

Selling Salvation, Selling Success: Neoliberalism and the US Prosperity Gospel

Neoliberalism relies on optimism. Without faith in meritocracy – unwavering belief that rewards will eventually and justly come to those who work hard enough – support for the capitalist system and belief in neoliberalism would unravel. How that optimism is perpetuated in the face of persistent income inequality and exploitation within the workplace requires an examination of those cultural institutions which reinforce and reproduce optimism over practical experience. This research focuses on one particular religious institution of the US – the Prosperity Gospel.

The Prosperity Gospel is a modern, neoliberal variation of Pentecostalism that is premised on the belief that a Biblical covenant between the individual believer and God guarantees that believer blessings of health and wealth, provided she demonstrates adequate faith. Accordingly, for those who are less adept at navigating the business world, financial success is still available for those believers who can dedicate themselves with the same frenzied ambition to the spiritual world. The Prosperity Gospel thus supports and sustains neoliberalism; the Prosperity Gospel is an institution which provides refuge to individuals from the exigencies of the market as well as a social practice which reinforces individual responsibility and fault. The Prosperity Gospel is the spiritual articulation of neoliberalism as well as a reinforcing institution.

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“The gospel to the poor is that Jesus has come and they don’t have to be poor anymore!” (K. Copeland 1994 8, bold original)

"Wallet, you are full of money in Jesus' Name!" (Thompson 1997 106).

The relationship between religion and capitalism is intricate, tangled, and difficult to parse.¹ The existence of both, however, hinges upon the same source: faith. Without faith in the existence of the supernatural, religion would wither away. Without faith in meritocracy – unwavering belief that rewards will eventually and justly come to those who work hard enough – support for the capitalist system would likewise unravel. What renews that faith – rekindles that faith in the face of lived experience – is optimism.

Neoliberalism – the ideological operant of this latest stage of capitalism – relies on the optimism of the individual. How that optimism is perpetuated in the face of persistent income inequality and exploitation within the workplace requires an examination of those cultural institutions which reinforce and reproduce optimism over practical experience. It seems logical that an examination of another social phenomenon which relies on optimism to fuel faith in its continued existence – religion – would expose the interdependencies between them. This research focuses on one particular religious institution of the US – the Prosperity Gospel. The first section describes the US Prosperity Gospel movement: its origins and core teachings. The section which follows examines the common social practices found within the varied strains of the Prosperity Gospel movement and how those Veblenian patterns of behavior contribute to the perpetuation of the movement. The third section explores the ways in which the Prosperity Gospel in turn contributes to the perpetuation of neoliberalism, followed by a section which focuses more narrowly on the Prosperity Gospel within the context of the 2007-08 financial crisis. The final section concludes.

The US Prosperity Gospel

The Prosperity Gospel is a distinctly American invention². By the end of the 19th century, various forms of spiritualism had seized the popular imagination of Americans and from this cauldron of mysticism and transcendentalism which proposed mastery and perfectibility of the self, emerged a religious movement called New Thought. The New Thought movement imagined that the individual's connection to a higher power imbued and infused that individual with the capacity to improve herself and her world. External realities existed but could be shaped and countered through the divine connection and targeted thinking of the individual. At the turn of the twentieth century, renewed enthusiasm for faith healing in evangelical circles inspired New Thought preachers to focus on the mind's power over health. Likewise, a small contingent of clergy in the nascent Pentecostal movement practicing ‘faith cure,’ began incorporating techniques of New Thought into their theological practice (Bowler 2013; Walton 2012).

Throughout the twentieth century, Pentecostalism and its subset of mind-over-matter practitioners waxed and waned. In the prosperity of the post-WWII period, and riding a swell of American optimism and exceptionalism, the power of positive thinking once again seized the US imagination. Faith healing experienced a revival and transitioned from proclaiming truth, healing, and prosperity to *commanding* it be done. Over the course of the 1950s, healing promises began to fade (inversely with advances in medicine, such as vaccines) while financial promises grew in emphasis. The experimentalism of the 1960s further encouraged non-traditional approaches to conventional religious practices. Within Christianity, the neo-Charismatic Movement voiced itself - literally. Speaking in tongues and worship in song and on stage spread across the cultural landscape of the US. More than anything, the neo-

Charismatic movement flung open the doors of the traditional church and encouraged new expressions of divine connection to worship.

During the 1970s, the by-then recognizable catechism of the 'name-it-and-claim-it' Prosperity Gospel emerged as its teachers/preachers built empires through televised Christian broadcasting. As the 1970s drew to a close and traditional denominations returned to their roots, those swept up in the neo-Charismatic movement found themselves without a denominational home. The Prosperity Gospel churches which eschewed denominational structures, welcomed all strays. By the end of the 1970s, the Prosperity Gospel's message had been refined to a sharp point: faith is financially measurable (Bowler 2013; Walton 2012).

The Prosperity Gospel is a modern variation of that earlier cross-pollination of Pentecostalism and New Thought, later infused with elements from the neo-Charismatic movement. The Prosperity Gospel maintains the Pentecostal belief that blessing and salvation emerge from a personal, individual relationship with God (Barker 2007). What separates the Prosperity Gospel Christian from the traditional Christian – indeed, from even the modern Pentecostal – is the unassailable belief of the Prosperity Gospel that prosperity is in the works; it is the believers' due. While the traditional Christian might believe that God has a greater plan or that all things happen for a reason, the Prosperity Gospel Christian believes that God has victory planned for her and that to receive it, she must act as though she already has received it (Bowler 2013; Walton 2009).

