

Article

American Prosperity Gospel and Athletic Narratives of Success

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Abstract: When athletes give interviews about their success, they tend to iterate on themes of self-assuredness, dedication to a goal, positive thinking, and divine blessing. By examining the history of prosperity theology in the U.S., we can see one possible source of this rhetoric. Prosperity theology teaches believers that God wants them to be healthy and wealthy and that the means to achieve health and wealth are at a believer's fingertips. All one must do is give faithfully to one's church, never waver in one's belief that God will grant health and wealth, and act as though one has already received the blessing one desires. While scholars have long critiqued prosperity theology for obscuring structural inequalities, particularly those that impact people of color, the philosophy remains popular in many congregations across the U.S. and is nearly ubiquitous in black churches. Examining similarities in the rhetoric of prosperity gospel and athletes' narratives of their success shows that these narratives also contribute to the faulty logic of meritocracy by ignoring systemic inequalities.

Keywords: prosperity gospel; professional sports; black church; megachurch; sports coverage; sports ministry; Christian athletes; meritocracy; structural racism

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1. Introduction

Tara Lipinski, fifteen-year-old figure skating gold medalist, appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* after her win in the 1998 Olympics in Nagano, Japan. Winfrey asked her to describe her experience skating in the Olympics and she said, "You have four minutes out there, and it could, you know, be the best day of your life. And you go out there and you're skating great. There is just this joy inside of you that's saying, enjoy every moment of this." Winfrey asked Lipinski to describe what was going on in her head as she executed her skating routine, leading to this interview exchange:

Lipinski: Well, when you go out there, there's good thoughts and bad thoughts, and the bad thoughts try to creep in and are saying, oh, what happens if this happens, don't pop, don't fall, don't do this. And then you have to just push it away. Um, I think the biggest thing for me was I thought of Saint Teresa. She's one of the most important people in my life. And I think she helped me through the whole thing.

Winfrey: Saint Teresa? Why Saint Teresa?

Lipinski: Well, I've been praying to her for a really long time and in the past four years, she's helped me through everything . . . I think she helps me through everything because she wants me to do well and be happy. ([The Oprah Winfrey Show 1998](#))

In Lipinski's explanation for her victory, she invokes prosperity gospel understandings of success. Two things are central to prosperity gospel: first, God desires all believers to be healthy and wealthy, and second, believers have the power to demand these outcomes from God. In Lipinski's telling, Saint Teresa fulfills this role: Lipinski has been praying to Saint Teresa for assistance, and Saint Teresa comes through for her because, as Lipinski sees it, Saint Teresa wants her to "do well and be happy." Though prosperity gospel developed

in the American Protestant context, Lipinski's narrative is one example of how prosperity gospel rhetoric has grown beyond its original context and frequently appears in athletes' narratives of their own success.¹

In this article, I examine similarities between the rhetoric of American prosperity gospel and how athletes describe their successes. Central to the theology of prosperity gospel is the idea that a believer can speak their faith into reality. Relying heavily on an interpretation of Proverbs 18:21 (NIV), "Death and life and in the power of the tongue: and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof," mid-century prosperity preachers such as Kenneth Hagin and Oral Roberts called on believers to speak aloud their desires. Sometimes called word-of-faith teaching, this approach led to a popular catchphrase for the movement: "name it and claim it." According to sociologist Shayne Lee:

Word-of-faith preachers argue that once believers strengthen their faith by memorizing and confessing scriptures, they are able to live in total victory and control their physical and financial fate. The prosperity gospel is a central part of word-of-faith teachings and suggests God wants all believers to prosper financially and will bless them according to their faith. (Lee 2005, p. 100)

When prosperity gospel preachers use "name it and claim it" rhetoric, they are presenting a world wherein faithful believers should demand their success and feel assured that their success will be divinely granted. The rhetorical similarities between athletes' narratives of success and prosperity gospel teachings showcase two important aspects of contemporary American culture. First, prosperity gospel rhetoric has become ubiquitous in the world of sports due to the elevation of sporting celebrities and the impact of evangelical sports ministries on the world of sports. Second, just as the prosperity gospel worldview fails to account for structural inequalities that contribute to poverty and health challenges, athletic narratives that emphasize desire to win, believing in oneself, and/or God's will as key to their success fail to account for the athletes who subscribe to this philosophy but yet are never able to compete at elite levels.

2. Prosperity Gospel in the U.S.

Tony Tian-Ren Lin's ethnography of Latinx Pentecostalism offers an understanding of prosperity gospel faith. As Lin puts it, "Faith means always thinking positively and always believing that things will work in their favor" (Lin 2020, p. 75). The faith that Lin describes is relentlessly optimistic: an inkling of doubt undermines one's faith and impedes one's blessings. Therefore, faith must be unwavering, leading to a sense of entitlement that one is deserving of blessings and can demand these of God. Key to the worldview that Lin has identified is positivity, so believers train themselves to identify positive outcomes as blessings and to attribute these blessings to their faith and actions. As demonstrated in Lipinski's narrative above, Lipinski credits her success to her prayer to Saint Teresa and Saint Teresa's divine assistance. In order to demonstrate how the rhetoric of prosperity gospel came to be present in athletes' narratives of success, it will be helpful to provide historical context for the emergence and rise of prosperity gospel approaches.

