

## Slave Prosperity Gospel

Debra J. Mumford, Ph.D.  
Frank H. Caldwell Professor of Homiletics  
Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary  
Louisville, Kentucky

**Abstract:** *Contrary to popular belief, what is known today as the prosperity gospel did not emerge ex nihilo in 1962 from the preaching of Kenneth E. Hagin. Long before Hagin began preaching his message that God wants Christians to be rich and experience good physical health, Protestant preachers of many different sects integrated their faith in Jesus Christ with their commitment to capitalism to justify theologically and to perpetuate socially the institution of African chattel slavery. This integration of theology and capitalism formed the first prosperity gospel of the New World: the slave prosperity gospel.*

This essay traces the origins of the slave prosperity gospel to understand better how *gospel* has the ability to shape and be shaped by ideology and culture. The development of slave prosperity gospel evolved in four distinct movements, based in historical periods.

### The First Movement (1452–1558)

European capitalists and papal authorization initiated the West African slave trade. Based on the presumption that Popes wield Godly authority over all of God’s creation, on June 18, 1452, Pope Nicholas V issued a call to “Holy War” in *Dum Diversas*, a papal bull giving the Portuguese the right to “attack, conquer and subjugate Saracens, pagans and other enemies of Christ” wherever they happened to be.<sup>1</sup> The bull authorized the conquerors to subjugate their captives into perpetual slavery. This edict applied to recently explored territories along the West Coast of Africa. The Portuguese later appealed to Nicholas V for authorization not only to enslave Africans but also to sell them. In 1455 Nicholas V issued *Romanus Pontifex*, which expanded the authority to the Portuguese capitalists to acquire Africans through violence or trade.<sup>2</sup> In return, the Pope granted remission of sins to kings, all participants, and those who furnished money or troops for the expeditions.

Christopher Columbus is credited with making the continent of Europe aware that North and South America existed. The Spanish monarchy sponsored his thirty-six day voyage, which concluded in August of 1492. At this time Columbus claimed the Bahamas on behalf of Spain.<sup>3</sup> His supposed “discovery” came during a rivalry between European nations for geographical expansion of their territories. Though Columbus made his voyage on behalf of Spain, Portugal also asserted a claim to the new territories. The Portuguese based their claim on Nicholas V’s papal bull of 1455.<sup>4</sup> In 1493, the Pope issued a series of bulls that awarded all territories east of

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Raiswell, “Nicholas V, Papal Bulls of” in *The Historical Encyclopedia of World Slavery, Volume II*, ed. Junius P. Rodriguez (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 1997), 469.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Biography.com Editors, “Christopher Columbus Biography,” New York, NY: A & E Television Networks, 2015, accessed November 29, 2015, <http://www.biography.com/people/christopher-columbus-9254209>.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Nicholas V, “Romanus Pontifex,” Rome, Italy: *Carnegie Institution of Washington*, 1455, accessed November 29, 2015, <http://www.nativeweb.org/pages/legal/indig-romanus-pontifex.html>. Many aspects of this document are mindboggling. First, any one person believed that he had the God given right to determine the fates of

Cape Verde Islands to Portugal and those to the west to Spain. Spain was ultimately awarded Brazil in the Treaty of Tordesillas. Other European nations like France, Denmark and England factually denied that the Pope had the right to “give and take kingdoms to whomsoever he pleased.”<sup>5</sup> As a result, European nations continued to struggle for colonial territories. Through these struggles, England emerged the clear victor. Thus, to the victor goes the spoils!