The belief that prosperity is guaranteed is predicated on the Prosperity Gospel's emphasis on the covenant between believer and Deity as revealed in Genesis 15 in the exchange between God and Abraham in the Old Testament³. Within this theological structure, logic dictates that this covenantal relationship between God and the believer is iron-clad as God is infallible and incapable of reneging on this promise – this contract. The responsibility of the individual is that she must 'claim' those blessings from God through positive confession – positive confession (or 'Word of Faith') is required to catalyze and enforce this covenantal contract. The believer must positively confess her trust and belief in God in order to make manifest that which she is owed. Failure to receive comes from failure to believe adequately, confess positive belief that one will receive at some point in the near future, or from failure to claim what God has promised (Barker 2007; Bowler 2013; Walton 2009, 2012).

The Prosperity Gospel teaches that believers are not entitled to health and wealth, but rather that they already have it and are obligated - duty-bound - to claim and receive it (Jenkins 2006). The attraction of the Prosperity Gospel is plain to see - it puts health and wealth in the control of the individual. And for the sick - prayer is the cheapest medical care available in the US (Bowler 2013). In the Prosperity Gospel canon, poverty and depravation are not materially or conditionally determined; they are tools in the Devil's arsenal, a curse that can be lifted by the devotion and determination of the believer (Bowler 2013).

It is tempting to compare the Prosperity Gospel to the Protestant or Calvinist work ethic, and certainly the Prosperity Gospel and Protestantism writ large share the general values of hard work and dedication. The Prosperity Gospel, however moves beyond the generic idea of God blessing the faithful; it is both more dogmatic and more specific than the amorphous Protestant claims of a 'Promised Land' (Bowler 2013). The Prosperity Gospel departs from Weber's protestant work ethic and John Calvin's covenant theology in one defining tenet of its theology: the Prosperity Gospel eschews frugality and endorses the display of material wealth as an act of proof of its own efficacy. Not only does the Prosperity Gospel reject asceticism, it also undermines other faiths by the insistence of verifying its doctrine with material wealth as 'proof' of faithfulness (Augustine 2010).

The word "money" appears in the King James' Version of the Bible 125 times, however outside of the topic of charitable giving, US Protestant preachers generally seem reluctant to discuss issues of personal finance or broader systemic issues of economic inequality, according to sociologist Robert Wuthnow. The Prosperity Gospel overturned that taboo: from the small and pragmatic invocations for saving and paying down debt to the larger - and by far more popular - message that belief begets wealth (Van Biema 2008). Along with teaching about debt and financial management, Prosperity Gospel churches also preach about tithing and seed-sowing (Jenkins 2006). Indeed the last critical, core tenet of the Prosperity Gospel is that in order to 'reap,' one must 'sow.'

Ritualistic habituations

Religions require faith; religious movements perpetuate themselves through bespoke religious social practices of the particular church community, and faith is sustained (albeit unevenly and imperfectly) through those social practices. The Prosperity Gospel is a special case; it stands apart from other religious movements because of its promises of earthly, tangible rewards. Sustaining faith in promises of earthly fulfilment requires confrontation with lived experiences of failure of fulfilment. The social practices of the Prosperity Gospel work to undermine doubt and reinforce investment – both literally and figuratively – in the movement.

The call for tithing and for 'sowing a seed' from the Prosperity Gospel are clear examples of what we might call a Veblenian social practice or a ritualistic habituation.⁴ Believers in the Prosperity Gospel are encouraged to tithe – to make a financial contribution to their church - as regular religious practice.

Before you can qualify for a promise to be fulfilled in your life, someone has to give a tithe. No tithe, no promise (C. Dollar 1998 39).

The call for tithing - and the disastrous outcomes that follow when one doesn't tithe diligently - are taken primarily from the Book of Malachi. In the Jewish tradition, the Book of Malachi does not feature prominently, and in the Christian tradition, Malachi is typically overlooked given its home in the Old Testament. The Book of Malachi, however contains strict admonitions against negligence in tithing and grand promises for diligence⁵. Malachi is thus a favorite among Prosperity Gospel preachers and its place at the end of the Old Testament is framed as setting up the prosperity promised in the New (Jenkins 2006).

Tithing in and of itself is not an unusual or new religious practice, but tithing isn't the only call for financial contribution to the church that congregants receive. Followers of the Prosperity Gospel are urged specifically to 'sow a seed' when asking for something from the Divine.

If you don't have enough money to pay your bills, sow a seed . . . every time a worried thought about money pops up in your mind, the next thing you do is sow. This is spiritual law. Whatsoever a man soweth, he shall also reap (Savelle, quoted by Walton 2012 108).

In order to receive financial reward from God, there must be financial seed sown. Plain and simple. You want a harvest of corn? What do you plant? Corn seed. You desire, or better yet, need money? What do you plant or sow or give? Money seed! Ask of the Lord, and He will direct you concerning giving (C. Dollar n.d.).

The Prosperity Gospel teaches that the tithe and seed-sowing are demonstrations of faith; depth of faith is therefore measurable and demonstrable through financial contributions made to the church. More importantly, the Prosperity Gospel teaches that the tithe and seed-sowing are acts of faith which attract prosperity. Although warned about the purity of intentions in tithing and seed-sowing, the bottom line of the Prosperity Gospel is clear: money measures faith and tithing is a portent to prosperity (Bowler 2013; Walton 2009).

