these problems.

I tried really hard to track responses to the recession and the government shutdown in order to ask, do you prosperity preachers ever sort of deviate from that message to say, maybe the structures, the institutional systems are at fault. And instead I got the characteristically bland and optimistic urging people to turn to God and not Washington for results. There were some sort of systematic descriptions. Very often Wall Street was a real target and would say that believers might be robbed now but in the end, the righteous would find that their coffers were full and that God had found a way around this corruption, bulldozing a divine path.

Now, there are lots of exceptions to this paradigm. Depending on racial and regional demographics, lesser known megachurch pastors might take a side. African American prosperity preachers -- now there's a huge denominational range there -- but if they had historic denominational ties, they usually openly supported a presidential candidate, sometimes democratic, sometimes republican, and maintained a presence in city politics. I spent a lot of time following Latino prosperity churches and it really depended, actually, how they were on the spectrum on hard to soft prosperity, the harder prosperity and very often those in South Florida were much more politically active and they were usually committed republicans with a favorite political candidate who might visit their megachurch now and again. Most national prosperity preachers are not typically seen as those with an axe to grind. Their widespread appeal has been, in part, owing to their deliberate silence when it comes to an election.

Are we seeing the evolution of the prosperity gospel in the era of Trump? Has it gained new political traction? Yes and no. Certainly, Donald Trump is an ambivalent hero for any religious movement who's only explicit religious beliefs seem to come from impulses rather than a fully orb'd religious world view. But his spiritual loyalty is seen from the outside to be malleable in this way. His time in Washington seems like it will be more likely steered religiously by white evangelical political sway and the persistence of the religious rights power brokers than Paula White. I don't really know who he's networking with right now but I think there's an easy map to make associationally to figure it out.

As you well know, Trump is an unlikely advocate for hot button evangelical issues, a three-time married man fighting for traditional families, a sexual braggart at the helm of a purity-obsessed culture. But in many other ways, his individualistic vision of self-made men saddled with righteous causes and a vision of Christian America galvanized voters and offered Trump Washington allies forged in the fires of past evangelical culture wars. So then perhaps he is the most stunning example of the success of the prosperity gospel in casting a vision of the self-made American.

The prosperity gospel is fundamentally a theology that explains away luck. It is pragmatic, results-based, and a therapeutic set of beliefs that explain why some believers rise to the top and others plummet to the very bottom. But it is not simply a theodicy, which is to say an explanation of evil. These new religious conceptions of the self-constituting individuals sprang up, in part, as you know, as a response to late capitalism as a strategy for managing a new set of economic conditions.

As countless histories of neoliberalism have documented, the privatization and reduction of social services characterized by this age has forced people to turn toward the market as a symbol of choice and solution-oriented thinking but its solutions are also its burdens. A workforce promised flexibility is much less likely to give employee benefits and stable hours. Risk and instability are woven into the fabric of the modern workplace. Prosperity believers know that the market is a fickle god but they share its vision of the type of resourceful person who can persevere.

The prosperity gospel, in explaining how to succeed is very deliberate in showing believers how to account for their faith, how to tabulate their effort and the change in their lives. If you ask what are the economic differences when someone accepts the prosperity belief and after, the answer is absolutely nobody knows right now and it really varies by class and we can talk about how incredibly malleable it is by class. But what it does teach every single believer is a kind of calculus to tell if your life is working, "how do I know my faithfulness has borne results?" They don't typically experience prosperity or the message as a random occurrence, a kind of mysterious envelope of cash in the mailbox or an unexplained healing, though many of them do report healings. But rather they learn a spiritual calculus that they use to weigh all of their actions as religious labor from singing in church to smiling at their boss at work. I'd argue that a lot of the theological effort of prosperity churches is directed at believers in cultivating a new religious imagination. This is the kind of how of the prosperity gospel, the patterns and tools that believers acquire to set their own beliefs in motion. It has popularized instruments by which to count change in an era of tremendous ambiguity about what constitutes paid work and it has

successfully promoted a vision of the Christian life lived inside overlapping cosmic and American economies.

Like Donald Trump's *Think Big* and *Think Like a Champion*, both of which I have audio books for, the economy of the American prosperity gospel is fueled by positivity and ambition and a steely resolve to stand alone if need be. It effectively explained away the role of chance, systemic obstacles, education, advantage, race, age, gender, generational wealth and even skill in explaining why one worker thrived and another floundered. Their imagined workplace was governed by spiritual lessons and divine rewards, bosses who noticed or companies launched if they didn't. Instead of a faceless system, believers saw an invisible God working on their behalf who never imagined his children as just another cog in the machine.

In the past, I always thought that America didn't need a political prosperity gospel. Unlike Nigeria and Brazil and Guatemala where iterations of the prosperity gospel have evolved into very hungry political parties, the prosperity gospel didn't seem to need a collective partisan platform, well-suited as it was to a nation where people still believed that with a little divine boost, they could make it on their own. But it appears that we are at the dawn of a new era of the political respectability of the prosperity gospel. Just as Nigeria's 1980s Pentecostalism evolved into a 1990s prosperity gospel in the wake of major privatization, it could be that the United States is simply adjusting its theological sails to new economic winds.

It's never been directly tied to the market in an obvious way so different iterations of the prosperity gospel that thrived in the '20s and '30s, it did as well in boom years as it did during the Depression. In times of wealth, it explains what people already have. In times of poverty, it offers them a free solution because thought is always free. But no matter what the market, it has always been yoked to the American conception of the self. The prosperity movement may not need a political party but it has made a theological champion out of a New York businessman who has seemed impervious to risk and even failure itself. Every time Trump has fallen, he has gotten back up somehow able to win in an unsteady world that wants to believe with him that there's no such thing as luck. Thanks so much.

## **Q AND A PART I**

**E.J. DIONNE, *The Washington Post*:** We are blessed that you are here so thank you. That was really fantastic. I wonder if you might talk about the struggle within the African American church and in particular, does the African American wing of this movement have any of the socially critical aspects that so much of the rest of the African American church does? More generally, and this came out in your beautiful op-ed piece, I'd just like to know theologically, what do they make of "blessed are the meek, blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are they who mourn?"

From somebody on the outside, there seems a disjunction that poor people, disadvantaged people would embrace this. So just the African American experience in particular but, if you will, the contradictions of the prosperity gospel or at least as I would see them from the outside?

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**KATE BOWLER:** Well, I'll say I think African American prosperity churches are the most interesting because they're the most denominationally diverse—Pentecostal, Church of God in Christ and Pentecostal Assemblies of the World. The largest black Trinitarian and oneness Pentecostal traditions are both now run by prosperity preachers who are also on TV. On the other hand, if you look at the social services provided by these large churches, it's African American churches, even prosperity ones, that are more likely to have housing for the elderly, a much more structural solution to the needs. It can range though from a heavily entrepreneurial vision that you see a lot in non-denominational black hard prosperity churches. There's a tremendous diversity among black churches, I think because of a cultural legacy of community care and a kind of communal indictment of the forces that constrain black health, black economic upward mobility, black middle class.

