"I Tried Poverty": Exploring the Psychological Impact of Poverty and Prosperity in the Life of Oral Roberts

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By Todd M. Johnson and Gina Zurlo

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Abstract

The origin of the prosperity gospel is most often linked to the influence of American Pentecostal Christianity, particularly to Oral Roberts and his concept of “seed faith.” In light of this, this study seeks to understand Oral Roberts’ concepts of poverty and prosperity by exploring the psychology of his own experience of poverty. It will suggest that the biology of inequality he experienced as a child shaped the development of his prosperity theology.

Introduction

As a tradition whose first adherents were from poor and minority classes, Pentecostals have always been interested in the interplay between poverty and their Pentecostal faith. It is not a surprise, then, that today Pentecostals have become increasingly interested in the extent to which Pentecostals are engaged in social issues such as poverty. As Donald E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori have documented, the global Pentecostal church is a progressive form of Pentecostalism that is engaging social issues, especially work among the poor. The emphasis on personal transformation inherent in the Pentecostal message has been directly linked to upward social mobility as converts become honest, faithful, and hardworking citizens. As Miller and Yamamori recognize, “financial gain is an unintended consequence of a changed life.” Thus, for many global Pentecostals, the gospel truly has become “good news to the poor” not just in a spiritual sense, but in a this-worldly sense that can affect a person’s economic situations.
In placing a focus on the benefits of faith to lift believers out of poverty, a stream of Christian teaching has emerged in Pentecostal and Charismatic circles known as the “prosperity gospel.” As Jacob Ayantayo defines it, the “prosperity gospel” is the teaching that emphasizes the benefits of the faith primarily in terms of “material possession or acquisition.”

Emphasis is often placed on the gospel’s ability to give believers success, health, and wealth through the principles of faith and divine economics. In this theology, it is not just that the gospel leads people out of poverty through neo-liberal economic uplift; it is God himself who provides financial resources to those who believe in him. Critics of this form of “health and wealth” teaching point out that often this spiritualized materialism commercializes religion and turns faith into little more than an economic transaction. Worse, it has too often been used as a litmus test for divine approval, implying that material blessing equals favor from God and poverty equals the opposite.

Originally a North American phenomenon, the prosperity gospel has expanded its influence globally, especially in the Majority World. In many of the poorest global contexts, such as Africa, preachers emphasize “the spirit of prosperity in order to counter the spirit of poverty, which is claimed to be the cause of African problems.” The message is so popular that many “prosperity churches” have become some of the largest Pentecostal and Charismatic churches in Africa. Critics of the prosperity gospel have argued that the pastors of these megachurches have used the prosperity message to enrich the preacher more than uplift the poor. Further, it is often the churches in urban settings that have benefitted most, which has done little to uplift the poor outside the already middleclass in these communities.

The origin of the prosperity gospel is most often linked to the influence of American Pentecostal Christianity in the last few decades, particularly to Oral Roberts and his concept of “seed faith.” Kate Bowler labels Oral Roberts as the “major architect of the prosperity gospel.” Furthermore, the spread of prosperity in Africa was primarily through Archbishop Benson Idahosa, who is considered the pioneer of the prosperity gospel in Africa and was a close friend of Oral Roberts, who exported his ideas of God’s blessings and “seed faith” into his African context and gave rise to current prosperity leaders such as David Oyedepo in Nigeria. In light of the blame placed on Roberts for the negative effects of the “prosperity gospel” in the Majority World, this study seeks to understand Oral Roberts’ concepts of poverty and prosperity by exploring the psychology of his own experience of poverty. It will use Roberts as a case study on the psychological effects of poverty and how his experience shaped his concept of God and the promise of material provision.
“I Tried Poverty”

Kate Bowler’s examination of prosperity teaching in America notes that Oral Roberts once quipped, “I tried poverty; I didn’t like it.”11 This is a fitting quote to illustrate how Oral Roberts’ prosperity teaching cannot be understood apart from his impoverished upbringing. Roberts was born in 1918 in rural Oklahoma where his father Ellis and mother Claudius made their home prior to statehood. Ellis was a tenant farmer who owned a 160-acre farm in Pontotoc County, Oklahoma. Originally Methodists, the Roberts were saved, sanctified, and filled with Holy Spirit when pioneer Pentecostal revivalists came to Ada in 1914.12 So impacted by his conversion and call to the ministry, Ellis sold his land and launched into pastoral and evangelistic ministry. Shortly after he sold it, oil was discovered on his land and the new owners were becoming wealthy. But Ellis did not regret it. He said, “You can have your oil money. I’ve got an oil well in my soul. Many people are getting saved in my meetings. That’s worth more than all the oil fields in the world.”13