In 1553 a group of London merchants set out on a mission to expand English trade. They returned two years later with ivory, gold, Malaguetta peppers, and five Africans from Ghana. The Africans were taught English and later returned to Ghana to serve as interpreters for future English traders.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Second Movement (1559–1640)**

England experienced a political, theological, and cultural sea change when Elizabeth I was crowned Queen of England in 1559. Upon ascending to the throne, she re-established Protestantism by establishing the Church of England and decided that it was no longer necessary to adhere to the will of the Papacy. Rather than adhering to previously issued papal bulls, she embarked on her own mission to expand colonization and trade. In 1561, the Queen provided ships and provisions to adventurers and merchants who returned to England with more commodities and more Africans.<sup>7</sup> The Atlantic Slave Trade officially began with Englishman John Hawkins in 1562 who captured 300 slaves by sword and other means along the Guinea coast.<sup>8</sup> Because estate owners in the Dominican Republic needed cheap labor for their sugar and tobacco plantations, Hawkins sold to them one hundred and twenty-five Africans.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Third Movement – North American British Colonies (1640–1819)**

The seventeenth century was one of political unrest in England. The 1640’s brought civil war under the reign of Charles I, followed by the dictatorship of Oliver Cromwell, and then the subsequent restoration of the monarchy with Charles II in 1660.<sup>10</sup> During this time, working class people suffered from poverty, hunger, and unemployment. For them, the prospect of escaping to a New World had great appeal. Like many other English citizens, they dreamed of owning their own land for what they considered a more prosperous future.<sup>11</sup> However, it was not

---

people throughout the world. Second, in the name of Christianity people could be held in perpetual slavery. Three, the name of Christ was used to wreak havoc upon people of many other nations—especially Africans in this case.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Williams, *Capitalism & Slavery* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1944), 4. Williams’ work remains one of the most comprehensive published treatments of the Atlantic slave trade. Williams includes in his work details of the slave trade in the United States and the West Indies. In addition, he provides details of the beneficiaries of the slave trade, which were not simply plantation owners in the West Indies and North American colonies like Virginia. The major beneficiary was England itself. England established a monopoly of trade in which only English ships and English merchandise could be traded. This monopoly gave rise to industries such as shipbuilding, roperies, and clothing merchants. Williams contends that the mammoth profits from the slave trade served to undergird the establishment of British capitalism when capital earned directly from the slave trade was put into banks, which financed cotton factories, brewers, liquor merchants, and grocers.

<sup>6</sup> Black Presence, “Adventurers and Slavers,” London, England: *The National Archives*, 1991, accessed November 28, 2015, [http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/early\\_times/adventurers.htm](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/early_times/adventurers.htm).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Williams, 99–100.

<sup>9</sup> Black Presence.

<sup>10</sup> Kolchin, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Archibald Andrews Marks, “Life at Jamestown,” Williamsburg, VA: *Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation*, 2007, accessed November 27, 2015, <http://www.historyisfun.org/visitus/documents/LifeatJamestown.pdf>, 3.

only the working classes who were interested in the New World. Some who wanted to make the journey were members of the gentry, people of higher social class. Investors recruited the gentry to help found new colonies.<sup>12</sup> In addition, those religiously persecuted sought to live in a place where they would be allowed to worship according to the dictates of their consciences. Though people chose to make the trip to North America for different reasons, many heard stories of a faraway place with a moderate climate, rich soil, and abundant waterways that were conducive for agriculture.<sup>13</sup>

While the citizens of England had various reasons for wanting to live in the New World, the government had its own interests. If they could establish British colonies in North America, they could expand their ability to conduct trade throughout the world. For example, if the colonies were able to produce raw materials such as lumber, then lumber would be one less commodity England would need to purchase from other nations. In turn, the colonies could become markets for goods produced in England.<sup>14</sup> With economic interest in mind, Britain issued charters for colonies with three different types of government: royal, proprietary, and corporate.<sup>15</sup> The proprietary and royal charters maintained direct reporting relationships with the British government. The corporate colonies were more independent. In 1776, nine of the thirteen colonies were royal.<sup>16</sup>

When the English decided to cross the Atlantic to settle in the New World, they encountered several challenges. The first challenge was cost. Making the trip to the new world required large sums of money. Therefore, royal, corporate, or independent sponsorship was necessary. The second challenge was the environment. In the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, America was a wilderness. A large percentage of people who made the early voyages died within a year of their arrival from malnutrition, starvation, disease, oppressive heat, unbearable cold, Native American attacks, murder, or suicide.<sup>17</sup> Such was the case of the Jamestown settlement. One hundred and four men and boys were members of the group who settled in the New World in April of 1607. By the time a new group of settlers arrived in January of 1608, only thirty-eight of the original one hundred and four were alive. Of the thirty-eight, only ten were able to do physical labor because of illness.<sup>18</sup> The first attempt to establish an English settlement on Roanoke Island in North Carolina in 1587 suffered an even worse fate. Two years after one hundred and twenty men, women, and children landed on the Island, they disappeared.<sup>19</sup> Though there were many theories about their fates, no one actually knows what happened to them.

