

Empowered: The entrepreneurial ministry of T. D. Jakes

by [Jonathan L. Walton, Ph.D.](#) in the [July 10, 2007](#) issue

It is 11:30 a.m. on a clear, sunny Sunday morning in southern Dallas, and traffic is heavy on Highway 480 near West Kiest Boulevard. Just off the exit ramp, a lot of Range Rovers and Cadillac Escalades are navigating a maze of orange cones in vast parking lots that could belong to the Cowboys' Texas Stadium. But this largely buppie crowd (young black urban professionals) has come not to see a football game, but to hear "Bishop" T. D. Jakes, pastor of the nondenominational megachurch The Potter's House.

As thousands of well-groomed and perfumed worshipers enter the The Potter's House lobby, they are met with images of the bishop plastered on the walls of the lobby: there is Jakes advertising one of his many books, or Jakes promoting his DVD series—and all of the products are available at The Potter's House bookstore. Booths scattered throughout the lobby offer ministerial services such as blood-pressure screenings and premarital counseling. The worshipers stroll past the displays as they move toward the sanctuary, casually exchanging pleasantries and business cards as they go.

Most have come to hear a message of psychological healing, emotional deliverance and economic empowerment in a dynamic presentation that some say makes Jakes the Christian alternative to Oprah or Dr. Phil. In an African-American community that remains reluctant to discuss mental health issues, frowns on psychological counseling and resides disproportionately at the bottom of America's economic pyramid, T. D. Jakes is both therapist and financial adviser. By rhythmically remixing Afro-Pentecostal rhetoric with pop psychology, and evangelical Christianity with American capitalism, Bishop Jakes has recast the ecclesiastical mold in America. Jakes is, as Tulane University sociologist Shayne Lee says with the title of his book on the rise of the bishop, *America's New Preacher*.

The bishop has graced the cover of *Time* and has been on the *New York Times* best-seller list. He spends time with and counsels President Bush. He has written and starred in a Hollywood feature film and has appeared on *Larry King Live* and *Oprah*. Unlike other televangelists, Jakes commands respect on the campuses of both Oral Roberts and Princeton universities. This may be due to his ingenious preaching style: in the pulpit Jakes combines the dramatic showmanship of Billy Sunday, the organizational acumen of Oral Roberts and the homiletic creativity of C. L. Franklin with mass media and consumerist impulses. He captures the spirit of an old-fashioned revival meeting and markets it via the electronic airwaves.

In the process, he's become the new gold standard in the evangelical world. When Jakes speaks to women, one hears part fiery Pentecostal preacher and part Barry White baritone, both ascetic and erotic. He can discuss a chaste relationship between a woman and her God with the velvet imagery of an Arabesque romance novel, encourage female congregants to eclipse societal norms and gender ceilings that preclude positive self-actualization, and affirm the traditional ordering of the Christian family—all in one sermon. Thus he addresses the realities of a rapidly shifting cultural landscape while resonating with those who long for the good old days.

Jakes was born in 1957 in South Charleston, West Virginia. His father ran a cleaning business and his mother, a graduate of Tuskegee College, was a grade school teacher selling Avon products and fresh vegetables in her spare time. As a teen, Jakes attended a small Pentecostal church; the congregation became a spiritual haven for him as he dealt with his father's kidney failure, his parents' divorce and his father's subsequent death. He dropped out of high school to assist his mother financially and pursued a call to ministry by preaching at small storefront churches throughout West Virginia. In 1979 he organized his first congregation, then relocated the church several times before landing in Cross Lanes, an affluent suburb of Charleston. Here Jakes began a women-only Sunday school class where he addressed taboo topics such as rape, child molestation, domestic violence and emotional abuse. He titled the class "Woman, Thou Art Loosed," drawing on the Lucan narrative in which Jesus heals a woman of her infirmity.

In 1993, Jakes preached a sermon of the same title at the annual Azusa conference led by then-evangelical superstar Bishop Carlton Pearson of Tulsa, Oklahoma. Soon afterward Jakes self-published the book *Woman, Thou Art Loosed*. When it proved to be a professional and economic windfall, he held a national conference under the

same name and attracted tens of thousands. In 1996, he established The Potter's House Church in Dallas, which is now the institutional headquarters of T. D. Jakes Ministries (nonprofit) and T. D. Jakes Enterprises (for-profit). A \$45 million sanctuary attracts over 30,000 congregants, while the \$11 million Clay Academy houses a private Christian school. Work has begun on the \$150 million Capella Park, a 1,500-unit, single-family residential development. Meanwhile, investments of millions of dollars are being used to build schools and provide health care in Africa.

Jakes's followers hail him for his messages of empowerment for women, a ministry that's informed by his appreciation of his own mother and grandmother. In *God's Leading Lady* Jakes writes:

I watched my mother purchase many "fields" and "vineyards," although in her case they were often rental houses or small businesses she could run from home. I learned to admire and appreciate the incredible combination of strength and creativity displayed by . . . [these] resourceful women. They have both inspired me many times in my own pursuit of the opportunities God presents to me.

The countless women who gravitate toward Jakes's message are not duped. As Marla Frederick of Harvard University contends, "Women who attend these conferences are obviously experiencing something that they are not getting from traditional churches."

