

THE GOSPEL OF BLING

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by

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A couple weeks ago I was listening to one of those uber-Christian radio stations you know I like listening to, and I was surprised to hear the preacher, I think it was Chuck Swindoll with his mild, mild voice, say, “For each dollar you give away here on earth, you will receive two dollars in heaven.” Now, that’s a pretty tall order. First of all, you have to accept the notion that there is a heaven, of which I’m not terribly convinced myself. Second of all, there’s this idea that money will still be important to you in the afterlife, again not something I’m much convinced of. But then there’s this other thing. I studied economics for a short while and the most important idea in classical economics is that it’s based on a law of limits. There is only so much supply of a particular resource—oil, for example—and so the cost of the resource depends on the scarcity or abundance of the resource. Money, of course, is a resource too in whatever form, and it seems to me that if you’re going to promise there’ll be at least twice the supply after you die, you’d better have your inventory calculated.

Think about it. If only one person listening to that radio broadcast took the preacher up on it, and let’s say he’s not disappointed, and he gives away five dollars, he

gets ten dollars in heaven. Seems as if god would have enough pocket change to cover that. But let's multiply the possible audience by any millions we want to consider, and then say each of those millions gave away any number of millions, and this comes to, well, a lot. A million here, a billion there, and we're starting to talk some real money. Not to mention the untold millions who have done this same practice down through millennia and will continue to do so throughout the numberless millennia yet to come, whether they were aware they were doing it to lay up stores in the afterlife or no.

Now, the idea of limits is limits—there aren't any more of a certain thing. Some people might say, "Well, god just makes more as the need arises. He can do that; he's god." But that denies the preciousness of the thing itself, whether it's credit, bills or seashells. Remember, the worth of a thing depends on how scarce it is. This is why diamonds cost more than table salt, although there's a good argument concerning the genuine scarcity of diamonds. Seems the best god could do to make such a thing work is the same plan as American Social Security, in which you pay for your parent's retirement and your children pay for yours. This should worry us I think if god is operating the celestial social security in the same way we've been operating it in the US. In this scenario, the money you give away now helps bank up the stores of your great-great-great grandmother. Assuming of course she went to heaven. Maybe not, in my case.

All silly, you say? You're right. It's an example of simple one-handed reasoning and it doesn't make much sense at all. I want to point out the speciousness of talking about something as material as money or wealth in terms of what we reap from doing good.

Earlier this year *Sojourners Magazine* printed an article called “The Gospel of Bling” by The Reverend Robert Franklin of Emory University where he teaches social ethics. Franklin is disturbed by the influence of affluence, especially in the black church. The prosperity gospel, which he refers to in his title, is a relative of a longer-lived theology called Prosperity Theology or Word of Faith, in which the success or failure of an individual in business is seen as external evidence of god’s favor. A common claim of televangelists, including Benny Hinn, Kenneth Copeland, Pat Robertson and T.D. Jakes, this is a theology which claims god wants Christians to succeed in every way, including, maybe especially, financial success. The theology traces its roots to the writings of mid-century evangelist E.W. Kenyon, coiner of the phrase “what I confess, I possess,” still heard often among Word of Faith proponents. Its exemplar proponent most recently has been Tyler Perry, whose prosperity has spawned some successful movies based on his preaching, like *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, *Daddy’s Little Girls*, and *Madea’s Family Reunion*, which have taken in many millions in profit, as well as preaching the late Kenneth Hagin’s four-part formula, “say it; do it; receive it; tell it” to many millions of watchers. It’s interesting to note that Perry, whose best-known creation is the Southern matriarch Madea, himself portrays Madea in drag, which is not usually an approved form of Christian worship.

Franklin writes in his essay about a visit he made to the neighboring church of his fellow Atlantan, Dr. Creflo Dollar, pastor of the World Changers church, one of that city’s various mega churches. He describes a comfortable, large place, and I can tell you, mega churches are nothing if not comfortable. Reclining seating, cup holders, a good deal of wide room between rows. Attentive ushers. Good sound system. The effect is

often the same as in a pretty good-sized movie theater, and the effect of sitting in one is often not unlike the other. You're watching a show, something meant to have an impact on you and then you file out afterwards and go on with your life.

