Knocking the Hustle: Against the Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics

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When the economy crashed in 2008, America’s largest automakers (Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler) lost so much money that two of them (General Motors and Chrysler) filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy and were briefly taken over (GM by the federal government, Chrysler by the UAW and Fiat). The entire world felt the brunt of the crash, but, as I implied in the last chapter, Detroit was arguably hit harder than any other major American city. On December 7, 2008, while Congress debated whether to bail the automakers out, a *New York Times* journalist wrote an article (“Detroit Churches Pray for God’s Bailout”) about a special service held in one of Detroit’s most prominent megachurches, Greater Grace Temple (Bunkley 2008). Bishop Ellis conducted the service for the hundreds of churchgoers directly or indirectly employed by the auto industry. He wasn’t the only one—several Detroit area Catholic churches had similar services, dedicated to getting their worshippers through the auto industry’s trying times.

But his service was perhaps the most audacious in its attempt to bring God into the fray.

The article’s feature photograph depicts Greater Grace’s leader, Bishop Charles H. Ellis III, waving his hands furiously on an elevated stage (backed by his choir) while a liturgical dancer performs in the center aisle.

On the stage, between Bishop Ellis and the choir, were three sparkling white Cadillac Escalades.

Why the Escalade? The Escalade, one of General Motors’ most expensive vehicles, symbolically stands in for the twofold aspirations of churchgoers. People who work for GM depend on the Escalade (and other cars like it) for their livelihood. People who don’t work for GM but believe in the American idea of
upward mobility see the Escalade as representing that vision. Perhaps they can’t afford an Escalade now but, if they put the effort in, they will be able to afford an Escalade at some point in the near future.

I’d also suggest that the Escalade served as a stand-in for the city of Detroit itself, simultaneously representing Detroit’s storied past—when it was known as the Paris of the West—and its desired future.

The *New York Times* journalist revisited Greater Grace a year and a half later, this time focusing on Marvin Powell, a middle-aged Pontiac Assembly plant autoworker and one of Greater Grace’s armor bearers.\(^1\) A family man much like my father, the autoworker and his wife had two small children and a $150,000 mortgage. One of the few people in the region still able to make a good living without a college education (he attended college but withdrew for financial reasons), Powell was on the cusp of being let go, as the plant was in danger of being shut down. Given his age and the lack of a college degree, his job prospects in the event of being let go looked bleak. I was struck by the following quote:

> Powell is a popular figure at Pontiac Assembly. Some of his co-workers have encouraged him to run for office at their local, and people often ask him what he thinks is going to happen at the plant and what he intends to do if it closes. “No. 1, I tell them I can’t worry about what I can’t control; no matter what I say or do, I can’t keep the plant open,” Powell says. “And No. 2, I tell them that God provides for his own, and I am one of his own.” (Mahler 2009)

This quote struck me for a few different reasons. Because Powell reminded me a lot of my own father (who worked dozens of six-day weeks over the course of three decades to provide for us), I immediately thought about how much better off Powell

\(^1\) An armor bearer is an honorary church position some churches bestow that designates an individual as the church leader’s protector.
would have been if he’d been born in the forties or fifties rather than the late sixties or early seventies. Not only would he be looking at a good retirement, he’d likely have put his two children through school already.

I also thought about how resilient he had to have been to continue going to work and providing leadership for his church and his co-workers even in the face of a looming layoff.

Finally, I was struck by his leadership and his (lack of) politics. The position of armor bearer is a high honor normally bestowed upon the most dedicated worshippers and church leaders. Similarly, union members don’t just ask anyone to run for office. However, his leadership traits do not translate into progressive politics. It doesn’t occur to him, for example, that working with the union could potentially save both his job and the jobs of the co-workers he obviously cares about. In Powell’s opinion, those who choose God will be saved from the worst of the economic crisis while those who don’t, won’t.

