

Prosperity Gospel... Buying Salvation

Ross Welcome to Renegade Inc. It is said in the Gospel of Matthew that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. But what happens when the rich men are the pastors? Today, the prosperity gospel has conflated Christianity with capitalism. Its business model is to sell access, success and salvation. And if you don't buy any of those, all you'll get is hellish damnation.

Ross I've got to tell you, the first thing that I do when I get to America is jump into the hotel room, get the remote control for the telly, get to the cable channels and find the God squad. And there's about five or six of them. And someone's falling over. Someone's being baptised. They're people in Rapture in the audiences. And I am transfixed.

Mary Wrenn Yes.

Ross The televangelists, they know how to put on a show.

Mary Wrenn Yes, they do. They do.

Ross But there's a dark side to all this isn't there? Because preying on someone's vulnerability or loneliness, someone in need, if they need health care, if they need money, whatever it might be. These people are exploiting people who are in a situation, often not because of their own doing.

Mary Wrenn Right.

Ross Just talk us through this movement and what's really going on at the heart of the pastors and the televangelists.

Mary Wrenn Well, the prosperity gospel is really predicated on individualism. So an individual relationship with God and individual responsibility, not only for your eternal salvation which is the normal purview of a pastor, but also individual responsibility for your material circumstances in the here and now.

Ross Right.

Mary Wrenn And so the prosperity gospel preaches that not only is eternal salvation accessible through faith, but that material wealth in the here and now is also accessible through faith.

Ross I see.

Mary Wrenn And that faith has to be demonstrated. And the way that one demonstrates that faith is through something called positive confession. And this is where the 'name it and claim it' nickname for the prosperity gospel comes from. It's this idea, not of asking God for money or wealth or success, but from claiming it from God because God has already set it aside for the individual.

Ross So God's - he or she - is sitting there?

Mary Wrenn Yes.

Ross You make contact?

Mary Wrenn Yes.

Ross There's a sort of, I don't know, a rota or a roster or database or something. And you're in there and all you then have to do is communicate that and then channel that into your life. And the reason why it works is because other pastors who've done it are materially very successful?

Mary Wrenn Yes. I mean, they hold their wealth up. They're not ashamed of their wealth.

Ross Right.

Mary Wrenn So calling them out on their wealth is not a gotcha. It's proof. It's proof that their method works.

Ross What about the camel, the needle, the gates of heaven?

Mary Wrenn They have a standard response for that. The prosperity gospel, if you tried to bring up those particular verses out of Matthew to them, they will say, 'look, it's not money is the root of all evil, it's the love of money that is the root of all evil. It's not wealth that God abhors, it is prioritisation of wealth above God that God abhors'.

Ross And it's okay if you're spreading the word of the gospel in a private jet around the Midwest?

Mary Wrenn Yes. They would see that as a necessity in spreading the gospel. They would see that as an instrument, a tool.

Ross Jesus had a donkey, not a jet.

Mary Wrenn Yes. Yes. And one of the preachers has said in today's terms, a donkey is a cadillac. I don't specifically remember this part of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus talked about wealth. But they claim that Jesus is indeed wealthy and that Jesus wants you to be wealthy and that all you need to be wealthy is to claim what is rightfully yours from God.

Ross Because there are so many different facets of televangelists and prosperity gospel, evangelicals, mega churches. How do you start to divide them and say, oh, well, these people believe this; this happens here? give us an overview of these different sects.

Mary Wrenn It is really complicated and it can be very confusing because you have evangelicals, the prosperity gospel and mega churches, and there's a significant amount of overlap between those three groups. But they are not all in the same thing. And that's further

complicated by what these groups call themselves and how they regard each other. So, for instance, the prosperity gospel preachers would not consider themselves, would not call themselves, prosperity gospel. They would not claim that for themselves. But they would, generally speaking, most of them, would say that they are evangelical.

Ross Right.

Mary Wrenn Evangelicals would call them prosperity gospel. And for that reason, say that they are not true to the spirit of evangelicalism. So it's a contested landscape to say the least.

Ross And the people doing this, are there different groups vying for position? Are some closer to God than others?

Mary Wrenn Well, it depends on who you ask. Yes, of course. Of course, each thinks that they have, you know, the mainline to God. They think that their interpretation of the gospel is the truest to the message. And then you have mega churches and mega churches are churches that typically have a congregation of 2000 or more. And a lot of the more popular prosperity gospel people and more popular evangelicals do have mega churches. So like I said, there's a lot of overlap, but it's not a single circle.

Ross A lot of these preachers, pastors, are super wealthy.

Mary Wrenn Yes.

Ross They've done very well out of this.

Mary Wrenn Yes.

