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Things Fall Apart: Faith, Prosperity and Division within the African American Community

By

Jacqueline Denise Bass

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

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in

Political Science

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University of California, Berkeley

Committee in Charge:

Associate Professor Laura Stoker, Chair

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## Abstract

Things Fall Apart: Faith, Prosperity and Division within the African American Community

By

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Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

University of California, Berkeley

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During the past decades, tensions have emerged between a relatively new, highly popular theology focused on material prosperity and individual accountability, known as the prosperity gospel, versus a traditional African American doctrine that emphasizes humanitarianism and racial consciousness. Despite the diversity of interests and experiences within the African American community, none of these divisions have manifested themselves systematically in the political arena. I argue that considering the importance of the church in shaping African American political views, values, and norms, a significant shift in church doctrine could dramatically alter not only congregants' own political values, but also could lead to a significant change in how the church interacts with its surrounding community. The prosperity gospel may be that significant shift. Based on interviews with community and church leaders, participant observation, sermon content analysis, and archival research, I present evidence to suggest that not only do churches that espouse the prosperity gospel reinforce humanitarianism and racial consciousness, in certain circumstances, they do so more aggressively than their traditional counterparts. This dissertation supports numerous scholars' claims that the prosperity gospel emphasizes individualism and individual versus collective level solutions to societal problems; however, this bias toward individualism and self-accountability is found in all of the younger ministers who participated in the study, even when categorized as a traditional church. I argue that this is evidence of the global trend of the infiltration of neo-liberal ideas into religious institutions. The prosperity gospel provides an effective conduit for neo-liberal ideals, but no longer monopolizes the dispersion of these values.

## Dedication

Grandma, we did it!

*Proverbs 18:15*

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## Chapter 1 - A Battle for the African American Church's Collective Might

In May 2006, Bishop Eddie Long, pastor of New Birth Missionary Baptist Church, the largest African American church in Georgia, was invited to speak at the graduation commencement of the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC), a well-known ecumenical school of theology in Atlanta, Georgia. Word of his invitation sparked an immediate outcry. African American theologian James Cone, who was to receive an honorary degree at the commencement, boycotted the event. Thirty-three graduating seniors sent a six page letter to the school president, protesting Long's selection as commencement speaker, citing, among other concerns, his "theological irresponsibility". Despite fears of protests or a mass walk out disrupting the ceremonies, Long gave the commencement address without incident. While many in the audience enthusiastically applauded Long's speech, according to the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, many others "sat stoically in their seats rolling their eyes" (Mitchem 2007).

Why does Bishop Long, a highly successful minister and ITC alum, incite such outrage? Should not the ITC community be proud of him? Would not the school embrace a man that helped grow one of the largest congregations in the country and rubs shoulders with heads of state?

Though some of the criticism leveled at Pastor Long stems from his church's questionable administrative practices, and the rejection of his more conservative views toward gays and women by liberal theologians, the primary source of critics disdain for Long is his adherence to the tenets of Word of Faith, commonly referred to as the prosperity gospel. According to his critics, Long and ministers like him betray the social gospel by embracing prosperity and capitalism (Smith 2006). With their million dollar homes, expensive cars, and flashy suits, ministers such as Long are accused of turning a blind eye to issues of social justice and equality. Opponents claim that prosperity gospel ministries defend the status quo rather than allowing the church to be an agent for social change (Smith 2006).

In the controversy surrounding Long's participation in the ITC, we find a tension between a new, highly popular theology focused on material prosperity and individual accountability versus a traditional African American doctrine that emphasizes social justice and racial group consciousness. Journalist Verne Smith refers to this conflict as not just a struggle for theological and political primacy among African American preachers, but also a battle to determine what African American Christians do with their collective might in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Smith 2006, p. 32).

Until that battle is over, the African American community is facing an unprecedented division within its ranks. There has always been a diversity of interests and experiences within the African American community, but none of these divisions, however, have manifested themselves systematically in the political arena (Dawson 1994). Considering the importance of the church in shaping African American political views, values, and norms, a significant shift in church doctrine could dramatically alter not only congregants own values, but also their political attitudes and policy priorities. Additionally, a change in doctrine could also lead to a significant change in how the church interacts with its surrounding community. Understanding the potential implications of the rise of the prosperity gospel on the African American community is the goal of this project.

Scholars have long noted the importance of the church in the social and political lives of African Americans. The church's role in influencing African American political orientation has been well documented. Numerous studies have shown the impact of religious affiliation and

religiosity on voting behavior as well as the role of churches in influencing the type of political participation congregants choose and when they choose to do it. What is less well documented is the relationship between the content of religious beliefs and political behavior within the African American community. This theoretical under-development is particularly pronounced as relates to the prosperity gospel. Whereas religious scholars do a better job of delving into churchgoers' beliefs, the claims they make about the prosperity gospel often lack solid empirical support. It is extremely difficult to isolate the relationship between an ideology and specific political behaviors and attitudes. A multitude of other confounding factors can be at play. What I can do is analyze the relationship between religious doctrine and church activities. Also, I can analyze the messages delivered in church sermons and determine what values and ideas they promote. Understanding what prosperity gospel churches do within their walls and within their communities as well as understanding the messages to which their congregants are exposed is an important gap that must be filled in order to understand the true impact of these religious changes within the African American community. Based on interviews, participant observation, and sermon content analysis, I plan to start filling this gap by analyzing the effects of the changing doctrinal orientation within the African American church on African American church activities and lead pastor messages.

This dissertation explores the increasing divisions emerging within the African American community through the lens of the religious conflict incited by the emergence of the prosperity gospel in the African American community. I specifically plan to address the following questions:

1. Do prosperity gospel churches have significantly different relationships with their community than traditional churches?
2. Do prosperity gospel churches have differing ministries than traditional African American churches?
3. Does the doctrine of prosperity gospel churches systematically differ from the doctrine of traditional African American churches?

### **The increasing significance of class?**

The African American community is usually characterized by an image of deep political unity (Dawson 1994). Despite the diversity of interests and experiences, especially in recent decades with the increase in economic polarization within the community, African Americans have remained relatively unified in their political choices. They have consistently supported the Democratic Party, liberal social welfare policies, and conservative social positions (Tate 1994). For decades, scholars have warned of significant divisions emerging due to increasing economic stratification within the African American community (May and Nicholson 1933; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Wilson 1978). As of yet, there is no evidence that these divisions have manifested in the political arena (Tate 1994; Dawson 1994).

Yet despite this evidence, I argue that the emergence of the prosperity gospel signals a significant division in the African American religious community, where certain churches will continue to reinforce traditional values while others will reinforce individualism, materialism, and reduced racial consciousness. I predict that this religious division will decrease political unity due to an increased divergence in political attitudes and policy priorities between congregants of the differing churches. I predict this divergence will manifest itself through differing church ministries, with traditional churches focusing on ministries that help others and



focus on spreading the gospel while prosperity gospel churches promote ministries that help the individual. I predict pastoral messages will mirror the divergence in ministries, with traditional pastors promoting values that reinforce collectivism and serving God while prosperity gospel pastors focus on empowering the individual and what God can do for them.

Before moving on to discuss the above mentioned principles, it is important to stress that the lack of systematic divergence in the political arena does not mean that there is not extreme polarization in the life experiences of African Americans due to class. Wilson's most recent work, *More Than Just Race*, details the multiple barriers that the African American urban poor face in contrast to their middle class counterparts, and how these constraints lead to differing cultural frameworks (2009). A recent study by the Pew Institute shows that African Americans believe middle-class and low income African Americans have different values (2007). The beliefs within the African American community concerning class division coupled with empirical evidence play a large part in keeping the class stratification question foremost in many scholars mind. Thus far current political institutions have not allowed these obvious class differences to manifest.

### **What are traditional African American principles?**

Traditional African American churches are commonly referred to as social gospel churches. The social gospel has its roots in the urbanization and industrialization of turn of the century America. Recognizing the suffering occurring in urban cities, social gospelers tried to awaken their Northern Protestant congregations to the plight of factory workers and their families. The social gospel theory and method has been espoused by diverse groups for a variety of social justice causes. There are, however, common elements utilized by many proponents of the social gospel (Goddard 1999):

1. It focuses on collective and social sins instead of individual transgressions.
2. Belief that humans could progress to the point that Heaven on Earth could be achieved.
3. It focused on addressing practical issues of justice and physical needs versus solely emphasizing spiritual issues.

The tenets of the social gospel were particularly evident during the Civil Rights Movement when the church played a crucial role in organizing and protesting the United States' system of discrimination. These churches then, and for the most part now, focus on putting the good of others over self-interests. Though the majority of African American churches do not have a direct or explicit social gospel heritage the underlying teachings of the church are similar to the tenets of the social gospel (McDaniel 2008). This explains why many observers erroneously equate the social gospel to the African American church.

African American churches have a history of supporting ministries that help the needy and combat racial oppression. This could comprise of simply taking up a collection for those having immediate needs, raising funds to support schools, or becoming involved with civil rights organizations and activities (Baer and Singer 2002). Even though the primary emphasis of most traditional African American churches is salvation and evangelism or merely focusing on the more insular needs and desires of church members, they still share in the legacy of putting community interests over self-interests and supporting ministries and policies that help the disadvantaged and alleviate human suffering.

Two concepts best represent the principles that have been consistently reflected in the African American church and community: “humanitarianism” and “racial consciousness”. Humanitarianism is defined as the promotion of human welfare and social reform.<sup>1</sup> The term “racial consciousness” combines two similar yet distinct concepts, linked-fate and group consciousness. In *Behind the Mule*, Michael Dawson defines linked-fate as when group interests serve as a proxy for self-interest. Group consciousness is defined as “a politicized awareness, or ideology, regarding the groups relative positions in society, a commitment to collective action aimed at realizing the group’s collective interest” (Miller et al 1978, p.18). Both mindsets are important in shaping African American behavior, and usually co-exist in an individual. In summary, the term “traditional African American” church in this paper refers to churches that have the following features:

1. Emphasizes collective interest over self-interest
2. Reinforces the ideals of humanitarianism and racial consciousness
3. Emphasizes salvation and evangelism

Traditional African American churches also commonly belong to the Baptist or Methodist denominations. Protestants make up 78 percent of the African American population (Pew Research Center 2009). Based on the 2000-2004 General Social Survey, 88 percent of African American Protestants belong to the American Baptist, National Baptist, other Baptist, AME, and AME Zion denominations (Greeley and Hout 2006). The Black Baptist and Methodist churches are the oldest and most established African American denominations, with roots dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Baer and Singer 2002). There are other established denominations such as Church of God in Christ or Holiness, but these have connections with Pentecostalism, as do most prosperity gospel churches. It would provide a cleaner analysis to exclude these churches, and they only make up less than 10 percent of protestant African American church goers (Greeley and Hout 2006).

**Table 1: Predicted Outcomes**

	Ebenezer	First Baptist	Temple of Faith	All Nations
Focus on Individual vs Focus on God	God	God	Individual	Individual
Reinforce humanitarianism	Yes	Yes	No	No
Reinforce racial consciousness	Yes	Yes	No	No
Power of Thought	No	No	Yes	Yes
Neo-Liberalism	No	No	Yes	Yes
Emphasize Politics/Social Justice	Yes	Yes	No	No

<sup>1</sup> Definition taken from the Merriam-Webster dictionary.

## **What is the Prosperity Gospel?**

The prosperity gospel, also known as the “prosperity ministry” or “Word of Faith”, is a theological belief system with roots in the Pentecostal and charismatic traditions that has been taken up over the past two decades by many young energetic ministers within the African American community. Based on the teachings of E.W. Kenyon and Kenneth Hagin, Sr., the prosperity gospel combines a variety of traditions, including Evangelicalism, neo-Pentecostalism, and New Thought metaphysics. Three basic points form the core of the Faith Message: (1) the principle of knowing who you are in Christ, (2) the practice of positive confession, and (3) a worldview that emphasizes material prosperity and physical health as the divine right of every Christian (Harrison 2005). The prosperity ministry can be found among various U.S. ethnic groups and internationally. This message, however, found particularly fertile soil among African Americans. Whatever the actual incarnation of the prosperity ministry, there are two predominate traits that an observer will find in most African American prosperity -based churches: (1) a focus on economic-empowerment and material success, (2) a focus on self-improvement and the individual’s ability, through faith in God, to overcome any obstacle, (3) an emphasis on positive-confession and the power of words, and (4) a negative framing of the poor (Harrison 2005). Prosperity ministry claims that the scriptures promise believers an “abundant life” on earth. Many people, so they claim, are trapped in a “lifestyle of poverty” or live under the “curse of poverty” because of their own thoughts and ideas, not structural impediments such as racism or other injustices. This theology is in stark contrast to the traditional position of the African American church that often attributes poverty to systemic issues, and even presents the poor as favored by God. While traditional churches focus on holiness and sacrifice, prosperity ministry churches prioritize spiritual gifts and empowerment.

Many African American elites are extremely suspicious of the prosperity gospel. They argue that it alters the traditional role of the church as an agent of social change (Smith 2006). Three assumptions about the prosperity gospel fuel their distrust. First, many critics believe the people driving the growth of these churches are middle- and upper-class African Americans. Some argue that a growing spiritual yearning existed within this group that the new vibrant neo-pentecostal style of worship quenched (Smith 2006). According to journalist Beverley Hall Lawrence, it was this new worship style that brought middle-class African Americans back to church participation (Mitchem 2007). While many agree that higher income African Americans are behind the growth of these churches, some would claim the attraction was a doctrine that justified their social position and encouraged the accumulation of wealth. Second, the focus on material accumulation is extremely concerning to those accustomed to a church message that urged all Christians to care for the poor and warned against chasing after worldly possessions. The prosperity ministry explicitly rejects the connection between righteousness and lack of material possessions. Bishop Long urges his members to “eschew a mindset that was ‘making a mockery out of having’” (Smith 2006, p. 33). Among many prosperity gospel followers, the image of a poor, humble Jesus is replaced by a wealthy, empowered man. To them, the poor should not be lauded, but their condition recognized for what it is, an affliction. This focus on material gain ties in to the third assumption about the prosperity gospel. Research has shown that the individualistic orientation of materialism conflicts with collective values; therefore, observers suspect that the prosperity gospel may lessen the racial consciousness and humanitarianism within the African American community, both collective principles. In many ways, the prosperity doctrine mirrors the ideology of black Conservatives. The prosperity gospel stresses individual accountability and the individual’s ability to overcome.

Another set of assumptions about the prosperity gospel involves its position toward race. If one accepts the belief that through faith in God and using the gifts He gave you, you are guaranteed prosperity, systemic issues such as racism or inequality will not matter. As a result, race is strongly downplayed in many prosperity gospel churches. Based on their assumptions of how God and the world works, race should not be important. Stephanie Y. Mitchem in *Name It and Claim It?* argues that prosperity gospel churches deny black racial identity (2007). This desire to distance themselves from being seen as black community churches is evident in their names, she claims. Creflo Dollar's church in Atlanta is called World Changers Church International. Another popular name is All Nations. If it is true that these churches actively downplay race, members' class identities may become more prominent. Prosperity gospel churches will have the following characteristics:

1. Emphasizes individual empowerment
2. Focus on material gain
3. De-emphasizes racial consciousness

Whereas some churches have the phrase "Word of Faith" in their titles, almost no church will explicitly state that they are prosperity gospel. You will not see it on a sign. It will not be in a church name. The pastor will not speak of it from the pulpit. In fact, most churches will deny that they espouse the prosperity gospel. The prosperity gospel is not a denomination. It is a set of values and behaviors that churches embrace in whole or in part. Labeling a church as espousing the prosperity gospel is somewhat subjective, but my determinations were based on multiple visits to these churches, hearing numerous sermons, examining church networks, and gathering information from those within the community.

### **Expected Findings**

If it is true that prosperity gospel churches are different, in what ways would one expect these differences to be manifested? The fact that several high profile prosperity gospel pastors openly supported former President George W. Bush raised a lot of eyebrows. Could this be the opening the Republican Party has been looking for to siphon off African American voters? Most likely not. African Americans' aversion to the Republican Party and its platform run deep, and even a few high profile ministers supporting them is unlikely to change that (Smith 2006). Additionally, with the extreme unpopularity of Bush upon leaving office, coupled with the election of the first African American Commander in Chief, the likelihood of seeing significant behavioral changes is slim. In addition, in the absence of comparative survey data, it would also be difficult to detect underlying attitudinal shifts. Where I do expect to see observable changes is in the ministries offered by the church and the messages coming from church leadership.

I expect the sermon messages of the prosperity gospel and traditional churches to vary in references to the poor, wealthy and prosperity in church teachings and sermon topics. References to the poor represents the way the poor or poverty is depicted in church teachings. It will probably range from positively to negatively. References to the wealthy represent how individuals with wealth or the actual accumulation of wealth are depicted in church teachings. This can include topics such as personal finance or improving one's credit. Attitudes toward prosperity is a measure of whether or not church teachings positively or negatively refer to prosperity and how the church defines prosperity. Sermons will also vary in how they reference African American culture, which will be positive or negative. I anticipate sermon topics to vary

as well. For example, the topic could concern social justice issues, spiritual concerns, or issues of personal accountability.

Church ministries can range from soup kitchens, street evangelism, youth after school programs, singles ministries, financial preparedness classes, Wednesday night prayer meeting, to a host of other activities. The church has been and still is expected to carry the burden of social change within the African American community. This is evidenced through the faith-based initiatives established by President Bush or even the frustration of some with the way the church initially responded to the HIV/Aids epidemic (Cohen 1999). Many observers assume it is the church's responsibility to take a lead in addressing problems within the community. It is possible that prosperity gospel churches will have a different vision of their role in the community than traditional churches, a possibility that could greatly impact many neighborhoods. With the government and other actors increasingly expecting religious organizations to participate in social service provision, it is important to understand whether and how these doctrinal changes impact the churches ability to do so.

### **Alternative Theories**

It is possible that instead of a doctrinal story, the rise of the prosperity gospel is an organizational story. The population ecology literature uses evolutionary process to explain why some organizations are born and why others die. Environmental changes occur, often favoring a new organizational form. Old organizations either adapt, or they often die out (Scott and Davis 2007). Some church leaders argue that the old socio-political model of traditional churches is not relevant in today's environment (Harrison 2005). African Americans need economic development and empowerment. They want to be uplifted, not hear about suffering and hardships. Prosperity gospel churches' worship style and ministries meet this need. The Prosperity gospel hit the African American community in the mid-seventies, but did not really take-off until the nineties, meaning most prosperity gospel churches are relatively new. These churches took on an organizational form—business model, praise and worship teams, emphasis on empowerment, focus on economics—that the environment dictated. As new churches sprouted, they mimicked the successful model. Though traditional churches and prosperity gospel churches have doctrinal differences, there is nothing about traditional church doctrine that says they cannot have lively church services, updated music, and ministries that focus on economic development. If what is drawing people to prosperity gospel churches is organizational characteristics, not the doctrine, then it is likely that any recently founded church would have the same ministerial characteristics as prosperity gospel churches.

It is also possible that these organizational changes within the African American community reflect ideological shifts in the world as a whole. Numerous scholars have noted the influx of neo-liberal ideas into religious organizations. I will provide more detail in the next chapter, but the embedding of neo-liberalism into religious institutions manifest itself through the emphasis on self-help, accountability, and productivity in not only sermons, but also in ministries. Perhaps changes in churches are not due to the prosperity gospel, but rather the impact of neo-liberal ideas. Even if the prosperity gospel had not risen to dominance when it did, many churches may still espouse these principles.

Another organizational story turns on resources. When the media talks about the prosperity gospel, they usually focus on mega-churches, churches with over 2,500 members. Their pastors dress well, have big homes, and drive expensive cars because their large membership base can afford a large salary. Potential church goers are often attracted by a church

offering a variety of ministries and a polished worship service. Large numbers of members allows churches to expand their programs and offer sophisticated church services (Smith and Smidt 2003; Harrison 2005). It is possible that the characteristics ascribed to prosperity gospel churches – ministries focused on economic development or personal finance, are a product of church size, not doctrine. In practice, small churches that profess to follow the prosperity gospel may act in the same way as their traditional counterparts because they just do not have the resources to behave differently.

## **Methodology**

This study was conducted in a large southern metro area from 2010-2012. Throughout this paper, this metro area will be referred to as “Jefferson”. The information used in this paper was culled from interviews, participant observation, and archival research. Through snowball sampling, I recruited 18 community leaders with whom I conducted approximately one-hour long, semi-structured interviews to gather their opinions about the role of local churches within their community. The primary requirement was that they had some role in the community that put them in a position to work with or observe local church behavior. Interviewees ranged from executives of local non-profits and development organizations to consultants for religious organizations. Though the economic status of the interviewees varied, almost all were highly educated African Americans who attended an area church and varied in age from 23-66.

Next, after site visits and Internet searches, I contacted local mega-churches to ask if they would participate in my project. A mega-church is a Protestant church with an average weekend service attendance of at least 2000 people (Thumma and Travis 2007; Hartford Institute for Religion Research 2014). Four churches with at least 4000 members and doctrinal beliefs varying roughly along a traditional doctrine-prosperity gospel continuum allowed me to conduct semi-structured interviews of active church members. I categorized churches along this continuum based on church visits and inquiring from community members about what churches they believed espoused the prosperity gospel. The churches recruited the participants because they were better able to identify members that consistently participated in church activities versus those who just attended a couple of Sundays each month. The rationale for seeking active members was the belief that people highly involved in the church might have views that more closely approximate their church's stance on doctrinal issues and that they had more accurate knowledge of their church's ministries. Most interviewees were administrators or ministers within their church. As a group, ranging in age from 28-63, they were highly educated and solidly middle- to upper-middle class with the exception of a few who had been adversely affected by the 2008 economic downturn. All were of African descent. I conducted five interviews with members from each church, with questions that touched on their beliefs about the church's role in the community, their own church's ministries, attitudes toward the poor, and the relationship between finances and faithfulness, amongst other matters. I digitally recorded all interviews and then had them transcribed by a third party. I later coded the interviews using Atlas.ti computer software. I replaced the names of all people and places with pseudonyms.

I also conducted four weeks of participant-observation at each church, attending Sunday and weekday services and other church programs to see firsthand what activities the various churches were prioritizing and who they were targeting. I bolstered this data by gathering church brochures and looking at online records of church activities. In addition, I gathered a random sampling of 8 sermons from each church from the year 2012. This is not a sufficient number of sermons to run any type of statistical analysis, but it is enough to determine whether and how the

messages from each pastor differ within the areas critical for this analysis. Because of the small number of sermons involved, it was more efficient to code each sermon by hand.

### **Church and Community**

The church is one of many actors working on a local level trying to effect community change. In the metro area where I based my research, however, almost all of the community activists I interviewed had some affiliation with an area church. This is not surprising considering that in the urban South the church remains what Christopher Ellison and Darren Sherkat (1995) call the “semi-voluntary institution,” meaning that participation in church activities is strongly influenced by social norms and expectations. Ellison and Sherkat show that this social pressure is stronger amongst more educated African Americans within the South, which includes almost all of my community activist interviewees.