Around the same time the New York Times journalist visited Greater Grace, I visited a predominantly black church in Baltimore County. The pastor, like Bishop Ellis, was a powerful orator. And just like Ellis, the pastor routinely used the pulpit to speak to the economic crises afflicting black communities in general and his community specifically. Words cannot convey the powerful effect his sermon had on churchgoers. I saw men and women walk in the church burdened by fear, depression, and economic anxiety, and I saw them leave uplifted and prepared for battle.

But as uplifting as his message was for churchgoers, the content of this message was far from uplifting, because he believed all of the ills associated with the economic crisis (increased debt, poverty, unemployment, stress and anxiety, marital discord) were caused by a poverty mindset. This mindset affects individual habits—it causes people to spend money (perhaps on the latest Air Jordans) when they should save, it causes them to be late to work instead of being early, it causes them to lay around the house when they should be hustling. In a word, this mindset makes people undisciplined. And this mindset reflected and was caused by a poor relationship with God.
Note the logic here. People are materially poor because they don’t think right. Their inability to think right makes it impossible for them to receive God’s blessing.

These ideas were contained in a series of sermons sold as a CD package called “Destroying the Root of Debt”.

Now debt is a form of bondage. Now I don’t want to spend a lot of time telling you how it binds you because most of you know that. It is a form of bondage. Limitation. Constraint. And Christ came to set us free from all forms of slavery. In order to enjoy our complete freedom in Christ and never be entangled with financial debt again we must attack it at its root….God hates debt. So he will miraculously provide favor, forgiveness and favor, everything you need to get out of debt but if you have not learned the discipline of living a debt-free life you will always go back and that’s with anything in Christ Jesus….I’m coming to understand this more, a lot of time God opens doors for us and he will provide opportunities but if you don’t discipline your flesh those opportunities will be lost, those doors will be closed. (Robinson 2008)

If people are materially poor because they are undisciplined and because they lack a personal relationship with God, then what’s the solution?

They need to become disciplined in part through a personal relationship with God.

The connection he makes is one that neatly fits common sense about black populations—black people are poor or experience financial hardship not necessarily because of structural issues but because of personal failings. And it fits the common desires we all have for some degree of control over our circumstances.

The pastor of the church I visited is a disciple of Dr. Creflo Dollar, founder and senior pastor of World Changers Church International. Dr. Dollar regularly delivers sermons to over 30,000 at his church in Georgia, and to tens of thousands of others through satellite churches. Further, he delivers his message through a series of books including No More Debt! God’s
Strategy for Debt Cancellation (Dollar 2000). Dr. Dollar, like the Baltimore County pastor, believes that both the New and Old Testaments provide the perfect template for living a prosperous life. But living this life requires understanding and acting on God’s Word.

Matthew 11:12 tells us that “…the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.” In other words, prosperity will not fall out of the sky and into your lap. There are biblical principles that must be applied to your situations and circumstances before you see the manifestation of debt release. And the only way to apply those principles is to first destroy old patterns of thinking and develop a new mindset concerning debt and prosperity. A renewed mind is an important key to debt release. (Dollar 2000, pp. 12–13)

Above, we see the same focus on the mindset we see in the Baltimore County pastor. But there’s more. What does a “new mindset” look like? How would we know someone with a new mindset if we encountered her? For Dr. Dollar, someone with a “new mindset” has a different attitude about the relationship between labor, saving, and prosperity. Rather than believe that the money one makes through labor should be saved, and then both applied to debt and applied to savings, Dollar uses the Bible to argue that someone with a new mindset has a very different attitude about the relationship between these concepts.

God’s system is based on giving and receiving. Sounds like a strange way to get out of debt, doesn’t it? Let me explain. God’s system is the exact opposite of the world’s system. The world tells you to hoard every penny you’ve got, while God tells you to give in order to get out of debt. The key is obedience to God in your giving.

