5-2021

A Theology Built on Meritocracy: A Theological and Sociological Examination of the Prosperity Gospel and the American Dream

T.E. Starman
tes16a@acu.edu

ABSTRACT

In American megachurch Christianity there lies a paradox in the concept of wealth and blessings; many megachurch leaders take deliberate steps to distance themselves from the defamed and heretical label of prosperity gospel, while simultaneously using many of its theological tenets as foundational to their own theology of wealth, money, and success. This thesis examines the nature of this paradox from both a theological and sociological lens. Through content analysis and case study examples, this thesis assesses the theological tenets of American megachurch prosperity theology as well as the sociological reality of stratification and the ideology that buttresses it. This work shows the paralleled nature of the paradox of prosperity and the American society's belief in a meritocracy. The thesis explains that American megachurch Christianity's overt and covert prosperity gospel themes are simply a religiously coded form of the American meritocratic ideology. The results call for religious leaders to identify this reality and work to correct the negative ramifications of it, while concurrently calling for more inquiry into the ways in which the American social stratification structure has become embedded in and maintained by religious systems.

A Theology Built on Meritocracy: A Theological and Sociological Examination of the Prosperity Gospel and the American Dream

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School of Theology

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Theology

By

T. E. Starman

May 2021

This thesis, directed and approved by the committee for the thesis candidate Tess Starman, has been accepted by the Office of Graduate Programs of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Theology

Assistant Provost for Graduate Programs

Date

4-19-2021

Thesis Committee

Dr. Frederick Aquino, Chair

Frederick D. Aquino

Dr. Sabrina Danielsen

Sabrina Danielsen

Dr. Tony Tian-Ren Lin

Tony Tian-Ren Lin

To all my mentors who have stood with me in solidarity.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

A PARDOX IN THE CONCEPTION OF "BLESSINGS"

The prosperity gospel has long been acknowledged as heretical in much of Christianity, yet so many of its ideological tenets continue to be found in American megachurch culture. By definition, the prosperity gospel conflates earthly blessings in all forms, but especially fiscal, with being in right relationship with God. Conversely, those who do not experience earthly blessing must work harder and correct their own misdoings in order to achieve this prosperity. In his 2018 book *Poverty, Riches, and Wealth*, Kris Vallotton addresses the heresy and hurt caused by the concept of the prosperity gospel.[1] A pastor in the Bethel Church community, Vallotton guides readers through a deconstruction of the unorthodox prosperity gospel and the overcorrection against it: poverty mindset.[2] As the book continues, Vallotton aims to find a middle ground between these extreme paradigms. In doing so, he uses the principle of reaping and sowing—that what one invests will come back to them[3]. If a person is faithful, they will receive reward. If a person is not faithful, they will receive lack of reward. This middle ground conclusion, in actuality, is rooted in the very prosperity gospel he outright rejects. Vallotton's theology, as outlined in his book, is just one example of the many

1. Kris Vallotton, *Poverty, Riches, and Wealth: Moving from a Life of Lack into Kingdom Abundance* (Aida, MI: Chosen Books, 2018), 97-98.

2. Vallotton, *Poverty, Riches, and Wealth*, 13-14.

3. Vallotton, *Poverty, Riches, and Wealth*, 20-21.

pastors who sit in this apparent contradiction. How can American megachurches hold the prosperity gospel as both a heresy and as an undergirding of their theology?

Toward an Understanding of Societal Factors

In his 2020 publication *Prosperity Gospel Latinos and Their American Dream*, Dr. Tony Tian-Ren Lin examines the lives of Latin American Immigrants in the United States and their attraction towards Prosperity Gospel Pentecostalism.[4] His ethnographic work details the stories and patterns seen in multiple communities as they strive for spiritual and worldly pursuits. Lin explains this contradiction detailed above, labelling it in his research as the "paradox."[5] For the communities he has studied, the prosperity gospel seen in action serves as an antidote to the systemic oppression of immigrants in America. They never can truly assimilate nor become "Americans" in this modern context, and consequently, true achievement of the American Dream will always be out of reach. At the center of this paradox is the concept of meritocracy. Lin writes, "meritocracy reproduces the inequalities in society and erases any evidence that contradicts its values. As a result, the paradox of Prosperity Gospel is the paradox of meritocracy."[6]

In *The Tyranny of Meritocracy,* Dr. Michael Sandel outlines the concept of meritocracy from a philosophical and social perspective.[7] He details the ways in which meritocracy has become the ruling ideology in our modern American context. We as a

4. Tony Tian-Ren Lin, *Prosperity Gospel Latinos and Their American Dream* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

5. Lin, *Prosperity Gospel Latinos*, 11.

6. Lin, *Prosperity Gospel Latinos*, 20.

7. Michael Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Grioux, 2020).

culture have correlated professional and economic success with social status and moral values. When one achieves success, they are seen as leaders, winners, and thought of a "good" human being.[8] When one does not achieve success, it is seen in society as some sort of failure on the part of the individual rather than the social systems at play that may have prevented that individual's success. Sandel finds that luck and good fortune are actually much greater factors in one's rise to the "top," compared to hard work and talent like the meritocracy would lead us to be believe.[9]

The Work Ahead

In this thesis, I will endeavor to continue the work of Dr. Lin while utilizing and expanding upon Sandel's conclusions. Lin's basic thesis is aligned with my own efforts: to show that there is inherent contradiction in the relevance and popularity of a prosperity gospel ethic. His work, however, focuses not on the conditions that gave rise to this modern paradox of belief but on how that contradiction impacts the Latino immigrant community of believers and the way they live in American society, as well as its ramifications for American and the world at large. My work, by contrast, will take a step back from his focused efforts, instead discussing key examples of this paradox from megachurch Christianity.

To do this work, Dr. Sandel's efforts prove foundational. Sandel outlines one of the most significant variables at plan in the contradiction of the American megachurch prosperity gospel ethic: society's meritocracy. In his work, Sandel outlines the roots of meritocracy in many western religions yet ends the discussion of religious influence at

8. Sandel, *Tyranny of Merit*, 24-25.

9. Sandel, *Tyranny of Merit.*

this point. In this thesis, I will enter into the conversation with these scholars and, moreover, discuss how the manifestation of meritocracy from these roots has resulted in a causal relationship between society and the church. Understanding the theological nuances at play, coupled with the sociological factors in society at large, I will prove that the primary theology of money and wealth that American megachurches preach is a theology built on meritocracy. To accomplish this, the thesis is divided into the following three parts: Chapter II on the Theological Conceptions of Wealth and Blessings, Chapter III on the Sociological Foundations for the Prosperity Gospel, and Chapter IV on Finding a Better Way.

In Chapter II, on the Theological Conceptions of Wealth and Blessings, I will outline the major theological tenets used to construct the prosperity gospel. I will discuss the rationale used theologically to justify the existence of the prosperity gospel and prosperity gospel rhetoric in American megachurches. Furthermore, I will make a distinction between what I term "overt prosperity gospel theologians," whose theology meets point for point the basic tenets of prosperity gospel while being largely unashamed by the label of prosperity gospel, and "covert prosperity gospel theologians," whose work aligns in a large way with prosperity gospel, but in a way that often rejects the label and outright prosperity-driven language found in overt prosperity rhetoric. To illustrate the overarching principles and cement the distinction between overt and covert prosperity gospel theology, I will examine two present-day megachurch leaders, Joel Osteen and Kris Vallotton, who serve as examples of overt and covert prosperity gospel theology, respectively.

In Chapter III, Sociological Foundations for Prosperity Gospel Theology, I will examine the present sociological factors, supported by conflict and symbolic interactionism theories. These theories and the discussion of sociological factors serve as the context and justification for prosperity gospel ideology to thrive both overtly and covertly in American megachurch Christianity. I will lay out the ways our society's stratified structure aids in perpetuating the concepts behind this ideology as well as the resulting framework of a theology built on the meritocracy and the fallacy of the American dream.

In Chapter IV, A Better Way, I will present a case for the ways in which religious institutions can work to correct the ramifications of a theology built on meritocracy. I argue that religious institutions could potentially serve as a space for deconstructing and correcting this paradoxical reality through values, beliefs, and tradition within the church and the bible, such as justice, equity, inclusion, and community. Finally, I will conclude with a call for more inquiry into the relationship between the sociological factors of societal stratification and the meritocracy, with the theological conceptions of success, wealth, and the prosperity gospel in American Christianity.

In their analysis of scholarship in the field of sociology of religion, Smith et al. discuss the need for more investigation into the relationship between religion and race, class, and gender stratification.[10] This scholastic inquiry will not only shed further light on how religious belief and affiliation influences concepts regarding poverty and

10. Christian Smith, Brandon Vaidyanathan, Nancy Tatom Ammerman, Jose Casanova, Hilary Davidson, Elaine Howard Ecklund, and John H Evans, "Roundtable on the Sociology of Religion: Twenty-Three Theses on the Status of Religion in American Sociology- a Mellon Working-Group Reflection," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81.4 (2013): 928.

prosperity, but also how society's stratification has seeped into the American megachurch culture, resulting in religion being a system that perpetuates and maintains the stratified and unequal society in which we live. This work will continue to bridge the wide chasm between the academic fields of sociology and theology. These fields have a propensity for being at odds with one another; consequently, this work aims to serve as an example for how the two disciplines of academia can be beneficial for one another.

CHAPTER II

THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTIONS OF WEALTH AND SUCCESS

The themes of the prosperity gospel[1] have become central to American megachurch culture. The foremost proposition of this line of theology is that God rewards those who do good deeds in God's name.[2] God desires to give good gifts to God's followers and therefore, when one lives a "good life" as a believer, they will be rewarded in kind. Along with this central proposition comes the converse line of thinking: if one is disobedient, in discord, or not living a life that honors God, earthly blessings will be withheld from them. While its exact origins are uncertain, scholars agree that it has been the American culture[3] that has led to the increased prevalence of prosperity gospel ethic.[4] In this chapter, I will explore this claim, discussing the definition and founding principles of the prosperity gospel. I will dig into common themes, rhetorical devices, and theological groundings used to buttress this ideology. Finally, through content analysis

1. For more extended learning on the nuances of the prosperity gospel see Bowler 2013, Lin 2020, Mundey 2017, Schieman and Jung 2012.