At points in this study, it may seem that I am making an artificial dichotomous comparison between the “church” view and the “community” view. That is not my intention. Each of the interviewees provide an authentic voice of both the church and community in some way. The interviewees I categorize as “church leaders” and “community leaders” do differ, however, in one important respect. Those that I call “community leaders” were chosen because their primary interaction with the community is through the lens of their non-profit organization, whereas the primary interaction with the community of those categorized as “church leaders” is through the lens of their church. The fact that they are actively engaging the community through the mechanisms of their particular organization is why I divided these interviewees into these separate categories. I believe the following pages support my initial supposition that the entities through which the interviewees interact with the community influenced their priorities, what they saw as community problems, and even who they saw as “the community.”

I use the term “the church” throughout this paper. I am aware that religious institutions within the African American community are diverse, and some of that diversity is reflected in this paper. Approximately 80 percent of people of African descent, however, identify as Christians, with the vast majority belonging to Protestant denominations as stated above (Pew Research Center 2009). For this reason, this paper adopts the convention, found in scholarly and popular discourse, of using the term “the church” to refer to the collective of African American Christian religious institutions.

### **Dissertation Structure**

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the critical role the church played in the economic, social, and political development of the African American community. It also provides more detail on the prosperity gospel as well as the possible role that neo-liberalism and mega-churches may be playing in creating divisions within the community. Chapter 3 explores whether or not traditional and prosperity gospel churches differing in their relationship with the community. Chapter 4 lays out the ministries of each participating church and how they vary from one another. In Chapter 5 I analyze the sampling of sermons from each church to uncover any thematic patterns related to the religious doctrine of each church.

## Chapter 2 - The Centrality of the Church

*“In the main, there are no social classes in the Negro church...In practically all of the 609 churches there exists a thorough democratic spirit. The church is the place where the Negro banker, lawyer, professor, social worker, physician, dentist, and public-school teacher meet the skilled and semi-skilled tradesmen, the maid, the cook, the hotel man, the butler, the chauffeur and the common laborer; and mingle with them. The Negro church still furnishes the best opportunity for Negroes of different social strata and various cultural groups to associate together in a thoroughgoing democratic way.*

*The Negro race is young in emancipation. It has not had sufficient time to build churches of the wealthy nor of the cultured. As the race gets older in freedom, the number of college-trained business and professional people will inevitably increase. There will be more grouping and mingling among people of similar interest, and the tendency will be in the direction of a more rigid separation between Negroes of different interests and achievements. Up to this time, the Negro church has been one the most outstanding channels through which this gulf between the “high” and the “low,” the “trained” and the “untrained” has been bridged. It will continue to be for years to come; because the vast majority of Negroes who reach the business and professional classes are the sons and daughters of parents whose opportunities for training have been meager and who for the most part have kept this Negro church in operation.” (The Negro’s Church, Benjamin Elijah Mays and Joseph William Nicholson, 286-87)*

The emergence of the prosperity gospel has created intense schisms between many groups within the African American community. Some African American ministers and churchgoers express deep concern over the materialistic focus of many prosperity gospel pastors. They believe promising people wealth and health if they are obedient to God is a distortion of biblical scripture. Most religious scholars are highly critical of the Movement. Many within the scholarly community staunchly cling to an ideal vision of the church, a church born out of the Civil Rights Movement and imbued with the social gospel. Black liberation theologians, including Jeremiah Wright and James Cone, believe the prosperity gospel is uncritical of US society and turns a blind-eye to the many needs still plaguing the African American community, particularly amongst the poor (Smith 2006; Powell 2008; Bowens 2012). Other scholars show concern over the prosperity gospel’s emphasis on individual achievement and self-improvement at the expense of communal aims such as social justice (Franklin 2007; Mitchem 2007). Dr. Robert Franklin goes as far as to write in his book *Crisis in the Village* that the prosperity gospel is “the single greatest threat to the historical legacy and core values of the contemporary black church tradition” (2007, 112).

Despite this chorus of criticisms, there is a relatively young cohort of ministers with relatively young, yet fast growing congregations who openly challenge the traditional church—claiming to have a model and doctrine that is more relevant to meeting the needs of their congregants and bettering their lives physically, spiritually, and materially. The ministers that espouse the prosperity gospel are very diverse, crossing racial and national boundaries. They also offer more gender variety, as many of the leading figures of the movement are women, and wives and husbands are often listed as co-pastors, a leadership structure not common in a traditional African American church. All of these pastors emphasize material prosperity, but ministers within the African American community emphasize economic empowerment as the path to the



uplift of African American people. The churches look different, their ministers dress differently, and their message emphasizes different values.

The reason so many observers are concerned about this growing division is based on the important role the church has played and continues to play albeit to a lesser degree within the African American community. This chapter outlines how the African American church has helped develop and unify the community. I will then present my argument for why this theological doctrine and movement has the potential to create sustained divisions within the African American community.

### **The Centrality of the Church**

Night has come and the white owner and the overseer are finally asleep. Through secret signals and messages, the knowledge of the meeting was passed. They quietly moved from the slave quarters through the dense brush and thickets to their secret meeting place, their “hush harbor.” Wet quilts have been hung to muffle the sounds of singing and shouting, but a lookout is still assigned to watch out for intruders. Away from the controlling gaze of a white pastor demanding obedience to their masters, they freely worship. Combining African rhythms and beliefs with evangelical Christianity, they develop their own songs and their own faith—a Christianity that offered religious salvation, but also an outlet to express their desire for freedom.

These clandestine services provided not just space to fortify enslaved Africans’ spirits against the inhumane circumstances they faced; they also served as small acts of defiance. Attending these services at risk of punishment were valiant acts to maintain their independence. They had little control over their bodies, their labor, their families, their choices, but in the face of such unspeakable oppression, they could maintain control over their spirit. Though bodies were bound, souls were free to choose who and how to worship. On second thought, these were not small acts of defiance. No, they were mighty acts of rebellion. Biblical teachings that were used to pacify them and encourage obedience, in their own hands, when filtered through their own interpretations and spiritual meditations, were transformed into teachings that inspired hope. It gave them the courage to hope for an end to their suffering; the audacity to see themselves as God’s chosen people. These acts of courage planted the seeds of what would become the most powerful and influential African American-controlled institution. The small, clandestine institution that provided encouragement and spiritual sustenance, would become a vast and far-reaching network that provided the framework for African Americans to not only openly challenge an unjust system, but also provided them the space and resources to economically, socially, and politically develop. One, however, probably would not have predicted this considering Christianity’s inauspicious start within the enslaved African population within the United States.

### **The Beginnings**

Most of the enslaved that came from Africa followed their own traditional religions, believing in gods and spirits that worked not just in the spiritual realm, but that could also influence outcomes in the “real world”, such as diseases, floods, or droughts (Raboteau 2001, 14). This holistic view of religion would be a persistent trait throughout African American religious traditions within the United States. Europeans and early colonizers held divergent views as concerned Christianizing the slave population. British Americans were reluctant to do so because, at first, there were legal questions about whether baptism guaranteed freedom. The 18<sup>th</sup> century brought legislative action in the United States explicitly stating that baptism did not grant

freedom, but lingering doubts toward conversion remained (Jernegan 1916). Many whites feared conversion would increase their slaves' sense of self-worth, ultimately leading to demands for equal rights and rebellious behavior. They also feared that religious meetings would provide slaves the opportunity to organize and that teaching the Bible would make them literate. British-American Protestants wanted to keep the social and cultural divide between them and enslaved Africans, and worshipping together as fellow Christians might erode that, threatening the maintenance of an effective slave system (Raboteau 2001).

The staid conversion process was another barrier to the widespread acceptance of Christianity by enslaved Africans (Frazier 1974). The Africans came from religious traditions that celebrated music, dance, and emotions, all in sharp contrast to the reserved style of worship favored by the Anglicans (Raboteau 2001). Anglican Church priests emphasized memorization and education during their conversion process. This all changed during the religious revivals that started during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Religious revivalism spread throughout colonial America, starting in New England, but eventually extending to the South. Revival preachers used powerful oratory to convict there sometimes thousands of listeners of their need to repent and accept Jesus Christ. They encouraged building a personal relationship with God and free, emotional outpourings. Unlike their Anglican counterparts, revival preachers emphasized the experience, not rules. This style of worship was similar to the traditional manner of most enslaved Africans, leading them to be more open to the message. Free and enslaved Africans would pray and preach during the revivals. Being poor, illiterate, or of African descent were not barriers to baptism (Raboteau 2001).<sup>2</sup>

Baptists and Methodists would license African American men to preach, fostering these denominations expansion within the African American community. Large numbers of slaves across the South became church members. Their willingness to license African American men also led to a significant number of them pastoring their own people starting in the 1770s. Many African American preachers were still overseen by white clergy or slave-owners, but some were able to minister relatively independently. These African American preachers played a critical role in shaping African American Christianity. They presented their followers with a Christianity that did not further a European-American agenda, but rather spoke to the experiences of both free and enslaved African Americans. African American preachers interpreted the stories and events of the Bible to fit the day-to-day lives of African American people. They taught them that, despite what whites told them, the bible states that all people were created in the image of God. They, too, were God's children. Receiving the acceptance and love of God helped fortify Christian slaves against the dehumanizing forces of slavery. In God's eyes, they had value and worth. They saw parallels between themselves and the Children of Israel, appropriate Old Testament symbols and stories into their own narratives.

The increasing independence of African American preachers also allowed slaves the opportunity to more freely worship. These freedoms, however, sometimes came with risks. The slaves began to develop a religious life that existed outside of the institutional church. The slaves' religion was known as the "invisible institution" because it was often hidden from the slave owners (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990, 24; Raboteau 2001; Frazier 1974, 36). In the woods, cabins, or "hush harbors", slaves secretly met to worship and apply religious doctrine in a way

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<sup>2</sup> There is some debate concerning the continuance of African traditions and customs by enslaved Africans in North America. Some scholars such as Raboteau and Dubois thought the African American church was a continuation of African religion, while others, such as E. Franklin Frazier, thought all ties with their African religious past had been destroyed.

that reflected their own experiences and helped them make sense of their own lives. Many risked severe punishment in attending these forbidden meetings, but to have a space to freely express their longing for freedom in this world and the next made it a risk worth taking. So in these early steps toward independence from white Christian oversight and indoctrination, and during these early, sometimes secretive, religious meetings between free and enslaved Africans was born the “black church”.

### **The “Black Church” in Action**

While in the South, the “black church” was forced to spread in a secretive fashion, African American churches in the North could expand more openly, and used their relative freedom to provide not just a communal space for African Americans, but also an institutional base for political and civic activism.<sup>3</sup> In 1794 in Philadelphia, Richard Allen helped found Bethel AME, the first independent African American church, or African church as they were known at the time. The African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church was the first African American denomination in the country. Many other African churches were established around this time. These churches played an active role in establishing self-help organizations, such as benevolent societies as well as moral reform societies. These organizations helped churches do more than just meet African Americans basic needs, such as food, education, or even burial services. They also provided a way for African Americans to come together collectively to work toward better conditions within their own communities. These societies fostered racial pride, encouraged community activism, and fostered a sense of agency amongst African Americans. African American ministers believed that progress for their race depended upon education, temperance, thrift, and responsibility. In order to achieve these goals, they emphasized the need for moral behavior and self-respect.

The church also provided African Americans a platform to express their views on Christianity and issues that affected their community. The church fashioned many early civil rights leaders, as many African American ministers used the pulpit or any other medium they could to debate, discuss, and attempt to solve the pressing issues facing their communities, the most pressing one being slavery. African American churches were extremely active in the anti-slavery movement. Not only did they speak out against slavery, they also helped shelter fugitive slaves through the Underground Railroad. Some churches took it a step further, working to foment rebellion, a well-known example being the Vesey Revolt. In 1822, Denmark Vesey a former slave who had purchased his freedom, planned a slave revolt in Charleston, South Carolina, organizing the action in part through the AME Church he had helped found in the city in 1818. Plans of the revolt were leaked before it took place, resulting in the execution of the more than 30 African American men, including Vesey, and the destruction of the Charleston AME church, the second largest AME congregation in the country at the time.

During these antebellum years, the foundation of the African American church as an agent of change was laid. An institutional framework was created that provided a springboard for economic and civic development. The church became an incubator for community leaders and the transference of administrative and organizational skills. It provided shelter for those in

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<sup>3</sup> The following historical section pulls from the following texts: Dubois, *The Negro Church*; Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*; Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*; Mays, *The Negro’s Church*; Raboteau, *Canaan Land*; and Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church*; Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African- American Church in the South, 1865-1900*; Harris, “Black Churches and Civic Traditions”

physical need and fellowship for those in emotional need. It provided spiritual succor from the harsh outside world and a place to regain dignity so often trampled on in everyday life. Perhaps most importantly, it shaped a theological framework to challenge Eurocentric world views that positioned African Americans as inferior, providing the mental resources necessary to maintain a sustained campaign for civil and human rights within the United States. This mental strength would be necessary as the hopes for a more just country upon the abolition of slavery went unfulfilled, and the African American community faced one of the most challenging and demoralizing periods in its history.

Starting in the mid-19th century following the abolition of slavery, the African American church experienced immense organizational growth as it increasingly became the center of African American life. African Americans faced so much humiliation and surveillance in their day to day lives, the church became one of the only places where they could experience any recreational outlets. The church served as a place of worship, but it also increasingly served as a springboard for future political, economic, and social organizing. Urban churches in particular, possessing more members and relatively more resources than their rural counterparts, were extremely active. They offered an array of services, ranging from helping the sick and former prison inmates to meeting basic needs such as providing food and clothing. Sometimes through partnerships with others, they founded hospitals, orphanages, and nursing homes. As rural African American migrants streamed to the cities, many African American churches aided in the transition to a foreign urban environment. They recreated the traditional values and communities ties to which country-raised migrants had grown accustomed to in their former homes. They had an anchor of familiarity in the midst of the new urban foreignness. This mass southern migration to the north and urban centers made some churches balloon to a size that would rival today's mega-churches—having numerous salaried workers, ministers, social clubs, and educational programs.

African American pastors, though often not formally educated themselves, played a major role in encouraging children to seek an education. Beyond moral support, the church had a critical role in the organizational development of an educational system for African Americans. Predominantly white religious societies did play a leading role in forming schools, but local African American congregants were also instrumental in creating and sustaining educational programs. They often pulled together what meager resources they possessed to pay teachers' salaries or provide them with shelter, buy school supplies, and acquire classroom space.

The African American church also served as an incubator for early African American enterprises. Most beneficial/benevolent and burial societies were originally started in or in association with churches. They were formed to help during times of death and sickness. Over time these societies developed into insurance associations, some of the first African American owned enterprises (Harris 2001, 142; Dubois 1898). Church building provided a central location where a lot of African American businesses advertised (Mays 1933, 285-86), a tradition that continues today. The seeds of community, economic, and educational development were all first planted by the church.

### **The Church as a Political Actor**

The role of the African American church in politics and social activism has always been contentious. Many critics and social reformers even dating back to Reconstruction criticized the church for not doing more to better the economic and social position of its people (Harris 2001; Mays and Nicholson 1933). They argued that many African Americans avoided dealing with

discrimination and other earthly ills, instead focusing on salvation and the afterlife (McDaniel 2008; DuBois 1990, 2003). This other-worldly orientation was in part to blame for what some saw as the “backwardness” of the African American community (Frazier 1974). Though there is some truth to these claims, Albert J. Raboteau argues that the absence of a national movement distracts observers from the numerous activities of churches on a local level. He writes that “In numerous black communities, black churches sponsored housing improvements, neighborhood development programs, health-care clinics, day-care centers, and activities for senior citizens” (2001, 121). African American ministers were very involved in the development and growth of organizations such as the NAACP, the Urban League, and Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) (Raboteau 2001). They also took an active role in politics within the African American community as they were trained in the oratorical and organizational skills needed for political leadership (Frazier 1974; Smith and Harris 2005; Raboteau 2001).

In addition to the very practical and community-based role the church played in the African American community, over time the church has also played a critical role in shaping African Americans’ values and political ideology. The religion and politics literature supports the claim that the church can be a powerful agent of change for the beliefs and ideology of its congregants. Even today, messages from the pulpit and interactions with other congregants seem to promote a common political outlook among church members. In fact, this collective outlook may even be more politically influential than the worldview of the individual church member (Wald 1988). Continual exposure to a particular religious doctrine can pull church goers in an ideological direction they would not normally go based on their own individual characteristics.

Considering the cultural and historical legacy of the church in the African American community, the church is probably even more influential and more critical in shaping the political ideology of African Americans than of other racial and ethnic groups. In fact, it is impossible to understand the values and political priorities of the African American community without understanding the church’s role in shaping those values and priorities. Melissa Harris-Lacewell (2004, 51) writes, “In black communities, the church is a critical location for the definition of truth, and as individuals interact with one another and with church leadership, they enter a process that helps them create a worldview central to the construction of a political ideology.” We know that the church plays a particularly important role in reinforcing both racial group consciousness and humanitarianism amongst African American church goers. In *Behind the Mule*, Michael Dawson argues that the church reinforces the political salience of racial interests. In fact, Dawson explicitly states that he expects as conditions and institutions (the church) within the African American community change, the nature of racial identity should change as well (Dawson 1994, 63).

The church has also reinforced traditional African American values amongst its members. What are these “traditional values”? African American churches have a history of supporting ministries that help the needy and combat racial oppression. This could include simply taking up a collection for those having immediate needs, raising funds to support schools, or becoming involved with civil rights organizations and activities, as mentioned above (Baer and Singer 2002). Even though the primary emphasis of most African American churches is and was salvation and evangelism, or focusing on the more insular needs and desires of church members, they still share in the legacy of putting community interests over self-interests and supporting ministries and policies that help the disadvantaged and alleviate human suffering.

The presence of many of these tenets in the African American community can be documented for at least a century. Elsa Brown noted that as far back as Reconstruction, when

observing African Americans, many Northerners were troubled by “the strength of the individuals’ sense of responsibility to each other and to the community as a whole” (Brown 1989, as cited in Dawson, 98-9). Many African Americans perceived voting against the interest of the community as a crime (Dawson 1994). Michael Dawson (100) eloquently describes this unique perspective:

Political responsibility to the African-American community was considered a higher good than the individual’s right to act on his or her own preferences if those preferences were considered potentially harmful to the black community. The communalism of African-American public life shared its roots with the communalism of African-American religious thought. One of the critical differences between black and white Protestantism is the African-American belief in “self-realization of individuality within community” (West 1982).

The African American community’s focus on group interests puts it in sharp contrast with many traditional American principles of liberal democracy.

The prioritization of the needs of the African American community over individual interests influences all aspects of African American life. In *Behind the Mule*, Dawson labels this phenomenon “linked-fate” (77). This focus on the group, and subsequently using group interests as a proxy for self-interest, has profound implications for African American political behavior. Dawson posits that the primary goal in African American politics is to advance the political interests of African Americans as a racial group (Dawson 1994). In accordance with this view, Mack Jones (1987, 26) writes, “the central concern in black political thinking has been how to end black oppression from political formations based almost exclusively upon the extent to which their actions were perceived as advancing or compromising black liberation.”

Two concepts best represent the principles that have been consistently reflected in the African American church and community: “humanitarianism” and “racial consciousness”. The definition of the former is rather straightforward. Humanitarianism is defined as the promotion of human welfare and social reform.<sup>4</sup> The latter concept is not quite so simple. I am using the term “racial consciousness” to refer to two similar yet distinct concepts—linked-fate and group consciousness. “Linked-fate” refers to the use of group interests as a proxy for self-interests (Dawson 1994) Group consciousness is defined as “a politicized awareness, or ideology, regarding the groups relative positions in society, a commitment to collective action aimed at realizing the group’s collective interest” (Miller et al 1978, 18). Both mindsets are important in shaping African American behavior, and usually co-exist in an individual.

### **The Church Provides Dignity and Healing**

There is abundant evidence to show that, despite numerous critics, the church, both directly and indirectly, played a crucial role in fighting for the spiritual, economic, and political interests of the African American community. I would be remiss, however, if I omitted the perhaps most critical role the church played. Criticisms against the church often overlook the significance of the emotional healing and dignity that the church provided its members. The church is the first public organization that African Americans completely owned and controlled. Many African Americans, unable to own their own homes, took pride in ownership of their church. People need the opportunity to develop initiative and self-direction. The African

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<sup>4</sup> Definition comes from Merriam-Webster dictionary.

American church provided African American's with the space to do so. People crave recognition, affirmation. They want to feel like "somebody" (Mays 1933, 279-81). They were immersed in an environment that constantly devalued them and proclaimed their inferiority. More than anything, the church was a place for African Americans to regain their humanity. In a world where they were "nobodies" the church allowed them to be "somebody". Benjamin Mays presents this very eloquently in his chapter entitled "The Genius of the Negro Church" (1933, 281):

The opportunity found in the Negro church to be recognized, and to be "somebody," has stimulated the pride and preserved the self-respect of many Negroes who would have been entirely beaten by life, and possibly submerged. Everyone wants to receive recognition and feel that he is appreciated. The Negro church has supplied this need. A truck driver of average or more than ordinary qualities becomes the chairman of the Deacon Board. A hotel man of some ability is the superintendent of the Sunday church school of a rather important church. A woman who would be hardly noticed, socially or otherwise, becomes a leading woman in the missionary society. A girl of little training and less opportunity for training gets the chance to become the leading soprano in the choir of a great church. These people receive little or no recognition on their daily job. There is nothing to make them feel that they are "somebody." Frequently their souls are crushed and their personalities disregarded. Often they do not feel "at home" in the more sophisticated Negro group. But in the church on X Street, she is Mrs. Johnson, the Church Clerk; and he is Mr. Jones, the chairman of the Deacon Board.

African Americans face so many tense situations in their everyday lives where they are disrespected, unwelcomed, must accept poor treatment, and must always be on their best behavior. The church gave them the chance to relax, be free, and feel welcomed. They could recharge again so that they would have the strength and wherewithal to make it through another week (Mays 1993). Week after week, year after year, African Americans survived until the moment when community, national, and world events converged, allowing them to openly and somewhat effectively challenge the racist regime they confronted. Surviving shifted to rebelling. The leadership, funding, and organizational support that the church provided during the Civil Rights Movement is well documented. Just as important, however, were the intangible benefits, or what Frederick C. Harris calls "micro resources," described as resources that are "nonmaterial and thus less tangible—some examples are group solidarity, the symbolic articulation of political goals, and feeling confidence in one's ability to affect political matters," (Harris 1999, 27-8). It was the church that convinced many African Americans to not give up; to believe that things would get better, even if they did not see it for themselves; to keep going until their faith in their God could be transformed into effective, collective faith-based action against the system. Defeating Jim Crow was indeed an impressive feat. Surviving 200 years with their humanity intact was miraculous.

The historical record clearly demonstrates the important role the African American church has played within the African American community. It has offered space for fellowship and moral support. It provided an incubator for early African American businesses and a safety net for those in need. The church was a springboard for African American activism, allowing African American leaders to develop their organizational skills and offered a platform for

mobilization and advocating for African American interests. Through sermons and interactions with other congregants, specific political and moral values were reinforced within the community, the most consistent being humanitarianism and racial consciousness. African American Christianity provided a counter-narrative to the oppressors' claims that they were inferior, emboldening them to challenge the injustices they faced. Christian doctrine gave them courage and inspiration to maintain their prolonged battles. Most importantly, the church provided healing and sustained their humanity.

The church continues to play an influential role within the African American community, even though its power is not what it once was. Despite these declines, African Americans remain the most religious racial/ethnic group within the United States (Pew Research Center 2009). Also, the work of Ellison and Sherkat (1995) suggests that in the South, particularly in rural communities, there are social norms and community expectations that keep church attendance high for African Americans, meaning that the church still functions as a “semi-involuntary” institution for many African Americans.

