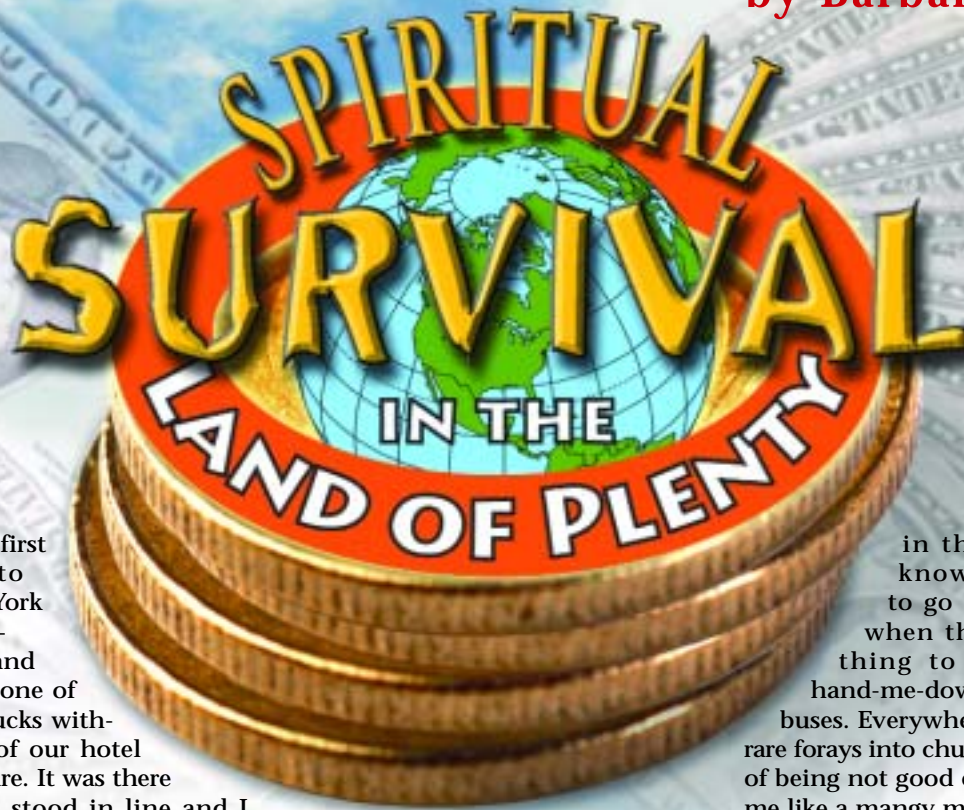


by Barbara Curtis



On our first trip to New York City, my husband, Tripp, and I ducked into one of the 167 Starbucks within five miles of our hotel on Times Square. It was there—while Tripp stood in line and I held our table—that I experienced one of those moments of truth.

I was pursuing my favorite pastime, people-watching—the good, the bad and the ugly—when the door opened to reveal a little brown boy in ill-fitting clothes. Completely out of place in this trendy environment where the only other kids were toddlers in designer strollers, the boy avoided looking around as he headed for the nearest table, where he offered a badly wrinkled piece of paper to a gaggle of prosperous-looking women who barely paused before handing it back. They never even glanced at him.

Next was a hip-looking couple, who shook their heads as though he were offering an NRA brochure.

I watched as the boy made his rounds. A dozen tables responding with variations on a theme—not a single kind word or glance. When he reached my table, I took his note and read:

“My mother is home with my three little sisters. Our father has gone and we have no food. Can you help us a little?”

It was written in pencil and so worn from worried crumpling that it threatened to soon fall apart. I gave it back to him and asked, “Do you speak English?” No. And the fact that I don’t speak Spanish left us with very little to say.