2. Kate Bowler *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel,* New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. Peter Mundey, "The Prosperity Gospel and the Spirit of Consumerism according to Joel Osteen," *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society of Pentecostal Studies* 39.3 (2014): 318-41.Scott Schieman, "The Education-Contingent Association between Religiosity and Health: The Differential Effects of Self-Esteem and the Sense of Mastery," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47.4 (2008): 710-24. Scott Schieman and John Hyun Jung, "Practical Divine Influence: Socioeconomic Status and Belief in the Prosperity Gospel" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 51.4 (2012): 738-56.

3. The main characteristics of American culture which have led to the increased prevalence in prosperity gospel ethic include social inequality and stratification, the meritocracy, and the American Dream. Each of these characteristics will be discussed at length in chapter 2.

4. Bowler, *Blessed*, 5-8. Mundey, "Spirit of Consumerism," 322-23.

methods, I will illustrate and draw attention to several key examples of prosperity gospel ethic in action in American megachurches today.

Theological Bases for Prosperity Gospel

Conceptions of God

"How we see God is a direct reflection of how we see ourselves."[5] This statement from writer Elif Safak proves relevant to the starting point of our discussion of prosperity gospel theology. For prosperity gospel-adhering Christians, the overwhelming view of God is that of abundance.[6] God is a God of abundance; therefore, the conception of self as a believer finds its roots in being a benefactor of an abundant God's munificence. A metric of a Christian life well lived, from this perspective, is earthly blessings: tangible goods, high-paying job, great benefits, good health conditions, and more.[7] The image of God is one of a loving father who desires to lavishly pour out gifts to his children who "behave well." Matthew 7:11 (NIV) is used to illustrate this point scripturally; it reads, "If then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him." God, as the almighty, *El Shaddai*, has all resources and all the earth in God's hands; therefore, out of love, God gives preferential treatment to those who follow God. After all, Jesus himself said that he came to earth so that believers would have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10 NIV), so the justification of a prosperity gospel believer goes.

---

5. Elif Safak, *Forty Rules of Love: A Novel of Rumi* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 30.

6. Mundey, "Spirit of Consumerism", 319.

7. Bowler, *Blessed,* 94.

Additionally, prosperity gospel rhetoric employs the name of God, *Jehovah Jireh,* to a great extent. *Jehovah Jireh,* God the Provider, plays into the overarching narrative of prosperity gospel theology. Derived from Genesis 22:14, *Jehovah Jireh* emphasizes God meeting humanity in all situations to provide generously, as God met Abraham with a sacrificial substitute for Isaac.[8] Prosperity gospel rhetoric often sets itself apart from other lines of Christianity by claiming to be the *true* believers. Believing so fully in God as the provider manifests in a deeper and more carefree life of abundance, as compared to the traditional counter part of Christians who are often depicted as living a tough life or trying to just "get by."[9] This deliberate contrast made with lukewarm Christians is seen across most examples of prosperity gospel theologians.

In Contrast to Poverty

Prosperity gospel theology also finds its identity in another very common comparison—that of prosperity compared with poverty. This contrasting element is seen most prevalently with the use of the terms "poverty," "poor," or even a "poverty mindset" in prosperity gospel-centered messages and publications. The argument for a prosperity mindset is, in actuality, one built against poverty mindset. From the prosperity gospel mindset, poverty is not defined in sociopolitical or contextual terms; rather, if one is in a place of poverty, the responsibility and explanation for such a lot is defined in spiritual terms.[10] The poverty mindset is often defined as pessimistic thinking, thinking clouded by

8. Bowler, *Blessed*, 94-95.

9. Bowler, *Blessed*, 96-97.

10. David T. Williams, "The Heresy of Prosperity Teaching: A Message for the Church in Its Approach to Need," *Journal for Theology of Southern Africa* 61.1 (1987): 41: Doug Bandow, "Capitalism and Christianity: The Uneasy Partnership?" *International Journal on World Peace* 19.3 (2002): 41-45.

one's own physical and material limitations, and doubt in God's ability to give good gifts and provide for those who believe in God. If one does not have a prosperous situation in life, then prosperity gospel Christians believe that one's own mindset of poverty is to blame; the believer does not function with a prosperity mindset, believing that God is the ultimate abundant provider who promises good things to God's followers.

While the concept of prosperity mindset is fundamentally defined by its contrast to a poverty mindset, there is one central characteristic found commonly across most megachurch pastors: a positive confession or positive self- talk. It can be summed up using a quote from Bowler's work: "change your words, change your life."[11] Speaking positively into your life, believing in your identity, and declaring the things you want in your life is a pillar of believing and living fully in the prosperity mindset.[12]

The Individual Believer

A theme that continues to strengthen the theological basis of the prosperity gospel builds off the concept of God as the abundant provider, that of "divine right." "Divine right" originates from the concept of the special authority placed on those with religious power, namely, the pope, high clergy, and heads of state.[13] With the Reformation and writings of Martin Luther, this historically specialized and reserved term was first opened and applied to all Christians through the phrase Luther popularized, "the priesthood of all believers."[14] With this redefinition of privilege within Christianity came the foundations

11. Bowler, *Blessed,* 125.

12. Bowler, *Blessed,* 125.

13. Roland Ziegler, "Priesthood and Office," *Logica* 28.1 (2019): 33-44.

14. Ziegler, "Priesthood and Office," 33-34.For the scope of this thesis, the "priesthood of all believers" will be discussed in theological terms, regarding its redefinition during and after the Protestant Reformation to include all believers, instead of only those who have done through the ordination process.

for a new understanding of resource distribution. No longer was direct access to God, and by consequence the anointing and blessings from God, only available to those in religious and worldly power positions. Divine blessing became directly accessible to all those who were *true* believers. At present, we see this manifested not simply as a privilege but also as a right of all believers; when one believes and obeys God, reward is preordained. Because divine right is defined as a privilege and right, it is accessible only to those to who live their lives in faithful accordance with God's will. As Dr. Lin writes, prosperity gospel believers see themselves as "*entitled* to those palpable signs of God's love."[15] Schieman and Jung describe it this way: "Divine rewards are perceived to be linked to individual efforts; God sanctions hard work and the pursuit of riches --- and prosperity are the believer's *due*" (emphasis added).[16]

The individual effort, as the variable that impacts access to the divine right, is purported by prosperity gospel theology through an overt emphasis on the concept of reaping and sowing. Prosperity gospel believers recognize this as a foundational principle in both the physical and the spiritual world. The outcomes one sees in their life can be directly tied back to the inputs of their individual efforts. This theme draws a direct causal relationship between the believer's actions and the end results. If the end results are not what one might hope, then the actions were incorrect or not sincere enough to yield the proper harvest. The end result of blessing is promised, because of who God is, but in order to gain access to that promise, the believer must ensure they get each piece of

---

This is a small view of the phrase and its historical implications. The full depth of this phrase doctrinally, historically, and socio-politically will not be explored here.

15. Lin, *Prosperity Gospel Latinos*, 10.

16. Schieman and Jung, "Practical Divine Influence," 740.

the equation just right: Did they pray enough? Did they believe enough? Did they rely on the right scripture? Was there a miniscule level of doubt in their mind that God wouldn't come through?

As a result, there are implicit expectations of where one ought to be as a believer, how one ought to live, and the criteria that distinguish those that get the equation right from those that do not. When the desired result is not yielded, there is an embedded process of analyzing and assessing one's own behavior against the normative criteria that has been established. Lin uses the language of "formula" to describe this phenomenon.[17] In his ethnographic work, he found that prosperity gospel believers were motivated to engage in this transactional practice out of "lack of peace, an abundance of fear, and an irrepressible sense of hopelessness."[18] The criteria, therefore, come in the form of one's own belief—belief in the formula means there is *no* place for fear or uncertainly.[19] Social factors, identity markers, and access to opportunity are not accounted for in the equation; one's plight has only one's own action or inaction, poverty or prosperity mindset, full belief or lack of belief in God to blame.

Individual culpability is incubated by the understanding of God; God is omnipotent, omniscient, and bigger than any life-limiting conditions one may be experiencing as roadblocks to prosperity. As believers, one must say "big prayers" and believe for the "impossible" because what one believes of God is that God is the almighty benevolent provider who will give you all the desires of your heart. If your faith matches

17. Lin, *Prosperity Gospel Latinos,* 85.

18. Lin, *Prosperity Gospel Latinos*, 85.

19. Lin, *Prosperity Gospel Latinos*, 85.

your image of God, the "impossible" will come true in your life. The ideal of impossibility is concentrated on that which is in human reason, that which is in some way attainable, and that which is focused on wealth and health. If the impossible does not come true, your faith is less strong than it ought to be. The culpability rests on the individual and their ability to believe in God for all of their desires. As Bowler and Reagan put it, "faith was faith because it achieved measurable results: heath and wealth."[20] Believers looked to their own bodies and wallets for evidence of the power of God at work in their lives. An individual's measure of faith is the variable in the equation of prosperity Gospel; who God is and what God desires to do in the life of true believers is the perpetual constant.

Rituals of Prosperity Gospel Theology

Consequently, prayer and petition are frequent actions of the prosperity gospel faith. If God is a God of abundance, if we are privileged to God's power as children, then we must believe and ask God for the desires of our hearts. Dr. Lin describes the practices he witnessed during his study of prosperity gospel Pentecostals. He writes, "claims are asserted through positive confessions: verbalizing something that one desires (whether physical healing, a good marriage, or a new car, for example) and steadfastly believing that God will deliver."[21] Lin goes on to describe the process as a guaranteed transaction so long as believers of the prosperity gospel "hold up their end of the bargain."[22] Of the may spiritual disciplines and practices believers can partake in, prayer and petition prove

20. Kate Bowler and Wen Reagan, "Bigger, Better, Louder: The Prosperity Gospel's Impact on Contemporary Christian Worship," *Religion and American Culture* 24.2 (2015): 190.

21. Lin, *Prosperity Gospel Latinos*, 10.

22. Lin, *Prosperity Gospel Latinos*, 10-11.

the highest priority for prosperity gospel Christians as it is this gateway where one proves their understanding of God and their own identity as a child of God, to seek and ask for the promises of God to show up in their lives.