On the other hand, some of the most heavily supernatural "nothing matters but your faith", I've seen have been rampant in their community. So it's the place of the most robust debate but sometimes it's also the place of the most ambiguity. For example, one of the largest southern Baptist megachurches is a black prosperity megachurch run by Mia Wright and her husband Remus and it's called "Fountain of Praise." And they are in Dallas or Houston. I can never remember. But it openly has co-pastors when the southern Baptist denomination fought against women's dis-ordination and dis-fellowshipped anyone who didn't stay in line. And yet some of the largest black churches that mainline denominations or evangelical denominations are so proud to tout they are actually neo-Pentecostal black prosperity preachers, so incredible diversity of both critique and solutions to the problems that plague their communities.

That is something I'd like to see more reporting on, honestly, because it's focusing on non-denominational prosperity preachers, the same dozen is, I think, a little tired and there are so many other churches that just because they don't call themselves prosperity, they never get any airtime.

One of the internal contradictions of living inside the movement, I saw the way that they negotiated perpetual suffering with airtight solutions that they were given every week. I saw the same woman wheel herself in and never speak aloud the illness she had that put her in that chair. I knew her for years and she never wanted to negatively confess. On the other hand, privately, she found all kinds of ways to mitigate the accusation from the pulpit that she was not just unlucky but that she was unfaithful. She would sometimes say, "Well, it's like the friends of Job; you know, eventually, we're going to see who's righteous in the end."

I think people use it like any religious tradition, like a buffet. Sometimes they take what they need and they leave the rest. I think there's all kinds of ways to deal with the very totalizing nature of what it creates around suffering people. It's both incredibly empowering to feel that much hope and there is a moment in which that hope becomes poisonous and exhausting.

**ANNE THOMPSON, NBC News:** Kate, I have two questions for you; the first is regarding Paula White-Cain. When I interviewed her, I asked her about the criticisms of her and she blamed some of that criticism on the fact she's a woman and said she felt there is a real sort of sexism within the preaching

community. How much do you think the criticism she's getting comes from the fact that she's a woman?

And my second question is regarding both Paula White-Cain and Donald Trump. If you look at them and you see they both have been married three times, they've had a series of moral and financial indiscretions, if you will, and yet that doesn't seem to matter. Why is that looked passed?

**KATE BOWLER:** In the first example, Paula White is one of the very few women in American history who've ever run a megachurch. I'm sure it's true that she is a target in a way that other people are not targets. But she's probably referring to the fact that the most public sort of theological arch nemeses of the prosperity gospel are the think tanks run by the Southern Baptist Convention, and they are both deeply repulsed by what they see as a cancer in their theological body and as well as the fact that sometimes I'll just see little snippets with like "and by a woman." It's an example that women's ordination is already a heresy that lends itself to other heresies.

And why is it looked passed? It is this telos of victory. It's like when people famously commit sexual indiscretion and then apologize but as long as they can create a sense of past, that all things will be wiped clean. The prosperity gospel is an incredible message of second changes in which everything never spoken again can be forgotten because God is able to always make a way. Their triumphalism is able to erode the past in ways that I have not seen as powerfully in other Christian iterations.

**MICHELLE COTTLE, *The Atlantic*:** I grew up Southern Baptist and a lot of this sounds like a lot of what I grew up with on speed. If something is going wrong with your life, it's because you don't have enough faith. I was deeply scarred by this and eventually had to leave the church.

Did you have a sense, for the people who can't rationalize it, do they have a high percentage of people who just at some point throw up their hands and are, like, enough? Is it just kind of the same and it's baked into the cake because people are already in that mindset? Do you have like a sense of are there more defectors of the sort?

**KATE BOWLER:** There's no good study of overall participation because of the problem with identifying labels. But I have heard some people say that there is a higher rate of defection among what I call hard prosperity churches because there's a much higher psychological pressure to give gifts. I've seen much more hard-sell tactics in those churches that I imagine create the kind of totalizing environment that creates the in and the out much more aggressively. I think you're probably right on that but what's different though about, say any typical maybe Southern Baptist assumption of healing is that they will not root through that person's spiritual inventory as aggressively. That person probably wouldn't have to do a generational curse analysis. I mean these are all things that people who love me and love others who are suffering are trying to do. They want to find out the precise spiritual cause—you are a problem to be solved. I think you're right, likely leads to a higher rate of defection among certain kinds.

**EMMA GREEN, *The Atlantic*:** This is awesome and I have approximately 12,000 questions.

The first is that it strikes me that one of the common features of how prosperity gospel is talked about in the press by people who are not part of the tradition is through mocking. Creflo Dollar like literally writes jokes about himself. But I think he is on the far end of the spectrum and has become this sort of media stooge in a way that a lot of people perhaps don't deserve or aren't really part of what he's doing.

I think one aspect that really complicates this mockability is the fact that there are prosperity traditions that are not about people who are getting snookered, that are middle class, that are people who might have professional education and are not maybe that different than us.

That's the first aspect, which is trying to get at this notion of perceived otherness which, in fact, I think is a myth and getting a little bit at how prosperity gospel complicates across classes.

And then the second question I have is just try and get a little bit of a finer cut between prosperity gospel and Pentecostal traditions?

**KATE BOWLER:** I love your first question/comment because there is a typical caricature of the prosperity gospel story that plays itself in the easiest article ever written.

Person attends healing revival slash prosperity thing. Finds person in wheelchair or with crutches. Person has lots of hope. Person goes through the service. Person seems hopeful at the end and they came as they went, comma, on wheels. Yes it's too easy and I think it's a pathologizing of a certain kind of poor. I really enjoyed that recent *Atlantic* article about Trump and healthcare. It is exactly the kind of thing that I've argued about, the national secular ethos.

**EMMA GREEN:** You should all read that, by the way. It's about the healthcare bill and prosperity gospel and the sort of prosperity gospel fit. I didn't write it though— Vann Newkirk, he's great.

**KATE BOWLER:** The problem is when he goes on to suggest that there's a, "delirious optimism of prosperity that has something to do with the desperation of poor whites," and it is a kind of pathologizing of a certain sort of poor person that narrows the worst excesses of Pentecostal historiography. It used to be that old arguments about Pentecostals -- and let's be clear, most prosperity people are Pentecostals; they are a version of Pentecostals. They're not their less exciting friends, the Evangelicals who often hate them.