If the preacher is the pinnacle of faithfulness and the preachers of the Prosperity Gospel not only promise that God will deliver wealth to the faithful but also offer their own considerable personal wealth as proof, then in order to achieve the wealth of the preacher, congregants must emulate their devotion through the act of tithing and seed-sowing. Prosperity Gospel preachers point to stories of wealth throughout the Bible⁶ in order to support their claims that God ordains prosperity according to belief (Jenkins 2006). Prosperity Gospel preachers claim to be role models - living examples that God's abundance is awarded to the most able practitioners. They argue that their conspicuous displays of wealth provide evidence of the power of the Prosperity Gospel as well as honor God and His beneficence (Bowler 2013). The wealth of Prosperity Gospel preachers proves their point that faithfulness pays and if you are ill or experiencing financial difficulties, it is the result of insufficient faith. In the world of the Prosperity Gospel, invidious distinctions are essentially distinctions of piety – invidious distinctions of faithfulness.

The Prosperity Gospel sanctifies wealth. If the tithe and seed-sowing are markers of faithfulness, then wealth is God's recognition and reward of that faithfulness – wealth is proof. The Prosperity Gospel justifies wealth and conspicuous displays of wealth through three central assertions. First, in addition to eternal salvation, the Crucifixion promised believers earthly salvation from death, disease, and poverty. Poverty is the result of evil forces working in the individual's life, and much like demonic spirits, could be cast out through acceptance of Christ as saviour:

Prosperity is due you as a believer, because in Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, He took your place in poverty. He took your place of *poverty* so you could take His place of *prosperity* (Thompson 1997 217, emphasis original).

Secondly, they argue that Jesus was prosperous.

As soon as Jesus arrived, that anointing to prosper acted like a magnet, drawing wise men with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Those were not cheap gifts, either. Prosperity attached itself to baby Jesus immediately, and that same gift to prosper has been given to us as heirs of Christ (C. Dollar 2004 16).

That his (earthly) parents owned a donkey (a Cadillac, when adjusted for inflation) provides further proof according to Creflo Dollar (Bowler 2013). Kenneth Copeland suggests that Jesus was wealthy throughout his life:

Up until the time (Jesus) went to the Cross He was extremely prosperous. He not only had the finances to fund His entire ministry team, He was famous for giving money to the Poor. His resources were so great He even needed a treasurer to oversee them. Poor people don't need a treasurer! So, clearly, Jesus wasn't poor during His life on earth (K. Copeland 2017 9).

Thirdly, Prosperity Gospel preachers draw from the Abrahamic covenant that faithfulness and fidelity will be rewarded materially as well as spiritually. Further, Prosperity Gospel proponents have well-rehearsed responses to critics who point out the seeming incongruity between the New Testament and Jesus' comments on wealth. In response to critics who cite Matthew 6:19-21⁷ or Matthew 19:2⁸, Prosperity Gospel believers counter that it is not wealth that God abhors per se, but rather the prioritization of wealth above God. Likewise, when critics cite the Biblically inspired adage 'money is the root of all evil,' Prosperity Gospel believers counter by quoting the entire passage in 1 Timothy 6:10⁹, again emphasizing that it

is the 'love of money' that is contrary to God – not money itself (Van Biema 2008). The materialism formally rejected by mainstream Christianity is thus sanctified, made honorable, and serves as an outright distinction of worthiness of grace.

Indeed, wealth is an example of the fulfilment of the Prosperity Gospel and believers are encouraged to practice what Veblen might call prosperity emulation – acting as if the same prosperity experienced by the church leaders will manifest itself in their own prosperity and wealth. Relentless optimism is the underlying theme to the Prosperity Gospel; it is taught, socialized, and habituated. Since its beginning, Prosperity Gospel theology has emphasized heavily the power of the not simply professed, but confessed affirmations - "positive confessions" (Bowler 2013 67). Positive thinking, grounded in faith in God and spoken out loud, unleashes prosperity:

When discouraging thoughts attack, instead of complaining and expecting the worst, say it again and again: 'Something good is going to happen to me. I'm a victor and not a victim.' It is not enough to merely think positively: You need to speak positively . . . (Osteen 2007 200-201).

The obsessive emphasis on positivity encourages believers to see obstacles as opportunities (Bowler 2013). Indeed, Prosperity Gospel preachers shy away from the threats of fire and brimstone for sinners and instead push a relentlessly positive message. The only real sin that a believer commits is to speak or think negatively, the punishment for which is that their pessimistic expectations will be fulfilled (Ehreneich 2009).

Indeed, believers are expected to act 'as if' – as if they aren't sick, as if they aren't economically precarious, as if their prayers have already been answered – because acknowledgement of difficult circumstance invites negative forces and creates difficult circumstance (Bowler 2013 and 2015).

If you pray and you believe that you have received you can never pray about it again ... Only to the extent of thanking the Lord that you believe you have it . . . but you sure can't ask for it again. Because if you ask for it again, you've just said by asking that you didn't believe you received it. And therefore the system is short-circuited. And it can't work! Because if you did have it, why would you ask for it again? (Price quoted in Bowler 2013 152)

When you want to make a withdrawal from your faith account, speak the Word of faith. Don't talk the circumstances. Don't "tell it the way it is." Speak the end result. Say what God says the outcome is going to be... If you want prosperity, stop talking about lack all the time.... Start calling yourself blessed and prosperous. "But, Gloria, I'm not prosperous right now." Well, just imitate God then and call things that are not as though they were! Use your words to write some checks on that faith account you've been building. You'll be amazed at what will happen (G. Copeland 1994 12-3).

When faced with financial difficulties, believers must take care to not worry, for to worry is to doubt and lack faith. The time between the positive confession and the receiving of improved physical or financial condition, is marked by unabated claims - "claiming it" (Bowler 2013 151) means one must never admit that circumstances are ever anything other than what the believer hopes for. To speak hardship out loud is to invite hardship to exist and persist. Negativity is not allowed - indeed, negativity invites and assures prolonged illness or poverty. While the prohibition on negativity superficially signals the importance of positive thinking, it also effectively stifles any discussion of lingering hardship. Congregants can only speak of the blessings they've received - even if they had yet to receive them. Pointing to evidence that the Prosperity Gospel failed is credited with creating that very failure. As such, critique is silenced (Bowler 2013; Walton 2009).

