

Jesus in North America (5)

The Rich Jesus

In North America the notion one must choose between spiritual and financial "success" seems to have disappeared. Preachers of the "prosperity gospel," also called "health and wealth gospel", uncritically proclaim the debased and pervasive notion that unhappiness and discontent with one's lot in life is a disease. They preach a "gospel" in which the basic tenet is that God rewards the faithful with wealth, spiritual power and debt-free living. Unfortunately, they have a steady and gullible audience for their message. Their entrepreneurial spirit has built empires radio and TV empires, offering a Jesus Who will make the poor rich and the sick healthy. They suggest that if you only ask God, He will answer positively. Money will pour in. He is the "Rich Jesus."

"Was Jesus Rich?" was the title of a *National Post* article (Nov. 4, 2006) about Rev. Creflo Dollar, senior pastor of Atlanta, Georgia-based World Changers International, who drives a Rolls-Royce. Dollar believes in a Messiah who is rich, born into wealth. He says, "Did Jesus have money? Well, the Bible was clear. Kings brought him gold. Did Jesus have money? It's clear. He had a treasurer to keep up with it." Dollar proclaims a Saviour who wore clothes so expensive that the Roman soldiers who crucified him gambled over them. But Dollar's message is not unique. It is just another variation of the "traditional" health and wealth which caters to the "authentic self" so prevalent in our consumer's culture.

The Bakker Empire

"Jim" Bakker (1940-) and his wife, Tammy Faye, were without doubt the most notorious prosperity television evangelists in the scandal-plagued 1980s. They were hosts of the *PTL Club* – variously known as "Praise the Lord," "People That Love," and, by cynics, "Pass the Loot." Their show blemished both television evangelism and the name of our Lord. They were veritable cartoon characters. Neither Tammy Faye, with her grotesquely painted face and her frequent on-air-sobbing, nor Jim, with his perpetual grin, never showed spiritual depth, or for that matter any sense of being in the presence of a holy awesome God. Their show was a mix of bland chitchat, insipid music, and homespun advise. They founded a Christian theme park, which included a hotel, a campground, a shopping mall, restaurants, condominiums, and an amusement park.

The Bakkers were tireless proponents of the "health-and-wealth" belief that God was eager to bestow worldly goods to anyone who contributed generously to PTL. "We preach prosperity," Bakker said, "We preach abundant life. Christ wished above all things that we prosper." He insisted that God is willing, and indeed eager to bestow material blessings on the faithful. Expect a blessing. Name what you want to have and claim it. Don't take a "no" for an answer. Believe! If you have enough faith, say the right prayer, and remain stubbornly persistent, God's power and blessing will assuredly come. But the ones who really prospered were the Bakkers through ill-gained contributions. More than anything else, they loved money, fame, and worldly

amusements. But their lifestyle of conspicuous consumption - gold-plated bathroom fixtures, Rolls Royces, air-conditioned doghouses, and financial scandals, led to their downfall. PTL filed for bankruptcy. Bakker served five years in jail. While in prison, he learned that Tammy Faye wanted a divorce. She remarried in 1993. While in prison Bakker renounced his "prosperity theology." He said that he began to look up all the Scripture passages used in prosperity teaching, such as "Give, and it shall be given unto you". And he recalled in a 1998 interview. "When I put that Scripture back into its context, I found Christ was teaching on forgiveness, not on money, He was teaching us that by the same measure that we forgive, we will be forgiven." He added, "I believe the harlot of the book of Revelation is materialism."

After the downfall of the Bakker empire one wonders why the enthusiasm for the "prosperity gospel" did not vanish. So many people were financially, emotionally, and spiritually hurt by their debacle. But judging by its current popularity on the "religious market," the opposite is true. Prosperity preachers still have a vast audience and still rake in the money.

Morris Cerullo (1931-)

Morris Cerullo hosts his own "health and wealth" TV show. He was raised in an Orthodox Jewish orphanage in New Jersey where he was given a New Testament by Helen Kerr, a Pentecostal woman who worked at the home. She was fired for her action. Cerullo didn't forget her, nor the impression she had made on him. When he ran away from the orphanage at the age of fourteen, he went to see her. She arranged for Cerullo to stay with her brother in Paterson, New Jersey. He began to attend an Assemblies of God church, received a Spirit baptism, became convinced of the call to preach, and studied at Northeastern Bible College, Essex Fells, New Jersey.

