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# Does God Want Us to Be Rich? *TIME* Looks at Prosperity Theology

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The cover photograph for this week's issue of *TIME* magazine just about says it all — a picture of a Rolls Royce grille with a chrome cross as hood ornament. In the event anyone missed the point, the cover asks: "Does God Want You to Be Rich?"

Theological confusion takes many forms, but with this cover story, *TIME* directs us to one of the most pervasive perversions of the Christian Gospel in our times — prosperity theology. The article, written by David Van Biema and Jeff Chu, is fair, balanced, and devastating.

As they explain:

*For several decades, a philosophy has been percolating in the 10 million-strong Pentecostal wing of Christianity that seems to turn the Gospels' passage on its head: certainly, it allows, Christians should keep one eye on heaven. But the new good news is that God doesn't want us to wait. Known (or vilified) under a variety of names—Word of Faith, Health and Wealth, Name It and Claim It, Prosperity Theology—its emphasis is on God's promised generosity in this life and the ability of believers to claim it for themselves. In a nutshell, it suggests that a God who loves you does not want you to be broke. Its signature verse could be John 10:10: "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly." In a TIME poll, 17% of Christians surveyed said they considered themselves part of such a movement, while a full 61% believed that God wants people to be prosperous. And 31%—a far higher percentage than there are Pentecostals in America—agreed that if you give your money to God, God will bless you with more money.*

Then:

*"Prosperity" first blazed to public attention as the driveshaft in the moneymaking machine that was 1980s televangelism and faded from mainstream view with the Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart scandals. But now, after some key modifications (which have inspired some to redub it Prosperity Lite), it has not only recovered but is booming. Of the four biggest megachurches in the country, three—Osteen's Lakewood in Houston; T.D. Jakes' Potter's House in south Dallas; and Creflo Dollar's World Changers near Atlanta—are Prosperity or Prosperity Lite pulpits (although Jakes' ministry has many more facets). While they don't exclusively teach that God's riches want to be in believers' wallets, it is a key part of their doctrine. And propelled by Osteen's 4 million-selling book, *Your Best Life Now*, the belief has swept beyond its Pentecostal base into more buttoned-down evangelical churches, and even into congregations in the more liberal Mainline. It is taught in hundreds of non-Pentecostal Bible studies. One Pennsylvania Lutheran pastor even made it the basis for a sermon series for Lent, when Christians usually meditate on why Jesus was having His Worst Life Then. Says the Rev. Chappell Temple, a Methodist minister with the dubious distinction of pastoring Houston's other Lakewood Church (Lakewood United Methodist), an hour north of Osteen's: "Prosperity Lite is everywhere in Christian culture. Go into any Christian bookstore, and see what they're offering."*

Yes, go into those bookstores if you dare. The consistent message you will find is that God wants you to be wealthy. Interestingly, health seems to have taken a back seat to wealth. Those described by Van Biema and Chu as "Prosperity Lite" preachers are unlikely to offer old-style healing services like those of Oral Roberts. It is material prosperity that takes center stage in their message.

The reporters lay out the basic theological and biblical issues, pointing to the anomaly of Christ's Gospel repackaged as material prosperity. They also try to place the prosperity preachers in a cultural and historical context:

*If the rest of Protestantism ignored finances, Prosperity placed them center stage, marrying Pentecostalism's ebullient notion of God's gifts with an older tradition that stressed the power of positive thinking. Practically, it emphasized hard work and good home economics. But the real heat was in its spiritual premise: that if a believer could establish, through word and deed (usually donation), that he or she was "in Jesus Christ," then Jesus' father would respond with paternal gifts of health and wealth in this life.*

The prosperity preachers find their roots in the Pentecostal tradition. The most famous among them — like Joel Osteen and Creflo Dollar — spread their messages through television and publishing. Osteen now dominates the field like no other, and he is front and center in the *TIME* article.

Prosperity theology is fueled by the combination of Pentecostal teaching and American consumerism. Our culture of material abundance (and consumerist appetites) is fertile ground for the emergence of this distorted and corrupted teaching. Jesus never promised His disciples material security, much less material prosperity. The benefits of the Gospel of Christ are redefined in terms of material and financial blessings.

The reporters quote one man who acknowledged the influence of Joel Osteen and his teaching:

*"I'm dreaming big—because all of heaven is dreaming big," [George] Adams continues. "Jesus died for our sins. That was the best gift God could give us," he says. "But we have something else. Because I want to follow Jesus and do what he ordained, God wants to support us. It's Joel Osteen's ministry that told me. Why would an awesome and mighty God want anything less for his children?"*

Well . . . why *would* an awesome and mighty God want anything less for his children? The saddest aspect of that question is its focus on material prosperity at the expense of the limitless spiritual riches we are given in Christ. The problem with prosperity theology is not that it promises too much, but that it promises so little — and promises that so falsely.

Of even greater significance is the eclipse of the authentic Gospel of Christ. The justification of sinners is ignored as material prosperity and wealth dominate the message.

*TIME's* cover story is a wake-up call. The fact that prosperity theology has *TIME's* attention should demand our attention.

*COMING NEXT: The problem of preaching to felt needs*