But the trope that dominated scholarship for decades was the visions of the disinherited and it was the sway of trying to say that some people's hopes are reasonable and some people's hopes are sad. I think it cuts racially, regionally. It finds and feels condescendingly sorry for a certain kind of poor white. There is no evidence that the prosperity gospel is anything less than middle class for the most part. It is useful across classes because it is so flexible. It doesn't have, as I mentioned, the kind of cultural currency that makes it-- everyone remembers the first Pentecostal who ever got public office—John Ashcroft. They've been lacking the cultural currency but other than that, there's plenty of rich people. Prosperity megachurches are almost entirely middle class and then, of course, there's a million

prosperity storefront churches. It's entirely flexible and because of that, you're right. We have to pick our targets wisely.

Especially when prosperity gospel was born, it has always been a minority position inside Pentecostalism. There was always a real concern that they were the kind of aggressive marketplace tent travelers whereas Pentecostal denominations were the bricks and mortar after World War II more respectable types. By the '70s, the prosperity gospel had settled down, taken over TV and established enough bible schools to educate a generation of preachers that came up in the '80s and '90s.

It's still a minority tradition inside Pentecostalism. Just as I said, it has a kind of market dominance that erodes the distinction between the two. There's some denominations, Church of God in Christ, Pentecostal Assembly of the World, as I was mentioning, there's an overlap between Pentecostalism and prosperity because who they're run by these hands.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Other than Oral Roberts University, what bible schools have they founded?

**KATE BOWLER:** Christ for the Nation was run by T.L. Osborn and Daisy. They educated a lot of the Nigerian prosperity up and comers. Rhema Bible Training Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma was a huge one and now megachurches usually have their own bible school so they almost always educate in-house.

**EMMA GREEN:** Could you just give a theological cut on that though?

**KATE BOWLER:** Pentecostalism has historically been marked by the use of speaking in tongues as the initial evidence of salvation, so tongues has usually been the cutting off point, but also an expectation of spiritual gifts that are the result of sanctification in the Christian life.

Prosperity gospel, less on tongues now, expects spiritual gifts to be made most obvious in health and wealth, so has the same kind of playfulness about the spirit -- just thinks that it can measure it with a certain kind of metric.

**WILL SALETAN, *Slate*:** Let me ask you a little bit about "acting faith." On net, is it functional, I mean famously the Protestant ethic was functional. The notion that you should act as if you are well has a well-grounded basis of efficacy in medicine. And in wealth, the acting as though you are blessed can obviously have productive consequences.

But on net, setting aside the evil that it does to those who lose, is there any evidence or is there a basis in evidence; if it's not about the prosperity gospel, is perhaps about acting faith, is there evidence that that works?

**KATE BOWLER:** That is a study for a sociologist that I've been actively encouraging every sociologist I meet to set up a series of surveys and track over time. There's a study out of Baylor that's trying to create, to follow expectations for these things, the performance of it and the result.

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I think it's hard to do with money so I think the better thing is to look at how people report confidence and satisfaction with their life, like self-reported, is quality of life as being imperceptible as it is. I think there is a lot of evidence to suggest that it does work, that what it does primarily is set horizons for people and that since class is largely a function of your social imagination of what you expect, then I think that it has -- other than four people who are entirely kicked out of the system for various reasons, I think it inculcates all kinds of middle class virtues; punctuality, expectation of productive employment.

I've talked to prosperity pastors who talk to their participants, their followers boss's to see how they're doing at work. People report a greater sense of expectation that their job is going to lead to something else, the smile because your boss notices you has direct consequences and it's often a promotion.

There's also a reward system within a lot of prosperity megachurches that reward and create a kind of aspirational class among believers. I do think it creates a series of expectations that often result in what they call "redempt and lift" in Pentecostal historiography. There's been good stuff in Pentecostal studies to show that some people become more upwardly mobile.

**SARAH PULLIAM BAILEY, *The Washington Post*:** You mentioned the Evangelicals are not a fan, so I kind of have two questions; one is about how you map this and where. I see a lot of Evangelicals kind of denying that this is a thing but are there strands in Evangelicalism where you see this thread or this line of thinking that may not be fully prosperity gospel, Pentecostalism, but like Prayer of Jabez? And then also, with Oprah, like what is Oprah's role in this?

My first question is about how you map these things and where you decide people are not part of this. And then the second question is how does this play out in terms of policy? I image that it's not clear-cut but in terms of like abortion, Israel, these policy implications, do you see trends in these churches?

**KATE BOWLER:** On your first question, I figured out who was in or out by my definition based on the dense association of networks, so they have to appear on the same stage dozens of times. And then I watched how they gradually started to sound the same because we are all just so impressionable by nature. I think the future of the prosperity gospel is not in these hard prosperity churches but it's in Evangelicalism's optimism and the rapid expansion of its most market-dominant churches and the fact that in trying to create media saturation, they have to go through the prosperity gatekeepers so their message starts to sound more and more the same.

For example, the second largest -- one of the largest churches in the top five, Life Church, is an Evangelical covenant church, this adorable Swedish Evangelical denomination. Ed and Lisa Young are its pastor and pastor's wife, spend most of their time going to the Joyce Myer convention and he sounds almost indistinguishable from Joel Osteen at this point. I think the kind of happy therapeutic arch of Evangelicalism in these market-dominant churches is absolutely prosperity theology. You'll hear them say, "faith," "health," "wealth."

What people don't like is how very easy it is to trace the roots of most of their language into prosperity thinking but it's also because rich prosperity preachers will fly out up and coming evangelical pastors and kind of show them the ropes. It's who mentors them and very often it's prosperity preachers.

Oprah, yes. You have to think of it as new thought plus mainline theology plus American civil religion equals positive thinking. For prosperity gospel, it's new thought plus Pentecostal theology plus American civil religion equals prosperity gospel. These are labels that we use.

And then just Oprah, we can use as a proxy for American civil religion combined with new thought. So her much-touted *The Secret*, she has this heavily metaphysical strain and also the kind of vague place she holds. If you do a survey of who's the only female spiritual leader in America, then they will almost always say Oprah. She's a kind of religious stand-in because of her deeply metaphysical approach. There's a great book by Katie Lofton called *The Gospel of Oprah* if you want to use that as an American civil religion argument.

Policy. They don't talk a lot about abortion. Only the religious right ones talk about Israel, so John Hagee. There's only a clump of about six of them and those are the old religious right ones that were also Pentecostal. But no hot button issues. They almost never talk about them, at least not in the main services.

**JORDANA HOCHMAN, NPR:** I had a couple questions and one was for young people who come up in the church and grow up in the church, do they stay? Is there disillusionment? Like what is the path through generations? The other question that I had is, what's a funeral like and when a sick person dies? How is that talked about by the pastor or by the family, by the person?