This decision to sell all for the sake of the gospel ministry led the Roberts family into a life of poverty that deeply affected Oral. Despite Ellis pioneering twelve churches as an evangelist, ministry did little to provide for the Roberts family who did not own a home or a car. On one occasion, Ellis was invited to preach in a town fourteen miles away. In order to save money on bus fare, he walked to and from the church in the dead of winter, arriving home in the middle of the night. When Claudius asked why the church did not drive him home, Ellis replied as Oral listened in from his bed, “They knew I had no way except to walk, but no one volunteered.”14 On another occasion, while Ellis was at a revival, Oral’s mother announced to her children, “We’re out of groceries, and I’m sorry but we’ll have no supper tonight.”15 Events like this shaped Oral’s remembrance of the church and ministry. He lamented that church members took advantage of Ellis’ love and care for them by intentionally keeping him in need in order to “be poor like Jesus.” Oral famously recalls that the deacons would say, “God, you keep Rev. E. M. Roberts humble and we’ll keep him poor.”16

Oral’s accounts of how the strain of poverty tore his father apart “emotionally and spiritually” demonstrate how much his experience as a young child traumatically impacted him even later in life.17 His father’s decision to choose ministry over stability meant that Oral would be destined to be poor and made him angry with God and with his parents. Ellis, who was once a tenant farmer, turned to sharecropping to make ends meet and would move to various farms to pick cotton during harvest seasons.18 Oral just could not understand why his father had given up being a successful farmer for a life of suffering in ministry.19 He and his brother would ask, “Why did papa have to
preach? We hardly ever had enough to eat.” He knew the calling to serve God should be an honorable calling, yet he could not understand why serving God meant poverty, hunger, depression, and suffering. He recalls, “Why was it that we were ‘supposed to be poor’? The doctors lived in good houses, so did the lawyers and merchants, and many others.” The only reward his family received for sacrificing for the ministry was “stinking poverty.”

The suffering Roberts experienced as a child led him into a deep sense of hopelessness. He was a bright student who loved school and hoped one day to be a lawyer or Governor of Oklahoma, but often missed school because he was expected to join his father in the fields until the harvest was finished. By his teen years, Roberts came to the conclusion that if he stayed in his parents’ house he would never achieve his educational and life goals. So at the age of sixteen he ran away to live with the basketball coach at Atoka High School, nearly fifty miles away, hoping to elevate himself by playing basketball. He quickly realized that life was not any better there. At sixteen he had to support himself by working several jobs. He recalls, “I couldn’t make enough to eat on. Many times I didn’t have enough to eat or the right place to sleep.” To add to his misery, he was beginning to grow sick and developed tuberculosis, which left him bedridden and dying after collapsing during a basketball game. Roberts’ coach drove him home to Ada, which for Oral meant “back to poverty, back to religious faith that found no place in me, back to dreaming with no way out.” After struggling for several weeks, Oral was saved and later received his healing in the tent of George Moncey.

The Poor Evangelist

Following his healing, the effects of his sickness and poverty were still very much with him. The months of weakness he endured kept him from finishing high school and left him with few options for a career path moving forward. As a result, Roberts felt called to follow his father in the same path of ministry, which he also knew meant choosing a life of poverty. Yet, Roberts believed in his ability to be successful in ministry. He jumped in whole-heartedly and quickly became a sought-after speaker in the Pentecostal Holiness Church (PHC) denomination. For the first couple years while traveling and preaching, Oral and Evelyn often lived in the homes of other families, sometimes weeks at a time or until Evelyn would get fed up and take the kids to her parents’ house. Evelyn recalls, “[We] never really knew what a home was like. Rebecca Ann, our oldest child, was carried from place to place until she was past two years old.” Although a successful revival speaker, Oral suffered from the same challenges of poverty and instability as his father. To supplement his income during revivals, Oral would do side
jobs such as hanging wallpaper in the town where he was ministering. Worn to the point of exhaustion and in search of more financial provision, Oral decided to turn to pastoral ministry, taking his first church in Fuquay Springs, North Carolina, in 1941. In 1942, he moved his family back to Oklahoma to pastor the Shawnee PHC. The Shawnee PHC was a sacrifice at first, but by the time Roberts had been there a year he had already seen several wage increases and even noted his salary was the highest in the area among PHC churches at forty dollars per week. Roberts also enrolled at Oklahoma Baptist University. Although he enjoyed a living wage, he was uncomfortable staying in one place and in 1943 returned to evangelistic ministry and for a short time in 1945 considered becoming a missionary to Palestine.

