THE "ME GOSPEL":
An Examination of the Historical Roots of the Prosperity Emphasis Within Current Charismatic Theology

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The shelves of Christian book stores abound with it. Television viewers may send for tape series proclaiming it. It has been called variously the "prosperity message" or the "faith message," or from other perspectives, "health and wealth," name-it-and-claim-it," or even "blab-it-and-grab-it." From the early days of the charismatic renewal movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, an interesting and in some ways disturbing concomitant has arisen which has captured the attention, the allegiance, and the pocketbooks of millions of American Christians. The prosperity or faith doctrine is simply the idea that a believer should and can live in divine perpetual health and material abundance and that one should learn to exercise his or her faith to appropriate those blessings.

This is no small phenomenon. Through their daily or weekly television broadcasts, "teachers" like Robert Tilton, Kenneth Copeland, Oral Roberts, and Robert Schuller reach millions of viewers across the nation. Many of the faithful from time to time climb into their Winnebagos for cross-country pilgrimages to faith conferences, seminars, or "Word Explosions" to hear "evangelists" such as John Osteen, Norvelle Hayes, or Kenneth Hagin. They send "love gifts" for booklets and tape series with titles such as Living in Divine Prosperity, God's Laws of Success, Have Faith in Your Faith, or Self-Esteem: The New Reformation. According to Charles Capps, "...you CAN HAVE WHAT YOU SAY" (emphasis his). Jerry Savelle says, "...when Jesus of Nazareth moves in with you, He will start making things better around where you live. He will teach you how to get out of poverty and He will teach you how to enjoy prosperity." Kenneth Copeland magazine articles appear with titles such as "How to Receive from God."

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Copeland, Savelle, Tilton, and the other "faith teachers," along with motivational speakers like Zig Ziglar and Art Linkletter who often appear with the preachers at the faith conferences and seminars have left a significant imprint on American religion in the 1970s and 1980s. The message is nothing brand new, for the attempt to reconcile piety and prosperity, righteousness and riches, godliness and worldliness, is as old as Jamestown and Massachusetts Bay. In the years between 1607 and the present, Americans, while fulfilling "The Call," have had to wrestle with "The Temptation," and attempts to resolve what Lewis Lapham has called "the American dialectic" have been many and varied.

This study will trace and examine the historical roots of the prosperity gospel preached and taught by men like Copeland, Capps, Savelle, and Tilton. It will become clearly apparent that this present message is merely the most recent edition of an American theology with abundant precedent. It will also be evident, given that Americans hold a deep admiration for individualism, success, and the self-made man and that the Church tends to absorb and to mirror the values of secular society, that the prosperity message of the 1980s should come as no surprise.

The purpose of this examination is strictly historical. No value judgements or attacks on individual ministries are intended. Their theologies will be presented as fairly and objectively as possible, using their own words, and will be used solely for purposes of illustration. It should also be noted that the "health" portion of the "health and wealth" gospel will not be discussed here. Miraculous healing is a valid but entirely different matter—a subject obviously large enough to demand separate investigations. Another subject suggested by this issue is its establishment within sociological, cultural, and psychological contexts. Though fascinating to consider, these obviously vital ingredients must await a more complete examination in a subsequent study. Again, the purpose here is a search for historical roots and relationships. The study will begin with a brief exposition of the tenets of the prosperity doctrine, will include discussions of the recurrent attempts to meld wealth and Christianity, and will close with a listing and analysis of four points suggested by the investigation.

Prosperity preachers base their philosophies and their ministries on Scripture. They thus believe that their interpretation is squarely on the right track. But as is the case with many esoteric or tangential theologies, the faith teachers then return to the same key verses time and time again. The following is a small sample of the foundational Scripture on which the gospel of prosperity is built.

Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth.\(^5\)

... I am the Lord thy God which teacheth thee to profit.\(^7\)

For verily I say unto you, that whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; and shall believe that those things which he saith shall come to


\(^6\)III John v. 2 (KJV)

\(^7\)Isaiah 48:17
pass; he shall have whatsoever he saith. Therefore I say unto you, What things soever ye
desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and you shall have them.8

Let them shout for joy, and be glad, that favor my righteous cause: yea let them say
continually, Let the Lord be magnified, which hath pleasure in the prosperity of his
servant.9

Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for man . . .10

. . . ye have not, because ye ask not.11

. . . I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.12

Though there are many other examples which could be cited, these are
sufficient to provide a field from which may be gleaned the basic, salient points of
prosperity theology. First, the faith teachers believe that the Kingdom of God on
earth already exists and that it is the responsibility of Christians to begin to
demand back from Satan the good things of life (particularly money) and to begin
to live on this earth as what they like to call, “King’s kids.” According to Charles
Capps, “You can have the kingdom, and the benefits right here on earth.”13 Jerry
Savelle says,

There is no reason for you to wait until you get to heaven to receive the blessings of
God . . . The time for prosperity is Now. I don’t know about you but I am not in any hurry to
get to heaven . . .14

Kenneth Copeland says, “He (Jesus) bore the curse of poverty to get us out of it,
not to leave us in it.”15 Most of the prosperity teachers would agree that God
intends that the world’s wealth should belong to His children, but that Christians
have failed to lay claim to that which rightfully belongs to them. This is why Oral
Roberts had no qualms about accepting a $1.3 million check from the owner of a
Florida dog track. According to these preachers, God’s wealth is in the wrong
hands and it is up to Christians to regain it.

This idea leads directly to the second major tenet of the prosperity message.
Great emphasis is placed upon the individual believer both in terms of being the
object or recipient of God’s blessings and in terms of personal responsibility for
making it happen. Kenneth Copeland says, “The way you hear the Word of God

8Mark 11:23,24
9Psalm 35:27
10Galatians 3:13a
11James 4:2c
12John 10:10b
1985, p. 3.
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determines how much it will produce in your life."'16 and "There is enough undiscovered wealth in the poorest nations of this world to turn their poverty into abundance if they would just believe the gospel."17 According to the faith teachers, much of a Christian's ability to possess health and wealth involves his own capacity to claim it, to believe God for it, or to confess it with his mouth. As Charles Capps says repeatedly, "YOU CAN HAVE WHAT YOU SAY"18 (emphasis his). Capps also asserts that man's shortened life-span is due to faulty, careless, or playful confession as when one says, "I'm just dying to do that (or) that just tickled me to death."19 Though this idea seems to relate more to health than wealth, it clearly illustrates the emphasis Capps places on the believer's responsibility to alter his affairs with his or her own speech. Capps further suggests that man's fall was due to Adam's prior sin of having failed to take dominion and authority over the serpent.20 Jerry Savelle emphasizes what he calls, "Positive expectancy."21 According to Fred Price, "If you let a hurricane or a tornado destroy your property, it's your own fault."22

Most of the faith teachers would agree that a Christian should have the right and the power to change the circumstances of his physical environment, his body, and his life. Though each preacher may provide a slightly different variation (Oral Roberts' "Seed Faith," Robert Schuller's "Possibility Thinking," Robert Tilton's "Success-N-Life") the theme remains the same: Christians should be able to acquire anything they want if they learn to exercise sufficient faith and if they utilize the proper techniques. As Kenneth Hagin says, "God wants his children to... wear the best clothing... drive the best cars... have the best of everything... just claim what you need."23

Though these two themes—Kingdom Now and Positive Confession—set forth the essential nature of the prosperity message, it should be noted that other subsidiary or adjunct themes could be described as well. Most of the preachers in this study are charismatics; that is, they believe in the continuing manifestation of the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit as practiced by the Apostolic age Christian community. They emphasize the "Baptism of the Spirit" with the resulting "speaking in tongues" as evidence. Almost all of them claim to have received fresh, post-canonical revelation, in which God reveals particular new truths or hidden meanings behind Old or New Testament Scriptures. They also tend to regard any financial setback, even those created perhaps by overspending, overreaching, or simple mismanagement, as an "attack of the devil," thus