**KATE BOWLER:** Young people, because, as Mark Chase's work has shown, there's a greater and greater concentration into the largest churches, we're not seeking a kind of -- insofar as we can map it, a move of young people away from these large churches. They've done a good job of creating sort of churches within churches, so they'll have a young adults thing in which they can have their own services. They found sort of age and stage ways to keep people in megachurches like that but the turn has largely been away from hard prosperity and the Benny Hinn types to soft prosperity.

What we're also seeing is a kind of physical embodiment of it in which we're seeing preachers get really jacked up in ways that they haven't been since the Promise Keepers movement. I mean part of the way they're getting cooler is that they've gotten their Instagram presence, their ability to document enviable life online perfectly hits the prosperity gospel's ability to be publicly beautiful.

On funerals, I once accidentally walked into a funeral when I thought I was going to be seeing a healing service and it was a very loved pastor. And what struck me is that they spent so much of the bulletin explaining why he died and you might think that he was unfaithful, but we would like to assure you that he was fully devoted to the gospel of healing, he lived a full and beautiful life. The specificity of their expectations makes these things incredibly painful.

I have found that the desperation leading up to the death is probably the most painful part in which they always expect that there'll be a sudden turnaround because their theology demands it. A student came in to talk about how her mother had died and her aunt had come in and danced around her mother's dead body to proclaim that the body would be yet resurrected and she just sat there and wept.

The ability to meet death gracefully is not a virtue and it's something that has to be explained at the same time as it's being confronted. And I think it's a difficult pageantry for churches to enact, especially for its most beloved leaders. So you saw all the sadness around Eddie Long who then didn't admit that he was dying and then the church's attempt to explain why this great man of healing and faith had died so suddenly. So denial and then death, I think, is the short form of this answer.

**ELIZABETH DIAS, TIME:** Thank you so much, Kate. We all have great examples right now of how these religious impulses have clustered around and furthered and grown, political impulses on the right. There are a lot of prosperity preachers and folks on the left but I hear less about them. How are prosperity impulses shaping them on the left differently? You mentioned Wall Street and sort of criticism of unchecked Wall Street. What does that look like?

**KATE BOWLER:** Tell me who you're thinking about on the left side.

**ELIZABETH DIAS:** I ran into a group of these folks at the DNC. They're all African American preachers, like Jamal Bryant and that crowd. And you know deep distaste for their friends and their theological spiritual tradition on the right on this. But I also wonder why this came to fruition on the right first and if there was any chance that it could have on the left and we just don't know.

**KATE BOWLER:** The impact of the prosperity gospel on the black church fractured communities in so many ways. The truth is that the language of growth and progress embedded in its message hit these typically historic black traditions like Jamal Bryant. His dad is a famous A.M.E. bishop.

It's really helpful for you to say "left" because I think of them all as so religiously conservative that it helps me to see you're right. Politically, they are left, yes.

The Pentecostalization of black denominations has done very little to change their fundamental political orientation. It seems to me to be mostly determined by region and other factors. What it did do though is it provided them an aggressive platform of growth and a kind of commercialization of their personalities that only amplified their political reach. It just offered them the tools of self-promotion and then church growth.

A lot of people will talk about kind of borrowing prosperity gospel while their personal brand or if their church is going through a growth period. And Jamal Bryant, with his website with like lasers and he went through a real growth phase and I imagine that it is a kind of like bilingualism that he uses in churches to speak a certain way about health and wealth and then externally has a kind of political agency. Those people are probably rarely in the same room together. I would be hard-pressed to think

of an example when the left that is ever in the same room and maybe they will mobilize in a prosperity super left.

**ELIZABETH DIAS:** And then are there certain inflexion points where prosperity gospel abroad -- you mentioned in Brazil and elsewhere -- what are the inflexion points that turn that into a full blown political party?

**KATE BOWLER:** Well, we don't yet have a global history of the prosperity gospel but it does seem like the '80s and privatization, as I said, was a huge turning point and also the rise of an elite class that could demonstrate the benefits of it. You had to have sort of a whole bunch of up and comer and then one person to rise above who then -- like in Nigeria, Adejare Adeboye, who then has all the pageantry of like his limos. I think it has to create an elite class who can then become the figurehead of the movement before it -- I think it's sort of an impulse and a reaction until it becomes crystallized around a few personalities.

**MOLLIE HEMINGWAY, *The Federalist*:** Apart from the general theological objections a traditional Christian might have for this movement, it strikes me that there might be a particular danger or concern for people dealing with mental illness.

I'm curious if that is something that's dealt with or how it's dealt with. And then I also was wondering about Benny Hinn. I think he just had his offices raided by the IRS so just curious about anywhere the U.S. Government is concerned or whether there are any religious liberty questions there, too.

**KATE BOWLER:** As this very like passive observer, you know, I did get to walk where Jesus walked with Benny Hinn for 10 beautiful days but I never get to be the person with the kind of access to do the investigative reporting that usually creates these sorts of situations. I was surprised, honestly, by the Benny Hinn news because there hadn't been a cluster of media around it leading up to it which is what you usually see. That group in particular, the ones that have been identified in the Senator Grassley investigation, have been particularly prone to only putting each other on their boards, their supervisory boards and having very little oversight. There was one attempt, the Council on Financial Accountability. There have been some attempts that have become more robust to ask them to repeatedly put their things online.

That was a bit of a mystery to me, to be honest, because I hadn't seen any recent exposes that seemed like anything was new. I sort of doubt that the Government is all that interested in prosecuting those kinds of people in this political moment. But I always see the role as journalist as being the primary catalyst.

Mental illness. The answer is, yes, more prone to abuses because of the heavily supernaturalization of explanations of sin and distress. Conservative Evangelical etcetera churches, other than the recent initiatives done by Rick Warren's church, they tend to be quite thin on their language of anything beyond mild depression. But yes, I would imagine that they would pathologize and supernaturalize like bipolar, for example, as being demonic interference before they would likely advocate a doctor's care.

## Q AND A PART II

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** I will also mention, as Kate mentioned, she has a new book coming out from Princeton called, *The Preacher's Wife: Women in Power in America Megaministries*.

**KAREN TUMULTY, *The Washington Post*:** In the prosperity gospel view of the world, what's the role of government?

**KATE BOWLER:** I think it's ambivalent. For the most part, the theological infrastructure of the prosperity gospel does not require good government but it's also been led by preachers who had no access to it. And so a lot of its aspirational language can be read as an explanation for its distance from it. I haven't studied the Brazilian or Nigerian iterations but I imagine that they may. It might pivot very well as both an indictment of corrupt structures working in favor of the kind of self-made story that every politician uses. I imagine that it would be politically weaponized quite easily.

But for the most part, in all the sermons I've heard, they're trying to inspire righteous individualism and so sometimes there'll be topics that infringe upon that. Israel, I've only ever seen that in those who have strong Zionist tendencies that are more like a side dish but I've rarely seen them integrated.