If you desire to get out of debt, it’s absolutely vital that you learn to give under the direction of the Holy Spirit. In Luke 6:38, Jesus says to “give” so that “…it shall be given into you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom…” Take a look at the first part of this verse. “Give
and it shall be given unto you…” Giving to others causes others to give to you. And whatever you give will be returned to you.…

The way out of debt is through giving. Give to live, and then live to give. Take a look at Matthew 13:3. I call this the grandfather parable of them all, because if you can get a good understanding of this, you will probably understand just about everything in the Bible. It says, “…Behold, a sower went forth to sow…” Now stop right there. A farmer has to sow if he wants a harvest. And just as he will never harvest a crop by hoarding his seed, neither will you get out of debt by hoarding your money.…

This mindset is a problem for many Christians. They think it’s okay to give every now and again, but to give all of the time… no way! (Dollar 2000, pp. 27–29)

Above, Dr. Dollar takes the Parable of the Sower—a parable Jesus uses to tell his disciples about the effect of spreading the gospel on different populations using the analogy of a farmer spreading seed on different types of soil—to talk about the relationship between labor, debt, savings, and prosperity. The seed Jesus refers to is the message of the gospel. But for Dollar, the seed has more than one meaning. The seed is the message, yes, which is sown among the people. The sower here is the pastor or the minister who sows the message of the Gospel to different people in the hopes that the message will be received properly and multiply. The ground here can be thought of as the hearts and minds of potential churchgoers. However, the seed is also money, which is sown amongst potential recipients, for the purpose of generating a spiritual and material harvest. Here the ground is different potential institutions, most important of which is the church. One of the ways is through tithing—churchgoers are expected to donate ten percent of their earnings to the church. The tithe is an incredibly important tool. Many pastors and churchgoers referred to tithing as “sowing the seed”.

I’ll come back to this.
In 2013 Kelvin Boston (host of the PBS show “Moneywise”), Dennis Kimbro (author of *Think and Grow Rich*), and a host of other economic empowerment luminaries and church pastors conducted a multi-city economic empowerment summit called “Faith, Family, and Finance”. The summit was pitched to the same population that routinely attended churches like the one I visited in Baltimore County, like Greater Grace Temple in Detroit. In the beginning of one of the promotional videos advertising the summit, Boston engages in a call-and-response with the audience:

**BOSTON:** Turn to your neighbor and say “Neighbor”
**CROWD:** Neighbor
**BOSTON:** “I am…”
**CROWD:** I am
**BOSTON:** “…a millionaire…”
**CROWD:** a millionaire
**BOSTON:** “…in the making.”
**CROWD:** In the making
**BOSTON:** Now you have to say it like you really really mean it this time, okay, “I am…”
**CROWD:** I am
**BOSTON:** “…a millionaire…”
**CROWD:** a millionaire
**BOSTON:** “…in the making.”
**CROWD:** In the making
**BOSTON:** Now give yourself a round of applause.
*(Crowd applauds.)*

(KBMoneywise 2013)

The call-and-response tactic employed here was an important component of the equation—if they said the phrase enough times they’d come to believe it. Once they came to believe it, they would do whatever necessary to achieve it. Again, mindset dictates circumstance.

For some scholars, black churches remain a viable source of black political development (Alex-Assensoh and Assensoh 2001; Calhoun-Brown 1996; Harris 1999; McDaniel 2008;
Owens 2007; Tucker-Worges 2011). Others take strong exception to this viewpoint, arguing that black churches pacify rather than politicize black men and women (Reed Jr. 1986a). Though not going as far as the most intense critics of black churches, Eddie Glaude (2007) has gone as far as to provocatively argue that the black church is “dead”.

Is he right?

Greater Grace is a good example of a “megachurch”, defined as a church with more than 2,000 members on average (it has approximately 6,000 members). Megachurches, like other churches, exist primarily to serve the spiritual needs of its churchgoers. However, their raw size enables them to engage in activities other churches cannot. For example, Greater Grace has 34 separate ministries listed on its website (and notes over 200 more), including separate ministries for men, women, and children, ministries for new members, ministries for ministers in training, ministries for people suffering from cancer and other life-threatening illnesses, ministries for media production and for information technology (the church’s services look as if they were professionally produced and are regularly streamed over the Internet), among other things. The church site itself is so large it looks more like the headquarters of a multinational corporation than a place of worship.