Ross And you've got to say that those cash flows have come from people tithing and wanting to be either closer to God or having prayers answered. There's something pretty pernicious about this?

Mary Wrenn Yeah, I'd say so. And tithing isn't unique in religion in the United States. There are lots of denominations that require tithing. I lived in Utah for six years and the LDS church has a tithing requirement. So that's not as unusual. What is unusual is this sowing a seed.

Ross Right. What does that mean?

Mary Wrenn What that means is that when you have a particular thing that you need from God, whether that is financial success or its health or it's you want your career to move forward.

Ross Curing Corona virus?

Mary Wrenn Yes. You need to sow a seed. So what you do is you make a financial gift offering. And that is the sowing of a seed. That is saying, I am giving my money to you because I have faith that that money will come to me.

Ross He's here with us.

Mary Wrenn If a light falls I'm out of here.

Ross Just so we know, and people watching this at home, there's been a big bang over their which you heard. We might be watched or being watched. Keep going.

Mary Wrenn OK.

Ross One of the things that I find really difficult in all of this is the sense of hope that is sold. And as we know, hope is a false friend because you're really exploiting people in the most vulnerable, often in the most vulnerable state.

Mary Wrenn Yes.

Ross And that persistent selling of hope is a really, really, awful thing to do to people, especially if you're pulling a few dollars out the other end of it.

Mary Wrenn Absolutely. Absolutely. And it can have disastrous consequences as well. Imagine that you're a congregant. The year is 2005, right? We've just done with the Clinton administration, lots of financial deregulation. We're in the George.W. Bush administration. Bush ran on this idea of the ownership society that everyone should be able to buy a home. Now, you're a congregant and you are told to claim what is rightfully yours, what God already has for you. And then suddenly you qualify for a mortgage. Suddenly you don't have to have a down payment to put on a house. These seem like to the congregant signs of God's favour. And what's more, if you don't take on this debt...

Ross Oh, no.

Mary Wrenn If you don't take on this debt, that is a sign that you do not have faith that you will be able to pay this back. So you have to take the leap of faith and acquire this debt because this is what God has set before you.

Ross You see there's historical context to this, because basically what pastors are doing is conflating Jesus with capitalism. And back in 1936, a new thought mystic and founder of the Unity Church, Charles Fillmore, rewrote Psalm 23 to read, 'The Lord is my banker, my credit is good'.

Mary Wrenn Yes, it's very much part of the prosperity gospel narrative.

Ross And then Bruce Bowler back in 1925 - he was an advertising executive - and he wrote a book called The Man Nobody Knows. And he argued that Jesus was the first great capitalist. And so he's saying someday someone will write a book about Jesus. Every businessman will read it and send it to his partners and his salesmen, for it will tell the story of the founder of modern business.

Mary Wrenn Right.

Ross So this is a guy who threw money lenders out of the temple?

Mary Wrenn Correct.

Ross But he's really the godfather of capitalism?

Mary Wrenn Right. And that's what the prosperity gospel preachers teach. They teach that Jesus was a wealthy person. That wealth is not a sin. That wealth is a sign of God's favour. They claim that Jesus was prosperous. Kenneth Copeland says that Jesus was so prosperous that he had to have a treasurer and that he had to have been prosperous because he funded the ministry. He funded his disciples. Creflo Dollar has said that Jesus, from the time he was born, attracted wealth. And as evidence, the three wise men coming to bring him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. These are expensive gifts.

Ross So he's the godfather of capitalism and he's the first goldbug?

Mary Wrenn Yeah.

Ross He's the first sound money guy?

Mary Wrenn Yeah. From from his infancy he attracted wealth.

Ross But this is this law of attraction, isn't it?

Mary Wrenn Yes, very much.

Ross Because that's what they're selling. If you do this, you can be a little like me because I've attracted this and then you will get this.

Mary Wrenn It grows out of a long tradition of the power of positive thinking. So in the early 19th century we had first wave transcendentalism and mesmerism. And both of these were sort of experiments with spirituality that sought to make a more direct connection between the individual and a higher power. And out of that grew toward the end of the 19th century, something called New Thought. And New Thought is a tradition that talks about the perfectibility of the Self. And the individual, in their direct connection with a higher power, can tap into that higher power and essentially achieve mind over matter. So they can heal themselves, make themselves wealthy. Now, at the beginning of the 20th century, we also have the Pentecostal movement that starts. And a small sect of the pentecostal faith starts experimenting with New Thought and they bring into practise faith cures. So at first we get these cures that are based primarily on health. As we move through the 20th century, it waxes and wanes until we get to the 1950s. And there is an author named Norman Vincent Peale who comes out with a book called The Power of Positive Thinking. And it is a bestseller and incredibly influential. And the connections are quite obvious when you remember that Norman Vincent Peale was the pastor for Donald Trump's church growing up. So a lot of these things start to make sense. Through the 1950s, we see more medical advances in vaccine development. And so what happens is we have a pivot away from promises of health healing and toward promises of financial wealth. And then once we hit the 1960s, we've got