**KAREN TUMULTY:** So they can kind of latch onto a Donald Trump figure who's obviously been anointed by God because he's rich without latching on to any of the things that he says he wants to do?

**KATE BOWLER:** I struggle a little bit with understanding exactly how expectation about Donald Trump fits into the kind of the imagination that he cultivates because he embodies and describes a world in which every individual can make it in America with a little theological help. On the other hand, he came to power as an indictment of the corruption that says that no one can make it in America.

I sometimes I wonder if it's part of the relationship that if Trump, to the American people with this kind of prosperity imagination, would be somewhat similar to a prosperity preacher and his congregation in which he will always have the things that they don't have but will serve as an aspirational figure.

The proximity to him will be a reminder that it could be possible even if mostly what the pastor is doing is telling them to wait.

**CLARE DUFFY, *NBC News*:** Thanks, Kate. I have two questions. Would any of the megachurches that you study object to being called "prosperity?" Is it a term that they see as pejorative?

**KATE BOWLER:** Yes. That became the worst part of the study and then the fixation on creating all the appendices to try to offer supplemental but it is pejorative as Emma's point about the worry of condescension. And right now, of course, and I am always a perpetrator of this, is that condescension it's such an easy time for that right now when the claims can be so absurd but part of what fuels it is its absurdity that in the course of a human life, this can be fixed, nothing is broken, nothing is lost. It's like just the flip side of something very beautiful that can be rendered so terrible both in the words we use to describe it and in the people we see as the victims of it. I struggled a lot with the naming rhetoric.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** What would they like to be called?

**KATE BOWLER:** There was this tradition that came out of Rhema Bible and they were comfortable with being called "word of faith." I tried hard to say "faith preachers" for a long time and I realized no one used it and publishers thought it was lame. But the Pentecostals were like, "but most of us aren't like that" so I just had to bite the bullet and use it even though I would like to just suggest that it be used to describe kind of an orientation or sometimes a language that people use and then discard. So you might look through my appendix and think, well, that person didn't sound like one when they talked to me, and sometimes it'll be a way they talk to a certain congregation or conference. And sometimes it's a language they take on, especially during a building campaign because most Christians lack language to fundraise, frankly, and so it became a kind of borrowing. It's a rhetorical expression. But for the most part, it should be term used lightly.

**CLARE DUFFY:** And my other question is quite a bit bigger and I guess I should have read Vann's article in *The Atlantic* before asking this, but how do you see that influencing the healthcare debate right now?

**KATE BOWLER:** I think one of its much more disturbing results is the way it allows people a language by which to justify inequality because righteous individuals can always make it. Also, I think part of the work of being in the movement is also its advantage. It helps inure people to the exhaustion of constant risk so oddly enough, it might make the same people that it is pulling benefits from feel more comfortable with the growing disparity in the country between those who can afford the very best and those who can't.

I wrote one piece on how it's not just that the prosperity gospel's approach to health is purely supernatural. A lot of the people that I spent time within that ethnographic study that I did were nurses at Duke University Hospital and they would often use faith teaching for certain things and then with others, they would just go to the doctor and then they would get a diagnosis and then sometimes they just hop off the table and decide they're going to take care of it spiritually. It was always a "both and." People use their institutions as well as they might say that Jesus is the best physician. So we'll find people pivoting back and forth as they make sense of the resources that are available to them.

**DAVID RENNIE, *The Economist*:** In terms of numbers, you talked about the numbers of churches but how many Americans do you think actually routinely attend these churches?

**KATE BOWLER:** I have now convinced national congregation surveys to add my questions to their surveys so I will have an answer for you in four years.

*Time* did a good survey a few years ago that tried to drill down on how many of you go to a church that professes that faith is rewarded in health -- some version of it. The answer was about 38 percent, I think, with that study.

The thing is I can only count megachurches and with the increase in concentration, as I mentioned, of people in big churches, it's not a bad count but I can't get a sense of all the very small churches. It's millions. How many millions, I do not know.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** But not all megachurches are prosperity gospels?

**KATE BOWLER:** No. Just 40 percent of the big ones.

**DAVID RENNIE:** Is it your kind of hunch if there is a link to Trump getting elected that this language is out there in the ether and he has, over time, learned how to use it effectively in a kind of distinctively American way or he is saying things in a way that directly speaks to enough people that it has a kind of an electoral impact?

**KATE BOWLER:** To further complicate your helpful first question, I don't know if there's a relationship between the number of people who believe that God rewards people with health and wealth as those who actually attend those churches or if it's something that they get from Oprah. It is so much a part of the water everyone's swimming in that naming numbers in terms of congregational attendance is going to be really tough.

Do I think that it created some of the cultural and ideological preconditions that help make sense of a person like Trump? Absolutely.

Do I think that it helps give people a greater comfort with the fickle market and an ideologue who can help control it? Yes, absolutely. I have no idea though whether that could map as easily onto congregational attendances I would like.

**SALLY QUINN, *The Washington Post* and *On Faith*:** I'm really interested in the idea of the contradiction between "luck" and "blessed" because "blessed" sort of has an edge of hubris to it and you know, pride is one of the seven deadly sins and "blessed," which by the way, is a word that has caught on. I hear people always saying, "oh, I'm blessed, I found a good apartment" or "I'm blessed, we got a weekend at the beach." It's become very sort of trite. I'm blessed to be at the Faith Angle Forum, exactly. What I'm trying to figure out is so you're blessed and you don't believe in luck but what do you say to the family who's driving down the highway and their car gets hit and all five of their children are killed? Are they blessed? I mean where do they go with that? That's my first question—because I believe in luck.

And the other question is you haven't mentioned your cancer and your feelings about that and your spiritual feelings about that and where you stand on the subject of prosperity, health, wealth, and how that has affected you emotionally and psychologically. I'd really like if you could answer the question about "blessed" versus "luck" and then talk about your cancer.

**KATE BOWLER:** Sure. Well, I think you're right that "blessed" is a really loaded term that connotes a gift but also reward and that people use it in a way that suggests that they put themselves in the right place at the right time. It's incredibly natural for us all to hope that all of our small efforts are amounting to

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something. I think it's a very human impulse to want to pat ourselves on the back at the same time as we're pretending that we're also giving the pointy finger. But it has become an expression of the prosperity gospel's cultural influence that we are combing through our own biographies to look for evidence of our divine good fortune and also the fruit of all the hard work we put in.

I think that also expresses the ambivalence I have. I come from a Mennonite background. I was initially horrified, I think is the right word, by the prosperity gospel. And then the more time I spent with its believers, the more I became deeply sympathetic to the way that they're all trying to run that spiritual math; how do I know if my life is getting better; how do I know if the work I'm putting in is going to make my kids happy and strengthen my marriage. And I saw that they were being taught a spiritual math and a way to track in a way that was deeply attractive, not just to them but I think most of my middle class friends who all want to think, at least in my subset, that education and our general scrappiness was amounting to something.