Cerullo, who often billed himself as a "converted Jew", became a healing evangelist. He built his own organization, called *World Evangelism*, in San Diego in the early 1960s. He started a monthly magazine, *Deeper Life*, and moved into television in 1975 with *Helpline*. He conducted campaigns throughout the world. He tried to take over the remains of Bakker's PTL empire in 1990. The attempt failed, but Cerullo managed to salvage the PTL Network, renaming it the Inspirational Network.

In his booklet *Total Provision... Continual Supply: God's Promise For His People* (1990), Cerullo expounds his views. He says, "I have a deep burden for the Body of Christ because I've seen Satan's attack on the finances of God's people; we cannot afford to sit back and allow Satan to bind our finances any longer." Among the Bible verses taken out of context, his choice text, a prosperity preacher's favourite, is: "Beloved, I wish (**pray**) above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth." (III John: 2) Cerullo says, "**Pray** is the real translation of the word 'wish.' Do not ever **wish** again! ...God wants you to prosper, to be in health, that your body may be strong, that your finances be well, as strong as your soul is." He also states, "Before you can break out of the financial bondage and receive the great financial increase that God

wants to give you, you must come to a position where you do not doubt." And so, he says, "The serious question before you today is literally, 'Can you take – will you seize – the blessing of God?'" He claims when you give to God you will receive supernatural provision in return. But giving to God means making a sacrificial offering for the Billion Soul Crusade "by completing the offering coupon in the back of this book." And as a bonus, when you release your faith, he will send you "an anointed prayer cloth to carry with you as an act of releasing **faith** for God's prosperity."

Evaluation

The prosperity gospel is not only about "the sweet by and by", but above all, about the "sweet here and now". It goes no further than personal health, prosperity, and happiness for the believers in this world and in the world to come. It has no social dimension. The "rich Jesus" does not have much to say about God's concern for the whole world and for creation, and for the poor.

How then can a Christian embrace the prosperity Gospel in the face of the sober realities of death, illness, injustice, tsunamis, and the martyrdom of multitudes of Christians? The New Testament makes it plain that one's witness may include suffering and death. It is amazing that prosperity preachers can miss such clear statements as the apostle Paul's, who said he wanted to know "the fellowship of sharing in [Christ's] sufferings" (Phil 3:10). "For," said the apostle, "suffering produces perseverance; [and] perseverance [produces] character" (Rom 5:3). There is grace and purpose in suffering. As Bonhoeffer, whose life was marked by suffering and eventually was martyred by the Nazis, testified, "It is certain that our joy is hidden in suffering, and our life in death; it is certain that in all this we are in a fellowship that sustains us. Jesus Christ God has said Yes and Amen to it all."

The prosperity preachers construct their own Jesus. But the Jesus of the Gospels is not the rich financial and health provider. He has delivered us from an inner blindness and addiction to self and remade us in the image of Christ that had been effectively lost through human sin. We must say "NO!" to self-proclaimed prophets, who brazenly abuse the Scriptures to give themselves a license and opportunity to merely fulfill their own wishes and dreams. We must remember that the demonic may threaten from within the church as easily as from without. The second century theologian, Tertullian, writing amid persecution, likened the devil to a scorpion that through heretical views repeatedly stings the church. Not all who call themselves preachers proclaim the Gospel. And those who teach a false gospel will have to give an account to God. They should repent of their heretical teaching. Didn't the apostle Paul say, "If [anyone] preach *any other gospel* ...let him be accursed " (Gal.1:8)?

Instead of buying into the "prosperity heresy", the church should clearly state that to belong to Jesus means to walk a difficult, lonely, and even a dangerous path in a world antagonistic to the claims of the Gospel, a world unwilling to submit to the Lordship of

Christ. We need to learn the cost of discipleship in our hedonistic, entertainment saturated culture.

Continue

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