

What do you get for your Dollar?

Asking what's special about the prosperity gospel yields surprising answers. First, what do the suckers get out of it?

- [Comments \(14\)](#)

Two questions have arisen in comments to my [piece on the "Blab it and grab it" show](#) put on at the Hippodrome in Golders Green. The first is [what the audience gets](#) out of these prosperity gospel shows (it's obvious what the preacher gets: money, fame, and status) The second is whether there is any essential difference between this kind of thing and other religious beliefs. I think that both questions are connected, in a way that becomes apparent when we answer the first one.

Obviously, the audience at these shows don't get rich; they don't get healed of incurable diseases: they don't get any of the blessings promised on stage and they pay a lot of money, often more than they can afford, to keep the preachers in luxury. So why do they keep coming back? Credulity comes into any answer, and so do low expectations, and so do the tremendous attempts made to keep them: viewed economically, modern pentecostalism is a merchandising operation, kept afloat by live shows.

That's not its only likeness to the music business. What you get at these shows is partly a slick musical performance, in which the audience is invited, exhorted, to join in. Communal singing is a joy; cheesy "anthemic" rock music fills stadiums: add in the element of community which the pentecostalists undoubtedly offer, and we have a coherent set of attractions quite independent of the theological or magical decorations. I have friends who used to trail [the Grateful Dead](#) around America, singing ["Wake up to find out that you are the eyes of the world"](#). Now that was a largely middle class pastime, and the music was a whole lot better. But there are certainly important similarities as well as a difference I will get to later.

On top of the music, pentecostal congregations get a dramatic performance. These preachers are very talented actors. I'd say they were at least as convincing as anyone you would find in a daytime television soap, and their story lines are no more improbable. So if you look at the cultural alternatives available to the kind of people who go to those shows – and they are hardly going to go to opera, or live theatre – you can see that this makes sense, simply as a way to spend money on entertainment and self-transcendence.

Of course it's money they can't afford; and of course real art offers something much greater than the transient promise of wish-fulfilment. But even if we look at this kind of thing as no more improving than crack cocaine or alcoholism, it does a great deal less damage to the addict's health, and to their ability to function in the outside world. The deadheads, like contemporary middle class university students, could goof around, take lots of drugs, and generally behave in a totally dysfunctional way without suffering any long-term consequences. They weren't going to lose their jobs or screw up their futures. It was all a holiday. The working poor don't have that luxury. They can't get back after mistakes of that sort. And they are the backbone of the prosperity gospel business: no one bothers to exploit people who only have a giro to give. It's an important attraction of all Pentecostalism, though, that it offers a holiday from sanity and sense without leaving you incapable of work the next morning; and you don't wake up the next morning to discover that you have beaten your wife or left your children hungry.

I know some people die every year as a result of not going to the doctor because their pastor tells them not to – but it's a very much smaller figure than the number of people who die each year because they can't afford medical treatment. Elderly, poor people in the US [survive their illnesses better](#) if they are religious. Unless you want to assume that this is all the work of the Holy Ghost, you have to put it down to a mixture of healthy lifestyle and the psychological benefits of belonging to a supportive community. Of course, most of their churches are not "blab it and grab it" prosperity gossellers; but while the prosperity gossellers will certainly make you poorer, they won't make you less healthy. And they will keep you entertained: all you require is a willing suspension of disbelief.

Now there is a way to test this theory, which would be to look at prosperity gossellers as a whole, and see whether their performances are slicker, and more dramatically engaging, than those who preach orthodox, or more orthodox [Christianity](#). I'd be prepared to bet that they are, though I don't know who (except Templeton) would fund such a study, nor who would perform it.

None of this is to deny that the preachers exploit their flocks. Of course they do. But it's an attempt to answer the question: what do the flock get out of it? Why do they keep coming back? And I am reluctant to assume that it is simply because they are stupid, brainwashed, ignorant, and so on. Even if many of them are in fact stupid and ignorant, that doesn't explain why they would choose this way of spending their money rather than, say, the slots at Vegas.