In 1946, after several more years of successful evangelistic ministry, Roberts was once again looking for stability and came to Enid, Oklahoma, to pastor the Enid PHC. Although he was successful in the new church, beneath the surface, he was suffering psychologically and admitted he was miserable. Roberts’ struggle in ministry went beyond simply not having God’s power in his life; he lamented that although he preached the abundant life, he suffered from depression and constant torment of not having enough. He recalls that his family did not have enough clothes and that sometimes Evelyn had to leave items at the checkout stand in the grocery store when she did not have enough money. Roberts resented his church board for not doing more to supply for the needs of his family, and like his father before him, concluded that the church was simply unconcerned. It was in this struggle that he discovered John 2, the verse that would change his life and set him on a course toward making a name for himself in healing evangelism.

The Biology of Inequality

“I have never been a person who can live with a need. Something has to give—me or the need.”

Research concerning the biological effects of socioeconomic status is just now beginning to catch up with the social effects on health, education, and emotional development. Researchers are beginning to understand that the stress of poverty has significant impact on brain development. The stress of “not enough” handicaps the whole person to where people are continually hindered by unmet basic needs. Lucy Jewell has identified this as the “biology of inequality.” The awareness of poverty and lack actually changes a person’s brain in a way that limits their cognitive wellbeing and makes them more susceptible to a number of psychological inequities. She says,
Structural violence and status syndrome are not just abstract theories. We are now beginning to understand the mechanics of how this happens in the body. Through the mechanism of stress, social and economic inequality produces measurable changes in the human body at the genetic and synaptic level. . . . Growing up in a disadvantaged environment correlates with greater social and psychological problems, such as anxiety, impulsiveness, and depressiveness.37

In this way, poverty is more than psychological; it is biological even to the genetic level, affecting cognition, development, and health. Jewell says, “These factors of inequality manifested in poor health and scarcity mentality become encoded into the DNA and can be passed on to the next generation, continuing the cycle of poverty.”38

The concept of the “biology of inequality” is instructive to understanding Roberts’ story. Each of his autobiographies tell of his own family’s food insecurity, lack of education, and poor health. Though a brilliant man, his upbringing of poverty and disease affected his educational life. His childhood dreams of being a lawyer and Governor of Oklahoma seemed destined for disappointment because he missed school so often due to his father’s seasonal farming. By the time he was a sophomore, he had been in ten different schools.39 Even when he attended school, his issues with stuttering affected his reading skills and made him the target of bullying.40 His socio-economic status also made him susceptible to disease, contracting tuberculosis at age sixteen. His poor health once again kept him from attending and graduating from high school, opting some years later for a GED. His experience as an adult was not much different. In 1943, he enrolled for a year and a half at Oklahoma Baptist University, and later enrolled in Phillips University in Enid, Oklahoma, in 1946.41 In both cases, his proclivity to endure only short tenures in ministry appointments—a trait highly characteristic of children from impoverished backgrounds—hindered his ability to stay focused on his education and he never finished.42

Experiencing poverty during early adolescence can alter the human psyche with feelings of insufficiency and insecurity that manifest as the constant sense of “never enough.” The stress of watching his parents struggle as a child and his own struggles with his family greatly impacted the psychology of Roberts. No matter how successful he became in ministry, he still struggled with having enough. In fact, it was this feeling of dissatisfaction that led him in 1947 to search for greater fulfillment in ministry through launching into healing evangelism.43 Even still, at the height of his popularity as America’s healing evangelist, he admitted, “No matter how large the crowds grew or how many thousands were healed, or how many souls were saved, I still felt a certain emptiness that would not go away.”44 Statements like this suggest that Roberts may
have never been able to recover fully from his compulsion to achieve to compensate for his feelings of inadequacy as a child.

**God’s Sufficiency for Roberts’ Poverty**

At the lowest point in his emotional health while pastoring in 1946, Roberts discovered 3 John 2. Prior to this discovery, Roberts struggled with the attitude among Pentecostals that poverty was good for Christians. Depression era Pentecostals were critical of wealth and often taught that Jesus was poor and therefore those who followed Jesus should also be poor, especially pastors. For Roberts, this attitude was nothing more than justification for the church to place a low priority on the pastor’s family and their needs. Beyond that, it ingrained in him the idea that God was not concerned with physical and financial needs. But the discovery of 3 John 2 changed all that in his mind. In it he discovered that God desired not for people to be poor, as his childhood had conditioned him, but “to prosper and be in health.” He said, “I found that there was a true scriptural basis for believing that God wants man to be happy, normal, healthy, strong and prosperous.” Poverty, like disease, then, was an enemy that Jesus came to conquer.