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery 1619–1877* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1993), 24.

<sup>14</sup> Marks.

<sup>15</sup> Nelson Kloze and Robert Francis Jones, *United States History to 1877* (Hauppauge, NY: Barron's Educational Series, 1994), 34.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1968), 23.

<sup>18</sup> Marks.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Carney, "Roanoke Island," Raleigh, NC: *North Carolina History Project*, 2015, accessed November 28, 2015, <http://www.northcarolinahistory.org/commentary/25/entry>. Sir Walter Raleigh, a wealthy Englishman, received a charter from Queen Elizabeth I in 1584 to establish an English colony. After sponsoring several expeditions, Raleigh sent John White with 120 men, women, and children to settle a colony in 1587. The first English Christian child was born, on August 18, 1587, was Virginia Dare. In November 1587, White sailed back to England to report to Elizabeth I about the colony. When he returned two years later, the colonists had disappeared. The only sign that remained of the colonists were the letters "CRO" carved in a tree and the word "CROATOAN"

Despite these early experiences, many made the journey with hope of realizing a better and more profitable future. During the early years, more people crossed the Atlantic determined that expansive trade could be realized through the production of crops such as tobacco and cotton. The largest obstacle to maximize trade and profit was labor. A large labor force was necessary for large-scale production. Settlers first attempted to establish a labor force with Native American populations. However, colonists complained that Native Americans were “haughty” and refused to work properly. Native American men in agricultural labor brought the colonists face-to-face with a cultural roadblock. Native American men refused to engage in agricultural labor because in their culture it was women’s work. Also, engaging in supervised labor was a very new and different experience. In addition, the Natives used their intimate knowledge of the terrain to escape captivity and then to conspire against their captors.<sup>20</sup>

After failing to find a needed labor force, colonists enlisted poor white populations. Some of these came as indentured servants, signing contracts that bound them to serve for agreed upon periods of time in return for their passage.<sup>21</sup> The ship captains sold to the highest bidders other poor whites, known as “redemptioners” because they arranged with the captain to pay for their passage within a certain time period, if they were unable to pay. The British government sent to the New World another group of poor whites, who were convicted criminals, to serve as laborers for a pre-determined period of time.<sup>22</sup> In 1661, religious intolerance provided another source of free white labor. Quakers who refused to take the Crown’s Oath of Allegiance were transported to the New World and forced into service on plantations.<sup>23</sup> Poor whites who made the journey were mostly young men. Some engaged in skilled trades such as blacksmiths and carpentry. Most worked as agricultural laborers under the supervision of men who tried to maximize their labor before their time of servitude expired. Some escaped their toil. If they were apprehended, they were whipped and branded, and their period of servitude was extended.<sup>24</sup> As the years passed, new immigrants were not the only ones who became indentured servants. Citizens of the colonies who found themselves unable to pay their debts became convicted criminals and then forced into indentured servitude. Sometimes they even served multiple terms.<sup>25</sup>

Indentured practices, however, presented several challenging issues. Indentured servants sometimes accepted food and clothing after declaring unwillingness to immigrate and then sued for unlawful detention when they were imprisoned. As the population of the colonies increased, white indentured servants escaped and blended into the local population. In addition, some indentured servants expected to receive land at the end of their contracts.

When the demand for free labor became greater than the supply of indentured servants, the English turned to Africans. African slaves could not blend among the local populations if

---

carved on an entry post. White search for the colonists but never found them. This colony became a North Carolina legend and deemed “The Lost Colony.”

<sup>20</sup> Kolchin, 8. The English discovered that enslaving people on their home turf was difficult if not impossible. As a result, they found it more profitable to export them to other locales once they had been captured in battle. For example, in 1676, after Massachusetts settlers conquered the Native leader Metacom, they sold his wife, children, and many of his followers as slaves to the West Indies.