16Ibid., p. 2.
18Capps, The Tongue, pp. 30,31,32,47.
19Ibid., p. 91.
21Savelle, Mental Attitude, p. 20.
paradoxically absolving themselves of personal responsibility for their own economic misfortune. Of course, there is the ever-present, overriding emphasis on wealth. As Copeland says, ""The grief over the loss of children is in the same class as the loss of labour and income""24 and ""the gospel to the poor is that Jesus has come and they don't have to be poor anymore.""25

This blending of Christianity and wealth acquisition did not begin with the present generation of prosperity preachers described above. The two have been entwined in various ways and with varying degrees of difficulty and success from America's beginning. Lapham describes ""two minds about the purpose of New Jerusalem.""26 One faction believed ""that the American experiment was about the discovery of a moral commonwealth. Another... that money was a sacrament and that America was about the miracle of self-enrichment.""27

The Puritans of Massachusetts Bay were not the first to wrestle with the dualism of religion and financial gain. As Perry Miller has demonstrated, the founders of Jamestown saw themselves as representing much more than the interests of the London Company. Like the later Puritans, the first Virginians perceived their work as an ""errand into the wilderness."" They too believed in a divine Providence that had placed the coasts of America in reserve to await discovery and use by the standard-bearers of true religion.28 According to Martin Marty, ""A foreknowing God had seen to it that the better part of the Western Hemisphere would not be explored until the Protestant Reformation was well under way in Europe.""29 First Europe in general and then England in particular had drifted away from a godly mooring into apostasy and as a result God had offered His blessing afresh to this remnant who would occupy this New Jerusalem.30 According to William McLoughlin,

It was a land committed to the reformation of God's world... though its settlers also possessed a large share of self-interest, aggression, and acquisitiveness.31

The Puritans were constantly aware of a connection between piety and prosperity. As Miller asserts,

Afflictions do not just happen, but are sent from on high; public calamities are moral judgments upon a sinful people, literally ""acts of God."" The moral status of a people is

26Lapham, p. 5.
27Ibid.
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therefore written out in events; if they are sinful, they suffer; if they are virtuous they prosper.³²

Though the linkage between piety and prosperity was an integral part of Puritan theology, the individual Puritan held a view of wealth much more balanced than the prosperity preachers of the 1980s. Puritans believed that the godly person should work hard not for personal aggrandizement but for the good of the community. Accumulating personal wealth was irrelevant. Christopher Lasch writes that the Puritans instructed men who prospered not to lord it over their neighbors. The true Christian . . . bore both good fortune and bad with equanimity, contenting himself with what came to his lot.³³

Though the Massachusetts Puritans were remarkably adept at maintaining material gain in a proper perspective, the relationship between piety and prosperity underwent revision through the years, and the Puritans' balance ultimately was perverted or lost. This will be shown below.

The impact of Puritan theology upon the prosperity message, though perhaps not readily apparent, originates with the Puritan concept of their unique call—the "errand into the wilderness." The view of America as the "New Israel," the "City-on-a-Hill," or "Elect Nation" has been transmitted, often in secular terms, across the centuries to the present.³⁴ And this pervasive air of spiritual superiority seems to cause each generation of Americans to consider their every endeavor, no matter how carnal, as having been granted automatic, a priori ratification from on high. It seems reasonable to see, therefore, how post-Puritan Americans could grasp for wealth, cloak their grasping in appropriate religious language, and comfort themselves with the notion that they were squarely in the center of God's will.