I emptied my wallet and my pockets and gave him everything I had—which wasn’t as heroic as it sounds because my husband was carrying most of our money. I didn’t feel like a saint, but a sinner. What in the world was I doing in

in the inner city. I know what it’s like to go to sleep hungry when there just isn’t a thing to eat. We wore hand-me-downs and rode on buses. Everywhere I went—even rare forays into church—my feelings of being not good enough followed me like a mangy mutt I tried unsuccessfully to leave behind.

But it happened that by the time I became a Christian I was 38 years old and Tripp and I were married with five children, a lovely home, and a successful business in one of the top ten most affluent counties in the country. We went to church with lots of splendidly successful folks just like us.

With the ups and downs of my background, it’s taken time for me to sort through the issues of God’s blessings, wealth and success.

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Starbucks anyway spending so much for a drink and its fleeting pleasure—which I could certainly have done without? Rather than feeling somehow superior to the other customers who’d been asked for help and refused, I felt ashamed of my proximity to them.

Being in Need and Having Plenty

I grew up poor myself—with a single mother and two little brothers

Though at first I might have been naïve enough to think that somehow they were all related—after all I was poor before I knew God and fairly wealthy when I found him—wasn’t he responsible for that? I’ve come to understand the subtleties that many churches, and churchgoers, seem prone to miss.

Our society, built on capitalism and free markets, has always measured success in one way and one

ILLUSTRATION BY MARY WEGNER—PTM

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way only—money. Consider: No matter how much homage we give to education, a well-educated poor man is not considered a success. And though the Bible tells us that children are a blessing and a reward, we don't consider a man and woman successful just because they have a lot of them (ask me—as a mother of 12, I know that even in the church this is the last way many measure success!) We don't measure success by good deeds: Mother Teresa may be admired, but she would be considered an aberration, not a role model for success.

And if the philosophical/social foundation weren't enough of a problem, the acceleration of consumerism and the power of the media to create desire and inflame greed has pushed our distorted view of success to the limits. How easy it is to get hooked on always trading up!

What drives us to trade in a comfortable home for the newest McMansion on the other side of town? To trade in a reliable car for a newer, sleeker model? What causes us to work longer hours away from our families to be in constant pursuit of bigger and better things—ATVs, home theaters, \$20,000 Kubota tractors?

Wouldn't you think Christians would be at least a little less vulnerable? The Bible gives us clear warnings:

"Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15).

"Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:15).

Jesus must have known that for most of us, the struggle with greed, and our susceptibility to society's obsession with material success

would call for constant vigilance. He said, "Watch out! Be on guard." Which causes me to cry out: *Lord, help me to watch out and be on guard! Help me be satisfied with and make the most of what I have. Help me learn to keep less and give more!*

Health and Wealth

In light of these warnings, it seems almost unfathomable that many American churches in Christ's name proclaim that we can will our way into success—that simply by speaking our desires in faith we can make God bless us with health and wealth—all the outer measures of success.

Never mind that the premise is flawed—the premise that health and wealth equal success and that success is something we should be striving for. Never mind that according to this simple-minded system anyone who loses a job or a child or his ability to walk simply lacks faith.

But to see God relegated to the role of Cosmic Vending Machine—put in the right amount of faith and out pops your heart's desire—now that is painful.

Especially to people like Tripp and I, who spent seven years exploring every nook and cranny of the New Age, latching on to the principles of *prosperity thinking* and *creating our own reality*—backed by our guru with actual Bible verse—to stay healthy, build a business, buy a house—to attain all those outer symbols of success.

Of course, when we accepted Jesus as our Savior, when we discovered what it meant to remove ourselves from the throne of our hearts and to be willing to follow God, we put down those powers. Yes, there are truly supernatural powers you can use to create wealth and health. But make no mistake, they are not powers given to us by God, but by the Great Deceiver. *This is not theory, this is my own experience.*

I remember consciously counting the cost, knowing that by surrendering to God and giving up the New Age tools, we would be opening

ourselves up to possible hardship. And indeed, since becoming Christians in 1987, Tripp and I have actually been on more of a roller coaster—experiencing miscarriages, the birth of a child with special needs, several financial setbacks.