It is no coincidence that Roberts developed his view of prosperity alongside his view of healing. Like sociologists today, he recognized the correlation between disease and poverty. Roberts understood the role stress could play in the psychology of poverty as a root cause of poor health. Similarly, he recognized, no doubt by his own experience, that those who live in poverty are more susceptible to societal disadvantages that bring disease. He says, “Poor housing tends to breed disease, and disease among the poor affords little opportunity for adequate medical care.” The theological connection between healing and divine provision was a logical one in his mind. In Roberts’ mind, the gospel was good news for both. If God was a healing God who could address the symptoms of poverty, then addressing poverty with the provision of God was also part of the healing gospel. He also recognized that it was the worry and stress created by poverty that also caused sickness.

**Poverty and the Origin of “Seed Faith”**

What Roberts accomplished over the next four decades was nothing short of remarkable. Through his healing ministry, millions of people came to faith in Christ and were healed in his crusades. Roberts’ televised tent crusades brought Pentecostalism into the mainstream and he also had a prolific radio and print media ministry. In the early

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1960s, Roberts made the transition from evangelist to founder of the nation’s first Charismatic university, Oral Roberts University (ORU). In the 1980s he launched into the field of Christian medicine by opening the medical school at ORU and building the City of Faith Medical and Research Center. In each successive decade, Oral Roberts continued to reinvent himself and his ministry to push the envelope of what was possible for Christian ministry. Although there is no doubt that Roberts was a man of unique faith and vision, there was certainly more to his accomplishments than simply talent and personality. He was driven by an intense sense of mission to accomplish impossible goals that required God to be a God who provided.

During this first decade as a healing evangelist, Oral Roberts Ministries required a large donor base to fund his healing crusades, television ministry, nation-wide radio programs, and distribution of hundreds of thousands of magazines around America and to 154 foreign countries. To help him fund this, Roberts discovered the practical value of wealth by befriending a number of wealthy Pentecostal businessmen who supported his ministry and whom he organized into the Full Gospel Businessmen’s Fellowship with Demos Shakarian. These wealthy men became the backbone of his support and acquainted him with the power of wealth for accomplishing big things. Even so, during the evangelistic era, Roberts kept his own wealth private and continued to project the image of a flashy, but not materialistic, evangelist.

The first development in Roberts’ teaching of prosperity came in 1957 with the introduction of the “blessing pact,” a special giving arrangement he created for his partners to join with him in meeting the financial demands of ministry. Connected with the “blessing pact” was the idea that God would reward believers who invested in worthy ministries. Roberts also began to emphasize God’s abundance and surplus for believers who faithfully gave. In 1958, he commented,

**GOD DEALS IN SURPLUSES!** God is not interested in your starving to death. He is not interested in your being so stricken with poverty that you cannot clothe, house and feed yourself and your family, or find your useful place in society. God *knows* that you’re in a material world. He *knows* that you have needs, and he has promised to add all these things unto you if you put his kingdom first.

The surplus rested in God’s goodness as the hope that one does not have to live in poverty. However, the key to experiencing God’s abundance was also linked to one’s generosity. As one blessing pact partner declared, “Since I received this blessed supply from God, I joyously pass a portion on to you to use for God’s work.” At this point,
giving originated out of abundance—such as was the case with his wealthy business friends—rather than giving out of needs.

Over the next decade, Roberts’ drive to achieve meant his demand for support needed to grow exponentially as he maintained his previous ministry initiatives while launching his newest venture: Oral Roberts University. Between 1962 and 1985, Roberts built a 500-acre university campus with twenty-five state of the art buildings—fourteen of which were built during the decade of the 1970s. Just as soon as one building was going up, the next campaign would launch. His pace was relentless. Each building required massive fund raising campaigns to solicit contributions from his base.

As the demands of building the university increased, the amount of provision needed for the ministry was growing exponentially. The previous emphasis on God’s abundance through the “blessing pact” began to morph into the idea of “seed-faith” in 1969 through the three keys to the “blessing pact”: 1) recognize God is your source; 2) give a seed that represented your faith; and 3) then expect a miracle. The key, however, was no longer that you gave out of your abundance, but out of your need. He says, “Your Blessing Pact giving is a higher law of faith. You give BEFORE you have received, you give as seed money for God to multiply back to you.” The emphasis on giving out of your need was a crucial step that fueled the idea of the prosperity gospel. Rather than giving because one has prosperity, one gives as a way to achieve prosperity.

