

Paula L. McGee. *Brand® New Theology: The Wal-Martization of T.D. Jakes and the New Black Church*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017. 221 pages. \$18.87.

Within the pages of four short chapters, Dr. Paula McGee displays the marketing objective, branding initiatives, constructive identity, ideological ethos, and reconstructed gospel that have become the religious product the New Black Church is selling. Focusing on Bishop T.D. Jakes and the Potter's House Ministries, McGee explores the operation and impact of this new theology on the Black Church and the African American community. Visualizing Jakes through the lens of Sam Walton, McGee "argues that his success with the Woman Thou Art Loosed brand and the Potter's House is a vivid example of the Wal-Martization of African American Religion" (3).

Chapter one is a historical primer for understanding the Black Church and the New Black Church. McGee offers this disclaimer: "The terminology of Black Church and even New Black Church is no longer adequate for the more nuanced discussion of African American religion and theology" (33). Opting to bypass the "definitional dilemma," McGee focuses on models of ministry instead. She explores how the communities understand and define their Christian identity, which she views as foundational for understanding both the Black Church and New Black Church (35).

McGee then delves deeply into the waters of prosperity theology or theologies of prosperity (57). Born in the 1980s and 1990s, New Black Church preachers emerged during a cultural sea change (82). Riding the waves of an economic upturn, a rising Black middle class, and a swelling Black population that understood little about the suffering and segregation of their ancestors, "Black preachers responded to the change by transforming deeply rooted symbols from both American secular culture and African American religious culture" (82-84). Utilizing a "this world" liberation theology in familiar African American folk idioms, prosperity preachers constructed "contextual theologies to satisfy the needs of their target audience and the millions of consumers" (61). Prosperity preachers, or theologians of prosperity, McGee says, are "those who interpret Scripture and use rituals such as seed-faith giving and positive confession to create theologies that justify their personal economic empires. They also believe and affirm that it is God's will and a believer's right to obtain prosperity or health and wealth" (180).

Chapter three contains a biographical sketch of Bishop T.D. Jakes. Called to ministry at an early age and raised in an Apostolic church, Jakes organized his first church in 1979 (117). However, he relocated several times because of increased membership. During this time he received an idea from God for a women's Bible class (117). The Bible class material became the book *Woman Thou Art Loosed*, as well as a conference, a play, and a music CD. Jakes writes, "God gave me the ability to take the idea and package it to reach a much larger audience than it would have reached if it had remained just a Bible class" (117). These early life experiences find their way into the stories he preaches to his congregation to justify the prosperity gospel and his personal economic wealth.

Jakes is described as a preacher, pastor, businessman, CEO, writer, playwright, and movie producer. While true, the difficulty is in distinguishing where one feature begins and one ends (108-109). Theologically, Jakes views God "as acting just like a CEO at the helm of a multinational corporation" (124). Christologically, Jakes argues that the atonement provides the believer with access to the blessings of God.

McGee concludes her book with a detailed exposition on the Woman Thou Art Loosed brand. Society has historically held an oppressive view of Black Americans. Jakes, however,

focusing on Black women, positioned himself as someone who understood their plight. He wrote a counternarrative from the Scriptures that offered respectability and spoke health and wholeness to them (149), but which also developed into a media empire where everything has a price, even a VIP seat at the conferences. Blurring lines between sacred and secular in his theology mirrored a blurring of lines between ministry and entertainment.

Bishop T.D. Jakes is a central figure in Black American life and religion, and his prominence is an indicator of the shift occurring in the Black Church. In a society ever more individualistic and focused on capitalism, such churches are extremely attractive. However, McGee, relying on the observations of Peter Drucker, writes, “No one raised the question of whether treating people as consumers was problematic for the overall Christian understanding of making disciples, and whether this fit with each church’s identity within the universal church—what Christians theologically identify as the Body of Christ” (24). More specifically, “What are the ramifications when the Great Commission of making disciples becomes making consumers?” (25). These questions warrant our wrestling as we seek to understand the New Black Church and its prosperity theology. McGee’s book is timely and necessary.

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