2.1. The Roots of Prosperity Gospel

The basis of prosperity gospel reaches back to the late-nineteenth century movement of New Thought and its teachings on the "law of attraction" or how to use your thoughts to attract what you desire (Albanese 2008). New Thought professes the primacy of mind in relation to the experience of the physical world, and places great emphasis in positive thinking, affirmations, meditation, and prayer. Essential to New Thought was the idea that people had the power to shape their material reality through their outlook; negative thoughts would lead to negative consequences and positive thoughts would lead to positive consequences. During the late nineteenth century when New Thought emerged, common medical treatments included bloodletting, mercury and arsenic tonics, and other risky practices. New Thought offered an alternative to standard medical treatments by

empowering an individual to see illness as an imbalance that could be corrected through the power of the mind.

While New Thought relied on Christian understandings of the divine, it was innovators such as Essek William Kenyon that brought these ideas firmly into Christian rhetoric and practice, paving the way for prosperity gospel theology. Kenyon preached that a second spiritual experience called sanctification happened after conversion. Sanctification, or what Kenyon called “entire sanctification,” was a calculable moment in the spiritual life of the believer when the believer received gifts of salvation in the earthly realm (notably healing, but this could also manifest in speaking in tongues and other physically exuberant gestures). Kenyon preached that believers seeking healing should act as though God had already healed them; they should rely on faith, the confident assurance that God has already provided everything they desire via the laws of the universe (Bowler 2013).

Pentecostalism emerged in the early twentieth century and continued these trends. On 9 April 1906, a black Holiness preacher named William Joseph Seymour held a small prayer meeting at a home in Los Angeles, California. During the meeting, one participant began to shake uncontrollably and utter strange sounds. No one could decipher the meaning of these words and those in attendance attributed this outpouring to the Holy Spirit. Using their understanding of Acts 2, which describes the Holy Spirit visiting disciples on the day of Pentecost and miraculously causing them to speak in languages they did not know, attendees interpreted the sounds from their fellow believer as speaking in tongues, also called glossolalia.² Over the next hours and days, more and more onlookers and faith-seekers gathered with Seymour’s group. This became known as the Azusa Street revival (the growing crowd relocated to an old building on Azusa Street) and was a founding moment for Pentecostalism. Glossolalia became a signature practice of the movement. Over the next few decades, Pentecostalism stabilized into an exuberant religious tradition that taught a gospel of divine healing, personal salvation, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the imminent return of Jesus Christ.

The Azusa Street revival was one of many boisterous religious gatherings across American Northern and Western cities as the great migration brought millions of rural black southerners to these places. Some of the black preachers that gained followings around this time embraced lavish consumption as part of their public image. For example, Sweet Daddy Grace founded the United House of Prayer for All People, and in addition to creating a line of home products for congregants to buy (including toothpaste and soap), he demonstrated a lavish lifestyle replete with expensive cars, high-quality clothing, and long hair and fingernails (an indication that he did not perform manual labor). Another popular preacher, Father Divine, used his Peace Mission to teach that it was negative thinking that brought on economic strife and that positive thinking would cure financial woes.

Beginning in the 1940s, some Christian ministers began to take Pentecostalism’s approach to healing and extend it to material wealth. For example, Kenneth Erwin Hagin attributed his recovery from a heart defect in his teens to divine intervention and preached that believers could harness God’s power to speak their desires into reality. He called this “faithful speaking” and taught that a believer’s words had the power to transform their material reality. Around the same time, prominent evangelist Oral Roberts began preaching that God desired his beloved believers to have financial success. Roberts often spoke publicly about his assurance that God wanted Roberts’s own ministry to expand and flourish, and he invited believers to take part in this flourishing through their own financial donations. He promised that God would grant financial blessings on those who donated \$100 or more to his ministry. According to Tony Tian-Ren Lin’s analysis of prosperity theology, “This idea gave way to the broader ‘seed faith’ concept: believers could ‘sow’ (contribute) money into the work of a preacher with the promise that God would return the favor in the form of a prosperous financial ‘harvest’” (Lin 2020, p. 9). The practice of sowing one’s seed (donating to a church with the promise of financial reward) is now common in prosperity churches.

