

HISTORY SPEAKS

To Hard Questions Baptists Ask

The year 2009 is the 400th anniversary of the founding of the Baptist tradition. To help celebrate this big year, the Baptist History and Heritage Society has created a new 24-article series, HISTORY SPEAKS.

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Baptists and the Prosperity Gospel: Have We Turned the Gospel into Magic?

Karen Bullock

“Decree Your Abundance,” “Seven Steps to Prosperity,” and “Activate Your Faith with Seed Offerings” are all slogans found on nationwide TV and radio broadcasts, church signboards, and Web sites. Sometimes called the “health and wealth” gospel or “word of faith” teaching, these messages claim that if believers make financial contributions to God’s work in faith, they will receive abundant material blessings and physical health in return. In fact, some preachers even claim a 100-fold return *in this life* of whatever people forsake to follow Jesus. The “name it and claim it” refrain says all we need to do is ask.

However, as the recession of 2008-09 further erodes the expectations of a steady paycheck and job security for many wage-earners, Baptists join the rest of Americans and other world citizens looking for economic stability. Many voices compete to provide solutions to ensure financial soundness. Christ’s apprentices must know what the Scriptures teach about money and how affluence relates to servant-hearted devotion to Jesus. Baptist heritage helps Baptists to live as good stewards of God’s gifts.

Do Baptists buy into the notion that financial contributions will translate into prosperity? Proponents of the prosperity gospel point to Old Testament passages that seem to equate material wealth with God’s favor and isolated New Testament teachings about abundant life, but no biblical formula ensures God will multiply and return to the giver whatever amount is given to a particular ministry. Critics of the prosperity gospel today call it biblically anemic and superficial at best, rendering God small, in contrast to the transforming God C. S. Lewis describes in *Mere Christianity*—the God who “overhauls our hearts so that we truly desire his goodness and his will on behalf of others, not to accumulate [merely] for ourselves.”¹

At its worst, health and wealth preachers emphasize the devil as over against the transforming power of the Risen Lord, or center transformation in an individual’s self-motivation. Some see faith healers as demoting God and deifying humanity even as they redefine the nature of faith as a “human force,” generated by human beings, and directed at God in order to force God to perform. The true Good News is the person and work of the Incarnate God-Man, Jesus Christ, not material largess.

How can Baptists reconcile the prosperity gospel with the reality of poverty? Thinking Baptists know that this kind of preaching especially hurts the poor. Many people have followed church leaders, given all they possessed, and received nothing in return, becoming wounded or bitter when the reality of their checkbooks fail to match promises made in God's name. A mature biblical faith is not "Delivery Faith," which seeks a "quick exit" from difficult circumstances, but a "Sustaining Faith," which instead focuses on *God's* faithfulness through all of life, even when economic hardship or illness or suffering or sorrow come to stay.

Have some Baptist churches lost the biblical model of sacrificial service because of their wealth? Contrary to the notion that Christianity consists of ease and plenty, the writings of Paul, Peter, James, Hebrews, and the Revelation give pointed instructions for suffering and sacrifice in the service of God. They specifically refer to the costliness of following Christ; to pain and persecution; to the linking of life and death in this relationship journey with God—grounding the conviction of countless followers through the centuries that "to live is Christ and to die is gain." *This is no cheap grace we have received.* In this life with God, great hope is available to churches and individuals who both know and live this truth in sacrificial service to others whether out of great means or the widow's mite.

Today, Baptists rightly ask, "How can Christ-followers live in luxury while much of the world lacks daily provision?" The Baptist story contains heroic examples of those who, in their day, addressed social, economic, and moral concerns: Walter Rauschenbusch of the social gospel and Robert Cooke Buckner of the social Christianity movements; Annie Armstrong and Fannie Heck of home missions efforts; James Manning and Nannie Burroughs of educational work; and T. B. Maston, Howard Thurman, and Martin Luther King, Jr. as activists of human rights. Today, Baptists serve others and address both the source of systemic disparity and individual human need even as they proclaim reconciliation in Christ alone. Baptists need not fear for tomorrow or resort to magical formulas. In Christ there is all sufficiency.

Karen Bullock is director of the Ph.D. program at the B. H. Carroll Theological Institute in Arlington, Texas, and chair of the Baptist World Alliance Commission on Baptist Heritage and Identity.

¹ Ken Camp, "Prosperity gospel not all good, some Baptist leaders say," *Associated Baptist Press*, 16 October 2006.