When faced with indisputable evidence that the faithful have not attracted prosperity, believers react - according to Bowler (2013) in one of four ways: to reserve comment, so as not to judge; blame a personal failing on the part of the sufferer; rationalize hardship as "righteous suffering" (176) in the spirit of Job¹⁰; and lastly, a minority would quietly and privately, question the church. All four of these tactics silence any critique or questioning. Critics, including those which point to evidence of the failings of the Prosperity Gospel, are dismissed by Prosperity Gospel preachers as either Satan's emissaries or as lacking sufficient faith (Jenkins 2006).

With the ritualization and habituation of positive confessions, the Prosperity Gospel not only discourages critique of its own core tenets, it also discourages reflection on potential negative outcomes, such as acquiring debt: to explore potential negative consequences invites negative outcomes according to the Prosperity Gospel. The Veblenian social practices of the Prosperity Gospel – tithing and seed-sowing, wealth as a distinction of piety, and prosperity emulation through positive confession – provide a means of social control for neoliberalism (Walton 2012).

The theology of the Prosperity Gospel and Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is the prevailing ideological operant of the most recent stage in the evolution of monopoly capitalism over the last nearly five decades. Neoliberalism embodies the ideological shift in the purpose of the state from one that has a responsibility to insure full employment and protect its citizens against the exigencies of the market to one that has a responsibility to insure protection of the market itself (Harvey 2005). Under neoliberalism, the state is thus preoccupied with the frictionless functioning and expansion of markets rather than the general welfare of society or the particular welfare of any individual or group: the state legitimizes and prioritizes market activities above socially integrative ones. Individuals are left responsible for their own welfare under neoliberalism.

Indeed, neoliberalism teaches through the socialization process that each individual should be accountable to herself and in so doing, each individual's responsibility to others and to the collective is eroded. Society is then comprised entirely and solely of self-interested, atomistic individuals seeking to forward their own agendas. The emphasis on individual accountability and responsibility naturally segues into the power of the individual acting alone (Wrenn 2015).

The epicenter of the Prosperity Gospel theology is the individual's relationship with God. The Prosperity Gospel is thus a spiritual articulation of neoliberalism: the individualism of the Prosperity Gospel rejects state welfare assistance while it justifies and instrumentalizes class relations; individual responsibility is the core catechism of the Prosperity Gospel, much as it is the central ideological truism of neoliberalism; and the Prosperity Gospel loosely stitches back together the social dislocation wrought by neoliberalism and as a consequence, helps to sustain neoliberalism.

Wealth and Class

The Prosperity Gospel is unsubtly, if not explicitly, neoliberal. If all the individual needs to secure material wealth is a belief in God, then anything the state does is either redundant, irrelevant, or interferes with divine machinations - neoliberals would simply substitute free market for divine machinations. It is likewise an easy, parallel step between belief in the supernatural logic of a contractual promise from God to provide and belief in the supernatural logic of a free market which provides efficient and fair outcomes (Walton 2012).

The logic of the Prosperity Gospel and the logic of neoliberalism neatly align on the issue of welfare: both preach that an individual is responsible for her own welfare and that intervention of the state on behalf of the individual is tantamount to heresy. The anti-welfare

rhetoric of Prosperity Gospel preachers castigates those whose beliefs aren't strong enough to make God's promises manifest:

And if you are on welfare and food stamps, I encourage you to get off them as soon as you can. Welfare is a poverty train that will keep you broke, because if you're always depending on somebody else to do something for you, you're going to stay in poverty (Thompson 1997 33).

You ought to say, 'No I don't want payment from the government. I don't want to say that a man made me rich. I want God to pay me back (C. Dollar quoted in Bowler 2013 63).

This is something we, as believers, need to get clear about: Poverty is not a money problem. It's a spiritual problem. You can throw as much money at it as you want and, when you get finished, the poverty will still be there. President Lyndon Johnson proved this. Back in the 1960s he spent literally billions of dollars in his 'war on poverty,' yet more people in this nation are living below the poverty level now, than back then. The president's intentions were good; he just didn't realize that poverty, as a spiritual problem, requires a spiritual solution" (K. Copeland 2017 9).

Neoliberalism is dependent upon the existence of the welfare state - in a specific form - that helps to create and sustain flexible labor markets and defray the cost to capital of providing a living wage (Wrenn 2015). Neoliberalism is also dependent upon anti-welfare rhetoric that shapes public beliefs on the merits of individual responsibility and the evils of the undeserving poor. The Prosperity Gospel doth provides.

Spiritual/cultural movements like the Prosperity Gospel are both born from and are instrumental to the management of class relations; as this is true for capitalism, it holds true for the neoliberal ideology (Walton 2012). The appeal of the Prosperity Gospel cuts across class lines: for the upper class, it further justifies their place in the hierarchy; for the middle class, it affirms their aspirations and opens the perception of possibilities; and for the poor, the Prosperity Gospel gives hope.

Poverty is a curse and the Bible says that we have been redeemed from it (K. Copeland 21 1994 emphasis original).

Indeed, class mobility is grounded in the Biblical prophecy of the Rapture according to the Prosperity Gospel. Under traditional Evangelical eschatology, the Rapture occurs on Judgement Day when devout believers will be literally lifted from Earth to Heaven. Under the Prosperity Gospel, the Rapture is an ongoing process that lifts earthly problems from the believer; essentially, raptured believers can 'ascend' through the class ranks while still alive (Bowler 2013).

