

Debra J. Mumford. *Exploring Prosperity Preaching: Biblical Health, Wealth, and Wisdom*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 2012. 160 pages. \$15.99.

In this work, Debra J. Mumford engages with the prosperity gospel in the United States that allures many Christians into believing that “God wants believers to be rich and enjoy good physical health” (1). It promises material wealth and physical health for people who believe and obey the word of God. Mumford is concerned that advocates of such theology usually interpret the Bible out of context and often dismiss social justice as unimportant. While recognizing several strengths that prosperity preaching may contribute to Christianity, Mumford critically reflects on its distorted message by comparing it with black prophetic preaching. Through her work, Mumford intends to provide the audience of prosperity preaching with “a critical analysis of the theology and alternative ways of understanding God in relation to financial prosperity, physical health, and Christian social responsibility” (3).

In her first chapter, Mumford attempts to trace the origin of prosperity preaching in the United States. While recognizing that the prosperity gospel in the United States is deeply rooted in the “American dream,” she describes how New Thought and the Word of Faith Movements have shaped prosperity preaching in the United States. She argues that they have originated with Phineas, Parkhurst, Quimby, and Essek W. Kenyon, respectively, who emphasized self-reliance and individualism. Although prosperity preaching in the United States originated from Euro-Americans, Mumford argues that it quickly crept into many black churches, coming into conflict with the black prophetic tradition that proclaimed the need for solidarity and the power of unity in the face of injustice (17).

From chapter two through chapter eleven, Mumford begins each chapter with her description of the prosperity theology and ends with a critical reflection that she calls “Sifting the Wheat from the Chaff.” In chapter twelve she offers her view on the positive aspects of the prosperity gospel, her critical stance on the prosperity gospel as “unbiblical,” and reconstructive ways for the audience of the prosperity gospel to guide their faith.

Instead of simply condemning the prosperity gospel as unchristian, Mumford carefully approaches it as a Christian practice in which many Christians in the United States have already engaged. For example, she believes that many Christians today need to learn the “unwavering faith in God” from the prosperity gospel. However, she boldly names it as “unbiblical” since she believes that the prosperity gospel is based on Christianized humanism that focuses on individualistic positive thinking (131–132). It uses biblical texts to support its messages but often lacks contextual interpretation of the scripture. It seems that one of the strengths in her work is to invite ordinary Christians, not necessarily theological scholars, to reflect on their belief and practice critically and reorient them toward a more biblical, contextual, and communal understanding of Christian life.

In recognizing the gap between the prosperity gospel in black churches and the black prophetic tradition, Mumford tries to bring both parties together, offering several points they can learn from each other. However, many audiences may want to know more about the black prophetic tradition in terms of its definition, history, and challenges for today. While Mumford works mostly with the prosperity gospel, her discussion of the black prophetic tradition seems to be too little or only in comparison with prosperity preaching. Some readers might find it difficult to reconcile them. In addition, her view on the black prophetic tradition seems too simplistic and needs further discussion when she argues that it often lacks “personal accountability” in favor of “blaming the ‘Man’ and the systemic structures” (127).

Still, this work of Mumford should be appreciated because she picks up an important topic in Christianity that has often been dismissed as unchristian or disregarded as

nonacademic. It is still a critical Christian practice to which many cling in search for temporary release from their stressful situations. Many preachers will also have to approach their listeners wherever they are, invite them to analyze and reflect critically, and offer a constructive way in which they may redirect the ways of their Christian life.

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