<sup>21</sup> Williams, 9.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 13. Swearing oaths to secular powers was against Quaker beliefs. Imprisoning people for their dissent was common practice. Adrian Davies, *The Quakers in English Society 1655–1725* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 2000), 183.

<sup>24</sup> Kolchin, 9–10.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

they escaped captivity like the whites. African slaves did not have intimate knowledge of their geographical environment like the Native Americans. Over the long term, African labor was cheaper. Though the initial purchase price of African labor was higher, it was a better long-term investment—especially since, unlike white labor, the female slaves passed along their slave status to their children.<sup>26</sup>

Under the monarchy of Charles II in 1672, Britain formed the *Royal Adventures into Africa Company* (which was later reformed and renamed the *Royal African Company*). This company held a monopoly in the African slave trade and included, among its membership, representatives of the royal family and the aristocracy.<sup>27</sup> With the establishment of the Royal African Company, the British passionately pursued a monopoly on trade. What became known as the transatlantic slave trade formed a triangular exchange: ships left Europe bound for Africa with British manufactured goods such as guns, cloth, and beer; their ships landed in Africa and exchanged British manufactured goods for slaves; their ships left Africa with slaves and landed in North America or the West Indies where they exchanged slaves for goods such as sugar, rum, and tobacco; their ships returned to Europe where they sold goods traded in the Americas for healthy profits.

Before slavery was abolished in the British Empire in 1833 and in the United States in 1865, slavery grew into an industry that brought tremendous profits to people on both sides of the Atlantic. Many people and institutions profited from the slave trade: British slave ship owners and the colonies that could only use British ships when engaging in trade,<sup>28</sup> slave traders who bought and sold slaves, plantation owners who used slaves to grow and harvest crops, planters who invested their profits in manufacturing which helped to finance the Industrial Revolution,<sup>29</sup> factory owners in Britain who made and sold traded goods such as guns since colonies could only buy British goods unless the goods were first taken to England,<sup>30</sup> manufacturers in British factories that included glassware for rum and refined raw sugar, West African leaders who were involved in capturing and selling other Africans, the port cities and businesses that grew up around the slave trade, banks and lenders who made loans to merchants to finance long voyages, ordinary people who worked in factories, and small businesses who made goods that were sold to people in West Africa.<sup>31</sup>

More than six million Africans were transported on British vessels before slavery was finally abolished throughout the British Empire in 1833.<sup>32</sup> During that dark period of world history millions of people profited socially and financially from slave labor. Since the institution of slavery was the source of economic well-being for millions of people, justification for its perpetuation originated from many different societal sectors including religious ones.

*Slave Prosperity Theology*

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>27</sup> Black Presence, "Britain and the Trade," London, England: *The National Archives*, 2003, accessed December 19, 2015, [http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/africa\\_caribbean/britain\\_trade.htm](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/africa_caribbean/britain_trade.htm).

<sup>28</sup> Williams, 56.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> The Abolition Project, "British Involvement in the Transatlantic Slave Trade," London, England: *East of England Broadband Network*, 2009, accessed November 28, 2015, [http://abolition.e2bn.org/slavery\\_45.html](http://abolition.e2bn.org/slavery_45.html).

<sup>32</sup> Marika Sherwood, "Britain, Slavery and the Trade in Enslaved Africans," London, England: *Institute of Historical Research*, 2007, accessed November 28, 2015, <http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Slavery/articles/sherwood.html#17t>.

Many Protestant newcomers to the colonies not only embraced slavery personally by becoming slave owners, they used the Bible to justify the institution of slavery and developed their own *slave prosperity gospel*. Slave prosperity gospel is defined here as Christian preaching that includes the death and resurrection of Jesus but also the benefit of financial prosperity.