The Role of Grace

As we discuss the tenets of prosperity gospel theology, it is important to detail the role of grace.[23] Many of those who are included in the population of megachurch Christianity in America are considered evangelical[24] in nature, and as a result believe in the doctrine of being born again with salvation through grace. Therefore, we must examine how grace fits into this theology of wealth and blessings, which as we outlined thus far, does not hold much room for a grace as a concept.

To one extreme, Lin notes in his work that the role of grace in Latino prosperity gospel Pentecostals is nonexistent. The belief, he writes, is that "people get what they deserve, and God's favor is bestowed based on merit, not grace."[25] Lin's work focuses on one contextual understanding of the role of grace in prosperity gospel theology. In the

---

23. The factor of grace in the paradox of prosperity gospel theology is complex and has not been fully explored here in this thesis, nor in the field of the sociology of religion to the extent I found in reviewing the literature. As I will discuss in the concluding chapter, more work needs to be done in the field regarding the conception and manifestation of the grace both in Christianity has a whole as in covert prosperity gospel

24. Evangelical churches, as defined by the Pew Research Center, are churches found in Protestantism either as rooted in the Southern Baptist Convention and Independent Baptist denominations, or church which find core to their theology, the idea of being born again. The vast majority of megachurches are defined as evangelical due to their denominal affiliation or theological tenets; therefore, due to this paper's focus on megachurch culture, we must also recognize and acknowledge its association with evangelicalism as both defined in research and characterized in mainstream media.

Pew Research Center, "How Does Pew Research Center Measure the Religious Composition of the U.S.?," Pew Research Center, 2019, https://www.pewforum.org/2018/07/05/how-does-pew-research-center-measure-the-religious-composition-of-the-u-s-answers-to-frequently-asked-questions/

25. Lin, *Prosperity Gospel Latinos*, 80.

context of this thesis, with its focus on American megachurches, the role of grace is a bit more nuanced. When acknowledged in megachurch theology, grace is centered primarily on salvation, not favor. One is saved by grace, so their eternity and the promise that they are entitled to blessing is secured, yet the actual blessings one receives while on earth is based on the individual's ability to successfully execute the prosperity gospel formula. The benefits of belief in God, health and wealth, are already granted, but is up to the believer to figure out and apply the principles of a prosperity mindset to gain access to this blessing.[26]

Therefore, while there is an acknowledgement of grace in many of these circles of faith, it does not function as grace is set up to function, as a gift freely given. Instead, the language used to describe grace in American megachurches related to prosperity gospel rhetoric illustrates something more akin to an analogy of a game of mouse trap: there is cheese (blessings of health and wealth) at the end, so it is a guaranteed result, technically. However, to get to it, one must take all the right steps while also avoiding all the missteps. If one does not get the cheese, it was not because the cheese did not exist or was not at the end of the game; rather, it is because the person navigating the game was not effective in taking the right steps. Despite believing that one's eternity and the resulting blessing is freely given when entering into relationship with Jesus, one's actual attainment of that blessing on this side of heaven is gained through thoughtful execution of the prosperity gospel formula: a prosperity mindset, faithfulness to God, belief in God as the abundant and benevolent provider, and individual faith acts of prayer and petition.

26. Bowler, *Blessed*, 17.

Throughout this section, we have seen an overview of the linguistic and scriptural factors at play that undergird the narrative of prosperity gospel theology in American megachurch culture. God is the abundant provider. God desires to give good gifts to God's children. Being a faithful believer means one has the privileges of divine right accessible to them, given their ability to faithfully follow God. The concepts, and their consequential foundation for belief, perpetuate the line of argument for prosperity gospel Christianity: that God is one who blesses those who are faithful and obedient above all else.

Prosperity Gospel Theology in Action

In order to fully explicate the principles outlined above as pillar to prosperity gospel theology—namely the image of God as generous provider, divine right of believers, and individual culpability—this next section will detail specific examples of prosperity gospel in action found in many megachurches. Megachurches are defined by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research as protestant church bodies that have a consistent average weekly attendance of 2,000 or more adults.[27] I will examine two prosperity gospel theologians in this section, Joel Osteen and Kris Vallotton. Both are megachurch pastors with large groups of followers both in and outside of their church walls. Joel Osteen is a common, even archetypal, example of an overt or hardline[28] contemporary prosperity gospel theologian. As I have come to define it, overt prosperity

27. Hartford Institute for Religion Research, *Megachurch Definition*, 2020.

28. Bowler, B*lessed*, 97-98.

In her book, Kate Bowler makes the distinction between "hardline" and "soft" prosperity gospel theologians. This distinction is similar to the distinction made in this thesis between overt and covert prosperity gospel in action.

gospel is defined by religious institutions and individuals who preach with the outlined prosperity gospel rhetoric, while simultaneously not rejecting the prosperity gospel label as heretical. They are, in general, okay being named as such, and some even celebrate or cherish such a label, believing that this confirms their evangelism to the world. However, due to this vein of theology being seen and named as heretical by much of Christianity, many modern-day prosperity gospel theologians have become more covert in nature. Covert prosperity gospel theologians are defined as pastors who utilize some or many of the claims of prosperity gospel theology, while taking intentional steps to distance themselves from overt prosperity gospel theologians and the label of "prosperity gospel." They often outright reject the prosperity gospel as heresy, and while they do employ many of the prosperity gospel tenets, their theology of being blessed also includes interpretations that are not necessarily defined as prosperity gospel. Kris Vallotton, of the Bethel Church community, serves as an example of covert prosperity gospel in action.

Overt Prosperity Gospel

First, we shall discuss Joel Osteen as an example of overt contemporary prosperity gospel theology. Osteen pastors the largest congregation in the United States, Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, with an average weekly attendance of 43,000.[29] Osteen has risen to fame in Christian circles not only due to pastoring the largest church in America, but also due to a written corpus of fourteen books, seven of which have been on the New York Times Bestseller list. Scholar Peter Mundey argues that Osteen's form

29. Associated Press News, "Osteen Welcomes Congregation Back to Houston Megachurch," Associated Press 2020, https://apnews.com/article/virusoutbreaknbajoelosteenhoustonhoustonrockets06e01eed8507a93e4624f67893fdcf83#:~:text=Lakewood%20Church%2C%20where%20more%20than,1000nations%20around%20the%20world.

of theology is not only overt prosperity gospel, it is actually downright consumerism in theology form.[30] Mundey writes, "In addition to God providing faithful Christians what they *need*—which is not consumerism—Osteen argues that God will give them the desire of their heart, which *is* consumerism."[31]

Osteen's vein of theology not only emphasizes consumerism, it does so through explicit language of the prosperity gospel rhetorical devices and practices, which lend followers to see their efforts for consumerism as simply fulfilling their God-given call. Living a blessed life, according to Osteen, is not for the believer themselves but is truly an effort towards evangelism; non-believers will see their physical blessing and desire that, consequently desiring relationship with God.[32]

Through his content analysis of Osteen's work, Mundey pointed to examples of every prosperity gospel tenet outlined in the first section of this chapter.[33] Osteen continually names God as a God of Abundance, even going so far as to interpret the name of God, *El Shaddai,* as the "God of more than enough,"[34] rather than its generally accepted translation as "God Almighty" or "God of Heaven." This differing translation of a common name of God emphasizes the transactional nature of the relationship between God and believers. God is not just God Almighty or God of Heaven, as *El Shaddai* usually indicates, but the "God of more than enough." God is keenly aware of what you

30. Mundey, "Spirit of Consumerism," 325.

31. Mundey, "Spirit of Consumerism," 325.

32. Mundey, "Spirit of Consumerism," 326.

33. Mundey, "Spirit of Consumerism," 318-41.

34. Mundey, "Spirit of Consumerism," 325.

have and desires to give you more than that, or so Osteen's translation aims to communicate to believers.

In addition to a conception of God as the provider and giver of all good things, Osteen consistently teaches his congregants to "supersize" their prayers, praying and believing not just for their basic needs, but for the deepest desires of their hearts, that might seem impossible in reality. Osteen equates this to his wife's supersized prayers for a large house and property with a pool in the backyard, which were not feasible given their small pastor's income. Praying and believing for the "impossible" centers on that which technically is possible on earth but seems beyond the realm of possibility, given human, financial, and technological limitations. With enough prayer and faith in God, Osteen preached, believing for the desires of her heart, his wife's prayers were answered by a benevolent God, and she now gets to live in a large home with a pool.[35]

Finally, Osteen positions himself and his theology in stark distinction to living in poverty, settling further in line with the rhetorical patterns in prosperity gospel theology. Osteen does not fully embrace the idea of being a prosperity gospel theologian as some overt prosperity gospel theologians do, but he also chooses to favor this label over the contrasting idea of being a "poverty minister." Mundey shows that from Osteen's perspective, disallowing physical wealth or prosperity equates to denying God.[36] In his book *The Power of I Am,* Osteen writes,

> While I don't like the term *prosperity minister*, I must say I am not a poverty minister. I can't find a single verse in the Scripture that suggests we are supposed to drag around not having enough, not able to afford what we want, living off the leftovers, in the land of Not Enough. We were

35. Mundey, "Spirit of Consumerism," 327.

36. Mundey, "Spirit of Consumerism," 326.

> created to be the head and not the tail. Jesus came that we might live an abundant life. We represent Almighty God here on this earth. We should be examples of His goodness—so blessed, so prosperous, so generous, so full of joy—that other people want what we have.[37]

Osteen's theology serves as an archetypal example of blatant prosperity gospel theology. His work highlights the importance of believing God for what is not likely to occur given one's present circumstances, knowing that if one does not see the results, it is due to some individual action or inaction. Osteen is forthright in his contrast to poverty, proclaiming God as a God of abundance who desires to give good gifts to those who are faithful.

Covert Prosperity Gospel

Secondly, we will examine Kris Vallotton of the Bethel Church community. Vallotton serves as an example of covert prosperity gospel in action. His form of prosperity gospel goes under the radar, avoiding the direct "give and get" rhetoric so present in Osteen and other overt or hardline prosperity gospel preachers. Scholar Kate Bowler calls much of the modern evangelical church "soft prosperity gospel" theologians,[38] with leaders being less explicit, preferring a "more roundabout way that faith returned blessings."[39] Many of the same hallmark prosperity gospel themes emerge despite this roundabout theology: God as almighty provider, Christians as benefactors, and individual culpability if end results are less than desirable.