Each phase of his ministry, from the tent to the university, was to some degree motivated by the biology of inequality in which he was constantly revisiting his feelings of insufficiency and insecurity rooted in his impoverished childhood. At each stage in his ministry, the demands to achieve tested his own adequacy and his belief in the sufficiency of God to provide for his needs. This is particularly seen in the development of his prosperity teachings, which slowly developed as the demand for funds increased.

**From Sufficiency to Prosperity**

In 1970, Roberts released what is perhaps his most famous book, *The Miracle of Seed Faith*. Up until 1970, Roberts’ emphasis on blessing was primarily focused on God’s abundance to help believers and meet their needs. The idea of using giving to God as a means to gaining wealth was largely absent from his preaching and teaching. Like healing, God’s provision flowed out of his goodness and desire to bless people who had faith in God. However, the financial demands of the university led him to emphasize that “sowing” into God’s ministry through the “blessing pact” was a way to “reap a harvest” for a person’s own need. Thus, the message of “seed faith” became the primary...
way to maintain his financial base that now included the university, the Hollywood style prime-time television specials, and worldwide ministry through the World Action Teams. The university alone required a budget of several million dollars per month to expand the buildings on campus and create the new Graduate Schools of Theology, Medicine, Law, and Dentistry in the mid-to-late 1970s. A significant factor that also led to a change in Roberts’ giving message was related to his base. In the years after starting ORU, Roberts’ financial situation was changing from classical Pentecostals and Full Gospel Businessmen in the 1950s to Christians from mainline Charismatic communities, particularly the United Methodist Church. By the late 1970s, many of Roberts’ earliest Pentecostal supporters had moved on in a time when the American economy was struggling and Roberts’ many initiatives had overtaxed his support base.

Things came to a head in 1977 with the announcement that Roberts was going to build a 120-million-dollar, three-tower City of Faith Medical Complex and Research Center. This decision, however, was not made because of the tide of success as a ministry; it was born out of a “desert” experience following the death of daughter Rebecca and son-in-law Marshall Nash in a plane crash in 1977.59 Behind the scenes, Roberts was also dealing with the deteriorating marriage of his son Richard and his wife Patti, who divorced officially in 1978. On top of that, Oral’s brightest son, Ronnie, had been caught up in years of drug abuse and self-destruction that eventually led to his suicide in 1982.60 After years of declaring “God is a good God” and seemingly having success to everything to which they put their hands, the Robertses were once again emotionally placed in a place of powerlessness. No amount of fame or fortune he had achieved could bring Rebecca back, save Richard’s image, or restore Ronnie.

What I am suggesting is that the personal emotional trauma of 1977 awakened in Oral Roberts the “biology of inequality” to a point that he had a compulsive need to build the City of Faith, despite the enormous cost and difficulty. To do this, it would test his fundamental assumptions about God’s goodness and sufficiency. How could a minister with a $10 million dollar per month budget possibly feel poor? The answer may lie in the “Relative Income Hypothesis,” which posits that perceptions of poverty are relative and contextual.61 Helen Rhee points out, “the notion of sufficiency, or for that matter of necessities, has been evolving and contextualized—inevitably so.”62 While the secular press believed his appeals for millions were motivated by self-enrichment, I suggest that it was more plausible that Roberts’ trauma re-awakened his biology of inequality. For Roberts, it did not matter how many millions God provided in the past, psychologically he was still the struggling minister who did not have enough to do what God was demanding him to do. In these moments, Roberts was faced with the
questions of his earliest years: Does serving God mean suffering lack? Will God provide what he demands?

The emotional responses to Roberts’ lack in funding the City of Faith quickly became more controversial in early 1981 when the stress of raising the final $45 million was fully upon him and he claimed that he saw a vision of a “900 foot Jesus” that held the City of Faith in his hands. Dismissed as emotional manipulation by outsiders, Roberts’ psychological trauma seems apparent in his appeals. Roberts even went on television on *Larry King Live* and the *Donahue* show to defend his vision. To his critics he said, “Yes, I have always seen Jesus, by the eyes of faith, as He has met the needs of the people through the years. But I also saw Jesus, just as I reported, lifting up the City of Faith. I hope I will see him again.” But the reality was, God had already provided Roberts with $75 million in cash to that point to build the hospital.

Over the next year Roberts began to promise that if his supporters would help him build the hospital debt-free, that God would also give “the money you need for your bills and debts.” To do this, nothing less than a full on commitment to “seed-faith” and prosperity teaching would be necessary to accomplish his goals. Thus his message of prosperity was solidified, evident in the books he released during this time including *Flood Stage: Opening the Windows of Heaven* in 1981, *If You Need to Be Blessed Financially Do These Things* in 1982, and *Attack Your Lack* in 1985.