A Puritan pastor and Harvard graduate, Cotton Mather, developed and propagated one of the earliest slave prosperity gospels in 1706.<sup>33</sup> Mather delineated the tenants of his gospel in the essay *The Negro Christianized: An Essay to Excite and Assist That Good Work, the Instruction of Negro-Servants in Christianity*. With this essay, Mather had two goals: to convince slave masters to convert their slaves to Christianity and to provide slave owners with guidelines to educate their slaves into Christian faith. The education section of the essay includes a longer and shorter catechism.

Mather wrote definitively that it was the duty of Christians who owned slaves to share their faith with their slaves. He then proceeded to address slave owners' particular concerns, such as the belief that slaves would have to be set free after Baptism. Mather assured slave owners that baptism was not a license for manumission. Indeed, quite the opposite. Baptism in particular and Christianizing slaves in general had benefits: better and more financially profitable slaves. Mather used the words of the Apostle Paul in Philemon to justify his contention that Christianized slaves could be profitable:

Your *Servants* will be the *Better Servants*, for being made *Christian Servants*. To *Christianize* them aright, will be to *fill them with all Goodness*. *Christianity* is nothing but a very Mass of *Universal Goodness*. Were your *Servants* well tinged with the Spirit of *Christianity*, it would render them exceeding *Dutiful* unto their *Masters*, exceeding *Patient* under their *Masters*, exceeding faithful in their *Business*, and afraid of speaking or doing anything that may justly displease you.<sup>34</sup>

*Onesimus* was doubtless a *Slave*: but this poor *Slave*, on whose behalf a great Apostle of God was more than a little concerned; yea, one Book in our Bible was Written on his behalf! When he was *Christianized*, it was presently said unto his *Master*, Philem. 11. *In time past he was unprofitable to thee, but now he will be profitable.*<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Reiner Smolinski, "Biography: Cotton Mather," Atlanta, GA: *Georgia State University*, 2011, accessed August 9, 2015, <http://matherproject.org/node/22>. Cotton Mather was a Puritan pastor, philosopher, and scientist who wrote over 450 books and pamphlets during his lifetime. His unusual name was a combination of his maternal grandfather's name (John Cotton) and his family name (Mather). He was the pastor of Boston's Second Church (Congregational). Among his many publications, he produced one of the most comprehensive medical handbooks in colonial America, *The Angel of Bethesda*. He also published more than fifty works related to eschatology. Mather's many scientific and theological achievements have been eclipsed by his role in the Salem witch trials in which he had people investigated for witchcraft.

<sup>34</sup> Cotton Mather, "The Negro Christianized: An Essay to Excite and Assist That Good Work, the Instruction of Negro-Servants in Christianity (1706)," Boston, MA: *University of Nebraska - Lincoln*, accessed August 5, 2015, <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/etas/28/>, 13.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

With the catechisms in mind, we get a glimpse of Mather's Protestant theology, anthropology, and ethic. Africans were slaves because God called them to be slaves. If they served Jesus Christ faithfully in their calling and lived Godly lives by not sinning against God, they would be rewarded with eternal happiness in heaven. It was only in heaven where they would enjoy rest from all of their labors and troubles.

*Tell them; That if they Serve God patiently and cheerfully in the Condition which he orders for them, their condition will very quickly be infinitely mended, in Eternal Happiness. Show them, that it is GOD who has caused them to be Servants; and that they Serve JESUS CHRIST, while they are at Work for their Masters, if they are Faithful and Honest Servants, and if they do cheerfully what they do, because the Lord JESUS CHRIST has bid them to do it; and that, if they give themselves up to JESUS CHRIST, and keep always afraid of Sinning against Him, it won't be Long before they shall be in a most Glorious Condition; It can't be Long before they Dy, and then! they shall Rest from all their Labours, and all their Troubles, and they shall be Companions of angels in the Glories of a Paradise.*

If taken out of context, it would be easy to presume that Mather's contention that African slaves were called by God to be slaves and that this error was based solely on race. As previously mentioned, this assumption ignores the status-based social hierarchical structure of 18<sup>th</sup> century England. Mather believed that God assigned people to their place in society.<sup>36</sup> At the top of Mather's hierarchical social structure were the nobility. At the bottom were the laboring poor. Though people could move from one level of the hierarchy to another, people generally accepted their caste assignments, responsibilities, and privileges of their ascribed status. Therefore, Mather's advice to slave masters may have been a reflection of his acceptance of English status hierarchy. To Mather, God called Africans, like many white English men and women, to occupy a low social status.