For all of the above reasons that attest to the influence of the church within the African American community, I argue that a significant change in church doctrine will lead to significant value shifts and forms of activism within the African American community. The promulgation of a divisive ideology will create fissures within the community. The organization that for so long had reinforced unity within the community may now be sowing the seeds of division.

### **Past Predictions of Fragmentation**

There have been past predictions that some change would unravel the sense of unity or unified interests within the African American community, and that these divisions would be most pronounced in the political sphere. The most commonly suspected culprit behind this predicted fragmentation was economic stratification. With the impressive gains made by the African American middle-class and the dramatic decrease in overt racism, some scholars thought that the political cohesion within the community would diminish. Though in the minority, those scholars who argued that class had eclipsed race as the principal explanatory factor for African American political behavior were very influential. Most notable among them was William Julius Wilson.

In his 1981 work *The Declining Significance of Race*, Wilson argues that, due to the passage of civil rights legislation and changes in race relations, the status of African Americans is determined more by class than race. According to Wilson, as the number of affluent African Americans increases, they will develop interests that diverge from those of economically marginalized African Americans, mirroring some of Benjamin Mays' predictions (Mays 1933). Social theorists theorize that the residential isolation of many poor African Americans will help them maintain a strong racial identity, leading them to vote collectively as they have in the past (Tate 1994). Also, being low income, they will continue to support more liberal economic policies and the Democratic Party. More affluent African Americans, on the other hand, having been forced to abandon their cultural identities to integrate, may not identify as strongly with the African American community, the Democratic Party, or liberal causes. Research has noted the positive correlation between upward social mobility and Republican Party identification (Walton 1985). Wanting to protect the newfound privileges gained from their increasing wealth, affluent African Americans may form coalitions with other racial and ethnic groups with similar economic interests. In effect, the class theorists argue that middle-class African Americans had become more politically conservative than working-class and poor African Americans. As



economic polarization increases within the community, so will political polarization, reducing political cohesiveness and loyalty to the Democratic Party and their policies.

Most studies did not support class theorists' claims, but rather the following conclusions (Tate 1994; Dawson 1994). First, the political polarization due to economic polarization predicted by class scholars had not occurred. Highly educated, high income African Americans continued to identify strongly with their race. Second, consistent with race scholars' historical evidence, individual economic status continued to play a subordinate role in shaping African American political choice. The perceived interests of the group remained preeminent. The importance of this finding is to emphasize that throughout the history of the African American community within the United States, no movement or demographic change has detached significant numbers of African Americans from supporting the traditional principles of racial consciousness and humanitarianism. Unity has remained intact.

Yet despite this past evidence, I argue that the emergence of the prosperity gospel signals the potential start of significant divisions in the African American religious community, where certain churches will continue to reinforce the traditional values of humanitarianism and racial consciousness while others will reinforce individualism, materialism, and reduced racial consciousness. I foresee that this religious division will decrease political unity, resulting in increased divergence in political attitudes and policy priorities between congregants of the differing churches. The reader may ask, "Why now?" If significant divisions did not emerge after the Civil Rights Movement or during the 80s, why should we believe that divisions will emerge now? Below, I give an overview of what the prosperity gospel is and why now it presents an unprecedented challenge to the unity the church has played so important a role in crafting.

### **The Prosperity Gospel**

"Prosperity gospel", also known as the "Word of Faith" or "Prosperity Ministry", is a theological belief system with roots in the Pentecostal and charismatic traditions that has been taken up in recent decades by many young energetic ministers across the United States. Based on the teachings of E.W. Kenyon and Kenneth Hagin, Sr., the prosperity gospel recombines a variety of traditions, including Evangelicalism, neo-Pentecostalism, and New Thought metaphysics. Evangelicalism emphasizes the "born again" experience and the inerrancy and absolute authority of the Bible. Neo-Pentecostalism focuses on spiritual gifts from the Holy Spirit and ecstatic worship services. New Thought metaphysics stressed the power of thought and words, claiming that the mind could cure the body. Religious elements were eventually added resulting in the belief that a relationship with God could restore health and well-being.

Three basic points form the core of the prosperity message: (1) the principle of knowing who you are in Christ, (2) the practice of positive confession, and (3) a worldview that emphasizes material prosperity and physical health as the divine right of every Christian (Harrison 2005). Prosperity ministry can be found among various U.S. ethnic groups, and has found a particularly receptive audience among the poor and the entrepreneurial-minded middle-class. The largest church in the country, Lakewood, with over 25,000 mostly white church attendees each Sunday, is led by a white pastor, Joel Osteen, whose message is firmly aligned with prosperity gospel. The Prosperity gospel message, however, found particularly fertile soil among African Americans due to the community's strong Evangelical tradition, large number of low SES members, and its relatively nascent middle-class. The manifestation of the prosperity ministry alters with each church, ranging from the entrepreneurial spirit of T.D. Jakes' Potter's House to the "money cometh" slogans of Dr. Leroy Thompson.

Whatever the actual incarnation of the prosperity ministry, there are three predominate traits that an observer will find in most African American prosperity-based churches: (1) a focus on economic-empowerment and material success, (2) a focus on self-improvement and the individual's ability, through faith in God or God's gifts, to overcome any obstacle, and (3) a demonization of poverty. The prosperity gospel claims that the scriptures promise believers an "abundant life" on earth. Many people, so they claim, are trapped in a "lifestyle of poverty" or live under the "curse of poverty" because of their own thoughts and ideas, not structural impediments such as racism or other injustices (Harrison 2005; Mitchem 2007; Johnson 2007). This theology is in stark contrast to the traditional position of the African American church that often attributes poverty to systemic issues, and even presents the poor as favored by God. While traditional churches focus on holiness and sacrifice, PM churches prioritize spiritual gifts and empowerment.

Though the prosperity gospel began shifting to the American mainstream during the 1980s and 90s, it is not the first time that the prosperity gospel has reared its head within the United States. Variants of today's prosperity gospel go back as far as the early 1900s. There are also several well-known African American figures that espoused doctrines similar to the prosperity gospel, such as Dr. Frederick J. Eikerenkoetter, also known as "Reverend Ike", and Charles Manuel Grace, better known as "Sweet Daddy" Grace. Both men encouraged their followers to live the "good life" here on earth. They owned businesses and lived extravagantly, very similar to some of today's prosperity ministers. These particular ministries, however, were marginalized within the African American community (Mitchem 2007), in sharp contrast to today's prosperity movement. So why now? How has a belief system that was once scoffed at become so embraced in whole or in part by mainstream United States religion? I argue that two important changes led to this occurrence: the infiltration of neo-liberal ideas into the religious community and the emergence of mega-churches.

### **What Changed?**

The dominance of neo-liberal ideas and the emergence of mega-churches as a dominant organizational structure within the religious field plays a large explanatory role in the current rise of the prosperity gospel throughout the United States. My analysis, however, focuses primarily on the African American community and the unique significance of its spread within that specific group.

Neo-liberalism is a contentious concept within the academic community. What it actually is and why it came to prominence as the societal and economic logic of our time will perhaps continually be debated. I do not wish to engage in that debate here. In the following passage I will attempt to present enough information about its origins and underlying principals in order for the reader to understand the claim that neo-liberalism played a major role in the ascent of the prosperity gospel.<sup>5</sup>

An admittedly simplified version of the story starts during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Seeing the devastation caused by the failing markets, several economists, the most notable being John Maynard Keynes, recommended a series of policies that would protect society from the instability of market capitalism. The state would get involved regulating the market in the belief that states could more effectively maintain economic growth and social well-being than could the market if left to its own devices. The values implicit in these economic policies are that the economy needed to be reined in by, or "embedded" in, society and politics

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<sup>5</sup> Harvey, A Brief History of Neo-Liberalism; Shah, A Primer on Neo-Liberalism

and that its end should be to promote social welfare. This is an economic philosophy that promoted collective solutions, government intervention into personal welfare, egalitarianism, and a social safety net. Whether due to ineffectiveness or a campaign by economically conservative interests, these policies began to flounder in the face of the “stagflation” of the 1970s. In response, the conservative economic philosophies coming out the Chicago School gained traction amongst the political elite of the day. They recommended cutting taxes on the wealthy, reducing government regulation of corporations, and reducing the welfare state. These neo-liberal policies were accepted whole-heartedly by prominent politicians of the eighties such as US President Ronald Reagan and UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

What is important for this story is not the economic policies of neo-liberalism per se, but the values and assumptions underpinning these policies. Embedded in the roll-back of government intervention was the belief that individuals must be incentivized to provide for themselves. It is a neo-“survival of the fittest” philosophy. Whether the individual fails or succeeds rests on his or her own efforts. Intentionally or not, these values slowly seeped into other areas of US culture and beyond, eventually finding their way into religion.

Nancy J. Davis and Robert V. Robinson address this development in their book *Claiming Society for God* (2012). Davis and Robinson's framework positions religious orthodoxy on one hand against modernism on the other. According to their theory, the religiously orthodox position is labeled theologically communitarian, which means individuals are subsumed by a larger community that must obey the laws of a deity. One aspect of theological communitarianism, the compassionate side, inclines the orthodox to economic communitarianism, “whereby it is the community's or state's responsibility to share with or provide for those in need, reduce the gap between rich and poor, and intervene in the economy so that the needs of all community members are met.” (12) Theological modernists are on the other end of the spectrum, inclining adherents to being theologically individualistic, meaning individuals, not a deity, are largely responsible for moral decisions. Modernists are also inclined toward laissez faire economic individualism, meaning that individuals, including the poor and jobless, are responsible for their own economic condition. Theological modernists are less willing to support state and community intervention. (13)

Mona Atia (2012) also addresses the influx of neo-liberal ideas into the religious field in her article “A Path to Paradise”. Through a case study of faith-based development organizations within Egypt, she examines what she entitles “pious neoliberalism” defined as “a discourse produced by a new breed of religious leaders and organizations who combine religion and neoliberalism in a way that encourages individuals to be proactive and entrepreneurial in the interest of furthering their relationship to God” (2012, 822).

The people analyzed in Atia's case study exemplify the neoliberal subjects who work toward individualism, self-improvement, productivity, and entrepreneurship. These subjects are not victims of neoliberalism; they are actively engaged in making and scripting a pious neoliberalism by drawing on a globalized religious discourse of volunteerism and faith and combining it with widespread individualism and entrepreneurship. They value science, efficiency, wealth, and accountability. They are also religious subjects, seeing religiosity as a necessary component of self-actualization. They work first individually and then collectively to cultivate unyielding faith in and obedience to God and his order. They are driven by faith and a belief that their good deeds will be rewarded in the hereafter. Pious neoliberal subjects, then, are driven toward material success in the present life and spiritual success in the afterlife (2012, 811). Atia (818) writes the following about the religious leader at the center of her article:

Resala calls attention to the rewards of volunteerism (usefulness, success, satisfaction, social networks, salaries, etc.) and links the rewards of volunteerism in the current life to rewards in the hereafter (your good deeds will be returned to you). Individuals can volunteer in the interest of furthering their relationship to God, but material benefits are equally motivating. Linking material and spiritual benefits is one of the hallmarks of pious neoliberalism.

The activities and doctrine of Resala overlap perfectly with the prosperity gospel doctrine espoused by evangelical Christians within the United States. Though Atia based her study in an Islamic context, the patterns and processes involved in pious neoliberalism are not unique to Islam. They are indicative of a particular combination of religious and economic rationality increasingly prevalent in the contemporary world (2012, 811).

In “Contesting Benevolence: Market Orientations among Muslim Aid Providers in Egypt” (2013), Tugal Cihan looks at the presence of neo-liberal and communitarian benevolent activity in the Middle East. His article questions whether these contrasting movements represent the two legs of Polanyi’s “double movement”—marketization vs society’s self-protection against market forces. At this stage, he has found that Islamic mobilization does not represent a clear check to the marketization of benevolent activity as many communitarian organizations begin to adopt neo-liberal values due to the influence of state and pro-business actors.

The work of the above authors makes a strong case for the claim that there has been a global infiltration of neo-liberal values into religious domains. It just so happens that within the United States an old religious tradition containing the principles found in neo-liberalism was waiting in the wings for the opportunity to move into the mainstream. The 1980s provided that window. As neo-liberal ideas slowly infiltrated all aspects of US culture, the prosperity gospel, once marginalized and ridiculed, crept behind in now fertile soil; minds now open to its righteous framing of prosperity, individualism, and material success.

That the minds of many African Americans are now open to this neo-liberal tinged religious doctrine is exceedingly concerning to many observers (Franklin 2007; Mitchem 2007; Smith 2006). The values of humanitarianism and racial consciousness, traditionally reinforced in the African American church, are collective values in contrast to the individualistic values of materialism and responsabilization promoted by neo-liberalism and the prosperity gospel.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, African Americans had strongly rejected Reagan and his economic policies. Fewer than 20 to 30 percent of African Americans approved of President Reagan during his two terms in office, less than half the approval rating given to Reagan by whites (Tate 1994). Now it appears that a community that has for centuries rejected the values neo-liberalism represents is being indoctrinated with those same principles within the walls of the church.

### **Mega-Churches**

A mega-church is generally defined as a Protestant church that averages at least 2000 attendees during the weekend service (Thumma and Travis 2000, xviii). There have been large churches in the past, but many were Catholic parishes and their numbers were relatively few. Starting in the 1970s, the number of large Protestant churches began to increase dramatically, now becoming the most influential organizational form within the United States religious landscape. Amongst all Protestants, the largest 20 percent of the churches have about 65 percent

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<sup>6</sup> Responsibilization – To shift responsibility from the state to the individual (Atia 2012, 810)

of the resources (Thumma and Travis 2000). As of 2000, the combined annual income of mega-churches exceeded \$7 billion dollars. Although they account for only one-half of 1 percent of all religious congregations in the country, their weekly service attendance equals the total across 35% of the smallest churches. The largest 1 percent of US churches contain at least 15 percent of the worshippers, finances, and staff in America. In short, fewer and larger churches are controlling more and more of the country's religious resources. There is no sign of this trend stopping. The number of megachurches is growing at a faster rate than the US population (2000, 7).

The emergence of neo-liberalism may be the primary occurrence that permitted the rise of the prosperity gospel, but the increasing pervasiveness of the mega-church model provided an effective framework within which to reinforce the validity of the prosperity gospel's message. Growth, gaining more members and acquiring larger buildings, became a sign of God's favor. Many of the new, quickly growing churches, a great number of which espouse the prosperity gospel, started extremely small, but saw their congregations grow into the thousands in a matter of a few years. The lives and successes of these ministers are presented as evidence of what God will do for you if you but only believe and obey. If their ministries can grow so large, others may infer that those which remain small are doing something wrong. Every time someone is exposed to these enormous structures, with massive sanctuaries, coffee shops, and professional productions, they are indirectly being exposed to the ideals of prosperity and the connection between material success and godliness. This message does not just affect members, but the thousands if not millions of people given access to these churches through expansive multi-media outreach.

Through mega-churches, not only does the prosperity gospel have a physical space to reinforce its values, so does neo-liberalism. As religious institutions grow in size, they must adopt more business-like practices to manage their growing resources, but also to continue to attract a large number of attendees. Increasingly, religious consumers expect no less from their churches than they would from secular organizations (Thumma and Travis 2000). They want to see operations run efficiently and highly professionally. This requires a productive and highly trained staff. Churches must always think of ways to improve their services and ministries. The same values we see promoted in "pious neo-liberalism"—self-improvement, productivity, and entrepreneurship—are the same values necessary to achieve and maintain a mega-church. Neo-liberalism, the mega-church organizational model, and the prosperity gospel mutually reinforce each other. As one spreads, the others can more easily follow.

Approximately 10 -12 percent of mega-churches are predominantly African American. Views on the effects of mega-churches within the African American community are mixed. Milmon Harrison in his book *Righteous Riches* (2005, 145), presents a positive image of the role played by mega-churches within the community:

The Black megachurches discussed here are providing services to their members as well as the surrounding community. Their activities extend beyond basic pastoral care or attending to the needs of the spirit and soul. They are also working for economic development and financial empowerment in the inner city, rather than relying solely on government programs and administration. Today's Black ministers are decidedly entrepreneurial and well educated, with a staff of well-trained specialists in finance, accounting, economics, and community development, and they have access to resources that half a century ago were uncommon for many churches, especially those in African

American urban communities. They are well connected, and they are among the first generations to directly benefit from the political and economic gains won in the civil rights movement.

While all of the above may be true in some cases, some observers express concern. The following chapter will present these concerns more fully, but the tendency for mega-churches to locate themselves in the suburbs, the need to attract middle-class members to raise funds, and the demand for highly professionalized staff present challenges to these churches continuing the traditional role they have played within the African American community.

### **Implications for the African American Community**

The African American church still plays an important role in meeting the immediate needs of vulnerable populations within its community. I do not predict these ministries will be drastically reduced, but it is possible that there will be a shift in the priorities amongst many African American congregations. With the prosperity gospel's emphasis on the individual's ability, through faith in God, to overcome all obstacles, there may be a shift from advocating structural change to an emphasis on ministries that improve the individual, such as tutoring programs or finance classes. Considering that many consumers of these internal programs are middle-class, they may do little to ameliorate community-wide poverty. In this same vein, as churches increase in size, they increasingly must focus on programs and other budgetary priorities that continue to attract middle-class members at the expense of meeting the needs of low income families. In summary, the church increasingly becomes a vehicle that promotes the interests and needs of middle-class African Americans. The African American church that once was a source of encouragement and dignity for the downtrodden may itself marginalize this same group that has been marginalized by the rest of the country. If the church will not fight for disadvantaged African Americans, who will?

In the following chapters, I will analyze divisions arising within the African American religious field due to doctrinal differences and their impact on the community. Each chapter will begin with expectations, followed by an analysis of actual findings gathered in the field. Before moving on, it is important to stress that this analysis is not based on the belief that the prosperity gospel, nor neo-liberalism for that matter, are bad and traditional church values are good. They are different, and as stated before, the prosperity gospel does offer a marked ideological change for the African American community. Only time will tell whether these doctrinal differences will bring about positive or negative changes for the African American community. The goal of this project is to ascertain how these doctrinal changes currently impact church behavior and what implications can be drawn from these changes.

Over eighty years ago, Mays and Nicholson wrote of the "genius" of the African American church to bring African Americans of diverse backgrounds and socioeconomic status together as equals under one roof. Perhaps his predictions about the end of this institution's unifying powers have finally come to pass, or perhaps the true genius of the "Negro Church" is its ability to constantly evolve in order to meet the current needs of the African American community.

### **Chapter 3 - Do Prosperity Gospel Churches Have Significantly Different Relationships with Their Community than Traditional Churches?**

Upon entering the field, my first task was to ascertain what type of interactions community leaders had witnessed between prosperity gospel churches and the community. I wondered if they noticed a difference in the behavior of prosperity gospel and traditional churches and how they went about meeting community needs. It quickly became clear that this was not a realistic goal. First, beyond the most well-known churches, the average person does not necessarily distinguish between prosperity gospel and traditional churches. This is understandable considering that few churches admit to espousing the prosperity gospel. Over the years, the prosperity gospel has taken on a negative connotation in many quarters, causing those that espouse it to reject the label. Also, the ideas of the prosperity gospel have become so pervasive that it can be challenging to draw sharp doctrinal distinctions between churches.

Second, most of the community leaders with whom I spoke made a marked distinction between themselves—typically non-profit, secular organizations—and churches, period. There was some mention of large vs small churches and a few comments concerning churches that espouse the prosperity gospel, but for the most part, they focused their comments on churches as a whole. From this I began to suspect that the prosperity gospel is not the source of increasing divisions within the African American community, but rather an easy target for those that disagree with the role the church as a whole is playing within the community. Community leaders have an idealized vision of what the church should be based on an archetype established during the Civil Rights Movement. They believe that the church should meet the needs of a locally-based community and focus its resources on social change. It should advocate for marginalized communities, challenging the system, just as *some* churches did in the past. Most of the church leaders I interviewed agreed that they should be agents of change, but what that actually looks like in practice differs from the expectations of community leaders. This chapter looks at the growing division in expectations within the African American community.

#### **Differing Visions**

On January 29, 2001 President George W. Bush signed Executive Order 13199 establishing the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, stating that “[f]aith-based and other community organizations are indispensable in meeting the needs of poor Americans and distressed neighborhoods” (Executive Order 13199). Bush’s signing of this Executive Order was the continuation of a trend within the United States towards expecting religious organizations to offset the diminishing social safety net that was once the responsibility of the United States government. Between 1996 and 2000, President Bill Clinton signed a series of legislative acts known as Charitable Choice that allowed the federal government to provide direct funding to religious organizations that offer a specific category of social services. Though offering government funding to faith-based organizations was and is controversial, the belief that these organizations play an important role in providing services and promoting change within communities, for the most part, is not. On a national and local level there is an expectation that faith-based organizations can and should aid in community development.

Though there is widespread agreement that the church is critical to solving community problems, there is disagreement amongst African American community leaders on how the church should do this. Although many community leaders prefer a collaborative, outwardly-oriented church, focused on the local community and systemic change, they accuse most

churches of adopting a more inwardly-focused, insulated model, focusing on problems at the individual level. This tension, or misalignment of expectations, appears only to be exacerbated by the increasing influence of the prosperity gospel, mega-churches, and neo-liberalism within the US religious field. The goal of this chapter is to examine the divergent expectations for the church and its relationship with the community.

### **The Church Is an Agent for Change**

Within the study, while there are serious divergences between many non-profit and church actors about the role of the church in facilitating community development, there is one issue about which there is little dispute. Most actors agree that the church should play a central or leadership role in the transformation of their communities. Many interviewees positively referenced a time when the church was the primary African American controlled institution within their neighborhoods. Chris Peters, an active member of a large Baptist church, recalled the following:

The role the church should play in the community is a leading role, in not just family matters but community matters. I believe the church's role in the community should set the tone for the community on how the community goes about their way of life, daily living, even to the extent of taking care of each other. This is how it used to be, even when I was young. I know from my mom and my parents growing up. Everything that started, started with the church. The church's role is the centerpiece of the community. The community is in need, the church is there.

There were also many references by the interviewees to a perhaps romanticized (Harris 2001), but persistent, characterization of the church's leadership role during the Civil Rights Movement. Dante Peters, the head of a community development organization in a Jefferson neighborhood, stated, "[T]his isn't a conversation that our churches are having as it relates to how they can help to be the change agents in neighborhoods, versus when you think about the Civil Rights Movement. The churches were the change agents." Clarence Johnson, a minister of a local Baptist church, seconded Dante Peters' view, though perhaps in less critical terms, when asked what the role of the church should be:

To be a change agent. That change agent is really to bring Jesus Christ into the neighborhood and demonstrate the love of Christ in the neighborhood and be a very visual part of the neighborhood. We can call it mission, but whatever you want to call it, it's being part of the community and working to help the community to something better. All the time I'm thinking that the black community, the black churches giving leadership to the black community over the years, should not lose that influence.

Whatever the point of reference, people working within and outside of the church have high expectations for what it should be doing in the community.

