

Why Are So Many Churches Still Teaching the Prosperity Gospel?

In recent years, an intriguing transformation has taken place within the landscape of American Christianity. A study conducted by Lifeway Research in September 2022 reveals that a growing number of American Protestant churchgoers are embracing the teachings of the prosperity gospel.

This controversial belief system suggests that financial prosperity is a divine blessing attainable through increased donations to churches and charities. Such a trend raises important questions about the evolving spiritual landscape in the United States and its implications for the Christian faith.

A Lifeway Research study reveals that 52% of churchgoers now affirm that their church teaches God will bless them if they donate more—a significant increase from the 38% recorded in 2017. Additionally, 76% of respondents believe that God desires financial prosperity for them, up from 69% in 2017. The belief that individuals must take action to earn material blessings has also risen to 45%, from just 26% in 2017.

This shift in beliefs has not gone unnoticed. Scott McConnell, the executive director of Lifeway Research, characterizes it as a concerning trend. McConnell suggests that the financial hardships brought about by factors like inflation and the pandemic may have contributed to this shift, as people search for solutions to their economic challenges.

“In the last five years, far more churchgoers are reflecting prosperity gospel teachings, including the heretical belief that material blessings are earned from God,” McConnell says, noting that the financial struggles due to inflation and the

pandemic might have contributed to this shift in beliefs.

The prosperity gospel, often associated with the “Word of Faith Movement,” fundamentally contradicts traditional Christian teachings. Instead of emphasizing spiritual growth and salvation, it encourages believers to seek God’s favor primarily for material gain. Critics argue that this theological perspective distorts the essence of Christianity by reducing it to a transactional relationship with God.

Many preachers have rejected the prosperity gospel in recent years, including Todd White, Benny Hinn and Francis Chan. Joyce Meyer also warns about the prosperity gospel getting “out of balance.”

In 2019, Hinn said, “The prosperity gospel teaches, among other things, that believers have a right to the blessings of health and wealth, and they can obtain these blessings through positive confessions of faith and the ‘sowing of seeds’ through the faithful payments of tithes and offerings.”

Hinn said that at that time the prosperity gospel is literally making him “sick to my stomach.”

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The study revealed the acceptance of the prosperity gospel is more pronounced among younger and less educated churchgoers. An astounding 81% of individuals aged 18-34 and 85% of those aged 35-49 believe that God wants them to prosper financially. This age-related disparity could signify a generational shift in religious thought and a growing disconnect from traditional Christian theology.

Different denominations demonstrate varying levels of acceptance for these prosperity gospel teachings. Methodist (93%) and Restorationist movement (88%) churchgoers are more

likely to believe that God wants them to prosper financially. Those with evangelical beliefs also exhibit a higher acceptance rate (80% versus 74% for those without).

The study revealed that African American churchgoers are particularly receptive to the idea that giving more money will lead to divine blessings, with 71% expressing this belief. Additionally, regular church attendees who participate in worship services one to three times a month are more likely to agree with these teachings compared to those attending at least four times a month (57% versus 49%).

Christian leaders across denominations voice concerns about the excessive focus on material wealth, cautioning against the potential for it to become an idol. The teachings of Jesus in the New Testament consistently emphasize the importance of spiritual growth, love and compassion over worldly riches.

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Shawn A. Akers is the online editor at Charisma Media.