37. Osteen, *The Power of I Am,* 155, as quoted in Mundey, "Spirit of Consumerism," 326.

38. Bowler, *Blessed*, 125.

39. Bowler and Reagan, "Bigger, Better, Louder," 190.

Vallotton, as a covert prosperity gospel theologian, takes intentional steps to distance himself from the aberrant theology of the prosperity gospel. He does so explicitly in his 2018 book *Poverty, Riches, and Wealth,* by calling the prosperity gospel "one of the most destructive heresies of the twentieth century."[40] Vallotton further criticizes prosperity gospel theology, claiming it is nothing but "smoke and mirrors" supported by "pride, vanity, arrogance, and egotism."[41] This direct denunciation of the prosperity gospel is a hallmark theme of the covert prosperity gospel theologians. Through this section of his book, Vallotton aims to set the stage for what he claims is a true understanding of wealth and prosperity according to God, since he rejects the concept of the prosperity gospel entirely.

Despite this contrast and rejection of the prosperity gospel, Vallotton blatantly employs each aspect of the prosperity gospel outlined in the first section of this chapter. The employment of these themes begins before one even opens a page to read the book; the subtitle of the work reads, "moving from a life of lack into true kingdom abundance."[42] This subtitle language utilizes several cornerstone elements of prosperity gospel theology: the concept of abundance and God as the abundant provider, along with a deliberate contrast to poverty. The subtitle compels readers to see that which they lack in life in order so that they might call on the God of abundance to meet their every need. The concept of "kingdom abundance" is one Vallotton defines throughout the book, with

40. Vallotton, *Poverty, Riches, and Wealth*, 97.

41. Vallotton, *Poverty, Riches, and Wealth*, 97.

42. Vallotton, *Poverty, Riches, and Wealth*, 0.

an effort to create a distinction between abundance as the world defines it, a life lived in poverty, and abundance that only a relationship with God can provide a person.

The efforts continue, even before Vallotton's argument commences, through the foreword by Jentezen Franklin, senior pastor of Free Chapel Church in Georgia, an evangelical megachurch with an average weekly attendance of 11,500.[43] Through the foreword, Franklin claims that God *promises* prosperity and success to God's people.[44] His foreword emphases several defining concepts of prosperity gospel theology: individual culpability and divine right. Franklin argues that human beings are limited solely by themselves and that the only factor that defines those in prosperity versus those in poverty is that specific individual's choice to be so.[45] A person in poverty, so Franklin claims, is in such poverty because they chose not to accept the blessings that God desires to give to them.[46] Like much of prosperity gospel, this is a reductionist view of poverty in society, which does not take into account the multitude of other factors that impact one's ability to successfully move out of poverty. Furthermore, prosperity is a promise, Franklin writes, a divine right given to believers who are obedient and faithful to God. Franklin's foreword sets up the tone for Vallotton's book, one riddled with prosperity gospel concepts, yet "safe" under the guise of outright rejecting the prosperity gospel as aberrant theology.

---

43. Vallotton, *Poverty, Riches, and Wealth*, 14. Outreach Magazine, "Top 100 Largest Churches in America," *Outreach Magazine*, 2018, https://outreach100.com/largest-churches-in-america/2018

44.Vallotton, *Poverty, Riches, and Wealth*, 13.

45.Vallotton, *Poverty, Riches, and Wealth*, 14.

46.Vallotton, *Poverty, Riches, and Wealth*, 14

Vallotton explicitly defines kingdom wealth to set up the rest of the book. He defines this wealth in fine parts: (1) wealth creates positive outcomes in the midst of difficult circumstances, (2) wealth is hope in darkness, defined in many different ways according to Vallotton, (3) wealth is a mindset and a belief system that propagates the idea that nothing is impossible, (4) wealth is "radical generosity, extraordinary compassion, sacrificial giving, and profound humility," and finally, (5) wealth is gratitude, celebration, and forward-focused.[47] True to the defined covert prosperity gospel, Vallotton emphasizes explicit prosperity gospel themes through this five-part definition, such as wealth being a "mindset" and an individual's choice, while simultaneously taking divergent steps from overt prosperity gospel themes through ideas such the idea that even in abject poverty physically, one can find hope and richness in God alone.[48]

Vallotton builds his case for a concept of kingdom wealth by examining the life of Jesus and discussing the ways in which Jesus acquired, benefitted from, and displayed fiscal wealth for others to see.[49] Vallotton parses out key points of scripture, including the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11), his alliance with tax collectors and his emphasis on the economic structures of the day (Matthew 17:24-27), and his work in "impacting the fishing industry" (Luke 5:4-7). His usage of scripture buttresses his arguments for understanding a believer's right to wealth and prosperity. After all, Vallotton claims, Jesus did not shy away from accepting gifts, blessings, and funding from the wealthy, so

47.Vallotton, *Poverty, Riches, and Wealth*, 20-22.

48. Vallotton, *Poverty, Riches, and Wealth*, 20-22.

49. Vallotton, *Poverty, Riches, and Wealth*, 28-37.

why would believers today function under the idea that Jesus lived a meagered and impoverished life?[50] In actuality, Vallotton so claims, Jesus came from heaven (a place of richness), willingly entered into poverty, to then work his way back to richness in order to serve as an examples to his followers.[51] Jesus desires one to live abundantly, including not worrying about physical needs, money, food, or shelter. His followers are meant to do the same work.

Vallotton's argument continues through explicit contrast of poverty and wealth, echoing the foremost tone of poverty being a choice and its status being dependent on the individual. This explicit contrast pervades the entire book. Of its 194 pages, the words "prosperity," "wealth," "rich(es)," and "money" are mentioned a total of 508 times, averaging out to 2.62 times per page. Alongside this, one finds 126 mentions of the words "poverty" and "poor." This contrast, consistent with most prosperity gospel theologians, sets the believer up to see two options in life: poverty or prosperity. If one does not witness complete satisfaction and prosperity at present in their life, as few, if any, do, then the conclusion is that one finds themselves in a place of poverty.

Vallotton positions himself as a witness for a life lived in kingdom abundance. He references specific monetary amounts that have been gained or lost in his own life 66 times over the course of the book. These examples range from how much he spent on a watch ($110) and gained from the exchange of another ($1,500), [52] to how much he was

50. Vallotton, *Poverty, Riches, and Wealth*, 28-29.

51. Vallotton, *Poverty, Riches, and Wealth*, 28-29.

52. Vallotton, *Poverty, Riches, and Wealth*, 67-69.

able to sell one of his nine businesses for (a quarter of a million dollars), [53] to how much a stranger generously gave to pay off his mortgage ($487,000).[54] These examples provide guide posts for readers and his congregants to follow as they endeavor to dream big and ask God for the things that are placed deep in their hearts. God gives good gifts to God's children; one's job then is to be faithful to God and believe that God will meet and exceed all of their desires.

Furthermore, through the course of his book, Vallotton discusses the rule of reaping and sowing,[55] divine right,[56] individual culpability,[57] and the importance of prayer as a cornerstone of kingdom abundance.[58] Vallotton serves as one clear example of covert prosperity gospel theology in action. He outright rejects prosperity gospel theology, yet over the course of his book on wealth and abundance, he manages to use each and every tenet of prosperity gospel theological argumentation outlined in the first half of this chapter. Vallotton does not write to be a covert prosperity gospel preacher; he does compel readers to think of wealth and abundance in a broader term than simply money and health, which is the focused aim of overt prosperity gospel theologians. Yet, despite these contrasts, there remains too much in common with the tradition line of the prosperity gospel to ignore it.

---

53. Vallotton, *Poverty, Riches, and Wealth*, 39.

54. Vallotton, *Poverty, Riches, and Wealth*, 20.

55. Vallotton, *Poverty, Riches, and Wealth*, 65-66.

56. Vallotton, *Poverty, Riches, and Wealth*, 13-14, 20, 152-53.

57. Vallotton, *Poverty, Riches, and Wealth*, 20-21, 42.

58. Vallotton, *Poverty, Riches, and Wealth*, 50-53.

Moreover, Vallotton only serves as one example of covert prosperity gospel in action. Within the American megachurch culture, we see other stark uses of prosperity gospel theology and rhetoric from pastors and churches that name it as heretical.

Bill Johnson, also of Bethel Church, wrote in his book *When Heaven Invades Earth,* "The abuses of a few in the area of prosperity does not excuse the abandonment of the promises of God to provide abundantly for His children. It is His good pleasure to do so."[59] Here, too, we see an attempt by Johnson to distinguish his theology from prosperity gospel preachers, yet he claims that all the blessings and wealth in heaven is the standard for what a believer ought to expect here on earth because of their faithfulness to God.[60]

In a 2017 sermon entitled "Never Not Enough," megachurch pastor Steven Furtick of Elevation Church[61] discussed the promise of more than enough that is entitled from God if, as a believer, you choose to (a) "lean in" by praying, (b) "look down" to ensure you see your life from an abundant heavenly perspective, and (c) "listen up" to what God promises and trust in that.[62] The principles outlined in this sermon reiterate several key components of prosperity gospel rhetoric: blessings are promised to you by God but require individual responsibility of praying, remembering that God is a God of abundance, and knowing that blessings are a divine right if you are in relationship with God.

---

59. Bill Johnson, *When Heaven Invades Earth: A Practical Guide to a Life of Miracles* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 2009), 4.

60. Johnson, *When Heaven Invades*, 4.

61. "Top 100 Largest Churches in America," *Outreach Magazine,* 2019, https://outreach100.com/largest-churches-in-america/2019

62. Steven Furtick, "Never Not Enough," Elevation Church, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6SMCffmiQQs

In a 2019 sermon, Robert Morris, pastor of Gateway Church, the second largest megachurch in America,[63] preached a sermon entitled "The Ten Financial Commandments" during a series called *Beyond Blessed.*[64] Through it, Morris emphasized the need to trust God and remember that God is in control of everything in our lives, including our finances. Morris declared, "God provides supernaturally when we decide to do it His way."[65] While Morris primarily outlined pragmatic practices of stewardship, financial wisdom, and good sense money management, his overall argument was that God will provide richly for you, but to do so, you must trust God and be wise with the provision God has given you now.[66]

Johnson, Furtick, and Morris simply provide us with further examples of the argument set forth: many modern megachurch pastors outright reject the notion of the prosperity gospel because of its negative image in society today, both in the church and in culture more broadly, yet despite this rejection, their own public theology of money echoes many of the major tenets of prosperity gospel theology. Some, such as Vallotton, could be considered covert prosperity gospel preachers, while others simply take small pieces of prosperity gospel rhetoric and infuse them into their theology of money and wealth. Regardless of where one finds themselves on the spectrum of prosperity gospel

63. Top 100 Largest Churches in America," *Outreach Magazine,* 2020, https://outreach100.com/largest-churches-in-america/2020

64. Robert Morris, "Beyond Blessed: Ten Financial Commandments," *Gateway Church*, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=chowZo8tgMo

65. Morris, Beyond Blessed."

66. Morris, "Beyond Blessed."

theology, one thing is certain: in the contemporary American megachurch culture space, no one is immune to the theology of prosperity.

