The Almighty Dollar: Exploring the Use of the Bible in the Personal Development Industry

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The Almighty Dollar:
Exploring the Use of the Bible in the Personal Development Industry

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By

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Abstract

The Personal Development Industry (PDI),¹ a market conglomerate encompassing the fields of “self-improvement,”² “personal growth,”³ “success industry,”⁴ and “positive thinking/positive psychology,”⁵ had a global valuation of USD 41.7 billion in 2021, and is expected to reach an estimated USD 59.8 billion by 2028, rising 5.3% over the forecast period.⁶ Today, it is no secret that more people than ever are looking for ways to improve their lives,

¹ To provide clarity and consistency, I will henceforth use “Personal Development Industry” (PDI) as the formal term for the collective self-improvement industries. Given the widespread use of the term “Personal Development Industry” by speakers and authors in the PDI, as well as its interdisciplinary influence, I suggest that scholars of theology and religion should adopt PDI as formal terminology to describe this unique area of study.
² “Self-Improvement” refers to the process of improving oneself through conscious effort and self-reflection. It can involve setting goals, acquiring new skills or knowledge, and addressing personal weaknesses or limitations. See Iris Giles-Mathis, “The Experience of Resilience and Striving for Self-Improvement among Adults,” (Ph.D. diss., Capella University, 2023), here 1-5, 11-13.
³ “Personal Growth” refers to the process of developing and expanding one’s potential as a human being, including emotional, intellectual, and spiritual growth. Personal growth can involve gaining self-awareness, increasing resilience, and building positive relationships with others. See Stephen Covey, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), here 17-23. Covey argues that “personal growth” is the “ongoing” development of improving one’s life to reach “its full potential.”
⁴ “Success Industry”—sometimes regionalized to, for instance, “The American Success Industry”—refers to the businesses, products, and services that are marketed towards helping individuals achieve “success” in various areas of life, such as career growth, financial increase, and/or deepening personal relationships. For an excellent primer on how this achievement-based model came to be in the U.S., see Richard M. Huber, The American Idea of Success (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), 1-9.
⁵ “Positive Thinking” refers to the belief that an optimistic and positive mindset can improve one’s well-being and lead to greater success and happiness. Positive thinking can involve focusing on one’s strengths, reframing negative thoughts, and cultivating gratitude and mindfulness. Positive psychology, on the other hand, is a scientific field of study that seeks to understand the factors that contribute to human flourishing, happiness, and well-being. Despite these differences, the terms “positive thinking” and “positive psychology” are often used interchangeably, particularly by thought leaders who may use the latter term to make their message sound more scientific to their audience. See, for example: Martin E. P. Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, “Positive Psychology: An Introduction,” American Psychologist 55, no. 1 (January 2000): 5-14; Michael F. Scheier and Charles S. Carver, “On the Power of Positive Thinking: The Benefits of Being Optimistic;” Current Directions in Psychological Science 2, no. 1 (February 1993): 26-30; Barbara L. Fredrickson, Positivity: Top-Notch Research Reveals The 3-To-1 Ratio That Will Change Your Life (New York: Harmony, 2009), 29. Barbara Ehrenreich in her book, Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2009), argues that positive thinking has taken such a significant hold on the psyche of Americans that the category of “positive psychology” discourse began from “within” solely to make positive thinking sound more science-based (chap. 6).
⁶ The top five income-producing categories in the Personal Development Industry listed in order or priority are: developing stronger relationships (38%), acquiring new skills (35%), improving work/life balance (33%), improved stress management (33%), and becoming more efficient at work (29%).
often reflecting on what theologian Miroslav Volf calls “the good life.” In this unfamiliar territory of normative inquiry, individuals struggle with the same questions that the world’s greatest traditions have grappled with for thousands of years. For those in search of stable ground, the message of the Personal Development Industry is grand and consistent: You can enjoy success—ideal health, abundant wealth, newfound joy—so long as you persistently follow the universal laws that govern success. In accordance with its message, industry leaders utilize a vast corpus of resources that they call “success materials,” much of which are dedicated to fostering individual growth. In recent years, PDI leaders have been increasingly incorporating “the world’s number one bestselling book,” the Bible, into their achievement-centered message.

This thesis examines the Personal Development Industry for its use of the Bible to encourage individual financial gain. I begin by addressing the history behind the PDI and its method of selecting biblical passages for interpretation. Second, using four of the PDI’s most popular thinkers, John C. Maxwell, Joel Osteen, Anthony “Tony” Robbins, and James

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8 A careful consideration of how we and the world ought to ideally exist; cf. M. Volf, M. Croasmun, R. McAnnally-Linz, Life Worth Living, 12-14.
9 The pursuit of the good life is a perennial concern that has been explored by various philosophical, religious, and cultural traditions throughout history. As individuals navigate its associated “life questions,” they engage in internal conversations that draw on the wisdom of these traditions to craft their own visions of a meaningful and fulfilling life. See, for example, Miroslav Volf, Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).
10 A widely used phrase in the Personal Development Industry referring to the “all-encompassing, universal power” that governs all things. According to many PDI leaders, this power can be harnessed for personal success. See, for example: Covey, 7 Habits, 83-87; Carol S. Dweck, Mindset: The New Psychology of Success (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007), 56-61; Jack Canfield, The Success Principles: How To Get From Where You Are To Where You Want To Be (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005), 43-49.
Emmanuel “Jim” Rohn, I provide textual examples of everyday PDI biblical interpretations in various physical and electronic forms. Third, using liberation theology as a hermeneutical lens, I review three biblical passages to offer a different perspective on financial gain to the interpretations provided by PDI leaders, highlighting noticeable discrepancies. To conclude, I argue that the use of the Bible by industry leaders is a direct reflection of the intersection between Christian principles and right-wing capitalistic motives in the nations where the PDI thrives. Given its historical success since the 19th century, I assert that the recurrent spike of PDI adherence is due to its function in America as a sellable rhetorical model.

In the United States, a recent trend of PDI adherence is fueled by the current sociopolitical divide, and increasing individual fear regarding the loss of national identity and personal freedom. As a result, Americans are seeking a sense of familiarity and comfort amidst uncertain times, and are turning to the language and beliefs that have been ingrained in American culture since its inception—Christianity. This project invites readers to think critically about the task of biblical interpretation, particularly in the context of self-improvement, and will conclude by offering reflections on how to do so.

**Keywords:** The Personal Development Industry, rhetoric, persuasion, American Success Industry, New Thought, influence, biblical interpretation, self-help, health and wealth, positive thinking, mind cure, positive psychology, money and religion, uses of the Bible
Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to Dr. Teresa Morgan, my thesis supervisor, and Dr. Michal Beth Dinkler, my second reader. Their patience, insights, and support throughout this process has made it possible to distill all the ideas in my head into a workable Master’s thesis. Next, I would like to thank my family, specifically my mother who, in addition to her other responsibilities, sat beside me at many Personal Development seminars over the years. Their support along this educational journey has allowed me to explore the intersection between theology, religion, and the business world. Finally, I would like to thank my partner, Tanja, for her continual encouragement throughout the ideation and writing of this thesis. Thank you for listening to my late-night ramblings, supporting my theoretical ideas, and reassuring me that this topic is pressing work for the current study of theology and religion.
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Preface

This thesis arose in response to the rapidly growing popularity of the Personal Development Industry in recent years, and its impact on my life. Prior to my more recent stretch in theological education, I spent several years working in international product marketing and sales. In 2015, while attending a leadership seminar, a colleague asked me for guidance on *what the Bible had to say about personal growth*. I recommended the books of John C. Maxwell, as he was the only industry leader I knew in that moment who wrote personal development books from the perspective of a Protestant minister. Later, I came across a podcast where Maxwell credited books such as Norman Vincent Peale’s *The Power of Positive Thinking*\(^\text{12}\) and Robert Schuller’s *Move Ahead with Possibility Thinking*\(^\text{13}\) for “inspiring him to teach Bible principles without the biblical verses to business executives.”\(^\text{14}\) Even in those early years of what I realize now was the basis for my theological curiosity, I found it interesting that Maxwell drew inspiration from popular “positive thinkers” for Christian teachings, which began the process of my interest in the interplay between Christianity and positive thinking.

For those who attend even one PDI seminar or consume any of its literature, it is clear that the industry uses self-improvement concepts to drive its workers to new heights of productivity. For me as a young kid trying to “make it” in the intimidating world of Corporate


\(^{14}\) The original podcast episode entitled “Success: A Positive Mental Attitude” *The Ziglar Show* (podcast audio, January 29, 2016) is no longer available to the public. I have its original version in CD form. For another example of Peale’s influence on Maxwell’s career in the Personal Development Industry and incorporation of the Bible, see John C. Maxwell, “Live2Lead 2018 Keynote Speakers: John C. Maxwell,” (Live2Lead seminar, October 5, 2018; original link unavailable—sourced from my personal archive). Referencing his upbringing, Maxwell states, “I grew up in a Christian home, but I became a follower of Jesus Christ after reading ’The Power of Positive Thinking’ by Norman Vincent Peale. He didn’t mention Jesus in the book, but he did introduce me to the idea of positive thinking, which led me to the Bible.” Though many of these seminars are unavailable to the public without a paid event registration, Maxwell cites the words and works of Peale throughout his podcasts and seminars. Many examples are available in his online teaching library and his corporate YouTube channel—“Maxwell Leadership”; cf. John C. Maxwell, “Leadership – When It Matters Most: Leadership & Life Lessons From My Father (Part 2),” (recorded lecture, Atlanta, GA, Spring 2021), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sm4XJjDv-q0&t=827s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sm4XJjDv-q0&t=827s).
America, these resources had a lot to offer. I took fervent notes at seminars and conferences, jotting down quotes in my spiral notebook like “success leaves clues,” “master the mundane,” “success comes to those who want it,” and “for things to change, you must change.” It did not take long for these stock gnomic sayings to take hold in my brain as the best way to fake it until I made it. Needless to say, I was hooked; and yet, I had not stopped to ask why the materials spoke to me so deeply.

Per the guidance of the CEO of my former employer, I invested a significant amount of time attending self-improvement seminars, reading personal growth books, and listening to tapes on financial well-being. It was not until I later entered divinity school that I noticed an increased use of Bible stories in personal development teachings, which furthered my curiosity about its cause. This led me to search for earlier instances of the crossover, which is when I first stumbled upon M. Scott Peck’s *The Road Less Traveled*. In the book, Peck shares his journey from secular psychiatry to a hybrid domain that combines psychotherapeutic principles with Christian values for Americans looking for hope during the fallout of the Vietnam War. It was then that I wondered if Peck’s book was the only occurrence of this connection. After further research, I found that the intersection between Christianity and the PDI had a storied history prior to its current form, which I explore further in section I of this project.

In light of current affairs in America—economic and otherwise, many PDI teachers have begun the frequent use of biblical stories as a rhetorical device because, in general, American people respond positively to them. For example, in a 1998 seminar entitled “How To Have Your Best Year Ever!,”16 James Emmanuel “Jim” Rohn taught the “Parable of the Sower” (Matthew

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13:1-9, 18-23) to a Dallas crowd. Rohn took his audience on a journey through the importance of this parable in the lives of all those who desire more. He began and concluded with the statement: “the Sower is ambitious…the Sower kept sowing, which is the good news and the key to our success. If you keep sowing, some of the seed will always fall on good soil; learning this is how I got rich by age 31.” To provide another example, during a 2010 seminar based on his book Awaken The Giant Within, Anthony “Tony” Robbins shared the story of David and Goliath. He passionately paraphrased the biblical passages and exclaimed in conclusion: “If David can defeat Goliath, you can defeat anything holding you back from your highest potential—a lack of money, success—these are just limiting beliefs.” It is worth noting that both speakers have publicly acknowledged the influence of the Bible on their teachings. The fact that some of the most popular PDI thinkers publicly recognize the Bible as a personal inspiration snowballed my interest in the connection.

Rohn and Robbins’ use of the Bible is not abnormal for the industry as a whole. In fact, several of the PDI’s most well-known speakers—namely, Norman Vincent Peale, John C. Maxwell, and Joel Osteen—began their influential careers as Protestant ministers. While

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17 For a precise recording of Rohn exegeting the Matthean parable for his audience, see Jim Rohn, “The Law of Sowing and Reaping,” in Build Your Network Marketing Business (recorded audio version, SUCCESS Media, 2005). A video recording based on the information in the audio presentation has been uploaded here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GApTt0N36pY.

18 Many recordings of this seminar are available on YouTube. As a note, most Personal Development Industry materials are not presented in a traditional academic setting. As such, acquiring knowledge about Industry leaders typically involves attending seminars, following social media or blog posts—some of which are later deleted or edited, making some materials cited in this thesis challenging for the general public to access.


20 Prior to the 2020 Coronavirus Pandemic, Tony Robbins did not offer online sessions or public recordings of his “Unleash The Power Within” (UPW) seminars, from which this example originates; materials are only accessible after the event to those who have a prior event registration like myself. However, Robbins also uses the story of David and Goliath in a similar fashion in his book, Unlimited Power: The New Science of Personal Achievement (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986): “When we believe in ourselves and in what we’re doing, we have the power to achieve our goals, no matter how big or seemingly insurmountable they may appear. Remember the story of David and Goliath? David was a small, unarmored shepherd boy who defeated the giant Goliath with nothing more than a slingshot and a stone…” (127).
working in the corporate world, I never questioned why the Bible was used in seminars and trainings; and since I was a practicing Christian, I enjoyed hearing it. If anything, most of my colleagues and I saw it as a positive—in that God was uplifting our efforts in those sessions. In retrospect, for a seemingly (mostly?)-Christian audience, having God in support of your work would certainly be persuasive;21 and after years of listening to these biblical interpretations, I began to wonder if the Bible contained any opposing views on financial well-being.

To explore this phenomenon, I shifted my focus to the industry’s emphasis on the “mind-body connection” and its ancestry in scientific forms of Christian thought. PDI authors and speakers produce an enormous amount of content on this topical intersection, touting the “powerful synergy” that occurs when the mind and body work together.22 Seminars and workshops abound, with the explicit goal of helping attendees harness this connection to increase their overall well-being; every ounce of energy put forth in the PDI is used to encourage financial success. These industry leaders, including Peale, Maxwell, Osteen, Rohn, and Robbins, are direct descendants of New Thought, a spiritual-philosophical movement from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that emphasizes the individual’s ability to influence their reality by channeling their Mind Power.23 New Thought claims to draw on various religious and

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21 A study of religious affiliation and PDI adherence would be interesting area for future research.
22 See, for example, Jeff Olson, The Slight Edge: Turning Simple Disciplines into Massive Success and Happiness (Austin, TX: Greenleaf Book Group Press, 2013). Olson emphasizes the significance of creating synergy between various aspects of life, e.g., physical health, relationships, finance, and career. Reconnecting the mind and body provides the individual a “slight edge” in their lives through the process of making “small, positive decisions consistently and persistently over a long period of time to drive positive results” (29-46). This is what Olson calls “mastering the mundane” (47-62). Thus, these small decisions compound, producing personal growth and success. Much of this language can be found in popular nineteenth- and twentieth-century self-improvement lectures, much of which were later citified into books. One such example is Russell H. Conwell’s book, Acres of Diamonds (1st edition [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1915]).
23 Sherry Evans, The Roads to Truth: In Search of New Thought’s Roots (West Jordan, UT: Northern Lights Publishers, 2005), 20. Further attention will be given to the influence of New Thought on subsequent forms of personal development in later sections of this project.
philosophical traditions without maintaining any one tradition as its sole foundation, which will prove significant later in this thesis.

In this project, I propose that the periodic success of the New Thought movement in America during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be attributed, in large part, to the timing of each of its revivals. In the 1865 aftermath of the Civil War, many Americans were left grappling with the loss of loved ones and the destruction of their communities. After the Spanish-American War ended in 1898, Americans were left questioning the role of their country on the world stage and looking for ways to regain their sense of national purpose. In the period following the World Wars circa 1945, Americans were again facing the challenges of rebuilding their lives and communities in the traumatic aftermath of global fear and devastation. Correspondingly, books like Samuel Smiles’ *Self-Help*, published in 1859, Orison Swett Marden’s *The Secret of Achievement*, published in 1898, James Allen’s *As a Man Thinketh*, published in 1902, and Peale’s *The Power of Positive Thinking*, published in 1952, all became national bestsellers in the years following a war or large-scale political strife. In the aftermath of historic crises, New Thought’s emphasis on personal empowerment and positive thinking

25 Samuel Smiles’ international bestseller, *Self-Help: with Illustrations of Character and Conduct* (London: John Murray, 1859), was first published in the United Kingdom and became popular in the United States in the years following the American Civil War. The book espouses the value of hard work, perseverance, and self-discipline as the keys to personal success. The book was seen, in many ways, as a response to the global hardships of its era, and has remained influential to this day. For more on the book’s influence on the history of the Personal Development Industry, see T. H. E. Travers, “Samuel Smiles and the Origins of ‘Self-Help’: Reform and the New Enlightenment,” *Albion* 9, no. 2 (1977): 161-87.
29 See Charles R. Snyder, *The Psychology of Hope: You Can Get There From Here* (New York: The Free Press, 1994). Snyder notes that after World War II, Americans turned to self-improvement materials as a way to cope with the traumas of war. Additionally, Snyder discusses the general trend of personal development literature becoming popular in the aftermath of national conflicts and posits that this can be witnessed historically.
provided a hopeful message that resonated with Americans who were in search for a framework to overcome adversity, recover their personal identity, and reestablish their lives.\textsuperscript{30}

Fast forward to the early twenty-first century, America has undoubtedly seen a rise of fear and uncertainty. Significantly contributing, some conservative evangelical leaders\textsuperscript{31} and organizations have used personal development concepts, such as self-discipline, self-reliance, and positive thinking, to promote a neoliberal economic agenda that emphasizes individual responsibility and devalues collective action and social safety nets.\textsuperscript{32}

People often seek personal freedom during times of national uncertainty as a way to regain a sense of control over their lives.\textsuperscript{33} This desire for control can manifest in various ways,

\textsuperscript{30} While to my knowledge no one has made this exact argument in the context of New Thought and Christian biblical language, similar arguments regarding social transformation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been widely criticized. See, for example, Marilyn Ferguson’s, \textit{The Aquarian Conspiracy: Personal and Social Transformation in the 1980s} (Los Angeles, CA: J.P. Tarcher, 1980), in which she explores the New Age movement and its various roots, including New Thought. She argues the rise of these movements can be traced back to the social and political upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s, and broader cultural shifts towards individualism and personal growth. Additionally she cites the role of crises and uncertainty in the growing appeal towards these movements, as they seek empowerment and control in the face of adversity. More recently, Catherine L. Albanese in her book, \textit{A Republic of Mind & Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), examines the historical and cultural context of the New Thought movement. She argues (among others) that its emphasis on positive thinking has resonated with Americans throughout history, particularly in times of collective healing.

\textsuperscript{31} This will be defined in Section IV.