Like traditional churches, megachurch members engage in volunteer projects. However, again because of their size, many megachurches conduct this work through community development corporations they own and operate. A 2007 Crain’s Detroit Business article about Detroit megachurches noted almost $230 million in investments, including almost 230 single family homes and condominiums, two apartment complexes totaling over 200 units, and several banquet facilities and retail centers. The following passage captures the ethic espoused by megachurch pastors in general, and Greater Grace’s pastor specifically:

Church pastors often think of their neighborhoods as small cities, said the Rev. Charles Ellis III, pastor of the $36 million Greater Grace Temple on the city’s northwest side. “What we’re creating is a campus which we call the
city of David. When we built this church, we thought of it being a city that would offer all kinds of activities.” Greater Grace’s 20-acre “city” includes a banquet and conference facility, retail centers, an 89-unit apartment complex for senior citizens, a Montessori School and the historic Rogell Golf Course, purchased from the city of Detroit for $2.1 million in the spring. (Benedetti 2014)

Community development corporations have become such a standard component of megachurch activity that one of the pastors (Rev. Charles G. Adams, pastor of Hartford Memorial Baptist) partnered with Harvard University to create a summer workshop for pastors interested in starting their own CDCs (Benedetti 2014).

The church I visited in Baltimore county was not a megachurch, though the pastor and many of its members desired that it become one. The sermon I quoted from that church’s pastor, as well as the text I cited from Dr. Dollar, reflect “the prosperity gospel” at work. We can see elements of it in both the special Greater Grace Detroit service and in the Boston–Kimbro “Faith, Family, and Finance” empowerment workshop. Proponents of the prosperity gospel promote the idea that people who follow the Bible will not only become spiritually prosperous but will become materially prosperous as well. The idea of using the Bible to become materially as well as spiritually prosperous may strike some as odd, given quotes in the Bible that suggest that wealth and spiritual living do not go together. Some Christians who believe too much wealth is a sin, for example, routinely cite Matthew 19:24 (“Again, I tell you it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God”). Dollar and other prosperity gospel ministers argue this quote and others like it are misunderstood—it is not wealth but rather love of wealth for its own sake that is the problem.

According to the inheritance package listed for us in Deuteronomy Chapter 28, God promises to bless or “empower to prosper” our baskets and store (v. 5). If we were to translate that into today’s language, baskets
would be our purses or wallets, and store would be our bank accounts, or the places we store money. Verse 8 tells us that the Lord will command His blessings on us. In verse 11, He promises to make us plenteous in goods....

However Deuteronomy is not the only place in the Bible that talks about prosperity. Psalm 35:27 informs us that the Lord takes pleasure in the prosperity of those who serve Him. And in Psalm 115:14, David let us know that we should expect to increase more and more.... Still you may be thinking, “Brother Dollar, that’s the Old Testament! What does the New Testament have to say?” Third John [verse] 2 sums it all up for us. “Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prosperity.” You see, it is the will of God that we live a prosperous life. But no one can do that if they are broke. (Dollar 2000, pp. 60–61)

Many, though not all, megachurches are prosperity gospel churches.

Taking the work churches like Greater Grace increasingly perform in black communities in tandem with the prosperity gospel, we are left with a complicated picture. Certainly when Eddie Glaude argues that the black church is “dead” he is being purposely provocative. There’s no way that we can say that a black church that invests tens of millions of dollars in revitalizing the black community it sits in is “dead”.

Yet at the same time, we can certainly suggest that some of the ideas they promote about the relationship between black economics and black progress are, if not dead, then at least zombie-like. The data suggests, for example, that, contrary to the idea that blacks tend to spend frivolously, blacks are fairly frugal (Conley 1999). Contrary to the idea that blacks are broke because of spending habits, black financial troubles are driven by significant increases in the costs of education and housing rather than Xbox 360s (Ball 2014). Drilling down on specific segments of black communities, black college students have accrued a lot more debt in student loans than their white counterparts. In fact, they’re more likely to drop out than white
students *because* of their student loan debt (Kerby 2013). Several years before the housing market crashed the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) found that almost 50% of home refinance loans in predominantly black Baltimore neighborhoods were subprime, compared to only 6% in predominantly white Baltimore neighborhoods (US Department of Housing and Urban Development Office of Policy Development and Research 2000).