From here, a tone of dissatisfaction quickly arise as it becomes apparent that most of the community leaders—but not most of the church leaders—believe that the church is not doing enough to carry this change agent mantle within their communities. Rashad Morris, who works for the local branch of a national organization with a long history of advocating for Civil Rights,



passionately expressed the following:

Again going back to things that amaze me, we have these churches in poor communities and the people remain poor. Poor to me is a dual state, you can be poor and not have a whole lot of money but typically that feeds into a poor state of mind... can't see beyond these constraints that I have. I think the church should not only be there... [to] give material support, which I think they should, but I think they should also be active in you know...to be specific, drug addiction counseling, tutoring programs, providing and creating jobs, providing shelter for abused women, providing counseling for molested kids. I mean literally physically real life services because we know the things that make people poor are typically low education, bad job opportunities which increases your crime and drug use and from those things you have social issues like battery, molestation and rape. They all feed together, I think the church should be literally attacking all those problems.

Barbara Gordon, founder of a neighborhood development organization, concurs by saying, "I believe that churches have abdicated their responsibilities in the community. That is why people started to look at government in terms of handouts and anything else. I truly feel that churches should really provide the human services needs in the community and then that way it could be holistic."

How well the church is doing in fulfilling its perceived role within the community is debatable. What is not as debatable is the belief held by most community entities that for the African American community to resolve the many issues it faces, the church must be more involved. Sharon Knight, director of an education non-profit, stated, "[W]hen you have so much suffering, you can't expect suffering to leave a community without the church having some type of participation."

### **Misalignment of Expectations**

While there is agreement between church and community leaders that the church has an important role to play in addressing community needs, there is no agreement for how the church should achieve this. As the discussion below demonstrates, churches provide a variety of community services. Thus the tension between church leaders' expectations and churches' actions is not primarily an issue of quantity of outreach activities, but rather an issue of the nature and depths of these activities. This lack of agreement over the kinds of outreach activities that churches engage in, and the communities they serve, creates a misalignment in expectations that undermines the ability of church and community leaders to work together to solve pressing community issues.

Although many community leaders prefer a cooperative, outwardly-oriented church, focused on the local community and systemic change, they accuse most churches of adopting a more inwardly-focused, insulated model, focusing on problems at the individual level. The following examines the divergent expectations of the church and its relationship with the surrounding community.

### **Serve the Local Community**

An issue that rose frequently in interviews with community leaders was the question of

who the church should serve. The community leaders stated that the church had some obligation to serve members of the community in which they were physically located, the local community. Repeated references were made to the fact that many ministers and congregants only drove in from other areas of the city to their church neighborhoods on Sundays and Wednesdays, the rest of the week having no contact with the local community. Maria Simpson owns a consulting firm that collects data on the neighborhood in which a church is located and advises churches on ways to meet their local community's needs. Ms. Simpson articulated the reasons she felt such a service is needed:

I think that...if you, I go back to if you believe that you're called to a community of God, that's what you say, then I believe you have to become more sensitive to what's actually happening with the local community. Behind the dialogues, because we can talk all day, let's start putting some action plans. Let's start seeing some outcomes. Let's start building some strategies that take our communities back, and develop ways that the church, if it's positioned in a particular community, empowers that radius around it.

Ms. Simpson went on to express the following:

...I think in some ways it's a detriment to the community... [L]iterally, we go to church and we have service, and we go back to our separate communities, wherever they are. And my question, even to my own pastor was, "Can you or anyone in your staff, any of our members tell me what happened a week ago, two weeks ago, twelve months ago in this community? And, for the most part, they don't know. There's very few people that are really connected to the community issues.

As is implied in the comment above, what is driving this concern about churches' lack of local connection is a belief that this trend is undermining the church's ability to respond to community needs. Many congregants do not live near the church they attend and therefore lack the knowledge or concern to effectively respond to local community issues.

This was a key point to an anecdote provided by Dante Peters. As he explained, several weeks prior to our interview, a man was attacked in broad daylight by two other men "directly across the street from a church." The beating occurred in front of a store across from a bus stop where people were exiting and boarding the bus. No one intervened; no one called the police to stop the attack. Apparently, someone posted the incident online and a third party eventually contacted the authorities. There were debates about whether the man was attacked due to his sexual orientation or whether this was a dispute between acquaintances. Either way, according to Mr. Peters, the church seemed reluctant to publicly speak out against the attack or organize a community response. I asked Mr. Peters if he thought the man's sexual orientation was a factor in the local churches' silence on the matter:

I'm not sure. I'm not sure what the issue was. The issue was that it went on three days before I even decided to do a rally because I was waiting for our faith leaders to step up and say stop the violence... I think it happened because of a couple reasons. The pastor doesn't live here, and I really do like the pastor at that church,

and most of his congregation doesn't live here anymore. It's this sense of disconnect. What happens there Monday through Saturday, we're going to leave it over there. On Sunday we're going to drive in and do what we need to do.

After I raised the awareness, they were like, "You can use the church, da, da, da." We did a bunch of rallies but there was never the faith institution stepping up and saying, "We want to lead it."... I really think that what has to happen is that churches really have to do this internal audit and really think about what is the mission and the vision of the church. What is it? What's its responsibility back to the place and where the church is, the community that's there? And how does the congregation play an active role in it?

Barbara Gordon expressed a similar concern that local churches' disconnect from the physical area in which they reside presents problems when non-profits and government agencies attempt to reach out to churches to address community problems. Her community-based non-profit, in league with other organizations, was attempting to establish a community network to protect children in a particular neighborhood. After an assessment was done, it was determined that there were more than 18 churches in this small neighborhood, but, according to Ms. Gordon, "...[M]ost of the churches were commuter churches, meaning people only came into the community on Sundays, or maybe one night during the week if they were having Bible Study. There might have been one church that had some community outreach."

Barbara Gordon recounted another incident involving a local church's youth group that is very telling about who many churches are serving. Youth programs are often an easy channel to draw local youth into the church. If any ministry of a church has a local emphasis, one would expect it to be the youth group. For the churches in Ms. Gordon's community, that was not the case:

...[W]e have a church that is directly across the street that I have been persistent, in terms of reaching out to them, about connecting with us, in terms of their accessibility, in terms of space, asking them if they can provide some space. Again, it's a commuter church. Most of the members come from outside of the community... I went to a service at the church recently, and I took one of the residents that lives across the street in the apartment complex where we're working, and asked her if she could identify any of the youth that were in their youth group. This woman is very active in the community and because she has children herself, they're very active in the Parks and Rec department which is right down the street, so she knows most of the youth in the community. That's why I'm making this point. She did not recognize any of those youth as being from the Terrance Road community...so even the kids were commuting in. The outreach that this church was providing was for their own church members. They don't live in the community.

The community leaders are fighting against a common trend within the metropolis. One interviewee stated that you have to drive at least 25 minutes to get anywhere in Jefferson. People commute long distances to get to work, to go shopping, and perhaps even to go to school. The religious field is no exception. In large metro areas, many upwardly mobile African Americans,

are moving toward the suburbs (Cnaan et al. 2006, 8). More land, larger homes, and often better amenities often come at the price of moving miles away from childhood neighborhoods. Maria Simpson comments on this trend:

In my community, I think there's a shift that's happening just because ... the role of the church has changed from like the 1950s and 60s to now in the sense that we moved from being a localized entity within a community that dealt very in-depth in community issues. Especially in Jefferson, we have what's called "commuter churches," and so I would say 85% of the people who go to church in Jefferson, we commute from other communities. And my church is one of them.

This disconnect with a local community is reinforced by the increasing presence of mega-churches. The churches participating in my study attract weekly Sunday attendances ranging from 4,000 to 8,000 people. In addition to worship services, most of the churches have their own schools and recreational centers. An increasing trend among large churches is to have your own coffee shop and bookstore, although only one of the churches in my study had one. Maintaining operations this large requires an extensive staff and meeting spaces, in addition to an abundance of parking. Organizations with these facility demands require land, a lot of it. The increasing drive to expand is pushing more churches to less densely populated areas. Many mega-churches are located in areas not because they have a historic connection to the location, but rather because the location meets their logistic needs.

Almost none of the church leaders interviewed expressed concern about not directing their services at the local community. There were references made to their churches being representative of their county. Most of the outreach partnerships mentioned were with metro-wide non-profits. All of the monthly or bi-monthly missionary or evangelical outings traversed the city, not just their local area. When asked what they did in the community, several people mentioned programs that anyone could take part in, but nothing limited to the local area. They could be attracting people from down the road or from a neighboring town. No one indicated that this was problematic. I asked leaders what were the most important ministries of their particular church? One minister responded, "I believe that missions is a critical piece that we have, where we're reaching out to people in different places, whether it's our local missions or one across the country, or even in another country." The local ministry was not given more importance than any other level of ministry. All the churches that participated in my study had expansive views of who and where they were called to serve. Similar to R. Drew Smith's (2001) findings in Indianapolis, for these churches, community was not bound by a geographic area and they did not view themselves as local churches serving the local community. Indeed, these churches resemble what Ammerman (2001, 130-31) calls "niche congregations":

[N]iche congregations do not serve a specific locale. They reach beyond an immediate neighborhood to create an identity relatively independent of context. While many forces still bind congregation and community to each other, making parish-style congregations a recognizable part of the religious landscape, there are also strong forces creating a larger urban religious ecology with many choices not tied to residential neighborhood. The implications of a mobile, cosmopolitan culture, where congregational choice is the norm, make such specialized religious sorting more and more likely.

A traditional, neighborhood-based church model that many of the community leaders clamored for does not reflect the four participating churches' outreach ministries, membership pool, or mobilization efforts. When I asked the church leaders whether there was a local issue around which the church mobilized, the only issues that were mentioned were Katrina and Trayvon Martin. Terrance Davis, a youth pastor, stated the following:

**Davis:** I think when we have issues that are close to home we do respond to those issues. We are not necessarily a politically-affiliated church though. We're not really political in a lot of things we do. I can tell you two major issues. I guess these are not necessarily local but made it on the list. With Katrina in '05 we secured several apartments in the adjacent complex for those who came from Katrina and provided a lot for them. With the Trayvon Martin case as well, I think that had national press.

**Interviewer:** The church got involved how...

**Davis:** The church got involved through like hoodie rallies. We took up Skittles and sent them to the police department of the region where it took place. I can't think of anything local, but if something local was to take place I think we'd be involved, yeah.

Though Minister Davis seemed confident that the church would mobilize around a pressing community issue, neither he nor anyone else I spoke to in the church could recall a local incident in which the church got involved. This was the same in the other participating churches. The only mobilizing events that arose in the interviews were Katrina and Trayvon Martin. Local events do not appear to be on their radar. The churches' reluctance to speak out or organize protest activities on local issues, however, is consistent with the behavior of African American churches nationally. Michael L. Owens (2007, 198) revealed that many church leaders and African Americans in general decreasingly found protest as an effective means to bring attention to issues within the community. In addition, churches increasingly fear the loss of their tax exempt status due to engaging in prohibited political activities, though Owens noted that church leaders often overestimated the expansiveness of these prohibitions.

### **Collaboration Deficit**

A contentious issue for religious institutions deals with their ability to collaborate with others. Some scholars claim that churches are isolated and unaware of what other organizations are doing, while others refute this position, providing evidence that collaboration among religious and secular organizations is commonplace among churches (Farnsley 2003; Cnaan 2006, 96). The community leaders in this study do not support the collaboration thesis. A common complaint mentioned by interviewees was that church leaders did not listen. Instead of listening to the advice of community organizers who often had more expertise in the area, many church leaders would tell them what the problems were and how best to solve them.

For example, in one community the churches went to an area non-profit asking for funds to start a food kitchen. The organization said they could not directly provide them funds, but they could help them obtain food from a local food bank. The leader of the organization thought that

this was a more sustainable model for the program. The churches disagreed. Sometime later, as predicted, the churches ran out of money and again asked the non-profit for funds. The organization explained that they could not directly give funds to a religious institution, but suggested they use one offering a month to support the food program. The church leaders immediately refused, stating that they could not afford to give up a week of offerings. The leader of this non-profit repeatedly tried to help the churches create a sustainable food distribution system without success. The churches came to the non-profit, not looking to collaborate on a program, but with a set idea of what they wanted to do and what was the best way to do it. They sought resources, they did not seek partnership. During my interviews I heard several other stories of church leaders entering potentially collaborative situations unwilling to listen to other ideas.

Another critique within this same vein leveled by community leaders toward churches is the tendency of churches to act as competitors to other community organizations, not collaborators. Instead of focusing on the areas in which they may hold an advantage, many churches want to be, as one community leader put it, “the all in all.” Many churches may behave this way because, as explained above, that was the role the church played in the past. It is also possible that smaller churches are mirroring the models they increasingly see in today’s mega-churches. The problem with this model is that most churches do not have the capacity that mega-churches possess. Dante Peters, the head of a community development organization, believes a church model based on actors focusing on their own strengths best serves the community:

We can be definitely helping the same family in a wrap-around of services where the church is meeting more of the social needs and we're meeting more of the civic and economic needs. I think that's a better mix. But when I have to compete with a church for housing development in the same neighborhood that we're in or I have to compete with a church around social service programs, it does a disservice to the neighborhood.

The type of model advocated by Mr. Peters would require relatively extensive engagement and coordination with other community actors, which would go against another characteristic many community leaders found increasingly common in area churches. The phrase “insular” was often banded about in my interviews. In line with the trend to be church members' “all in all,” many observers see some churches as isolating themselves from the rest of the community. Diane Ford, administrator of an ecumenical organization, stated, “There are some churches that I really worry about the fact that they don't need anybody else.” To Ms. Ford, being a church implies working collectively within “the body of Christ” to work on issues. Many churches seem content to “stand in the gap” alone.

My time visiting churches and interviewing church leaders does, in part, give credence to this concern. I saw very little evidence, in fact no evidence, of activities carried out in collaboration with other churches or non-profit organizations, the exception being within youth programs. Outside ministers did participate in church services on occasion, but these were often ministers with a national presence who traveled from outside the state. I write “in part,” however, because the churches did on occasion allow outside entities to use their facilities. They also frequently provided volunteers to area wide non-profits, but these were all short-term, low commitment activities, not the extensive engagement for which many community leaders advocate.

There are many reasons that may account for what I call a “collaboration deficit” amongst many churches and between the churches and area non-profits, the first being tradition. Historically, the African American church has been the primary if not sole African American controlled organization within African American communities. There was a time when the church probably was the most knowledgeable about the needs of its community, in large part because most members of the community were congregants. The church’s central role within the community logically meant that the pastors of said churches were also central figures. African American pastors have long been highly respected and powerful figures, not just as spiritual leaders, but often as political leaders as well. Traditionally more educated and well-spoken than those around them, they wielded an enormous amount of power and influence, to the chagrin of some observers.

E. Franklin Frazier was noted for his contempt of ministers, blaming them for what he saw as the “backwardness” of African Americans (Frazier 1974). From slavery through the Civil Rights Movement, many ministers actively counseled their congregants to avoid resistance, ranging from telling them that obeying their masters was God’s will to discouraging them from participating in the activities surrounding the Movement. Calling them “petty tyrants”, Frazier argued that ministers used their power not to effect change within their communities, but rather to punish and reward based on personal loyalty and enrich themselves off the backs of their poor congregants (90). This authoritarian style of leadership filtered into the other social and business enterprises that would eventually be spawned from the church. Frazier claimed that African Americans were not prepared for the democratic process because of this authoritarian environment (1974, 90). There is work that counters Frazier’s claim, arguing that the church has been an environment where African Americans could hone important civic skills (Brown and Brown 2003). The truth is probably a mix of both positions, but it is safe to say that ministers were influential figures within their communities.

Times have changed and the church is no longer the hegemonic power base it once was, but pastors still tend to be highly influential figures within their congregations and communities, particularly the leaders of today’s mega-churches whose charismatic personalities are typically responsible for their churches’ enormous growth. In the era of mega-churches, they often possess unmatched capacity to mobilize and reach the masses. This influence is compounded by the emergence of Christian multi-media. Christian scholars have often written books and a few appeared on television in the past, but today’s top televangelists have global empires. TD Jakes, founder of the Potter’s House in Dallas, TX, not only has a congregation topping 30,000 members, but is seen on television by millions of viewers. He has written numerous best-sellers and produced more than five films. This is in addition to his conferences and speaking engagements throughout the world.

The head pastors of the churches in my study do not have the reach of TD Jakes, but their influence is still considerable. In addition to the thousands of congregants that fill their pews every Sunday, their church services and Bible Studies are transmitted via the web. One church leader remarked that over 20,000 people watched church service through their web page every Sunday. Few of the community leaders with whom I spoke can match the level of influence of these pastors; therefore, it is not hard to understand why some church leaders believe that they have an inside track on understanding the needs of the community at large. Yet influence does not always equate to knowledge and expertise. Most of the community leaders I interviewed possessed at least a master’s degree. They have spent years dedicated to specific areas such as education, the social welfare system, or finance. Though much of the church staff is also well

educated, most do not have expertise in areas specifically related to community development, nor do they have the time to specifically focus on such issues as they were hired to run ministries within a church.

One of my interviewees thought this collaboration deficit boiled down to training. Ministers are trained to deal with congregations, they are trained to deal with staff, and they are trained to lead. They often are not trained to collaborate. Dante Peters, senior executive of a large foundation, offers the following solution:

...I think that we've got to give greater attention to preparation and leadership for African American clergy and faith leaders. I think that...being here in the home of one of the largest schools that prepare folks, I suspect that, while there are attempts to kind of change and bring it into kind of a new era and current, that it's not happening nearly enough, so there, there's not enough early exposure and understanding of community, of the changes, that are going on in community, of the ability to connect with ... the non-profit sector, with community and civic groups. I think the focus is still on building a strong church, you know, sending a good, a strong message, but really knowing how not to just go visit the sick and hungry but if the issue is HIV/AIDS not being scared and understanding what that means, I don't think that's keeping up, and I think it needs to be.

Whether or not it does exist and whatever the reason for its existence, community leaders' belief in a cooperation deficit poses a serious impediment to effectively mobilizing resources to combat community problems. At the least it shows that many important community actors are dissatisfied with their working relationship with religious institutions.

### **Divergent Priorities**

Another important factor contributes to the "collaboration deficit" between churches and community-based organizations. During my time with community leaders I realized that many of them did not fully appreciate the fact that churches are not your typical non-profit organizations. They may do many of the same activities that a non-profit would, but they ultimately have different roles and priorities. Jeavons (2000, 18 as cited in Cnaan 2006, 1) writes that religious institutions' core functions are worship, religious education, and organizational maintenance. The findings from this study support that assessment.

Almost all the church leaders in the study cited bringing people to Christ as their primary objective. They may participate in similar activities as traditional non-profits, but their ultimate aim is evangelism. In this study, most churches use activities and services as a means to draw people to Christ, which seemingly contradicts the findings of Ram Cnaan (2006) in his study of churches in Philadelphia, where he claimed most of the churches in his study did not offer social service provisions in order to evangelize. Diane Winters, an associate pastor, explains, "If you go on missions, the idea is you are going to be meeting some needs. It might be hunger. It might be clothing. It might be medical. In the same frame you are going to provide an opportunity to share who Christ is." She later expressed this idea in even more detail:

We have a social ministry, first of all, that is dedicated to reaching out to different people wherever they are, whatever their needs happen to be. We also have our recreation ministry. We try to get to know our community through providing those kinds of opportunities. I'll just tell you, I came to St. Paul because my



children joined the sports ministry... That's a great conduit for us to have an opportunity to reach out in a different way, but all of it coming right back to try to share Christ with the world. We have opportunities in even something like golfing. We teach them to golf and in the context of their golfing, there's conversation happening. Bowling. There's conversation happening. We have quite a lot of conduits where we get to know people. We share with them, and we use that knowledge. You could say it is a ploy of a sort. It's our way of saying, "We want to be involved with every aspect of people's lives." That's what we do.

Byron Jackson, a deacon at another church, expressed a similar idea about offering church benefits as a way to draw people in:

...I think the ultimate purpose would be to attract people to come, for whatever needs they have, by offering them something that ultimately attracts them to salvation...I think if we are working more on taking care of the people in the Church, their physical needs, their economic needs, then you attract people to come to the Church, where essentially what you'll wind up with is a congregation or community of people that benefits from the resources they all have.

This focus on bringing people into the church, known as church growth, requires churches to expend resources in areas that attract and maintain church attendance—constructing nice buildings, maintaining recreational spaces, offering youth programs, hosting funerals, and numerous other resource consuming activities. Traditional non-profits can focus most of their resources on resolving community problems. Most churches cannot, although the amount of resources churches focus on their members is and has been a point of contention. All four churches in my study are extremely large, with two out of the four having their own primary and/or secondary schools to run as well. In addition to the paid staff that runs the various ministries, these churches also need additional staff to maintain their respective campuses. Giving the people what they want requires money, a lot of it. A large percentage of church revenue goes to maintaining these substantial infrastructures in addition to widespread ministerial obligations.

Not everyone in the community approves of how many of these churches distribute their funds. Rashad Morris, an administrator with a national civil rights advocacy organization that has an office in Jefferson, is one of the critics:

What the church has become is what I like to call a “spending house.” People bring their tithes and offering in the church and they spend it. The church is not storing it. So the church has been a place where there is a tremendous amount of benevolent energy and a tremendous amount of benevolent resources brought to this entity—it spends it on itself. So we have a lot of buildings, a lot of payroll, a lot of pastor assistants, a lot of pastors with no jobs. We have a lot of a lot. But what is not is a lot of people actively working. You have these churches with \$3 million dollar budgets and they, heaven forbid they give \$25,000 bucks of that back out...

The debate over how churches distribute their funds has lasted centuries and is unlikely to end any time soon.

The intense focus on church funds should not overshadow the fact the many churches are dependent on volunteer resources to function. Expectations are high for churches, especially mega-churches, to fulfill many roles, yet they often lack consistent resources to meet these expectations. Despite extensive paid staff, they still rely on their members to donate their time and resources to sustain their ministries. Some of my interviewees expressed concern about the dearth of people that actually participate in church activities. Chris Michaels, a leader in his church's men's ministry, states, "Today you have what they call the mega-church. The mega-church is filled with a lot of people. It's a mile wide but an inch deep." Mega-churches are dependent upon that inch. The more people in a church, the easier it is for members to blend into the masses, their lack of contribution to church ministries and activities being hard to detect. Unlike most of the community leaders I interviewed, participating in ministries is not many church leaders' full time job. Churches find themselves in a Catch-22. The overhead and salaries that critics complain about are to some degree necessary to build the large membership bases that provide churches the institutional capacity community organizations want to leverage.

### **Behind the Walls**

Another reason that churches are not like traditional non-profits is their emphasis on serving those within the walls of the church. As stated earlier, none of the churches in the study had any type of ministry outside of their own buildings, but some church leaders argued that their primary biblical responsibility was to those within their own congregation. Below is an exchange that occurred during the interview of a youth pastor, Terrance Davis, after I asked him what the church's role should be in dealing specifically with the poor:

**Davis:** The church's role in helping the poor is to provide for their needs... the poor. I think based upon God's word, the church is responsible for taking care of its own, primarily those within the flock, within the fold who are experiencing some sort of economic hardship or poverty, all their needs should be met within the church, or at least to some extent.... I think in the sense that, if the church does not help the impoverished outside of its fold, I don't think the church is failed, but I do think the church can do well from a public relations standpoint, from a community perspective or image standpoint too, to be visible to those in need.

**Interviewer:** But the moral responsibility or the biblical responsibility is for...

**Davis:** I think the biblical responsibility is for those in the flock first, the moral responsibility does include any and all.