\textsuperscript{32} Examples of this can be seen throughout diverse communities; see, for example, Jacqueline D. Bass, “Things Fall Apart: Faith, Prosperity and Division within the African American Community,” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2015), esp. 1-5, 60-61; Daniel Nehring, “Making Neoliberal Selves: Popular Psychology in Contemporary Mexico,” in \textit{A Post-Neoliberal Era in Latin America?: Revisiting Cultural Paradigms}, eds., Daniel Nehring, Magdalena López, and Gerado Gómez Michel (Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press, 2019): 47-70.

\textsuperscript{33} Catherine L. Albanese in her most recent book, \textit{The Delight Makers: Anglo-American Metaphysical Religion and the Pursuit of Happiness} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023), notes religious practice and self-help language have been used from the time of Jonathan Edwards and Cotton Mather to the twenty-first century in response to existential anxiety and uncertainty. Based on Albanese’s research, I argue that both provide a sense of meaning, purpose, and control, and that the Personal Development Industry subfields have adopted religious language to appeal to its audience in times of individual or global uncertainty. Arlie R. Hochschild in her book, \textit{Strangers In Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right} (New York: The New Press, 2016), provides insight into the ways in which the rhetoric of self-help and personal responsibility has been adopted by the political right as a way to address economic anxiety and cultural change in the United States. While she focuses on the rise of the Tea Party and the conservative movement in Louisiana, Hochschild’s central argument is noteworthy: The political right’s recent rhetoric is a consequence of a “mourning” stemming from the absence of a “deep story” among working-class conservatives who believe that they have been “left behind” by globalization. Here, I argue the overall decline of Americans’ trust in prevailing religious and political institutions has led many to personal improvement materials and a sense of heightened individualism. The materials become coping mechanisms,
including a preference for strong government or a longing for financial security and social stability. However, the emphasis on personal freedom has gained significant traction in recent years, particularly in the intensifying political climate of the “Christian Right” in conjunction with the rise of the consumeristic “megachurch culture.” These movements appeal to a deeply rooted American idea of personal empowerment, which resonates with many Americans who feel a sense of disempowerment and uncertainty. I assert that, in moments of crisis, people often seek comfort in familiar language and cultural values; and the Bible—with its language present in the foundation of America and American culture—is a familiar and comforting source of language for many.

This is where the PDI’s strategic use of the Bible comes in. By using familiar Christian language in their materials, industry leaders create a convincing adherence to their teachings. It is important to note, however, that PDI popularity is not solely due to its use of biblical language. Its success is also attributed to the industry’s emphasis on personal empowerment and positive providing hope to individual Americans in times of global insecurity and uncertainty. While a sufficient investigation of this intersection between personal development materials and American politics is beyond the scope of this thesis, it would be a valuable subject of future research.

34 The “Christian Right,” sometimes called the “Religious Right,” can be defined as a collection of politically active individuals and organizations that work together to promote their vision of Christian values in the public sphere. In other words, it is a (loosely) organized coalition of individuals and groups who share a common commitment to a conservative agenda on social and political issues and who seek to influence public policy through political action. See John C. Green, Mark J. Rozell, and Clyde Wilcox, “Introduction: The Christian Right’s Long Political March,” in The Christian Right in American Politics: Marching to the Millennium, eds., John C. Green, Mark J. Rozell, and Clyde Wilcox (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2003): 1-20.


35 In the introduction to the edited volume, The Bible in American Life ([New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017], 5-31), editors Philip Goff, Arthur E. Farnsley II, and Peter J. Thuesen describe the Bible’s influence American culture and society over time, providing a large-scale study of familiar language and cultural/moral values stemming from each text. They contend that the Bible offers a framework for interpreting and responding to social, political, and religious issues, and explore data that suggest biblical language is being heavily used during times of crisis in American history, such as war, political turmoil, and social change.
thinking, which provide a hopeful message that resonates with Americans who are in search of an individualistic framework—especially in the aftermath of war or political strife.

This thesis explores the ways in which the Bible passages have been selected and taught by PDI leaders to encourage financial gain, and in turn, create an alliance between Christianity and financial success. Having the “support of God” will no doubt persuade large swaths of Americans—especially practicing Christians—to adhere to personal development methodology. I begin by outlining the history leading up to the PDI in its twenty-first century form. This history will show that personal development, as a model, meets an American socio-religious need in times of crisis. Second, I examine four key industry leaders, Maxwell, Osteen, Robbins, and Rohn—each of whom are fairly typical of the industry as a whole—for their interpretations of the Bible. Much of these interpretations aim to assure their audience that, biblically, God desires significant financial gain. In this section, I critique the PDI for its overly optimistic, unrealistic rhetoric of exclusively individual success and achievement—an example of what Wayne Booth calls “rhetrickery.”

Lastly, using narrative criticism and liberation theology as interpretative lenses, I explore additional possibilities of financial interpretation for each of the industry’s most frequented Bible passages. These distinctive interpretations are foregrounded by the following theological questions: If personal financial gain is understood as a blessing from God, does it mean therefore that the lack of this financial gain conveys God’s opposition or punishment of that person and their actions? What are the implications of this view for Personal Development thinkers’, and subsequently their students’, understanding of God? Does the Bible offer an alternative representation of God’s attitude regarding personal financial gain?

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Acknowledgements and Limitations

This thesis seeks, in part, to contribute to the gap in scholarship in the study of theology and religion by exploring the intersection of the PDI and biblical interpretation. Many have written on related topics such as the sociological inquiry of the American prosperity gospel, tracing the history of New Thought, “positive thinkers,” charismatic authority, or the influence of the Bible in culture, to name a few. Scholars like Kate Bowler, Joel Carpenter, and Stephen Warner have written extensively on the relationship between Christianity and the prosperity gospel, tracing its history and impact on American religious culture. Additionally, Catherine Albanese and Leigh Eric Schmidt have explored the influence of New Thought and other positive thinking movements on history and practices of American spirituality. An exploration of previous scholarly research on the PDI and its subsidiary industries will be conducted later.

These studies provide valuable insights into the ways in which religion and self-help have intersected historically, situating the PDI within this broader historical and cultural framework. However, the ways in which the industry engages with biblical interpretation and how this engagement affects religious belief and practice remains to be studied. As such, beyond this thesis, further research is needed to better understand the implications of the PDI’s teachings on American religious culture—the ways in which it may be challenging or reinforcing traditional religious beliefs, and the ethical concerns that arise from its engagement with biblical texts.

41 C. Albanese, A Republic of Mind and Spirit (for full citation, see note 30).
It is important to acknowledge that this thesis focuses primarily on the teachings of four male leaders within the PDI. While women have historically played a role in the industry, the discussion of gender and masculinity in the rise of the PDI is beyond the scope of this thesis. Still, however, it is worth noting that male leaders dominate the industry, and further research could explore the role of gender in the industry’s success and rhetoric.

Other areas that could be explored in future research to deepen our understanding of the PDI and its effects on wider religious and cultural traditions include: the intersection of biblical interpretation, the PDI, and Black church traditions in the U.S., as well as the social affects to the rise of “the megachurch drug,” or the global effects of Bible interpretation in personal development materials on diverse religious and cultural traditions beyond Christianity.

Although the PDI is very American in origin, inspiration, and ethos, it is global in reach and therefore has powerful cross-cultural appeal and influence. Furthermore, the industry not only uses religion, but acts like a kind of religion in itself. While I recognize the widespread phenomenon of esoteric, spiritual, and mystical practices that are commonly associated with the “New Age” movement—which some scholars have suggested is emerging as a distinct religion in its own right—I will not delve into it with extensive detail. It is worth noting, however, that

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45 To begin such research, see chapter 6—“Metaphysical Asia” in Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 330-393.
some success teachers incorporate elements of New Age practices into their materials.\textsuperscript{49} Given the pervasiveness of personal development materials in modern American culture, it is now opportune to address the scholarly deficiency on the PDI.

\textit{Project Context}

As of Spring 2023, the United States is experiencing a growing sense of political, economic, and religious polarization, resulting in increased public violence. This thesis holds twofold importance in light of these realities. First, as one of the world’s largest and most powerful nations, America’s founding religious traditions have had a significant global impact, including the intersection of the PDI model and the Bible. Second, the mounting alliance between Christian extremists and conservative politics in America has raised interest in these communities more broadly. In this case, the primary concern is the use of the Bible to justify violence.\textsuperscript{50} This trend is particularly problematic given the widespread cultural influence of industry rhetoric.

On the one hand, my hope is that this thesis, in a small way, expands the awareness of the Personal Development Industry and its growing power and influence in American culture. On the other hand, the global influence of the PDI represents a promising area for future research, which is further detailed in the final section of this project. My prediction is that the influence of the PDI model will continue to influence American religion and politics, further affecting our socio-religious milieu for years to come.

\textsuperscript{49} Wouter J. Hanegraaff, \textit{New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought} (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 3-6.

On A Personal Note

Throughout my journey on this project, I could not help but think of a dear friend and former coworker, who has always inspired me with her unwavering determination to achieve her goals and aspirations. She is someone who is deeply committed to personal development and growth, and constantly seeks out new sources of knowledge and inspiration. However, I have always been concerned about the limited exposure she (and all of us) had to the Bible and its teachings in our former work environment.

Like many of us who spend time in the corporate world, she has been taught to seek out personal development materials as a means of improving her skills and advancing her career. And while there is certainly value in this approach, I believe it has left her with a limited and incomplete understanding of the Bible.

In my own research and study of the Bible, I have come to realize that there are many different ways of interpreting its teachings. Some interpretations are more rigid and dogmatic, based on personal preconceptions, while others are more contextually flexible, considering the historical and cultural framework in which the Bible was written. Unfortunately, my friend has only been exposed to the former approach through our PDI seminars and development trainings. She has been taught to interpret the Bible in a very specific way—one that I believe is narrow and limiting to its original meaning.

That is why I write this thesis with my friend in mind. I want to offer her, and others like her, a more expansive and nuanced understanding of the Bible and its teachings. My intent is to explore the many different ways in which the Bible can be interpreted, and to offer a more thoughtful and reflective approach to studying this ancient text. My hope is that through this project, my friend (and all other readers) will be inspired to explore the Bible in a more
conscientious way, and to see how studying the Bible through *diverse perspectives* can offer a fuller understanding of the text and its application for personal growth and achievement.
I

The Personal Development Industry

“Money often costs too much.”

—Unknown

This section explores the Personal Development Industry (PDI), which was estimated to be worth USD $10 billion in 2010 and just under USD $12 billion in 2019, with projected growth to between USD $15-25 billion by 2025 in the United States alone. It comprises three parts: defining the PDI, examining its modern history, and providing three examples of negative consequences arising from conflating strict Bible teaching with personal development philosophy. These components serve to inquire about the industry’s recurrent success. Given its historical influence and recent growth, this section positions the PDI as a model that warrants future study by scholars of theology and religion.

Its Definition

In this thesis, I argue that the 21st century has seen a convergence of the self-improvement (“self-help”) industries and twentieth-century New Thought metaphysical teachings with an orthodox Christian ethos. I call this convergence The Personal Development Industry—and its

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51 This quote is often attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson; however, after further research, I could not find any academic sources that confirm its origin.

staggering profit and cultural influence will soon be no longer ignorable by the study of religion. Few discussions of personal development devote much attention to defining it. Broadly, however, most academic uses of the term contain an implicit definition along the following lines.

The PDI is a vast and diverse field that encompasses a wide range of materials, products, and services that aim to improve an individual’s personal growth and development. The industry is defined by its focus on self-help, self-improvement, and positive psychology, with the goal of achieving personal fulfillment and success in various areas of life, such as relationships, finances, career, health, and spirituality.

One of the main characteristics of the PDI is its emphasis on individual growth and self-awareness. Many of the materials and services provided within the industry aim to help individuals understand themselves better, including their strengths and weaknesses, and to aid in the development of strategies for personal improvement. This can include exercises and practices designed to increase self-awareness, build self-esteem, and foster personal growth. In addition to self-awareness and personal growth, the PDI also focuses on self-empowerment. This includes providing individuals with tools and techniques to help them take control of their lives and achieve their goals. For example, many personal coaches and therapists within the industry work with clients to identify their goals and develop plans for achieving them, while others offer products such as books and online courses that provide practical strategies for achieving success. The industry is constantly evolving, with new products and services being developed.

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55 See, for example, Mel Robbins, “Courses,” *MelRobbins.com*, accessed April 23, 2023, [www.melrobbins.com/](http://www.melrobbins.com/). Her courses and books offers are located at the top of the main page of her website. See also
to meet the changing needs of individuals seeking personal growth and development in the progression of a globalized world.

Social scientist Bert Juch offered one of the only concrete definitions of personal development as I have defined it in his 1983 book on organizational management, *Personal Development: Theory and Practice in Management Training*. In it, Juch argues that personal development is a model of human organization centered around a process by which individuals seek to realize their full potential. He notes that personal growth, which became popular in the 1960s, had replaced classical psychiatry as a method of self-improvement for many Americans, and its message gave corporations the power to inspire higher quality workmanship. This shift away from a traditional psychiatric model of human improvement was due in part to the confusing and esoteric terminology used in classical psychiatry, which, according to Juch’s assessment, many working-class Americans found off-putting. Instead, Americans began to turn to alternative forms of healthcare—including self-help techniques, as well as other non-traditional practices—and PDI leaders took note.

Recent studies suggest a second wave of departure from traditional psychiatric practices is currently taking place in the United States. According to a report by the National Center for


59 For example, Bonnie Burstow and Brenda A. LeFrançois in the first chapter to their edited volume entitled, “Impassioned Praxis: An Introduction to Theorizing Resistance to Psychiatry,” (in *Psychiatry Disrupted: Theorizing Resistance and Crafting the (R)evolution*, eds., Bonnie Burstow, Brenda A. LeFrançois, and Shaindl Diamond [Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014]: 3-15), argue that, historically, psychiatric language has been intentionally confusing and ambiguous. She suggests that psychiatric diagnoses are often subjective judgments rather than objective criteria and that the language used to describe illnesses are often steeped in personal and cultural stigmas and are, as a result, dehumanizing.

60 Juch defines “classical psychiatry” as previously “holding exclusive franchise for man’s psyche” until the 1960s brought grassroots change to the industry of mental and emotional services (*Personal Development*, 108).
Health Statistics, the number of Americans who reported using alternative forms of healthcare, including self-help practices, increased from 33.8% in 2002 to 42.7% in 2012. An additional study by Kessler et al. (2005) found that individuals with mental health diagnoses were more likely to consult self-help resources than mental health services, such as therapy or medication due to a rise in medical practitioner distrust. While it is important to note that these studies are correlational and further research is needed to fully understand the factors contributing to this trend, their results begin to explain the progression away from clinical psychiatric practices in America since the late twentieth century.

The rising adherence to the personal development rhetoric can also be linked to economic concerns. Record levels of household debt since the turn of the century, including mortgage and credit card debt, have left many Americans feeling financially insecure. Additionally, the rise in the national debt has led to a heightened sense of fear surrounding the economic status of America in the global economy.

Historically, the Bible has been used as a means of comfort and guidance during times of fear and uncertainty. As we will explore in the next section, this is due in part to the familiarity and widespread use of Christian language since America’s founding. In response, the PDI has

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63 According to the Kobeissi Letter (Simon Kobeissi [@KobeissiLetter], “Record $16.5tn in Household Debt,” The Kobeissi Letter, Twitter, March 13, 2022, 10:51 a.m., https://twitter.com/KobeissiLetter/status), there has been a significant increase in household debt with a total of USD $16.5 trillion, including USD $11.9 trillion in mortgages, USD $1.6 trillion in auto loans, and USD $986 billion in credit card debt. The total mortgage debt has exceeded the 2006 peak and more than a third of Americans have more credit card debt than savings. Furthermore, mortgage rates have reached 7.1% and credit card debt rates have hit a record of 24.9%. As a result, interest rates are increasing at an unprecedented rate, with an average payment on a new mortgage rising by 61% in just 18 months. Additionally, the average American is spending a record 46% of their income on house payments, while using debt to purchase basic necessities. The U.S. government’s national debt is projected to reach USD $50 trillion within the next decade, with an annual interest of USD $500 billion in 2023 alone.
increasingly turned to orthodox Christian teachings as a means of promoting self-improvement because, effectively, its rhetoric sells.

**Its History**

I began this thesis with the intent to understand how and why self-improvement materials have lasted the test of time. The roots of what we can now call the Personal Development Industry has been around in some form since the early modern world, but it has been evident and has grown since the mid-nineteenth century. After some initial investigation of the industry, I began to wonder if the origin of this Industry was traceable. In other words, is personal development a large-scale sellable product? Are these materials an essential component of our humanity? Why has its rhetoric continually become popular since, at least, the nineteenth century? What is it contributing?

On February 2, 1832, former U.S. senator, congressman, and a presidential candidate, Henry Clay coined the phrase “self-made men” in a speech on the floor of the United States Senate. Clay’s use of the phrase was simply intended to argue for manufacturer autonomy in

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64 Perhaps the furthest back would be the Reformation, if you accept Max Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism* (trans. Talcott Parsons [New York: Routledge, 2001])—though some scholars are now critical of Weber’s work; see, for example, Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1998). Loomba explores the relationship between capitalism and colonialism, challenging the Eurocentric assumptions underscoring Weber’s thesis. However, Steven Starker (*Oracle at the Supermarket: The American Preoccupation with Self-Help Books* [New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1989]) posits that Puritan tracts aimed at providing moral guidance may have laid the groundwork for the secular self-help book. Starker cites Benjamin Franklin, who was raised in a Puritan household, and later wrote “The Way to Wealth” in 1757, considered by many to be the first secular self-improvement publication. Starker also notes that the Calvinist belief in predestination was logically modified to acknowledge that God created a rational universe where humans “could reap benefits” by “fulfilling their obligation to God” (36); cf. Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002). This thesis, however, will not discuss further the validity of Weber’s thesis, and will rather focus primarily on the more recent example of increased adherence to personal development rhetoric and materials as I’ve defined it—from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first century.

light of strict governmental oversight and demanding tariffs. Nevertheless, the phrase has survived for centuries, ironically in the notion of self-development.

In the 1910 publication The Science of Getting Rich, Wallace D. Wattles illustrates a method to personal financial gain in alleged cooperation with the will of God. The race [of humankind] as a whole, Wattles advises, “is always abundantly rich, and if individuals are poor, it is because they do not follow the Certain Way of doing things which makes the individual man rich.” Wattles, alongside many other descendants of the popular nineteenth-century American philosophical-healing movement New Thought, believed that any person could realize wealth through what he called personal development. The movement claimed that this process of “working on improving oneself” in health, wealth, mindset, only functioned in coordination with God’s unyielding desire for each individual to be successful.

The personal development world continually reflects the enduring concerns and changing social needs of its time. During the World Wars, PDI titles included Handbook for Army Wives & Mothers, How the ‘Jap’ Army Fights, and Psychology of the Fighting Man; in fact, books like these sold thousands of copies across much of middle-class America in the mid-1900s. Even when its offerings seem deluded or harmful, as some have argued regarding New Thought’s “mental cure” practices, it helps to consider the other options for Americans in the mid-1900s. This was a time when slapdash medical practices like injection treatments for backaches, the

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removal of ovaries for women with personality disorders, bloodletting, leeches, and extemporaneous electric shocks for headaches and other ailments, were also popular. Knowing the history behind these procedures makes the “mind power” teachings of New Thought’s more recent offspring like the 2006 book, *The Secret,*, look slightly less experimental.

