

Kate Bowler. *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. 352 pages. \$34.95.

Kate Bowler, assistant professor of the history of Christianity in the United States at Duke Divinity School, has produced a remarkable book not only for the field of North American religious history, but also for concerned homileticians today. She has four definite writing aims. First, she wishes to introduce readers to a fast-growing 20<sup>th</sup> century movement that has so far been only vaguely defined and researched. It is known by various names including “Health and Wealth,” “Name It and Claim It,” “Faith or Word of Faith,” or most commonly “Prosperity Gospel.” Second, as a hard-working, critical researcher, she traces the origin and development of the prosperity gospel, starting with the late 19<sup>th</sup> century roots of the movement, through its flourishing during the Pentecostal revivals of the World War II period, to the final stage of its recent maturity after the 1960’s. Third, to aid the first purpose and using the methods of the second one, Bowler suggests her own definition of the prosperity gospel. She sums up this definition with four key themes—faith, wealth, health, and victory. Fourth, as the ultimate concern of the book, she wants to see how the prosperity gospel movement has been (re-)shaping North American religiosity. As Bowler argues, “[T]he prosperity gospel is a decisive theological, economic, and social force shaping American religion” (9).

With the four purposes above, Bowler constructs the main body of the book with five chapters. Chapter one (*Gospels*) is a historical note on the early 20<sup>th</sup> development of the prosperity gospel, which took various forms and different names like “mind cure, success literature, positive thinking, self-help, and prosperity theology” (11). She suggests three distinct yet interrelated religious or religio-ideological streams as the foundational sources of the prosperity gospel: 1) Pentecostalism, 2) New Thought (an amalgam of metaphysics and Protestantism), and 3) an American gospel of pragmatism, individualism, and upward mobility. In chapter two (*Faith*), Bowler finds that since the late 1940s, the “faith” talk started widely spreading throughout the nation with the symbolic faith motto, “God has greater things in store.” Proponents of the movement then boldly started preaching faith that heals, delivers, and prospers. Chapter three (*Wealth*) explains how the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s prosperity gospel “successfully” interpreted and transformed invisible faith into material wealth. What is particularly interesting in this chapter is her distinction between hard prosperity gospel (immediate causality between faith and financial reality) and soft prosperity (psychotherapeutic enhancement of one’s spirit). In chapter four (*Health*), in the prosperity gospel circle, Bowler recognizes physical health or healing as an essential demonstration of faith. In the last chapter, she articulates how *Jehovah Nissi* (translated as “my victory”) as another fundamental force of the prosperity gospel has been applied to individual success and national blessings.

At the close of the book, Bowler seems to have achieved most of the goals set in the beginning. We might, however, wonder if for her fourth goal she has really succeeded in arguing that the prosperity gospel is a decisive theological and social force (re-)shaping American religion. Undoubtedly, we see plenty facets of evidence in the book that show the evading presence and growth of the prosperity gospel on American religious soil. But, the book does not discuss exactly how the faith or theology of the prosperity gospel has changed or transformed existing or previous (mainline) American faith or theologies, which otherwise still hold their privileged positions as religious forces. Another common curiosity we might share at the end is

about how much or to what extent the prosperity gospel movement is rooted in biblical foundations.

This book, obviously, *is* a priceless resource for today's homileticians who cannot ignore the prosperity gospel preachers anymore as degraded preaching clowns spreading distorted Christian messages. If Bowler is right, those once ignored "clowns" are fast becoming "crowned" forceful propagators of a uniquely American religion. Informative charts and photos at various points in the book, as well as two ample appendixes at the end, prove the growing religio-social force of the prosperity gospel movement.

The book does its job extremely well in including, with significant weight, the same movement unfolding in the African American church communities and among numerous women groups in the nation, not to mention women prosperity gospel preachers. If the author wants to expand the volume in the future, further research might be lent to the adoption of the prosperity gospel movement by Asian American and Hispanic American populations, who are the fastest growing Christians in number now in the U.S. This latter research will aid Bowler in arguing more convincingly for the sweeping influence of the prosperity gospel on North American religiosity in a broader sense.

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