2.2. Prosperity Gospel Today

Prosperity teachings continued to thrive in American churches and exploded with the growth of megachurches in the 1980s and 1990s. Megachurches (churches with more than 2000 members) numbered fifty in 1970; by 1990, the total was over three hundred (Bowler 2013, p. 101). Evangelical prosperity congregations tended to construct buildings that resembled corporate headquarters rather than traditional sanctuaries. Preachers such as Oral Roberts and Jimmy Bakker (with his wife Tammy) turned to television to spread their gospel of Christian self-help and economic uplift. As Kate Bowler notes of the 1980s televangelism phenomenon, “Faith televangelists dominated religious programming as masters of persuasion, able to inspire the continuous financial donations required to maintain their electric churches” (Bowler 2013, p. 105). Like their forerunners in prosperity preaching, televangelists flaunted their wealth as evidence of the truth of their theology: God wants you to be rich (like me).

Scandals rocked televangelism in the late 1980s. Revelations of sexual and financial improprieties toppled the careers of the Bakkers, leading to disillusionment and skepticism toward many televangelists. However, at the same time, prosperity preaching blossomed in African American megachurches. As more and more African Americans entered the middle class and many relocated to the suburbs, they flocked to churches that celebrated their success and ambition. Black denominations with smaller congregations like the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) also embraced prosperity theology in the 1980s and 1990s, and with the success of big-name prosperity preacher Thomas Dexter (T. D.) Jakes in the 1990s, black prosperity preaching became normalized in many black congregations.³

Prosperity preacher T.D. Jakes rose to popularity in the 1990s and embraced a lavish lifestyle of million-dollar homes, luxury cars, and designer clothes. Headquartered then in Charleston, West Virginia, the local press criticized Jakes for his extravagant homes and possessions. He defended his riches using prosperity theology: God wanted him to economically prosper, and he was dedicated to teaching others how to do so as well. Feeling betrayed by his West Virginia peers, Jakes relocated to Texas in 1996 and bought a \$1.7 million home in Lakewood, an elite suburb of Dallas. He told *Christianity Today* two years later that he bought the biggest house he could afford because he wanted to embrace being blessed by God financially (Jones 1998).

“Name it and claim it” is related to “seed-faith” in T.D. Jakes’s and others’ prosperity teachings. Congregants are told to name the blessing they are seeking as they donate money to their church and to hold faith that God will deliver the blessing, allowing the believer to reap the rewards of sowing their money. For example, in Jakes’s fundraising letter from 2002, he wrote: “Take a moment to do two things: First, write your most urgent prayer request on the reply form and send it to me so I may join you in praying for your miracle harvest! Second, take a moment to sow the most generous miracle faith seed you can” (quoted in Lee 2005, p. 111). In this context, sowing a seed means donating to Jakes’s ministry. Prosperity gospel promises that sacrificial giving will lead directly to financial blessings from God. Preachers such as Jakes sell a compelling narrative that God is working for one’s success and that one’s own faith will inevitably lead to financial rewards.

Shayne Lee’s analysis of the teachings of T.D. Jakes emphasizes his failure to address structural inequalities. Lee writes, “Rather than treating poverty as a residual component of a capitalist society, Jakes depicts poverty as a spiritual ailment that can be overcome with prayer, faithful giving, and positive confession. His individualism also overlooks the structural forces behind such inner-city ills as unemployment” (Lee 2005). Similarly, Mary Wrenn has argued that prosperity teachings support neoliberal capitalism by encouraging believers to channel their ambitions into spiritual work, rather than assess the efficacy of capitalism to provide for all people (Wrenn 2021).

In her exploration of North Carolinian black Christians, Marla Frederick’s *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* includes an analysis of how prosperity gospel teachings impacted the rural black women that she studied. Pulling from her anthropological fieldwork in the late 1990s, Frederick shows that the black women she

talked to enjoyed prosperity gospel televangelists such as Creflo Dollar and Frederick Price because of the simple, accessible message that individuals have the power to gain divine favor. Though the women Frederick talked to did not seem to expect dramatic changes in their financial station through faith, none of them critiqued prosperity preaching for failing to address the inequalities built into American capitalism. As Frederick puts it, “The idea of material accumulation as a sign of God’s favor distracts attention from the very real problems of exploitation and exclusion within a free-market society” (Frederick 2003, p. 152). The prosperity gospel worldview does not acknowledge structural inequalities.

Scholar of African American religions Stephanie Mitchem has argued that prosperity gospel theology is particularly appealing for black churches because of what she calls “poverty fatigue,” a sense of exhaustion that:

America—the land of so-called opportunity—is closing the doors to educational access, blaming and condemning poor people, considering all forms of social welfare ridiculous while expanding opportunities for corporate greed, expanding free market racism to new global markets, and denying that race is yet a factor in American society. (Mitchem 2007, pp. 35–36)

In this context, prosperity theology is appealing because it offers the believer a sense of empowerment in the face of daunting structural and systemic inequalities. Critiques of prosperity gospel note this inclination to eclipse economic and social realities in favor of encouraging sacrificial giving and steadfast faith.⁴

3. Prosperity Gospel Rhetoric in Athletes’ Narratives of Success

It is common for athletes to express gratitude to God in post-game victory interviews. A typical rendition of this would be NBA player Steph Curry’s Most Valuable Player (MVP) speech from his 2014–2015 season. He began the speech:

First and foremost, I have to thank my lord and savior Jesus Christ for blessing me with the talents to play this game, with a family to support me day in and day out. I’m his humble servant right now and I can’t say enough how important my faith is to how I play the game and who I am. I’m just blessed and I’m thankful for where I am. (NBA 2015)

This is similar to Serena Williams’s post-game interview after winning Wimbledon in 2015. When the interviewer asked her how it felt to have her hands on the Wimbledon trophy again, she responded, “It feels so good. It’s been a little while and I really appreciate holding it, but I have to give thanks to Jehovah God for today. I just really relied on his strength” (Wimbledon 2015). In these examples, we see athletes crediting their faith for their success. While they come from different faith traditions, Curry and Williams use similar rhetoric. In order to better understand this trend, it will be helpful to explore the phenomenon of sports ministry in the U.S.

3.1. Sports Ministry

In 1954, former athlete Don McClanen wrote letters to a number of athletic celebrities that he knew to be Christian. He told them, “If athletes can endorse shaving cream, razor blades, and cigarettes, surely they can endorse the Lord, too. So my idea is to form an organization that would project you as Christian men before the youth and athletes of this nation” (quoted in Atcheson 1994, p. 158). McClanen’s letter writing campaign resulted in the formation of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA), America’s first sports ministry organization. Similarly, in the mid-1960s, Dave Hannah, founder of Campus Crusade’s sports ministry branch Athletes in Action (AIA), employed advertising and celebrity endorsement language in describing his vision of an athletic ministry. According to AIA historian Joe Smalley:

The idea for the project came to Hannah one day as he watched a Campus Crusade music group share an evangelistic message through its performance.

Hannah thought out loud, “Why couldn’t an athletic team be used in the same way? . . . Athletes are used to sell everything from candy bars to cars. Why not have them tell about something far greater—the message of Jesus Christ?” (Smalley 1981, pp. 31, 26)

Sports ministry founders Hannah and McClanen noticed the rise of athletic endorsements in the television industry and envisioned using America’s hero-worship of athletes to further an evangelical agenda.

Sports ministry came on the heels of an era that began the elevation of athletic celebrities via televised sports. Television was integral to the rise in sports spectatorship on a grand scale. In the United States in 1947, there were around 14,000 television sets; in 1948, 172,000; and by 1950, four million. By 1954, there were thirty-two million sets and before the end of the decade 90 percent of American homes had a television (Gamson 1992). The rise of television ownership coincided with a rise in sports programming. According to sports historians Randy Roberts and James Olson, “Not only did sports programming please the affiliates, but it also provided a solid platform for launching the network’s fall season. Good sports promoted good ratings” (Roberts and Olson 1997, p. 423).

However, “good sports,” in other words, sports that were accessible to more than just die-hard fans, required some technological innovations. In the 1960s, Roone Arledge, an employee of ABC, revolutionized televised sports through targeting the “casual viewer.” Arledge saw it as his mission “to get the audience involved emotionally. If they didn’t give a damn about the game, they might still enjoy the program” (quoted in Rader 1984, p. 106). For example, when Arledge produced the 17 September 1960 NCAA football game between Alabama and Georgia, the coverage presented Alabama’s legendary coach, Paul “Bear” Bryant, as dueling it out with Georgia’s flashy quarterback, Fran Tarkenton. According to sports historian Travis Vogan, “The narrative Arledge created of the wise veteran taking on and ultimately defeating the impetuous and gun-slinging young man reflected the popular westerns that ABC aired in prime time during the week” (Vogan 2018, p. 29). Arledge’s sports coverage philosophy was to emphasize the up close and personal in order to make sport into human dramas.

As sports programming grew, American evangelicals began to see sport as a resource for conveying their religious message. Sports ministry founders imagined celebrity athletes as spokespeople with the respect of a non-believing population and the potential to garner a large audience. Not only were athletes already promoted culturally as morally virtuous, they were also key endorsers in the commercial sector; an athlete was an icon who could generate attention and revenue. By 1965, Oral Roberts was overt about promoting sports at his university in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He said, “Athletics is part of our Christian witness . . . Nearly every man in America reads the sports pages, and a Christian school cannot ignore these people . . . Sports are becoming the number one interest of people in America. For us to be relevant, we had to gain the attention of millions of people in a way that they could understand” (quoted in Coakley 2001, p. 470). Evangelicals entered the sports world in droves, forming organizations that educated athletes on how to deliver their Christian testimony from the platform of sport. By the early 1970s, sports ministry organizations had formed to target all major professional sports, and private Christian colleges had begun to significantly invest in sports programming for their students.