That's partly why I wrote that memoir, *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*, is I was trying to grapple with how much I have loved those myths of self-improvement. I thought that my scrappy personality was unique to who I am and is probably just a product of education and a general sense that things were going to work out and then all of a sudden when the rug got pulled out from underneath me, I realized I had much more in common with the people I was studying than I realized.

I've tried to translate that ambivalence into a kind of compassion for the fragility that I think we are all experiencing as we just try to keep our lives together. Though at the same time, I'm saddened by the kind of individualism that always makes me a problem to be solved. I mean the world is not safe for me anymore and it's one of the hardest things about being sick is that everyone wants to explain my suffering and I wish they would just learn to be present. It's a kind of "both and".

**EUGENE SCOTT:** So I grew up in black Baptist churches which are perhaps inherently somewhat charismatic but—

**KATE BOWLER:** Were you Bapticostal or just Baptist?

**EUGENE SCOTT:** Bapticostal would definitely be the term we would use. So just to show legitimacy to the term, the denomination that my family is a part of, it's called "The Full Gospel Baptist Church" -- what's based in New Orleans, which is a Baptist denomination that was started by a Pentecostal pastor so it's literally Bapticostal.

But most of the criticism I was exposed to of the prosperity gospel came when I became more visible in reformed white Evangelical circles. I've seen lots of columns and op-eds about what's wrong with the prosperity gospel. I have not seen much self-reflection about what role that these faith communities play in creating the prosperity gospel because I tend to think of the prosperity gospel as a response to some maybe vacancies or weaknesses that some of these people saw in more mainline traditions, more reformed, less expressive emotional traditions and I didn't know if you had seen anything like that

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opposed to literally I read a column yesterday by Tim Challies about what's wrong with T.D. Jakes opposed to I have yet to read a column about why does T.D. Jakes exist and what role did we play in it.

**KATE BOWLER:** I think it's everyone's favorite whipping boy for greedy capitalists and when in truth, you know, I go to a church with more money in its organ and its stained glass than it does in its rose garden and the upkeep of its cemeteries than it does in outreach programs.

A hearty yes to your observation. I do think Full Gospel is an example of a market domination who has used that bilingualism, structural solutions, very community and civic minded at the same time as very high-flying prosperity gospel into a single denomination. And I think that there's a tremendous energy around those kinds of pairings because it is exempt from the critique that it's just bald capitalism. It is trying to take and then transform not just themselves but its leaders. It does mimic a lot of the same lack of transparency though in some of the worst and there's been some scandals that have been, I think, largely put aside right now but they struggle from the same kinds of imbalances as most other big churches, lack of accountability, family dynasties, etcetera, etcetera. But I think the impulse is incredibly honest and I think that's exactly the right question, not who but why. It's an indictment on us all.

**DOYLE MCMANUS, *LA Times*:** First in the topic of your talk, you touched very briefly on the question of explicit political engagement, electoral engagement some preachers endorse, others don't. I'd like you to talk a little bit more about the phenomenon, the taxonomy of that, is there an explicit debate over engagement or separationism of the kind that has, of course, been roiling Evangelicals forever? That's question one.

And then question two is observation. We've seen faith at work here today because I think you probably sold two dozen copies of your book. But that book is five whole years old which is a real long time and so to fill in our reading time between after we finish reading *Blessed* and your new book coming out, where can we find examples of your work and this conversation in the months intervening?

**KATE BOWLER:** Well, most of my stuff, because I'm trying to get and keep my job, goes to academic journals. And so I put it on my academia.edu website and then I just tweeted it out to you all so you can see uploaded versions of things I wrote on. It was like a religious history major tries to understand the economy, a religious history person tries to understand politics, so there's a little of that. But it shows stuff that might be useful to you all as the bilingualism people seem to have when they think about their healthcare; bilingualism, like the supernatural plus structural. There's a lot of my reflections on the prosperity gospel from chemo chairs so it's the feeling side. If you want some feelings, there's a lot of feelings there. But the academic side, I tweeted to you all so you could any uploads if that stuff's helpful.

On the matter of policy, this is the stuff I'm the weakest at, to be honest, so I only have impressions and not conclusions. I did a study of the largest Latino megachurches, period, in the country to figure out which ones are Pentecostal and which were prosperity and which were mainline. A lot of it actually was inspired by the timepiece that Elizabeth did a while ago on Latino Protestants and found that among the

Latino prosperity churches in South Florida, they were the most oddly hard prosperity and most politically vigorous. I only slightly understood Florida republicans.

You have to think of those churches as being the northern most tip of a global southern reach. And so they're echoing Latin American politics the same time as they're translating into an American context.

I'm happy also to provide a list of Latino megachurches. They're much more actively Republican than I expected and seem to host political candidates though they said they weren't endorsing them. There seems to be a hub of African American Republican that has political currency around the Word of Faith church in Detroit and that seems like a real hub. And then in California, most of those megachurches that were black were Democrats by instinct. I really couldn't track any kind of circuit of politicians among them because they didn't publicize it and I could never get it on conference advertisements, so to be honest --unless I showed up and they were there that day-- I really struggled to actually map their circuits.

**A.B. STODDARD, RealClearPolitics:** I wanted you to just touch briefly on the spiritual math, whatever these metrics are for acting faith and for feeling because it's rooted in the power of positive thinking, that you have to go through your day no matter how you feel or what bills you're trying to pay, seeing everything as achieved, right?

But there's a finality of victory which you didn't spend too much time on that seems so incongruous because it is just a waiting game. And I mean it sounds derisive to say that but it is it is a faith of waiting it out. What is victory and what happens to those in the church who achieve victory and then what-- how is it measured and how is it received among the group?

**KATE BOWLER:** That's exactly right. The language of victory ends up being more of an orientation than an accomplishment because every time something is achieved, like for a church, for example, the most important communal church activity of victory is in a building expansion. And so at the center of the foyer, they'll have like a little architect, little man, trees, tiny buildings that they can all look at for years as they think about donations and all kinds of ritualizing of excitement around expansion and all the souls that will be saved.

If you just want to look at an example of how they do their metrics, like their language of victorious metrics is always in the pastor's bio about the church. Now it's all video. But like it was, "one man in a living room and eight people" and then it shows by numbers, it's always in numbers -- it will show the ascent and then usually just a video montage of expanding buildings and then the crowds. The most important public expression of victory is the crowd--it's the expression of influence which is why American prosperity preachers have always needed, African in particular, audiences. They'll see them in front of a million people as the most powerful confirmation of their influence. Megachurches have institutionalized revivalism. It's the biggest number of people but it's the people echoing back is the greatest expression of God having arrived and souls having been saved, etcetera, etcetera.