This debt isn’t accumulated because people spent too much time at the mall, or because they bought one car too many, or because they waited hours in line for the next pair of Air Jordans. Given the challenges Detroit, Baltimore, and cities like them face, one could argue that it makes a great deal of sense for churches like Greater Grace to think of themselves as miniature cities, because of their size (some larger megachurches are large enough to be considered cities), and because of the social services they increasingly provide for churchgoers and for their communities. However, one could also make the case that the trend towards megachurches and community development corporations is simultaneously a trend away from the types of grassroots activism that black churches are known for.

We are witnessing the neoliberalization of the black church. However, this neoliberalization process is not alien to black communities. To a certain extent, what we’re witnessing in churches like Greater Grace represents a resurgence of sorts. We can draw a straight line between early twentieth-century black-church behavior and contemporary black-megachurch behavior. Similarly, we can also draw a straight line from a range of church leaders who used their pulpit to preach a message of economic development to prosperity gospel proponents.

Take the role of black churches in the Great Migration. Black pastors recruited tens of thousands of black men and women to migrate North to work in the growing manufacturing sector. Their churches and organizations, like the Urban League, often worked with employers like Henry Ford to integrate black immigrants into Northern cities. As early as 1918 in Detroit, Ford granted black pastors like Second Baptist’s Reverend Robert L. Bradby the power to recommend “good Negro
workers” to the Ford employment office (Thomas 1992). In integrating them, black pastors emphasized “respectability”. Black men and women in the North still had the capacity and the responsibility to carry themselves with dignity and distinction. Black elites hammered home this responsibility through sermons; they hammered this message home through pamphlets telling black men and women how to dress and how to parent. They hammered this message home through photographs depicting “respectable” black men and women. Ford employed this process to create a relatively integrated shop floor, but also to control labor quality.

Rev. Bradby and other leaders participated in this process because it gave them the ability to employ upstanding members of the growing Detroit black community (Dillard 1995; Meier and Rudwick 1979; Thomas 1992). But it also gave them significant social and political power. Second Baptist Church increased in both size and scope as a result of Bradby’s activities—the more jobs he provided, the larger and more important his church became. And the larger his church became the more people he could serve and the more power he could accrue through serving them. Furthermore, the larger his church became the more activities the church engaged in. His church swiftly became one of the largest employee services in Detroit’s black community.

Just as one could find forerunners of the megachurch in the early years of the twentieth century, we can find forerunners of the prosperity gospel there as well. In the early twentieth century, Phineas Parkhurst Quimby founded a religious movement called New Thought, which was based on the idea that individuals had the capacity to transform their reality through thinking. This movement had a number of different offshoots but they all contain the same germ of an idea, that thought transforms reality. Here, for example, is the Religious Science take:

People initiate the…creative process at the level of Spirit by focusing on a thought or selecting an action to take. At the Soul level or in the Creative Medium, the thought is unconsciously subjected to the beliefs we
already hold personally or the beliefs we share with the race, resulting in the manifestation of our thoughts as we really believe them through the working of the Law. For example, if a particular woman wants a new job but feels lacking in her professional abilities and believes no one will hire her, or she believes that the job market is scarce, then her experience will be that she will not find a new job. In short, this teaching presupposes an intelligent and responsive universe.

Religious science seeks to teach a reliable system for creating positive life experiences. Its approach is to raise the consciousness of its adherents to a level of personal empowerment and responsibility grounded in the idea that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God even to the extent that individuals have the same creative power in the microcosm that God has in the macrocosm. It is taught that once this unity is recognized, the Universal Mind can be utilized by anyone to create a life abundant in health, wealth, and happiness. (Martin 2005, pp. 26–27)

E.W. Kenyon, an east coast pastor some view as the intellectual forefather of the Word of Faith movement, combined the central ideas of the New Thought Movement with Christian ideals and principles in the early years of the twentieth century. The first modern-day preacher to combine the use of mass media with a prosperity infused message was Oral Roberts. In the early fifties Roberts began broadcasting his citywide crusades on local television stations, within a short time developing a considerable broadcasting empire. Those early broadcasts included much of what we now associate with modern televangelism—demonstrative praise and worship, individualized healing (where the pastor would lay hands on and attempt to heal the ill), a sermon, and a call for financial assistance. Television airtime was expensive, and could not be provided for by crusade attendees alone. Roberts’s solution was innovative.