Because winning is central to gaining cultural attention, some Christian athletes began narrating winning as God’s will. For example, Roger Staubach told the press after the 1972 Super Bowl, “I had promised that it would be for God’s honor and glory, whether we won or lost. Of course the glory was better for God and me since we won, because victory gave me a greater platform from which to speak” (quoted in Hoffman 1992, p. 121). Sports ministry organizations in the 1970s encouraged athletes to use attention garnered from winning to deliver a Christian message. Like prosperity gospel, this sort of affiliation between winning and God’s will was problematic for a number of reasons: it could not explain why Christian athletes might lose games, it did not take into account that there

may be Christian athletes on opposing teams, and it elevated a win-at-all-costs mentality that eclipsed any discussion of the morality of athletic behavior.

3.2. Implied Prosperity Gospel Rhetoric

It was Norman Vincent Peale who mainstreamed the idea that people could manipulate reality by faith. Peale was the pastor of a prominent church in Manhattan and taught his parishioners that they could think their way out of problems and into success. He preached on this topic as well as published widely, and his 1952 book, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, became his largest success. The book was a *New York Times* best-seller for a record-breaking three years, selling more than two million copies in its first five years. In this text, Peale instructed Christians on how to access God's power through mental will power and turn this spiritual energy into attaining health, self-esteem, or business skills. Peale offered a simple formula: "picturize, prayerize, and actualize" (Peale 1952, p. 55). Coinciding with post-war economic uplift and the threat of communism (painted as atheism by prominent politicians), Americans warmed to Peale's message of optimism, self-reliance, and the power of God.

During the self-help boom of the 1960s, Peale's approach began to show up in secular resources and began to affect sports. For example, a number of texts appeared that explored the notion of visualization—vividly imagining success as a way to achieve its actualization. The 1960 release of *Psycho-Cybernetics* by Maxwell Maltz includes several instances of using visualization to improve athletic performance. For example, under the heading "Imagination Practice Can Lower Your Golf Score," Maltz lists several professional golfers who practice in their imaginations as a way to prepare for competition. According to one golfer, "[I]f you would picture the end result—'see' the ball going where you wanted it to go, and have the confidence to 'know' that it was going to do what you wanted, your subconscious would take over and direct your muscles correctly" (Maltz 1960, p. 39). Some Christian athletes adopted visualization strategies. Retired National Football League (NFL) player Bill Glass included visualization in his 1969 address to the Fellowship of Christian Athletes' National Conference. "A large part of athletic success is in the mind of the athlete. The premise is that experiences vividly imagined have the same impact on the subconscious as experiences actually experienced" (Glass 1970, p. 14). Athletes like Glass who spent time mentally envisioning success at their sport were finding that this mental exercise significantly improved their on-field performance.

Like visualization, the rhetoric of positive thinking also found its way into athletes' descriptions of their success. For example, in Michael Jordan's postgame interview after the Chicago Bulls won the 1998 NBA finals, he described making a basket that contributed to the win, saying, "When I got that rebound, my thoughts were very positive . . . I took advantage of that moment. I never doubted myself. I never doubted the whole game" (NBA 1998). Similarly, Olympic alpine skiing champion, Lindsey Vonn, described her win in Vancouver 2010 by saying:

I was really calm and really confident and I knew that this was my time, what I had been waiting for. And I was in this really great state of mind that I don't think I'd ever been in before in my career . . . It was definitely a very risky and gutsy run that I did. When I was in it, I didn't feel like it was anything extraordinary. It was just what I had to do. That was me just fighting. I was fighting the whole way, from start to finish, and I knew the pressure, but it didn't really affect me anymore. I just had accepted it . . . I had a really determined and aggressive feeling in my heart—it was a gutsy run, I was very much on the limit, but that was me pouring my heart out. (Team USA 2012)

Jordan and Vonn credit their states of mind as key to their success, mirroring New Thought and positive thinking ideologies.

Kathryn Lofton's analysis of Oprah Winfrey demonstrates another instance of prosperity gospel worldviews seeping into larger American consumer culture. Lofton shows how Winfrey offers a carefully curated consumerism that invites her fans to think of shopping

as a form of self-improvement. Connections to prosperity gospel are most apparent in Winfrey's promotion of the self-help book and DVD, *The Secret*, in 2007. *The Secret* teaches that you can use your thoughts to attract what you desire (Byrne 2006). Winfrey tells her viewers not to believe in scarcity, to believe in abundance and to ask for abundance. While Winfrey has an outsized influence on American consumerism (financial observers have noted the "Oprah Effect"—an upswing in market popularity for anything Winfrey recommends), her advice on believing in abundance and positive thinking reveals one flaw of prosperity gospel theology. As Lofton puts it, "if you believe that the right thoughts and speech will prompt divine repayment, then it follows that those who experience poverty have only themselves to blame" (Lofton 2011, p. 46). Prosperity theology taken to its logical conclusion will blame individuals for their own failures rather than reveal structural inequalities that impede success.