Moreover, the Prosperity Gospel justifies the distribution of income according to a spiritual metric and frames inequality as a spiritual battle between the have-belief and have-not-belief rather than as class warfare. In order to 'win' this spiritual battle and ascend class hierarchy, one must turn inward to strengthen her own belief rather than outward toward collective efforts - God will redistribute income according to faithfulness.

Now God is declaring the wealth of the wicked will begin transferring over to the innocent—and as impossible as that seems, it will surely happen. This message of wealth transfer literally runs throughout all of Scripture (Avanzini 1989 80).

It is the simple transference of the secular ideals of meritocracy and ambition which underpin neoliberalism to the non-secular ideals of spiritual worthiness and faith (Augustine 2010).

The Individual

The Prosperity Gospel aligns with and reinforces the core of neoliberalism - that of individualism. Within the Prosperity Gospel, the relationship a believer has with God is highly individualistic; salvation can only be achieved through the individual's covenant - a contractual relationship which exchanges belief and devotion for eternal salvation and earthly blessings - with God (Barker 2007). The Prosperity Gospel and neoliberalism are both premised on individual responsibility - in both systems, if an individual fails it is the result of incomplete dedication to their respective supernatural logics - if one wants to improve her material well-being, she needs to work harder (Walton 2012).

Faith is stored up in your heart—and since your faith (or lack of it) determines your future, the truth is, your future is stored up in your heart as well. Think about that. Your future is stored up in your heart! It's not dictated by your history, or your current circumstances. Your future is determined by you... Now, consider this: Who stored up the evil things in the evil man's heart? Obviously, the man himself did it. Who stored up the good things in the good man's heart? Again, the man himself did. (G. Copeland 1994 8-9).

We know that in the presence of God there is healing, and I would give all that I have to see people healed, so I really believe it is the fault of the person. They have failed to enter into God's presence and allow Him to touch them (Hinn as quoted in Bowler 2013 151).

According to the causal determinism of the Prosperity Gospel, individuals are fully responsible for their own prosperity or poverty, therefore the mission of the Prosperity Gospel church is one of spreading the Word and global reach (Bowler 2013; Walton 2009).

Within neoliberalism, the individual is self-referential and within a limited, personal sphere, has agency. That the neoliberal economic sphere has disembedded from and subordinated the other spheres of living, however means that the individual is only empowered to interact with and change institutions superficially; the individual cannot ignite lasting and systemic changes to the social structure itself, nor can the individual do much to change her position within the financial hierarchy (Wrenn 2015). The Prosperity Gospel offers a powerful counter narrative to the inauthentic agency of neoliberalism - the individual is able to control her circumstances (as well as her salvation) through self-discipline and belief. Take this prayer for job seekers:

"I now dissolve and put aside all negative, limiting beliefs about where I will work and what kind of job is available to me. I open myself to all of God's possibilities. I call for a perfect, satisfying, well-paying job to manifest in my life. I am always in the right place at the right time, for the Spirit of God directs my steps. (Prov. 16:9; Rom. 5:17.)" (Capps 2004 35-6)

The Prosperity Gospel offers the individual a sense, a perception of control - and a new *spiritual* hierarchy to which she can aspire, one which also offers financial returns (Brouwer 1996).

According to Prosperity Gospel teachings, all solutions to overcome adversity come from the individual - there is no emphasis on institutional, systemic, or social change. As such, the Prosperity Gospel teaches that the oppressive frameworks within which adherents are located are irrelevant and deprivation is the result of moral failings of individuals rather than systemic issues subject to social redress (Walton 2012, 2009).

Though (original) sin ruined God's original plan for us, Jesus restored it through His death on the cross and His resurrection. Christ destroyed the barriers that separated people by gender, race, age, or economic status, so that people could be reconciled to each other and to God... (Ephesians 2:14, 15, NIV). The world still lives according to the way life was before the cross, but when we accept what Jesus did to restore equality, we receive the freedom to be exactly who God created us to be. When we feel the tug on our hearts to do something others tell us is wrong because of our gender, we can move in that direction because Jesus has set us free to do so. We don't have to let the world squash the call of God on our lives. Christ has removed all inequalities... (Galatians 3:28). (T. Dollar 2017)

The idea that poverty is the result of moral failings is not new or unique to neoliberalism – after all, Malthus made it clear in his work his belief that poverty emerges from an individual's succumbing to her innate hedonistic tendencies. The Prosperity Gospel takes this line of thinking one step further by asserting that while there might exist institutional obstacles between the individual and financial success, those obstacles are irrelevant when the individual possesses the right spiritual fortitude. The Prosperity Gospel thus teaches that structural barriers and systemic obstacles are no match for the covenant between the believer and God. Individuals cannot therefore experience racism, misogyny, or any type of institutional discrimination or injustice without having explicitly invited that experience into her life through a negative mindset (Walton 2009, 2010).

The Prosperity Gospel movement and neoliberalism thus run in parallel. Both over-ascribe agency to the individual - all of the individual's success and failure is the result of that individual's choices. Both offer a single, clear touchstone - that of faith, faith that God will provide and faith in the free market. This straightforward and simple frame of individualism and faith makes the Prosperity Gospel and neoliberalism even further compatible and allows the individual to adapt and interpret that frame on her own terms.