In order to subsidize the initial television pilots Roberts instituted an expanded financial partnership
program referred to as the “Blessing Pact”… Persons were encouraged to send in money to the ministry according to their faith, and Roberts would pay for its tenfold return. Based upon the principles of seed time and harvest, Roberts professed that financial offerings are commensurate to sowing seeds. According to the natural order of God’s law, believers will reap materially in tenfold proportion to what they sow materially by faith. (Walton 2006, pp. 85–86)

Oral Roberts was not the only pastor to promote this type of message. Over the last several decades a number of African-American pastors have promoted messages that strongly resemble those promoted by New Thought adherents, including Father Divine (founder of the Peace Mission), Reverend Ike (founder of the Christ United Church), and Daddy Grace (founder of the United House of Prayer) (Martin 2005). Modern-day proponents like Fred Price (head of Ever Increasing Faith Ministries), Ed Montgomery (head of Abundant Life Cathedral), and Creflo Dollar increasingly fuse high technology (sophisticated production studios, the Internet) with prosperity messages. The Baltimore County pastor I witnessed (a disciple of Creflo Dollar, himself a disciple of Word of Faith founder Kenneth Hagin) was not the first to use the Bible as a New Thought–inflected, spiritually based economic self-help tool.

I want to return briefly to the economic ideas I examined in the first chapter. Keynesian economists thought consumers were more important than producers and entrepreneurs because neither could profit if they had no consumers to buy their goods. Radical economists believed laborers were more important than business owners, because without laborers business owners would have nothing to sell. Neoliberal economists, on the other hand, thought entrepreneurs and business owners were more important than laborers or consumers, because if they didn’t innovate, consumers wouldn’t have jobs. Furthermore, society wouldn’t progress. Keynesian economists thought governments should guide the economy in ways that would increase employment and productivity. Radical economists thought governments should guide the economy in ways that would improve human development. Neoliberal
economists suggested these approaches would end up having the opposite effect.²

Here’s where the idea of human capital comes into play. It transformed labor from a simple unchanging unit into something much more dynamic, something human beings could themselves transform through skill development, education, creativity, and choice. Just like a business owner spends money on research and development in order to increase productivity and profit, the new human being is supposed to spend the necessary capital to develop herself in order to increase her productivity and profit (defined in the individual case as income). Just like the market provides the business owner with the information needed to make rational assessments about risk so as to maximize his potential for profit (and reduce his potential for loss), the new human being is supposed to use the market to make rational assessments about how to develop herself to maximize her own profit-making potential. Finally, just like the market tends to reward businesses who make the proper risk assessment and develop themselves properly, and sanction businesses that don’t, the woman who will not or cannot work and develop herself will tend to fail. Just like businesses that successfully develop their capital profit, and should profit according to capitalist common sense, individuals who successfully develop their human capital should profit according to neoliberal common sense.

Let me now connect this idea to the concept of sowing the seed, one of the central concepts of the prosperity gospel.

For Dollar and others, seed sowing is a form of human capital development. The act of graciously sowing the seed (the churchgoer is expected to not only give but to lovingly give³) represents an act of labor necessary for individual prosperity.

² If laborers, for example, knew that they couldn’t be fired, they would be more irresponsible. Their irresponsibility in turn would reduce their productivity, which would in turn make societies worse off rather than better off. If governments attempted to plan every aspect of the economy they would eventually fail and devolve into totalitarianism.

³ Here Dollar cites 2 Corinthians 9:7. The entire passage of the New International Version states: “Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” Dollar takes the last portion, “… God loves a cheerful giver.” (Dollar 2000, p. 30).
According to the prosperity gospel, the work the individual performs on himself in order to properly sow is the same work performed by the individual who figures out how to become more productive on the job or at school.