Left out of the *slave prosperity gospel* are sections of the Bible that would lead slaves to believe that they should be free, such as the entire book of Exodus or Luke 4. Passages such as Ephesians 6:5 ("slaves, obey your masters...") were highly recommended. The Ten Commandments were part of the catechism with slight modifications such as:

Q. *What is the Tenth Commandment?*

A. Thou shalt not Covet.

Q. *What is the meaning of it?*

A. I must be Patient and Content with such a Condition as God has ordered for me.

The catechism includes each of the Ten Commandments. However, they are also interpreted intentionally for slaves. In the example above, the tenth commandment was interpreted to encourage slaves to be content and satisfied with their enslaved condition. The task of slaveholders was to persuade slaves that God created them for slavery. By attributing their enslaved condition to God, Mather undoubtedly hoped slaves would be persuaded to accept their forced servitude.

---

<sup>36</sup> Thomas William Heyck, *The Peoples of the British Isles: New History* (Chicago: Lyceum Books, 2008), 47–48.



Fear of the wrath of God was used to persuade slaves to accept Christ as savior. Mather instructed slave masters to tell the slaves that God was angry with them because of their sinful state. If they died in that sinful state, their endured earthly suffering would pale in comparison to the suffering they would experience in hell. Also slaves were taught that Jesus was “King of Kings and Lord of Lords.” He would look upon “sorry slaves” who believed in Him and prepare a mansion for them in heaven.<sup>37</sup>

This *slave prosperity gospel* conflated faithfulness to God with service to the slave master so that slaves could only please God when they pleased the slave master. Only God could reward them when they met the many standards of the slave master. Slaves who pleased their slave masters were financially profitable to the slave masters as well. Therefore, the greatest financial beneficiaries of the *slave prosperity gospel* were the slave masters. Slaves benefitted spiritually by being introduced to the gospel of Jesus Christ and receiving the spiritual reward of an afterlife with God.

Mather cited Colossians 4:1 as evidence that it was the will of God for masters to impart just and equal treatment upon their slaves. While Mather encouraged masters to teach slaves that God called them to be slaves, he taught that God mandated masters to treat their slaves humanely by feeding them, clothing them, affording them “convenient rest,” and allowing them to live comfortable lives.<sup>38</sup>

Missing from Mather’s gospel was a racialized ideology. In one section of his essay, Mather refutes slaveholders’ objections to introducing their slaves to Christianity. Some slaveholders believed that it was a waste of time and energy to Christianize slaves because they lacked reason:

It has been cavilled, by some, that it is questionable whether the *Negroes* have *Rational Souls*, or no. But let that *Bruitish* insinuation be never whispered any more. Certainly, their *Discourse*, will abundantly prove, that they have *Reason*. *Reason* shows itself in the Design which they daily act upon. The vast improvement that *Education* has made upon *some* of them, argues that there is a *Reasonable Soul* in *all* of them.<sup>39</sup>

In another statement, he counters those who consider Africans to be less than human:

An old Roman, and Pagan, would call upon the Owner of such Servants, *Homines tamen esse memento*. They are *Men*, and not *Beasts* that you have bought, and they must be used accordingly. ’Tis true; They are *Barbarous*. But so were our own *Ancestors*. The Britons were in many things as *Barbarous*, but a little before our Saviours Nativity, as the *Negroes* are at this day if there be any Credit in *Cæsars Commentaries*. *Christianity* will be the best cure for this *Barbarity*.<sup>40</sup>

While Mather denies that Africans are beasts, he also denies that they are any more barbarous than their white ancestors before they too were converted to Christianity. Mather’s slave prosperity gospel held five key teachings: God condoned slavery; God called slaves to be slaves;

---

<sup>37</sup> Mather, 20.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Mather, 14.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 14–15.



God obligated slave masters to share the good news of Jesus Christ with their slaves; slaves who were converted to Christianity made better, more profitable slaves; only select sections of the Bible should be used to preach and teach slaves.