Polanyi and prosperity

As capitalism evolves, continual technological advance in combination with capital's relentless accumulation imperative serves to amplify material progress. The increasing momentum of market intensification encourages the extraction of the market from the other spheres of social life, in other words, Polanyi's disembedding of the economic sphere. In following the logic of its own momentum, the economic sphere enlarges, eventually encompassing the entirety of social life, subordinating the other spheres of livelihood to support its purpose and further intensification (Polanyi 1944). The dictatorship of the disembedded economic sphere changes the structure of society and in so doing, fundamentally changes the institutional structures through which individuals are socialized. The concurrent intensification of the market mentality and the continued disembedding of the economy drives a deeper wedge into the development of personal relationships as anonymity of the market, pecuniary values, and the competition of emulation serve to distance individuals from one another by eroding, preventing, or calling into question social bonds and collective goals (Stanfield 1996). Although Polanyi wrote prior to the emergence of neoliberalism, his concepts of the disembedded economy and the protective response nevertheless describe quite clearly how neoliberalism emerged and continues to evolve (Dale 2010; Wrenn 2018). The Prosperity Gospel is a clear case study of Polanyi's disembedding within the context of neoliberalism. Likewise, the ways in which the Prosperity Gospel churches respond to the protective responses from its congregants reinforces neoliberalism and serves to differentiate the Prosperity Gospel from mega- and evangelical churches.

Prosperity Gospel churches have embraced the aesthetics of corporate America in their large, non-descript (in one case, a former pro-basketball arena) worship headquarters

equipped with stages instead of altars, typically with a globe as backdrop instead of a cross. Services function more like conventions or TED Talks and the preachers look more like bankers than clergy. As well, these churches have adopted the standard capitalist operating and management practices: large payrolls; retail stores offering everything from books to clothing to home décor; production studios to polish the weekly services to a high shine for the millions in the global audience watching online. The Prosperity Gospel doesn't just support capitalism, it has harnessed capitalism for its own purposes (Ehrenreich 2009; Walton 2009). Indeed, the Prosperity Gospel is a micromodel of capitalism: the preachers hold the 'means of production' - they are the gatekeepers, the owners of sacred space, and the liaison to God; the congregation are 'the workers' - apart from church service, they volunteer their time to keep the church running and are charged to recruit other workers/worshippers into the fold. The call to tithe and seed-sow is outright extraction, the support from church volunteers is exploitation (Bowler 2015).

The size of the market for the Prosperity Gospel is difficult to judge. Industry figures - including sales, yearly income, or even congregation numbers¹¹ – are difficult to uncover or assess. The closest proxy for marketing and merchandising within Prosperity Gospel churches is in the number of books authored by the central figure in the respective organization.

Preacher	Organization	# of “distinct works”
Joyce Meyer	Joyce Meyer Ministries	727
Creflo Dollar*	Creflo Dollar Ministries	360
Kenneth Copeland*	Kenneth Copeland Ministries	272
Benny Hinn	Benny Hinn Ministries	170
Joel Osteen*	Joel Osteen Ministries	149
Jerry Savelle*	Jerry Savelle Ministries International	69
Paula White	Paula White Ministries	64
Charles Capps*	Capps Ministries	60
Leroy Thompson*	Leroy Thompson Ministerial Alliance	19

All figures from each individual author's page on Goodreads

*author quoted in this article

It should be noted that the number of books published by the central figure in the Prosperity Gospel ministry constitutes a very conservative proxy for the sales effort of each respective church. Each ministry's website sells much more merchandise than the numbered works listed here, including books authored by other members of the ministry (typically a spouse of the central figure), CDs, DVDs, study guides, conferences, and assorted gifts (candles, wall art, tote bags, etc).

The social dislocation and economic precarity generated by the disembedding of the economic sphere and the intensification of the market, prompts Polanyi's protective response. Individuals seek meaning, order, and the means for social continuity in daily living and look to major social institutions like churches to serve that function as an integrating mechanism and provide opportunities for individuals to express social concerns and seek amelioration (McClintock, 1998). The Prosperity Gospel does provide a community bound by the belief that things will get better - coping emotions previously provided by unions, but stripped of collective action (Carter 2015). In offering a social community, the Prosperity Gospel functions in a similar manner to megachurches and evangelical churches, both of which place an emphasis on fellowship through social groups and activities offered outside of the Sunday

service. As well, all three groups generally provide opportunities for social connection online, so even far-flung parishioners can experience and benefit from the fellowship made possible by these organizations.

Prosperity Gospel, mega-, and evangelical churches tend to overlap but should not be thought of as synonyms. In broad strokes, megachurches are typically defined as having membership exceeding 2,000 members and evangelical churches are unified by a 'born-again' Christian theology. While the Prosperity Gospel churches typically share similar aesthetics and fellowship/social connections to mega- and evangelical churches, the emphasis on seed-sowing, positive confessions, the aspirations of personal wealth, and emphasis on the individual set the Prosperity Gospel apart. The community provided through Prosperity Gospel churches is thus of a very different character than the communities of mega- and evangelical churches.

The social support offered through Prosperity Gospel churches is rooted in the above discussed positive confessions wherein admitting that one requires support is cast as inviting the negativity the individual is already experiencing. Prosperity Gospel congregants are thus discouraged from expressing the protective response to the intensifying market setting – from seeking social support through their fellowship networks or material support from the church. Apart from providing rationales for why a congregant might experience financial hardship and precarity along with the advice to persevere in making positive confessions, the Prosperity Gospel does not go far in directly addressing the material side of the protective response. The rabid individualism of the Prosperity Gospel means that local community engagement and aid to individuals is limited. Engagement primarily takes the form of non-localized educational, self-help materials (for example, financial counseling) or in offering limited-run services or annual drives as opposed to sustained, longer-term initiatives (Bowler 2013; Walton 2009). Indeed, the lack of longer term initiatives which might provide a material resources for congregants distinguishes Prosperity Gospel churches from mega- and evangelical churches.