In the 1940s, psychologist and social theorist, Carl Rogers, played a role in the development of the PDI. Previously involved in the creation of many well-known theories of psychology, Rogers was the first in his field to emphasize *personal growth* in his writing. His ideas about human nature brought about a definition of *self-actualization*—the need for people to grow as individuals—for the professional psychology world.

Building on Rogers’ work in the 1950s was psychologist, Abraham Maslow. Maslow established a psychological model that would later be called “Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs,” a developmental theory about human’s desire to fulfill their basic needs. According to Maslow, humans continually go to great lengths for their fundamental psychological and material needs—food, water, oxygen, shelter, and safety. His theory of “Peak-Experiences” has been compared to William James’ “mind cure,” in that both hypothesize a negative relationship between adherence to *conventional religious beliefs* and the ability to experience “peak life moments.”

In *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences*, Maslow theorized that the peak experiences of life are “self-justifying moments” which come from people who realize that they are “the creative

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center of [his/her] own activities.” It was in the 1950s when Christian thinkers began to take notice of New Thought’s success.

It is important to note that, in its establishment, the New Thought origins of the PDI did not claim to be Christian. As the movement progressed from nineteenth-century philosophical healing to twentieth-century spirituality, however, the appearance of Christian designations such as God and Christ began to make their way into its rhetoric. I contend that this occurred for several reasons. On the one hand, New Thought thinkers purported that “a scarcity mindset”—the mentality of “not having enough”—was overtaking the early twentieth-century United States. In a country actively dealing with two World Wars, reverberations of the Great Depression, and the consequences of a rise in industrialization in a matter of fifty years, Americans wanted more personal autonomy. For the average American, anything which provided a sense of pride, independence, strength, or hope was appealing; people were longing for it. In 1950, Protestant minister, Norman Vincent Peale, provided the answer to this craving U.S. population: The Power of Positive Thinking. It was an instant hit.

*The Power of Positive Thinking* exploded on the scene, becoming an international bestseller in less than a year, selling more than 5 million copies sold worldwide, and translated into more than 40 languages. In it, Peale writes that the book was written “with deep concern for the pain, difficulty, and struggle of human existence.” The book sought to provide “every person” with the “methods” to “overcome” any “obstacles.” Moreover, Peale states that “by learning how to cast them from the mind, by refusing to become subservient to them, and by channeling spiritual power through your thoughts” no person will be “defeated” by their

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challenges because “this personal improvement manual…teaches applied Christianity.” To a postwar America, Peale and Pealeism repackaged the Gnostic truisms of the New Thought movement as seemingly self-evident teachings of an advantageous Christian revival. The brilliance of the Peale gospel is that, in its modernized, therapeutic form of New Thought, it managed to sell a reactionary economic prospect within an expansive theological one: Jesus could be counted on to revive economic stability and reestablish political harmony.

It is important to note that Peale’s interpretive pattern carefully extracts many positive homilies from the Bible, while texts which challenge its philosophy escape mention. As religious historian Chris Lehmann recounts:

The church-building aphorisms of Paul and the Book of Acts always claim pride of place, as do the sunnier, meritocratic parables of Jesus, such as the story of the servants and the talents. But the Book of Job and Ecclesiastes almost never come up, nor, naturally, do the bleaker moments of the Passion narrative, of Jesus’ famed camel-through-a-needle’s-eye simile about the rich man’s chances of entering the Kingdom of Heaven.

Lehmann subsequently notes that the interpretative choices of Peale’s gospel reveal the priorities of what had become the “Protestant business gospel” in the mid-twentieth century. In this frame, the primary function of Christianity and the Bible is to guide adherents toward the main purpose of American life: maximum personal and material success.

Moving now to current times, we may wonder whether the increased adherence to the PDI in the twenty-first century has anything to do with the split-up between fundamentalism

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80 “Pealeism” is often used by religious historians to describe the merged teachings and philosophies of New Thought and Christianity behind *The Power of Positive Thinking* (and other similar publications) in the context of the 1950s post-war America. For more on “Pealeism” as a formal term, see, for example, Carol V. R. George, *God’s Salesman: Norman Vincent Peale and the Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
83 Defined by George M. Marsden (*Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd edition [New York: Oxford University Press, 2006]) as “a movement that began as a protest against the accommodation of Christianity to
and Pealeism in the 1980s. Pealeist rhetoric proved fruitful for Christianity from the release of the first edition of *The Power of Positive Thinking* in the 1950s until the precipice of the Reagan era of the 1980s for its promotion of “American values.”

During the presidency of Ronald Reagan, after a backlash of negative press, fundamentalism merged with Evangelicalism, an energetic Christian movement that distinguished itself from Pealeism and all other forms of New Thought metaphysical practices by emphasizing *personal salvation in Christ via the Bible alone.* The convergence of fundamentalism and evangelicalism gave rise to a new brand for *conservative Christianity,* which exerted a notable impact on American politics and culture in the latter half of the twentieth century.

_**modernity and that maintained that the essence of the Christian faith must be strictly adhered to and defended against compromise or dilution**_ (2). He goes on to explain that fundamentalists typically emphasize the authority of the Bible, the importance of personal conversion and religious experience, and a strict moral code. They are often skeptical of higher education, science, and other modern institutions that they see as “threats to traditional Christian beliefs and values.”

84 The desire to “return to traditional American family values,” which is a coded desire to return to a white, heteronormative form of conservative Protestant-Christian theology from the foundational roots of America, has been a widely used phrase by conservative Christian groups since the 1984 election campaign of Ronald Reagan. See Richard V. Pierard, “Religion and the 1984 Election Campaign,” *Review of Religious Research* 27, no. 2 (December 1985): 98-114, esp. 100.

85 Fundamentalism began to carry a negative connotation after several of its religious leaders were indicted on criminal charges, including embezzlement and sexual bribery—Bakker, Swaggart, and Falwell, Sr. (Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 11; see also Carpenter, *Revive Us Again*, 91). Another of Marsden pieces, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), provides a detailed account of the development of the “new evangelicalism” movement which arose in twentieth-century America. According to Marsden, these new evangelicals sought to distance themselves from the excesses of *fundamentalism*, including its anti-intellectualism, separatism, and political isolationism. They also rejected the idea that Christian doctrine must be defined narrowly and strictly, and instead embraced a more expansive and inclusive vision of Christianity that engaged with contemporary issues and culture. One of the key institutions of the new evangelicalism was Fuller Theological Seminary, which was founded in 1947 and became a center of intellectual and theological activity for the movement. Fuller sought to combine rigorous theological education with practical ministry training and to produce leaders who were both deeply committed to traditional Christian beliefs and able to engage with the broader culture. Fuller also emphasized the importance of social justice and community service, and many of its graduates went on to become leaders in evangelicalism and other Christian movements. Overall, the new evangelicalism represented a significant shift away from the separatism and anti-intellectualism of fundamentalism and toward a more engaged and culturally relevant Christianity. It helped to shape the direction of American Christianity in the latter half of the twentieth century and continues to be a significant force in contemporary evangelicalism. As a result of the early success of many churches and leaders in the new evangelicalism movement, many fundamentalist adherents joined the rapidly-growing evangelical communities, and New Thought spiritual practices were left behind.
Despite their previous popularity, Pealeism and all other forms of New Thought spirituality were deemed insufficiently rooted in traditional Christian doctrine, and ultimately clashed with the newly consolidated “traditionalist” Christianity that blended fundamentalist and evangelical principles. As a result, Pealeism sought a new home for its ideas and practices and found a resting place in the capitalistic framework of Corporate America in the early 1980s, incorporating into what we now know as the Personal Development Industry in the mid-1990s.

During this time, PDI leaders attempted to distinguish themselves by focusing solely on the pragmatism of self-improvement practices and encouraged individuals to take responsibility for their own success and happiness. They did so by drawing on a wide range of sources, including psychology, spirituality, and business, to offer individuals tangible tools and strategies for personal growth and transformation. Once the 1980s newly-merged evangelicalism—later identified as the “new evangelical movement”—acknowledged the success of Pealeism in the eighties.

I do want to recognize that some critiques of the theory of a fundamentalist-evangelical divide during Reagan’s presidency exist. For example, in chapter three of The Future of Evangelicalism in America entitled “The Emerging Divide in Evangelical Theology” (eds., Candy G. Brown and Mark Silk [New York: Columbia University Press, 2016]: 92-123), Roger E. Olson argues that Marsden’s theory on the doctrinal-based schism between fundamentalism and evangelicalism in the 1980s was unduly pessimistic (104). Olson asserts that evangelicalism is inherently fluid and adaptable, which he admits could lead to some challenges down the road. However, he disagrees with the notion that the divide between the two movements during the Reagan era was clear. Still, Olson does conclude that any divide that did exist in the 80s, despite its ambiguity, ultimately detriments the future of evangelical theology and practices (119).

An example of this merger is the creation of “The People’s Network,” founded in late 1994 by PDI leaders, Jeff Olson and Eric Worre. While the company itself has since merged several times and no longer exists in its original form, the company’s original vision was to “form a global partnership, creating an information passageway that offers knowledge from the greatest minds of the world, in an ongoing supportive environment, bringing awareness, purpose, principles and value to all, while stimulating one’s imagination and recognizing one’s achievements. TPN is more than just a conduit; it is also a movement that gets people involved in personal development.” See Loren Larsen, “29 The People’s Network (TPN),” Stason.org, accessed April 23, 2023, https://stason.org/TULARC/self-growth/self-improvement/29-The-People-s-Network-TPN.html. See also Greg Boudonck, “The People’s Network: TPN History, Review and Cool Facts,” OnlineMLMCommunity.com, May 3, 2016, accessed April 23, 2023, https://onlinemlmcommunity.com/the-peoples-network-history-review-and-cool-facts/.

In the corporate world, all modern Pealeists needed to do to successfully survive the split with fundamentalism was to tailor its ministries to the displaced economic souls of the seventies and eighties, actively reinventing itself as a management theory that all Americans need.\(^9\)

Despite its recent growth in popularity, current scholarship on the PDI remains limited. However, a few scholars have examined the self-improvement industries for their intersections with theology and religion which have yielded valuable insights, including Cawelti (1965), Huber (1971), Meyer (1980), Albanese (1981, 1990, 2007, 2023), McConnell (1990), Anker (1999), Satter (1999), McGee (2005), Lindenburger (2013), Bowler (2013), and Lofton (2017). Cawelti’s work focuses on the American self-help tradition and its influence on popular culture.\(^9\) Huber’s analysis of the self-help genre highlights its emphasis on individualism and self-realization.\(^9\) Meyer provides a thorough overview of the sociological and psychological impacts of New Thought’s theological choices for postwar Americans, underlining the nineteenth and twentieth century influence of popular “positive thinkers” such as Peale, Schuller, and Mary Baker Eddy, pioneer of modern Christian Science.\(^9\) Albanese’s familiar research delves into the relationship between religion, popular culture, and American identity, exploring the history and revealing the aesthetic nature of American metaphysical religions.\(^9\) Expanding on his master’s

\(^{9}\) In Stephen Covey’s popular opus, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (for full citation, see note 3), Covey states, “[All] Americans need to focus on self-improvement as a way to achieve success and personal fulfillment” (3). Tony Robbins in one of his more significant publications, *Awaken the Giant Within* (for full citation, see note 19), explains to all personal development adherents and practitioners that self-improvement is the “key” to unlocking their full potential and achieving every single personal dream and goal (2); cf. Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen, *Chicken Soup for the Soul* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc., 1993), 1; Martha Beck, *The Joy Diet: Ten Daily Practices for a Happier Life* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1999), 1; Wayne Dyer, *10 Secrets for Success and Inner Peace* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, Inc., 2000), 9.


\(^{9}\) R. Huber, *The American Idea of Success* (for full citation, see note 4).


\(^{9}\) Catherine L. Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1981); *Nature Religion in American: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); *A Republic of Mind and Spirit* (for full citation, see note 30); *The Delight Makers* (for full citation, see note 33).

Despite the differences in their approaches, these scholars recognize the importance of exploring the use of religious rhetoric in self-improvement materials and its consequences. The goal of this project is to take a step forward by exploring the utilization of the Bible and its interpretive liberties as a tool to influence an audience toward the desire of financial gain. As one

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98 Lindenburger, “The Religion of Success,” 66-90 (for full citation, see note 46).
99 Bowler, Blessed (for full citation, see note 38).
100 Kathryn Lofton, Consuming Religion (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017). Using an array of examples from American history and popular culture, including televangelists, megachurches, Apple products, and Coca-Cola advertising, Lofton argues that religion and consumerism are intricately woven into the fabric of American society. She underscores the importance of comprehending this interconnection to gain a better understanding of how religion and consumer culture influence and shape our society and daily lives.
modern Pealeist has frequently declared, “Can’t you see? God is blessing our businesses; building our company as big as we can honors Him because we are helping people become their best selves all over the world!”

**Its Potential Left Unchecked**

Some historical discussions of the Bible’s influence choose to focus on whether biblical texts *should* or *should not* affect people’s lives. As Michal Beth Dinkler explains in *Influence: On Rhetoric and Biblical Interpretations*, “one extreme is represented by those who hear ‘Bible’ and think ‘outdated, irrelevant religious text’. The other extreme is represented by those who hear ‘Bible’ and think ‘Timeless and Eternal Truth’.” Indeed, most people would agree that the Bible itself has been used to both divide and unify. While the question of *how* the Bible influence’s people’s lives can be answered in many ways which span beyond the inquiries and limitations of this thesis, interpretations of the Bible have very real consequences. Dinkler notably concludes:

> Whatever one might think about the Bible’s origins or nature, whatever one’s assessments of its readers, the starting point…is the undeniable fact that the Bible *does* influence. Studying the inner workings of the Bible’s powerful influence is crucial because the consequences of biblical interpretations are not abstract or hypothetical. They are real.

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101 Bo Short, “Keynote Lecture, Neora International Convention,” *Neora, LLC* (Dallas, TX, Spring 2019). I was in attendance; the audience roared with applause after this declaration.


103 The Bible’s influence on people’s lives is complex and multifaceted. For instance, the Bible has been used to justify slavery, segregation, and oppression of marginalized groups, such as women and LGBTQ+ individuals. In contrast, the Bible has also been used as a source of inspiration for social justice movements, such as the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the Bible has had a profound impact on literature, art, music, and popular culture. Many of the world’s most famous works of art and literature have been inspired by biblical stories and themes, including Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling and John Milton’s “Paradise Lost.” The study of the Bible’s influence and its various interpretations impact spaces beyond that which are deemed “religious.” See, for example, Paul Harvey, “The Soul’s Train: The Bible and Southern Folk and Popular Music,” in *The Bible in American Life*, eds., Philip Goff, Arthur E. Farnsley II, and Peter J. Thuesen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 127-141.

Accordingly, the use of exaggerated language or rigid dogma in interpreting the Bible can have detrimental effects and cause considerable harm.

Lately, the PDI—and many of its popular speakers—find themselves in deeper waters. Gwen Shamblin Lara\textsuperscript{105} was an American Personal Development author, speaker, and founder of the Remnant Fellowship Church in Brentwood, Tennessee. She grew to widespread fame through a weight loss program which she called “The Weigh Down Workshop”—a long-standing platform in which she incorporated biblical teachings with lessons on weight loss and spirituality. Shamblin Lara’s teachings and practices were criticized by newspapers, tabloids, and congregants for promoting extreme dieting and weight loss methods which were later linked to cases of malnutrition and eating disorders.

In May 2021, Shamblin Lara and several other members of Remnant Fellowship Church chartered a private plane to Florida on the way to a rally for then-president-elect Donald Trump. In route, uncharacteristic maneuvers were noted from flight crews in contact with the plane. These maneuvers led to a later crash which left no survivors. Controversies surrounding the manner of the crash restored interest in Shamblin Lara’s questionable weight loss methods and teachings. She posthumously received criticism for her methodologies in the 2021 HBO documentary, “The Way Down: God, Greed, and the Cult of Gwen Shamblin,”\textsuperscript{106} and the 2023 Lifetime film, “Gwen Shamblin: Starving for Salvation.”\textsuperscript{107} Sadly, Shamblin Lara is not alone in her use of the Bible in harmful self-improvement teachings.

\textsuperscript{105} The following details can be found in Gregor Schrettle, \textit{Our Own Private Exodus: Gwen Shamblin’s Dieting Religion and America’s Puritan Legacy} (Essen: Verlag die Blaue Eule, 2006).


In 2009, speaker and author, James Arthur Ray, sought to bolster his career with a “wellness retreat” — based on his most recent book, *Harmonic Wealth*, aimed at improving all aspects of one’s life. The camp, which took place in desert lands of Sedona, Arizona, cost $10,000 per attendee and did not fully include add-on, day-to-day travel expenses. Several days into this “retreat,” Ray’s career took a dark turn. A “sweat lodge ceremony,” called “vision quest,” which Ray supposedly modeled after indigenous practices, included a 36-hour period in the desert without food, water, or medical aid. As a result, three attendees died of heat stroke and organ failure along with several others who were hospitalized. Ray was subsequently arrested for negligent homicide in 2011 and sent to prison for two years. During the trial, evidence emerged that Ray had used several biblical teachings — including Matthean and Johannine texts — to justify his extreme and dangerous practices; and there were additional claims against his unsafe practices dating back to the turn of the century. Following his release in 2013, Ray re-launched his personal development business and has since offered several retreats.

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110 In a 2010 article for *Huffington Post*, colleague in the Personal Development Industry, Grant Cardone, claims he advised Ray not to “become a fraud” but to practice tangible business and life principles for his audience. Cardone told his business partners to “stay away” from Ray after he paid Cardone for a consultation in 2000 to “break into” the “seminar scene”; see Grant Cardone, “James Ray Was Warned,” *Huffington Post*, May 18, 2010 (updated May 25, 2011), accessed March 23, 2023, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/james-ray-was-warned_b_333970.
For the final example, the following context is important. PDI author and speaker, Jim Collins, wrote two books entitled *Built to Last*\(^{111}\) and *Good to Great*,\(^{112}\) both of which address how “average businesses” become “successful businesses.” In *Good to Great*, Collins discusses the “Level 5 leader,” a person who is an “atypical” mixture of humility and will, modest and hesitant to talk about themselves.\(^{113}\) Collins writes: “Level 5 leaders channel their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company. It’s not that Level 5 leaders have no ego or self-interest. Indeed, they are incredibly ambitious—but their ambition is first and foremost for the institution.”\(^{114}\) The following example will show that the “self-less leader” archetype has been revived in recent years.

In 1998, an entrepreneur and a former psychiatric nurse founded a purported self-help organization near Albany, NY. The group believed in the “betterment of every individual,” that “everyone can access their power provided to them by the Universe, or Higher Power.”\(^{115}\) Its programming, ESP (Executive Success Programs) combined cognitive-behavioral therapy with group therapy and elements of Ayn Rand, simple psychoanalysis, and logical spirituality like that of Scientology. Since its founding, the group gained an estimated 18,000 members in under 15 years of existence, all centered around its daring leader, Keith Raniere, and his “self-less demeanor and desire to help those in the group achieve their most ideal self.”\(^{116}\) In 2017,


\(^{113}\) Collins, *Good to Great*, 20-25.

