

Health and wealth

by [Heath W. Carter](#) in the [September 4, 2013](#) issue

In Review



Blessed

Kate Bowler

Oxford University Press

Riches were not always beyond reproach. The Puritans famously convicted Boston merchant Robert Keayne of “oppression,” having determined that he was charging too many shillings for a bag of nails. Such hard-line censure was always rare, but

even two centuries later, at the dawn of what Mark Twain dubbed the Gilded Age, New Testament warnings about wealth continued to generate compunction. When Cornelius Vanderbilt, the 19th century's richest American, died in 1877, many fretted about the fate of his soul—as had Vanderbilt himself, according to some reports.

One of the most remarkable developments in the ensuing history of American Christianity is that money shed its moral ambiguity. By the mid-20th century most believers saw no contradiction between sincere faith on the one hand and upward mobility and unfettered consumption on the other. What is even more striking, as Kate Bowler shows in this marvelous book, is that millions came to see not just wealth but also health as a birthright of the born again.

The prosperity gospel eludes easy definition, so Bowler takes a multifaceted approach. *Blessed* is part genealogy. She traces the movement's roots back to the turn of the 20th century, when evangelical and especially Pentecostal streams of faith intermingled with New Thought, a movement that emphasized the power of the mind to rearrange matter and taught that humans shared in the divine ability to create.

A little-known minister by the name of Essek William Kenyon stood at the theological headwaters. He advanced a bold new interpretation of the atonement, in which, as Bowler writes, "Christians could look to the cross not as a promise of things to come, but as a guarantee of benefits *already* granted." Jesus' sacrifice entitled believers to full and immediate access to God's generative, healing might. All one had to do was invoke the Savior's name.

As this conviction proliferated in both white and black church networks, it gave rise to diverse but unmistakably related strains of what would emerge after World War II as a bona fide movement. A wide-ranging cast of characters keyed the prosperity gospel's postwar advance.

Bowler introduces readers to Kenneth Hagin, who systematized the movement's ideas; Oral Roberts, who popularized them via his university and media empire; and a host of others, including T. D. Jakes, Joel Osteen, Gloria and Kenneth Copeland, and Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker. Bowler weaves a comprehensive history and brings the story all the way up to the present day.

The book is also a richly textured tour of the world inhabited by prosperity believers. Bowler's credibility as a guide springs from her extensive fieldwork. Remarkably, she visited a quarter of all American prosperity megachurches. She also attended nearly every major conference, toured in Israel with televangelist Benny Hinn and logged 18 months of observation at the Victorious Faith Center, a small African-American congregation in Durham, North Carolina.

As she sifts through these experiences, she strikes some lighter notes, relaying, for instance, that on her trip abroad with Hinn, "an unscholarly thing occurred. I got sick." But Bowler's immersion in the subculture also produced significant insights, which she unveils in four thematically organized chapters on faith, wealth, health and victory. Moving deftly between anecdote and analysis, she explores the complicated ins and outs of each theme. For example, the experience of a cancer-stricken Victorious Faith Center member named Judy provides an opportunity to explore the thorny question of what happens when someone is not healed.

A visit to Osteen's Lakewood Church in Houston on the most somber day of the Christian year drove home the movement's pervasive emphasis on triumph over struggle. As Bowler made her way into the worship service, six different chipper greeters exclaimed, "Happy Good Friday!" She observes that "the movement could be identified by its heavily instrumental definition of faith. . . . Faith was faith only because it worked."

But even here she finds a diversity of understanding. "Hard prosperity" teaches that life circumstances reflect the state of one's faith; prolonged illness, according to this paradigm, is a troubling sign indeed. Much more prevalent is "soft prosperity," which finesses the relationship between spiritual and material reality, offering some wiggle room in a world where the prayers of even the most fervent believers seem at times to go unanswered.

This is a stunningly empathetic book. Bowler engages a set of actors and ideas that many find problematic, even distasteful, with the utmost respect. At points I was looking for a more critical treatment, especially when the dubious seemed to border on the absurd—as with the notion that Joseph and Mary's donkey was tantamount to a Cadillac, for example, or that Jesus outfitted himself in designer clothes.

Only in the conclusion does Bowler indulge in a bit of cultural criticism, declaring that "the prosperity gospel was constituted by the deification and ritualization of the American Dream." By that point in the book one can appreciate how her refusal to

rush to judgment has made room for a number of analytical surprises (who knew that one could find in health-and-wealth circles efforts to combat structural injustice?). By pushing far beyond caricature, Bowler has produced a must-read for anyone who wants to understand the prosperity gospel and how it is, even now, remaking the American religious landscape.