The eighteenth century American version of the Age of Reason saw the philosophy of wealth accumulation undergo significant changes. Lasch writes that As Puritan gave way to Yankee, a secularized version of the Protestant ethic emerged . . . The Puritan urged the importance of socially useful work: the Yankee stressed self-improvement.³⁵

Wealth was considered a pragmatic necessity which would permit one to refine, to discipline, and to cultivate himself in the social graces, the arts, and, of course, reason. According to eighteenth-century thinkers like Benjamin Franklin, the pursuit of self-improvement could not be accomplished if one were beset by financial worry.³⁶ Franklin's The Way to Wealth, far from being simply a "how to

³⁵Lasch, Culture, pp. 54-55.
get rich’’ manual, is more of an exhortation to strive toward higher living in many areas. Though this use of wealth seems benign or even noble, the shift in emphasis from ‘‘wealth for the good of the community’’ to ‘‘wealth for the good of self’’ is of obvious significance. It would require only a matter of time for self-improvement to evolve into self-promotion and self-aggrandizement.

The first half of the nineteenth century was a period of phenomenal economic expansion and national prosperity. As the young United States acquired first Trans-Appalachia; then the Louisiana Territory, it seemed as if land was becoming available faster than it could be settled and exploited. The availability of unlimited space on the frontier provided freedom of movement and economic opportunity. Economic opportunity fostered economic self-determinism which, in turn, stimulated a unique American brand of political and social individualism. It seems only natural that such modes of individualistic thinking would sooner or later be reflected in American religion as well.\textsuperscript{37} Arminianism, the philosophy that rejected Calvinist predestination by stressing the part the individual was to play in bringing about his own salvation, seemed tailor-made for the rugged, self-made individualist of young America. The economically and socially mobile ‘‘booster’’ or ‘‘go-getter,’’ as Daniel Boorstin has called him,\textsuperscript{38} could not be confined by a rigid caste system; neither could he accept passively the idea of predestination. If one could ‘‘pull himself up by his own bootstraps’’ economically, he could do so spiritually as well.

The wave of revivals which broke out on the trans-Appalachia frontier in 1800 and 1801, fed the fire of religious individualism in America. According to the authors of \textit{Religion in America}, the frontier revival movement contributed more to American religion in general than new, congregationally-oriented denominations such as those formed from the Stone/Campbell philosophy. When the fires of revival had died in Kentucky and Tennessee and upstate New York had been ‘‘burned over,’’ the Second Awakening had infused American Christianity with several essential, long-term influences. Pietism placed emphasis on an individual’s list of personal religious experiences. In time, those subjective experiences were afforded, in most cases, a stature and authority equal to or greater than that of church dogma and tradition or even Scripture itself. Individualism, closely related to pietism, stressed the significance of an individual’s ‘‘working out his own salvation with fear and trembling.’’\textsuperscript{39} Of importance here were the concepts of contrition, repentance, and holiness. Reductionism removed the individual’s reliance on denominations, synods, formal creeds, seminary training, or detailed theologies. With the individual’s personal encounters with God rapidly becoming the only thing that mattered, the institutionalized church lost, for most frontier Christians, its \textit{raison d’etre}.\textsuperscript{40} To these three characteristics may be added a


\textsuperscript{39}Boorstin, \textit{National}, p. 319.

\textsuperscript{40}Bedell, et al., \textit{Religion}, p. 165.
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fourth—anti-intellectualism. As the importance and influence of the institutionalized church declined, there arose a distrust of institutionalized doctrines and of the institutionally and formally-trained ministers who held to them. Many frontier revivalists were illiterate, their sermons consisting of "a recounting of (their) own conversion experiences, plus the repeating of selected (memorized) verses of Scripture, or 'proof texts.'" 41

To those familiar with present charismatic and prosperity theology and methods, the importance of these four characteristics is readily observable. With few exceptions most of the prosperity preachers have little (if any) formal academic or theological training. Their "teaching" consists of personal anecdotes interspersed by and buttressed with a few favorite proof texts. Most followers of this gospel would consider themselves "non-denominational," and they are often delighted when their preachers belittle, mock, or ridicule the institutionalized church.