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What happens when it's in an individual life though it's much harder, of course, for any of us to know whether things are working. I find that it's more the habits. I can see it in other people in the habits that they take on in their day. Sometimes it'll be from the way they'll praise God for a perfect day when they get up. Usually, if it's in a workplace, I can always tell a nurse who has a prosperity leaning by her sticky tabs on her monitor. Just like, "Everything is possible", exclamation mark, smiley face, hearts, hearts, hearts and it's because we all need that perpetual cycle of reminders. And then, of course, in the way that they chitchat, so the way that they correct each other. This always made me the absolute worst when I was doing the preamble before the service starts where someone will say, like, "And how are you?" And the only answer is "Blessed." I find that because it's performed, they have a thousand small examples of how they achieved it and so it eases the burden of waiting. It really does.

**A.B. STODDARD:** But so the health and the wealth is in the perception, is in the eye of beholder but the victory is more of the group and of the church and of the leadership. It's not your own. You don't get to victory, you get to health and wealth.

**KATE BOWLER:** I mean unless you get the amazing promotion and then you become sort of part of the super team in your church that's elevated as an example.

**A.B. STODDARD:** And if you succeed in a measurable way, you're in the more special inner sanctum?

**KATE BOWLER:** That's right, and that time that was normally used for prayer requests is very often a testimony time of someone who has a businessman. It's so that we can all watch it and then believe that we can do it, too.

**EMMA GREEN:** You've talked a little bit about the international footprint of the prosperity gospel and how this is really actually become bigger than it is in the United States. I'd love if you could just talk a little bit about trends and patterns you see overseas and particularly for us with the reporter brain, what should we be following and looking for as prosperity gospel sort of expands overseas.

And then in the domestic context, I'd love it if you could talk a little bit more about notions of femininity, masculinity and sexuality that show up in prosperity gospel and how this deals with LGBT issues, women preachers, that kind of stuff. What are the connections between those sort of themes and what you see in the United States?

**KATE BOWLER:** So world, interesting thing. I think it's a very kind of Philip Jenkins rise of global Christianity argument when you look at prosperity expressions move, so you'll see certain countries became kind of global seed beds for their denomination which is why the largest church in the Ukraine is run by a Nigerian named Pastor Sunday and it's an expression of like Ukrainian folk dancing and then hard core prosperity preaching. What I would look for are big churches, hybrid cultural expressions. It's never usually like "and now the Swedes" even though the Swedes were super into it in the '80s.

But people always surprise you. And mostly look for first generation immigrant churches growing, like the biggest ones in Toronto are all first generation and then when they transition into second

generation, then they usually move from hard to soft prosperity and then watch how they assimilate. I find that stuff fascinating but they're networked. This is never just going to be man with a plan. It's always going to be a network and it's not hard to trace.

LGBT people.

**EMMA GREEN:** And gender more broadly.

**KATE BOWLER:** Because they come from Pentecostals and much more comfortable with female leadership, but almost always a wife. Paula is very rare in that she survived a divorce but she needed the Presidential bump. She was reduced to TV. She was on the way down before. And I've only seen gay prosperity preachers be ousted. I've never seen an open and affirming prosperity megachurch. Families is one of the primary expressions of the prosperity gospel and so fertility, abundance and like Christmas cards -- I mean that's the showpiece of how it works. It makes them more sort of aggressively heterosexual.

In the new book, I ended up kind of tracking how they perform that and part of it is hyper-femininity and hyper-masculinity. You can tell a prosperity preacher sometimes because he looks like a cross-fit instructor and she is just like tucked into his arms all willowy. I mean it's a faith, you can see, right?

**ADELLE BANKS:** I was wondering if you could reiterate the difference between hard and then not so hard prosperity. Hard and soft. And a couple of the key figures in each. And I also wonder if you could talk at all about the symbolism in the Executive Order National Day of Prayer ceremony in which Paula White was given one of the pens that was used to sign one of the Orders, and she was just over the President's shoulder like the whole time during the ceremony. I just wonder about all that symbolism, what it meant to you.

**KATE BOWLER:** Hard and soft prosperity, so I used it as a spectrum to understand the relationship between them speaking and it coming into being, so how causal they thought their words were. Hard prosperity was immediate, supernatural, heavily instrumental. Hard prosperity preacher, like Charles Capps was a famous hard prosperity preacher and he used to be an Arkansas farmer and he gave his famous example of how it works. He laid out his mortgages and he said, "Debt, be gone; I command unto you finances be restored," and so the way he preached was that he really believed there was a direct relationship between his speaking over and the dissolving of his debt. He never tells the story where he probably paid his bills but it's the very immediatist. Charles Capps is a famous spreader of hard prosperity; Benny Hinn; I think Paula White's a hard prosperity preacher; Mike Murdoch. Most of the more famous ones were hard prosperity.

Soft prosperity has the same framework for cause and effect but it's gradual, therapeutic, and largely less immediatist about how results can come about. You can get the money not just with a sudden infusion of cash but with a gradual promotion. And I did not follow that nearly as carefully as the rest of you did but it was the first time I've ever seen a prosperity preacher be publicly acknowledged and be

the perching, overseeing eye rather than the person who they take the money from and never publicly acknowledge.

**ANNE THOMPSON:** Kate, listening to you describe the pastor's funeral, how do they in the prosperity gospel balance both healing and the notion of eternal life? Because in most Christian traditions, that's the ultimate reward and yet they, at least from what you describe, they seem to back away from it. What role does eternal life play in the prosperity gospel?

**KATE BOWLER:** I mean they do believe in heaven. This is imported into an entirely Christian salvation like redemption eschatology spiritual narrative arch. So yes, they absolutely believe in heaven and they think it will be wonderful.

But what they do think though is people who rely on heaven as an excuse not to get theirs in the here and now are weak Christians. They are almost counterfeit. They have very harsh words about people who won't put into action the God-given faith that every believer has the luxury they've been afforded. They think of it as a kind of spiritual laziness or a lack of expectation on the part of the people. They'll just call them traditional Christians. They, too, believe in the beauty of heaven and every now and then, you'll get a glimpse of it in a funeral at the end.

But for the most part, theirs is what we call a fully realized eschatology, which is the idea that the kingdom of God is almost fully present whereas most Christians believe that you get glimpses of it but it's the here and not yet.

**ANNE THOMPSON:** What is eschatology?

**KATE BOWLER:** End times. The end of time, the culmination of time so it could be Jesus returning in a very exciting moment or it could be the afterlife.

But I think our other speaker was right that they don't really parse them that much. Their concern is that people --like Reverend Ike used to say, have your pie right now with a cherry on top. They really thought that it was more faithful to be looking in the here and now.