CHAPTER III

SOCIOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR PROSPERITY GOSPEL THEOLOGY

American society is significantly stratified into levels of success. People are sorted into the embedded system of inequality depending on a number of individual factors, primarily defined[1] economically, through one's income level and wealth.[2] The social ideologies of a free market, capitalism, and open mobility for all position economic success as the cornerstone for status within the stratified system.

Through this section, I will aim to construct a view of society that shows that the theology of prosperity, both overt and covert, is a theology that is built on the social stratification system of the meritocracy in American society. To support this argument, I will first outline the basic elements of social stratification in American society by discussing key sociological theoretical frameworks which give justification and sociological weight to the claim. Then, I will discuss the specific concept of the American system of meritocracy with the goal of paralleling its principles to the tenets of prosperity gospel theology considered in Chapter II. Finally, I will show the ways in which the theology of the prosperity gospel is a theology built on meritocracy, while

1. Though it is of note that other identity factors, such as race, ethnicity, education attainment, gender, and more also have an influence on where one finds themselves on the social ladder.

2. Steven M. Caliendo, *Inequality in America: Race, Poverty,* (New York: Routledge), 41. Income and wealth are distinct concepts. Dr. Caliendo defines them simply, in his book, *Inequality in America: Race, Poverty, and Fulfilling Democracy's Promise.* "Wealth is a person's (or household's) total worth (assets minus debt), while income is simply the amount of money a household (or person) earns in a year." For more information on inequality and stratification on income and wealth, see chapter 2 of Caliendo's work.

simultaneously showing how the meritocracy is both enhanced and maintained through American megachurch religious systems.

Stratification and Religion

Stratification and inequality are two of the longest-standing and most regularly debated concepts in sociology, so in order to discuss these concepts, we must first have common understanding of them.[3] For the purposes of the work at hand, I will define "stratification" as the normative way in which society categorizes and sorts people into subgroups based on a number of factors, though primarily based on economics, demographics, and status-driven identify markers. These subgroups are ranked in a hierarchical manner to determine those that society defines as successful and those that are not. For the purposes of our discussion, we will largely focus on the concept of stratification, though it must be noted that the sociological concept of inequality is often largely tied to stratification; where people find themselves in subgroups on the hierarchical ladder of societal stratification is the main driver of whether one finds themselves in a privileged place with access to opportunity and advantage, or in a place of disadvantage.

In order to provide further evidence of the role and function of societal stratification, and in turn, in prosperity gospel rhetoric, we must have an understanding of the conflict theoretical framework. A foundational area of sociological theory, conflict

3. Dr. Xiang Zhou synthesizes much of the social science literature to come up with a working definition for both of these concepts. "Inequality refers to the extent to which a valued resource is distributed unevenly across individuals or between population subgroups."3. A distinct concept from inequality, "stratification, by contrast, refers to the extent to which the overall population subgroups occupy separate hierarchical layers within an overall distribution of resources."

Xiang Zhou and Geoffrey T Wodtke, "Income Stratification among Occupational Classes in the United States," *Social Forces* 97.3 (2019): 946.

theory framework examines the stratification of society and the inequalities between groups as a function of power. Conflict theories operate mainly at a structural level, focusing on institutions and structures in society in order to understand how stratification and inequality are created and maintained through them. This theoretical framework posits that stratification and inequality are drivers of power differences and that the system itself is set up to be maintained so that those who are in power will remain in power. Conflict theory is essential to understanding the impact of American social structure on American megachurch Christianity due to the establishment nature of religion as a social institution in society, as well as the social construction of stratification and its maintenance through societal institutions.

According to conflict theorists, religion is a way in which people on all levels of the stratification ladder make sense of their lot in life. Karl Marx argues that the proletariat (the working class that is lower on the ladder of stratification) are inoculated into a false sense of hope through religion and that this reality further alienates them from their disadvantaged place in society.[4] Through this theoretical supposition of Marx, we are gifted the infamous phrase of religion being an "opiate for the masses." The bourgeoise (those in power) justify their place as leaders in society based on the belief that their success is a blessing from God, according to Max Weber.[5] Furthermore, Weber elucidates the reality that religion impacts inequalities through the internalized and

4. Karl Marx, *Marx, A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* 1844*,* ed. Joseph O'Malley, trans. Joseph O'Malley and Annette Jolin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

5. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of* Capitalism, (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1946).

socially reproduced doctrines that come in the form of different interpretations of economic prosperity.[6]

Through a conflict lens perspective, religion serves a conduit for perpetuating the already prevalent stratification in society based primarily on economic factors. Understanding the conflict theoretical framework and supported by these foundational sociologists, I will show that American megachurch prosperity gospel rhetoric is a way society perpetuates power and highlights, or even legitimizes, inequality.

While conflict theory applies a macro-level sociological perspective on religious systems' interaction with social stratification, it is equally important to understand the ways in which this relationship functions on a microlevel. The theoretical lens of symbolic interactionism takes a micro level approach to society, focusing on the interactions between individuals. As individuals, we give meanings to things, people, and actions, often by way of a system of meaning making, such as a religion.[7] Symbolic interactionism theorists, like Clifford Geertz and Peter Berger, observe these meanings and see how society molds meaning collectively, how meanings can change and, as a result, how these meanings can change society.[8]

---

6. Weber, *Protestant Ethic.*

7. Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays,* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) 87-125.

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

Lin describes Berger's work like this: "a dialectic between the ordering of the world the religion creates and the everyday social interaction of the people who inhabit that world."

Lin, *Prosperity Gospel Latinos*, 21.

The application of symbolic interactionism in the case of our present argument works in tandem with conflict theoretical framework. When applied to religious and social stratification, this theoretical framework shows on a microlevel how meaning about life and the world is constructed individually and as a collective, communal ethos. It is vital to understand this framework to show the nature religion has to the individual; through religion and a religious system, an individual creates meaning from the aspects of everyday life. Symbolic interaction is an important framing for this argument because the continuation of inequality and stratification conceptually challenge the Christian dogma yet reinforce much of the theology of wealth and finances we have seen outlined thus far. These coexisting social realities lead to an undeniable tension resulting in a diluted and contaminated religious meaning-making system that has conformed to the society at large.[9] This is the argument I set forth in this thesis: supported by the weight of symbolic interactionism theory, we can understand the paradox of the prosperity gospel as a robust meaning-making system in megachurch Christianity that has tears in its fabric due to the influence of society.

In this section, we have come to an understanding of the stratification in American society based on the major sociological theories that provide explanations and depth to our understanding of the stratification. Through a conflict theory lens, we acknowledge the reality that social stratification is created and enhanced in an effort to maintain power. Social structures, like religious systems, are used as a means for the continued stratification of society into hierarchical groups. Through a symbolic

9. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, "Why Mainline Denominations Decline," in *The Churching of America: 1776-1990; Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press), 237-96.

interactionism approach, we see on a microlevel the ways in which a religious system reinforces stratification through its own symbols, language, and way of interpreting the world around it. All of these theoretical arguments set a foundation for understanding the way in which the social system of stratification and inequality, then embedded into society through structures, to finally be reinforced by our language, customs, and rituals.

The Meritocracy

The structure of inequality and stratification would not exist without a method of justification, whereby providing rationalization for where specific individuals and groups find themselves on the social hierarchy ladder. In American culture, this belief system that creates narratives about those at every level of society is the ideological framework of meritocracy. Through this section, I will describe the basic principles of the meritocratic structure that rules our society to continue the line of argumentation that the prosperity gospel rhetoric is a theology built on meritocracy. By outlining the basic elements of a meritocratic structure, we will be able to draw direct parallels to the rhetoric and tenets of prosperity gospel theology, as outlined in Chapter II.

Dr. Michael Sandel, a political philosopher at Harvard University, has become a leading figure in our understanding of meritocracy. In his 2020 book, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?,* Sandel endeavors to outline meritocracy, along with its major shortcomings and recommendations for a path towards justice. Sandel writes, "In an unequal society, those who land at the top want to believe their success is morally justified. In a meritocratic society, this means the winners must believe they have earned their success through their own talent and hard work."[10]

10. Sandel, *Tyranny of Merit,* 13.

Through this definition, Sandel points out several major principles of the American meritocracy. First, that the concept of meritocracy is an ethos of a stratified society. Its aim, therefore, is to foster a system of inequality by creating and then reinforcing categories based on individual characteristics, which serve as a sorting mechanism for people. It functions accordingly in a divisive nature, pitting people against each other in an effort to break out of one's own category into another. Secondly in this definition, Sandel shows us that the characteristic that is used as the justification for inequality in such a society is the belief in success being earned. Economic prosperity and social status are the outcomes of success in the meritocratic social system of America, and the value tied to this is the individual's ability to claim responsibility for said success due to their own actions. Finally, through this definition, Sandel shows us that a meritocratic system is tied to morality. Consequently, hierarchy also establishes and defines that which is good and right in society versus what is bad and wrong. Because achievement and success are the goals, that which aids an individual's advancement in society is seen as good and right.

One of the starkest elements of this and other definitions of meritocracy is not found in its definition, but rather, in what is *not* found in its definition. By defining status in society based on one's work and achievement, the idea and narrative of the ideology of meritocracy does not account for any social factors outside the individual's achievement that may account for an individual's potential for social mobility. [11] This reductionistic

11. Some of these factors include, but are not limited to, race and ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, education, political capital, family of origin, opportunity access, and many more. For the purposes of this paper, other factors that impact one's social status in American society cannot be explored at length. For more information on some of these factors, I would encourage exploration into the following social scientists: G. William Domhoff, Barbara Ehrenreich, Robert Grandfield, Annette Lareau, and more.

concept of success fails to illustrate an accurate picture of all the variables that impact one's ability to be successful in society, such as their race, family of origin, opportunity access, and more.