\(^{114}\) Collins, *Good to Great*, 20-30.


Reniere’s brainchild company, NXIVM, came under fire when several former members sought investigation over alleged sex trafficking within the group. In October of 2017, Raniere was charged with 120 years in prison for his role in developing a cultlike harem of sexual “slaves” who were branded with his initials and coerced into having sexual relations with him.

In many cases, these PDI leaders incorporate spiritual or religious beliefs into their teachings, and their use of the Bible or other religious texts has been criticized for being exploitative or manipulative. The controversies surrounding individuals like Gwen Shamblin Lara, James Arthur Ray, Keith Raniere and others have raised questions about the ethos of the PDI as a whole. While there are certainly helpful and legitimate practices and resources within the field of self-improvement, these examples should warrant the attention of modern religious scholars.

Section Summary

These two books analyze the case of NXIVM and Keith Raniere, both focusing on the dynamics of power and control that allowed Raniere to commit sexual harassment and abuse. The authors also discuss the role of the group’s behavioral programming and spiritual ideology in enabling and justifying these behaviors.

In its employment of the imagery of slavery, NXIVM leaders utilized tactics of power and violence that haunt America. Additionally, the organization exploited contemporary structures that made individuals susceptible to manipulation, particularly by leveraging their immigration status for financial gain. The civil suit filed by the Eastern District of New York asserts that the defendants enticed individuals from foreign countries with misleading assurances of educational or financial benefits. These individuals were ultimately left in precarious situations, lacking legal immigration status and working for minimal or no pay, resulting in debt accumulation and the fear of potential arrest and deportation if they chose to leave the NXIVM community. For more on what can be called “cult capitalism,” see Lyra Walsh Fuchs, “Cult Capitalism,” Dissent 68, no. 2 (Spring 2021): 7-11, https://www.proquest.com/magazines/cult-capitalism/docview/2516292151/se-2 (accessed March 1, 2023).

In addition to this example of Raniere as the “self-less leader,” a second example of this archetype from an entirely different context is found in Doug Coe (1928-2017), a former “American activist,” associate director of “The Fellowship,” the founder of the annual National Prayer Breakfast in Washington D.C., for which he is primarily known. Jeff Sharlet in his book, The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), follows a secretive fundamentalist Christian organization (known as “The Family”) as they seek to use political power and wealth to teach “elite fundamentalism” globally, which Sharlet illustrates as the group claiming “God’s will” for a laissez-faire form of economic policy, and providing instant forgiveness of elites who engage in morally-questionable actions or more directly commit federal crimes. The intersection of the conservative forms of Christianity and their use of the Bible is very relevant, and will be explored further in Section IV of this project.
The Personal Development Industry, as defined in this section, has never before been studied in the context of religion. By examining the history of the industries comprising the PDI together, a glimpse of the complex interplay between Christian religiosity, non-Christian forms of spirituality, and the PDI has been shown. Through an analysis of how the PDI shapes and incorporates religious beliefs and practices, this section has contributed to a deeper understanding of the potential impact of these materials on individuals during times of political unrest and uncertainty. Still, however, the PDI remains largely under-researched, and its unchecked authority figures pose potential risks to religion more broadly. Further research is needed to fully comprehend the implications of the PDI phenomenon for the practice and perception of religion.
II

Personal Development Bible Interpreters

“The danger of the Personal Development Industry is that it can be misused to promote the idea that material success equals spiritual success.”

—Marianne Williamson, author and political activist

This chapter examines how four of the Personal Development Industry’s most sought-after thinkers, John C. Maxwell, Joel Osteen, Tony Robbins, and Jim Rohn, use the Bible in their teachings. Maxwell, Osteen, Robbins, and Rohn, and their credentials—mainline Protestant minister turned leadership coach, megachurch founder and non-denominational evangelical pastor, champion of positive psychology and self-help practices, and business development speaker—are representative of the Industry’s vast spectrum of thought. As a whole, industry leaders make similar requests of its adherents, asking questions, and subsequently providing the answer, such as, for example: “[h]ow many of your activities are predicated on getting ahead? You become what you believe and what take steps toward every day.”

There are broadly two ways to question the interpretation of texts—by showing that they fall outside the range of what most scholars would think credible, and by showing how people have offered very different interpretations in the service of e.g., liberation theology, which will be defined in section III.

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119 Marianne Williamson, “The danger of the personal development industry is that is can be misused to promote the idea that material success equals spiritual success,” Twitter, May 22, 2012, 8:15 a.m., (original post/link removed).

120 My process for choosing which Bible passages and interpretations to include from each thinker focused on frequency of use and most notable interpretation in an attempt to represent the vast spectrum of materials from the Personal Development Industry as completely as possible.

121 Laurie B. Jones, Jesus, CEO: Using Ancient Wisdom for Visionary Leadership (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 291. Look no further for the use of the Bible to justify financial increase and tightening of leadership strategies for “personal success” than Jesus, CEO, hence her quote: “I shape my own destiny. What I believe, I become. What I believe, I can do,” on the same page as: “I proudly say I AM, knowing clearly my strengths and God-given talents (…) I am internally connected to my Higher Power (…) I am aware that only God knows the total plan and that I am a part of it” (appendix).

122 Section III will offer thoughts on the latter point—a different perspective on similar biblical texts dealing with financial gain and personal increase.
The aim of this section is to show what PDI leaders do and highlight where their approach to the text is not self-evidently right.

**John C. Maxwell**

The air is thick with anticipation as a crowd of eager learners fills the auditorium, waiting for the arrival of one of the Personal Development Industry’s most prolific and inspiring figures. Wesleyan-Holiness minister John C. Maxwell stands at the forefront of a movement aimed at helping individuals achieve their full potential and become better leaders.

With over 120 books translated into fifty languages and three million copies sold worldwide, Maxwell’s influence stretches across the globe. He founded EQUIP and the John Maxwell Company to train leaders from diverse fields to reach their personal goals and improve their leadership abilities. With more than five million leaders trained to date, Maxwell’s impact on the PDI is unparalleled. His unique perspective on the integration of Christian principles into personal development teaching and consulting comes from his extensive 25-year ministerial background, setting him apart as a primary source for this thesis. As Maxwell takes the stage, the crowd knows they are in for an enlightening and transformative experience.123

In my initial research, I came across one of Maxwell’s most popular books, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*.124 In it, Maxwell states the following about his teaching methodology: “As a pastor, I taught God’s Word verse by verse. But as a business trainer and consultant, I take a different approach. I don’t bring up Bible verses, but I still teach biblical

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123 Details on Maxwell’s background, career, and personal life can be found both on his website: [https://www.maxwellleadership.com](https://www.maxwellleadership.com/) and on his social media profiles: [https://www.linkedin.com/in/officialjohnmaxwell](https://www.linkedin.com/in/officialjohnmaxwell); [http://twitter.com/JohnCMaxwell](http://twitter.com/JohnCMaxwell); [https://www.instagram.com/johncmaxwell/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/johncmaxwell/?hl=en).

principles. The difference is that I don’t say, ‘Here’s what the Bible says’. I say, ‘Here’s what works’.”125 Later, Maxwell expresses that the Bible is not just the greatest book ever written, but rather should be regarded as the “greatest leadership book ever written.”126 As a result of his viewpoint on the role of the Bible in non-religious spaces, Maxwell’s process of biblical exegesis involves interpreting biblical passages as metaphors or allegories for leadership principles, attempting to draw out underlying messages and applying them to the context of an individual who desires to improve their leadership abilities.

In his teachings, Maxwell commonly focusses on the idea of adding value, which can take two forms: personal development activities—what he calls “working on yourself,” or positively influencing others through your leadership abilities. In a 2005 seminar entitled “Leadership Principles from the Bible,”127 at Hillsong Church in Sydney, Australia, Maxwell speaks about his process of “wrestling with God” after stepping down from his 25-year pastoral career to build several personal development consulting companies. He illustrates speaking to “the largest U.S. lumber manufacturer,” in which its business executives took a collective sigh after discovering that the “fresh leadership skills” they had been taught that day “all came from the Bible.”128 As he does in this seminar, Maxwell often cites his “favorite leadership proverb” which he popularized for a U.S. context: “He that thinketh he leadeth, and hath no following, is only taking a walk.”129 It is worth noting that this Old English language is strikingly similar to

125 John C. Maxwell, 21 Irrefutable Laws, 9.
128 Maxwell, “Leadership Principles,” 3:48. In the first half of this seminar, Maxwell spends the majority of his time illustrating his experience going from “teaching pastors to teaching Christian businessmen to the secular business world” (3:35).
129 Maxwell, “Leadership Principles,” 0:32. The origin of this truism is found in many ancient African proverbs. The Kenyan proverb: “He who thinks he is leading and has no one following him is only taking a walk” is strikingly similar. Also, the Nigerian proverb: “a leader who has no followers is like a palm tree standing alone in
the familiar and traditional language spoken from the King James (KJV) bible translation. By making this connection, Maxwell is leveraging the authority of the Bible to reinforce his leadership teachings, leaving his audience unaware to the proverb’s origin. He uses this proverb and other axioms to illustrate that “leadership is influence—nothing more, nothing less,”¹³⁰ and that the Bible is the greatest way for all people to succeed as leaders, regardless of industry or tradition. Given his large-scale influence on the PDI today, much of which is arguably due to his considerable teaching experience as a Christian minister, it is necessary to look closer at four of Maxwell’s interpretations of select biblical passages to discover how he interprets the Bible for a “secular”¹³¹ audience.

**Genesis 11**

The first example of Maxwell’s biblical interpretation is found in Genesis 11, a passage he frequently uses as an example of leadership pitfalls. In a seminar presented by *Success Magazine*, Maxwell states, “When people start building their own tower of success, it’s easy to lose sight of their ultimate purpose. Success is knowing purpose. Successful people hold steady to their true North Star—a cause to be focused on, and a steady anchor is a confidence based

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¹³¹ Maxwell, “Leadership Principles,” 3:35-4:52. Maxwell frequently identifies the “non-Christian business executives” in his testimony by the title “secular world” or “secular executives.” The term *secular* is a complex and evolving concept that can be defined in three parts. First, it refers to the historical process of *secularization*, which involves the decline of religious belief and the increasing importance of individual autonomy. Second, it refers to the current social condition, in which people have a wide range of choices about their beliefs and the role of religion in their lives. Third, it refers to the philosophical and cultural outlook that emphasizes human agency and freedom, and questions the traditional religious framework for understanding the world; cf. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), chap. 2, 14.
upon a knowledge of purpose.”132 Often Maxwell proposes that the people in the story of the Tower of Babel were more concerned with their own ambition and goals than with their ultimate purpose, and that this led to their downfall.133 Biblical commentators purport that the first eleven chapters of Genesis are meant to introduce the relationship between creation and Creator, but are not intended to denote a sequence of happenings.134 Westermann’s commentary contends that this text is so “polymorphic, so many-sided” that a single exegetical method is not sufficient to capture the full meaning of the text.135

Maxwell interprets this passage elsewhere differently, emphasizing the importance of “obedience to the cause” in the process for personal growth.136 This interpretation circuitously cites Gen. 11:6: “If they who speak the same language have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be withheld.”137 He frequently notes that the people in the story of the Tower of Babel were punished for their arrogance in attempting to reach the heavens, suggesting that leaders who prioritize their own success over the needs of their team or organization risk falling victim to a similar fate.138 On the topic of leadership momentum—or in his words, “the Big Mo,” Maxwell argues that developing a proper skillset to produce and foster momentum is essential to

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135 Westermann, Genesis I-11, 569.
136 Maxwell, 21 Irrefutable Laws, 210-217; see also John C. Maxwell, The Winning Attitude: Your Key to Personal Success (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1993), esp. 12-13. In The Winning Attitude, Maxwell uses the story of Jesus at the Cana wedding to illustrate the same point—that “obedience to the cause” is vital to the “success” of any organization, including his depiction of early Christian communities and their actions (12).
137 Unless otherwise noted, all Bible translations and interpretations are my own.
138 See, for example, Maxwell, Leadership Bible, 12.
long-lasting, quality leadership. He warns that “unchecked” momentum can lead to arrogance and a lack of accountability, which may ultimately undermine a leader’s success, just like the peoples of Abraham’s day. Wenham’s commentary, however, posits that the author of Genesis 11 is primarily concerned with displaying God’s grace exceeding God’s wrath. That is, the author’s brevity on Abraham’s genealogy, use of complex language, and inclusion of Abraham’s test of faith stand as a model and an incentive for all descendants to follow Abraham’s example; this passage has little interest in individual leadership, and is much more invested in the collective model that Abraham’s example serves to future generations. In sum, Maxwell’s interpretation of Gen. 11 aims to show that leaders must focus on their surroundings in the pursuit of personal growth and leadership development, which I, and Genesis scholars from various parts of the interpretative spectrum, would argue is not a sound contextual analysis.

Numbers 13:1-2, 17-33 and 14:1-4, 26-33

Next, we turn to the stories the Israelites in the wilderness from Numbers 13:1-2, 17-33, and 14:1-4, 26-33; Maxwell titles this section of his exegesis “A Negative Attitude Dooms a Generation.” In the biblical story of Numbers 13:1-2, 17-33, we find a testament to the struggles of oppressed people in their quest for liberation. The giants and fortified cities in the

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139 Maxwell, 21 Irrefutable Laws, 197.
140 Maxwell, Leadership Bible, 1.
141 Wenham, Genesis 1-15, 266.
142 To expand on this point, in 21 Qualities of Leaders in the Bible: Developing Leadership Traits Inspired by the Men and Women of Scripture (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2019), Maxwell builds on his interpretation of Genesis 11 in his thoughts on Genesis 12. In the biblical account of Genesis 12, readers learn about Abram’s call from God to leave his home, and in doing so, identifying with the plight of those who have been marginalized. God’s promise to Abram is not just about personal blessing, but about a broader social and political vision. The promise to make Abram a great nation is a call to work for the transformation of social and political systems in a way that promotes well-being for all people. Defining the central message of Gen. 12 as “God’s vision and personal alignment,” Maxwell states that “leaders who follow God look for vision that honors him. A vision from God aligns with Scripture, serves people, and makes a positive difference in the world” (253). He goes on to say, “[i]n fact, a visionary leader usually senses it as a clear calling from God” (ibid).
143 Maxwell, 21 Qualities of Leaders, 154.
land of Canaan symbolize the structural barriers that prevent oppressed people from achieving freedom, such as economic exploitation, political oppression, and cultural hegemony. In Numbers 14:1-4, 26-33, we read about a rebellion of the Israelites against God and Moses, refusing the enter the land of Canaan due to fear and lack of trust in God’s promises. The Israelites lack of trust in God leads them to miss out on the opportunity for liberation and instead consigned them to a life of wandering and hardship. Maxwell interprets these biblical passages differently, explaining that the stories from Numbers convey that a “positive attitude can make the difference between winning the game [of life] and losing, between reaching the summit and turning back, and between achieving your organization’s goals and falling short.” All people, Maxwell declares, “will imitate your example and press on with you even when the going gets tough. Attitude is contagious. Cultivate the right one [in your leadership], and that positivity will spread, taking you and your people as far as you can imagine going.”

Wenham’s commentary on Numbers, in alignment with de Vaulx’s work, maintains that recent scholars have identified the heart of the book to be the tension between God’s faithfulness to a promise and Israel’s propensity to disobedience and unbelief. “Its open-

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144 This interpretation is supported by Gustavo Gutierrez, a prominent liberation theologian, who writes in his book, A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1971), that “the giants and fortified cities that stood in the way of the Israelites’ entry into the promised land can be understood as systemic barriers that hinder the liberation of oppressed peoples today” (84); cf. Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, Introducing Liberation Theology (Tunbridge Wells, UK: Burns & Oates, 1987), esp. 32.
145 Theologian James H. Cone writes in God of the Oppressed (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1975) that “the story of the Israelites…is a warning to oppressed people that fear, and lack of faith can lead to missed opportunities for liberation and prolonged suffering” (25). Similarly, womanist theologian Delores Williams (Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993]) discusses this story as a paradigm for the experiences of African-American women in the United States. She argues that the wilderness represents the experience of oppression, while the promised land symbolizes the possibility of liberation. According to Williams, the story shows that “liberation requires faith, trust, courage, and resistance” (25).
147 Maxwell, 21 Qualities of Leaders, 154.
endedness,” Wenham concludes, “invites subsequent generations of Israel to recall God’s past goodness to the nation and go forward in faith and obedience to the law in their current situation.” Given the text’s original setting, re-contextualizing the book of Numbers to modern organizational success seems to miss the wider message of the book, which is to be faithful to God in any challenging seasons of life.


The third example of Maxwell’s interpretations for a secular audience is a combination of two passages found in the New Testament—Luke 3:1-18, and Colossians 3:1-17, 23-24. In the Lukan passage, we see the preaching of John the Baptist, who calls on people to repent and prepare for the coming of the Messiah. He urges people to share their resources with those in need and to practice justice and fairness. This passage seems to plainly highlight the call to share resources and to challenge social and economic injustice, particular in light of the context in which John the Baptist was preaching. Colossians 3:1-17, 23-24 speaks to the ethical implications of the Christian faith. The passage calls on believers to put to death their old selves and to live as new creations in Christ. They are urged to put on compassion, kindness, and humility, particularly in solidarity with those who are suffering. Maxwell interprets these two passages together in the following way:

> [P]assion…is a speak to light a fire within. It’s fuel for the will, keeping people going even when they’re tired and tempted to quit. It is more powerful than circumstances, plowing through seeming impossibilities. If passion is not a quality in your life, you’re in trouble as a leader. The truth is that you can never effectively lead something you don’t care passionately about. You can’t start or sustain a fire in your organization unless one is first burning within you.

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After asking what “a star baseball player, a successful entrepreneur, and a prolific artist all have in common,” Maxwell provides the answer: individual passion. He then situates the reality of the business world by stating, “[e]ven the most heart-stirring career has elements of boredom or drudgery.” 154 In short, Maxwell interprets the suffering of those facing injustice who are listening to the preaching of John the Baptist as “passion build[ing],” where the passionate leader is able to get their team to “eagerly pursu[e] their dream together.” 155 I find this form of interpretation to be too individualistic in light of the ethical and contextual intricacies of each biblical account.

*Matthew 10:16-33 and Acts 11:1-26*

A final example of Maxwell’s interpretation of the Bible for his audience is another combination of passages which are found in Matthew 10:16-33, 38-42, and Acts 11:1-26. Matthew 10:16-33, 38-42 describes Jesus sending out his disciples to preach the good news to all the peoples. He warns them that they will face oppression and persecution, but encourages them to trust in God and to be bold in their witness. This story appears to underscore an appeal to trust in God in light of injustice, even in the face of oppression. 156 Acts 11:1-26 describes Peter’s vision in which he is called to share the gospel message with non-Christian peoples. He is initially hesitant, but ultimately obeys God’s call and shares the gospel with a Roman centurion stationed in Caesarea at the time, Cornelius, and his household. The purpose of these passages is evident: cross boundaries, break down barriers that separate people from one another, and work towards the inclusion of all people in the kingdom of God. 157

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154 Maxwell, *21 Qualities of Leaders*, 141.
155 Maxwell, *21 Qualities of Leaders*, 141.
Maxwell, however, begins exegeting this passage by identifying that every person on a developmental journey will face criticism. Citing Aristotle, Maxwell interprets God’s criticism as an illustration that we will certainly face criticism from other people. In doing so, he often subsequently asserts the popular self-help proverb: “dogs don’t bark at parked cars.” Further identifying the importance of this passage for the PDI, Maxwell contends that saying and doing nothing “isn’t an option for anyone who wants to be successful…” Maxwell concludes by offering the results of someone choosing the path of personal development and leadership: “We can’t do more than try to be all that we can be. We will sometimes take hits from others, but that’s okay. That’s the price for being out front.”