### **The Fourth Movement (1820–1865)**

Mather's slave prosperity gospel was one of the first forms. A second form of slave prosperity gospel was developed in defense of the institution of slavery during a period when abolitionists were gaining social and political support. The Second Great Awakening of the 1820's led by evangelists such as Charles Grandison Finney inspired many revival attenders to live more Godly lives.<sup>41</sup> Out of the Second Great Awakening emerged social initiatives such as the abolitionist movement. Abolitionists including David Walker, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, William Lloyd Garrison, and Wendell Phillips used all of their available resources, from Newspaper commentary to public proclamation, to influence public opinion to abolish slavery.<sup>42</sup>

In an attempt to counter abolitionist momentum, this second form of the prosperity gospel had one element that Mather's lacked: racialized ideology. Charles Colcock, an attorney and a Harvard graduate, was an eager proponent of this second form of the slave prosperity gospel. In 1842, he published a book called *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States*.<sup>43</sup> This text included an anthropology that characterized African slaves as morally deficient beings who required the paternalistic efforts of whites for their spiritual, physical, and emotional well-being.<sup>44</sup>

While Jones, like Cotton Mather, wrote his slave prosperity theology with slave owners in mind, Jones' intended audience included the wider public. Jones attempted to change public objections to African enslavement. To this end, he included a history of slavery and anthropology. In his anthropology, he contrasted the degraded moral character of the Negroes with the stellar moral character of people of the "fair Caucasian variety." He wrote that Negroes are "ignorant, vulgar, full of vice and speak broken English."<sup>45</sup> They are also "duplicitous, dishonest, tricky and cunning."<sup>46</sup> Their character

---

<sup>41</sup> "Second Great Awakening," Columbus, OH: *Ohio History Central*, 2006, accessed December 24, 2015, [http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/w/Second\\_Great\\_Awakening?rec=1532](http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/w/Second_Great_Awakening?rec=1532).

<sup>42</sup> "African-American Abolitionists," Philadelphia, PA: *The Independence Hall Association*, 2008, accessed December 24, 2015, <http://www.ushistory.org/us/28b.asp>.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Colcock Jones, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States* (Savannah, GA: Thomas Purse Printer, 1842). Charles Colcock Jones was born in Liberty County in Georgia in 1804. He attended South Carolina College, Columbia. He graduated from then Princeton College and Harvard Law. He practiced law and served as mayor in Savannah. He also practiced law in New York during the Civil War. He was the author of many archeological and antiquarian works. Jones wrote this manual for Christians in 1842. During this period abolitionists were publicly advocating an end to slavery. Jones' work, and other writing during this period, reflects the need of slave owners to justify slavery's continuance. They make their case by adopting a racialized ideology and integrating it with their theology.

<sup>44</sup> Anthropology is the study of humankind. It includes the study of human behavior, differences in body shapes and sizes, customs, clothing, food, speech, religion, and worldviews. Anthropology has four main subfields: sociocultural, biological, archaeology, linguistic anthropology. See David Givens, "What Is Anthropology?" Boston, MA: *Boston University Arts & Sciences*, 2015, accessed November 1, 2015, <http://www.bu.edu/anthrop/about/what-is-anthropology/>.

<sup>45</sup> Jones does not acknowledge the reality of English being the second language of first generation slaves or the reality of withholding education from Africans that could have improved their English speaking abilities.

<sup>46</sup> Jones, 104.

includes being “idle, dissolute, criminal and worthless.”<sup>47</sup> Jones wrote that people of the fair Caucasian variety, on the other hand, have given birth to the most civilized nations of ancient and modern times. They have also exhibited stellar moral and intellectual powers. According to Jones, the Caucasian race stands at the head of the human race. The Negro race is at the bottom. Therefore, Caucasians are superior to Negroes and Negroes are inferior to Caucasians. Superiority mandates that the behavior of Negroes be regulated, which means that they should not be released en masse into any city lest they serve as a “corrupting influence.”<sup>48</sup> Since Negroes are completely dependent on whites for their moral improvement, it is the moral obligation of white Christians to attend to their spiritual and moral needs.<sup>49</sup>

