

The questionable legacy of a prosperity preacher

By Susan K. Smith | December 15, 2009; 6:04 PM ET

Why does the "prosperity gospel" work so much better in drawing people than the Gospel of Jesus the Christ?

I read a piece by [William Lobdell](#), published in The Los Angeles Times, which reminded me that the late Oral Roberts was the preacher who "popularized" the prosperity gospel. Through his relentless efforts at permeating the airwaves, both television and radio, with his messages, as well as a well-planned direct mail campaign, he drew literally millions of people into his ministry ...and pulled in literally millions of dollars.

When I read Lobdell's piece, I got mad. I had to stop and think about why.

Was I mad at Roberts? No. He did what he did and he did it well. I think he had an enormous amount of faith, uncorrupted faith, I think, before all the money rolled in.

It's the money I'm mad about. No, not the money, but the worship of money over the Gospel. And in spite of the Gospel being the tool that Roberts and other present day prosperity preachers use to reel in the people, the world, for the most part, is STILL going to hell in a hand basket. Money is the god of worship, not God.

Roberts had an ability, at least in the beginning, to hear God. People can and do hear God. They are called mystics, and their gift to be able to hear God is real. When others who cannot hear God hear someone say that they do, they are drawn.

Hearing God is good in and of itself, but when hearing God translates into giving people hope, it is an unstoppable force. Many people have grown up under an oppressive God, as described by preachers. This God is angry, jealous, mean and not really fair.

But Roberts and others made this God the herald of the promise that all people are promised a good and prosperous life. That is appealing and it draws people. It makes them have a belief fueled by an intense desire for good things in their lives. They will do most anything to make the good things happen, and most of what we call "good" involves having money and things.

It seems to me, watching all of this, that what happens is that the preacher him or herself, now bringing in not only people but their money, becomes corrupted. It's the money. God is good and all, but God becomes circumspect and is used, for instance, in "healings" to bring in even more people.

I never listened to Oral Roberts intentionally; I heard snippets of his sermons from time to time, but I was always bothered by what I thought was manipulative Christianity, which involves this using God, or manipulating the Word of God, for selfish gain.

I talked to a preacher who had once been "in the crowd" with Roberts and others, and who talked about the lavish lifestyles they enjoyed, and I thought about the scores of people who were struggling to just make ends meet.

When Roberts said that "God will take me home" if he didn't raise \$8 million to build his medical center, I was offended. There it was again: this manipulation of people, who desperately wanted good things, and who were being taught that if one gave money, especially to the man or woman of God, good things, meaning money and material possessions, would be theirs for the asking.

I think that it is sad when faith melts and manipulation of God and God's word takes over, and I think Roberts did that. Money and power are very strong spiritual forces in the world. They give people a false sense of who they are and what they can do.

That is not good in any case, but when it comes to religion, it's unforgivable. There are people who will never be rich, but who are good people nonetheless. There are people who are attending the churches of preachers like Roberts who have nothing but hope, and will yet give their last penny to the preacher.

Meanwhile, there's the world, filled with suffering people, hungry and sick people, who need to know that there is a place in God's kingdom for them ... and that the people on earth, in churches, care enough about them to help them.

Oral Roberts was an American icon, and, no doubt, many will miss him. He was a fiery preacher and made people hope, and that is good.

But at the end of the day, and now, at the end of his life, was and is the world any better for his work? The huddled masses still huddle, while the likes of Roberts live in opulence.

That's a troubling thought.

http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/susan_k_smith/2009/12/roberts_legacy_questionable.html