Though not everyone would explicitly state that the church has a greater obligation to those within the church than without, this logic can be inferred in what many deemed their community outreach programs. Many interviewees seemed proud that their church offered services that were open to anyone in the community, member or not. Most of these services, however, required the person to enter the church. Whether it was tutoring programs, recreational activities, home buying classes, paying bills, or providing food, they were all done within the confines of the church. When many church leaders think of helping the community, they envision drawing people in and providing them support. With this fact in mind, the collaboration

deficit does make more sense to some degree. Community leaders criticized churches for participating in once- or twice-a-month outreach activities, claiming communities needed more extensive engagement to see any real change. The churches do provide extensive engagement in a sense. They are extensively engaged with community members that are willing to continuously enter their doors.

### **Change the System vs. Adapt to the System**

Diane Ford expresses an additional concern she has about church/community relations in the exchange presented below:

**Ford:** Yeah. Of course, many of them do run, I'm sure, food pantries, they do missions to Haiti, they send people. I believe, to be effective across the community, what you do and give should be about justice, not charity, but that's my personal opinion.

**Interviewer:** When you say that, you mean transforming the system, not just meeting an immediate need like a stop gap?

**Ford:** It could be. There's a place for both, but there needs to be an awareness that the system is broken.

**Interviewer:** What role do you think churches should play in the community?

**Ford:** As both dispensers of charity and advocates for system change.

Another community leader, Nancy Lismore, showed similar concern for what she thought were churches' focus on addressing short-term needs versus long-term transformations. I asked her what she believed was the church's role in specifically helping the poor. She responded as follows:

[W]ell, I think that, I actually think that's one of the best things they do. Now I don't know if they... help them long term, but I think that the church, and particularly African American church, ... is about – take care of the poor, take care of the needy, and so I think that generally [they are] pretty darn good about that. But I think it's probably more just filling an immediate gap. What they could do is more deliberately connect to these nonprofits and agencies that have the systems and the expertise to help to move a person from being hungry today to being employed, self-sufficient and employed, you know, at some point in time. Churches don't look that far, but they will give you a meal.

Nancy Lismore's position is supported by the literature. African American churches are very active in providing social services to marginalized groups, particularly the poor. Their effectiveness in producing systemic economic change is less evident (Owens 2007). This desire for long-term transformation of communities emerged throughout my interviews with community leaders. They expressed frustration with short-term church interventions such as monthly help with the homeless efforts, desiring extensive engagement that altered the

community. They wanted churches to focus on systemic change that transformed not only the people, but the situation they were in.

On the surface, it appeared that many church leaders were advocating for the same thing. Helen Winters, an associate pastor, seemed to express a similar philosophy:

I think—I don't think I actually know—that part of our goal is to reach out to the poor and to the needy to provide the support we can, and not to a fault, but quite often we provide food or things like that. The idea is also to be in that whole loop of helping them get jobs, and helping them be able to fend for themselves at some point. It's like giving them fish, but also teaching them to fish.

Like community leaders, church leaders have high expectations about the church's ability to transform their communities, economically and socially. Most of the church leaders believed their churches were doing their part. If people came asking for financial help, churches would require the person to participate in a budgeting course. If someone is going through some type of crisis, they offer counseling to help get them through the tough times. The churches provided space for members' to advertise their businesses. All of the churches prioritized education, either forming their own schools or hosting community-wide tutoring programs. Information about job openings and job fairs were routinely announced. Money management and investment seminars were offered to the community.

Yet while the churches in my study offered programs to help individuals overcome personal obstacles and succeed in the current economic environment, the strategy focuses on helping communities one individual at a time. These churches are not so much challenging the system as they are preparing people to succeed within the system. This is not the system change for which Diane Ford and other community leaders advocate. I make no claims about which approach is right or wrong, but it is important to recognize that they are different. An organization focusing on systemic change may not approach a problem or advocate the same solutions as an organization that focuses on changing the individual or that sees the individual as the source of the problem.

## **Summary**

The churches alluded to by the community leaders, and even more so the churches that directly participated in this study, can hardly be placed in the traditional category of “other-worldly.” The term “other-worldly” refers to churches that ignore earthly concerns, instead focusing on evangelism and the afterlife. All of the churches I observed prioritized evangelism, but they also appeared very intent on serving “their community” in some way. This is not, however, always “the community” that community leaders would prefer. In practice, these churches saw “their community” as including those people that came to use their services or the broader metro area, not necessarily the area that surrounds their edifices, as many community leaders envision religious institutions doing.

Without a doubt, the churches involved in this study offered numerous services to the metro area. They offered educational services, youth programs, art and music ministries, counseling services, prison ministries, funeral services, and financial management classes. The churches provided volunteers for metro-wide non-profits, gave money to those facing immediate financial needs, fed the hungry, and provided a space for certain electoral activities. The misalignment of expectations concerning the church's role in the community, therefore, is not so

much a quantitative issue, but rather a qualitative issue. Community leaders and church leaders disagree on how the church should be involved in the community. Community leaders desire churches to be localized entities that engage in extensive, outwardly-focused ministries, addressing problems in local geographic contexts while thinking at a systemic level. The church leaders do not feel bound to serve a local area, preferring independent, inwardly-focused ministries designed to address problems at the individual level. I cannot say what differences in outcomes the differing models would produce in the community, but these differences do create barriers to churches and non-profits effectively partnering to resolve issues that arise within the African American community.

Originally, I expected community leaders to identify clear ways prosperity gospel and traditional churches differed in their interactions with the community. They did not. Most of the community leaders did not know enough about specific prosperity gospel churches to make informed statements about their actions within the community. Those that did have some experience with these churches typically had positive things to say concerning their outreach ministries. The true division existed between community leaders and the church leaders. The following chapter delves into the ministries of the four participating churches to assess whether there are differences in church activities that relates to their position along the traditional/prosperity gospel doctrinal continuum.

## **Chapter 4 - Do Prosperity Gospel Churches Have Differing Ministries than Traditional African American Churches?**

African Americans continue to be labeled as the most religious racial/ethnic group within the United States. African Americans are more likely to pray privately, say grace before eating, attend religious services, and believe the Bible is the literal word of God (Jacobson, Heaton, and Dennis 1990; Johnson, Matre, and Armbrecht 1991; Putnam and Campbell 2010). Farnsley (2003, 37) determined in his work that African Americans were much more likely than whites to use their religious beliefs to make financial and political decisions. Religion and the church continue to play a significant role in the African American community. For this reason, numerous stakeholders continue to look to the African American church as a necessary change agent within the community, but do significant changes in the church's doctrinal orientation affect its ability to fulfill this role?

Chapter 3 made clear that community and church leaders had differing views on what the church could and should do within the community, but there was no evidence to indicate that prosperity gospel and traditional churches have significantly different relationships with the community and community leaders. This chapter takes a deeper look at the ministries of the four churches that participated in this study. Before entering the field, based on the values embedded within the prosperity gospel, I anticipated that the two churches most infused with the doctrine would have intensely practical church ministries more focused on individual development, particularly in the financial realm. I anticipated that the two more traditional churches would offer services meeting the basic needs of the community, offer activities focused on community-wide concerns.

Based on archival research and participant observation, I learned that while all churches offered a similar range of ministries, the churches on the prosperity gospel end of the continuum did have more individualistic ministries and stronger business orientations. None of the churches showed a great level of political advocacy, though, somewhat surprisingly, the congregations on the prosperity gospel side of the spectrum did more assertively venture into social justice issues and voter education efforts. Despite all of the churches offering monthly outreach activities to serve disadvantage communities and offering services such as food pantries and bill payment help, the bulk of the programming is geared toward congregants of at least a middle-income socioeconomic background.

### **All Nations**

All Nations is the newest of the four congregations. I became aware of the church by asking people in the community which churches they considered prosperity gospel congregations. As was stated earlier, few churches openly claim to espouse the prosperity gospel, but most observers would agree that All Nations is heavily influenced by prosperity gospel tenets. The founder of All Nations at one point was affiliated with one of the most well-known prosperity gospel churches in Jefferson. After serving there for several years, he branched off to start his own church, bringing hundreds of congregants with him. They started off in a smaller facility, but quickly moved up to their current building. All Nations certainly meets all of the physical requirements of the stereotypical prosperity gospel church. Eschewing the symbols of traditional churches, All Nations looks more like a business complex than a church. Within its large, new structure, the church has a coffee shop and bookstore, a large space for its children's ministry, and additional space that may be used for future expansion or additional business

ventures. The sanctuary looks more like a comfortable warehouse, with soaring metal braced ceilings, strewn with multiple flags from around the world. There is no stained glass, or images of Jesus Christ and his disciples. No crosses adorn the walls, in fact nothing adorns the walls except the church symbol subtly displayed throughout the building.

Though the newest of the four participating churches, it seems the most assertive about desiring to make a difference, a practical difference in the lives of its congregants. Two themes that often arise in its sermons and ministries are being practical and empowerment. For example, during the month of October they held a special Empowerment Month where their normal Wednesday Prayer service was substituted with events around specific relevant themes. The foundational scripture for the month was Hosea 4:6, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge: because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will also reject thee...". From this verse came the theme, "Empowered by the Knowledge of...". For the first week they had a Voter Awareness event, where they invited Democratic and Republican candidates for the upcoming elections.

This was not the only activity concerning the elections supported by the church. Delta Sigma Theta sorority ran voter registration drives following Sunday and Wednesday night services. The pastor spoke of the elections during Sunday service, usually in a neutral tone. One Sunday, he informed the congregation about a theologian that wrote about how Christians should vote. He advised them of the need to be practical in voting decisions. Pastor Robinson said, "I can't say now I will support Obama or Romney," but he added that, "Because we [referring to African Americans] are uneducated, we keep voting the same people in office." Statements such as these show his firm belief that lack of education, training, and practical knowledge are major barriers to the African American community getting ahead.

The staff seemed truly concerned about saying anything that came across as politically partisan during services. One minister told me that they had to always remind the pastor not to say certain things or wear certain campaign pins. Despite their attempts to not align themselves with one political party, the old tensions between the Republican Party and the African American community still reared its head. During the aforementioned Voter Awareness night, the Republican candidates that were supposed to come pulled out at the last minute. The replacement never showed. Pastor Robinson was obviously frustrated and stated that their complacent attitude toward the event said something about their overall attitudes. It definitely did not make a good impression on the waiting audience.

The following week was Justice Night and area judges, justices, and sheriffs came to speak about the justice system. Some of them were also running for office. The third week was called Financial Empowerment. Attendees rotated to various short sessions dealing with numerous topics including insurance, credit restoration, budgeting, investing, wills and estate planning. These were well-organized, practical sessions lead by professionals who were often members of the church. In fact, all the nights were very well organized with scripture accompanying every area they covered.

In addition to special events, All Nations has numerous long running ministries. Many were ministries you would expect to see in a traditional African American church of this size. They have a Living in Full Empowerment ministry that supports a food pantry, which serves "25-50 clients per month". They have a prison outreach that "will effectively equip, empower, support and restore offenders, former offenders and families of offenders." They have a sick and shut-in and bereavement ministry. They offer student, health, and singles ministries and several Bible Study classes. They also have a rather expansive counseling ministry covering areas

traditionally dealt with by churches, such as divorce, grief, marriage, and pre-marital counseling, but they also offer counseling for substance abuse, depression and anxiety, and anger management services.

Some of their ministries, however, were not quite so commonplace. For example, they have a Business Ministry where they recruit business owners and entrepreneurs to meet once a week. The intention of this ministry is not completely clear, but they did appear to leverage their congregational assets as much as possible. One Sunday they announced that a company was recruiting new employees and they provided details concerning the positions and how to apply. Presumably, they got this information from church members who worked at the company. In a similar vein, they have an Empowerment Resource Ministry which offers job readiness training such as working on resumes and improving interview skills. Another not so common ministry is their sign language ministry. They offering signing services at each service, have a Deaf Awareness Sunday, and even offer their signing services to other churches in need.

In addition to their formal ministries, the staff at All Nations continuously inform their congregation of opportunities for improvement offered within the community. For example, they were able to get their congregants a discount at a local gym. They announced a Math and SAT Prep Boot Camp offered at a local community center. It cost \$150, but three All Nations students could attend for free. Besides what I have written, there are many other ministries offered at the church, some that may go unannounced. They will offer emergency funding for people needing to pay their bills, but repeated help is contingent upon completing budgeting classes. They will help people, but their offerings aim to provide people with the information and skills necessary to prevent them from returning to the same situation again.

Critics have worried that churches espousing the prosperity gospel will abandon disadvantaged communities (Smith 2006). This was not the case with All Nations. They seem intensely concerned that their actions and ministries make a difference in the lives of their members and the community. The terms practical and empowerment come up often in their literature and programming, neither of which is, in fact, surprising from a church heavily influenced by the prosperity gospel.

There does, however, appear to be truth to the claim that prosperity gospel churches focus on the individual and individual level solutions. Pastor Robinson did link most problems in the community, particularly the African American community, to individual failings, typically a lack of knowledge, and their ministries were geared to filling this lack. There was no programming or activities that challenged systemic problems or evidence of any type of policy advocacy. All Nations emphasized empowering their congregants one by one, with knowledge and faith that God could produce radical changes in their personal lives and circumstances.

### **Temple of Faith**

Next, moving along the prosperity gospel-traditional church continuum is Temple of Faith. By far the oldest of the participating churches, Temple of Faith is in many ways surprisingly the most modern of the four. It has the typical trappings of a traditional African American church. Though enormous, the outside structure has the steeple and brick façade of a traditional church. The traditional features continue inside the church with its stained glass windows, massive sanctuary filled with rows of pews, and a massive choir loft behind the pulpit for its numerous church choirs. The traditional elements continued with the church's traditional worship style. Most of the choirs I saw during my time at the church were traditional large choirs in contrast to the modern, leaner praise and worship teams extremely prevalent amongst



prosperity gospel churches. They sing some contemporary songs, but they also sing many traditional hymns and gospel tunes. Whereas most relatively young pastors stick to a more structured and restrained style of preaching, Pastor Hughes's sermons are filled with intermittent whooping, him breaking out into an old hymn, or several minutes of him completely getting "into the spirit" where he stops preaching, the musicians start playing, and the church is clapping and shouting to the Lord. This exuberance and lack of structure are features increasingly shunned by contemporary pastors.

There is also nothing that immediately stands out in its ministry offerings that distinguishes it from traditional churches. It has your basic ministries for singles, prisoners, women, men, children, music and arts, and community outreach, though on a large scale considering it reportedly has over 11,000 members. Of all four churches, it has the most explicit references to a social justice agenda. On its ministry website, Temple of Faith describes its social justice ministry as follows:

The Social Justice ministry seeks to assist individuals facing barriers that impact them legally, socially, politically, educationally, and economically limiting their access to a better life. The ministry provides opportunities to overcome unnatural barriers in our society based upon discrimination, due to race, gender, national origin or other areas of discrimination causing oppression.

This explicit reference to social justice is something I would expect from a traditional church, being reminiscent of the ideal-type churches, such as Ebenezer in Atlanta and Abyssinia in New York that advocated against structural barriers that marginalized vulnerable populations (Harrison 2005; Mitchem 2007). It is unclear how active this ministry is, but I did find some evidence of the church fulfilling this mission. They have established a ministry to combat human trafficking and child sex exploitation. A part of this ministry includes establishing temporary housing for strippers seeking to transition into other employment. While a social justice agenda is typical of traditional churches, in Jefferson, the only churches that I encountered with ministries dealing with human trafficking and sexual exploitation were prosperity gospel mega-churches. Human trafficking is just not an issue that many churches prioritize or perhaps have the capacity to confront in a large-scale, systematic way.

What makes Temple of Faith modern, however, is not so much the ministries it has, but rather the way the church is run. No other church more obviously adopts current business philosophies than does Temple of Faith. Church leadership brands itself as a church that serves many generations. By the composition of the churchgoers, this statement seems true. They have the elderly and many singles as one would expect, but what stands out is the large number of young families attending the church, typically a sign of church growth. To serve this generational diversity, they have ministries targeted at each age group. For example, all of the churches have singles ministries, but Temple of Faith has a single's ministry specifically for those between the ages of 41-55. They also have a senior adult ministry that hosts events and activities. Like the other churches, they have a large, multi-acre campus with several buildings, including a fitness center. Unlike the others, however, they own a conference center. Instead of the typical simple contact message and online request form for people to rent their facilities, Temple of Faith has well organized web pages with attractive photos. They actively market their facilities, for weddings, concerts, conferences and other community events. They own at least three business entities. On the website, they display a long-term strategy, listing their efforts to encourage

entrepreneurialism and leadership within the church. They also lay out their strategy for improving customer service and quality control. Temple of Faith can contact members by email or text message. Sermons and books can easily be purchased online. Behind the traditional façade of Temple of Faith is a sophisticated business with developed strategies and targets for growth.

Though I had suspicions about this church, I was reluctant to categorize Temple of Faith as prosperity gospel. After all, it had “Baptist” in its church name. I categorized it as a tech savvy traditional, African American Baptist church.<sup>7</sup> After several visits, I realized that I was mistaken.

I first suspected that this church was not the traditional Baptist church I first assumed it to be when I attended a special service at the church. On December 12, 2012, (12/12/12), the church held a special midnight service. Pastor French said that the dates mean nothing and they could not command God to do anything, but they could create an environment that would increase the likelihood of miracles happening. In addition to songs, dancing, running, and prayers, he had invited a prophetess to come and bless the congregation. She went to each section of the large sanctuary speaking specific blessings over the attendees. At one group she spoke of the gift of financial blessings, for another she spoke a gift of creativity. She gave anointings to heal for cancer and to bring financial miracles. Speaking gifts over people and having a prophetess do it are not common features of traditional Baptist churches. Then, toward the end of the service, to my utter surprise, the pastor called members to the front of the church to plant financial seeds. In this context, planting a seed, a concept common in prosperity gospel ministries, is donating your money to a ministry with the expectation that you will receive financial blessings in return. In this moment I realized two things. First, this was not a traditional Baptist church. Second, I had found a second prosperity gospel church.

As outlined in the introduction, the label of prosperity gospel is not an absolute. The prosperity gospel is a continuum, but there are certain phrases that are so aligned with the theology that upon hearing it, one would immediately associate the church with the prosperity gospel. Planting seeds is one such phrase. For this reason, I categorize Temple of Faith as a hybrid. Unlike many prosperity gospel churches, it does not run from the traditional symbols of the African American church—the architecture, the music, the worship style. The pastor’s religious message, however, is influenced by the prosperity gospel. I will explore this issue in more detail during the sermon analysis chapter.

### **First Baptist**

First Baptist is the first church in the study on the traditional end of the traditional-prosperity gospel continuum. All the churches in the study appear to serve largely middle-class or upper-middle class populations based on their cars, attire, and the educational level of those I interviewed. First Baptist, however, seems to be a step above the rest. The church parking lot could rival that of any luxury car dealership, and the attire of the people that step out of the cars is equally as impressive. This church is located in an area that has long been the base of the African American elite in Jefferson. Out of all of the churches, this is the place to see and be seen, so it is possible that there is more social pressure to show outward signs of wealth. Even so, the facilities and ministries of the church indicate that First Baptist has an enormous amount of resources. The main church, which is the focus of my research, is one of five multi-acre campuses run by the church throughout the Jefferson metro area. Four church services are held each weekend, with the massive sanctuary and large wrap-around balcony full for most of the

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<sup>7</sup> This church now goes by a moniker more consistent with modern day church nomenclature.

Sunday services. Though the church contains the trappings of a traditional congregation—tall steeple, wooden pews, numerous gold crosses—it is clear to any visitor that this is far from an ordinary traditional church. The massive church structure contains an early learning center, an adult learning facility, community center, and counseling facilities.

First Baptist offers a staggering amount of services and ministries for its congregants and the community. The church most closely represents the churches of the past in that almost all of one's needs can be met within the doors of the church. There are too many programs to list, so I will focus on the main overarching activities. First Baptist offers a massive list of bible study courses throughout the year, most for a fee of less than \$15, but some of the higher level theology class can run over \$100 dollars. Members can register online for these classes as well as most other church events. In addition to traditional bible study classes, they also offer less traditional training. For example, they offer disaster relief training to teach volunteers to provide normalcy for the victims of a disaster event. They also organize study tours to other countries such as Israel. In addition to offering study tours abroad, First Baptist has an extensive missionary program, both globally and locally. They organize several missionary trips each year to countries such as India, Kenya, and Jamaica. Each week in the church bulletin there is a list of local missionary work which includes monthly programs to feed the hungry and participate in local evangelism as well as a series of one off volunteer activities. First Baptist has also established counseling services on their campus in partnership with an outside organization. They have highly sophisticated children, teen, marriage, and singles ministries. Each of these ministries offer conferences, dances, classes, and many other events. There are many more ministries within the church—from Weight Watchers to men's retreats. Congregants need not look elsewhere to get their social and educational needs met. They offer a sophisticated range of services, but, as with All Nations, I saw little to no evidence of political or social advocacy or activism.

### **Ebenezer**

Ebenezer is the most traditional of the four churches within this study, but also the church with the most unique history. Founded in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, it was originally a predominantly white Baptist congregation. With changes brought on by the Civil Rights movement, however, African Americans began to rapidly move into the surrounding area. As more African Americans became members, the white members started to leave until around 1980 when one Sunday morning almost all the white members and the white pastor abandoned the church. It is for this reason that the currently African American church is a member of the Southern Baptist Convention, an organization not historically known as being welcoming to African Americans.

Ebenezer overcame this setback, eventually moving to a multi-acre, multi-building campus. The interior is now dark and dated, with wood paneling filling much of the church walls. The sanctuary is large with a wraparound balcony and a large traditional choir stand to match the traditional robes worn by the pastor. It has all of the traditional markings of a traditional church from elaborate stain glass windows to rows of old wood pews. The main reception area for the administrative offices continues the wood panel motif. As you walk into the main door toward the receptionist, to the right are bulletin boards promoting church member and area businesses. The halls and numerous meeting rooms and offices have drop down ceilings and large outdated lighting. What the facilities lack in style and modernity, it makes up for in space and functionality.

Ebenezer hosts a series of ministries and activities on its massive campus. Because of its

spaciousness, some outside organizations host events within the church. Ebenezer hosts a series of bible study classes covering numerous topics. Similar to many churches of its size, it has numerous choirs, a homeless ministry, a deaf ministry, and marriage enrichment classes. During my time at the church, their health and wellness ministry offered forums in conjunction with a local non-profit to teach healthy eating habits for \$50.00 per person. They have a community development corporation to transition people from renting to homeownership. They also host an annual day of giving. Every year they promote this day of giving and set a specific goal to raise, which can be as much as \$1 million dollars. On the designated day, members, both old and new, come together to fellowship. They have a large church service, then follow it with a large meal and an announcement of how much they raised for the year. The theme for the year I was there was “One Body, One Worship Service, One Word, One Fellowship, and One Day of Giving”. Like many churches they host a large Harvest Fest, offering games and food that serves as a substitute for Halloween. At least once a week, they offer \$5 dinners to give people a time to fellowship together before bible study classes. Beyond announcing the voter registration deadline in their bulletin and singling out members that were running for office, I saw no other type of electoral political activities during my time in the church.

