

When terrible theology makes good Christians

By [David Williams](#)

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It was the strangest thing.

I was heaving my way through a book by Creflo A. Dollar, one of the most potent purveyors of prosperity preaching in the United States. Like Joel Osteen, he's an evangelist for the health-and-wealth Jesus, the Jesus who gets you ahead and gets you rich. Also like Joel Osteen, he's managed to get rich as Croesus from the many blessings he receives from his teeming throng of congregants and the folks who buy his stuff.

That's multiple Rolls-Royces, multiple mansion, private jet rich. CEO rich. Oligarch rich.

He's a brilliant, able, wonderfully entertaining public speaker, who can cast out a spell of words and play a crowd like nobody's business. He's gotten better over the years, too, way better than when I would watch him pitching out magic prosperity prayer napkins on late night tee vee 25 years ago. Blessings, yours for a love offering of only a hundred dollars! What a bargain that was! Now, he's sharper, tighter, and smarter. And so very much richer.

Having referenced dear brother Creflo several times recently in my preaching, I felt obligated to delve a little bit more into his public thinking. I picked out one of his books from the library, because I find thrift lends itself to prospering.

It was a semi-recent tome, one that dated back from the beginning of the Great Recession, and it did not disappoint. [\*Winning in Troubled Times\*](#) was a wild, bold expression of the values of that peculiar strain of modern Christian expression. It opens with the confident assertion that we follow Jesus because we want to win. We want victory.

Faith is all about using supernatural power to win, or so Creflo tells us. Now!

On the one hand, sure. It's victory. But "Jesus-winning" is not victory in the rat race, or in our consumer striving to have and to own. It's victory over those things, and over the will to power, over that fundamentally broken part of our souls that insists on ruling and owning and having. The warnings against the dangers of wealth that are such a vital part of Christ's teachings are nowhere to be found.

I forced myself to keep reading.

And in the reading, I found myself struck by strangeness. For all of my eye-rolling about the absurdity of name-it-and-claim-it hucksterism, much of what Creflo writes is actually not so wildly different from the type of moral advice I would give.

There's a tremendous amount of focus on trust, self-sacrifice, and kindness. There's encouragement to recognize and strive towards unrealized potential, and to embrace possibility and reject negative sinkholes of self-hate and addiction. "Don't expect things to just magically happen," he says. "You've got to work for it. Push for it. *Believe* it."

Over and over again, there is the call to be generous and giving and open-hearted towards all those around you. It's a clear theme.

And it struck me: if you actually did all of this stuff, and took this gifted huckster's advice, there's a very real chance you might ... be a pretty good person. A faithful person. You'd pray a whole bunch. You'd give generously of yourself to charities and to neighbors and to strangers. You'd view it as your responsibility. You'd strive to improve yourself, both viewing success as a gift and having the hope-fueled resilience to hold up under adversity. You'd be helpful, gracious, and giving.

This, of course, is part of the careful calculus of prosperity preaching. On the one hand, it plays off of the human desire for wealth and power. It taps our yearning for some selfish magic, something supernatural that gets us ahead and makes us wealthy.

But if you go too deep down that route, suddenly you've created a mystic Ayn Rand, selfish and grasping and as giving as a stone. Or you've made a Sith Apprentice, who's all primed and ready to slay their master.

Neither of these ethics would build a ministry.

What you want is to teach an ethic that creates people who are hardworking and generous, hopeful and giving, who earnestly believe that they are blessed, and who are willing to trust that their sharing of their blessings with others is a good thing.

Good Christians, in other words.

So. Very. Peculiar.

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