But even as I counted the cost, I knew I could never give up my commitment to Christ, who brought spiritual healing to me and my marriage and who established peace in our hearts and our home. It was indeed that spiritual health and peace that helped us weather the real life difficulties ahead.

The New Age Invades Christendom

Imagine my surprise, then, after many years of surrendering my life to Christ, to hear New Age practices being preached from the pulpits of some of America's most "successful" churches. Joel Osteen, pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, with 30,000 attendees per week, the largest evangelical church in America, could well be the "Poster Pastor" for the prosperity gospel:

"Many of you today know this, you believe it down here in your

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heart. But the reason that you're not experiencing as much as you should is because you're not declaring it. You've got to give life to your faith by speaking it out. Your words have creative power. When you go around saying, 'I have favor, people want to be good to me and supernatural doors are opening.' When you make those declarations of faith, you are charging the atmosphere. And your own words can help to bring it to pass." (Joel Osteen, *Experiencing More Of God's Favor*, Tape # 212, Daystar, July 10, 2004).

"Words are like seeds, they have creative power....You can change

your world by simply changing your words.” (Joel Osteen, *Speaking Faith Filled Words*, Tape #223, Daystar Television, May 2, 2004).

The picture of God as a Cosmic Vending Machine is not a Christian view of our Creator, but unmistakably New Age. It’s up to you and your faith to create success and there’s only one way to measure success—materially.

It was easy for me to think of God this way before I’d actually met him. Now it seems like an atrocity. And such an unbelievable aberration for Christians—who are supposed to have made a commitment to remove themselves from the throne of their hearts to make room for Jesus.

I think of Mary breaking her alabaster jar and pouring ointment worth a few years wages over Jesus’ head, wiping his feet with her hair and her tears. I think of Jesus telling the rich young ruler to sell everything he had and give it to the poor and then follow Jesus.

The Bible says that the rich young man “went away sad because he had great wealth” (Matthew 19:22. And Jesus then told his disciples “...it is hard for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:23).

If we took that seriously, I guess we’d all be praying that God would save us from being rich!

But isn’t that what it’s all about? Being a successful Christian is not in any way related to success as the world measures it. It is all about how closely we are becoming conformed to Christ and how well we serve him.

Over and over, Jesus encouraged, exhorted and commanded us to care for our brothers. This precept



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is truly what sets Christianity apart from all other religions. It is the reason we go to the ends of the earth—not just to preach the gospel but to live the gospel by feeding, clothing and nursing those in need.

Saved For Riches... or From Riches?

The prosperity gospel is the opposite of true Christianity. Timothy dealt with it straight up:

“But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money

is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” (1 Timothy 6:6-10).

That teaching goes to the heart of how unbiblical it is for churches to regard the wealthy as “favored.” There’s really no room for any of that in God’s kingdom.

I remember as a new Christian realizing the ugliness of my old belief in karma—that it was this kind of belief that allowed the misery in India to continue unabated, that encouraged people to pass by suffering without any response, thinking, *He doesn’t need help—he’s just working out his karma.*

But when Christians posit individual faith as the source or lack of health and wealth, isn’t that the same?

Isn’t it just a philosophy which gets us off the hook for responsibility for our fellow man?

If a disheveled little boy wandered into your Starbucks or your church—or your church’s Starbucks (there’s one in the mega-church near where we live!), what would your perception of the situation reveal about your faith? Can you say with assurance the prosperous people flocking around the *frappés* or in the pews are truly successful?

Or is it true what Jesus tried to tell the rich young ruler, that the trappings of success are truly just that—trappings? □

Barbara Curtis writes from Virginia. In addition to appearing regularly in Plain Truth, Barbara’s work is published in a wide variety of Christian magazines.

IMAGE BY MARY WEGNER—PTM