In addition to these varied ministries, the bulk of Ebenezer’s activities can be grouped into three main areas: international, sports, and education. The church has an extensive ministry focused on overseas mission work and events to raise awareness about international issues. During my time at the church, they held a Global Missions Sunday. Congregants dressed in ethnic attire during the service, and afterward the church held an international fair populated with organizations that participate in international mission work in some capacity. They also organized mission trips for adults and students to South Africa and Jamaica. In their Sunday bulletin, they advertised an exhibition taking place at another church concerning the AIDS crisis in Africa.

Sports is also a big part of the church culture. Within Ebenezer’s church campus is a recreational center that includes a basketball court. For youth, they sponsor basketball, cheerleading, soccer, and baseball. They also organize an adult basketball league. Additionally, they host an annual golf tournament and free youth golf clinic at an area country club. In addition to providing a service to their congregants, according to Min. Winters, they also utilize these activities as a means to evangelize and draw in non-members.

The ministries that most define Ebenezer are its educational programs. Many of the early leaders of Ebenezer were educators. This early commitment to education has continued in the church, evidenced by its extensive and highly developed educational offerings. First, the church has an early learning center for preschoolers and an accredited academy for grades K through 12. They have a summer school program, for a fee, that offers courses such as devotional, math, and African-American Studies. For high school students, they offer a writing workshop to aid with the college admissions process. Whereas Sunday School is being phased out in many large churches, Ebenezer maintains a large Sunday School program with approximately 1000 people attending weekly. They have very organized weekly preparation for all teachers. They prepare detailed multi-page lesson pamphlets for the children.

Like the other churches, Ebenezer offers a wide variety of ministries. Their ministries do not have the intense practical emphasis as All Nations, focusing more on biblical training than financial empowerment. As expected of a more traditional church, Ebenezer stressed activities that brought the church together and emphasized oneness and unity within the congregation. They did not run from their African American heritage, appearing eager to stress their African

roots. Its foreign mission trips and the mission activities it sponsors or endorses focus on African or African Diasporic countries. Also, the curriculum of their academy, which has an almost entirely African American student body, contains an African American Studies component. There is no doubt that Ebenezer's leadership wants to make a difference in Jefferson and around the world, but it tends to take the form of community within the church, evangelism, biblical education, and meeting immediate needs. I saw virtually no evidence of any type of social or political advocacy during my time at the church.

### **Are Prosperity Gospel Churches Less Active in Their Communities?**

Considering the demands outlined in chapter 3—collaborative, outwardly-oriented churches, focused on the local community and systemic change—many of the community leaders I interviewed would not be satisfied with the type of community involvement of the four participating churches. Whereas these churches' target communities may not be satisfactory from the perspective of the community leaders, nor would they fully approve of the manner in which the churches engage their respective communities; nevertheless, the fact that these churches actively interact with their community and put a lot of thought and energy into how they can best engage their community would be hard to deny. Regardless of their position along the prosperity gospel-traditional church continuum, all of the churches are very active in offering services to members and those within the community that wish to take advantage; perhaps it is better said those that can take advantage of these services.

There is a definite class bias in many church activities. Besides the monthly outreach events, the food pantries, and emergency assistance programs, the activities at all of the churches are geared toward a middle-class population. Though anyone in the community can participate in church activities, many programs did come with a price tag, particularly educational opportunities. The prices charged for classes varied, but even a minimal price tag may present a barrier to a significant number of low income families participating in church activities and that is assuming a low income family would even feel comfortable attending the church. It is difficult for someone without a car to get to these churches. If they did have transportation, they might be intimidated by all the luxury cars in the parking lot. If the obvious signs of wealth and affluence of the other congregants did not keep them away, events held at local country clubs possibly would. How can churches promote meaningful change in communities if those most in need are too intimidated to enter through the doors of the church?

### **How Do the Ministries of the Prosperity Gospel Churches Differ from Those of Traditional Churches?**

#### *Individualistic Ministries*

One concern shared by critics of prosperity gospel churches is that they focus on the individual at the expense of advocating collective interests (Franklin 2007; Mitchem 2007). As I had anticipated, the ministries of the prosperity gospel churches that participated in my study were more likely to emphasize self-improvement versus collective betterment, a trait commonly thought to be reinforced in traditional African American churches. This is particularly evident when comparing the two churches at the end of the continuum, Ebenezer and All Nations. Based on his own statements, the pastor of All Nations appeared to believe that the source of much of the African American community's troubles was lack of knowledge—about investing, about politics, about budgeting. To address these perceived shortcomings within the community, All

Nations aggressively offers educational programs, particularly in the areas of finance and job preparation. The church focuses on individual shortcomings, not structural issues, and develops solutions targeted at the individual to overcome these problems. On the other end of the spectrum, Ebenezer's programs emphasize bringing people together, whether it is their yearly homecoming or their numerous sporting events. Interestingly, both churches on the traditional end of the spectrum prioritize international mission work more than do the prosperity gospel churches. I believe this shows that while the prosperity gospel churches shift their emphasis to empowering the individual, the traditional churches continue to prioritize the traditional church activity of evangelism. I am not arguing that prosperity gospel churches do not evangelize, but, based on their primary ministries, spreading the gospel globally does not rank as highly to them as offering individuals the resources they need to better themselves.

As presented in chapter 2, the African American community has historically relied on collective action and utilized group heuristics to determine the best course of action to combat the racism and disadvantages they faced as a community. The church has played a central role in these activities, so a shift to an explicitly individualistic strategy is a marked transformation. One concern of the increased individualism of prosperity gospel churches is that it signals the church's abandonment of collective political action and mobilization. Based on my time in all four churches, this is not a valid concern about prosperity gospel churches for none of the participating churches were that politically active. Besides bringing attention to the upcoming elections, the churches did very little in terms of political action, with the exception of All Nations; and their political activities came in the form of educating congregants to make informed electoral decisions and voter registration drives.

### *Strong Business Orientation*

With the exception of Ebenezer, all of the churches in the study have incorporated modern business principles into the running of their organizations, a feature commonly associated with prosperity gospel churches (Harrison 2005). This is most obvious in the two churches on the prosperity gospel end of the spectrum. First Baptist is the largest of the four churches; therefore, it clearly takes a high level of administrative capacity for it to run smoothly. Most of its activities are automated, requiring people to register online if one wants to attend events. They also have a highly professional staff—from the audio/video technicians to the educational coordination team. This administrative and technical sophistication are leveraged for First Baptist to continue to play the all-encompassing role the church has traditionally played within the community, just on a massive scale. What is happening in Temple of Faith and All Nations is different. They openly embrace a business model as a part of their identity and, I would argue, as a way of separating themselves from other churches. Both churches reflect a strong entrepreneurial spirit, as is evidenced in their respective business ventures. All Nations actively and openly leverages its business connections to benefit its congregants and church goals. Throughout its website and in conversation with church leaders, Temple of Faith uses modern day business concepts such as “branding,” “transparency,” and “accountability”. They have even created an online portal where Christian businesses can advertise, calling it a “missional marketplace”. With its Board of Directors and Executive Leadership team, it has adopted an organizational structure more common to businesses than Baptists churches. Both churches openly integrate business principles into the administration of their churches in order to function more effectively and as a means of achieving growth, but what are the implications of this strategy?

Scholars have documented the significant role the African American church played in providing a space for members to develop civic and organizational skills (Raboteau 2001). Congregants may have been blocked from taking on leadership roles outside of the church walls, but within, regardless of education and occupational status, they could. When a church is run in the same manner as a business, it could threaten this space. Traditionally, church leaders were cultivated from within the ranks. The successfully running of a church according to accepted business principles may require more highly skilled staff than can be found within a church's current ranks. Professionals will increasingly do what church members over time had been trained to do. As stated earlier, most church leadership within all the churches are highly educated, holding at least a Master's degree. Some staff were recruited from the membership pool, while others were not. The only clear sign of the four churches differing in their staffing decisions concerns the position of senior pastor.

According to the ministers I interviewed, the current norm amongst large churches is to hire relatively young senior pastors that were former youth pastors at other churches. Young adults are a highly coveted demographic for churches, and the belief is a young pastor will be more successful in attracting that segment of the population. All Nations, Temple of Faith, and First Baptist followed that logic when hiring their current senior pastors, while Ebenezer did not. Ebenezer went against current trends and choose Pastor Taylor as senior pastor, who had been serving as their interim pastor. He is at least fifteen to twenty years older than the other pastors. From a strategic perspective, it might not have been a wise decision, as the other churches do seem to be growing at a faster rate, particularly amongst young adults and young families. Ebenezer hired who they felt was "called" to lead their church.

## **Conclusion**

Despite their doctrinal differences, all four churches are clearly active and concerned with helping people inside and outside of the church. This chapter set out to determine the ministerial activities of prosperity gospel churches differed from those of traditional African American churches. I found differences in two areas. First, as I had predicted, prosperity gospel churches' ministries are more likely to target the individual versus targeting structural or community-level issues. Second, prosperity gospel churches are also more likely to embrace the language and logic of business in the running of their churches. The differences between Ebenezer, the most traditional church, and All Nations, the strongest prosperity gospel church, are the most pronounced. An analysis of church activities does support the argument that there is some difference between what prosperity gospel and traditional churches offer their congregants and overall community. Whether these differences produce divergent outcomes in their communities is difficult to ascertain. What is clear is that all of them, with the exception of All Nations in the realm of voter education, avoid the political realm, particularly political protest and advocacy, a role that community leaders believe the church needs to play in order to economically, socially, and politically advance the African American community. The following chapter will address the question of whether the doctrine of prosperity gospel and traditional churches systematically differ.

## **Chapter 5 - Does the Doctrine of Prosperity Gospel Churches Systematically Differ from the Doctrine of Traditional African American Churches?**

This chapter addresses the question of whether there are significant doctrinal differences between traditional and prosperity gospel churches. From the pulpit on Sunday mornings, pastors have a stage to more freely and clearly express their ideologies. It is from this stage that the pastor can wield the greatest influence over his congregants' worldview (Harris-Lacewell 2004). This chapter seeks to decipher what congregants are actually hearing. Week in and week out, what values are being promoted from the pulpit?

Based on the literature, I anticipated that the pastors from the two traditional churches would focus on morality, promote collective values, emphasize their African American heritage, and encourage sacrifice. The other two churches, however, would emphasize empowerment, ways to improve the individual, promote neo-liberal values, down-play their African American identity, devalue the poor, and place particular attention on finances and business. Eight randomly selected sermons from 2012 were chosen from each of the participating churches. After being transcribed by a third party, I hand coded each sermon. Based on this analysis, I determined that there indeed are substantial doctrinal differences between the two types of churches.

The following analysis is broken down by the major themes that emerged from the literature and from the sermons:

1. Focus on the Individual vs Focus on God: Does the sermon address improving the life of individuals, or is the message centered on God.
2. Framing of Marginalized Communities: Many observers believe that prosperity gospel churches attempt to distance themselves from their African American heritage. Also, prosperity gospel churches are associated with a negative framing of the poor.
3. The Power of Thoughts: The prosperity gospel emphasizes the ability of words and thoughts to affect reality.
4. Politics/Social Justice: This theme broadly encompasses any direct reference to politics (e.g. elections, government, political parties) or any reference to an issue that would fall under social justice (e.g. inequality, community development, prison reform).
5. Neo-Liberalism: Scholars such as Cihan and Atia write about the influx of neo-liberal ideology into religion and religious institutions. In this section I identify whether any of the neo-liberal values they identify in their work emerges in the sermons.

The distribution of themes maps out mostly as expected for All Nations and Ebenezer, while the sermon content of the two churches within the center of the continuum suggest that more than religious doctrine is driving the values to which church congregants are exposed.<sup>8</sup>

### **All Nations**

#### **Focus on the Individual vs Focus on God**

A recurring theme throughout Pastor Robinson's sermons is individual empowerment. Pastor Robinson presents it in different ways, but it is always the same basic idea, that God

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<sup>8</sup> All of the following sermon quotes are taken from sermons given by the lead pastors of the four participating churches on Sunday morning during 2012.



wants better for those that followed Him. He wants to bless you and see you achieve more in life. In a sermon entitled “Being Intentional” he said the following:

I understand that God...He has not placed me here on this earth to fail, and neither has He placed any of you on this Earth to live as a failure. We may sometimes fail along the way, but we can make up our minds through the power of God to get up, and do the things in which God is calling us to do. Many of us, we must come to the conclusion that no matter what we are facing, we have what we need to get the best out of our lives, and...to serve Christ with our best intentions.

In a sermon entitled “Fulfilling Your Potential” he states, “I believe that God wants all of us to reach our fullest potential in the end...He does not want us to walk around this Earth unfulfilled. He does not want us living a life that is below what he has created us to live, that there is more in us than is coming out of us.”

Pastor Robinson tells his congregation that God is leading them to a higher place, and He sends the Holy Ghost to empower them to do what they do not naturally have the ability to do on their own. These abilities can include speaking in tongues, loving people that are hard to love, and even the ability to stay in a situation when you want to leave. Pastor Robinson once again describes a holistic God that comes to empower his believers in all aspects of their lives.

More interestingly, he states that God's children were not called to a life of misery:

We, as children of God, we were not created to live a life of misery but we were created to experience it...Look at your neighbor and say, "Neighbor, I wasn't created to live in misery, but I am created to experience it." We are not to live in it but we have to experience it. We're not to live unhappy every day, but we are to experience unhappiness... “We are hard press on every side, yet not crushed. We are perplexed but not despair. Persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed." We deal with things but we are not to live like that every day... We have to recognize that as men and women of God that we were born to go through stuff but you are not to wake up going through stuff every day.

This statement is particularly interesting considering the history of African Americans. As a community, African Americans have suffered centuries of abuse from slavery to state sanctioned acts of violence to mass incarceration. Until relatively recently, most African Americans lived their entire lives under enormous oppression. One wonders how Pastor Robinson reconciles the reality of the African American experience with his position on human misery.

Throughout Pastor Robinson’s sermons, he recognizes the power and authority of God, but he focuses on how that power is used to help the individual believer in her everyday life. The focus is not on how the individual can add to God’s kingdom, but rather how God will add to the individual, be it spiritually, physically, or materially.

### **Framing of Marginalized Communities**

Scholars claim that African American prosperity gospel churches tend to downplay their African American identity, longing to project an image of being more than just a black church (Harrison 2005; Mitchem 2007). For the most part, the ideas expressed by Pastor Robinson support this position. In one of his prayers, he asks that his congregants be the global-minded people God called them to be. He remarks that the church should not be filled with just one

nationality, and this is the reason for the various flags throughout the church. The images used in their very professional looking announcements always include various races and ethnicities, although the congregation is close to 99 percent African American. Except for a couple of statements referring to African Americans as being uneducated, he makes no mention of issues particular to the African American community. The one exception is the murder of Trayvon Martin.

Nearly a month after his death, for the first time Pastor Robinson began his sermon with a statement about Trayvon Martin:

There comes a time when you just got to say something with this Trayvon Martin situation that's in the news. These are things that we cannot get tired of addressing. When you hear the stupidity of people who are in the media of Geraldo and Newt Gingrich. Who do not have sons that look like us. Who don't know what it is like to walk in a mall and cameras follow you everywhere. When it's so well stated that if a young black male who has parents that can afford to drive, give that car to that child and that child drives that car. They look at that child and follow that child, run the tag to see if that child stole the car. They look at them as a thug.

Whereas if it is a child of another ethnicity, they think that is a spoiled brat. Whose parents have it going on. We are still living in a very racist country. These issues need to be addressed and our hearts should be burdened, should be heavy. When a child can get killed from wearing something like this and carrying Skittles, and ice tea. You don't arrest the man that murdered this child.

If it had been a black child shooting a white child, he would have been arrested on the spot. We got to stop this. We got to say something, we got to stop sitting around like nothing is going on. It is still real. It is still prevalent and we need to raise our heads, and let them know we are tired of it.

I just ask that you be in prayer and don't be afraid to speak truth. We don't have to be ungodly while speaking truth. But we cannot be afraid to speak truth even in Gwinnett County where they are suspending more black children than any other ethnicity in our school system. It is real. You cannot tell me that our children is the only problem. I know personally what it is like.

I talked to a lady who is in a very high office in one of our police systems. She is afraid when she is not in uniform, when a policeman gets behind her. She is in a high office. We got a problem. We have a major problem in this country and the head of racism needs to be cut off. It needs to start at 8 o'clock and 11 o'clock on Sunday mornings. Amen.

[O]ne of my best friends growing up from high school...[he] would tell you in high school we had this group. Now...listen to the name of it. Executive Incorporated, that was the name of our group. We bought jackets that had Executive Incorporated. We were all black, calling ourselves Executive Incorporated. We had dreams of doing something with our life. Because we had jackets, Dekalb County put us down as a gang. Stereotype, High School students with jackets on that says clearly on the back, Executive

Incorporated, but Dekalb County police put us down as a gang.

That's a shame. Sounds like young men who wanted to do something with their lives. Not sell dope...

This is a long but powerful passage that shows an acute awareness of the everyday and structural racism that African Americans face in this country. It makes it clear that despite desiring to downplay the image of being “just a black church,” he is well aware of the racism the he and others in the community face. He is aware that wealth and power do not necessarily shield African Americans from its effects. Instead of trying to leave the community behind, Pastor Robinson seems to have a different view of the best way to move the community ahead. In contrast to many scholars that want overt advocacy and direct political action, All Nations focuses on individual empowerment and education. All Nations church leadership appears to believe that changing individuals will lead to changes for the African American community.

### **Power of Thought**

As one would expect from a prosperity gospel church, Pastor Robinson does speak on the power of thoughts to influence life outcomes. During my time at All Nations, Pastor Robinson led Wednesday night services using a text by TD Jakes called *Life Overflowing, 6-in-1: Six Pillars for Abundant Living*. During the lessons I attended, he spoke of freeing yourself from the past, and a critical piece in achieving this freedom requires freeing one's mind. He states, “If you don't know you are free, you'll remain in bondage in your mind, and where the mind goes, so goes your life.” Through the lessons, he stressed the importance of dealing with “stuff in our minds,” and the need to free ourselves of old fears, doubts, and negative thoughts in order live fully and abundantly. As stated earlier, focusing on the power of our thoughts is not common in traditional African American churches, but is prevalent throughout those churches influenced by prosperity gospel.

### **Politics/Social Justice**

In addition to the speech presented as a result of the killing of Trayvon Martin, any political talk by Pastor Robinson was generally limited to electoral politics. As outlined in detail in chapter 4, Pastor Robinson and his leadership team attempt to take a neutral posture toward the Republican and Democratic Party. His political leanings ultimately betray him, as he eventually reveals his support for President Obama.

### **Neo-Liberalism**

Throughout his sermons, Pastor Robinson stressed the importance of cultivating certain values. These values are consistent with Brown's definition of neo-liberalism as a forces that shapes “citizens as individual entrepreneurial actors across all dimensions of their lives,” (2005, 57). The primary values reinforced at All Nations include growth, self-responsibilization, and productiveness.

#### *Growth*

The concept of growth comes up in various ways in terms of growth of the church and the growth of individual members. As with many concepts used by prosperity gospel pastors, they weave in and out between the spiritual and the physical world. Terms that at one moment

seem materialistic and fleshly (greedy) are quickly turned to reference intangible and spiritual ideals. Terms such as abundant, lavish, and luxury are used, bringing to mind the conspicuous consumption the prosperity gospel is known for, but then, unexpectedly, the terms are applied to God's grace and forgiveness. Pastor Robinson walks this fine line between touting the materialistic image the Prosperity gospel is known for and challenging this perspective by framing all these seemingly superficial terms in spiritual nuance.

During the year I was there, the church's theme was "A Growing Church for Growing Christians". There are spiritual dimensions to their emphasis on growth. In one sermon he focuses on "fulfilling your potential". During his prayer, he asked God for a word that would push him and the congregants to where God wanted them to be and not settle for where they are. He declared that God wants us to reach our fullest potential. He does not want us walking around on Earth unfulfilled, living a life less than what He has created us to be. He proclaimed there is more in us than is coming out. In other words, God wants us to grow. Those trials that occasionally come into our lives are intended to push us forward. We should not be in the same place spiritually where we were three years ago. We must grow. Growth is healthy and a sign of life as long as we grow in the right things. If there is no growth, then God is not in that part of your life.

This focus on individual and spiritual growth is book-ended by direct statements about corporal church growth. He openly criticizes small churches, claiming that their leaders called themselves instead of actually being called by God. He justifies this position by stating that wherever Jesus was there was a crowd. Expressing a sentiment any steadfast proponent of neo-liberalism would be proud of, he finished by saying they had a responsibility to grow.

### *Self-Responsibilization*

Another value stressed is that of self-responsibilization. As written in chapter 2, Mona Atia (2012, 810) defines self-responsibilization as shifting responsibility from the state to the individual. Pastor Robinson does not use that exact term, but the idea of the individual being accountable for his or her position in life is often repeated. In his sermons he proclaims that if you have problems, it is your fault; you should not blame others. Although he continuously stresses the supernatural things God can do in one's life, he tempers that by stressing that we must do our part. God will bless you if you obey his commands, put in the appropriate effort, and try to make the necessary life changes. He also stresses the importance of not complaining and remaining humble.

Another value reinforced within the walls of All Nations in keeping with the concept of self-responsibilization is good money management. This is not surprising considering the numerous opportunities All Nations provides to take budgeting classes. They even have sample budgets available on their website. Pastor Robinson peppers his sermons with sound financial advice. One Sunday he told the congregation that it is good to spend wisely, make wise investments, pay creditors first, then go on a vacation. Another Sunday he told a humorous story about not flaunting one's wealth. He started the story by admonishing a hypothetical member for flaunting his Mercedes in front of him just because he drives a Pinto, because he needs to learn to be grateful for that Pinto. It gets him from A to Z just like your Mercedes. He then adds that he is grateful he does not have a car note. He is grateful that he is not car broke, house broke, and Visa broke because he is trying to impress people. This is clearly a hypothetical situation. He does not drive a Pinto, but he is emphasizing the need to not prioritize impressing people over making sound financial decisions. Note, he is not speaking against having a nice house nor nice

cars. He has made clear that he is not a poor man. The problem as he sees it is acquiring these material goods at the expense of having a sound financial position.

### *Productiveness*

The final value frequently woven into the themes of Pastor Robinson's sermons is that of being productive, productive in our spiritual walk and productive in our daily lives. Christians should be achieving something. Pastor Robinson states that we have to be obedient to God and hear his word, so that we live productive lives and live out our creative purpose. Christians should intentionally set goals and time limits, for themselves and for God. For example, he remarked, "I'm trying to lose weight. How many pounds do you want to lose? Twenty pounds. How long is it going to take you?" He advises congregants to set timelines and plans for all of their goals, whether it is getting out of debt or going back to school.

This need for productivity also applies to people's faith walk. He proclaimed that we need a productive faith. For one sermon, he preached from Luke 13:1-9, a parable about an unproductive fig tree. The gardener told the owner of the fig tree to give it more time to produce fruit. If it did not, cut it down. He said that is how God is with his people. We all need to have faith that produces something in our lives, and faith without works is dead (James 2: 18-20). According to Pastor Robinson, you cannot have faith by just sitting in the church. Your faith ought to make you produce something. If you believe in God, you should be productive, in your spiritual life and within the church.