The confluence of the nineteenth-century streams of rapid economic expansion and religious individualism led ineluctably to renewed attempts to reconcile personal piety and personal wealth-holding. By the middle of the century, the balanced perspective of the Puritans and the self-improvement philosophy of eighteenth-century exhorters like Franklin had evolved into a literature of self-help, epitomized by the works of Asa Greene (The Perils of Pearl Street, 1834), Mrs. H.F. Lee (The Log Cabin, 1844), and Sylvester Judd (Richard Èdney and the Governor's Family, 1850). 42 As the literature changed, so did the nature of the blend. According to John Cawelti, the self-help writers "tended to confuse economic success and moral merit in a way that earlier moralists would never have done... (and) resolved the pursuit of final ends and rising in society into one and the same thing." 43 He goes on to say that

Diligent worldly enterprise was not inconsistent with religious salvation since the Divine Providence had assigned to each individual a secular occupation to carry out during his worldly existence. By working hard in the occupation to which God had called him, the industrious man glorified God. 44

The juxtaposition of piety and wealth in America did not escape the notice of the perceptive French traveler Alexis de Tocqueville, who observed,

The American ministers of the gospel do not attempt to draw or to fix all the thoughts of man upon the life to come... While they never cease to point to the other world as the great object of the hopes and fears of the believers, they do not forbid him honestly to court prosperity in this. 45

He continues, "... it is often difficult to ascertain from their discourses whether the principal object of religion is to procure eternal felicity in the other world or prosperity in this." 46 In observations such as these, it is possible to establish clear antecedents for today's prosperity message.

41Ibid.; Boorstin, National, pp. 318, 319.
42Cawelti, Apostles, pp. 44–75.
43Ibid., p. 53.
44Ibid., p. 74.
46Ibid., p. 127.
After the Civil War the Industrial Revolution ignited a boom of prosperity that caused pre-war expansion to be all but forgotten. With renewed industrial and business growth came a renewed need to reconcile success, abundant wealth, and enterprise-building with Christianity. By the Gilded Age, however, attempts to merge wealth and piety were resulting in mixtures which, from the vantage point of hindsight, appear to have been increasingly more wealth and less piety, though the theologians of the era eventually crafted the language necessary to mask this and to restore the comfort which wealthy Americans found in God’s ratification of their pursuits. The great captains of industry simply took the gospel as preached by the conservative evangelicals, changed its emphasis slightly, and justified their own prodigious accumulations of wealth while devising ways of sharing some of it with others.47

The foundations for this were already in place by the time the robber barons needed to make use of them. “The nineteenth century attempted to express all values in monetary terms.”48 The Reverend Thomas P. Hunt had said in The Book of Wealth (1876) that “no man can be obedient to God’s will...without becoming wealthy.”49 In The Moral Law of Accumulation (1837) Francis Wayland had argued that “God intends that man should grow rich.”50 In his famous lecture and book entitled Acres of Diamonds, Russell Conwell asserted, “I say that you ought to get rich, and it is your duty to get rich...to make money honestly is to preach the gospel.”51

According to Martin Marty, “If God willed all men to be rich, he no longer willed them to be poor.”52 Just as God was crowning the righteous with success and prosperity the poor during America’s Gilded Age were becoming increasingly stigmatized. Explains Marty, “If they were poor, this was the result of their own fault, usually a moral fault.”53 Russell Conwell said,

To sympathize with a man whom God has punished for his sins, thus to help him when God would continue a just punishment, is to do wrong...there is not a poor person in the United States who was not made poor by his own shortcomings.54

Here is an obvious antecedent to ideas preached one hundred years later by Copeland, Price and Capps.

This prevailing Gilded Age notion holds an interesting paradox. What emerges from the writings of men like Russell Conwell is a kind of religious “natural selection”—a Christian version of “survival of the fittest”—the very Darwinian ideas that many other clergymen of the era were battling with great

47Bedell, Religion, p. 318.
48Lasch, Culture, p. 56.
52Marty, Righteous, p. 110.
53Ibid.
54Conwell, Acres, p. 20.
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vehemence. As Marty observes, "Though most of them avoided the name, they were Social Darwinists. They preferred to think of themselves as Christian defenders of laissez-faire free-enterprise competition." 55