While the City of Faith opened debt-free in 1981 (although somewhat unfinished), the expenses of running the hospital and medical school kept Roberts in a constant place of need. His pleas for funding and the resulting emotional turmoil continued. Roberts often mentioned the strain he was under in his articles about the City of Faith in the *Abundant Life* magazine. During the financial crisis in 1985, Roberts opened up about his struggles on national television.

I have asked God why this emergency happened to us. . . . You know, “What have we done to deserve this thing? Haven’t we obeyed you Lord? There’s no other man in the twentieth century who has built a university, a medical school, and a medical center. And I did it because God commanded me to. Now why have you brought us this far?”

Within this appeal, one can hear the echoes of the same questions he expressed as a little boy about his father’s experience. Why does obedience to God lead to insufficiency?
Roberts’ New Friends: The Word of Faith

Before the City of Faith and the controversies, Roberts was one of the most influential figures in American culture. But now his financial base was abandoning him and the American public was turning on him, leaving him friendless and searching for a new support base. Stepping into this vacuum, the leaders of the burgeoning Word of Faith movement welcomed him into their family, led by Kenneth E. Hagin and his protégés Kenneth Copeland and Fredrick K. C. Price. Up until this point, despite their similar Pentecostal origins and close proximity in Tulsa, Roberts and Hagin were not closely associated. In the first decade and a half, the “Faith Movement” was not well received by the primarily mainline Charismatic faculty and students on the campus of Oral Roberts University.⁶⁹

In 1979, in the midst of Roberts’ declining support and greatest fundraising demands, Kenneth Hagin invited Roberts to attend his annual Campmeeting in Tulsa. During one of the services, Hagin shared about his deep appreciation for Roberts and surprised him by taking a love offering to help him with his vision.⁷⁰ That night, Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, John Osteen, and Pat and Debbie Boone led the way as the audience overflowed with pledges to save the City of Faith. This gesture deeply moved Roberts and he commented, “I sat with my head in my hands, tears flowing down my cheeks, realizing that nothing like this had ever happened in my behalf.”⁷¹ Roberts found new friends that would walk with him through his most difficult times. In fact, three years later it was Hagin who stepped in to comfort the family when Ronnie committed suicide in 1982 and assured Roberts that Ronnie “has not gone to hell” but that he was actually saved through his death.⁷²

Over the next few years, Roberts was a regular speaker at Hagin’s Campmeeting and his rhetoric about prosperity followed suit. He was still careful about the “faith” principles around campus, but he could not deny that God was providing through this new constituency. Speakers at ORU chapel services began to shift from mainline Charismatics and Hollywood celebrities to Word of Faith preachers. The introduction of Word of Faith messages on campus caused controversy among some of the storied faculty, including Howard Ervin and Charles Farrah.⁷³ This alliance was also problematic for the United Methodists, who removed their affiliation with the seminary, which hurt Roberts deeply. However, this gave him the opportunity to initiate his own ministerial fellowship called “International Charismatic Bible Ministers,” filled largely with independent Charismatic and Word of Faith ministers including Copeland, Jerry Savelle, Mike Murdock, Earl Paulk, and other emerging independent Word of Faith
Charismatic ministers. Many of these same ministers joined the Board of Regents at ORU as well.

These new prosperity influences were the final step in the process of transforming Roberts’ theology of simply God’s ability to supply basic needs into a full-blown prosperity message that promised financial blessings through giving. His new Word of Faith friends landed him the reputation as not only a “health and wealth” charlatan who used God to “pickpocket” gullible Christians, but the leader of them. Criticism over his financial excesses increased for decisions such as purchasing their 2.4 million dollar home in Palm Springs in 1982. Worse, Roberts was being lumped in with his fellow televangelists Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart who were embroiled in financial and sexual scandal.

The image of Roberts as the worst of all prosperity preachers was solidified when in July 1986, Roberts announced that if he did not raise eight million dollars, God would “call him home.” While Roberts’ plea was intended to raise the money to continue to scholarship the students in his medical school, this brazen statement seemed to be the final straw for those in the mainline churches who had supported him. The public ridicule only added to his feeling of abandonment. He commented,

> Few people have had their loses and failures trumpeted by the media. . . . I stopped reading the ridicule after I saw there was no end to it. It hurt so bad I sometimes felt as King David did: “Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then I would fly away and be at rest.”

In 1987, the United Methodist Church withdrew its support from Roberts, the ORU seminary, and several of the Methodist faculty left. Two years later in 1989, heartbroken, Roberts closed ORU Medical School and City of Faith in defeat. Roberts called this “a disaster” that “took away a part of my soul.” Roberts eventually stepped down as president in 1991 and moved to his home in California where he could find some distance from his own pain.