### **Temple of Faith**

As written in chapter 4, I categorize Temple of Faith as a hybrid between traditional and prosperity gospel, and this view is reinforced through analyzing the pastor's sermons. It is probably this successful balancing act between old and new that explains the growth of his church, its ability to attract several generations, and his national renown as a speaker. Temple is a Baptist church with strong Pentecostal leanings. Pastor Hughes has contemporary content wrapped in a very traditional preaching style. Also, more than any other pastor in the study, Pastor Hughes challenges common tenets of the prosperity gospel head on. In one sermon he states, "Stop telling folks you're going to be rich and everybody's going to have prosperity. Jesus said the poor you have with you always. You can't go to parts of Africa and Zimbabwe and tell those folks money is coming. Tell folks how to make it through life. That's one day at a time." He goes on to state in another sermon:

Our gospel should not be a gospel of greed. Our gospel, therefore, is not a gospel of prosperity, it's a gospel of propitiation. Our gospel is not a gospel of things, it's a gospel of triumph. Our gospel is not a gospel of materialism. It should be a gospel about the master. It should be a gospel about the sinless blood, the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus Christ... It's not about materialism, it's not about the acquisition, it's not about being prosperous, it's not about a Bentley or silver spur.

Materialism is seen as one of the core tenets of the US prosperity movement, and Pastor Hughes explicitly condemns this focus on materialism. He also speaks about the increasing emphasis on self-improvement and self-benefit within the Christian community:

The problem with many people today is we no longer get excited about being saved. We

no longer get excited about the blood of Jesus. We want to hear about steps to improvement, we want to hear about home improvement, how to get more money, how to have a better life. While all these things are great and fabulous and wonderful. It's all right to hear about being loose. It's OK to hear about being empowered. It's OK to hear about how money can come... It's OK to hear about having your best life now. It's OK to learn about how to be purpose driven in life. But if all of that is not understood, if you never hear about promotion, if you never hear about God enlarging your territory... you ought be able to act a fool and pray simply because... Yes Lord, the clothes on my back is not reason enough for they will soon go out of style. The house that I live in is not reason enough because there's someone else whose house is bigger than mine. But I've got good news for you, salvation will last always and that's reason enough.

Pastor Hughes not only directly challenges aspects of the prosperity gospel, he explicitly pushes back against the neo-liberal values present in many of All Nations sermons. Despite these statements, for the most part, the content of Temple of Faith sermons is most similar to the content of All Nations. They both focus on very practical sermon messages. They help their parishioners deal with problems in everyday life – from being a parent, success with their businesses, staying in marriages, and finances. Pastor Hughes, just like Pastor Robinson, speaks heavily about current events such as the murder of Trayvon Martin, the death of Whitney Houston, and the 2012 presidential elections. Pastor Hughes, however, spoke more extensively about these issues, but this could be attributed to the fact that he consistently had the longest sermons. Some of his sermons lasted over an hour, a long time for people to sit and listen to someone speak, but he pulled it off because he was by far the most dynamic speaker of the four participating pastors. This dynamism enables Pastor Robinson to present the framework of a traditional African American church, but at its core, Temple of Faith reflects the values of the prosperity gospel.

### **Focus on the Individual vs Focus on God**

This is another area where the balancing act between traditional and prosperity gospel appears at Temple of Faith. A recurrent theme in Pastor Hughes's sermons is the need to praise God, indicating that focusing on the individual is not the only doctrinal priority for Pastor Hughes. Typically when he talked of the need to praise God, it was when people were facing hard times. The Sunday after their monthly Saturday outreach program, he talked about how in the midst of a world recession and the poverty around them, he thanked God for the food on his table. They were ministering to the homeless the day before and handing out basic necessities. He saw people living under bridges and just happy for some soap. He encouraged the church to praise God for what they did have. He is repeatedly charging the congregation to praise God for what they have.

In a later sermon he argues that praising God is an attack against the devil:  
Do you know the greatest thing you can do to the devil? Let me tell you the best thing you can do to the devil is when you shout. You've been taking a beating and taking whippings, financial beating, family beating, but out of all you've been through, you're still here praising God every time you shout with what you've been through, you give the devil a nervous breakdown, because you let him know he ain't going to take me out. Because if God be for me...Somebody lost your house but you got an apartment,

somebody lost a full time job but you got an unemployment check, some of y'all had a cancer but you still have your body left, you all give Him glory about what you got left. Some of y'all went through divorce but you're still happy, getting yourself together... If you see somebody get loud, they're just happy because they got something left. May not be a whole lot, but I got something left...Find somebody and say, "I'm still here, I'm still here."

Pastor Hughes emphasizes the importance of praising God, but it is because of the blessings He bestows on individuals. This is a more balanced approach than All Nations, but at its core, the main priority remains the individual.

After praising God, Pastor Hughes focuses a lot on empowerment. The message comes in different forms, but it is always the same idea that Christians should expect God to do great things in their lives. For example, in one opening prayer he asks the following:

I pray this year that you would allow us to have a mentality of awesomeness. I pray this year that you would give us the ability to rise over the spirit of average and walk in your awesomeness. Help us to understand that we are children of an awesome God, that we are not meant to be stuck on the bottom, but because our God is awesome, we can literally expect the great...I ask now in the name of Jesus that everyone that's in this room, that you give them the mentality to know that we are King's kids.

He goes on to ask God to bless businesses with awesome clientele and business deals, to bless the congregation with awesome test results, so their lives can be a testimony that they serve an awesome God. This prayer is a classic example of the empowerment message common within the prosperity gospel. It speaks to expectations of abundant blessings, for the lives to be more than ordinary. As a child of God, they should expect greatness. In this prayer we also see the tendency for followers of the prosperity gospel to focus on earthly success, in this case for success in business. In a traditional church it would not be surprising for someone to ask for blessings. It would be surprising, however, to hear someone pray specifically for success in their business deals and clientele. Those that espouse the prosperity gospel typically do not have such compunctions. Success in business and adopting standard business practices is highly valued within the prosperity gospel community.

Often the empowerment message comes in the context of overcoming when facing obstacles and hardships, particularly those brought on by other people. He tells the congregation that if they stay obedient to God and in His will, they can overcome the ill intentions of men:

I stop by to tell you, no matter what you're going through, you've got to be like Judah. And that is no matter what it looks like. I'm convinced that if I take praise with me, and if I stay rooted in the will of the king, that I shall live and not die. Somebody prophesy over your own life, say, "I shall live and not die." Say it again in the middle of recession, "I shall live and not die" When people are trying to get me fired from the job and trying to build a case against you...And I stopped by this morning on my way to heaven to tell somebody that if you're going through crisis, you've got to be transparent about your reality. You've got to be thankful that you still have some resources. But last, that you've got to be totally convinced that you will be rescued.

He repeats this message of how obeying the will of God will lead to blessings:

If you obey God and line up with the will of God... suddenly some things can change in your life...I speak right now, there's somebody who has been struggling financially. If you pay your tithes today and trust God, by the end of the week you'll get a check in the mail you weren't unexpected, suddenly. Does anybody believe suddenly He'll change your situation? He can give you a job suddenly. He can put your family back together suddenly. He can heal your body, suddenly.

In this passage, Pastor Hughes establishes a relationship between obeying God and receiving financial blessings, a common message within prosperity gospel churches.

### **Framing of Marginalized Communities**

Although Pastor Hughes repeatedly spoke of the need for all people to come together and that the church must reach out to all groups – all ethnicities, genders, ages, he still proudly embraces African American heritage and history, as is apparent in phrases such as, “You can say what you want. I don't mean this offensively, but there's nothing like the sound of black church.” He frequently speaks of important African American figures such as Whitney Houston or Don Cornelius, speaking of the great contributions they made to the community, but also of the lessons we can learn from their death. As was done in the past, he parallels the biblical struggles of the children of Israel to the current plight of today's African Americans:

What God is doing right now is navigating for his people. It's interesting because the Jews, the Israelites, the Hebrews, were the people of God. Yet at the time of this text, their plight was very similar to the plight of Africans living in America. At the time of the Judges fall, these Hebrews had been sold off to Jabin, who was the king of Canaan. If you will, they had traveled through the middle passages. They had been forced to once again make brick without straw. They had gone through Plessy v. Ferguson. They had experienced the Dredd Scott court decision. They had been declared that their humanity was only three-fifths of a human being. They had been declared that if you only had a drop of an African blood in you, then you will not be considered on the higher rank of the social economic status there in Canaan, that you would be on the bottom. Such was the case of the people of God. They were blessed, but they were in bondage. Leadership was getting ready to be changed because they were in bondage; their GNP was at an all-time low. Jobs, and supplies and resources were not accessible, and yet what happened to these people, they're crying out to God. They have feelings of war, they have feelings of lack, they have feelings of new leadership. They have feelings of domination and oppression...

He compares Mary, the mother of Jesus to “a 14, 15 year old girl from the ghetto fabulous slums of Palestine,” that would eventually live to witness a parent's worst nightmare:

Her child has preceded her in death; perhaps, he had been walking through the streets with a hood on, with skittles and Arizona tee in his hand. I don't know why...because of his pigmentation, or because of his social economic status, his life has been zapped out of him, because of governmental influence and propagation. It's difficult for her because her son has been executed. James Cone suggested it was analogous to the public lynching



tree, experienced here in America during the days of reconstruction and Jim Crow.

Pastor Hughes embraced African American history. While it is common to speak of Martin Luther King, Jr. in African American Baptist churches, one rarely hears mention of Malcolm X, a Muslim, or Marcus Garvey, a pioneering leader of Pan-Africanism. He proudly spoke of both. There is no attempted to reject an African American identity at Temple of Faith. If there is one church that continues the African American church legacy of reinforcing racial consciousness, it would be Temple of Faith.

### **Power of Thought**

Pastor Hughes directly speaks against this pillar of the prosperity gospel:

I think part of the problem of the word of faith movement, and the imbalance in our preaching, is we got people faking. That just because you speak things in the atmosphere, that your words will automatically change our entire context. Nothing can be further from the truth. When you go to a doctor and they say that you got a spot on your lungs, or you got a spot in your prostate. When they tell you that, perhaps, you're going through something and it looks like you may have pancreatic cancer. That ain't the time to say, "I'm just going to fake it until I make it, and not claim it." ... No. That's the moment to say to yourself, "I see what the result says. I know what the doctor has said, and I'm not going to bury my head in the sand. I'm going to change my diet if necessary. If chemotherapy, and if radiation are necessary, I do know that God is so awesome that God can work through medical science. I do know that God can work through medicine. I'm going to do my part. I'm going to be real about where I am, because just faking it until I make it, you may not make it, because it means you're not being real.

In keeping with his balancing act between traditional doctrine and the prosperity gospel, however, he goes on to talk about the importance of our mentality, praying that God allow the congregation to have a “mentality of awesomeness” and to give them “the mentality to know that [they] are King’s kids”. On one hand, he states speaking words cannot change your reality, on the other he claims your mentality, or thoughts will. The latter position is aligned just as much with the prosperity gospel as the former is with the traditional church.

### **Politics/Social Justice**

Pastor Hughes mentioned President Obama and the 2012 elections a couple of times while I was attending his church. The Sunday after the election, however, he dedicated the entire sermon to the elections and President Obama’s role in the country. He started out with a neutral tone toward both parties, but his sympathies toward Obama and a liberal agenda soon became apparent. He touched on the legalization of weed and gay marriage as well as many other issues, but one tirade during this sermon stood out in particular. When it came to abortion, he said the following:

[Pastor Hughes], what is your belief about abortion? Well, I believe that it's wrong. I believe that God gives life. But, my problem with that is, a lot of folks say they are pro-life. No, a lot of them are not pro-life. They're really pro fetus. There's a difference between pro fetus and pro-life. When you are pro fetus, you can have your Moral

Majority right wing evangelicalism and say to vote against abortion because you're pro-life, but then turn right back around and support Bush Jr. sending thousands of troops into Iraq, supposedly trying to find weapons of mass destruction and killing innocent Iraqis, innocent Iraqi babies, in the name of weapons of mass destruction. Stop lying.

If you're pro-life, you're pro-life in the womb and out of the womb in Iraq. Here you're going to boycott and march on abortion, but how many of us have boycotted and marched about us going into Iraq, getting Hussein for weapons of mass destruction. Here we are now 11 years later. We ain't found a BB gun. We ain't found a mosquito, a nun chuck, a gnat with nuclear tendencies.

Tell the truth, America. We didn't go to Iraq for no weapons of mass destruction. We went to Iraq to control the oil to make the wealth of somebody rich and rich oil companies. Tell the truth. Don't try to sugar coat it. Y'all quiet on me around here. And it's another thing, don't just fight for babies to be born into poverty but then want to fight to take away the subsidies that help to feed them once they get here. Don't just be pro-life, be whole life, to help them get born, to help them get educated, to help them get the WIC program, the milk, school, while they are here.

This passage not only provides a clear glimpse of Pastor Hughes's political leanings, but it also shows that he is not hesitant about expressing them. Pastor Robinson of All Nations expresses strong political views under extreme circumstances, such as the killing of Trayvon Martin. The other two pastors remain mostly mum on potentially controversial issues. Pastor Hughes, however, does not hold back. He clearly expresses his positions and provides the logic for his views. When I interviewed some of his parishioners, they would use the same phrasings he used in his sermons. He does not avoid political topics, and, as the literature suggests, he appears to impact his congregants own political positions (Harris-Lacewell 2006).

## **Neo-Liberalism**

### *Self-Responsibilization*

Pastor Hughes's sermons focus on real world applications of biblical principles. He usually takes a biblical text or narrative and extracts lessons that people can apply to their everyday lives. They are practical lessons that focus on things the individual can do to have a better life, to be prepared for the blessings God has in store for him. He gave a series of sermons about the life of Joseph. Joseph is an Old Testament biblical figure that was sold into slavery by his brothers, only to later become one of the highest ranking officials in Egypt. While many people stress the cruel treatment Joseph faced at the hands of his own brothers, Pastor Hughes presents the story in another way. He claims that most of Joseph's problems were caused by his own lack of maturity and pride. Like Joseph, Christians are often given dreams or visions of what God wants to do in their lives, but their own actions and lack of preparation makes them stumbling blocks for achieving what God has intended in their lives. According to Pastor Hughes, we must recognize our own shortcomings and be willing to change. This sermon series emphasizes individual accountability for ones actions.

He continues this theme in another sermon when he mentions the death of Whitney Houston and people's struggle to handle success. He states that they cannot blame other people for her death. We have to respect the choices people make. People often struggle more with their

success than with the struggles they face to succeed. Much of Pastor Hughes advice centers on preparing yourself for blessings and making sound decisions, values consistent with a neo-liberal world view.

As with All Nations, the ideal of self-responsibilization is partnered with an emphasis on sound money management. Pastor Hughes often prays for people's businesses to be blessed and he encourages sound financial management in the home. One statement in particular shows how important sound money management is to him. Pastor Hughes said, "You might be praying, 'God, give me a saved husband,' and the Holy Ghost says, 'No, you don't need a saved husband. You need to save your credit first,' because He knows you're not ready to be an asset. You're still a liability."

### **First Baptist**

At first look, it seems that First Baptist is the church that most aggressively tries to distance itself from things associated with the prosperity gospel. As mentioned in chapter 4, its website specifically states that volunteers for church ministries must agree not to speak in tongues, a common neo-pentecostal therefore prosperity gospel practice, during church functions. Throughout Pastor French's sermons, he made other subtle digs at symbols of the prosperity gospel. During one Sunday service he pointed out that God should be seen as more than a "Cosmic Santa Claus": "For God is much more than a cosmic Santa Claus. God is much more than a cosmic butler. God is much more than a divine genie in a bottle that you rub a few times quickly and you ask a prayer and, now, your wish becomes His command." During another service, after recounting a story of an unexpected financial windfall, he admonished his congregation to not say "he's walking in favor," a phrase coined by adherents of the prosperity gospel referring to believers existing in a time of continuous blessings.

Pastor French has a very practical inclination to his sermons. He places God in the midst of the everyday lives of his church members, speaking on jobs, marriage, relationships, business, careers, and broken dreams. He even gave a very personal sermon on the issue of discouragement, and how he one day had become so discouraged that he seriously contemplated suicide. Suicide is not the most commonly discussed theme within churches. For the most part, the content of Pastor French's sermons sounds surprisingly similar to the two other congregations on the prosperity gospel end of the scale. While First Baptist seemingly goes out of its way to distance itself from the trappings of the prosperity gospel. In reality, however, they distance themselves from the symbols of neo-pentecostalism, not the prosperity gospel as the themes of Pastor French's sermons attest.

### **Focus on the Individual vs Focus on God**

Although Pastor French stresses the powerfulness, or in his words, the "immenseness of God," his primary themes mirror the content one would expect to see from a prosperity gospel church. In several sermons, Pastor French speaks of the supernatural blessings God has in store for his followers. He uses phrases commonly associated with the prosperity gospel such as "What God has for me is for me" and "claiming the promises of God." He tells the congregation that he is thanking God for things he has yet to do: "I'm praising Him in advance for the new thing He's about to do in my life. I'm praising Him over the new job. I'm praising Him over my marriage turning around. I'm praising Him over my son coming home. I'm praising Him over the new thing. Similar to Temple of Faith, the pastor of First Baptist, Dr. French, recognizes the power of God, but it is often in the context of God's power being used to help the individual. His

sermons quickly follow the pattern of the two prior churches in proclaiming that God has better in store for his followers:

I've got some broken stuff in my life. I'm rebuilding some stuff right now in my life. Let me tell you why. Because I refuse to accept it like this. I know that God has something better in store so I'm ready, planting my feet. I'm ready to roll up my sleeves. I'm ready to get busy. I'm ready to get to work.

This last phrase is particularly interesting because it displays two themes common within the prosperity gospel. First, as presented above, God wants better for His followers and their lives. He wants to bless them and see them succeed. Second, God wants to bless his followers, but it requires work on their part.

### **Framing of Marginalized Communities**

Interestingly, the only time Pastor French specifically mentions race in the selected sermons was in the context of responsibility:

[Y]ou will never rebuild anything in your life until you take personal responsibility. Your finances are jacked up because of some decisions you made. You've got to take some personal responsibility. Your family is broken because of some mistakes and decisions you made. You've got to take personal responsibility. You didn't finish school, not because a teacher was fighting against you, but because you didn't apply yourself. You've got to take some personal responsibility. It ain't the white man that's keeping you down. It's some decision you made. You've got to take some personal responsibility.

Pastor French repeatedly espouses the neo-liberal principle of personal responsibility inherent within the prosperity gospel.

### **Politics/Social Justice**

Pastor French briefly touches on themes of social justice. In one sermon, he references real world events such as the current economic problems, predatory lenders, foreclosures, and paralleled it to what was happening in the biblical text when the actions of wealthy Jews were leading to poor living conditions for the Jewish people while they were rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. The sermon concerns dealing with conflict and the need to control our emotions, but he stresses it is necessary to get angry over social injustice and poor living conditions to lead to change. He never makes any reference to disadvantaged groups being cursed.

He did not touch on politics, or current events such as Trayvon Martin's murder or the death of Whitney Houston, but he does have a very practical, real world orientation to sermons.

### **The Power of Thought**

Pastor French makes a surprisingly high number of references to the importance of one's thoughts. In one sermon, he tells his congregation that many people allow past mistakes to hold them back. They must stop focusing on sins of the past, but also past sufferings. They do not move forward in life because of their toxic thoughts. He goes on to say the following:

We all know people that go through life constantly licking their wounds, sitting in a

corner, always bemoaning about what happened in their lives. They have this victim's mentality. They really don't want to move forward. They really don't want to advance. They really don't want to have a fresh start, a new beginning. All they really want are some people to come and join them in their pity party because misery loves company.

This statement is interesting, because not only does it bring attention to the importance of one's thoughts, it also subtly reinforces the neo-liberal value of self-accountability. Someone with a "victim's mentality" is seen as focusing on what others have done to them instead of taking responsibility for their own lives and actions.

In a later sermon passage, he tells the church they need to conceive a new future:

[C]onceive your new future. You have to cognitively have a sense of awareness that God is up to doing something new in you, through you, around you.... God wants to do something new, something new in your home, something new in your heart, something new in your marriage, something new in your relationship, something new in your job, something new at the church, something new in the community, something new in your business. God says, "I want to do something new."

Once again, he combines the importance of one's thoughts with an aspect commonly associated with the prosperity gospel, in this case emphasizing the blessings God wants to bestow in the everyday areas of people's life.

In this next passage, he references the power of words, "You and I are always on the verge of sliding down that slippery slope of discouragement, where we allow the enemy to speak some satanic suggestions that attacks our sense of value." An important aspect of the prosperity gospel is the belief in the power of words and a believer's ability to "speak" good or bad outcomes in their lives. In other words, what you say becomes reality. The above passage refers to other parties, "the enemy", and their ability to affect one's sense of self-worth. This is more than just someone's words hurting someone else's feelings. Pastor French refers to these negative words as "Satanic", meaning there is a spiritual element to the use of words.

## **Neo-Liberalism**

### *Self-responsibilization*

Just as reflected in the two churches grouped in the prosperity gospel end of the continuum, First Baptist also reinforces the concept of self-responsibilization. Pastor French argues that believers need to do the right things. The quote above shows the delicate tension often found amongst those influenced by the prosperity gospel. On one hand they stress the supernatural power of God in their lives, but on the other, they stress the believers' obligation to make good decisions and to take responsibility for their lives.

Once again, the theme of responsibility arises. More than any other pastor in the study, Pastor French stresses the need to repent for sins and the individual's responsibility for being in the situation in which he finds himself. During one sermon he states the following:

[A]s we expose our problem, it starts first of all with us. Because I discovered the greatest enemy is the enemy in me. I can be my biggest problem. I can be the biggest cause in some of the calamities in some of the challenges and some of the trauma in my...Come on, stop for a moment and look introspectively how much of the drama you're dealing

with in life really comes ultimately as a result of you being the source. It's so easy to look at everybody else and see how they're coming against you, but you can't see you have sown some seeds and now you're reaping the harvest.

Not only does Pastor French focus on the need to take responsibility for what happens in our own lives, but he also stresses the need for congregants to take more responsibility for world affairs: "It appears that we live in a world, we live in a time, we live in an age where we're living like the proverbial ostrich. We have our heads stuck under the sand of obscurity and don't want to accept the reality and even responsibility for the state of affairs of our world." He goes on to add the following:

Unfortunately, it is so easy for us to become so disinterested, so detached, so disengaged, so disconnected from the larger work of God that we miss our personal responsibility that results in our participating and partnering with God in what he is doing. That is why there are those that have this warped attitude as it relates to missions.

You take on the attitude, "Well, things are comfortable for me. I'm living in my plush palace here in this Western Hemisphere in this world. Why in the world would I want to go all the way over the Africa? Why in the world would I want to go to Jamaica? Why in the world would I want to go to Romania? Why in the world would I want to go to India?" It is because we have no sense of personal responsibility of partnering with God with the awesome work that he is doing down at the whole of his creation.

In this passage, while he clearly is stressing the value of personal responsibility, it is important to note that it takes place in the context of fulfilling God's works. Pastor French is arguing that all believers have the responsibility for spreading the Gospel. This is position consistent with First Baptists expansive missionary program presented in chapter 4.

## **Ebenezer**

### **Focus on the Individual vs Focus on God**

The most consistent theme present in head pastor Dr. Taylor's sermons is the importance of glorifying God. The purpose of our trials, the purpose of our blessings, the purpose of our service is to bring glory to him. Throughout his sermons, he stresses the importance of living a life so that others see Jesus through Christians' actions: "[T]he reason we try to live our lives so they can see more Jesus in us than they see of us, is so God can get the glory. God gets the glory out of our lives when people see more of Him loving than they see of you."