The prosperity gospel transforms the Christian Bible into an economic self-help guide people can use to develop their human capital. It transforms the impulse to become wealthy into a philanthropic impulse—prosperity gospel adherents do not want to become wealthy for the sake of being wealthy, they want to become wealthy in order to expand their capacity to do good deeds in the world. Along those same lines, the prosperity gospel transforms questions of wealth and poverty into questions of spiritual deservedness. Again the problem is that poor people have poor mindsets, poor habits, but also lack the proper spiritual anointing. It transforms risk assessment into faith assessment, which requires knowledge of God’s true purpose, which is attained through prayer, through attending churches.

But also through the goods often sold by prosperity gospel pastors.

Many prosperity gospel churches contain stores selling their pastor’s sermons and books, and also hold empowerment sessions. The church I visited weekly held such sessions for men and women providing a variety of materials (including economic workbooks) designed to help develop financial discipline and entrepreneurial activity in their members. After every sermon the pastor delivered, churchgoers were given the opportunity to purchase his sermon in CD form, giving them the ability to listen to the pastor at home, or on the way to work, or while working out. Additionally, he sold a debt relief package that included a workbook that helped individuals develop and balance their budgets.

The relationship between the churchgoer and the church (as well as the church pastor) is symbiotic. The churchgoer needs the church and the church pastor, but the church pastor needs the churchgoer. Dollar lists several components to sowing properly. I am going to focus on two, “Sow Into Good Ground” and “Give Expecting to Receive”. Giving expecting to receive is a fundamental component of the prosperity gospel. As Dollar notes above, God expects Christians to be as
materially prosperous as they should be spiritually prosperous. Christians should give and expect a return from their giving. But in order for that to happen the seed cannot just be sown willy-nilly, it has to be sown in good ground. How does Dollar define good ground?

Malachi 3:8–10 makes it very clear that if you are not tithing, you are stealing from God. In light of all He has done and continues to do for you, ten percent of your income is not too much to ask. This is a small amount of seed that goes to managing His house—the church. In addition, the tithe is your covenant connector. It keeps the windows of heaven open over your life and activates the blessings and promises of God. You cannot expect supernatural debt cancellation if you refuse to obey God with your tithe.

In addition, you cannot just tithe anywhere. You must be sure to sow your seed in a Word-based ministry that faithfully obeys God’s instructions. (Dollar 2000, p. 76)

Later in the text, Dollar refers to the importance of developing a partnership with what he calls “the anointing”, a godly power that operates through individuals, in this case through the right pastors. Indeed, Dollar goes as far as to note there is a “covenant relationship” that implies that the anointed has a responsibility to those he or she ministers to. Writing of his own responsibilities, Dollar notes that it is his responsibility to pray for God’s blessings for his partners, to seek God on the behalf of his partners (who Dollar implicitly identifies as readers of his book), and to personally send letters as well as special gifts and tools to his partners. And in exchange his partners are responsible to pray for Dollar and his ministries and to support the ministry with tithes (Dollar 2000, pp. 101–2).

In other words, in exchange for tithes (and other support), anointed individuals directly contact God on the tither’s behalf. Individual churchgoers choose between churches based on their ability to provide the type of information and the types of tools they need to properly develop their human capital, looking for the right place to “sow their seed”, the way investors choose between stocks. Church leaders along these lines think
of themselves as individuals selling themselves in order to sell God. In the wake of the neoliberal turn, black churches have increasingly become business-like institutions competing in the market. In 2014 Atlantablackstar.com published an article listing 8 black pastors around the world who make over 200 times more than their churchgoers. According to the article, Dollar is worth $27 million (Atlanta Black Star Staff 2014). The gap between these pastors and their churchgoers is very similar to the gap between corporate CEOs and their average workers. The CEO of General Electric, for example, makes 139 times more than its average worker, while the CEO of 21st Century Fox makes 268 times more (PayScale Staff 2014).4 Which may help explain why in 2015 Dollar (briefly) asked 200,000 of his supporters to contribute $300 each to purchase a brand new jet—after a tremendous backlash, he rescinded the request.