Like Mather’s slave prosperity gospel, Jones used the fear of God to provide incentive for slaves to accept Christ as savior. He admonished slave masters not to abuse their slaves. They were to treat slaves with kindness and show gratitude for their work.<sup>50</sup> While Mather’s slave prosperity gospel provided catechisms to teach slaves about the Christian faith, Jones’ gospel referenced catechisms while admonishing slave masters to deny slaves two particular rights: the right to read the Bible and the right to preach the gospel. Rationale for denying these two rights was not provided. However, it is not difficult to surmise that slaves who could read the Bible may come across parts of the Bible that inspired resistance and liberation. It is also not difficult to surmise that slave preachers may not preach a message of submissiveness and contentment with their enslavement.

### **Why Slave Prosperity Gospel Matters Today**

Reflection on the slave prosperity gospel reminds us that Christianity has not simply been complicit in the perpetuation of racialized ideology but helped generate it. As a result, followers of Christ must help eradicate it. The racialized ideology and anthropology of the slave prosperity gospel are woven deeply into the fabric of our society. Recent highly publicized incidents of police brutality such as the deaths of Laquan McDonald in Chicago and Sandra Bland in Texas demonstrate that some in society still perceive people of African descent as criminals who pose a threat to the wellbeing of others simply because of the color of their skin.

Followers of Christ should closely study the slave prosperity gospel to acknowledge and to understand that its anthropology and racialized ideology shapes the ways we perceive and interact with one another on every level of our society. We will never be able to fulfill the Godly mandate to love all of our neighbors as ourselves if we allow racism to guide our thinking.

Followers of Christ should closely study the slave prosperity gospel to understand how the gospel of Jesus Christ is good news for people who are oppressed by the various teachings of the slave prosperity gospel. People who are victimized by systems that perpetuate the ideology espoused in the slave prosperity gospel need to know that Jesus came to set them free from the racism that binds them. As members of the body of Christ we must allow the love of Christ to guide our actions on behalf of others.

---

<sup>47</sup> Jones, 103–4.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>49</sup> Jones, 174.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

We must confront racialized ideology, anthropology, and theology with a gospel of liberation and an affirming anthropology. Biblical texts such as Psalm 139 are instrumental:

<sup>13</sup> For it was you who formed my inward parts;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.  
<sup>14</sup> I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
Wonderful are your works;  
that I know very well. (Psa 139:13-14 NRS)

Through preaching we can affirm that wonderful are all of God's works, all of God's creation.

Homileticians teach pastors and faith leaders that sermons should be relevant to the people in their congregations. This instruction underscores that sermons directly impact the lives and well-being of the people present in the pews. In addition we must recognize that congregations in the United States are still, by and large, racially segregated spaces. As a result, preachers must not only preach to the people in the pews but to those whom are not represented. Catherine and Justo Gonzalez remind preachers to speak empowering and healing words:

The pastor whose preaching begins to accustom a congregation to hearing such words [words from the powerless that highlight the necessity of change] has made great strides in enabling the mission of the church to go forward in the midst of a very new reality in the world. Such preaching could also begin to heal divisions within denominations caused by differing worldviews and assumptions. To bring the absent powerless into the sermon wherever they belong in the biblical text can have these effects.<sup>51</sup>

Combating racism contributes to a liberated ontology—a reconstructed sense of being that shapes the daily, lived reality of all people. In this liberated ontology, people are empowered to conceive a new way of being that impacts self-consciousness, enables the racialized to dream big dreams of what they can do and become in the world, and compels those with racist conceptions to reconstruct and ground their anthropology in reality rather than stereotypes and falsely constructed personas.

Though the slave prosperity gospel was originally intended to maintain the institution of chattel slavery, in its second iteration it also helped to inscribe deeply a racialized ideology into the fabric of our society. Since the church helped to create and perpetuate racism, we have an obligation to help annihilate it.

---

<sup>51</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez and Catherine G. Gonzalez, *The Liberating Pulpit* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2003), 74.