Reverend Franklin's analysis of his experience at the World Changers Church is pretty interesting. He notes major variances from both traditional black sermonology and contemporary religious orthodoxy, most of which he attributes to the requirements of making the service available to the television cameras broadcasting the event worldwide. He also notes Dollar's enthusiasm and scholarly erudition and says of him that his "first 15 minutes...were encouraging and impressive. I heard evidence of a critical thinker who had done his homework..." Then Reverend Dollar mentions his two Rolls Royces.

Now, I've watched some of Creflo Dollar's preaching on YouTube and I can't say he's mesmerizing, but that's probably the effect of the small screen. I'm sure in person he's all Franklin and his listeners proclaim: erudite, powerful, entertaining. I want to hasten to explain to you I'm not offering a rejection of either Reverend Dollar or the Prosperity Gospel here today. Both are available aplenty online and among many contemporary Christian sources. As I've often said, it's easy for us who are concerned about the takeover of the country by the religious right to assume it's a massive wall of towering indifference to both criticism and doubt. Generally we only hear about their successes. But I can tell you, since I spend a lot of time there, there is a tremendous critical surge against preachers like Perry and Jakes and Dollar, and not only from the usual leftist suspects like Jim Wallis or Michael Lerner. When you go home this afternoon Google "prosperity gospel" or "Creflo Dollar" or simply the word "heresy" and

stand back. Among the true believers, these are fighting words. They are eating themselves over these subjects at a rate that should give us pause.

No, I'm not interested in rejecting the gospel of bling because, well, because it doesn't really have much effect on us. For one, of course, we're not Christian. Many of us individually think of ourselves that way of course but as a denomination, while we began as a Christian sect, we've moved theologically into other territory. For another we're not too into bling. In fact, I'm going to bet there's any number of you this morning who saw the title of my sermon and have heard me refer to it, and who don't know it's a coined word from the longer onomatopoeic "bling-bling," a hip hop term for oversized costly jewelry that is ostentatious in both its presentation and its symbology. It's meant to suggest, "I have more than you ever will." Think Flavor Flav, although many of you won't know who he is either, so think Liberace.

Besides, I couldn't hope to improve on the unintentional self-mockery of some of the proponents of the gospel of bling. One of the most famous is Suze Orman—who I know we've all seen because the only thing Unitarian Universalists watch is PBS—whose tome *The Courage to be Rich* (the courage to be rich?) has been the subject of no fewer than three different specials. Suze remarks in that book that the fifth of her Five Laws for Success is "Make everything you do be done as if God himself is doing it, for in fact He is." Missing from this law is any humble idea that what you're doing may not be all that good a thing to do, may in fact be a very selfish thing to do, and may be an instance others might interpret as god doing some heavy damage. I'm sure Kenneth Lay and John Rockefeller often thought of themselves as doing god's will. I know George W. Bush thinks he is.

Or in Gary Moore's *Ten Golden Rules for Financial Success*, in which he quotes his subject Sir John Templeton as saying, "Never did Jesus advocate government welfare for the poor." Now while that's technically true, it's also predicated on our throwing away the combined *New Testament* notions that we should give both to the government—render unto Caesar and all that—and to the poor—Jesus telling one man "sell what you have and give it to the poor"—and also conveniently forgetting that at the time of Jesus there was no government welfare for the poor. It makes as much sense to point out that neither did Jesus advocate going to college right out of high school or making monthly donations to your Roth IRA.

Most importantly, I couldn't hope to equal the decimation of this gospel that Reverend Peter Gomes deals out in his text on *The Good Book*. His chapter on "The Bible and Wealth" is a masterpiece of clear thinking on a very, very complex subject. The Prosperity Gospel's greatest offense, he says, is that it makes preachers unable to speak truth to power, which honestly is the only benefit we have to bring to the table. You know, comfort the afflicted, afflict the comfortable. And as William Ellery Channing said, "No book requires more application of reason."