counter culture, we've got experimentalism, and we have the neo charismatic movement, which is very similar to pentecostalism and speaking in tongues. And they are very theatrical in their worship. They have stages instead of altars. They have concerts as part of their service. And so with the prosperity gospel is really the product of that early cross pollination between New Thought and pentecostalism infused with neo charismatic elements. And then you throw in TV's in every home and you get the televangelists of the 1970s. And that's where the prosperity gospel, as we recognise it today, really started to take off.

Ross Welcome back to Renegade Inc. Before we talk more about how Jesus was the godfather of capitalism with the economist Mary Wrenn, let's have a look at some of the richest pastors in the world, in this week's Renegade Inc. Index. Unsurprisingly, much of this information is shrouded in secrecy. But we've put together an informal list from sources to give you an insight into how much money these people make. So in at number five, out of the richest, Benny Hinn, net worth 42 million dollars. He's an Israeli televangelist who holds miracle crusades. These are faith healing summits, usually hosted in big stadiums and broadcast on his TV show, which is called. This is Your Day. This is a problem selling this kind of false hope.

Mary Wrenn Yes, absolutely. And he also sells tours, from what I understand, of the Holy Land. So he will take you over to Israel and get you...

Ross That bit closer to God.

Mary Wrenn Get you that bit closer.

Ross At number four, Pat Robertson. He's worth one hundred mil. He's from Virginia. Also a pastor. Ran for president, unsuccessfully.

Mary Wrenn He founded the Heritage Foundation, which is a hugely influential conservative think tank in the United States. I can talk at length about him. He has also spoken about how the Republican party had lost its way. He's written several books about where the right went wrong and gave up its conservative roots.

Ross And conflating church and state with a think tank.

Mary Wrenn Yeah.

Ross Elegant stuff. Third richest, David Oyedepo, 150 mil, founder of the Living Faith Church worldwide, also known as the Winners Chapel.

Mary Wrenn In Nigeria, I believe.

Ross Right. So it's not just America. This is now for export?

Mary Wrenn The prosperity gospel is a distinctly American invention. But the preachers have been busy exporting it.

Ross Wow! Second richest, Thomas Dexter Jakes or T.D. Jakes, net worth, same 150 mil. He leads the non-denominational mega church, the Potter's House. And that's in Dallas, Texas. And he's actually been on the cover of Time magazine, Mary?

Mary Wrenn Yes, I believe the title was God Wants You to Be Rich.

Ross Of course. And coming in at number one, a country mile between him and his contemporaries, Kenneth Copeland, net worth 760 mil. He's a popular televangelist and founder of the Kenneth Copeland Ministries, also in Texas.

Mary Wrenn Kenneth Copeland is a prosperity gospel preacher. He brags about his wealth. He's very proud of his wealth. He's not ashamed of it.

Ross And he, too, is blessed?

Mary Wrenn Yes. He considers himself blessed, yes. And that this is God making sure that he has enough to fund his life and to fund his ministry and sees his wealth, essentially, as a tool to use or as a weapon to use in God's army.

Ross Well, something else about him. He's able, for just a few dollars, to cure Corona virus.

Video clip (Kenneth Copeland) Put your hand on that television set. Yes. Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Lord Jesus. He'll receive your healing. Yes. Now. Say it, I take it. I take it. I have it. It's mine. It's mine. I thank you and praise you for it. Yes. And I forgive you if I have it against any. And I praise you that I'm well and whole. I praise you that I'm well and whole. According to the word of God, I'm healed. And I consider not my own body. Yes. I consider not symptoms in my body. I consider no symptoms, but only that which God has promised. Only that what the word has said, and by his stripes I was healed and by his stripes. I am healed now. I'm not the sick trying to get healed. I'm the healed and the devil is trying to give me the flu or whatever else kind of thing he's trying. Heal and well. Yes and in the sweet name of Jesus.

Ross Hallelujah. We don't need a vaccine. We don't really need hospitals now. We just need this guy to...

Mary Wrenn Not just him. Not just him. There is also Paula White, a televangelist out of Florida who claimed victory over the Corona virus from the Rose Garden.

Ross In the White House?

Mary Wrenn In the White House, yes.

Ross Just remind us, greatest deaths in the world, country by country?

Mary Wrenn It's a heated competition between Brazil and the United States. But I think we're edging them out.

Video clip (Kenneth Copeland) Covid-19. I blow the wind of God on you. You are destroyed forever and you'll never be back.