**Conclusion**

Considering the development of Roberts’ view of prosperity in the 1970s and 1980s, critics of the so-called “health and wealth” gospel are rightly justified in their critiques and in pointing to Roberts as a source. He certainly was responsible for concepts of “seed faith” that have been used by prosperity teachers globally as justification for self-enrichment. However, his view of prosperity did not begin this way. Roberts’ view of prosperity began as the “sufficiency gospel” rather than “prosperity gospel.” Through...
faith and the Scriptures, especially 3 John 2, he was able to overcome his own anxiety of insufficiency by believing in a God who desired to meet basic human needs. Roberts was able to reprogram the biology of inequality in ways that provided him hope that things could get better by believing in a God who cared about his needs. Roberts’ orientation was not toward worldly abundance, but toward God’s sufficiency. He did not advocate for believers to enjoy boundless riches, only that God would supply their needs and enable people to live “the abundant life” and to accomplish what God has set before them. Because of this, he was able not only to overcome decades of poverty, but also to believe that he could ultimately accomplish anything God asked him to do.

Roberts’ development of prosperity teachings was also rooted in his experience of poverty. His need for a further developed “prosperity gospel” was ultimately governed by psychological factors of lack of security, rather than theological or materialistic factors. At the end of the day, he was not self-enriching; he was coping with an acute sense of loss related to the two highly debilitating forms of personal trauma: a child’s premature death and a child’s suicide. In Roberts’ case, his religious views helped him find meaning in order to make sense of his loss. The City of Faith represented Roberts’ reconstruction of meaning as a coping and recovery mechanism out of his grief. He could not save his children, but he could save others through a hospital, a place of healing and recovery. The only way to do that was to raise money and go all in on God’s ability to provide in a time when he was also coping with the abandonment of his support structure. Into this space, ministers from the prosperity wing of his movement enabled him to focus on the material aspects of God’s blessings in order to accomplish his vision.

As we consider the doctrine of prosperity as it has advanced into the world, it is necessary to recognize that Roberts’ view of prosperity originated in the simple concept of God’s goodness and provision for believers. That belief allowed Roberts to escape his own poverty by moving him into a sphere of sufficiency and security that counteracted the biology of inequality. Roberts’ experience is proof that belief in God’s sufficiency has a powerful effect on poverty by alleviating the psychological stress and regulating the biological and emotional states. But Roberts’ story also illustrates the dangers of turning God’s sufficiency into a means to an end. For Roberts, his emotional trauma triggered a sense of overcompensation that resulted in Roberts’ overemphasis on God’s abundance. This has resulted in others who used Roberts’ views of seed faith as means for self-enrichment.

While the abuse of prosperity theology is problematic for global Christianity, it should not negate the powerful impact of belief in a God who provides to those in difficult socio-economic situations. As Amos Yong notes, the social uplift that faith in
God brings should not be the privilege of Western societies. He says, “Why is it implausible that God should transform the poverty of his people into affluence across the southern hemisphere as God has done so in the Western world?”

Indeed, if God can provide for an impoverished Pentecostal Holiness preacher in depression era Oklahoma, why would he be so limited in impoverished systems globally? As Yong points out, “Minimally, I suggest that in impoverished situations, such a prosperity message will engender hope and perhaps motivate a certain course of action that anticipates the gradual, if not more efficient, overcoming of poverty.”

When hope is coupled with other values such as hard work, resilience, community responsibility, and innovation, it fuels possibility thinking and enables one to overcome the biology of inequality. Perhaps if this idea of faith in God to provide as a form of sufficiency gospel could supplant the prosperity gospel, the work of elevating the poor could be more effective in the type of social uplift that the gospel requires of the church.

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Notes

1 This research was originally presented at the 2019 Scholars Consultation of Empowered21 held 3–4 June 2019 in Bogota, Colombia, where the theme was “Poverty, its impacts, and the responses of Spirit-empowered communities.”

2 The theme of social engagement among Pentecostals was front and center in the 2018 Annual Meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies.


4 Miller and Yamamori, Global Pentecostalism, 165.


8 Clifton Clarke, Pentecostal Theology in Africa (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014), 139.


11 Bowler, Blessed, 234. The actual origin of this phrase Bowler does not identify. While I cannot confirm this phrase, it was certainly consistent with his attitude.

12 Ellis Roberts, “God’s Hand on My Life,” Healing Waters, August 1951, 6. Ellis and Claudia attended a brush arbor revival hosted by Luther Dryden, Dan York, and Dan Evans four miles from their home.


