

The Ponzi Prosperity Gospel

By Pen Itent

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Editor's Note: Be sure to read the companion to the below article, [Cosmic Lessons: When the Ministry Pulls a Madoff](#), by renowned scholar, Anthony B. Pinn.

Today we shriek as we hear of financial scams, corporate greed, and virtually anything money-related that isn't entirely on the up-and-up. While religion has generally been a help in these economically difficult times, there is one segment of Christianity that is scamming as many as they can. Those who have ears (and debt) let them hear.

The Prosperity Gospel, also known as a facet of the [Word of Faith](#) movement (a louder voice in Pentecostalism), has been writing checks with its lips that's its theology can't cash. Last year's [Pew Foundation mega-poll](#), which surveyed nearly 35,000 people (one of the largest religion polls ever accomplished), revealed a few interesting facts about Christians in the Pentecostal tradition, among them:

- *Pentecostals have the lowest incomes of any other Christian denomination.*
- *Pentecostals have the least education of any other Christian denomination.*

The results show that Pentecostals have the most high school dropouts, the fewest college graduates, and the fewest post-graduates. But the most interesting thing is that they earn the least annual income of *any* other Christian tradition polled. This is shocking, considering that a main feature in popular Pentecostalism is the Prosperity Gospel, where church members are promised that God will make them rich beyond their wildest dreams if they tithe generously and believe that they will receive the money.

The trouble I've seen...

Not only do Pentecostals fail to out-earn the regular "non-spirit filled" Christian, they make less. For me, to read such information is heartbreaking, as I am a teacher in a private school that's part of a Word of Faith church. The church is doing very well for itself, as most Pentecostal churches are, but the people are suffering.

I often speak with coworkers and church members as they slowly slip into despair. I watch helplessly as their hopes dim, and their pennies dwindle. When I attend a service at this church, I hear the pastors declare that God will make everybody rich, if only they will throw what little they do have into the offering plate. Loud confident voices echo off the palatial walls of the sanctuary, while weary, struggling believers bristle with the hope of God's "promises." My impoverished friends dance down the plush expensive carpet to the altar and pull out their dollar bills (not their [food stamps](#) and government checks, though they have those also) and cheerfully give. The pastor nods approvingly, his hands folded in prayer (a shiny Rolex on his wrist), his eyes misty.

Say what you want about the corruption of the pulpit, or the decadence of the minister—that's not my issue. My point is that while the world howls at the scam artists who fail to deliver on big promises, Christianity has its very own Ponzi scheme that's alive and well. At least when Bernie Madoff promised big returns he actually delivered (if only for a moment); the prosperity gospel doesn't even do that much. When [Joel Osteen](#), Ken Copeland, Paula White, or Benny Hinn take your money, you'll never see it again (unless you happen to glimpse one of their private jets leaving a runway for Bermuda).

Creating "The Least of These"

When a major tenet of your theology is that people who invest in your church will experience wealth, while the facts show that your congregants are among the poorest and most desperate in the country, you have just been exposed. Further, when the national economy is in shambles, it should be criminal to continue to avoid taxes as a charity, yet earn immense amounts of capital on the promise of a better future. In the business world we call it a scam.

So why are we silent while this happens in every neighborhood in America?

Another concern raised by the Pew poll is the average profile of the victim. As Pentecostals tend to be the least well-educated group of believers they make a prime target for would-be millionaire pastors. In many ways, I am as green with jealousy as these prosperity preachers are with greed, in that the scammed believers have more faith in their little finger than I will probably ever know in my lifetime. They would give the shirt off their backs if they believed God wanted them to, and many of them have. These people have the purest of Christian hearts, trusting the intentions of their Shepherd as they're led as lambs to the slaughter.

bankrupt Prosperity

Imagine that there was a brand of theology in which people were taught that God has promised to give followers an additional arm, right from the center of their chest. Let's say it taught that scripture had everywhere indicated that this was the case, and that by believing this "fuller" version of the gospel, you were opening up the as-of-yet closed off area of blessings that Christians have forgotten about (i.e. growing another appendage to better do God's work).

Let's imagine that after about 50 years the movement has spread worldwide, with followers numbering in the millions, and you look to see how many of these folks have in fact grown that "arm of the Lord." Upon inspection you find that the vast majority of them have lost an arm, leaving them worse off and less able to serve than even those old two-armed folk. The irony would be overwhelming.

Despite the statistics, and the continued empirical evidence of devastated human lives (Pentecostals also have the most divorces), few if any Christians have plainly spoken against the Prosperity Gospel, or raised awareness that measures any merit. While high-level corruption and financial disarray are the soup du jour of recent weeks' media cycles, this prominent and aberrant theology has been allowed to wreak destruction on a mass of people who are grasping at economic straws.

Prosperity Gospel theology is bankrupt. The debate raged for years about how much sense coveting money made in the context of biblical principles, but now the fruit has been borne and the numbers don't lie: those who attend Prosperity Gospel churches are in fact worse off for it.

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