But a closer examination reveals the bishop to be somewhat problematic as a liberator. Some call his prescriptions archaic, claiming that he embraces the very gender hierarchies that he claims to want to dismantle. Jakes's books, for example, are peppered with traditional assumptions concerning the roles of men and women in society—assumptions that reinforce male domination and female subjugation. In *Loose That Man & Let Him Go*, he calls for the restoration of males to a place of authority and purpose and employs hypermasculinist metaphors to explain "the essence of man." "There is a hunter in you whether you are stalking a contract, a deer or a woman," Jakes says, and he describes men who are hurting as "wounded warriors" in *He-Motions: Even Strong Men Struggle*. This rhetoric equates manliness with violence and aggression and leads Frederick to note inconsistencies:

As he redefines gender norms for women in his conferences—encouraging women to stop waiting on a man to ride in on a white horse, or telling them that they should start their own business, etc.—what kinds of “warrior men” is he preparing to interact with this newly defined and liberated woman? Is this “warrior man” now more apt to change diapers, wash dishes or scrub bathroom toilets, even as he learns from Jakes to be more emotionally available? In other words, as he liberates women to take on corporate America, is he liberating men to assume new domestic responsibilities?

Jakes matches this hypermasculinity with an ultrafemininity. In describing the creation of Eve, for example, he says:

The only thing that covered her soft, satiny skin was the bright yellow rays of the sun. In the night, the moonlight cradled her breast with tender hands and a radiant glow. She may have showered in the cascading current of a rapid waterfall. As she ran, her strong thighs whipped through the tall grain with a synergy that cannot be adequately described.

“Women, for the most part, enjoy being women,” says Jakes. “They surround themselves with beautiful things—flowers and lacy, delicate things that help to frame and enhance the beauty of their femininity.” Such a creature, he infers, needs to be protected. His conference and book titles, such as *Man Power* and *He-Motions*, suggest who will do the protecting. Contrast these titles with *The Lady, Her Lover, and Her Lord*; *Daddy Loves His Girls*; and *His Lady*. Even as he claims to move African-American women toward positive self-actualization, Jakes writes as if he is obsessed with having power over the female body. This is also evident in his gender-segregated conferences; he allows men to preach at conferences directed to women but has never allowed a woman to preach at a conference directed to men.

“Evidently,” says Frederick, “a man can liberate a woman, but a woman cannot liberate a man.”

Shayne Lee suggests that we not dismiss Jakes before we’ve sought to understand the context in which he speaks and writes. We need to remember, says Lee, that Jakes is part of the evangelical world and especially the televangelist world, in which women’s role has traditionally been restricted. In that setting, his message of

empowerment, despite its flaws and inconsistencies, is breaking through cultural and institutional barriers on behalf of women. Lee points out that Jakes affirms women in nontraditional roles, including ministry, and that he supports the ordination of women and the employment of women in a world that has at times opposed both.

Another criticism often leveled at the bishop relates to his preoccupation with amassing a personal fortune. While he claims to empower those trapped in economic despair, he models an ostentatious lifestyle and lives in a \$1.7 million mansion—a contradiction that makes him a lightning rod of controversy.

Jakes has earned \$100 million by marketing and selling every aspect of his ministry. The book *Woman, Thou Art Loosed*, for example, became a gospel music CD, a stage play, a women's study Bible and workbook, a cookbook and eventually a full-length feature film starring Jakes alongside Hollywood stars Kimberly Elise and Loretta Devine. Jakes's media empire—which includes Dexterity Records, his own gospel recording label—recently inked a nine-movie deal with Sony Pictures.

The bishop defends his business dealings in part by situating himself and his ministry within the black church's tradition of encouraging economic development where it is desperately needed. In "Preachers, Profits and the Prophetic: The New Face of American Evangelicalism," a public conversation with Cornel West, Jakes described his ministry:

From my pulpit I not only sought to win souls to Christ but to also challenge them that they be freed from poverty, narrow-mindedness and the lack of information that can keep you still enslaved even in our contemporary society because you can't control your destiny. . . . Some of the challenges that we face are not just racism but they are economic empowerment, moving beyond self-hatred; it's giving ourselves permission to be successful.

This economic orientation places him along a continuum with African-American leaders such as Booker T. Washington, Elijah Muhammad and J. H. Jackson, each of whom garnered public acclaim and personal fortune by advocating a "gospel of work and money" (to quote W. E. B. DuBois) while publicly eschewing political protest and prophetic social change.

But these men's prescriptions for economic success share certain shortcomings. Their themes of personal and economic empowerment presuppose that society invites and permits social mobility on a large scale. The bishop's rhetoric of self-choice—controlling one's own destiny and moving beyond self-hatred—employed in the service of promoting entrepreneurship and economic empowerment, operates from this assumption, as does the myth of the American Dream. Meanwhile, however, America's pyramidal economic structure seems more fixed today than ever before. Without an accompanying call for social change, the bishop's plan of action is a fool's paradise for many of those who are listening to him.

Like Donald Trump, Anthony Robbins and televangelist Joel Osteen, Jakes has entrepreneurial impulses, business savvy and unbridled ambition. He knows what Americans want and is unapologetic about selling his recipe. Lee criticizes Jakes's "hypercapitalist" values and his failure to address the structural forces that keep many from achieving economic stability, let alone success.

But seeing the durability of Jakes's ministry over time, Lee has moderated his criticism. That ministry seems to be what many Americans need, says Lee. "What Jakes is doing is very important with black people, but also with others. Jakes is empowering on a personal level—this is his model. You're not big enough to challenge the power structures on your own, he tells people, but you can try to transcend your own economic and personal situation. . . . Maximize your moment."

It may be too early, then, to dismiss Bishop Jakes as only a proselytizer for the prosperity gospel or a defender of traditional gender roles. He also offers a powerful and urgently needed message of empowerment and hope. It remains to be seen which of these messages defines his legacy.