But if I can quote the sainted Arlo Guthrie here, that's not what I came here to tell you about. I came to talk about how, in some ways, they're right.

Margaret Thatcher in a famous political speech referred to something often easy to overlook. She remarked that what everyone seems to forget about the parable of the Good Samaritan is that the Samaritan had the money to put the unfortunate, beaten Jew up in an inn. He didn't expect the innkeeper to do it for free. In fact, the Samaritan gives him two denarii, two silver coins, a laborer's daily wage, equivalent to someone making

an average wage, say ten dollars an hour, giving his full eight hour pay—before taxes— or \$80. None of us does our jobs for free. There are things we do for no money, voluntary activities we contribute and services we render because we have time or skill. But even here in the church, we don't do things for free. Mine is the most conspicuous example of that because I work for a salary, but everything we do, especially when it comes to what Gary Snyder calls the Real Work, the things that really matter, the things that must be done, we do for some kind of payment. A sense of accomplishment. A sense that we've done well. A sense that we've done something no one else could have done. A sense, at the very nub of it, that we've pleased ourselves by pleasing others.

I'll be the first to admit the following might not be entirely thought out since much of it relies on ideas I heard while attending Prairie Star District's Annual Conference the past two days, so if it seems a little fuzzy don't be afraid to ask me later to clarify some points or argue with them. I don't even need to say that, do I? That's one of the strengths of this denomination and this congregation in particular. We pay attention and we think. Now that's a strength, and a powerful one, but I admit I find myself discussing and thinking about the deficiencies of this congregation many times over the course of a day, because, after all, as the spiritual leader it could be argued I'm paid to be concerned about these things. But it's equally important that what you pay me for is to be a spiritual person. I don't think it's been put any better than the way Roger Hartz did several years ago when he said we come here to be in our integrity. I don't want to say about an issue that seems intractable, "ah, we can get over all this," because we can do that. Short of death, I know we can get through anything. It's a given, not a comfort. But we need to be beyond the deficiencies, not to ignore them or pretend we

don't see them or have them, but not to be overwhelmed by them. Not to be stopped by them. I spoke last week about my own depression and how easy it is for me to be brought up short in my tracks by what seems the futility of it all. We cannot do that.

Today over in Plymouth at the Congregational church it's Generosity Sunday. Today is also tax day, although Chuck Barnard has reminded us we have a reprieve until Tuesday. Next week is our annual meeting, when we debate and discuss and plan and strategize how we will face the coming year. Together. If you're a member, you received your agenda and your discussion items and most especially a letter explaining some of the issues, particularly monetary, we face. I ask you to read those carefully and think about them fully before next Sunday. What better day to talk about money than on this day when it's so important. It's easy to forget money or to downplay its effects. While some might contend—wrongly—that it's the root of all evil—the full quotation is “the love of money”—it is as much a part of being in the world as anything else. It makes many things possible, for instance the ability to pay for a beaten man to stay at an inn. This is not negated by the idea of being alive spiritually. Far from it, to be alive spiritually is to be aware, acutely aware, of reality. It's not to live airily, to see the world as spinning under you without regard to how you'll continue on it, unconnected to the silly mundane breathing in and out we do to continue this corporeal baggage. To be alive spiritually is to be intimately involved with living and making a living. It's car payments and rent and shoes and gas and food. It's lots of food. There's a Zen teaching that says, “Think on your death every day, and be happy.” Talk about honoring the manure and going on. That's living spiritually.

That's a hard thing to do and I can't swear I do it all the time. I probably don't, because if I did I wouldn't need my daily dose of Prozac. But it's also not enough just to live. We could do that, but Roy Blount once said about sweat, it's the body's way of saying to the sun, "you might broil my man here, but he's not going down without some gravy." Man needs more than meat, he needs a little gravy, see. That's a metaphor. Metaphor's important. Religion is metaphor. The gospels, the Suras, Torah, the sutras, the analects. All teachings. All metaphor. I'm comfortable with metaphor, maybe because I'm an English teacher so I'm trained to watch for them and try to make sense of them. They humanize things. They personify what might not otherwise be approachable, what might otherwise seem like a block of granite. "Like a block of granite." See, that's a particular kind of metaphor called a simile. In the spirit of that, I'd like you to think for a few minutes on the way you'd finish this simile: "Our congregation is like a..."