14 Oral Roberts, How I Know Jesus Was Not Poor (Altamonte Springs, FL: Creation House), 14.


16 Roberts, How I Know Jesus Was Not Poor, 7.

17 Roberts, How I Know Jesus Was Not Poor, 5.

18 Louis M. Kyrakoudes, “‘Lookin’ for Better All the Time’: Rural Migration and Urbanization in the South, 1900–1950,” in African American Life in the Rural South, 1900–1950, ed. R. Douglas Hurt (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 16, points out that both blacks and whites in the South were stuck in the cycle of yearly moving from farm to farm in search of lower rent or better yields to improve their economic status.

19 Roberts, How I Know Jesus Was Not Poor, 14.

20 Roberts, Expect a Miracle, 14.

21 Roberts, How I Know Jesus Was Not Poor, 6.


23 Roberts, Expect a Miracle, 22.


25 Isgrigg and Synan, “An Early Account of Oral Roberts’ Healing Testimony,” 170–73, gives the account of Roberts’ early success, preaching 600 times in the first four years of his ministry.

36 Lucy A. Jewell, “The Biology of Inequality,” *Denver Law Review* 93:3 (2018), 611–12, points out, “one’s material environment can get under one’s skin and into one’s genetic and brain pathways.”
41 Roberts received enough life experience credits from his years in ministry to apply for and receive his B.A. and M.Div. from Oral Roberts University in 1989. He was awarded an honorary doctorate from Centenary College in 1975.
42 Jewell, “The Biology of Inequality,” 631, points out that children from poverty show reduced ability to filter distractions and hindered achievement because of short attention spans.
43 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 64.
48 Roberts, How I Know Jesus Was Not Poor, 15.
51 Harrell, Oral Roberts, 193. Roberts certainly enjoyed a significant level of personal wealth, becoming a shrewd businessman and owning various properties and land investments in addition to his own ranch in Bixby, Oklahoma.
54 The order of buildings are as follows: Timko-Barton Hall, Braxton Hall, Sharkarian Hall (1962); EMR Hall, Claudius Hall, Health Resources Center, Learning Resources Center (1965); Prayer Tower (1967); University Village, Student Activity Center (1969); Mabee Center (1972); Susie Residence Tower, Wesley Residence Tower (1972); Howard Auditorium (1973); Athletic Residence Hall, Christ Chapel (1975); Francis Hall, Susie Hall, School of Medicine (1976); Baby Mabee, J. L. Johnson Baseball Stadium (1977); Student Apartment Complex, Graduate Center (1978); City of Faith (1978–1981); Grandview Hotel (1981); Journey through the Bible (1986).
55 There is a joke often told around the university that on the day Oral Roberts died, he called out to God, “Not yet Lord! Just one more building!”
58 Roberts, Miracle of Seed-Faith, 8.
60 Harrell, Oral Roberts, 337; Roberts, Expect a Miracle, 206–10.
64 The critiques of Roberts’ vision were numerous, especially in Tulsa. See “Oral Roberts tells of talking 900-foot Jesus,” Tulsa World, 16 October 1980, https://www.tulsaworld.com/archive/oral-roberts-tells-of-talking-to--foot-jesus/article_bbe49a4e-e441-5424-8fcf-1d49ede6318c.html (5 November 2019); David Avril, “Roberts says 900-foot Jesus appeared before my ‘inner eyes,’” Tulsa World, 7 May 1982,


It is important to understand that Roberts’ commitment to begin the medical school was attached to the idea that he would raise the money to scholarship all of the ORU Medical School students so that they were not hindered by debt after graduation. The goal was to scholarship doctors to serve as healing agents in medical missions around the world. This was the obedience to which Oral Roberts felt God had called him. He felt that if he could not obey God to raise the money to keep the medical school going, he had no more assignment here on earth. See John R. Crouch, Jr., “Healing through Prayer and Medicine,” 191–203; Thomson K. Mathew, “Oral Roberts’ Theology of Healing: A Journey from Pentecostal ‘Divine Healing’ to Charismatic ‘Signs and Wonders’ to Spirit-empowered ‘Whole Person Healing,’” *Spiritus: ORU Journal of Theology* 3:2 (2018), 303–23.

Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 300.


Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 298.

The story of the devastation of the City of Faith decisions do not end in 1991. Over the next decade, Richard Roberts attempted to navigate a university and ministry saddled with fifty million dollars in debt and declining enrollment. These tensions eventually led to a


86 Yong, “A Typology of Prosperity Theology,” 19.

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