The Gilded Age was, of course, one of many cyclical periods of laissez-faire conservatism—what Arthur Schlesinger has called "private interest eras." 56 According to Schlesinger these shifts away from progressivism and reform toward privatization and conservatism recurred during the 1920s and again during the 1950s. It is interesting that the twentieth-century versions of the wealth-and-religion synthesis have tended to follow this same cyclical pattern. It seems that during times of economic growth and prosperity Americans make the most obvious attempts to justify their materialistic bent by claiming divine sanction. In 1924, the advertising executive Bruce Barton published The Man Nobody Knows, a popular and influential reinterpretation of the life of Christ, in which he argues that Jesus was a "popular dinner guest...the ideal hero of energy, service, and philanthropy...the pre-eminent expositor and example of the gospel of success." 57 It is not surprising that some of the most popular success literature in American history appeared during the late 1940s and 1950s, as the United States experienced yet another period of economic prosperity, political conservatism, and privatization. In the 1950s "affluence, leisure, and the quality of life loomed as major issues." 58 Economically and socially mobile Americans eagerly read the works of Napoleon Hill, who produced titles such as, Think and Grow Rich, Law of Success, Mental Dynamite, and The Master Key to Riches. In Think and Grow Rich Hill asserts, "You can never have riches in great quantities unless you can work yourself into a white heat of desire for money." 59 Even more popular were Dale Carnegie's How to Win Friends and Influence People and, of course, the Reverend Norman Vincent Peale's The Power of Positive Thinking. According to Peale,

A man who is self-reliant, positive, optimistic, and undertakes his work with the assurance of success magnetizes his condition. He draws to himself the creative powers of the universe. 60

He writes further, "Every day as you confront the problems of life, I suggest that you affirm as follows: 'I believe God gives me power to attain what I really want.'" 61 The enduring popularity of Dr. Peale's books seems to underscore the idea that Americans continue to seek God's approval of their material pursuits.


56Schlesinger, Cycles, p. 40.

57Cawelti, Apostles, p. 197.

58Lasch, Culture, p. 64.

59Napoleon Hill, Think and Grow Rich, quoted in Cawelti, p. 211, and Lasch, p. 58.


61Ibid., p. 107.
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It is clear that the gospel of success has undergone considerable change since the simple, community-minded work ethic of the seventeenth-century Puritans. As American wealth has increased, so has the rhetoric of American Christianity. From the foregoing narrative and analysis it is possible to derive several salient points concerning religion and wealth in America.

First, it should be obvious that the attempts by the present-day prosperity "evangelists" to meld piety with prosperity are nothing new—merely the latest variation on a very old, very well-developed American theme. It comes as no surprise to the student of American social history that one of the chief characteristics of the American mind-set is materialism. According to de Tocqueville, "... the desire of acquiring the good things of this world is the prevailing passion of the American people."62 In a chapter revealingly entitled "Why The Americans Are So Restless In The Midst Of Their Prosperity," de Tocqueville observes that Americans "are forever brooding over advantages they do not possess."63

A native of the United States clings to this world's goods as if he were certain never to die; and he is so hasty in grasping at all within his reach that one would suppose he was constantly afraid of not living long enough to enjoy them. He clutches everything, he holds nothing fast, but soon loosens his grasp to pursue fresh gratifications... He who has set his heart exclusively upon the pursuits of worldly welfare is always in a hurry, for he has but a limited time at his disposal to reach, to grasp, and to enjoy it.64

What may be surprising, however, is the consistency with which Americans have sought to justify their worldly pursuits—to "assign spiritual meanings to the texts of money."65 As demonstrated above, this has been a perennial preoccupation, an ever-present task undertaken by American religionists. Always in the midst of striving, building, selling, and acquiring, Americans have needed "to be reassured that they had not departed from the traditional synthesis of religious and secular callings."66 Simply stated, it has been and is still a constant fact that Americans need to sense God's ratification of their materialism.67

Second, it is no secret that Americans worship at the shrine of success and have held and still hold a deep admiration for the self-made individualist. Again, de Tocqueville provides useful insight in a chapter on individualism when he writes of those who