The Prosperity Gospel provides believers an organized, structured world view that brings order to the chaotic disruption created by the continually disembedding economy (Polanyi 1944). The invisible forces of the market and the instability wrought by financial markets of intangible assets are given form through the Prosperity Gospel - invisible forces are 'evidence' of God's hand. National or global economic downturns are explained as evidence of God's displeasure of the general state of earthly affairs all while the disembedding of the economic sphere and the intensification of the market mentality creates social dislocation and cultural malaise which on an individual level takes on an apocalyptic portent. The Prosperity Gospel thus meets part of the Polanyi's protective response: the Prosperity Gospel demystifies neoliberal capitalism by providing God as the grand orchestrator – the man with the invisible hand.

I'm not moved by the economy, the stock market, my job situation. I know God supplies all of my needs. He promised He would prosper me even in a recession (Osteen n.d.).

God's financial system transcends the national economy, the stock market and any company's layoff plan. And, He wants you and your family to take advantage of it...(K. Copeland n.d.).

In this way, the Prosperity Gospel provides a rationale for the vicissitudes of the economy and lack of economic mobility within neoliberal capitalism. By explaining economic hardship and precarity as tests of belief and devotion, the Prosperity Gospel essentially absolves neoliberal capitalism for not rewarding the hard work and effort that is supposedly required to achieve financial success. The luck - over which the individual has no control -

which is actually required to succeed financially is transformed into devotion - which the individual can control (Barker 2007; Brouwer 1996).

By somewhat ameliorating the social dislocation wrought by neoliberalism and explaining material precarity as something that can be overcome with proper devotion, the Prosperity Gospel supports neoliberalism while also serving as a Polanyian countermovement against it. That is, the Prosperity Gospel at least partially redresses the social dislocation and distance that is consequent of the disembedding of the economic from the social sphere without challenging the economic sphere, without challenging the neoliberal ideology which guides it. Indeed, the Prosperity Gospel mimics and replicates neoliberalism.

Prosperity Gospel and Great Financial Crisis

Two institutions which support neoliberalism - lackadaisically regulated financial and credit markets and the accumulation imperative of the Prosperity Gospel – are a potentially dangerous combination (Van Biema 2008). In the early noughties, the Prosperity Gospel found particular resonance in W. Bush's advancement of the 'Ownership Society' and together fueled the idea that anyone could buy a house (Phillips 2008). Exact figures are not available, but it is easy to see how Prosperity Gospel believers might get swept up in manias, such as the housing market bubble prior to the 2008 crash: when the Prosperity Gospel teaches congregants that God will provide – that God will open the path before you – and then a mortgage on a previously unaffordable house is extended, it might well seem like divine intervention rather than predatory lending (Walton 2012).

By preaching the 'name it and claim it' doctrine, the Prosperity Gospel - intentionally or not - taught believers to see the easy credit of the pre-crash years as a sign of God's favor and His desire for the individual to own a home:

God caused the bank to ignore my credit score and blessed me with my first house
(Walton, cited in Van Biema 2008).

The promise of God's intervention to provide materially leaves individuals who are actively looking for 'signs' of favor vulnerable to credit offers. As well the Prosperity Gospel encourages debt accumulation with assertions that God will provide. Within the doctrine of the Prosperity Gospel, taking on debt serves as a 'leap of faith,' an act of belief that although the individual does not possess the resources now, she will in the future by God's hand (Augustine 2010). Take this guidance from Charles Capps (2004 31, all emphasis original)

DECLARATIONS*

*To be spoken boldly and authoritatively with emphasis on capitalized words.

To Eliminate Debt

Take copies of mortgages, notes, credit card debt, past due bills, delinquent taxes, and other papers representing your debt, and lay them out before you. Boldly declare on the authority of God's Word: In Jesus' name and on the authority of His Holy Word, I call these debts PAID IN FULL! Debt, I speak to you in Jesus' name: BE PAID and BE GONE! Dematerialize and CEASE TO EXIST! I now declare that all my debts, mortgages, and notes are PAID IN FULL, CANCELLED, or DISSOLVED!

Neoliberal financial deregulation baited the hook with subprime lending and the Prosperity Gospel assured that there would be no catch (Walton 2012).

The appeal of the Prosperity Gospel movement in both pre- and post-crisis years appears if not rational, then at least logical from the believer's perspective. In the pre-crisis years, when credit was cheap and abundant, consumers aspiring to the next rung up the financial hierarchy spent on mortgages, which they then refinanced to take out home equity loans in order to continue spending. It is easy to see how abundantly available credit could be interpreted by the believer as God paving the way toward the fulfillment of their desires if not making good on them. In the post-crisis years, the Prosperity Gospel provided certainty

that joblessness, homelessness, and economic precarity were only short run matters of circumstance. The Prosperity Gospel offered (and offers) a way for individuals to feel a semblance of control and hope when an economy crashed around them (Phillips 2008).

However, all of us are aware of the results of the economic downturn, such as families affected by foreclosure. People have lost cars. Children have been displaced from schools due to parents having to relocate. Millions have suffered job losses....God honors His Word, and in it, He promises us that a payday is on the way. Jeremiah 51:56 describes Him as the God of recompense, a rewarder—the Great Compensator. Now this can be good or bad, depending upon how you are living. Every action, whether positive or negative, will be rewarded. Speaking of good and bad, Proverbs 12:14 tells us it is all in the power of the tongue. We must not allow our mouths to put us in, or keep us in, poverty by speaking negative words. Say only what you would like to manifest in your life. If you don't want it to happen, then don't say it—not even jokingly (C. Dollar b).