In sum, Maxwell’s exegesis is characterized by a focus on moral and ethical principles, reflecting a continuation of the rhetorical tradition that emphasizes clear and practical exegesis, storytelling that resonates with a particular audience, and a focus on individualism. This

158 The quote he cites is: “[c]riticism is something you can avoid easily—by saying nothing, doing nothing, and being nothing.”

159 Many PDI leaders have used this quotation, so its origin is unclear. See, for example, Les Brown, “It’s Possible,” Seminar, Chicago, IL, Summer 1991, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXuSMjrxe8&t=1219s. Brown goes on to say, “some people are so negative that if they walked into a darkroom they’d begin to develop.” Popular motivational speaker and daytime talk show host, Steve Harvey has also discussed this phrase in several episodes of his show, and used it in several posts on his personal Twitter account; see Steve Harvey (@IAMSteveHarvey), “#HowToBecomeAMillionaire Don’t Follow Parked Cars: A dog doesn’t bark at a parked car, why follow one?” Twitter, March 28, 2016, 4:30 p.m., https://twitter.com/IAMSteveHarvey/status.

160 Maxwell, 21 Leadership Issues, 143.

161 Maxwell, 21 Leadership Issues, 144.

162 For example, in The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership, Maxwell presents biblical passages related to leadership and explains their importance for effective leadership in modern organizations (16-20).

163 Maxwell frequently stresses the value of storytelling in his teaching, explaining that stories are “powerful tools for initiating change” in people’s thinking, emotions, or behavior. See John C. Maxwell, Everyone Communicates, Few Connect: What The Most Effective People Do Differently (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 29.

164 See Marcus Tullius Cicero, On The Ideal Orator, ed. James M. May (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Quintilian, Institutio Oratoria, ed. Donald A. Russell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001). Maxwell’s approach to teaching—in which he offers a brief textual exegesis/explanation and quickly moves into its practical takeaways—is notably similar to the approaches of classical orators such as Cicero and Quintilian. One such similarity is their matter-of-fact teaching style when it comes to their respective teaching styles. Both Cicero and Quintilian explained the immediate relevance of their teachings to their audience using highly practical methodology. Similarly, Maxwell draws on biblical principles in his teaching, providing the biblical passage and then hastily explaining its practical application in contemporary leadership or organizational contexts. For example, Cicero writes, “For he who would make a real and powerful impression on his audience must have a
focus on individualism is significant because it aligns with how many Americans desire leadership training to be delivered: personalized, self-directed, and relevant to their unique situations. As a result, Maxwell’s teachings have resonated with many Americans who value a leadership approach that emphasizes personal growth and development.

**Joel Osteen**

The Houston megadome pulses with the energy of thousands of congregants, their faces illuminated by strobe lights flashing in a kaleidoscope of colors. Amidst the fervor stands Joel Osteen, the charismatic nondenominational pastor and American televangelist, delivering his message of God’s blessings. As the senior pastor of Lakewood Church, Osteen’s influence has rapidly grown, expanding the weekly attendance from 15,000 to a staggering 52,000. Son of John Osteen, a prominent Baptist televangelist and founding pastor of Lakewood Church, Joel has become a highly sought-after figure in American Christianity, preaching the power of faith, personal growth, and self-improvement. His messages are imbued with an emphasis on cultivating a positive mindset and trusting in God’s plan for a fulfilling life.

Despite facing criticism for his focus on *prosperity theology* and his reluctance to address controversial social issues, Osteen’s influence has resonated with millions of people around the world via best-selling books such as *Your Best Life Now* and *Become a Better You*, various speaking events such as “Larry King Live” and “The View,” his weekly television program...
called “Joel Osteen Ministries,” which airs in over 100 countries, and his substantial following on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.\footnote{165}{See Joel Osteen Ministries, “Our Ministry: Joel,” JoelOsteenMinistries.com, accessed April 23, 2023, https://www.joelosteensministries.com/our-ministry; see also Brianna Griff, “The Invention of Joel Osteen: How a Houston Boy Became the World’s Pastor,” Chron, October 9, 2022, accessed April 23, 2023, https://www.chron.com/culture/article/The-invention-of-Joel-Osteen.} In fact, there is a saying in some circles that “everybody knows Joel Osteen.”\footnote{166}{Supporting this claim is a 2021 article by Lesley Crews at Relevant Magazine (“Joel Osteen Will be the Subject of a New Documentary,” August 11, 2021): “Joel Osteen is one of the most well-known Christians today, regardless of whether people love or hate him.”} Due to his global influence beyond the walls of Lakewood Church, Osteen is undoubtedly one of the forefront voices in the increasingly intertangled world of personal development and Christianity.

In the introduction to his New York Times bestselling book Your Best Life Now,\footnote{167}{Osteen, Your Best Life Now (for full citation, see note 11).} Osteen describes the following areas of personal growth as “the profound steps to improve your life, regardless of your current level of success”: enlarge your vision; develop a healthy self-image; discover the power of your thoughts and words; let go of the past; find strength through adversity; live to give; and choose to be happy.\footnote{168}{Osteen, Your Best Life Now, x.} He concludes this section with a question to his readers: “Are you ready to develop your full potential?” The goal of this book is to “provide principles” so that readers may become more “happy and fulfilled, starting today.”\footnote{169}{Osteen, Your Best Life Now, x.} And yet, because Osteen is a Protestant minister, it is not surprising that each previously described “step to fulfillment” has with it the parenthetical support of biblical passages.

An exploration of these seven “principles to a better life”\footnote{170}{Osteen, Your Best Life Now, x.} using Osteen’s vast corpus of books and sermons reveals his exegetical technique and goals: to teach Pealeist Christianity. Many of these interpretations fall into the category of readings of the biblical text that are not
exactly wrong in themselves, or out of context, but are then used to make conclusions that we
cannot imagine the passage’s writer would have said in their respective contexts.

#1 Enlarge Your Vision

In Your Best Life Now, Osteen cites Genesis 12:1-2, where God tells Abraham to leave
his country, his people, and his father’s household and go to the land God will show him. Osteen
explains that Abraham had to leave behind his familiar surroundings and step out in faith to
pursue the vision that God had given him. Using this story, he argues that to achieve our dreams,
his audience must enlarge their personal vision. That each individual must be willing to step out
of our comfort zones, encouraging them to trust in God’s plan for their lives believing that, with
God’s help, nothing can hold them back from achieving great things. Biblical commentators
argue that Genesis 12:1-2 is one part of a larger divine narrative stringing entire books together
from Genesis 1 to the end of the Pentateuch.171 In Gen. 12:1-2, the author attempts to insert their
own prologue to the later patriarchal story into this introduction. It forms at the same time the
linchpin reaching backwards to the primeval story and forwards to the history of the people; the
promise of rescue (Ex. 3) and the blessing of “the families of the earth” (12:1-3) show the sketch
of history: God’s universal action which continues through the action with Israel’s ancestors and
then with the people of Israel toward the goal which God has for “all the families of the earth.”172
These biblical commentaries clash with Osteen’s interpretation of Genesis 12, as he emphasizes
the individual pursuit of dreams rather than the larger divine narrative that the passage is situated
within.

171 Walter Brueggemann, Genesis: A Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta, GA: Westminster
(Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1988), 143-158.
172 Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 143-158.
#2 Develop A Healthy Self-Image

In *The Power of I Am*, Osteen cites Psalm 139:14, which states, “I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that fully.” He uses this Psalm to argue that each person is uniquely created by God and has inherent worth and value, emphasizing that developing a healthy self-image begins with accepting and loving ourselves as God created us. Osteen encourages his readers to speak positive affirmations over themselves, such as “I am fearfully and wonderfully made,” and to reject negative self-talk and criticism. Ultimately, “a positive self-image," Osteen explains, “allows God to better work through you as a vehicle, *leading to improvement in your own journey.***

In contrast, Paul Tillich’s sermon on Psalm 139 explores the theme of the inescapable presence of God. It highlights the futility of attempting to flee from God through perfection, death, or technological advancements. The sermon acknowledges the human desire to escape God but emphasizes that God is the foundation of our existence and ultimate destination. It invites the hearer to recognize and embrace the profound connection we have with the divine. While I do not believe that Osteen would necessarily disagree with Tillich’s message here, it is important to notice their differences in interpretive choices; Osteen consistently notes that the overarching purpose of biblical passages is encouragement and personal increase.

#3 Discover the power of your thoughts and words

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175 Osteen, *The Power of I Am*, 4-5, 94-95.
177 It is worth noting here that this statement is strikingly similar to the language of 20th century Pealeists.
In *The Power of I Am*, Osteen cites Proverbs 18:21, which states, “The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.” He argues that our thoughts and words have tremendous power to shape our reality and influence our experiences. Osteen encourages his readers to speak positive affirmations over their lives and to focus on the good in every situation. He emphasizes that by choosing to speak words of life and positivity, his followers can *attract more positive experiences and outcomes*. While historically the aim of each proverb has been debated, several commentators posit that 18:21 fits in the description about “loving relationships with wives and friends like brothers (18:22, 24).” 178 In other words, this saying in verse 21 about “the tongue” refers to the ways in which we speak to one another and their effects. This proverb seems to be a warning; the imagery of eating denotes a sort of “eating words” as one might say. The saying is not clear whether one will be filled with bad or good “fruit,” but other sayings in the book seem to confirm that the *quality* of material that goes in the mouth depends on what comes out (1:31; 12:14; 13:2), in the text’s proper context. 179

#4 Let Go Of The Past

In *Your Best Life Now*, 180 Osteen cites Philippians 3:13-14, where the apostle Paul writes, “Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” Osteen uses this passage to argue that to move forward and achieve our goals, we must let go of past disappointments and forgive ourselves and others. 181 He encourages his readers to focus on the present moment and to

181 Paul’s ultimate goal is made clear within the broader section of doctrinal polemics in Phil. 3:1-4:1—blamelessness at “the Day of Christ.” Paul stresses here what he *does not* possess, as Moisés Silva’s commentary on Philippians (2nd edition [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005]) writes, “Clearly implied in this verse is a sense
believe that with God’s help, they can overcome any past failures or setbacks. One commentator suggests a different conclusion, suggesting that Paul is not telling his readers to forget the past, but rather to reimagine it in light of their new identity in Christ.\footnote{See N. T. Wright, \textit{Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon} (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 99-101.} In this interpretation, Paul is encouraging his readers to see their past failures and sufferings as part of their journey toward Christlikeness, rather than as obstacles to be overcome.

Similarly to many PDI speakers, Osteen spends a significant amount of time teachings on the concept of overcoming adversity by letting go of past circumstances. After citing Philippians 3, Osteen cites the story of David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17:45-47) to encourage readers to face their fears and overcome obstacles.\footnote{See, for example, Joel Osteen, \textit{You Can, You Will: 8 Undeniable Qualities of a Winner} (New York: FaithWords, 2014), 156-161.} The situation of this text is familiar: David declares that he comes in the name of the Lord and that God will give him victory over Goliath and he subsequently slays Goliath with God’s help. Osteen suggests that by having faith and trusting in God’s power, individuals can over\textit{come their own “giants” and achieve their goals.} This text is one of the most widely used biblical passages in the PDI, likely due to its easily-turned practical message: \textit{you can do it.} However, some biblical commentators stress that this passage seems to exist to demonstrate the larger narrative of David’s superiority to Saul as a war leader and “savior” of Israel, as previously suggested in the classic work of German biblical scholar, Julius Wellhausen.\footnote{See, for example, P. Kyle McCarter Jr., \textit{1 Samuel: A New Translation} (Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 296-298.} This text became a highly idealized and symbolic form of David’s rise to

\textquote{of frustration” (175). Here, Paul is recognizing that he is not perfect, though he longed for perfection. Furthermore, Paul makes a strong theological point in these verses regarding the tension between divine sovereignty and human agency, but the point is made within the framework of a personal confession regarding the overall Christian experience, or a reminder to “engage in th[e] great struggle for God’s best,” as James Montgomery Boice puts it in his expository commentary (Grand Rapids: MI: BakerBooks, 2000, 199), rather than Osteen’s point about overcoming situational setbacks or failures.}
power, and served a broader purpose than simply to encourage followers of Christ to overcome adversity in their daily lives.  

#5 Find Strength Through Adversity

In his book *Break Out!* Osteen cites 2 Corinthians 12:9-10: “But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” Osteen uses this passage to argue that in times of adversity, we can find strength and perseverance by relying on God’s grace and power. He encourages his readers to trust in God’s plan for their lives and to believe that even in the midst of difficulties, “God can use your challenges for your ultimate good.” While 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 seems to emphasize that God’s power is made stronger in meekness, some commentators argue that Osteen’s focus on finding strength in adversity may be overly focused on personal success and happiness rather than the purpose of the larger biblical ark, or, said more clearly, a focus on

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186 I should be clear here that I do not disagree with Osteen on this interpretation for the story of David and Goliath, in that the text can certainly be read and interpreted in an encouraging way for Christian adherents. Like Osteen and Robbins, Jim Rohn in his book, *Three Keys to Greatness* (Nightingale-Conant Corporation, 1994), uses the story of David and Goliath to illustrate the importance of courage and overcoming obstacles. He encourages his audience to face their fears and take bold action in pursuit of their goals, stating that greatness comes from stepping outside of our comfort zones. Rohn’s interpretation of this biblical story suggests that success requires a willingness to take risks and overcome challenges. However, the context of the passage’s author would likely not be so simple, given the perspective of the Israelites who were collectively pleading for the Philistine army to surrender at the outset of this battle. This contextualization of 1 Samuel would lead me to believe that interpreting this passage as solely words of encouragement cannot be its original purpose; cf. Mary J. Evans, *1 and 2 Samuel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), 83-86.


188 Osteen, *Break Out*, 79. A similar example comes from his book, *Blessed in the Darkness: How All Things Are Working For Your Good* (New York: FaithWords, 2017). In it, Osteen references Genesis 50:20 and Romans 8:28 to offer hope and perspective during times of hardship. He reminds his readers that God can use even the most difficult circumstances for good, and that *there is always a purpose to our pain*. Additionally, in multiple sermons delivered at Lakewood Church, Osteen references Psalm 34:19 to offer comfort and encouragement during difficult times. He reminds his congregation that even in the midst of adversity, God is with them and working to bring about good—“*that everything is going to ultimately be for good.*”
God’s grace and mercy.\textsuperscript{189} They point out that finding strength in God’s grace does not mean denying or minimizing the pain of suffering, but rather acknowledging it and finding hope in God’s promises.\textsuperscript{190}

\textbf{#6 Live To Give}

In \textit{Become a Better You},\textsuperscript{191} Osteen cites Luke 6:38, where Jesus says, “Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap.” Osteen uses this passage to argue that giving to others is an important part of living a fulfilling life, encouraging his readers to be generous with their time, resources, and talents. He states that God asks that they look for opportunities to help others in need, emphasizing that “when we give to others, we not only bless them, but we also open ourselves up to receive blessings in return.” In doing so, Osteen encourages his readers to cultivate a lifestyle of giving and to trust that \textit{God will bless the giver} as they seek to bless others. Sometimes, as here, the concerning feature of Osteen’s interpretation is not that the reading of the text is off,\textsuperscript{192} as the use the writer then makes of it. In other words, honoring God with your resources is surely fine; it is hoping that this will make you richer that is the issue. This is not a problem with the interpretation of a verse, but with the way the verse is then inserted into the wider agenda of the PDI for financial gain. Osteen’s context for citing this proverb is not simply

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item See, for example, N. T. Wright, \textit{Surprised By Hope: Rethinking Heaven, The Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church} (New York: HarperOne, 2018), esp. 3-12, 93-97, 175-187.
\end{itemize}
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to promote giving to God, but rather to say that God will bless the individual with personal increase as a direct result of their giving.  

#7 Choose To Be Happy

In *Think Better, Live Better*, Osteen encourages readers to “renew their minds” by focusing on positive thoughts and beliefs, as this can lead to a transformation in one’s life. He cites Romans 12:2, which states, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (NIV). Osteen suggests that by choosing to focus on positive thoughts, readers can align their minds with God’s will and experience positive changes in their lives. Additionally, in a sermon entitled, “The Open Windows of Heaven,” Osteen describes his belief that God wants to “bless his followers financially and provide for all their needs.” He cites Malachi 3:10, which says: “‘Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,’ says the Lord Almighty, ‘and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.’” By zooming out on Osteen’s teachings, a broader theme emerges—his desire to encourage his followers to trust in God’s provision. Osteen believes that by honoring God with  

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193 This is an example of the American Prosperity Gospel. Osteen has been widely criticized for his use of “prosperity teachings” not foregrounded in the Bible, but rather in “New Age spiritual practices.” A thorough investigation of the American Prosperity Gospel has already been completed, see K. Bowler, *Blessed*, esp. 178-184 (for full citation, see note 38).


195 Douglas J. Moo, in his commentary on Romans (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2018), argues that while positive thinking can be helpful, it is not the main point of Romans 12:2. Moo emphasizes that the focus of the passage is on being transformed by the renewing of the mind, which involves a deepening understanding of God’s will and a growing conformity to Christ’s character.

196 Joel Osteen, “The Open Windows of Heaven,” sermon delivered at Lakewood Church, Houston, TX, April 17, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1-sm_ktvY8. A more recent written overview (September 7, 2021) of his thoughts on the subject can also be found on his personal website: https://www.joelosteen.com/inspiration/todays-word/2021/08/25/20/15/Open-Windows.
their finances, his followers can attract even more blessings into their lives. Richard Hays, in his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, offers a counter interpretation to Osteen’s teachings on financial blessings. Hays argues that while the Bible does promise blessings to those who give generously, these blessings are not necessarily material or financial. He emphasizes that the ultimate goal of Christian giving is to participate in God’s redemptive work in the world, not to seek personal gain.

Osteen’s message of hope and encouragement, reminding readers that “individuals have the power to change their lives by changing their thoughts,” strikingly resembles the rhetorical features of New Thought.

Anthony “Tony” Robbins

As the music blasts and strobe lights flash, a towering figure at 6’7” runs onstage to the frenzied cheers of the crowd. With a deep, husky voice, he yells, “Life will never be the same.” This is Tony Robbins, a motivational speaker, life coach, author, and philanthropist who has built a business empire based on the core philosophy of personal power. His intense seminars, such as “Date with Destiny,” specialize in themes ranging from money management to healthy living and attract attendees willing to pay up to $2,995 for VIP tickets. Robbins’ desire to help others achieve their potential or become enlightened is a common thread shared by many personal development experts, both secular and religious, including popular 20th century revivalist preacher, Billy Graham.