... owe nothing to any man, expect nothing from any man, acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing above, and are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands.68

62 de Tocqueville, Democracy, p. 134.
63 Ibid., p. 136.
64 Ibid., pp. 136,137.
65 Lapham, Money, p. 4.
66 Cawelti, Apostles, p. 74.
68 de Tocqueville, Democracy, p. 99.
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This strong tendency toward self-interest and self-determination is readily apparent in the prosperity message, from conferences called "Take Charge of Your Life" to Copeland's admonitions that "God created the human being with the capacity to increase in productivity. We are capable of developing God's unlimited capacity of success."\(^{69}\) According to the prosperity preachers, it is ultimately the responsibility of the individual believer to believe—to have faith in his faith—to claim God's promises. "Self-made Christians"..."can write their own ticket with God."\(^{70}\) Many followers of the prosperity doctrine, building upon much precedent from the American religious past (and, for that matter, upon the very "human potential movement" and "secular humanism" they deplore and de-cry) have come to believe in the ultimate perfectibility of man. In fact, it is probably safe to say that the faith teachers believe that a Christian's perfection is already available if one would learn merely to claim it. Alexis de Tocqueville devoted an entire chapter to "How Equality Suggests To The Americans The Idea Of The Indefinite Perfectibility of Man."\(^{71}\) It is no wonder then that Robert Tilton can tell his followers that "they can be everything God created them to be, and be it perfectly."\(^{72}\)

Third, it should be apparent by this point that much of Christianity has a tendency both to absorb and to mirror secular society. As mentioned earlier, Arthur Schlesinger in his book *The Cycles of American History* describes with his usual searing acumen the pendulum swings with which American society oscillates between conservative or "private interest eras" and periods of reform or "public purpose."\(^{73}\) It has been demonstrated that the outpourings of the spirit of Russell Conwell, Bruce Barton, and Napoleon Hill have tended to accompany the periods of privatization.

Secular advertising has perceived the American's restless sense of "awakening desire"\(^{74}\) and continually makes appeals to it. As de Tocqueville said, "Besides the good things that he possesses, he every instant fancies a thousand others that death will prevent him from trying if he does not try them soon."\(^{75}\) Lasch says that American economy and technology has satisfied basic needs and now relies "on convincing people to buy goods for which they are unaware of any need until the "need" is forcibly brought to the attention by the mass media."\(^{76}\) According to Lapham, "The advertising business plays with ingenious skill on the themes of perpetual discontent that haunt the citizens of an egalitarian society."\(^{77}\) It is clear that the preachers of prosperity, self-esteem, and success


\(^{70}\)Hagin, *Thresholds*, p. 84.

\(^{71}\)de Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 33.


\(^{74}\)Boorstin, *Democratic*, p. 113.

\(^{75}\)de Tocqueville, *Democracy*, p. 137.

\(^{76}\)Lasch, *Culture*, p. 72.

\(^{77}\)Lapham, *Money*, p. 60.
cater (though probably unconsciously) to this “awakening desire” and “perpetual discontent.” In the message and techniques of “positive thinking,” “possibility thinking,” and “positive confession,” teachers like Peale, Schuller, and Capps have absorbed the values of secular American society and have presented to their followers a gospel of self-interest, self-aggrandizement, and self-gratification.

Finally, given the historic American demand for a reconciliation of piety and prosperity, given the American Horatio Alger ideal of the self-made, successful individual, the “health and wealth,” “name-it-and-claim-it” prosperity message of the 1980s should come as no surprise. All of the forces—economic, social, and religious—have converged at this point in time. According to Schlesinger, the United States is presently in a private interest mode.78 Few people have not heard the phrase “the Me Decade,” referring to the late 1970s and 1980s. Given the tendency of American Christianity to mirror American society, it should not be surprising that the “Me Decade” has produced the “Me Gospel.” It is a message whose time has come once again.

78 Schlesinger, Cycles, pp. 32, 34, 39, 45–47.