**EUGENE SCOTT:** I really do wonder how much of that is a reaction to people of faith in marginalized communities constantly complaining about suffering and being told that things will be better in the afterlife.

**KATE BOWLER:** Well, that's why -- and I didn't want to put too heavily on this--but the early people that combined the health and wealth message in the '20s, so Father Divine. I don't want people to take away the idea that they "invented" the prosperity gospel, because I think what they did was they were doing what other Pentecostals were doing which is applying that message of healing to other aspects of how about right now and not in the future. And it was an impatience. I mean it's the reason why they wore mink coats and some would even like keep their fingernails long to show their absence of a physical labor. It's also a pageantry of black beauty and dignity to say this is a body that is worth adorning rather

than some symbol of excess and corruption. People really have to be careful about what money means to people.

**SALLY QUINN:** I'm interested in the contrast of the prosperity gospel with other faiths. It does seem to me that, for instance, Christian Science has some similarities--particularly with the whole idea of healing and faith. But I don't see any similarities between the prosperity gospel and Islam. If you look at the Five Pillars of Islam, one of them is the concern for the needy. That seems to be what people are concerned about and in Judaism, one of my favorite songs is at Passover when people sing "Dayenu" which is basically even if we have only this, that would be enough. And I'm interested in your idea of the differences, where prosperity fits into these other faiths.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Do they have social ministries, soup kitchens, clothes drives? Is there a ministry of compassion that flows out of their own prosperity? If I could just add that to Sally's point.

**KATE BOWLER:** Yes, almost all have some kind of outreach though it ranges from very individualistic, like backpack kind of giveaway things to like I was mentioning more in black denominational prosperity churches, they'll have more for the infrastructure around it like housing and stuff. It falls along a range.

Almost all of them will have some kind of charity outreach and they use that as armor to say that we are not self-aggrandizing. Two justifications for their wealth; one, I have it to show you that you can do it, too; and two, look at all my charities.

I think the part that would be most familiar to other religious traditions is the idea of work's righteousness. Luther put a bad spin on it but really, just the idea that spiritual labor is valuable to God in acts of charity. As Hinduism, teaches a kind of a reciprocal relationship between your efforts and then your next life.

They would say they take care of everyone. They're quite defensive on that point. But I think you're right in terms of a sense though that acts of charity and giving unto others is more valuable to God than self-aggrandizement.

As an American religious historian who mostly just does Christianity, I run pretty thin on other traditions. But I will say that in all of the thousands of letters I got from people, I thought people's religious traditions is a very interesting barometer in how they reacted to my suffering. A lot of the lovely Jewish letters I got were like, oh, totally suffering; I get it; I'm so sorry, I am so sorry people are so mean to you about the suffering. But then a lot of like Hindu letters which were like, you maybe need to do some digging on why. And then some lovely Buddhists who were like let me take on practices so that you might transfer some of your suffering to me and that we might share it. I thought that was kind of beautiful.

It fell along a spectrum of people's ability to tolerate ambiguity around suffering and prosperity is the most intolerant of broken bodies.

**CATHERINE BREKUS, Harvard Divinity School:** Thank you so much for this talk and for this book. I wonder if you could say a little bit more about the relationship between the prosperity gospel and capitalism because listening to you talk this morning, you invoked briefly Max Weber. It sounds to me, in some ways, as if the prosperity gospel is creating the kind of ideal economic self or a capitalist marketplace that the discipline, the strenuousness of selfhood in this tradition is remarkable. And then it seems as if there's always a kind of easy answer for economic inequality.

I assume that there are points of resistance here that this isn't just kind of a mirror of a capitalist culture, and I'm wondering if there's anything other than a lack of faith, any demonic forces that prevent people from accumulating wealth. And then I wondered if you would just say something briefly -- I want to give you the opportunity to do this -- a few years ago, there was some press about whether prosperity preachings were responsible for the subprime mortgage crisis. I would love to hear your thoughts about that.

**KATE BOWLER:** Is this making the most effective, is this just Christian neoliberalism. This is probably what I struggled with when I was trying to understand their view of the economy, because I couldn't figure out if they believed it was entirely real. They believed that they were participating in kind of a closed spiritual universe in which everything, all effort is redeemable for rewards. They had a sense of that, their own divine economy and that it was somehow linked to the markets sometimes insofar as they would receive rewards usually through some kind of good capitalism.

But so often what I found was in their usually very heavily metaphorical language, it was hard to tell whether it was a real economy or whether God was ultimately the God of the market and beyond and could make these sort of supernatural interventions. The end times wealth transfer stuff I thought was a very impressive intervention into that by trying to say, Wall Street might entirely be against each and every one of us and be satanic and yet still, we will be remunerated. And I was never quite sure how literal this language was and how bound they were to the neoliberalism that they seemed to reflect.

I think they have not just easy answers but they have protests like they won't work on Sunday. In fact, they spend most of their time at church and so that is also an anti-capitalist. They're not skipping out on their spiritual responsibilities. They're assuming that if they give God the best, the first fruits that Paula loves so much, that God will reward them regardless. And they spend more time in church, that ethnographic community I was with, than anyone I've ever known expecting that that matters more to God than their time at work. They're not quite, you're right, as good capitalists as they may seem.

**FEMALE SPEAKER:** Did you want to say anything about subprime mortgage?

**KATE BOWLER:** Oh, it does not necessarily facilitate financial scandal. I'm probably the only one I know who bought one of those bad mortgages, not them.

**MICHELLE COTTLE:** All right. Well, I hate to close on the granular but I'm completely intrigued by back to the whole quantification of acting your faith. How literal are you talking here? I mean are they taught to write down every time you smile at your boss, and is it mostly the acting of the faith or is it

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also quantifying the returns they're getting, like I got a bonus this week and do they then need to share that with the congregations? So kind of first, how literal are we talking here? I mean it's like the quants have taken over religion on some level.

**KATE BOWLER:** I think they're mostly taught to pay attention and then some of them habituate it into their lives. There are certain things I think they do keep track of, scripture memorization and then ability to use it. Evangelism is really a huge part of this gospel so they do count the number of people they talk to in a day. I'm always on their saving end of that so I'm sure they're keeping track. I think it's more like a series of patterns that the most righteous then take on. And then churches become the primary showpieces of that. That's the place where you describe all the things you did that week that made a difference. You teach each other to count.

**MICHELLE COTTLE:** So that's part of the service is the sharing of what you did?

**KATE BOWLER:** If you're in a small church. Big churches will never let people talk unscripted but small churches, absolutely. That's the prayer and that's the testimony section. It's the spiritual humblebragging part of the week.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Ladies and gentlemen, join me in thanking Kate.

**END**

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