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199 Hays, “Matthew,” 165-190. More will be said regarding other possibilities for biblical interpretation on the subject of personal increase and financial gain in Section III of this project.
201 In fact, nineteenth-century America saw a wave of reform societies where religion and reform were conjoined, with preachers advocating for postmillennialism (the belief that Christ will return to Earth after a
A quick Google search along the lines of “Is Tony Robbins A Christian” reveals thousands of results by religious and non-religious individuals alike attempting to discern if Robbins is “a practicing Christian or a harmful hedonist.”202 The goal of this project is not to investigate the religious affiliations or practices of any of the PDI teachers chosen for this study, but rather explore the particular use of biblical stories or explicit passages to promote personal financial gain.203

An initial investigation of Robbins and his personal growth content shows that his teachings use significantly less Bible than that of Maxwell and Osteen, whom we have previously reviewed, and Rohn, the next subject of this study. Robbins consistently emphasizes personal responsibility and self-improvement, attempting to root each of the following Bible stories as principles that communicate wisdom, discipline, and faith. As this section will show, Robbins teaches well-known biblical stories to encourage individual success, or as he pragmatically calls “taking massive action.” While Robbins’ use of biblical stories to support his belief in the power of positive thinking may resonate with his audience, it is important to consider the diverse range of perspectives on each biblical passage and the broader context of each chapter.

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thousand-year period of peace and prosperity, which will be brought about by the spread of the gospel and the Christianization of society) and pushing their followers towards social reform work. Despite ideological and theological differences dividing Protestants into different sects, religious leaders often established interdenominational benevolent societies to advance their own ideology of salvation and blur the line between preaching the word of God and advancing social reform agendas.


203 And yet, a study of the religious affiliations of popular PDI leaders and the influence of their affiliations on personal development teaching methodology would be a fruitful area for future research. Also, while it is entirely credible that some individuals who consume content from Tony Robbins do in fact succeed, whether financially or otherwise, it is the goal of this study to examine each PDI thinker for their use of the Bible in the context of self-improvement. Future research is needed to determine long-term financial outcomes for individuals who consume personal development materials.
Proverbs 23:7

Robbins uses biblical exegesis to support his belief in the power of positive thinking. In Awaken the Giant Within, Robbins uses Proverbs 23:7 to illustrate the power of our thoughts, stating that our thoughts shape our beliefs and attitudes, which in turn determine our actions and outcomes. By emphasizing the importance of controlling our thoughts, he is drawing on the biblical idea that our internal state can shape our external circumstances. However, it is important to note that the interpretation of this verse is not universally accepted and has been subject to debate among biblical scholars. Some scholars argue that the verse speaks to the power of perception and the ways in which individuals can deceive themselves through their own thoughts. Others suggest that the verse may refer to the ways in which an individual’s character is revealed through their innermost thoughts and desires. Moreover, it is important to consider the broader context of the book of Proverbs, which is a collection of sayings and wisdom teachings that offer guidance for living a virtuous life.

Matthew 6: 9-13

In his podcast episode entitled “The Power of Forgiveness,” Robbins references the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13) to emphasize the importance of forgiveness in personal growth and healing. By drawing on this biblical text, he remarks that forgiveness is not just a personal choice but “a spiritual imperative.” In this example, Robbins’ interpretation of Matthew 6 is not

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204 See, for example, Fox, Proverbs 10-31, 451-452.
206 Proverbs contains a rich diversity of perspectives on various aspects of life, including wealth, relationships, and morality. Therefore, it is essential to approach the text with a nuanced and contextualized understanding, and to engage with a range of interpretations offered by biblical scholars.
in question; forgiveness is one central aspect of the Lord’s prayer. Moreover, though, the Lord’s Prayer is a widely recognized and revered text, so by referencing it, Robbins is also making a pointed appeal to the authority of the Christian tradition. This is a classic PDI example of using biblical exegesis to support an argument that appeals to their audience’s religious sensibilities. In doing so, Robbins’ interpretation also aligns with the broader industry agenda, which begins by encouraging all forms of individual wellness—forgiveness as a first step to cognitive clarity, and follows shortly after with lessons on financial awareness and growth.

Robbins’ podcast episode “The Power of Forgiveness” emphasizes the importance of forgiveness in personal growth and healing by drawing on the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13. He contends that forgiveness is not just a personal choice, but “radical forgiveness” is “a spiritual imperative.” While his interpretation of Matthew 6 is not contested, the use of religious texts to support self-help principles has been subject to criticism. Some argue that this approach simplifies the complexity and richness of religious traditions and co-opts them for personal gain. Additionally, others contend that the focus on individual self-improvement overlooks systemic issues and reinforces existing power structures. These critiques highlight the need to consider a diverse range of perspectives on the use of religious texts in self-help literature and the potential implications of this approach on the understanding of religious traditions.

In 2016, Robbins, alongside Netflix, produced a film entitled “I Am Not Your Guru,” which looks behind the scenes at Tony Robbins’ eclectic endeavors as a motivational speaker.

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and personal growth icon. One of the main aspects of the “Date With Destiny” seminars, which are a main feature of the film, are the conversion stories on what Robbins calls “Transformation Day.”

In 2014, Dawn Watson attended Date With Destiny in Boca Raton, FL and shared her story of surviving a traumatic childhood filled with physical and emotional abuse before an audience of more than five thousand people. During the seminar, Robbins used forgiveness language directly from the Lord’s Prayer to embolden Watson to confront and to ultimately forgive her abusers. Robbins encouraged her to see forgiveness “not as a pardon” for the abuser’s actions, but as a way to “release herself from the burden” of holding onto anger and resentment. Robbins’ use of biblical language in his interaction with Watson is indicative of his broader approach to incorporating religious principles into his self-help teachings.

*Philippians 4:8*

Another example comes from Robbins’ use of the popular verse, Philippians 4:8. The words from this text are familiar to many, often emerging on social media posts, coffee mugs, and college graduations: “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is trustworthy, whatever is venerable, whatever is right, pure, lovely, admirable, and of good repute—if there is any excellence and or anything worthy of praise, do these things.” In *Unlimited Power*, Robbins references this verse to stress the importance of cultivating positive and empowering beliefs. He states that our thoughts and beliefs have a powerful influence on our emotions, behaviors, and outcomes, and that we must choose to focus on thoughts that serve us well. By using this biblical text, Robbins is once again drawing on the idea that our internal state can shape our external

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213 Robbins, *Unlimited Power* (for full citation, see note 20).
circumstances, while also making the case that positivity and empowerment are not just abstract concepts but have a basis in Christian scripture. Most biblical scholars, however, situate this verse into its broader context. Some suggest that this verse fits into the larger list in chapter four intended to draw the Philippians’ attention to their higher Christian allegiance. Others argue that, because the substance of this list contains terms that are not particularly common to the Pauline letters, Paul is attempting to appeal to the Philippians’ cultural background; that is, to their familiarity with current pagan morality (4:2-9). Holding both interpretations in tension, Paul’s antidote for Philippian discontent and anxieties is clear in this section: bring your needs before God “in an attitude of thankfulness for what God has already given you. If you do this, you will learn what true and unshakeable contentment really is.”

_Ecclesiastes 9:10_  
In his talk “The Art of Fulfillment,” Robbins references Ecclesiastes 9:10 to underscore the importance of living in the present moment and making the most of each day. This passage states, “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the realm of the dead, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom” (NIV). By using this biblical text, Robbins is making the case that the pursuit of happiness and fulfillment is not just a personal goal but a spiritual one as well, presenting the idea that each day is a gift from God and should be treated as such. While I wholeheartedly agree with this statement, this was likely not the purpose of verse ten. Some commentators argue that this verse

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216 Silva, _Philippians_, 196.  
217 Tony Robbins, “The Art of Fulfillment,” (lecture, San Diego, CA, May 2007), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AN1mSKmfVP8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AN1mSKmfVP8).
shows God’s ability; that is, no human should attempt to “play God,” and all should accept that God’s scheduling (of death and life) is perfect.218 Other scholars would suggest that this verse describes that God’s ways are beyond our control; a theological model that conveys faith, not attempted human manipulation. This is a theology of suffering and evil that Susan L. Nelson calls “the paradigm of ambiguous creation,” which proposes, “that some suffering and conflict are a part of the design.”219 By using this passage to inspire and motivate his audience, Robbins reinforces his central message that the insights contained in these texts can be applied towards personal growth and financial success.

*Proverbs 29:18*

Proverbs 29:18 states, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” Tony Robbins references this verse in his book, *Giant Steps*,220 to emphasize the importance of having a clear vision and purpose in life, and, in the same breath, encourages his readers to define their goals and aspirations and to take deliberate action towards achieving them. By using this biblical text, Robbins is making the case that goal-setting and purposeful action are not just practical strategies but have a basis in Christian scripture.221 In doing so, he additionally states: “without a clear vision, people will perish,” which can be interpreted both as a warning and a call to action. Some

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221 Like Robbins, Jim Rohn in his book, *Take Charge of Your Life* (The Jim Rohn Corporation, 1981), cites Proverbs 29:18 to identically stress the importance of having a clear life vision. He encourages his audience to define their goals and aspirations, and to take deliberate action towards achieving them. He emphasizes that having a clear vision is essential for success in any area of life. Rohn’s interpretation of this passage suggests that clarity of purpose and action is essential for achieving success.
biblical commentators suggest that “vision” and “teaching” have only the purpose of a general, authoritative guidance for the community.\footnote{See Arndt Meinhold, \textit{Die Sprüche 16–31} (ZBK; Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1991); see also Zoltán Schwáb, “The Sayings Clusters in Proverbs: Towards an Associative Reading Strategy,” \textit{Journal for the Study of the Old Testament} 38, no. 1 (2013): 59-79; cf. Katharine J. Dell, \textit{The Book of Proverbs in Social and Theological Context} (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Both Schwáb and Dell insist that more than one reading of each verse is very possible. They also agree that a “good reading” of the text pays attention to the social realities behind the text, and also “exploit the ambiguities” (Schwáb, 77) of a text, particularly in the book of Proverbs, to offer creative constructions for the meaning behind each saying.}

Others disagree with this theory, arguing that the basic contrast of this verse is between nation and individual; that is, a people may be demoralized from poor leadership, but an individual can still find happiness by heeding inspired wisdom (cf. 15:15).\footnote{Richard J. Clifford, \textit{Proverbs: A Commentary} (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 254.} This is an example where, on the surface, Robbins’ reading of 29:18 is not inherently wrong. However, it is hard to think that individual goal-setting was on the minds of the biblical authors.\footnote{Robbins’ approach to using the Bible in his work is spiritually multifaceted, and one cannot easily classify it as either wholly positive or negative because he does not claim one religion as his source of inspiration. And yet, in this way he is an ideal example of PDI leaders using the Bible; while his biblical exegesis may be incomplete or at times superficial, his focus on personal growth and transformation is grounded in biblical principles that he knows will resonate with many of his followers. Ultimately, whether one agrees with Robbins’ interpretations or not, his use of the Bible underscores the enduring influence of biblical wisdom on contemporary culture and its ongoing relevance for personal growth and development.}

\textbf{James Emmanuel “Jim” Rohn}

The smell of whiteboard markers fills the air as the audience sits attentively, their eyes fixed on Jim Rohn, eager for a change in their lives and careers. Dressed in sharp suits, they eagerly listen to Rohn’s teachings, which are infused with biblical wisdom and delivered with the passion of a man who truly believes in the transformative power of personal growth. Rohn’s message of hope combined with practical tools for personal empowerment have resonated with millions of people around the world, inspiring them to take control of their lives and reach for their dreams. Through his writings, seminars, and speeches, Rohn has become one of the most
respected and influential figure in the Personal Development Industry, leaving an indelible mark on the lives of countless individuals who have embraced his teachings and transformed their lives for the better even after his death in 2009.\textsuperscript{225}

As the audience sits captivated by Rohn’s message, sometimes for up to five hours per session, it becomes clear that his exegetical methods are integral to his teachings. His method of interpretation of the following passages aligns with the concept of the “law of attraction,” a New Thought principle that suggests that positive energy and actions magnetize positive outcomes.\textsuperscript{226}

While Rohn’s interpretations may differ from what commentators believe is the original intent of the biblical author, his message of generosity and giving in conversation with financial abundance resonate with his audience of eager businesspeople. Through his work, Rohn inspires his audience to embrace a model of integrity that points back to God in both words and deeds, providing the "riches of wisdom" to the community.

\textit{Proverbs 11:24-25}

In 7 Strategies for Wealth and Happiness,\textsuperscript{227} Rohn draws on the “principle of giving” based on Proverbs 11:24-25, which states that “One gives freely, yet grows all the rich; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want” (NIV). He emphasizes that giving generously to others opens the door for abundance and prosperity in our own lives, encouraging his readers to be generous and to look for ways to add value to others. Rohn’s interpretation of

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\textsuperscript{225} Rohn often begins his personal development seminars by saying: “I am a farm boy from Idaho, raised in obscurity, two nickels in my pocket... but I learned a thing or two from the teachings of the most important leader who ever lived.” See, for example, \textit{Cultivating an Unshakable Character: How to Walk Your Talk All the Way to the Top} (reproduced audio recording, Chicago: Nightingale-Conant, 2014). This, as many of Rohn’s seminar recordings, are available on Audible or at \url{www.nightingale.com} for purchase; I have a signed CD from 2015. By frequently sharing his own humble beginnings, Rohn encourages his audience to believe in their own potential and to take action to improve their lives.


this biblical passage aligns with the law of attraction principle of attracting positive outcomes. Rohn is very honest about prior thinkers who influenced this philosophy for him such as Peale and Schuller in his interpretations of this passage and others, frequently prefacing his Bible narrations with the comment “now while I am an amateur on the Bible…”228 And while his reading of 11:24-25 axioms is not missing what seems to be its intended purpose (cf. Ps. 112:9; Deut. 15:1-11; Sir. 29:1-13),229 the biblical author was likely not writing about generosity with the intent to provide a step towards financial abundance.230 Rather, Proverbs 11 attempts, in sum, to describe an image of integrity that points back to God in words and deeds; a model which brings the “riches of wisdom” to the community.231 “Financial freedom for the giver” is, however, what Rohn subsequently concludes as the purpose of this proverb after his initial interpretation.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

In The Seasons of Life,232 Rohn uses Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 to highlight the cyclical nature of life and the importance of embracing change. The biblical passage speaks to the inevitability of change, stating that there is “a time for everything under the sun (NRSV),” including birth and death, planting and harvesting, and joy and sorrow. Rohn encourages his readers to view each season of life as an opportunity for growth and transformation, and to adapt to surrounding changes with a positive and proactive mindset.233 He also suggests that any adversity to the

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228 Rohn, 7 Strategies, 58.
229 A similar openhandedness, or to “give freely,” is found across these verses.
230 Clifford, Proverbs, 125-126.
233 That is, success is possible for anyone, regardless of their background or circumstances. He frequently mentions statements such as, “success is not to be pursued; it is to be attracted by the person we become.” See, for example, Rohn, Seasons of Life, 21.
process of embracing change presents an essential test of one’s personal growth and development. One biblical commentator suggests that chapter three of Ecclesiastes expands on issues raised in earlier parts of the text, such as the activities of humanity, toil, and the lack of advantage. More importantly, the chapter also highlights the appropriate human response to whatever God chooses to do and God's greater activity. The overall motif of verses 1-8 is God’s sovereign control over current and future events. The author concludes that people should find enjoyment in all their activities since they cannot control the future or what happens after they die. While Rohn is not alone in interpreting Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 as a call to embrace change, it appears that the writer of Ecclesiastes may be suggesting a different meaning.

Matthew 13:1-23

In The Five Major Pieces to the Life Puzzle, Rohn uses Jesus’s famous “Parable of the Sower” (Matthew 13:1-23) to illustrate the importance of mindset and personal growth. He emphasizes that our success in life is largely determined by the quality of our thoughts and beliefs, encouraging his readers to cultivate a positive and growth-oriented mindset. Rohn

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235 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 170-176.
236 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 176. Seow’s conclusion is logical here: “They will not be led to see what will happen in the future, that is, when they die.” In short, the “portion” the people are promised is a plot of dirt that someone must work on; toil is inevitable; and yet, humans can still control the level of enjoyment in their lives. Cf. Melanie Peetz, “Death and Evanescence in the Book of Ecclesiastes. An Interpretation of Eccl. 2:13-17 and 3:16-22,” Revista De Cultura Teológica (São Paulo, Brazil) 1, no. 97 (2020): 163-188.
237 In his book The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For? (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), California megachurch pastor, Rick Warren discusses a similar interpretation to Rohn’s on Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, arguing that people should be open to the changes that God brings into their lives and view them as a chance to grow and learn. This interpretation seems to date back to Norman Vincent Peale who argues in The Power of Positive Thinking that change is a natural part of life and that we should be willing to embrace it in order to achieve our goals, even in the difficult times.
frequently cites this parable, often subsequently suggesting that the way we approach life and our mindset towards growth and personal development are essential for achieving success.240

Throughout much of church history, Jesus’ parables were viewed as deliberately mysterious,241 which has led to frequent interpretations of this parable outside of its larger context.242 However, many scholars now widely interpret the theme of this parable as the reception of the kingdom of heaven in the world, emphasizing the importance of pinpointing the parable within the context of Jesus’ ministry.243 Here, the disciples want to know why Jesus speaks in parables, questioning why he chooses not to teach in a straightforward manner. As Davies and Allison suggest, “[t]heir query gives Jesus the opportunity to discourse upon the differences between those who have been given the secrets of the kingdom of heaven and those who have not.”244 In other words, in the broader Matthean context, the “seed” in this parable is “the word of the kingdom,” and the primary issue at-hand in this passage is Israel’s response to Jesus and his proclamation. In short, the main idea of 13:1-23 is to respond to the question of why, after hearing the gospel message, some people believe, and some do not.

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240 Similarly, in Building Your Network Marketing Business (RDA Press, 2014), Rohn refers to 1 Corinthians 3:6-9 to encourage his audience to focus on planting and cultivating seeds in their businesses. He emphasizes the importance of consistent effort and persistence, stating that success in network marketing comes from a long-term commitment to building relationships and providing value to others. Rohn’s use of this passage suggests that success in any endeavor requires patience, perseverance, and a willingness to put in the work. An additional example of persistence in the face of adversity comes from The Power of Ambition (Nightingale-Conant Corporation, 1995), in which Rohn references the story of Joseph (Gen. 37-50) to illustrate the power of persistence and determination. He encourages his audience to persevere through challenges and setbacks, stating that these obstacles are opportunities for growth and learning. Rohn’s use of this biblical story suggests that overcoming adversity and persisting through challenges is essential for achieving success.

241 In a similar way, Paul refers to the “mysteries” that God reveals to his followers in 1 Corinthians 2:7-10 and Colossians 2:2-3.


