



INTERVIEW



Courtesy of Kate Bowler

On Dying and Reckoning with the Prosperity Gospel

How church historian Kate Bowler's cancer diagnosis brought her face-to-face with the beauty and terror of the popular movement.

Interview by Morgan Lee / FEBRUARY 23, 2016

*Kate Bowler is a Canadian professor at Duke Divinity School who researches the prosperity gospel movement. She's also 35, a wife and mother, and critically ill with cancer. In a widely shared New York Times piece "[Death, the Prosperity Gospel, and Me](#)," the author of *Blessed* reflected on her research and how it informed her convictions on suffering and faith. ([Read CT's book review](#).) "I'm never very theologically declarative," said Bowler. "I've really tried to hold off on doing that in order to make enough space for people to make up their own minds. But in this case, it was just a lot more personal. I don't have a lot of pretension anymore."*

Bowler recently spoke with Christianity Today's assistant editor Morgan Lee about how Americans define suffering, what she would embrace from prosperity gospel theology, and how she copes with the loss of control that suffering brings. "It's very bizarre to be eclipsed by a disease you barely knew existed a couple months ago," she said. "It's been a really intense year."

In what ways have your feelings changed towards the prosperity gospel movement since your diagnosis?

I'm one of the many people who wants an answer when there is no answer, who wants to demand

things of God when God does not always connect the dots for us. Even more, I relate to their desire for certainty.

Prosperity gospel makes everyone feel special. It makes everyone feel uniquely chosen. Every detail of your life is God's ultimate concern. I've seen that do wonders for people.

Getting over not being special has been hard. I have to get used to being as beloved by God as everybody else. You want to feel like your personality, your efforts, and your theological insight counts for something. It doesn't. I just have to be as beloved as everybody else.

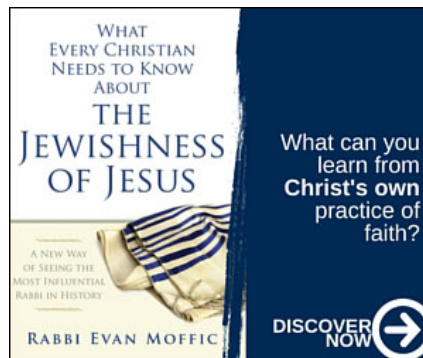
Is there anything in the prosperity gospel movement that you find tempting to embrace and hold onto at this point in life?

The prosperity gospel does expectation beautifully—the hope that God can always do more, the desire to see transformation before your eyes.

I love their spiritual tenacity. They work harder than most people that I know, spiritually speaking. They really believe that God is making a difference in their everyday life, and they're willing to put in time praying, serving others, acting as if their life is a ladder to somewhere.

I love their language of specificity. They really do believe that God is in the details of their life. Now what that means, of course, is that they work backwards from their biography to God's intent looking through their lives for evidence of God's favor. And that can be its own prison.

What is lovely about that is we do want to know that God counts the hairs on our heads, loved us since we were born, and cares about our family more than we could even imagine. Those kinds of comforts, prosperity gospel rightly foregrounds.



Given some of these strengths that you can see in the behaviors of the people that are involved in the movement or even the theology themselves, what keeps you from fully embracing it?

Prosperity gospel makes God into a kind of monster. It creates the problem that it tries to solve. It says we can always know the will of God because God has given us a special kind of faith which we can use to act. What that means is every single thing in your life becomes your fault or your reward. That's a terrifying place to be.

People who die are not necessarily just worried about dying. They're worried about the people they're leaving behind.

In some ways, it's as if God is bigger because they see him in everyday life. But at the same time, it makes God smaller because the theology gives you so much agency in our own life.

When we overly-instrumentalize prayer, we become convinced we've connected all the dots between us and God. To be totally honest, I cannot say things like "It would be better for my son not to have a mom, because surely God is working in all things for the good of those who love him." That sounds like a lie to me, because I'm working from my desires forward toward God's.

What I can say honestly is things that work backwards from God's desires to mine ontologically: God is good, God is faithful, God's desires for me are good. When I work from God to me I can say true and beautiful things. When I work from me to God, I end up lying.

How has your prayer life changed in the past couple of months?

I'm desperate. I pray for the day because I can't get through it without God. As it turns out, desperation is better for me, because I just can't assume that I'm able to cobble this thing together. Prayer has become radical dependence on the assumption that God will be there no matter what. It's just been a radical revelation of God's presence.

How have you learned how to talk about death?

It's still really new for me. I'm only a couple of months in to the drama.

I don't know about if I'm more comfortable talking about death, but I'm certainly more comfortable talking about pain. I certainly have many more opinions about how beautiful, loving children of God should shut their pie holes when it comes to marching into people's hospital rooms.

