

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Prosperity Gospel Born in the USA

RUSSELL S. WOODBRIDGE, PHD



My eyes were intently scanning, and perhaps my heart coveting, the piles of books at the Christian book fair in Kyiv, Ukraine. As I perused the merchandise, my eyes stopped, focused, and involuntarily rolled upward. There it was: Joel Osteen's *Your Best Life Now*, translated into Russian, lying on the table in front of me. This was another reminder that although the modern prosperity gospel originated in the United States, its preachers have exported this deadly virus around the world to places such as Latin America, Africa, Asia, and even Eastern Europe.

This article will briefly trace the origins of the prosperity gospel and suggest some reasons as to why it has prospered in the United States.

Rooted in New Thought

The prosperity gospel is built on a quasi-Christian heresy, popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the United States, known as New Thought. This philosophy teaches that the key to health and wealth acquisition is thinking, visualizing, and speaking the right words. Norman Vincent Peale (1898–1993), pastor of Marble Collegiate Church in New York City, popularized New Thought ideas and techniques in America through his book *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952). Ralph Waldo Trine (1866–1958), however, was the most prolific purveyor of New Thought. In both works, one can discern

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

some of the key recurring elements of the prosperity gospel: speaking the right words, invoking a universal law of success with words, and having faith in oneself.

The ideas of New Thought influenced, among others, E. W. Kenyon (1867–1948), an evangelist, pastor, and founder of Bethel Bible Institute. His approach to theology is the basis for one of the prosperity gospel’s most distinctive features—speaking the right words to bring about a new reality; what you confess, you possess. Kenyon served as a link to the popular prosperity preachers that formed the foundation of the modern prosperity gospel movement.

For example, in the late 1940s, Oral Roberts burst onto the religious scene with his ministry of alleged healing and financial prosperity. In the 1980s, his television show was one of the most popular religious programs in the country. While Roberts certainly captured national attention and spread prosperity theology, most recognize Kenneth E. Hagin (1917–2003) as the most prominent evangelist of the prosperity gospel as well the father of the Word of Faith movement. More than any other factor, the Word of Faith movement was the vehicle responsible for spreading prosperity teaching across the United States in the late 20th century.

In 1962, Hagin established his evangelistic ministry for the purpose of propagating his doctrines. Yet Hagin was not alone in promoting prosperity teaching. Numerous other preachers adopted Hagin’s tainted doctrine and began their own media ministries. Examples include Hagin’s son Kenneth Hagin Jr., Kenneth Copeland, Frederick Price, Robert Tilton, Benny Hinn, Charles Capps, and Jerry Savelle, among others.

While there isn’t a Word of Faith or prosperity gospel denomination, many organizations assist the ministries of prosperity advocates and export the prosperity gospel worldwide through media. In 1973, Paul and Jan Crouch, along with Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, founded the Trinity Broadcast Network (TBN). According to its website, TBN is now the world’s largest Christian television network. TBN serves as a platform for prosperity theology teachers to reach millions, including such well-known health-and-wealth preachers as Rod Parsley, Creflo Dollar, Paula White, Kenneth Copeland, Jesse Duplantis, and Kenneth Hagin Jr.

Today in the United States, the prosperity gospel is popular once again through the ministries of Joel Osteen, T. D. Jakes, and Joyce Meyer and others. In his 2007 book, *Become a Better You* (Free Press) Osteen writes, “Start thinking, feeling, and speaking positively about yourself. The Scripture says, ‘Our faith is made effectual when we acknowledge everything good in us.’ . . . Our faith is most effective when we acknowledge the good things that are in us. Declare affirmations such as ‘I have a bright future. I am gifted. I am talented. People like me. I have the favor of God.’”

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

This message is nothing more than New Thought ideas of positive thinking and the power of words to create new realities. Sadly, their media empires export this false teaching around the world. Without question, the prosperity gospel originated in the United States, but *why* does the prosperity gospel resonate and flourish here?

Secret to Success

3

While there is not just one factor in its success, perhaps a combination of reasons helps explain why the prosperity gospel has found a home in the States.

- **It appeals to the natural human desire to be successful, healthy, and financially secure.** Though these desires are not inherently sinful, they can become so if they supplant one's desire for God. The problem, then, is not with health and wealth but with one's attitude toward such things. Whenever we place our security and trust in anything or anyone other than Jesus Christ, we become idolaters. In a sense, then, the prosperity gospel brings out the worst in a wayward heart struggling to find its sufficiency in Christ. This reason, of course, is true of all humans regardless of where they live, but the next reason is peculiar to the United States.
- **It appeals to Americans because it helps them achieve the American Dream.** Own your own home, own two cars, and have financial security and a happy family. Bolstering the American dream is a consumer culture whereby advertisers try to make you discontent with your health, appearance, finances, or current possessions in order to buy their products. "You deserve better, and you can improve your life and be happier with our product," the message goes. Moreover, there is a strong concept in American culture of personal fulfillment, or perhaps even entitlement, and the prosperity message promises just that: personal fulfillment through positive confessions and words of faith. Ultimately, achieving the American Dream is the sign of success rather than faithfulness to God, and your immaterial faith in God will result in material riches. The prosperity gospel teaches that you don't need to give up on the American Dream; instead, you should see it as God's plan for and blessing on your life.
- **It appeals to certain aspects of American culture.** Optimism and individualism abound in the States. Have you ever heard mantras like "Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps" and "Be all you can be"? Personal responsibility and a positive attitude are desirable traits, but with such optimism and individualism Americans tend to have a lofty view of human nature and potential. The prosperity gospel says you are good and have the ability to bend circumstances to your will. Simply

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

change your thinking and your words, believe, and then God—your personal cosmic bellhop—will give you a push on the road to success.

- **In the framework of capitalism and a strong work ethic, the opportunity to create and increase wealth is present.** The United States is a wealthy country, in part, due to these factors. A capitalistic system has its advantages, and the creation of wealth through honest work is good for society; one can see, then, how the prosperity gospel is enticing. When you live in a country where upward mobility is possible, and there is a thriving economic system, having God on your side and blessing the economic system is an added bonus. You just need to have enough faith and divine blessings will flow from God. It is, after all, your right and privilege to be a child of the King.
- **Many in the church are more influenced by culture than by Scripture.** Christians often define happiness, joy, and success by the world's standards instead of God's. We often view success in terms of status, wealth, and position rather than holiness, faithfulness, and obedience to God.

Unfortunately, the prosperity gospel has spread to other countries through books, conferences, social media, and television—even in unlikely places. Last year I spoke in Armenia. What was the requested topic? The truth about the prosperity gospel. It continues to spread globally from its beginnings in the United States of America.

Russell S. Woodbridge lives in L'viv, Ukraine, with his wife, Ingrid. He teaches at Ukrainian Baptist Theological Seminary and is the co-author with David W. Jones of *Health, Wealth & Happiness: Has the Prosperity Gospel Overshadowed the Gospel of Christ?*

© The Gospel Coalition, June 14, 2015. Retrieved August 3, 2022.

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/prosperity-gospel-born-in-the-usa/>