For Matthew, Israel’s failure does not lie with God, but rather with people who are free to “harden their hearts.” Therefore, “unless or until God overrides wills, the gospel will meet a mixed reception.” In its intended context alongside chapters 11 and 12, this parable serves to address the issue of people’s failure to believe in and follow Christ. Thus, the “inspiration” that Rohn identifies from the seed falling on rocky soil, when viewed within its broader context, primarily serves to encourage the disciples to persist in sharing the message of Christianity. Because of the popularity and general misuse of this parable, it is crucial to note this distinction.

2 Timothy 2:15

Finally, in The Challenge to Succeed, Rohn references 2 Timothy 2:15 to emphasize the importance of lifelong learning. In this passage, Paul tells Timothy, an up-and-coming church leader, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (NIV). Using this verse, Rohn encourages his audience to invest in their own personal development education and to seek out knowledge and wisdom in all areas of life, stating that personal growth is a key component of success.

245 Referring to other gospel accounts such as Mark and Luke will substantiate this claim, as some scholars have suggested. See, for example, Francois P. Viljoen, “Why Jesus Spoke in Parables,” In Die Skriflig 53, no. 1 (2019): 1-7.
246 Davies and Allison Jr., Matthew, 215.
247 The parable draws a simile between Jesus’ ministry and the act of sowing seeds. Just as the seed falls on different kinds of soil, Jesus’ teachings are received by people in different ways. In his private clarification of the parable, Jesus explains to his disciples how it depicts the diverse responses of people to his teachings. Furthermore, in his response to his followers’ inquiry about why he spoke in parables, Jesus provides insight into the meaning of the parable and how it relates to his mission; cf. F. Viljoen, “Why Jesus Spoke in Parables,” 1-7; Joachim Jeremias, The Parables of Jesus, trans. S. H. Hooks (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), esp. 12-66.
Situating 2 Tim. 2:15 into its broader context is important here, as two reformed commentators have claimed.\textsuperscript{249} “Many interpretations of 2 Timothy are “shortsighted.”\textsuperscript{250} Timothy is responsible both to teach “the truth” and to handle error “correctly” (2:14). Too many churches in Paul’s experience have been rent asunder by quarrels, and the problem seems to be worsening. Consequently, Paul charges Timothy to do his best in conveying the “essential truths,” the core message, of the gospel—to love God and neighbor. Moisés Silva argues two points on exegeting New Testament texts: “It is proper and even necessary to approach the Bible with a strong sense of our needs,” and “proper exegesis consists largely of asking the right questions from the text.”\textsuperscript{251} Indeed, if we do not concentrate on the meaning (the what) and the relevance (the so what) of biblical texts, it will be challenging to fully understand the request of the passages in question.

In the case of 2 Timothy, Paul desires Timothy to thoroughly discern between teachers who faithfully and diligently share God’s message, and those who carelessly do so. Rohn’s interpretation is entirely out of context here. Essentially, his use of 2 Timothy 2:15 to promote


\textsuperscript{250} Interpreting the divisive language used in 2 Timothy has been a topic of debate among scholars and theologians for many years. While some believe that the letter provides clear guidance on matters of faith and practice, others argue that many common interpretations of 2 Timothy are shortsighted and fail to consider the historical and cultural context in which the letter was written. One article that supports this view is Patrick Nullens, “Theologia Caritatis and the Moral Authority of Scripture: Approaching 2 Timothy 3:16-17 with a Hermeneutic of Love,” European Journal of Theology 22, no. 1 (2013): 39-49. In it, Nullens argues that understanding the historical and cultural context is necessary to fully appreciate the meaning of 2 Timothy. He suggests that the author was encouraging readers to remain faithful and resist cultural pressures by drawing on the Bible. Nullens argues that traditional interpretations on 2 Timothy 3, for example, have focused too narrowly on the Bible as a guide for moral behavior, neglecting the broader context of the letter; he, in response, proposes a more holistic approach by using a lens of “Augustinian hermeneutic of love” that considers the social, political, and cultural factors shaping the biblical author’s original message.

\textsuperscript{251} Moisés Silva, Has the Church Misread the Bible? The History of Interpretation in the Light of Current Issues (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 22.
ongoing personal development for each individual reflects a broader trend within the PDI, seemingly to keep people attending seminars and consuming personal development materials.252

**The Personal Development Model**

The role of language and other communication strategies is a key component of the historical success of socioreligious and sociopolitical movements.253 Additionally, the role of ideology and discourse in shaping these movements has been the focus of increased scholarly inquiry in recent years.254 To better understand this intersection, scholars who study movements similar to the PDI often use one of two complementary methods of rhetorical analysis—an examination of a movement’s *external tactics* and *internal strategies*. The former scrutinizes how social movements use stimulating rhetoric to persuade external audiences, including the public, government, and other stakeholders to support their cause.255 This approach is grounded in neo-Aristotelian rhetorical criticism, which concentrates on the persuasive strategies—the desire to change the will or behaviors of its audience—used by key orators involved in social movements.256 However, this scholarship has evolved beyond studying only political elites to

252 In a scathing critique of Nigerian church leaders, Chidinma R. Ukeachusim (“2 Timothy 2:15 and the Ordained and Self-Styled Nigerian Ministers of God Who Twist the Gospel,” Verbum Eccles 43, no. 1 [2022]: 1-7, http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve.v43i1.2407) argues that the church is currently dealing with a theological crisis; namely, some ministers are “twisting the gospel message for a gamut of reasons by not being apt in studying, interpreting, and applying the word of God.” Ukeachusim calls these church leaders “self-styling” in their exegetical methods; and finds that Paul’s letter, 2 Timothy—particularly chapter 2, verse 15—is being used in “entertainment churches” to promote self-improvement, which is very similar to Rohn’s interpretation of verse 15.


256 For more on the employment of neo-Aristotelian strategies of persuasion in the Personal Development Industry, see Stephen R. Graves and Thomas G. Addington, *Clout: Tapping Spiritual Wisdom to Become a Person of Influence*, foreword by John C. Maxwell (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003), esp. 31-45. In the foreword to this book, Maxwell states his beliefs on the importance of having personal influence over one’s audience, concluding with the following thought: “Clout is for anyone hoping to better understand and improve their personal influence…and it has the potential to change your life.”
incorporate visual and embodied rhetoric used in protests. For instance, iconic photographs, such as the one depicting a young woman crying over her fallen classmate after National Guard Troops fired on peaceful demonstrators at Kent State University, were found to be vital in creating emotional appeal and identification between members of the public, which increased national sympathy toward the protest movement.257

On the other hand, scholars who analyze internal strategies focus on the rhetorical appeals directed toward a social movement’s membership and base of support. They argue that rhetoric plays a significant role in sustaining the larger system of the movement and its cohesion, momentum, and political efficacy. Such internal strategies are essential, particularly as the movement encounters resistance and the political situation that prompted the movement changes over time. To illustrate, rhetorical appeals may fulfill separate strategic functions at different stages of a social movement’s development, from its genesis to its termination.

Although these two approaches may seem divergent, they are often complementary, as confrontational rhetoric targeted at a movement’s opponents can also serve as a rhetorical appeal to its membership. Additionally, some social movements employ rhetorical strategies to build coalitions with other movements that share similar goals, which requires analyzing the internal and external consequences of the movement’s rhetoric.258 To study social movements thoroughly, it is best to use hybrid approaches that consider both internal and external factors of

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257 See, for example, Candice L. Edrington and Victoria J. Gallagher, “Race and Visibility: How and Why Images of Black Lives Matter,” Visual Communication Quarterly 26, no. 4 (2019): 195-207. In essence, Edrington and Gallagher’s article demonstrates the ability of visual imagery to bring attention to important social issues and challenge dominant narratives. See also David B. Sachman and Dea Lisica, After the War: The Press in a Changing America, 1865-1900 (New York: Transaction Publishers, 2017), which explores the role of the press in shaping public opinion and political discourse during this period, and the challenges that journalists faced in reporting on issues such as Reconstruction, race relations, and the growing influence of big business in light of the social, economic, and political pressures on the media during this period.

the movement’s rhetoric. This project has shown that the Personal Development Industry has been a successful, reoccurring business model since the early 19th century. Much of the model’s success can be attributed to its employment of a unique convergence of both internal and external tactics of persuasion.

Biblical rhetoric is commonly used in personal growth materials to provide external validation for practical self-help methodologies, even when the practices were morally questionable. One study showed that the use of biblical and self-help rhetoric in the context of American universities increases the credibility of the author or speaker by appealing to the reader or listener’s existing belief systems and seemingly calming their anxiety.259 These conclusions align with the earlier notion of this project that American identity is closely tied to Christian and biblical religiosity, making the appeal to the Bible effective for a large swath of Americans. By using the Bible as an external tactic of persuasion, the PDI succeeds through convincing its audience that the advice given is beneficial and credible.

An example of the PDI using internal strategies of persuasion can be found in the research of Maddux and Rogers (1983).260 They effectively demonstrate that fear appeals are a highly effective method for promoting attitude and behavior change, a tactic often utilized by the self-help industry to motivate individuals towards self-improvement. Fear appeals frequently aim to evoke feelings of guilt or shame within the individual to encourage positive change. PDI leaders use fear-inducing language from, for example, the apocalypse in the Book of


Revelation, to tap into their audience’s fears and create a sense of urgency for immediate action towards self-improvement. This internal persuasion technique has proven successful in building trust in industry leaders and driving the purchase of industry products and services.

The use of biblical references as a rhetorical tool has become a key strategy for leaders in the PDI, resulting in customer loyalty and high sales figures. The PDI’s rhetorical approach, particularly its internal strategies, aligns with research on social identity theory—where individuals derive a sense of belonging and self-esteem from their membership in a particular group, and group cohesion is necessary for the survival and success of the group. By creating a sense of belonging and community among its audience, the PDI fosters loyalty and ensures the success of the industry. Leaders in the PDI have found that using biblical references as a rhetorical strategy is highly effective during uncertain times, shown in its cyclical effectiveness since the early 19th century.

Section Summary

261 For an excellent monograph on resistance in the Apocalypse of John and its use/purpose in the context of the Roman Empire, see Luis Menéndez-Antuña, Thinking Sex With The Great Whore: Deviant Sexualities and Empire in the Book of Revelation (New York: Routledge, 2018). In the introduction to his book, Menéndez-Antuña argues that the Apocalypse of John is part of a long tradition (biblical and non-biblical) where the “Other must be destroyed, punished, or disciplined” (1), (emphasis added).


264 It may be interesting to explore in future research if the rhetorical model used by the PDI is more likely to resonate with a particular age group or generation. For example, the baby boomer generation in the U.S. (those born between the mid-1940s and mid-1960s), broadly speaking, have a distinct worldview from other generations due to the era in which they were raised. The baby boomers were raised in a complex environment that was marked by global warfare and domestic political strife. At the same time, they witnessed the expansion of the middle class and a wave of suburbanization, alongside significant countercultural movements, among other distinctive features. A question that could be posed in such research is the following one: Are baby boomers more susceptible to PDI rhetoric because of their unique worldview?
In today’s world, where uncertainty and turmoil seem to be the order of the day, more and more people are turning to spirituality for guidance and solace. As a result, individuals are seeking direction from religious texts, including the Bible. To cater to this growing demand, leaders in the PDI such as Maxwell, Osteen, Robbins, Rohn have been actively incorporating Bible passages into their teachings as a source of inspiration and authority. While it is commendable that PDI leaders are tapping into the wisdom of religious texts to provide guidance to their followers, it is essential to note that interpreting and applying biblical passages can be a complex and nuanced process. Thus, it is critical to maintaining the context of these passages to provide thorough interpretations to an audience of people who may simply take their word for it.

By incorporating biblical passages into their teachings, PDI leaders have a responsibility to ensure that they do not distort or misinterpret these texts to fit their message. Misinterpreting texts like 2 Timothy are a slippery slope—that is, once a leader starts misinterpreting 2 Timothy and other texts, it can lead to division within the community. For example, if a leader misinterprets 2 Timothy 2:15: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved” to mean that only certain individuals within the community have the authority to correctly interpret scripture, this can create a hierarchy of power and cause division among members based on differences like gender or sexuality. Some leaders have interpreted the phrase “a worker who does not need to be ashamed” as meaning that only men are qualified to teach and preach in the church, while women should be limited to more subordinate roles. This misinterpretation can


266 In the Southern Baptist Convention, which is one of the largest Protestant denominations in the United States, there has been significant debate over the role of women in ministry. Some leaders and congregations interpret Paul’s letters to Timothy as a prohibition against women preaching or teaching in the church. This interpretation has led to the formation of groups like the Baptist Women in Ministry, which advocates for the full inclusion of women in ministry roles. See Baptist Women in Ministry, “History,” Baptist Women In Ministry,
result in some members feeling excluded or marginalized, and may ultimately lead to a fracture within the community.

Instead, they should strive to provide a comprehensive understanding of the context and message of these passages to enable their followers to apply them accurately. Moreover, it is crucial to acknowledge that different interpretations of biblical texts can exist, and therefore, PDI leaders must be mindful of their audience's diverse beliefs and interpretations. By presenting a range of perspectives and interpretations, leaders can foster an environment of open-mindedness and encourage their followers to think critically about the messages they receive. In sum, while the incorporation of biblical passages into PDI teachings can be a powerful tool for guidance and inspiration, it is vital to maintain their context and ensure thorough interpretations. By doing so, PDI leaders can offer their audience a deeper understanding of these texts and enable them to apply Bible principles accurately in their lives, if they so choose.267

267 It is important to recognize that not every person in PDI audiences desire to implement Christian principles into their lives. For this reason, a survey of PDI audience religious affiliation would likely be a fruitful subject for future research.
III

Reimagining The Gospel Of Financial Success

“Jesus teaches us to give generously and sacrificially, to use our resources to serve others and build God’s kingdom.”

—Rachel Held Evans, author

“The Bible teaches us that true wealth is measured not by what we have but by what we give. We are called to be stewards of God’s resources, using them for the good of all people.”

—Rev. Desmond Tutu, Anglican Archbishop and theologian

Having reviewed the perspectives of PDI leaders on financial gain in the previous section, the question that arises is whether the Bible offers alternative viewpoints on it. This section reviews three Bible passages, Luke 4:18, James 2:5, and Acts 1:1-12, and explores the interpretations of prominent liberation theologians regarding the pursuit of financial gain and personal success within the pericopes. These theologians utilize exegetical methods that offer a perspective “from the margins” on passages that are often used to justify economic growth, therefore fostering a more inclusive and constructive discourse based in the lived realities of a globalizing world. It is important to recognize the critical task of biblical interpretation, as some

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269 Desmond Tutu (1931-2021) often spoke about stewardship of God’s resources. This particular quote can be found on his foundation’s website: https://www.tutu.org.za/.

270 In modern biblical scholarship, the “from the margins” perspective (otherwise known as “on the margins”) has been a commonly used hermeneutical tool to include and recenter historically oppressed and/or marginalized groups in biblical interpretation, thus returning power to said groups. See, for example, Kwok Pui-lan, Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 1-19; Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1995), 4, 25-33; María Pilar Aquino, “The Collective ‘Discovery’ of Our Own Power: Latina American Feminist Theology,” in Hispanic/Latino Theology: Challenge and Promise, eds., Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Fernando F. Segovia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996): 240-258; for a comparison of a western-centric approach to non-western perspectives, see Edward Said, Orientalism (New York: Random House, 1979), esp. 77-79. Said’s book is a postcolonial critique of unequal power in the world, which made a significant contribution to the study of religion and theology. However, it was widely criticized for dualistic language—defining the western and non-western worlds as the “Orient (East)” and the “Occident (West),” often redecorating previous colonialist tendencies and perspectives.
of the pericopes discussed in this section have contributed to the complex realities of our modern social and political landscape.\textsuperscript{271} While the Bible does not explicitly condemn individual financial success, it does widely emphasize the importance of using it for the greater good. In short, this section explores how biblical texts about personal growth and financial gain can be treated very differently—highlighting how PDI leaders read the Bible in a very particular way for their purposes.

\textbf{A Theology of Liberation}

\textit{Liberation theology} is a theological approach that addresses the concerns of marginalized communities in need of social, political, or economic equality and justice. While this approach has existed for centuries, it became an academic discipline in the African American and Latin American contexts during the 1960s. At this time, theologians from these communities began to ask new questions about how theology applied to their experiences of oppression, realizing that they needed to think theologically from the perspective of the oppressed, rather than the dominant culture. A primary focus of liberation theology has been to explain what the Bible and Christian tradition teach if the poor and the oppressed serve as the birthplace of theological discourse.

During the 1950s and 1960s, social turmoil was rampant in the Americas. In the African American context, theologians such as James Cone grappled with new applications of Protestant theology during the civil rights movement. Cone and others sought to make theological sense of

\textsuperscript{271} As a note, recognizing that I cannot entirely speak without my own socioeconomic bias and agenda, I have read widely from authors of many different theological, ethnic, and economic perspectives in preparation for the following section. I have tried to heavily weigh those few but significant experiences throughout my life of living outside of America first-hand with people in communities experiencing acute poverty. And I have been listening carefully to the voices of professors and fellow colleagues of mine in the field of biblical studies in an attempt to broaden my theological perspective—to better foster a “community of interpreters,” as my former professor Shively Smith often says, in the critical task of biblical interpretation.
slavery, Reconstruction, the Jim Crow era, the Black Power movement, and the political gains of the civil rights movement. Meanwhile, various parts of Central and South America were embroiled in revolution and social struggle. The Cold War further complicated the political stability of the region as Latin Americans struggled for freedom and sovereignty. Violence, oppression, and poverty dominated the lower classes throughout the region, and many felt that the Roman Catholic Church was either complicit in some of the oppression or simply turned a blind eye to the suffering of the common person.

Catholic and Protestant liberation theologies emerged in response to these issues, positioning the Christian Church to be an advocate for social, political, and economic change for the poor and oppressed. Liberation theology is defined by Gustavo Gutierrez, a Peruvian Roman Catholic priest and theologian, as:

A theological reflection based on the Gospel and the experiences of men and women committed to the process of liberation in this oppressed and exploited sub-continent of Latin America. It is a theological reflection born of shared experience in the effort to abolish the present unjust situation and to build a different society, freer and more human.  

Similarly, liberation theology can be defined as a response to injustice done to the poor, meaning not only individuals in need of alms but also collective groups such as workers exploited by capitalism and those pushed aside by the production process. Many liberation scholars have argued that Christian theology in its most foundational form is a theology of liberation that arises from oppressed communities and therefore interprets Jesus’ work as that of liberation.

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272 Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 13.
273 Boff and Boff, Introducing Liberation Theology, 29-30.
274 Liberation theology is not a single theological construct, but rather a collection of “theologies” developed from the personal stories of numerous key voices. These theologies share reservations about unregulated capitalism and are open to more communitarian forms of human flourishing, while also interpreting the Bible in light of the social situation of those on the margins. Most importantly, liberation theologies are action-oriented, with a focus on achieving tangible social change that can pave the way for the development of liberation theologies among other marginalized groups, such as women and indigenous peoples, in other parts of the world, such as
**20/20 Vision, A Pandemic Tale**

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended the world in ways that were once thought unimaginable. As of April 2023, the virus has infected over 500 million people and resulted in more than 11 million deaths globally.\(^{275}\) One of the many challenges presented by the pandemic has been the economic fallout, with millions losing their jobs and businesses shuttering their doors.\(^{276}\) Despite these challenges, many individuals and organizations have continued to push forward, seeking out new opportunities for growth and development which resulted in a resurgence of PDI success during the pandemic. On the inside of the PDI, the start of the new decade brought with it a renewed sense of vision and optimism, with many adopting the phrase “20/20 vision” to describe their aspirations for the future.\(^{277}\)

The pandemic has been counterproductive in the movement toward equality and justice. In fact, it is exacerbated structural inequality, systemic racism, and individualism due to long periods of isolation and increased fear of loss.\(^{278}\) It has also caused a new generation of youth to

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be raised in a culture adjusted to the fear of others—a fear of those outside of your “social bubble.”