Even athletes that do not explicitly mention religion tend to display similar prosperity gospel understandings of success. For example, Tampa Bay Buccaneers quarterback Tom Brady told an interviewer after his team's win of Super Bowl LV in 2021, "We came together at the right time. I think we knew this was going to happen, didn't we? [cheers from the crowd] We ended up playing our best game of the year" (CBS 2021). In this example, Brady presents assured knowledge of his team's success as key to achieving that success. As prosperity gospel rhetoric merged with the self-help movement, positive thinking unmoored from its Christian background to become ubiquitous in multiple areas of American life, including sports narratives.

4. The Problem with Prosperity Gospel Rhetoric

In an interview after his eighth gold medal victory in the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, Phelps said, "This is all a dream come true, you know, to really just imagine anything, and work towards it. To accomplish everything you've really ever dreamed of" (Berkes 2008). Similarly, women's soccer Olympian Alex Morgan told Robin Roberts in an interview for ESPN in 2019 that she had a dream of competing in the Olympics since she was eight years old. When asked what advice she had for young girls, Morgan responded:

I would say, it doesn't matter what your dream is. If your dream is not to be a professional soccer player, that's okay. But as long as you have a passion for something, you have a dream for something, you can achieve it if you put in the hard work, if you take on the responsibility head on, if you believe in yourself and stand up for yourself, and realize that you do have a lot of support—more than you think . . . [I would] have young girls realize that they should be confident in their own skin and they should feel like they can do anything, because the sky is the limit and, honestly, I had one dream when I was eight years old, and I was able to accomplish that dream. And even further than I'd even imagined. And that's possible with believing in yourself. (ESPN 2019)

Both Morgan and Phelps identify believing in themselves as key to their success; this is similar to how prosperity gospel preachers advise their congregants to achieve health and wealth, by "naming it and claiming it".

Compare Morgan's and Phelps's narratives to how prosperity preacher Creflo Dollar describes the success of his ministry and marriage. In his 1999 publication, *Total Life Prosperity: 14 Practical Steps to Receiving God's Full Blessing*, Dollar provides fourteen steps that he sees as significant attitudinal and behavioral modifications for believers to prepare themselves to receive God's blessings. The text makes its case using Dollar's own life and success as evidence: Dollar presents himself as one who has lived out these fourteen steps and claims that is the cause of his prosperity. For example, Dollar describes the early days of his ministry when his church would meet in a cafeteria and had only eight members. "Instead of leaving the cafeteria tables out, we set up things as if we were a big church . . . We were acting as if it were so. God didn't give me a vision of a little church, so we had to stop acting like one . . . Did it make a difference? Absolutely" (Dollar 1999, p. 93). Dollar includes and interprets biblical passages to support his point of view. One example is the

story of Jesus granting sight to the blind man Bartimaeus.⁵ Dollar interprets this passage from Mark as a lesson that faithful believers should request blessings with full belief that their requests will be granted.

Dollar tells his readers that believers deserve worldly success and should pressure God to deliver. Regarding his marriage, he writes, “I put pressure on the Word and got the wife of my dreams. I reminded God that He said I could have the desires of my heart, and I described her to a tee. I got exactly what I wanted” (Dollar 1999, p. 104). Dollar’s rhetoric of visualization, assured success, and living as if one has already succeeded show up in athletes’ narratives of their success. Phelps and Morgan describe their successes as outcomes of believing in their dreams, similar to prosperity gospel rhetoric that emphasizes faith as key to achieving one’s goals. The problem with prosperity gospel rhetoric is that it eclipses structural challenges to success including poverty, racism, and other impediments.

Tony Tian-Ren Lin turns to the language of the Declaration of Independence to argue that prosperity theology is built into American identity. He cites this part of the document: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (Lin 2020, p. 103). In Lin’s reading, this sentence sets the stage for prosperity theology by positioning God as desirous of human happiness and freedom. While Lin is clear that the “men” mentioned in this sentence both excluded women and failed to include all men, he sees this paradox as central to prosperity theology—a theology that lives in the contradictory space between suffering and blessing. For Lin, prosperity theology has thrived in the U.S. because its basic teachings are embedded in the nation’s founding documents. And, while perhaps most common in African American congregations, Lin notes that prosperity gospel is central to many Latinx Pentecostal congregations as well as white megachurches.⁶

Lin argues both prosperity gospel and the American dream rely on what he calls “miraculous meritocracy.” This is the sense that meritocracy is divinely ordained and the true state of humans. Lin argues that this perception of meritocracy is most comforting for the rich *and* the poor. “Meritocracy helps the struggling feel better about their suffering by giving them hope for their future. It empowers them at the face of helplessness... For the rich and powerful, meritocracy serves the same purpose. It allows the prosperous to feel better about their wealth in the face of stark inequalities” (Lin 2020, p. 163). For the Latinx immigrant population that Lin studied, miraculous meritocracy offered an endless supply of hope and comfort in the face of fear of deportation, meager economic realities, and daily hardships.