During the service to ordain new deacons for the church, he spoke of the importance of service. According to Pastor Taylor, each Christian has been given a particular purpose or charge by God. They fulfill this charge to help people, but ultimately to bring glory to God: "You've got a charge to keep, for in that charge and the fulfillment of that charge, God receives glory. I want to speak on this subject, servant leaders, keeping the charge, glorifying God. Servant leaders, you've got a charge to keep, you've got a God to glorify." He stresses this point again in a later sermon: "[W]e need to know that we have a purpose. Our purpose must be real clear. Our purpose as a people of God is to glorify God. Somebody say, "Bring God glory?"... We give God glory when we live in a way that people can see you and then seeing you they see Jesus."

The various pastors in this study place varying emphasis on the role of suffering or trials in Christians' lives. Pastor Taylor believes that the role of troubles is to maintain the focus on God:

I declare that God is still sovereign, God is still in control, God will not allow anything to happen to you that God cannot take care of, but God allows things that happen to you. He allows trouble to come in my life because trouble has a way of keeping me on my knees. Trouble has way of keeping my pride in check. Trouble has a way of helping me to keep my eyes on Jesus.

He stresses this point again in a sermon based on the book of James that speaks to the persecution of the early Christian church:

James letter is to encourage these believers to live in such a way, that their actions, their words, their behavior would validate, would prove just how real their faith was. Again, it's not what you say, but it's how we live, how we interact with people, how we deal with uncertainties, how we deal with problems that clearly give evidence that faith in Christ really makes a difference.

Perhaps, one of the best opportunities, help me, Jesus, to see just how real our faith is, is when we find our faith under the fire...Man's intent, those who are responsible for their persecution, those who are responsible for them losing their homes and businesses, those responsible for them having to go into a strange land. They intended that persecution to hurt them, to harm them, to hinder them, to hold them back, to discourage them...

That's what their intent was. I love this! Despite the intent of their persecution, this is a good one to remember, Proverbs 19:21 helps us to see something. It says, it reminds us, that, "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it's the Lord's purposes that will prevail."

No matter the topic, no matter the sermon, Pastor Taylor's sermons almost always lead to the importance of bring glory to God. If he does not preach on the glory of God, his sermons often focus on the power of God.

On more than one occasion, Pastor Taylor preached on the supernatural power of God to do things that we cannot do on our own. These things we need God to achieve dealt not with material gains or worldly success per se, but rather in treating others and acting in our everyday lives in a Christ-like manner:

[A]ll of the stuff that Jesus told us about how to treat people, He knew it was impossible. After all, why is it so hard for me to do it?...[A]ll the things that Jesus expects you, as a Christ follower to do, there is no way you can do it on your own. It takes a power, a supernatural power that's superior to your mind, your intellect, your networks, your buddies to accomplish.

Throughout his sermons, there is almost no mention of the attainment of material goods or the power of God to enable Christians to achieve physical or material goals. He focuses on the power of God to enable believers to be more Christ-like.

### **Framing of Marginalized Communities**

Although the activities of Ebenezer highlight the churches African American heritage, as presented in chapter 4, I heard no specific mention positively or negatively of the African American community in his sermons. Pastor Taylor, also made no negative reference towards the poor or disadvantage. In fact, the poor were not referenced at all. The only time that a curse was mentioned was in the context of someone trusting in themselves instead of trusting in God.

### **Power of Thought**

He made one or two statements concerning thoughts. In a sermon about the importance of the Holy Spirit he said, "The problem we have is that our heads, our hearts, and our minds have become so consumed with pollutants." These pollutants, according to Pastor Taylor, impede Christians from living a Godly life. His most telling statement about the power of thoughts, however, is a criticism of what is considered a major tenet of the prosperity gospel, positive thinking. In his sermon he states the following:

When we talk about maintaining a Godly attitude in an adversity, we're not talking about just being excited when every adversity comes. I don't know anybody that jumps up and down and does high fives when a problem comes. That's not the intent. Nor is the idea to come at the other from the standpoint of our mind over matter or the power of positive thinking. There are some things your mind cannot comprehend. There is something, I don't care how much positive thinking...When the fire gets hot enough, you're going to scream. You're going to scream. You exercise on power of positive thinking if you want. What are we saying? You can't do it on your own.

Not only does he reject the notion of the power of positive thinking, he presents it as tool to handle life's problems independently of God.

### **Politics/Social Justice**

He makes one detailed reference to politics in the context of a sermon asking whether there is reason to hope that things will get better. He turned to a well-known statement Ronald Reagan made in a 1980 presidential debate:

When Ronald Reagan was competing with President Jimmy Carter for the presidency that whole election swung on a debate they had one night. Some of you may remember it. The actor turned politician, Ronald Reagan, at the end of the debate, he looked into the camera. He was looking at America and he asked a question. He asked, "Is your life better today than it was four years ago?" The implication being that Jimmy Carter has fouled everything up. When the truth of the matter was, there were forces at work then that were beyond anybody's control. Just like this party that is trying to put everything on Barack Obama's back. There are things that he inherited that he's still working under.

He makes another political statement later in the sermon:

If you wrap your hope for the future in people, be they pastors, yes, be they teachers, yes, be they choir members or ushers. If you tie your hopes to the future in a donkey which represents the Democratic Party, if you bind your hopes to an elephant which represents



the Republican Party, if you put your hopes for the future in a Barack Obama, who I personally support, though I don't agree with everything, in every decision he makes. If you choose to put your support in a Mitt Romney, you need to understand that at best, they are leaky, broken cisterns and vessels that cannot provide hope for your future.

I find these statements interesting for a couple of reasons. First, he openly supports and defends President Obama. His statement is interesting because some churches are increasingly wary of openly expressing partisan positions for fear of jeopardizing their tax-exempt status. Secondly, his statement subtly takes a jab at Reagan and the Republican Party. He did not directly state the Republican Party, referring to it merely as “this party”. He tries to maintain some semblance of impartiality by recognizing that some listeners may support Romney, but it is clear that he does not, nor does he support the Republican Party.

### **Neo-Liberalism**

Unlike the three other churches, Pastor Taylor did not stress any values that could be associated with neo-liberalism. In fact, he is the one church that most closely fits the Davis and Robinson (2012) theologically communitarian ideal type. Theologically communitarian churches emphasize communitarianism and following the moral dictates of their deity, in contrast to the theological modernists that grants more moral authority to the individual as well as leans toward laissez faire economic individualism.

### **Core Findings**

Does the doctrine of prosperity gospel churches systematically differ from the doctrine of traditional African American churches?

If we compare the two churches at the ends of the traditional-prosperity gospel continuum—Ebenezer and All Nations, the doctrinal differences as evidenced through the sermons and statements of each church’s leaders do systematically differ. The differences are unmistakable. Through its ministries and sermons, All Nations most clearly articulates a doctrine that targets individuals as the level necessary to stimulate change. The primary themes of his sermons center on how God can empower the individual to do more and achieve more. Pastor Robinson’s sermons also reflect the common prosperity gospel value that believers are supposed to live blessed lives. Problems may arise, but for the most part, believers of Christ should prosper. The content of Ebenezer’s sermons is almost completely the opposite. The focus of his messages is God. According to Pastor Taylor, believers existence, success, failure, everything is about bringing glory to God. He makes no guarantees concerning believers prospering. He does not discuss God empowering believers to achieve material success on Earth. His sermons focus on the power and glory of God. I detect no individualistic orientation to Pastor Taylor’s sermons, but neither are there overt references to collectivism and the community.

All Nations is open in its desire to be more than just an African American church. There are few if any positive references to African American culture and history. No statements made during church sermons directly referenced African American culture, positively or negatively. I do not take this as a sign that racial consciousness is not promoted within Ebenezer, but rather that it is not heavily promoted through sermons. Its ministries reflect that a high value is placed on the congregants’ African American heritage.

Finally, more than any church, All Nations’ doctrine is interwoven with neo-liberal values. The concepts of growth, self-responsibilization, and productiveness—values highlighted

in the work of many scholars as evidence of the rising neo-liberal influence on religious institutions (Atia 2012; Cihan 2013). All Nations provides a strong example of how deeply the prosperity gospel parallels the neo-liberal logic. Ebenezer, on the other hand, in no way reflected neo-liberalism in church doctrine. Pastor Taylor's sermons were not crafted to shape citizens that can succeed in a market economy. His main purpose is to shape believers that recognize, and trust in, the power of their God. This is an obviously small sample, but based on this case, the congregants of a prosperity gospel and traditional church are being exposed to differing values within the walls of their churches.

The doctrine espoused at Temple of Faith carries the same doctrinal hallmarks as All Nations, but at Temple of Faith the content of the prosperity gospel is enveloped by the symbols and worship style of a traditional African American church. Symbols notwithstanding, Temple of Faith has an individualistic focus, espouses neo-liberal values, as well as most of the other core tenets of the prosperity gospel with some key exceptions. Expressions of the prosperity gospel are more tempered at Temple of Faith, but I believe this in part reflects the fact that All Nations was founded by Pastor Robinson, so he has no restraints in shaping the church in a manner that clearly reflects his beliefs. Temple of Faith, however, had an established congregation and a long history upon Pastor Hughes' arrival. He must walk a fine line between implementing changes in accordance with his own beliefs and respect the traditions of Temple of Faith. During his tenure, one can see that the church is moving in a direction that reflects more contemporary practices—rebranding efforts, developing businesses, adopting neo-pentecostal worship practices, and integrating a current business model. Based on exchanges with staff, it became clear that there is some tension over the changes occurring within the church. Some of the churches leadership became slightly defensive when the name change was brought up. Others showed discomfort when I recounted the story of the pastor asking people to “plant financial seeds” at the end of the 12/12/12 service. Pastor Hughes' strength is his ability to walk a tight rope of this sometimes competing doctrinal streams. The doctrine of Temple of Faith does differ from Ebenezer, but to the same extent as All Nations.

First Baptist has proven to be the most interesting church within the study. I categorized it as a traditional church, fully expecting that the analysis would show its sermon content to be most similar to Ebenezer. After my analysis, in many ways the doctrine presented in Pastor French's sermons more closely resemble the messaging at Temple of Faith. From the beginning, I positioned the churches along a continuum, so the fact that First Baptist is less traditional than Ebenezer is to be expected, but how strongly Pastor French focused on personal accountability, what God would do for individuals, and the power of thought is surprising. What I thought was First Baptist's rejection of the prosperity gospel appears to in fact be a rejection of neo-pentecostalism. Underneath the traditional Baptist façade are certain values strongly related to the prosperity gospel, leaving Ebenezer as the non-prosperity gospel outlier in the group. I present possible explanations for this in the following chapter. Before moving on, it is important to address the ways that the sermon analysis did not meet expectations.

Besides the unexpected doctrinal similarity between First Baptist and the two prosperity gospel churches, there are other ways that the outcomes did not match the original expectations. I expected that the traditional churches' sermons would have more references to issues directly impacting the African American community and issues of social justice. The results were the complete opposite. Temple of Faith is the most assertive in embracing its African American heritage, followed by All Nations, though it did so more due to external events than a desire to emphasize its heritage. The study occurred at a time when many events were taking place that

impacted the African American community. The concern that the Republican Party was attempting to suppress African American voters heighten the tension surrounding the 2012 presidential elections. Trayvon Martin had recently been murdered in Florida. Whitney Houston and Don Cornelius, two influential figures within the African American community, had passed away. Prosperity gospel churches are known for their practical and relevant messaging and ministries. To be relevant for their congregants, pastors needed to address these events that had clear implications for the African American community. Even if they wanted to, it would be hard to ignore these issues. Whereas All Nations and Temple of Faith clearly did not, based on the sermons I analyzed, First Baptist and Ebenezer dealt with these events to a much lesser extent. The external environment to some extent dictates that prosperity gospel churches openly deal with African American concerns. Any church that ignores the issue of race and its impact of the African American community risks becoming irrelevant; therefore, the evidence suggests that prosperity gospel churches, just as traditional churches, reinforce racial consciousness.

Also, although none of the pastors were leading protests or making strong public statements for or against certain government policies, Temple of Faith, and to a lesser extent All Nations and First Baptist, did address issues of social justice (e.g. poverty, injustice, racism, etc.). None of the findings suggest that traditional churches are more likely to take on these issues than prosperity gospel churches. None of the leaders are likely to lead a march any time soon, but they do educate members on political issues and mobilize members to vote. All of the pastors that broached the issue of politics, though cautiously at times, showed support for the Democratic Party. The sermons at Temple of Faith, and to some degree Ebenezer, provided a framework for congregants to rationalize the moral conflicts they may face in supporting the Democratic Party and its socially liberal agenda when they themselves are more socially conservative. For example, during one sermon when speaking on gay marriage, Pastor Hughes of Temple of Faith spoke against homosexuality, but proclaimed that the government could not legislate morals. In a later interview, a member used that exact phrase, “the government cannot legislate morals”. This situation shows the influence of the pastor on his members own political views, particularly in how members may frame issues and overcome possible moral conflicts.

## **Summary**

Is there a relationship between these two particular religious doctrines and the emphasis on individuality? Yes. Are prosperity gospel churches less likely to promote racial consciousness and humanitarianism? No. Both prosperity gospel churches in the study showed an equal amount of concern for their communities as the traditional concerns, those they may offer differing solutions in how to best help their communities. Is there a connection between the prosperity gospel and neo-liberalism? It would seem so, and this issue as well as other issues that may be influencing the findings will be addressed in the final chapter.

## Conclusion – The Church Is Evolving in Response to a Changing World

I started this study several years ago after I began to hear...it. First it was an African American evangelist that believed her depression era parents were poor because they were ignorant. Then it was an African American cousin that supported Republican presidential candidates despite coming from a highly Democratic family. Then there was the other family member that claimed his poor grandparents that raised seven college educated children in the coal fields of West Virginia in the face of poverty and racism, were lazy because, in between working as a maid and struggling to find construction jobs, they surely, according to him, could have started a side business to earn more money. As an African American woman born into a highly religious family, these statements were perplexing. Only between four and eleven percent of African Americans voted Republican in the last three Presidential elections, so open support for a Republican candidate is surprising, but not unheard of.<sup>9</sup> What was more astonishing was the public disparaging of one's elders. What could lead them to violate such a norm within the African American community? After some thought, I realized that a commonality between these individuals is that they all belong to churches that I would categorize as espousing the prosperity gospel. It was this realization that started me on a journey to understand the impact of the prosperity gospel on the African American church and community.

As a consistent churchgoer, I am familiar with the debate surrounding the prosperity gospel. The concern expressed by critics of its effect spiritually, socially, and politically on African Americans cannot be overstated. When it became clear that leaders of this movement were dominating religious thought and media, some observers became angry at what they saw as the misappropriation of Biblical scripture to justify personal gain. They saw the prosperity gospel as watering down the Gospel for the sake of church growth and personal enrichment. Other critics were afraid as they believed the church and therefore the African American community abandoning the values that had helped it survive and overcome centuries of discrimination and oppression.

Claims and accusations began to fly from ministers, scholars, and media. In the midst of all the mudslinging, what I saw as missing were facts, evidence of how this relatively new doctrine is actually producing change. Far more work is needed than was possible with my small scale dissertation, but I attempt to address three basic questions:

1. Do prosperity gospel churches have significantly different relationships with their community than traditional churches?
2. Do prosperity gospel churches have differing ministries than traditional African American churches?
3. Does the doctrine prosperity gospel churches systematically differ from the doctrine of traditional African American churches?

### Actual Outcomes

	Ebenezer	First Baptist	Temple of Faith	All Nations
Focus on Individual vs Focus on God	God	Individual	Individual	Individual

<sup>9</sup> Blackdemographics.com <http://blackdemographics.com/culture/black-politics/> Accessed: August 25, 2015

Reinforce humanitarianism	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Reinforce racial consciousness	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Yes
Power of Thought	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Neo-Liberalism	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Emphasize Politics/Social Justice	Slightly	No	Yes	Yes

**Do prosperity gospel churches have significantly different relationships with their community than traditional churches?**

No. From my interviews with community leaders, I found no evidence that traditional churches related with their community differently than prosperity gospel churches. Few interviewees distinguished between these two types of churches. Their comments were directed at the church, and for the most part expressed disappointment. While community leaders wanted a collaborative, outwardly-oriented church, focused on the local community and systemic change, they believe most churches adopted an inwardly-focused, insulated model, focusing on problems at the individual level. Though most community leaders were uncomfortable with the accumulation of wealth and materialistic themes coming from prosperity gospel churches, few had sufficient knowledge of prosperity gospel churches to provide evidence-based opinions about their outreach activities. Those community leaders that had firsthand knowledge of a prosperity gospel church typically had very positive things to say concerning their community outreach efforts.

**Do prosperity gospel churches have differing ministries than traditional African American churches?**

To some extent, yes. As one would expect of mega-churches, the churches’ size and resources enable them to offer an expansive array of programs, but being a mega-church does not pre-determine the type of ministries churches will promote. While there is a lot of overlap—monthly outreach activities to serve disadvantage communities, food pantries, youth programs, bible study, bill payment help, the churches on the Prosperity gospel end of the continuum did have more individualistic ministries and stronger business orientations while the traditional churches more strongly emphasized evangelism, as evidenced in both of their large missionary programs. None of the churches showed a great level of political advocacy, though, unexpectedly, the two congregations on the prosperity gospel side of the spectrum did more explicitly address social justice issues and promote voter education and mobilization.

This analysis raises two issues of concern. First, considering the types of activities and the price tag attached to many of them, these church offerings would appeal to upwardly mobile African Americans, alienating those low-income families and individuals most in need. Second, the increasing professionalization of church staff limits the church as a space to develop organizational and civic skills, particularly for those already educationally and economically disadvantaged.

Does the doctrine of prosperity gospel churches systematically differ from the doctrine of traditional African American churches?

On certain issues, yes. The sermons of the most traditional church's pastor focus on God. Believers' trials, successes, and suffering, according to Pastor Taylor, are to bring glory to God. The prosperity gospel churches, however, focus on the individual and how God will do great things in their lives. While the traditional church emphasizes what the individual can do for God, the prosperity gospel church emphasizes what God can do for the believer. Another important difference is that as you move further toward the prosperity gospel end of the continuum, the more the churches' sermons are infused with neo-liberal values. Interestingly, the content analysis did not support the position that prosperity gospel churches will lessen racial consciousness or focus on issues of social justice less than their traditional counterparts. Though sometimes forced to by external events, the two prosperity gospel churches were more vocal on political, racial, and social justice issues.

Most surprisingly, First Baptist, the church I categorized as traditional and that openly rejects the prosperity gospel, espouses many of the positions associated with the prosperity gospel. The neo-pentecostal elements are not present, but there is the emphasis on the power of thought, the focus on the individual, and the continual references to the neo-liberal value of self-responsibilization. Did I mis-categorize First Baptist when it does indeed espouse the prosperity gospel? I do not believe so.

In First Baptist we see evidence of what Atia and Cihan witnessed in Egypt and Turkey. Neo-liberalism is infiltrating the religious field, stealthily entering spaces once immune to its influence. As I argued in chapter 2, the spread of neo-liberalism created an environment in which the tenants of a once ostracized religious doctrine now makes sense. Throughout our everyday lives, we are exposed to these values—self-responsibilization, self-help, productivity, and growth. We hear them on Oprah, they are found in best-selling books, and even hip hop culture reinforces the value of individualistic entrepreneurialism and the accumulation of wealth. For Christians who believe promising believers prosperity and the “good life” on Earth are distortions of biblical text, the prosperity gospel is the problem. For those critics that are concerned about the political and social implications of the prosperity gospel on the African American community, the prosperity gospel is a symptom; it is a spiritual expression of neo-liberalism.

Why has Ebenezer thus far been immune to its reach? I believe the answer in that lies in the age of the pastor. All three other churches hired relatively young pastors that brought contemporary values into their respective churches. Ebenezer, however, choose to hire a much older pastor that is more entrenched in traditional church values and customs. He has not been socialized into the individualistic culture the way someone of a younger generation would be. I suspect that if Ebenezer hires a new pastor in the next ten years, the religious doctrine of the church would start to converge with that of First Baptist, bringing an increased emphasis on individual empowerment.

## **Implications**

The more a church embraces Prosperity gospel principles, the more I suspect it will see problems through an individualistic lens, adopt modern business practices, promote neo-liberal values, and develop highly practical and relevant church ministries. It will differ from the traditional ideal-type church associated with the work of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement. What does this mean for the African America church and community? First

we should recognize that few churches meet the ideal-type church clamored for by many scholars. Few pastors are leading their churches in protest, fighting for policy changes or to end inequality. Based on my time in Jefferson, most African American churches that do enter the political fray, stay in the realm of electoral politics, educating their congregants and mobilizing them to vote. Despite their attempts at neutrality, their churches still provide an environment that reinforces loyalty to the Democratic Party and provides rationalizations for supporting the Democrats despite moral objections to many aspects of the Democratic platform. Without more in-depth interviews or at least solid survey data, we cannot know the influence current religious doctrine is having on the congregants' political attitudes.

As stated earlier, some of the mega-churches, particularly the strongly prosperity gospel churches seek to be more than just a "black church". Recent events such as voter suppression efforts, Ferguson, the murder of Trayvon Martin and Eric Gardner make it hard for an African American church to avoid racial issues. These pastors must speak out or risk being viewed as irrelevant or, even worse, as turning their backs on their people. In addition, mega-churches pull together highly successful and educated African Americans. Every time someone enters the church, they are confronted with images of African Americans that diverge from what is often reflected in mainstream media. In Jefferson, they fellowship with politicians, entertainers, lawyers, teachers, financial planners, executives, and police officers. Even if it is not explicitly mentioned, the environment itself acts to reinforce racial consciousness.

Also, I saw no evidence that mega-churches in Jefferson were not deeply concerned about helping the community. All the churches I visited put a lot of thought and resources into their outreach ministries and benevolence activities. In fact, their role in the community mirrored the churches of old when every need—economic, social, and spiritual, could be met within the walls of the church. The concern, however, is that their community has changed. The mega-churches in Jefferson best serve middle-class individuals and families. As born out in recent studies, low-income communities are increasingly left outside the gates of today's churches, unless entering to receive charity or as the recipients of monthly outreach initiatives (Smith 2003). For the most disadvantaged within the African American community, these churches hardly provide a transformative space as many critics and community leaders would hope.

In 1933, Mays and Nicholson wrote of the "Genius of the Negro Church," an institution created by African Americans and controlled by African Americans that brought a diverse array of African Americans together, empowering them to survive and confront the vicious world in which they lived. The African American church has played a central role in uniting the community for centuries. Scholars worry that the church is hanging up that mantle. What if the church that once acted to unite the community now is a vehicle to reinforce divisions? On the other hand, what if the church still has its "genius". Recognizing that the battle is not political, but economic, perhaps these changes are the church adapting to meet the current needs of the African American community. As in the past, when pastors encouraged their members to marry and adopt other "middle-class" values, pastors are once again encouraging their members to embrace the values they deem necessary to survive and thrive in the still hard environment in which they exist. Change is taking hold of the African American church. The arguments positioning the prosperity gospel as the destroyer of the African American community definitely seem overblown. If Jefferson is any indication of what is occurring in the rest of the country, the average prosperity gospel church remains committed to positive change, even if they may go about achieving it in a slightly different way. The full effects of the new ways are yet to be seen.

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