Through his ethnographic work with Latino Pentecostals, Dr. Tony Tian-Ren Lin sees meritocracy most prevalently at the extremes of our society's ladder of stratification.[12] Lin explains that the ideology of meritocracy serves as a method of justification for the wealthy's success and continued possession of such success, while simultaneously giving those in poverty hopefulness for movement within "the very system that subdues them."[13] The entire system is itself contingent on the socialized belief that the economic system of the United States offers open and ample of opportunity for social mobility.[14]

This hope—that upward mobility is possible for those on the lower extremity of the social ladder—is known by many as the American Dream. "Americans have long tolerated inequalities of income and wealth, believing that, whatever one's starting point in life, it is possible to move from rags to riches."[15] This hope, however, "rings hollow"[16], given the reality that an ever-growing majority of individuals never climb the social structure ladder in the way the rhetoric of the American Dream promises. In fact, of those

12. Lin, *Prosperity Gospel Latinos*, 20.

13. Lin, *Prosperity Gospel Latinos*, 20.

14. David T. Lardier, Kathryn G Herr, Veronica R. Barrios, Pauline Garcia-Reid, and Robert Reed, "Merit in Meritocracy: Uncovering the Myth of Exceptionality and Self-Reliance through the Voices of Urban Youth of Color," *Education and Urban Society* 51.1 (2019): 478.

15. Sandel, *Tyranny of Merit*, 22.

16. Sandel, *Tyranny of Merit*, 23.

that start out at the bottom of the economic ladder in America, only four to seven percent ever reach the top rung,[17] despite the universal assumption in the American meritocracy that mobility is the answer to inequality.

The ideology of meritocracy is rooted in individualism, or the valuing of individual freedom of action and expression above the collective. In the United States, individual achievement is prized above all else and valued as an attainable goal. Due to the capitalist nature of the country, though, much of this concept is operationalized in economic terms, and consequently, the social structure results in individuals pitting themselves against each other in their effort to get to the top. There are limited scholarship dollars, limited spots in the graduate program, only one CEO position, so on and so forth. Individual achievement, in the social structure, always involves winning, and when one wins, all others, by definition, lose.

Sandel traces the strengthening of the American meritocratic framework in recent decades to arguments over the "welfare state" and individual culpability during the 1980s and 1990s.[18] Conversations about the welfare state during these decades moved away from the social conditions that predicated an individual's need to be on welfare and the society's responsibility to care for them, into a "rhetoric of responsibility."[19] The conversation shifted away from society's role in providing for those in a tough spot to explanations regarding the individual's choices that led to that spot. Therefore, responsibility fell on the individual, and as a result, the culpability did as well. This social

17. Sandel, *Tyranny of Merit*, 75.

18. Sandel, *Tyranny of Merit*, 64.

19. Sandel, *Tyranny of Merit*, 64.

reinterpretation created a direct line from an individual's action to culpability for its result. Lending itself into the meritocratic rhetoric well, this conversation is now infused into our language. We hear stories of "welfare queens" or people who "take advantage of the system." Regardless of the reality, people who receive these labels are depicted most prominently as individuals who *choose* to be lazy over working hard. Therefore, their explanation of being at the bottom of the social hierarchy is explained through the meritocracy framework.

Beyond the individualism framework, the ideology of meritocracy is reinforced through other rhetorical devices employed by those in power, namely political leaders and the media,[20] along with social conditioning and institutional policies and practices. Hope that the system of oppression will be the system of liberation for those at the bottom is what allows the ethos to continue to thrive. Every outcome that does not result in advancement in the meritocratic ideal is dismissed due to the individual's own lack of effort or lack of talent. Every outcome that does results in an individual's advancement is explained by their individual effort, their hard work, their innate strengths and talents, etc.

The meritocracy and the fallacy of the American Dream are further buttressed by tokenism. "Tokenism" is defined as the small percentage of disadvantaged people who defy the odds and rise above their circumstances to achieve success.[21] These individuals are then often publicized through popular media channels. These are the stories we hear

20. The rhetorical devices of the meritocracy are employed by all people at all levels of the social ladder. Due to the scope of this paper, examples from all areas of society cannot be explored. Instead, I will focus on two main areas: politics and media in an effort to draw a parallel to church leaders.

21. Catherine J. Turco, "Cultural Foundations of Tokenism: Evidence from the Leveraged Buyout Industry," *American Sociological Review* 75.6 (2010): 896.

of people "pulling themselves up by their bootstraps" or those we hear labeled as "exceptional," "very hard working," and "resilient." Once again, not only do these words employed create definitions that validate the meritocratic ideology, but the absence of acknowledging other factors, such as opportunity access, further defines those used as tokens. As a result, those who have achieved are not seen as the exception to the rule but further evidence of the rule itself. For example, Oprah Winfrey is very often a key example of tokenism in action. Oprah is the first Black female billionaire, and often, her biographies and life history are charted with the "rags to riches" narrative, depicting her as a benefactor of the meritocracy ideal: someone who is talented and worked hard, and simply because of that, she achieved success.[22] Oprah is used as a success story of the narrative of meritocracy; the belief is that if she can do it, anyone can do it if they simply work hard enough and have the right talent for it.

President Barak Obama is another example of tokenism but also an example of the language employed by political leaders, which reinforces the fallacy of the American Dream. Obama ran for office on the idea of hope and the concepts of the meritocracy through what Sandel calls the "rhetoric of opportunity."[23] This rhetoric of opportunity is grounded in the meritocratic idea of social mobility. Politicians lean into this idea, as Obama did throughout his campaigning and presidency, by responding to cries of inequality with promises of opportunity.[24] Furthermore, Obama frequently employed language in line with the idea of "pulling up your bootstraps." In his book, *The Audacity*

22. Dana Cloud, "Hegemony or Concordance? The Rhetoric of Tokenism in 'Oprah,'" *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 18.3 (1996): 115.

23. Sandel, *Tyranny of Merit*, 23.

24. Sandel, *Tyranny of Merit*, 22.

of Hope, Obama writes, "With the values of self-reliance and self-improvement and risk taking . . . thrift and personal responsibility . . . each of us can rise above the circumstances of our birth."[25] Not only does Obama utilize the rhetoric of opportunity, but he also tokenizes himself through his initial campaigning, sharing of his own story as "a son of a Black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas,"[26] claiming that "in no other country is my story even possible."[27] His language, in sharing his own story and sharing about his ideas for the country, communicate and reinforce the ideology of meritocracy. Anyone can achieve anything if they have talent and work hard. Obama's words proclaim the false promise of the American Dream and the meritocracy for all to hear.

Through this section, we have seen how the meritocracy ideal is utilized as a system for justification of societal inequality and stratification. People's placement on the ladder of societal stratification is understood in the context of the individual's propensity for success based on their natural talents combined with their willingness to work harder. This meritocratic justification system uses rhetorical devices and concepts of the tokenism and the American Dream to reinforce itself when examples of outliers to the rule emerge.

---

25. Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007), as quoted in Lardier et al., "Merit in Meritocracy," 495.

26. Michael Peters, "Conflicting Narratives of the American Dream: Obama's Equality of Opportunity and Trump's 'Make America Great Again,'" *Solsko Polje* 28.3 (2017): 27.

27. Peters, "Conflicting Narratives," 27.

The Meritocracy and the Prosperity Gospel

When we have understood the social factors at play in the ordering of society, namely, the societal stratification, the ideology of meritocracy, and the role of power in it all, we can see their direct effects on American megachurch Christianity. Through Chapter II, we saw the ways in which the themes of the prosperity gospel function both in an overt level, as exampled through Joel Osteen, and a covert level, as exampled through Kris Vallotton. Through this section, we will navigate the connections between the themes of the prosperity gospel, both overt and covert, and the social factors discussed thus far in Chapter III. Through these direct lines of connection, we will see how the prosperity gospel is a theology built on meritocracy, functioning as a religiously coded form of the American societal ideology.

Prosperity gospel theology functions through both a conflict theoretical lens and a symbolic interactionism lens. The direct give-and-get mentality that is taught to followers of both overt and covert prosperity gospel structures religion through a systematic way; one must know the formulaic elements required to properly ask, and therefore properly receive one's just reward from God, *Jehovah Jireh,* benevolent giver of all good things.

The first major parallel we see between the ideology of meritocracy and the prosperity gospel is in the language employed and the rituals undertaken. The prosperity gospel, like any form of religious belief, creates a meaning-making system through which to interpret life, lending itself to symbolic interactionism understanding. Along with knowing the proper rules and guidelines for receiving one's blessing as a benefactor of a God who is all powerful and giving to those who believe, one also must know the right rituals, such as prayer and petition, along with the right language to employ in such

religious acts. The language used is essential to prosperity gospel theology, not only as an individual, but also given the reality of the distinction between overt and covert prosperity gospel theology. While very similar in their theological tenets, covert prosperity gospel theologians, as exampled though Kris Vallotton, are especially careful with language, creating an intentional step away from overt prosperity gospel theology and the negative and heretical labels that often comes with it.

In his analysis of Joel Osteen's overt prosperity gospel rhetoric, Peter Mundey sums up the prosperity gospel's conflation with American culture. Mundey states that Osteen's prosperity gospel functions "as a quasi-religion in which Americans regularly worship at secular 'cathedrals of consumption' and find ultimate meaning, happiness, and purpose in consuming more than they need."[28] Through this quote in Mundey's work, we see an acknowledgement of religion as a system where power, authority, and stratification are present. This stratification is based on level of faith; those who have successful matriculated into the full abundant life, as Vallotton calls it in a covert way, find themselves at the top of this level of stratification, and those who still are succumbed to a poverty mindset find themselves at the bottom of this level of stratification.