While the Prosperity Gospel might be easier to sell during periods of boom, it also provides a safe harbor during periods of economic downturn: economic anxiety is soothed by assurances that faith will deliver, God will make the way forward (Walton 2012). Indeed, Prosperity Gospel preachers were able to turn the financial crisis in their favor, calling on congregants to energize their efforts and work harder in believing prosperity could be theirs, although the tone adapted, changing focus from achieving luxury to focus on coping strategies and how to survive in the economic downturn (Bowler 2013).

Conclusion

Americans are deeply, culturally attached to the idea of reinvention and redemption. It is this unrelenting optimism of Americans that fuels the pursuit of wealth on which the country was founded. The Prosperity Gospel presents itself as means by which the 'American Dream' might be achieved. For those who are less adept at navigating the business world, financial success is still available for those who can dedicate themselves with the same frenzied ambition to the spiritual world. Indeed, Western capitalist societies operate and are sustained by faith in merit – the idea that hard work will eventually pay off financially. In other iterations of Christianity, faithfulness might be informally measured by any variety of social practices, such as church attendance, involvement in church activities, mission trips and the like. In the Prosperity Gospel, faithfulness can be measured by the same metric of success as capitalism – through money. The Veblenian social practices which sustain and perpetuate the Prosperity Gospel in the US all hinge upon financial signifiers: the tithe demonstrates faith that God will allow the believer to prosper, wealth is the proof, and emulations of prosperity are encouraged.

The institutions of neoliberalism and the institutions of the Prosperity Gospel are mutually reinforcing. The teachings of the Prosperity Gospel affirm and sustain the underlying ethos of neoliberalism. The theology of the Prosperity Gospel reinforces the neoliberal idea that the poor are poor and the rich are rich because they deserve to be so; the Prosperity Gospel gives that logic a moral and spiritual sanction. By extension, poverty is sinful while wealth and excess become not just culturally acceptable, but spiritually aspirational. Ability to succeed in the marketplace transforms into a measure of moral fiber, of character in the Prosperity Gospel. Under neoliberalism, poverty marks lack of ambition. Under the Prosperity Gospel, poverty marks lack of faith (Bowler 2013). Both are the fault of the individual.

The Prosperity Gospel taps into the deeply ingrained American belief that personal reinvention is always possible while it reinforces the deeply ingrained neoliberal belief that individual responsibility is always proper. Because the spiritual universe operates on known,

mechanistic spiritual laws, individual believers are all the more responsible for their own fortunes and fates (Bowler 2013). Through the Prosperity Gospel theological paradigm, sense can be made of economic upheaval and uncertainty, job insecurity, poverty and overall economic precarity. As well, the Prosperity Gospel gives believers enduring hope that circumstances can and will change and that the individual is empowered to make that change manifest through belief (Barker 2007). The Prosperity Gospel requires faith in the Divine that an individual's material needs will be met; the subtext of which is faith that the capitalist system will deliver those material needs, no revolution required (Bowler 2015).

That even individuals who are more financially comfortable still find solace within the Prosperity Gospel fold is telling. It speaks to the deep unease and precarity that even relatively secure individuals feel. It speaks to the unconscious recognition that agency within neoliberalism is incomplete, that the levers of power are pulled by other individuals remote and invisible to most (Brouwer 1996; Wrenn 2015). The theology of the Prosperity Gospel demystifies neoliberalism through supernatural explanations; it is this metaphysical demystification which superficially re-embeds the economic sphere into the daily lives of individuals otherwise distanced from it.

The Prosperity Gospel supports and sustains neoliberalism; the Prosperity Gospel is an institution which provides refuge to individuals from the exigencies of the market as well as a set of social practices which reinforce individual responsibility and fault. The Prosperity Gospel thus offers a spiritual version of neoliberal self-governance (Ruccio 2015). And the formula offered is simple - if you don't like your life, change your lifestyle. Faith is the catalyst which ignites prosperity - and it is not a blind faith, for it is proven in the health and wealth of its truly devoted. Faith activates invisible forces (like an invisible hand) to bring the believer tangible returns (Bowler 2013). The Prosperity Gospel is the American Dream reshaped and given clear instructions - through devotion to God, patience, and belief in His blessings, prosperity will follow. Given the economic precarity of neoliberalism, it is easy to see why this message seduces.

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¹ Scholars, much better equipped with both insight and intelligence than this author, have written volumes about this relationship. See Tawney (2015), Weber (2010), Veblen (1997) to start.

² While the Prosperity Gospel is a distinctly American invention, the movement has since grown well beyond US borders. See Attanasi and Yong (2012); Brown (2011); Brouwer, Gifford, and Rose (1996).

³ Genesis 15:18 KJV “In the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates”

⁴ See Wrenn 2020 for a more in-depth exploration of the term ‘Veblenian social practice’

⁵ Malachi 3:8-12 KJV “Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings. Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation. Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it. And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground; neither shall your vine cast her fruit before the time in the field, saith the Lord of hosts. And all nations shall call you blessed: for ye shall be a delightsome land, saith the Lord of hosts.

⁶ For example: Abraham, Joseph, and David

⁷ Matthew 6:19-21 KJV “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also”

⁸ Matthew 19:2 KJV “And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God”

⁹ 1 Timothy 6:10 KJV “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs”

¹⁰ According to the Prosperity Gospel, material lack might well be a test proctored by God to test one's devotion or faith - much like Job (Barker 2007).

¹¹ Prosperity Gospel preaching (like that in many megachurches) transcends traditional media as the followers of the Prosperity Gospel learn and participate in its teachings through a sundry of mediums outside the traditional in-person church sermon, whether through watching televised services, books and videos, engaging with the material through social media or participation in workshops. For this reason, counting the number of believers is a difficult, if not impossible task (Bowler 2013).