Our congregation is like a rock. Our congregation is like my aunt Zelda. Our congregation is like an old porch. Our congregation is like a 72 Gremlin. Those are some similes I'd use, and no, I'm not going to explain them, because that's the benefit of coming up with similes. Sometimes their meaning can smack you right off the bat and sometimes, like a good laxative, they take a few hours to work their way through you. You can choose whether or not you want to explain your simile or let it stand. I choose to let those stand.

Sallie McFague has written voluminously about metaphor and she's said about religion, "it has to make sense, and it has to make a difference"—well, I'm willing to let the first idea go—we all know of religions we can say don't make any sense, and some might say there aren't any religions that make sense. But the second is not negotiable.

Religion has to make a difference. Religious communities have to make sense. We have to make a difference. Because ours is a theology of engagement, our congregation has to make a difference, in our own lives if nowhere else, although I think at a minimum it should make a difference in the lives of those around us.

To do this we need not only to live but to thrive. A vibrant religious community thrives. It doesn't just live. To live, that's easy, because all we need for that is the stuff on Maslow's hierarchy: air, water, food, shelter. Maybe love. But to thrive takes providing together. Providing money. Providing time and energy. Providing bling. We can't do that, I'd argue, as a church that exists only two hours a week. Thriving involves being a part of each other's lives more often than that, more fully than that. We are the measure of our faith. Is our faith such a fragile thing we can only stand to take it out and work around it a couple hours a week? Or maybe our faith is so overwhelming we can only abide being with one another two hours a week. We are the measure of our faith. Not what we say, but what we do. In the words of Laurel Hallman, senior minister at First Unitarian in Dallas, Texas—a UU minister in Texas, you got to know she's done some real thinking about articulating where she stands—we need to be ready to sacrifice everything, everything, for a vital and uncertain future. We are the measure of our faith. We need to move as one person, not think alike or follow a doxology, although we can follow any ritual or rite we want, but to feel like when we are in here we are one body. One spiritual body. A body that should feel better leaving than when it came in.

We are the measure of our faith. This doesn't mean we don't have conflicts, we don't have issues. These rough places of the congregation are to be expected because that's a part of living too. You can't be a mature apple without a bruise. You can't be a

wise woman without having made your share of mistakes. This is the congregation in what's called its quality of trust, the way we trust one another to make errors, sometimes gross errors, of judgment, of speech, of how we choose to live our lives, and then trust in the integrity of the congregation to get us over it. To honor one another by going on. It's a measure of the spiritual maturity of a congregation that its members don't leave when there are arguments, just like we don't pack up and move out when we have a fight with our partner over whose turn it is to do the dishes. Like a marriage, in which both partners decide, overtly or no, how it proceeds, the congregation must choose the direction she takes. Despite how it may seem sometimes, she never moves blindly. She moves inexorably toward vitality or death.

We are called as Unitarian Universalists and as people of a community of faith to be present in the world. We must never lose sight of the fact that we are a good people. Not the best, not the worst, but we are good. We put an emphasis on the benevolence of human nature rather than on the corruption of human nature. Try this practice. We've all done this. Someone does something hurtful to us or somebody else, we say, "Well, that's human nature." Is it? Try this. Someone does something good, something beneficial maybe for someone she doesn't even have to do it for, say, "well, that's human nature."

We need to provide to the world a more measured response than it's been getting. We need to provide one another with a more measure response than we've been getting. Once you know what it is this congregation is, once you've fixed that simile—remember the simile? "Our congregation is like a..." We're coming back to that—once you've fixed that simile for yourself what this congregation is like, then treat her accordingly. You heard that? "Her?" For me, a congregation is a woman, but it can be a man to you

or a child or a plant or a car or a cuddly, asexual bunny, doesn't matter. Once you've fixed that simile for yourself, treat her accordingly. We've got no other time to act. Like W.E.B. Dubois says, "now is the time...today is the seed time."