Sociologist of sport Jay Coakley has noted that Americans tend to see sport as a meritocracy where every competitor can showcase talent and hard work (Coakley 2015). Like prosperity gospel, this view tends to blame individual athletes for their failure to attain success. Maybe they did not want it enough or did not train hard enough. This is comparable to sacrificial giving; just as a believer giving money to a ministry is unlikely to become rich, a dedicated sportsperson who is too short to play professional basketball is unlikely to grow simply because they desire it. The meritocratic perspective legitimizes winners and losers as correctly determined and ignores other factors that impact success.

Athletes and sportscasters invoke meritocracy when they present success as deserved (and by implication, failure as deserved). For example, after the New York Giants won against the New England Patriots in Super Bowl XLII in 2008, an interviewer asked the game’s MVP and Giants quarterback Eli Manning, “You’re down a touchdown, and all of a sudden, you take your team eighty-three yards in twelve plays. Was there ever any doubt that you could pull that off?” Manning responded, “No, no, we believed in ourselves all year.” As the segment concluded, the camera panned back to show a new Cadillac Escalade Hybrid. As the interviewer handed Manning the keys, he said, “You deserve it” (Fox Sports 2008). In this example, we see the familiar themes of self-assurance as key to success and success as deservedly attained. These narratives leave out that the other team likely also

believed they could win, yet did not. Like miraculous meritocracy, victory interviews seek to confirm the idea that hierarchical statuses are as they should be.

Just as prosperity theology is likely to turn a blind eye to structural inequalities and racial discrimination, presentations of athletic success, and in particular black male athletic success, reinforce a myth of meritocracy with little attention to lived realities. Coakley has pointed out that Americans have long used a racialized ideology that tends to celebrate white intellectual achievement and black physical achievement. He calls this a “race logic” and examines its impact on sports. He surmises that many young Americans grow up believing that the black body is special and superior when it comes to some sports and that this belief may motivate black young people to dedicate their time and energy to athletic pursuits. “This inspiration might be especially strong if young blacks felt that their future could involve low-wage, dead-end jobs on the one hand or big money and respect gained from slam-dunks, end zone catches, or Olympic sprint victories on the other hand” (Coakley 2001). Coakley posits that some black young people will see sporting success as their biological and cultural destiny and therefore dedicate significant time and energy to sports, likely at the expense of other activities.

The statistics for athletic success, however, are quite grim. Of the approximately one million high school football players in the U.S., only 6.5% will go on to play in college, and only 1.6% of college players go on to play in the NFL. There are approximately 1500 male college basketball players in the National College Athletic Association (NCAA); of these the NBA will draft around sixty. The situation is even more dire for female athletes; there are approximately the same number of female college basketball players as male, but the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) will only draft around thirty. As Coakley points out, a race logic that motivates black youth to dedicate themselves to sports may also contribute to teachers perceiving black athletes as marginal students and disincentivizing academic advancement (Coakley 2001, pp. 254–55). This, combined with limited opportunities for professional athletic success, can dramatically impede a young black person’s ability to succeed in other ways.

In his critique of the racial dynamics of big-time sport, Howard Bryant points to the example of early twenty-first century Chicago. The city paid an estimated \$662 million in police misconduct settlements from 2004 to 2015, all the while only providing two librarians for its entire public school system. Bryant points out that rather than address issues of police brutality or inadequate educational resources, the city reveled in the athletic success of NBA player Kevin Garnett. He writes:

It was easy to use sports as proof that it was permissible, even in a new millennium, to still continue to value the black body over the black mind—because Kevin Garnett, who came from one of the roughest Chicago neighborhoods in the country, earned \$200 million in salary thanks to growing to be nearly seven feet tall and being really, really good at basketball. It was a delusion that allowed institutions public and private to point to Garnett’s success while continuously failing its citizens. (Bryant 2018, p. 166)

For Bryant and other critics of systemic racism, sports success narratives can overshadow and obscure economic realities that stand in the way of the vast majority of NBA hopefuls who see players like Garnett’s success as a roadmap to their own victories.

In Bryant’s telling, professional sports institutions denied the reality of racialized police brutality and discouraged players from advocating for change. In response, players developed public displays of protest such as wearing sweatshirts readings “I can’t breathe” during warm-ups after the death of Eric Garner or entering a stadium with hands raised in a hands-up-don’t-shoot gesture. When Colin Kaepernick began kneeling during pre-game national anthems in 2016, “sports journalism, never known for an abundance of courage or independence, reached a similar consensus to the fans’: shut up and play” (Bryant 2018, p. 8).⁷ For Bryant, these examples reveal a fundamental disconnect between what fans want to see and hear (black bodies performing athletic feats and expressing gratitude afterward) and the reality of lived black life in the U.S.