The second major point of connection between the meritocracy ideals and the prosperity gospel is found in the pillar of individual culpability, or as Sandel calls it, the "rhetoric of responsibility."[29] The stratification of poverty versus prosperity mindset is a coded manifestation of the economic social inequality and stratification we see in greater society. Just like the meritocracy framework gives justification for where one stands in

28. Mundey, "Spirit of Consumerism," 319-320.

29. Sandel, *Tyranny of Merit*, 64-66.

the economic ladder of stratification socially due to their individual factors of hard work and talent, so too does the theological structure of the prosperity gospel. Instead of hard work and talent as defined explicitly by the meritocracy, the prosperity gospel, in all forms, uses faith and faith acts as the method of justification. From the mindset of a megachurch believer and preacher, one is saved by grace therefore there is no need to work to gain salvation. Yet, when one does not achieve the wealth and health one asked for or believed they ought to receive they consequently land towards the bottom of the stratification ladder. Retrospectively then, the language used to explain or justify the end results is coded with all varieties of "works based" language. The individual did not truly believe that God is *Jehovah Jireh*, they did not fully trust that God was for them, they did not pray fully, fervently, and without doubt, so and so forth the individual culpability justification goes.

Lin details a nuance of this reality as observed through his ethnographic work. Lin discusses the characteristics of effectual prayer in the context of prosperity gospel Pentecostals.[30] Simply having a distinction such as this communicates that there are some types of prayers that are "ineffectual" in producing the desired results or fulfilling the formula correctly. Once again, this reinforces the individual requirement of learning the language, symbols, and signs of proper participation in the belief system. To advance in the ladder of faith towards a prosperity mindset, one must engage effectively in the meaning-making system through proper external language and rhetoric and internal beliefs. If one has not mastered these elements, they find themselves in a lower level of the stratified system of successful belief in God as defined by health and wealth.

30. Lin, *Prosperity Gospel Latinos*, 47-48.

A third major parallel between the meritocracy framework and the prosperity gospel is the ideals of social mobility and hope for a better future. Prosperity gospel theology communicates hope, like much of Christianity does, yet due the nature of this hope being centered on receiving one's reward as a benefactor of a benevolent God, propelling them out of poverty into prosperity, this form of hope echoes more closely to American Dream hope than resurrection hope (i.e., more sociological than theological). In their work, *Holy Mavericks,* Lee and Sinitiere argue that prosperity gospel preachers like Osteen construct "a vision of happy living that blends well with our consumerist self-indulgent culture and offers a narrative of hope grounded in the discourses of religious and bourgeois American middle-class sensibilities."[31] This hope communicates, as we have often seen, promised improvements in health and wealth. It echoes Weber's understanding of the protestant ethic and Marx's understanding of the function of religion: there must be hope that there is a better future beyond present circumstances and faith in God grants that. Hope for better circumstances is also the definition of the American Dream. The ideology of meritocracy thrives because of the belief in social mobility, despite the increasing difficulty of being able to move up on the social strata ladder. Belief in the potential for a better, different, more prosperous life is a foundational definition for both the meritocracy and for prosperity gospel theology.

Like Obama and Oprah, prosperity gospel theology also tokenizes people who have managed to achieve the rare feat of social mobility within the system, in this case, the mobility from poverty to prosperity. As exampled through Kris Vallotton's book and

31. Shayne Lee and Phillip Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and the Spiritual Marketplace* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 39.

much of Osteen's work, this tokenization often comes from the charismatic prosperity gospel leaders themselves.[32] They are where they are, blessed with wealth and health, because they got the formula just right. Vallotton details over the course of his book the extent of money, gifts, and blessings he has received.[33] Osteen shares of his wife's desire for a pool, and because they were successful in believing God for it, through the right prayers, enough faith, being chosen, etc., they now live in a house with a pool.[34] These examples show the way in which the rare feat of mobility in the system is used as evidence that the system work, and what is possible for one is somehow possible for all.

The American society is structured in a way that stratifies people into a hierarchical structure based on a number of factors, most prominently economic indicators such as wealth and income. This system creates and maintains who is in power and who is not, who wins and who loses, and often, who is able to be mobile within the system. The system is not complete without a method of justification, which in America, is found in the concept of the ideology of meritocracy. Through justifying placement in the stratified system based on talent and hard work, individuals find themselves culpable for the end result. Little to no credence is given to other variables that affect the outcome of one's social standing, such as access to top-tier universities, race and ethnic identity, gender, family of origin, and more. The factors that define and perpetuate the meritocratic ideology echo many of the characteristic pillars of the prosperity gospel rhetoric outlined in Chapter II. Through this comparison, we have seen that the prosperity gospel functions

32. Bowler, B*lessed*, 41.

33. Vallotton, *Poverty, Riches, and Wealth*, 67-69, 39, 20.

34. Mundey, "Spirit of Consumerism," 327.

as a religiously coded form of the meritocracy, truly being a theology built on meritocracy. We see this reality through its emphasis on individual effort and culpability above all along with reinforcement and justification of one's social status based on set criteria of faith and achievement. Additionally, like meritocratic rhetoric, prosperity gospel theology uses tokens, in the form of charismatic leaders, who serve as examples that the theology they preach is in fact possible. From the recounting of the theology of prosperity and key examples in Chapter II, to the discussion and explanation of the sociological factors giving rise to the rhetoric in this chapter, we can see the clear ways in which megachurch prosperity gospel theology is not buttressed by the gospel itself, but by the sociological principles of the American stratification system of meritocracy.

CHAPTER IV

A BETTER WAY

In this thesis, I have traced the American sociological factors that allow the themes of the prosperity gospel to thrive in megachurch culture today. The ideology of meritocracy in our society is truly a ruling ethos that continues to reinforce the themes of individualism, hard work as justification for success, and ignorance of the social conditions which may have a greater impact on success. Given the embeddedness of the meritocracy framework, it is hard to image a different structuring of society, and therefore of theological navigation of wealth and money. In conclusion of this work, I offer several recommendations for a better relationship between the meritocracy and the American megachurch's theological interpretation of money and wealth, along with recommendations for further sociological research regarding this relationship. These recommendations are in no way a mutually exclusive list, nor a guaranteed "Band-Aid" to easily correct the historical and systemic disadvantages both the meritocracy and the prosperity gospel have maintained. Yet, through deliberate effort, over time, change is possible.

A Better Way for the Church

"The more we think of ourselves as self-made and self-sufficient, the harder it is to learn gratitude and humility. And without these sentiments, it is hard to care for the

common good."[1] Sandel gives us a starting place for discussing a better way. Individualism seeks achievement above all, often at the expense of others. To combat the rampant individualism ethos present in both prosperity gospel theology and the American meritocratic system, we must reimagine churches and societies that focus on a collectivistic ethic. A collectivistic ethic, in contrast to an individualistic ethic positions the good of the group and advancement towards groups goals as higher priorities than the goals and good of the individual. A society built on the meritocracy will always prioritize individual goals, success, and needs over the collective. Therefore, collectivistic ethic proves countercultural in American society as it often requires individual sacrifice for the sake of one's neighbor. Many churches have small groups and bible classes, but how often do they truly carry the load of those around them in a practical, tangible, and regular way? Defining and living by a collectivistic ethic, as most prominently depicted in Acts 2, turns competition into compassion, and the struggle for success into life lived in solidarity.

Secondly, churches, especially predominantly white churches, have long been the place where social inequality and stratification are perpetuated, not deconstructed. The church can find a better way by intentionally endeavoring to champion equity and justice as greater priories than charity work or mission projects. Often mission trips and projects, along with charity work, perpetuate the narrative of inequality and stratification. Usually they involve primarily white, privileged individuals, who are in middle to high levels of societal stratification, travelling or sending money to an impoverished area of the country or world to lend a helping hand. Implicit in this common megachurch ritual is the idea

1. Sandel, *Tyranny of Merit*, 14.

that those going to serve have something to give to the less fortunate that are being served, reinforcing and maintain a sizeable gap in power, which sets up those doing mission work as the "saviors" to the impoverished people who need it the most. Most often motivated by good intent, these projects often have a negative impact on the communities they serve.

Christians wishing to make change in this area should shift their efforts towards justice and equity efforts. This change in efforts simultaneously shifts how Christians see those with whom they are working. It moves Christians from seeing those in a lower social status as someone who has been systematically disadvantaged, rather than someone who ended up in their position due to poor choices. The meritocracy forces us to have a negative or deficit-based view of those who are further down the social ladder. Achieving equity and justice for all will lay down vertical ladders, therefore removing all notions of upward and downward. Churches can be this change by considering massive social projects. Some examples of this kind of work would include as a vehicle for reparations as one Jesuit order has pledged to do[2], considering in-church income distributions, making intentional efforts to close the opportunity gap by sharing in each other's social and economic connections, and by becoming a model of community over the individual.

A Better Way for the Field of Sociology

Throughout this work, I have endeavored to outline the change that needs to occur within the American megachurch culture and to show the potential found in bridging the

2. In March of 2021, news was released that the Jesuit order of Catholic Priests pledged to raise $100 million to use for reparations for descendants of slaves it once owned. The pledge is one example of a church making substantive efforts to promote social justice and racial reconciliation. Rachel L. Swarns, "Catholic Order Pledges $100 Million to Atone for Slave Labor and Sales," *New York Times,* 15 March 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/15/us/jesuits-georgetown-reparations-slavery.html.

disciplines of theology and sociology. To critically engage and receive substantive information from communities of faith, it is advantageous to be affiliated with these communities of faith in some way. Dr. Lin calls this process "becoming one of them."[3] He writes, "religious organizations are more complicated because they have such clear symbolic boundaries for insiders and outsiders."[4] More research is needed regarding the relationship between religion and race, class, and gender, as Smith and colleagues note.[5] However, not only must we call for more research in this area, but we must also call for researchers with a willingness to come under the sacred canopy constructed in religious spaces in order that meaningful research and honest conclusions regarding the religious experience might result.

Furthermore, one area of research that seems to be especially underrepresented in the space of sociology of religion is an understanding of the doctrine of the role of grace as it relates to a working theology of money, wealth, and success and how that impacts the ways in which believers in this religious system navigate society. The paradox of the prosperity gospel and the American Dream becomes that much more complex when the role of grace is factored in as a pillar doctrine in many evangelical church and megachurches; therefore, robust research regarding this relationship is needed to elucidate the conversation further.