The concept of prosperity as expressed in the prosperity gospel and its intellectual ancestors implies that there is enough resources to go around for everyone to be wealthy. The prosperity gospel can, if followed correctly, generate further prosperity for everyone. But this gospel ignores several aspects of labor. First, it ignores the structural conditions that modified labor in a way that made the possibility of shared prosperity remote. Second, it privileges spiritual work and discipline over physical labor. Third, it de-emphasizes labor solidarity over individual work. Fourth, even though it articulates shared prosperity, this shared prosperity acknowledges and to a certain extent depends on a significant wealth gap, particularly between church leaders and churchgoers.

Now, I recognize that in Detroit and other places like it there are pastors with more explicit progressive politics. In 2011, Baltimore’s radical left caused Maryland Governor Martin O’Malley to halt a decision to build a $100 million jail for “youth charged as adults”. This would not have happened without Pleasant Hope Baptist Church’s Pastor Heber Brown

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4 Although Dollar does not write about his personal worth in No More Debt, he does note that this gap is part of the deal, stating on page 105, “Of course [intercessors] get blessed. That comes with the territory” (Dollar 2000).
and other progressive black pastors. Further, there are megachurches with pastors who routinely connect black suffering to structural dynamics. But these churches are few and far between. Just as they were few and far between in places like early twentieth-century Detroit.

The growth of the megachurch and the prosperity gospel represents the simultaneous neoliberalization of black churches and the return of black churches to the trajectory they were on before the intervention of the civil rights and black power movements. They represent remobilization projects that shunt black populations towards church development projects and personal discipline, rather than towards political organizing. At best this redirection reproduces the status quo and narrows the political imagination of individual churchgoers. At worst the prosperity gospel in particular generates an intense desire for personal growth that can only rarely be attained by the practices pastors propose. A desire that when unmet generates

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5 In fact, Baltimore has a long history of progressive pastors. The founder of one of Baltimore’s most storied black churches (Union Baptist) was present at the Niagara Movement (the forerunner of the NAACP), and its second leader (Reverend Vernon Dobson) created Baltimore’s first Head Start program, ended city discrimination against black business, and founded BUILD (Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development—a predominantly black working-class community power organization) through his work with the “Goon Squad” (a group of black activists who led Baltimore’s civil rights movement).

6 When Ford’s exploitation of workers and his racial discrimination became painfully apparent, Reverend Bradby and other black leaders found themselves in a precarious position. They relied on Ford to dole out jobs in part because these jobs were primary sources of their church’s prestige. It was difficult for them to generate sermons attacking Ford. It was difficult for them to provide organizing spaces for people to work against Ford. Churchgoers were constrained as well. The power pastors like Bradby often wielded could and often did make it difficult for churchgoers to give voice to different opinions and different sets of actions. And during those moments when they did decide they wanted to go against their pastor, they often had to contend not only with other churchgoers—who may not have felt similarly—they had to contend with the charismatic authority of the pastor himself. Black churches in places like Detroit took a more progressive route because they had to respond to the increased demand for black activism expressed by black churchgoers and mobilized by black progressive middle class pastors on the one hand and a combination of unions and national organizations like the NAACP on the other.
a more intense desire for the practices themselves, rather than critical resistance—because if churchgoers don’t get the results they look for it has to be their fault, they must not be prayerful enough, disciplined enough. As banks became more and more profit-driven in the wake of the neoliberal turn, many of them have aggressively tried to make money on the poor using the guise of progressivism, arguing that serving the “unbanked”—men and women who, because of their poverty, perhaps in combination with their poor neighborhood, do not have access to traditional banking services—represents an “untapped market” that can be used to not only increase profit margins for the bank but provide a much needed service to the poor. In the growth of the meg achurch and the prosperity gospel, we often see something very similar, with churches increasingly reaching out to the “unchurched”, treating this population as if it too were an “untapped market”. As both the people and the churches find themselves in dire economic straits, we need a new set of ideas as well as a new set of institutional practices in order to direct these churches towards more progressive ends.