5. Conclusions

In 2016, the Cleveland Cavaliers won the National Basketball Association (NBA) championship. With one minute left in game four against the Golden State Warriors, the game was tied 89–89. A three-pointer by Kyrie Irving put the Cavaliers ahead, and Cleveland star LeBron James picked up a rebound from a failed three-point shot by Golden State’s Steph Curry on the next play, keeping the score at 92–89. With ten seconds remaining, James was fouled while attempting a jump shot and given two free throw chances. He missed his first shot and sunk the second, making the score 93–89. Golden State called a time out and prepared to take possession of the ball. When play resumed, a foul gave Golden State another chance on their play with six seconds remaining. When Steph Curry missed a three-point shot and the timer sounded, the game was over and Cleveland celebrated victory. Cameras showed LeBron James encircled by hugging teammates and then falling to the ground with emotion, sobbing against the floor.

Following the game, an ESPN interviewer said to James, “As soon as that buzzer sounded, your emotions let loose. Can you describe what you’re feeling right now?” He responded:

I set out a goal, two years [ago] when I came back, to bring a championship to this city. I gave everything that I had. I poured my heart, my blood, my sweat, my tears into this game and against all odds, against all odds—I don’t know why we want to take the hardest road, I don’t know why the man above gave me the hardest road—the man above don’t put you in situations you can’t handle. And I just kept that same positive attitude, like instead of saying, “Why me?,” saying this is what he wants me to do. And, uh, CLEVELAND, this is for you! (ESPN 2016)

James’ victory interview contains common elements that recur in athletes’ descriptions of their successes. James describes setting a goal and working hard to achieve it. He attests that God wanted him to win and allowed him to win because of James’s positive attitude. Many post-victory interviews feature these themes of positive thinking and God’s will as well as themes of believing in yourself and envisioning your assured success.

Narratives of athletic success are shaped by interview questions that ask athletes to recount their road to success as working hard to make a dream become reality. Similarly, in prosperity gospel congregations across the country, believers recount tales of their good fortune, attributing their success to their faith and God’s will. As Lin points out, “There is no honor in admitting that one’s wealth and success resulted from chance or, worse, was unfairly attained” (Lin 2020, p. 164). Narratives of deserved success are more comfortable because they shore up belief in meritocracy and feel empowering to individuals. Since at least the nineteenth century, Americans have been attracted to the idea of positive thinking as a means to success. New Thought, Pentecostalism, self-help, today’s megachurches, and athletic narratives of success all promote the idea that right thinking and faithful believing are a surefire strategy for success. What is left out of this perspective are the ongoing structural inequalities of American life such as racism, poverty, and immigration status that pose barriers to success.

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- ¹ Many thanks to my student researcher, Abby Comey, for her assistance researching sources for this article.
- ² Acts 2:4 (NIV) reads, “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them”.
- ³ In the 1980s and 1990s, some prosperity preachers offered healing from HIV/AIDS. For example, Pastor John Walton of the Victorious Faith Center in Durham, North Carolina recounted to Kate Bowler that he was able to facilitate the healing of a man in the final stages of AIDS. In Walton’s telling, it was one of the most meaningful miracles of his life; God restored the man by delivering him from homosexuality. Bowler emphasizes that within this worldview, illness is a spiritual problem that requires a spiritual solution (Bowler 2013, p. 143). In a similar vein, sociologist Sandra Barnes has argued that black congregations that embrace prosperity theology are less likely to provide programs and outreach to those struggling with HIV/AIDS (Barnes 2013). For the black megachurches that Barnes studied, those that espoused prosperity theology tended to treat all forms of illness the same: as a lack of spiritual confidence. Even though HIV/AIDS disproportionately impacted blacks and Latinos in the 1990s, prosperity churches for these populations taught that spiritual healing was not only possible, but God’s desire for believers.
- ⁴ During March of 2020, when many states issued stay-at-home orders and encouraged or required religious institutions to suspend worship gatherings to slow the spread of COVID-19, sociologists Paul Djupe and Ryan Burge found that prosperity gospel churches were less likely to suspend services. They theorize that this is because prosperity gospel adherents see worship participation and the act of financial giving to their church as central to their possibility of receiving God’s blessings of health and wealth. Djupe and Burge note that this population saw the novel corona virus as a threat but perceived the solution to be faithful church attendance and continuing religious worship (Djupe and Burge 2021).
- ⁵ Mark 10:49–10:52 (NIV) reads: “Jesus stopped and said, ‘Call him.’ So they called to the blind man, ‘Cheer up! On your feet! He’s calling you.’ Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ Jesus asked him. The blind man said, ‘Rabbi, I want to see.’ ‘Go,’ said Jesus, ‘your faith has healed you.’ Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road”.
- ⁶ For an exploration of the role of prosperity theology in American megachurches, see Wellman et al. (2020).
- ⁷ Jeremy Sabella notes that reactions to Kaepernick differed substantially from reactions to a previous sideline kneeler, Tim Tebow. Sabella point out that while Tebow conformed to fans’ expectations, Kaepernick’s performance of the same gesture in the same location at a different time of the event registered as protest and triggered immediate backlash (Sabella 2019).

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