3. Lin, *Prosperity Gospel Latinos*, 24.

4. Lin, *Prosperity Gospel Latinos*, 24-25.

5. Christian Smith, et al. "Roundtable on the Sociology of Religion," 928.

Summation

In this thesis, I have detailed the ways in which American megachurch communities create a theology of wealth and money. Whether or not they claim affiliation and identity with the prosperity gospel, these churches overtly and covertly reinforce the themes of success on earth being a sign of favor from God. These messages are maintained and strengthened not only in theological spaces, but also in society at large through their paralleled nature to the meritocracy. The ideology of meritocracy justifies and maintains America's highly stratified socioeconomic and status ladder through its messages of hard work and talent as the mode to success. American megachurch culture's primary understanding of success and money is, in actuality, a theology that is built on meritocratic ideals, rather than being gospel centric. The meritocracy is deeply embedded in our society, so change cannot and will not happen quickly. But with recognition of the prevalence and prominence of meritocratic ideals seen in prosperity gospel theology, along with the narratives and actions that result from this relationship, the church can and ought to be a vehicle for change. With more research and understanding into this paradox, we may begin to see the interwovenness of the megachurch gospel and meritocracy begin to unwind.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bandow, Doug. "Capitalism and Christianity: The Uneasy Partnership?" *International Journal on World Peace* 19.3 (2002): 39-55.

Baumann, Roger. "Political Engagement Meets the Prosperity Gospel: African American Christian Zionism and Black Church Politics." *Sociology of Religion* 77.4 (2006): 359-385.

Berger, Peter L. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion.* Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967.

Bouma, Gary D. "Tales from a Life in the Sociology of Religion." *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 32.2 (2019): 117-30.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of Judgment and Taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987.

Bowler, Kate. *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Bowler, Kate, and Wen Reagan. "Bigger, Better, Louder: The Prosperity Gospel's Impact on Contemporary Christian Worship." *Religion and American Culture* 24.2 (2014): 186-230.

Caliendo, Stephen M. *Inequality in America: Race, Poverty, and Fulfilling Democracy's Promise*. New York: Routledge, 2017.

Chaves, Mark, and S. L. Anderson. "Changing American Congregations: Findings from the Third Wave of the National Congregations Study." *Journal for fhe Scientific Study of Religion* 53.4 (2014): 676-86.

Cloud, Dana. "Hegemony or Concordance? The Rhetoric of Tokenism in "Oprah," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 18.3 (1996): 115-137.

Coreno, Thaddeus. "Fundamentalism as a Class Culture." *Sociology of Religion* 63.3 (2002): 335-60.

Darnell, Alfred, and Darren E. Sherkat. "The Impact of Protestant Fundamentalism on Educational Attainment." *American Sociological Review* 62.2 (1997): 306-15.

Durkheim, Emilie. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life.* New York: Free Press, 1912.

Edwards, Korie L."Race, Religion, and Worship: Are Contemporary African-American Worship Practices Distinct?" *Journal for fhe Scientific Study of Religion* 48.1 (2009): 30-52.

Finke, Rodger and Rodney Stark. "Why Mainline Denominations Decline." Pages 237-96 in *The Churching of America: 1776-1990*: *Winners and Losers in our Religious Economy.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997.

Furtick, Steven. "Never Not Enough." *Elevation Church* 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6SMCffmiQQs

Geertz, Clifford. "Religion as a Cultural System." Pages 87-125 in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.

"Joel Osteen Welcomes Congregation Back to Houston Megachurch," *Associated Press News*, 2020, https://apnews.com/article/virusoutbreaknbajoelosteenhoustonhoustonrockets06e01eed8507a93e4624f67893fdcf83#:~:text=Lakewood%20Church%2C%20where%20more%20than,100%20nations%20around%20the%20world.

Johnson, Bill. *When Heaven Invades Earth: A Practical Guide to a Life of Miracles*. Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 2009.

Keister, Lisa. "Religion and Wealth: The Role of Religious Affiliation and Participation in Early Adult Asset Accumulation." *Social Forces* 82.1 (2003): 175-207.

Lardier, David T. and Kathryn G. Herr, Veronica R. Barrios, Pauline Garcia-Reid and Robert J. Reed. "Merit in Meritocracy: Uncovering the Myth of Exceptionality and Self-Reliance through the Voices of Urban Youth of Color." *Education and Urban Society* 51.4 (2019): 474-500.

Lee, Shayne, and Phillip Sinitiere. *Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and the Spiritual Marketplace*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.

Liebman, Robert C., John R. Sutton, and Robert Wuthnow. "Exploring the Social Sources of Denominationalism: Schisms in American Protestant Denominations, 1890-1980." *American Sociological Review* 53 (1988): 343–52.

Lin, Tony Tian-Ren. *Prosperity Gospel Latinos and Their American Dream*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020.

Marx, Karl. *Marx, Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* 1844. Edited by Joseph O'Malley. Translated by Joseph O'Malley and Annette Jolin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Mashau, Thinandavha D. and Mookgo Kgatle. "Prosperity Gospel and the Culture of Greed in Post-Colonial Africa: Constructing an Alternative African Christian Theology of Ubuntu." *Verbum et Ecclesia* 40.1 (2019): 1-8.

"Megachurch Definition," *Hartford Institute for Religious Research* 2020, http://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/definition.html

Mundey, Peter. "The Prosperity Gospel and the Spirit of Consumerism According to Joel Osteen." *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society of Pentecostal Studies* 39.3 (2017): 318-41.

Morris, Robert. "Beyond Blessed: The Ten Financial Commandments." *Gateway Church*, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=chowZo8tgMo

Niebuhr, H. Richard. *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*. New York: Meridian Books, 1957.

Obama, Barack. *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream.* New York: Broadway Books, 2007.

Outreach Magazine. "Top 100 Largest Churches in America*." Outreach Magazine*. 2018. *https://outreach100.com/largest-churches-in-america/2018*

Outreach Magazine. "Top 100 Largest Churches in America." *Outreach Magazine*. 2019. *https://outreach100.com/largest-churches-in-america/2019*

Outreach Magazine. "Top 100 Largest Churches in America*." Outreach Magazine*. 2020. *https://outreach100.com/largest-churches-in-america/2020*

Pattillo-McCoy, Mary. "Church Culture as a Strategy of Action in the Black Community." *American Sociological Review* 63.6 (1998): 767–84.

Park, Jerry. Z. and Samuel H. Reimer. "Revisiting the Social Sources of American Christianity 1972–1998." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41.4 (2002): 733-746.

Peters, Michael A. "Conflicting Narratives of the American Dream: Obama's Equality of Opportunity and Trump's 'Make America Great Again,'" *Solsko Polje* 28.3 (2017): 27-41.

Pew Research Center. "How Does Pew Research Center Measure the Religious Composition of the U.S.?" *Pew Research Center*. 2019. https://www.pewforum.org/2018/07/05/how-does-pew-research-center-measure-the-religious-composition-of-the-u-s-answers-to-frequently-asked-questions/

Regnerus, Mark D., Christian Smith, and David Sikkink. "Who Gives to the Poor? The Influence of Religious Tradition and Political Location on the Personal Generosity of Americans Toward the Poor." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37.3 (1998): 481-93.

Roof, Wade C. "Socioeconomic Differentials among White Socioreligious Groups in the United States." *Social Forces* 58.1 (1979): 280-89.

Safak, Elif. *Forty Rules of Love: A Novel of Rumi.* London: Penguin Books, 2007.

Sandel, Michael J. *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* New York: Farrar, Straus and Grioux, 2020.

Schieman, Scott. "The Education-Contingent Association between Religiosity and Health: The Differential Effects of Self-Esteem and the Sense of Mastery." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47.4 (2008): 710-24.

Schieman, Scott. "The Religious Role and the Sense of Personal Control." *Sociology of Religion* 69.3 (2008): 273-79.

Schieman, Scott and John Hyun Jung. "Practical Divine Influence: Socioeconomic Status and Belief in the Prosperity Gospel." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 51.4 (2012): 738-56.

Schwadel, Phillip. "Social Class and Finding a Congregation: How Attendees are Introduced to Their Congregations." *Review of Religious Research* 54.4 (2012): 543-54.

Sherkat, Darren E. "Investigating the Sect-Church-Sect Cycle: Cohort-Specific Attendance Differences across African-American Denominations." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40.2 (2001): 221-33.

Smith, Christian, Brandon Vaidyanathan, Nancy Tatom Ammerman, Jose Casanova, Hilary Davidson, Elaine Howard Ecklund, and John H. Evans. "Roundtable on the Sociology of Religion: Twenty-Three Theses on the Status of Religion in American Sociology—a Mellon Working-Group Reflection." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81.4 (2013): 903-38.

Smith, Christian, and Robert Faris. "Socioeconomic Inequality in the American Religious System: An Update and Assessment." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44.1 (2015): 95-104.

Sterne, Evelyn S. "Bringing Religion into Working-Class History." *Social Science History* 24.1 (2000): 149-82.

Sumerau, J. E., and Ryan T. Cragun. "'I Think Some People Need Religion': The Social Construction of Nonreligious Moral Identities." *Sociology of Religion,* 77.4 (2016): 386-407.

Sutton, John R., and Mark Chaves. "Explaining Schism in American Protestant Denominations, 1890–1990." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43.2 (2004): 171-90.

Swarns, Rachel L. "Catholic Order Pledges $100 Million to Atone for Slave Labor and Sales." *New York Times.* (15 March 2021). https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/15/us/jesuits-georgetown-reparations-slavery.html.

Swine Jr., Tom W. "Globalization, Creation of Global Culture of Consumption and the Impact on the Church and Its Mission." *Evangelical Review of Theology* 27.4 (2003): 353-70.

Thomas, Scott. *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations: The Struggle for the Soul of the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Palgrave, 2005.

Turco, Catherine J. "Cultural Foundations of Tokenism: Evidence from the Leveraged Buyout Industry." *American Sociological Review* 75.6 (2010): 849-913.

Vallotton, Kris. *Poverty, Riches, and Wealth: Moving from a Life of Lack into Kingdom Abundance.* Aida, MI: Chosen Books, 2018.

Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1930.

Weber, Max. "Class, Status, Party." Pages 56-67 in *The Inequality Reader*. Edited by D. B. Grusky and S. Szelenyi. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1946.

Williams, David T. "The Heresy of Prosperity Teaching: A Message for the Church in Its Approach to Need," *Journal for Theology for Southern Africa* 61.1 (1987): 33-44.

Ziegler, Roland F. "Priesthood and Office." *Logica* 28.1 (2019): 25-34.

Zhou, Xiang, and Geoffrey T Wodtke. "Income Stratification among Occupational Classes in the United States." *Social Forces* 97.3 (2019): 945-72.