What did studying the prosperity gospel teach you about the way that American culture understands death?

Prosperity gospel is a reflection of American avoidance of our finitude. Their denial of the inevitability of death taught me something about American confidence. Americans want to be in control. Self-determination is a theological good. It's really hard when it comes to the fragility of the end.

In almost all circumstances, I can understand why someone would go to a prosperity church. It has so many obvious appeals pragmatically, theologically, and emotionally. But when it comes to sickness, it offers so few resources to its folks.



The saddest stories that I heard in my research were when it was obvious that people would lose to whatever sickness they were facing. But the church was not able to surround them with comfort and tell them that they weren't to blame or that there were questions and uncertainties beyond our knowledge. They couldn't tell them that God was present in the suffering of his people, not just in the triumph of them.

Your essay made me think that many Americans define suffering as when they lose agency over a situation.

That's right. It's such an intense theological reaction to helplessness. The only problem is that helplessness is a prerequisite to the human condition.

So the prosperity gospel movement's understanding of faith is the most distinctive element of their theology. It's a faith that's meant to be used. It's wonderfully pragmatic. They expect to be able to extract an answer from God and that prayer will guarantee results. And the language of guarantee and formulas is really hard for Christians that want to put some wiggle room in that sort of space between human desire and God's response.

Long before Pentecostals were very interested in money, they were trying to figure out why some people get healed and others don't. They wanted to know what kind of language in prayer could make a prayer more effective or not. It's just that this practice lends itself to formulas that have to be repeated to prove God. Pentecostals will talk a lot about proving God in a way that would make Reformed people weep.

What do you think evangelical churches can learn from those in the prosperity gospel movement?

The prosperity gospel does expectation beautifully—the hope that God can always do more, the desire to see transformation before your eyes. Evangelicals would do well to remember that we can live in constant expectancy that God transforms things.

That said, performatively speaking, evangelical megachurches are almost indistinguishable from prosperity megachurches insofar as there are constant celebrations of you have to have the same emotional arc in the music. Everything has to lead to happy at all times. It's related to the fact that both Pentecostalism and evangelicalism are both very market savvy. But the desire to make things palatable and shiny and cheerful needs to be resisted. Not that everyone needs to have a blue Christmas, but people need a thick language of authentic pain in order to grapple with reality of life.

I've had conversations with Christians about how the church needs more lament.

Jesus dying for my sins is fundamental to my salvation. But that's actually not what I need to hear right now. What I need to hear is about the breaking of the kingdom. What I need to hear about is the sense that after the resurrection Jesus breaks the power of death and wants to transform us from the inside out.



The constant focus on justification without a language of sanctification that also includes hardship is like missing the point. People feel like they're always getting down to the basics when they do justification, but I cannot hear one more "Jesus died for my sins" without it meaning something else other than my personal salvation. It's making me bananas.

Does knowing that Jesus himself suffered make any difference to you?

Absolutely. It is incredibly comforting to think about a God who knows precisely how we feel. Yeah,

absolutely. But it has to be for more than me and my sin. Right? It has to be for the transformation of the world. I need a story in which my family gets to be together again.

I get to go to heaven. Thank you. That's actually wonderful, but people who die are not necessarily just worried about dying. They're worried about the people they're leaving behind.

What do you make of God sending Jesus to earth, of Jesus having literal skin in the game?

Before, I was caught up in the sense of my own progress. Now I don't have so many ambitions and desires—because I can't have them.

That's right. Yeah. And I don't know. The weirdest part about being sick is it feels like I can see the secret of the kingdom now. In suffering, you feel God's presence so intensely that you can see how God is trying to draw close at all times. In that sense, it's just an oddly intimate way to experience the suffering of the world, because it's not just yours. You see the brokenness of everything.

Before, I was caught up in the sense of my own progress. Now I don't have so many ambitions and desires—because I can't have them. And in that kind of stillness everybody else's pains and hopes become much more real.

It's been a really weird experience.

Doesn't some of it relate to that transformation of when you're not special anymore?

Yes. My friend sent me this Bonhoeffer quote the other day from the concentration camp:

"Almost all the people that I find in my present surroundings cling to their own desires and still have no interest in others. They no longer listen. They're incapable of loving their neighbor. I think that even in this place we ought to live as if we had no wishes and no future and just be our true selves. It's remarkable how others come to rely on us, confide in us, and let us talk to them."

Suffering that causes you to notice the suffering of others. There's peace in that.

My only prayer for this cancer is that it somehow makes me more of who God intended me to be. I mean that I could somehow be more myself than I would have been without it. And I don't know what that's going to mean, but I sure hope. I sure hope it happens.



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