Mary Wrenn That is the positive confession. That is claiming that God has already given you what you need.

Ross That's positive lunacy. And the difficult bit is that there are people in those congregations who are terrified to leave. They listen to that stuff, they'll send some more money. It's an abusive relationship, really because they are mentally captured by this.

Mary Wrenn Right.

Ross And then exploited?

Mary Wrenn Yes.

Ross Because we can sit here and laugh about it and say, isn't it lunacy. But actually, there's a really dark side to this, isn't there?

Mary Wrenn Yes. And I feel very protective of the congregants who get swept up in this. And think about this context for a moment. We're in the middle of a pandemic. And in the United States, where health care is only provided through insurance that is tied to your job, the unemployment rate is 20, 25 percent currently, which means that we have millions of people who have lost their jobs and do not have health insurance in the middle of a pandemic.

Ross So these guys are the balance sheet that these organisations are going to go through the roof, because ultimately, you know, if you're in that much desperation, you're going to cling to anything.

Mary Wrenn Yes, the cheapest health care there is.

Ross Which isn't health care.

Mary Wrenn Yes.

Ross I mean, how do you begin to address this?

Mary Wrenn It's not going to work to call them out on hypocrisy. It's not going to work to try to counter their narrative with evidence from verses in the Bible. I don't know how you would bring someone out of the prosperity gospel. And I don't know that you want to. I mean, whatever gives you solace during this period, you know, go ahead, embrace it.

Ross But those people who are in it, or, you know, and are captured, but they know intuitively or feel intuitively that there's something not quite right, they might be watching this conversation. Hopefully, we've pulled it apart in a way that has been insightful enough to get a little glimpse that maybe this isn't the real deal?

Mary Wrenn That might be true. But they also might see what we're talking about as inviting negativity in. See, that is the flip side of the positive confession.

Ross OK, what's that then?

Mary Wrenn If you have doubt, if you ask for something or you make a request and say you need it twice, you are being negative because you are not claiming it. And that's the really insidious power of the positive confession because there's no room for critique. And even though the material circumstances of an individual might not change, the prosperity gospel message is still going to seduce.

Ross But I can tell you now, regardless of how hard you work under the current economic arrangements of the so-called capitalist system, structurally that isn't gonna pan out.

Mary Wrenn Right. Exactly. Exactly. And so the prosperity gospel is essentially a spiritual articulation of neo liberalism. It's a reinforcing institution because what does neo liberalism teach? It teaches that if you are poor, it's because you didn't work hard enough. You didn't pull yourself up by your bootstraps. You don't have the work ethic. You haven't earned it, which is the same message of the prosperity gospel.

Ross That's incredible. And it's incredible to draw that comparison.

Mary Wrenn Yes.

Ross And it's no coincidence, is it, that the current president, Mr. Trump, is playing really hard to these audiences with these messages?

Mary Wrenn Exactly. President Trump, growing up, his childhood pastor was Norman Vincent Peale, the author of *The Power of Positive Thinking*. Peal's sermons were often built around stories of entrepreneurs as heroes, as the moral heroes of his narratives. And so Trump grew up hearing those messages. And you can actually see the positive confessions in Trump's unscripted remarks, which are nothing but word salads of superlatives, right? It's all, we've got this beat. We're going to we're going to take over. We're the best.

Ross Everything's fantastic.

Mary Wrenn Everything's fantastic.

Ross Everything's terrific.

Mary Wrenn And his two favourite words are, 'believe me'. Believe me, we're going to get this cure. Believe me, we're going to have an economic turnaround like the world has never seen. Believe me.

Ross I don't know if anyone's ever said it before, but let's do this. I think you've got a televangelist running the country.

Mary Wrenn Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. He's not our first neo liberal president, but he is absolutely our first prosperity gospel president.

Ross And like all the other televangelists, he's got a private jet.

Mary Wrenn Yeah, absolutely.

Ross So now we're in a position in America where it isn't just Goldman Sachs under then Lloyd Blankfein, who's doing God's work. It's now the president is doing God's work. And actually, God's on his side.

Mary Wrenn Absolutely.

Ross And with that backup, he can go about his daily job.

Mary Wrenn Right. Right. And you can see why Trump has been popular with evangelicals, which is a broader group than the prosperity gospel. And we should probably save that conversation for another day. But he has brought in a lot of evangelicals into his cabinet - Nancy Dubois, for instance. And he has passed a lot of executive orders that are very much favoured by the evangelical community.

Ross Mary, you've given us a massive insight to a world that I find absolutely fascinating. Thank you very much.

Mary Wrenn Thank you.

Ross That's it from Renegade Inc. this week. We'd love to hear from you, so studio@renegadeinc.com. Join us next week for more insight from those people who are thinking differently. But until then, stay curious.