In this light, liberation theology has taken on new relevance and urgency. This theological framework, which seeks to address issues of social and economic inequality, has long been a source of inspiration for those seeking to create a more equitable society, making it an ideal lens to assist in the response to PDI Bible interpretations of individual prosperity.

At the heart of liberation theology is a commitment to the idea that all people are equal in the eyes of God, and that everyone deserves the opportunity to live a dignified life free from oppression and poverty. This commitment is rooted in the Bible, which provides numerous in-context passages that support a more inclusive interpretation in the context of economic gain and prosperity.

*Luke*

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus proclaims that he has come to “bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free” (4:18; cf. 13:16). At the outset of his ministry, Jesus is depicted as overcoming evil forces who oppose the work of the kingdom of God. Luke 4 begins with the anointed prophet being sent to proclaim the good news (1:19; 4:43; 9:48; 10:16) to the poor. These are the people who are most in need of divine help and who wait upon God to hear the word (6:20). The story shows that Jesus’ message of grace and mercy is rejected by his own people (cf. Jn. 1:11). Still, his message brings healing to those who are broken-hearted (9:39; Mt. 12:20; Is. 61:1). The


undertone of the request to “release the captives” is made to stress the idea of forgiveness (4:10b). Based on this interpretation of Luke 4:18, Jesus calls on Christians to work towards the liberation of those who are oppressed and marginalized.

The PDI has been criticized for promoting a narrow focus on individual success and neglecting broader social and economic issues. However, by incorporating this interpretation of Luke 4:18 into their work, individuals and organizations in the PDI can take a socially-conscious shift. This means acknowledging and, not ignoring, but addressing issues of oppression and inequality in their teachings, such as racism, sexism, and economic disparities. It also means teaching empathy, compassion, and solidarity as key values of personal growth and development. By doing so, because of its vast connectedness and influence, the PDI can become a powerful movement for positive social change.

*James*

Similarly, the book of James warns against favoritism towards the wealthy, reminding readers that “God chose the poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him” (2:5). Liberationists incorporate material aspects of poverty as experienced in the first century in their interpretations of James. As William Brosend describes, “for the vast majority of those living in the first-century Mediterranean world, life was unimaginably precarious and fragile. The daily challenge was not to climb another rung up the ladder of success but simply to find or earn enough to eat to survive.” One of James’ most important purposes in this chapter is to discourage its audience from participating in patron-client relationships. Indeed, the needy are to be cared for, as they are, too, the chosen people of

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God (cf. Deut. 4:37; 7:7). Some scholars call attention to division other than rich/poor to which this passage could apply: James, in their view, challenges his audience not just to examine their perceptions of the poor but also “to establish relationships that are free from biased or evil judgments.” Byron argues that James moves past rich/poor to other religious and ethical considerations, such as the “subtle ways” in which economic status is often inexorably intertwined with such issues as ethnicity or gender. Other scholars argue that James 2:5 is not based on a close reading of James 2:1-7; in particular, Craig Blomberg argues that the description of “preferential option for the poor” should not apply to this passage since James is seemingly speaking about the poor “who love God”—Jewish Christians who were “often led to virtual slavery, and even penury consignment to debtors’ prison” on behalf of rich absentee landlords.

Still, for James, the oppressors are the wealthy, and his antipathy toward them and his sympathy for the poor are evident. While the intent of a biblical author is challenging to discern entirely, Bible interpretations use various Christian theologies, and they are undoubtedly influenced by the socioeconomic status and worldview of the interpreter. In essence, this passage emphasizes the significance of valuing every individual, irrespective of their economic

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284 Byron, Symbolic Blackness, 182.
standing, and striving towards providing equal access to resources and opportunities to foster everyone’s prosperity. 288

It is important that PDI leaders teach economic disparities, otherwise it is assumed, as it often is in my experience, that any person can achieve their goals without systemic roadblocks. “Comparison is the thief of joy” is a quote I often heard in PDI seminars, and yet, no one bothered to take a step further and mention the economic incongruencies among the audience; it was not fair to expect a father of six to pack his bags and move to Southern California solely to have the ability to “work on themselves in a more productive environment.”289 While I do believe that dreaming big is valuable, recognizing and addressing systemic discrepancies (economic and otherwise) will go a long way in fostering a healthier outlook on individual success.

Acts

To assign special status to any group as being preferred by God is to discriminate, something God does not do. The book of Acts, however, does not romanticize the past, nor does avoid the challenges of today. It witnesses to history; in that it does not ignore the harsh lived realities of the past. 290 As Willie Jennings eloquently states,

The book of Acts…is honest history revealing the creature that is history. Just as there are many creatures, so too are there many histories; and just as some creatures will yield to the Spirit of God, so too Acts is a history yielding to the Spirit. In this regard, Acts has an interesting relation to what will later emerge as the rule of faith and the idea of tradition. In truth Acts helped to establish the rule of faith and tradition in the ways it narrates the ‘and then’ and the ‘what follows’. Such establishment does not aim at immutability but irrevocability…The common takes from empire its designs for building a world and from diaspora its plans for surviving it…the common joins, weaving together purpose and hope in the life of discipleship to Jesus. 291

288 Volf, Flourishing, 87-93.
289 A close friend and colleague of mine had this experience. An argument was made that the Southern California company office had a “more productive environment to foster personal growth.” Needless to say, he did not move there.
Jennings’ *common* is firm about the interpretation history behind the book of Acts, and, too, critiques what he calls “monument thinking.”292 This philosophy “turns the book of Acts into an ecclesial museum, the purpose of which is to show us the earlier forms of church life, religious ritual, or theology. That way of reading Acts has given into a colonialist procedure that places Acts inside the processes of knowledge acquisition and accumulation.”293 In other words, antiquated thinking constructs and incessantly reconstructs the book of Acts as an artifact. Jennings posits that the book of Acts will always be contemporary due to Paul’s example of yielding to the Spirit in isolations—in each social, economic, cultural, religious, gendered, and geographic context.294 This reestablishment of authority would likely be supported by most, if not all, liberation theologians.295

Acts 1:1-12 offers a countercultural pushback on any-and-all themes of nationalism or isolation. It is admittedly difficult to imagine the world without various geographical and political boundaries. And, too, the disciples ask a separationist question: when will we rule our land, and become self-defining (1:6)? Jesus does not give into their desire to be placed in the winner’s circle, nor was he willing to redefine the purpose of resurrection’s meaning simply for their own *individual gain*. This question by the disciples can be referred to as “nationalist vision,” or the “zero-sum calculations” where we “win” by controlling our borders and/or controlling our identities, or we “lose” by being overrun by those who obscure our identities and oppose assimilation.296 “The love of God,” Jennings argues, “exposes our modern nations for

what they are—simple fabricated containers for the rich multiplicity of peoples who each and every one are beloved creatures of the Creator God.”

While context is important for interpreting any biblical passage, including Acts 1:1-12, its ideas are largely inclusive in concept and straightforward in praxis: segregationism is a false belief that hope is only found in one single narrative; Jesus offers a new way found in new life, a joining that fosters hope in the shared work of knowing, recalling, and testifying.

Jennings’ vision is also supported by various critics of the PDI, including Barbara Ehrenreich, who wrote about the dangers of “positive thinking” and its archaic promotion of individual success at the expense of social justice, and Thomas Frank, who wrote about the way that the industry promotes a “cult of optimism” that can lead individuals to ignore modern structural inequalities and systemic issues.

In his book No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future, Joerg Rieger offers a convincing concern about the future of religion and finance. He argues that “people who accept religious principles on blind faith seem to be more likely to accept economic principles on blind faith, as well, no matter how detrimental to human well being they might be.” He posits that too often people “forgo the questions that tie faith to reality.” And yet, Rieger concludes his preface fittingly for the main concerns of this project:

[T]here is real hope emerging in unexpected places. The struggle for alternatives had been going on long before the crisis, and it will continue afterwards. A crucial part of this struggle is constituted by those whom the system has taken for granted, overlooked, or even rejected…destruction and rejection are not the end of the story—as Jesus’ own story

298 Ehrenreich, Bright-Sided, 1-13, 29-34, 56-64.
301 Rieger, No Rising Tide, x.
302 Rieger, No Rising Tide, x.
continues through resistance and the production of an alternative way of life...through the cross and resurrection.³⁰³

The argument presented by Jennings and Rieger may represent a fundamental disagreement with the theological beliefs of PDI, rather than an issue of interpretation omission. Jennings and Rieger emphasize the importance of social justice in Christian faith, systemic financial and social concerns, and biblical interpretation, while the latter prioritizes individual responsibility and personal achievement. This disagreement reflects a broader theological divergence concerning the interplay between faith, justice, and individual agency, warranting further inquiry to unravel the nuances of these divergent perspectives and their implications for contemporary Christian theology. As the world continues to confront the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the principles of liberation theology remain relevant in advocating for a more equitable society that prioritizes the needs of marginalized populations.

**Financial Success: A (Brief) Theological History**

Critiques of significant personal wealth and prosperity have been occurring long before the American PDI model was created, and liberation theology considered. Pelagius, a British theologian, was a prominent figure in the debates among early Christian theologians about the relationship between grace and free will in the early fifth century. His views, which emphasized the responsibility and ability of humans to choose good, were seen as a challenge to the dominant Augustinian theology that emphasized the primacy of divine grace in salvation.³⁰⁴ Augustine wrote extensively against Pelagius and his followers, and what became known as the

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³⁰³ Rieger, *No Rising Tide*, x. Rieger’s words here are about the 2008 financial crisis in which the U.S. housing market plummeted, and many people lost their jobs, homes, and other means. Unfortunately, this is a scene that the post-pandemic world of 2023 knows all too well.

Pelagian controversy was a major theological debate in the Western Church. Pelagius’s optimistic view of the human condition and Christian perfectionism had a significant impact on subsequent Christian movements, especially those considered heterodox or radical. Furthermore, Pelagius believed that human beings had the potential to achieve moral perfection and live a life free of sin, and that this was the goal of the Christian life. This view appealed to many who were dissatisfied with the corruption and compromise of the institutional Church.

In his work De Divitiis (“On Riches”), Pelagius critiques wealth and property, arguing that they are often obtained through covetousness and theft. While he acknowledged that wealth is not inherently evil, Pelagius warned that it can lead to violence and sin, and that it blinds the rich to the reality of human equality. He further suggested that Christians should be mindful of their possessions and use them in a way that reflects their commitment to God and their fellow human beings.

Pelagius’s views on wealth and property were shared by many Christian radicals who believed in the importance of simplicity, poverty, and communal living. His critique of wealth and his emphasis on human responsibility and ability to choose good can be viewed as part of a broader trend in Christian thought that emphasizes social justice and ethical living. Pelagius’s rejection of the idea that wealth and power had any effect on salvation challenged other views of

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306 Drobner, Fathers of the Church, 173.
307 Drobner, Fathers of the Church, 173.
308 Drobner, Fathers of the Church, 173.
his time, and his work remains relevant to contemporary debates about the relationship between faith and material wealth.

It is important to mention that, on the one hand, the Bible does not necessarily condemn personal wealth or financial success. On the other hand, however, it does emphasize the importance of using it for the greater good. This interpretation is also supported by the well-known work of Max Weber, who wrote about the “Protestant work ethic” and its emphasis on hard work, discipline, and that subsequent financial success is a sign of God’s favor (cf. Prov. 10:22), and Randy Alcorn, who wrote about the importance of “eternal investments” and using one’s wealth to support charitable causes (cf. Deut. 8:18; 2 Cor. 9:8). Furthermore, feminist and womanist theologians such as Renita Weems and Jacquelyn Grant offer critiques of a systemic focus on individualism and self-improvement, arguing that it often overlooks the ways in which systemic oppression affects individuals and communities differently based on factors such as race, gender, and class. These scholars argue that a truly liberative interpretation of the

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313 González, Story of Christianity, 224; Rees, Pelagius, 78-79; Beck, “Pelagian Controversy,” 681-696.

314 Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic (for full citation, see note 64).

315 Randy Alcorn, Money, Possessions and Eternity (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003), 27, 47-48.

Bible should be centered on collective liberation and the pursuit of justice for all, rather than individual success and wealth.

Section Summary

The Bible’s teachings inspire the principles of liberation theology, emphasizing the importance of advocating for social justice and equality for all members of society, especially the marginalized and oppressed. By following these biblical principles, Christians can work towards creating a more just and compassionate world for all beings. As Jennings’ introduction to his Acts commentary concludes, “[s]egregation is an ancient strategy for creating a world, and it continues to work because it teaches us to see the world in slices, fragmented pieces of geographic space that we may own and control.”

In particular, the PDI can use biblical teachings to challenge harmful traditions and promote more inclusive assessments of social issues, if they so choose. By tearing off the Band-Aid of certain harmful traditions for more inclusive assessments, PDI organizations and leaders can help to promote a more holistic and compassionate approach to personal growth and financial gain. This approach emphasizes empathy, compassion, and solidarity with those who are marginalized and oppressed, and seeks to address the systemic issues that contribute to financial shaming—belittling individuals who do not fit social expectations of financial success.

By adopting these principles, the Personal Development Industry, in all of its influence and authority, can become a powerful force for positive social change, contributing to the

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creation of a more equitable world. Financial inequality is a systemic challenge that will require ongoing effort and commitment. “Welcome to the real.”319

IV

Final Discussion: What’s Next for the PDI?

“The Bible is not a book about personal wealth, but about the Kingdom of God, which is about justice, compassion, and love for all.”

—Rev. Dr. Serene Jones, theologian

The interpretation of the Bible, and more broadly Christianity, has been instrumental in the justification of actions since the founding of America. What is more, the current religious scene in America is familiar. The Christian share of the U.S. population is declining with the waning of mainline Protestant subgroups, while the influence of theologically conservative factions of Christianity have been gaining strength since the turn of the 21st century. The political mobilization of the Christian Right, also known as the “Religious Right,” has been decades in the making. Curtailing from this religio-political faction is that of Christian nationalism, which is currently the single most significant danger to religious freedom in America. Christian nationalism fundamentally aims to maintain a specific social structure, one where every individual, regardless of their faith, origin, ethnicity, or gender, acknowledges and


324 Defined by Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry in Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020) as the belief that “America is—and should be—a Christian nation” (5-7).
accepts their “rightful” position in society. This ideology—which asserts that the United States is fundamentally a Christian nation and that its laws and values should be based on a particular interpretation of Christian theology—has undergirded acts of violence, hatred, and prejudice related to Christian doctrine in recent years.\textsuperscript{325}

As the Christian Right has gained more political influence and visibility, their beliefs and values have shaped public debates on issues such as abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, immigration, and foreign policy.\textsuperscript{326} It is not secret that advocates of Christian nationalism are not quiet about their beliefs; in fact, the supremacy of Christianity, particularly in a nationalist interpretation of its intended principles and practices, are divisive—and intentionally so. Some scholars argue that the convergence of the PDI, (theologically) conservative evangelicalism,\textsuperscript{327} and American

\textsuperscript{325} For example, this ideology has been used in recent mass shootings to justify anti-Muslim or anti-Semitic sentiment, as well as other forms of discrimination and oppression. See esp. Diana L. Eck, \textit{A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation} (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

\textsuperscript{326} See Marcia Pally, \textit{White Evangelicals and Right-Wing Populism: How Did We Get Here?} (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2022). Pally offers readers a chance to reflect on the tragic aspects of the white evangelical story, including the distorting effects of economic and lifestyle pressures on their understanding of history and present circumstances, as well as the tragic consequences of choosing divisive “us-them” solutions that fail to address the underlying problems. It explores the path from economic and status loss to populist, binary solutions, and examines the white evangelical role in civil society and issues of racism, xenophobia, and sexism. The final chapter also considers those white evangelicals who do not align with the political right; cf. Paul A. Djupe and Jacob R. Neiheisel, “Political Mobilization in American Congregations: A Religious Economies Perspective,” \textit{Politics and Religion} 12, no. 1 (2019): 123-152.

\textsuperscript{327} See esp. Mark A. Noll, \textit{American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction} (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001). This work by one of the foremost experts in the field offers a superb exploration of the history and theology of “American Evangelicalism.” It portrays this form of evangelicalism as a dynamic expression of “biblical experimentation” that has adapted to cultural changes over time. “Evangelicalism” has been defined by scholars of Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, an evangelical seminary (otherwise known by Liberty University), as “groups [who] were not radically different in their Christian beliefs,” but rather attached to the “foundation of Christianity in America” as an “undeniable pretense of individualized preference.” According to these evangelical scholars, this history resulted in the following four principles from the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE): [The] four primary characteristics of evangelicalism [are] conversionism: the belief that lives need to be transformed through a “born-again” experience and a lifelong process of following Jesus; biblicism: a high regard for and obedience to the Bible as the ultimate authority; activism: the expression and demonstration of the gospel in missionary and social reform efforts; crucicentrism: a stress on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as making possible the redemption of humanity. For more on the NAE and its definition, see “What is an Evangelical?,” \textit{The National Association of Evangelicals}, accessed April 28, 2023, https://www.nae.org/what-is-an-evangelical/; see also Roger Erdvig, “A Model for Biblical Worldview Development in Evangelical Christian Emerging Adults,” (Ph.D. diss., Liberty University, 2016); Ralph Baeza, “21st Century Evangelism and Church Growth Approach to Reach Urban Professionals in North America Metropolises,” (Ph.D. diss., Liberty University, 2013); H. G. Walker, “The
politics has created a cultural and political climate that promotes individualism, consumerism, and nationalism over social and environmental responsibility, community building, and global cooperation.\textsuperscript{328} Others point out that not all members of these groups share the same views and that there is room for diverse perspectives and alliances.\textsuperscript{329} Therefore, further research is needed to explore the complexity and diversity of this religio-political intersection and its impact on various aspects of society, including but not limited to religion, economics, politics, culture, and identity.

Moreover, as this project has suggested, the use of the Bible to justify beliefs goes \textit{beyond} the rhetoric of self-improvement stated by the intentions of the PDI’s most regarded leaders. Instead, personal beliefs—economic, political, social—bleed into the fabric of industry teachings, which can be found in the justification of leaders (and even entire denominations) endorsing policies that are harmful to marginalized communities, as seen in recent attempts to cut social welfare programs or place increased restrictions on reproductive rights.\textsuperscript{330} Given the pressing nature of this research, exploring the wider connections between the Personal Development Industry, conservative evangelicalism, and American politics is imperative and warrants further investigation. In conclusion, the following are some possible directions of such research, which each comprise of an area of study impacted by the philosophy and practices of the PDI.

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Directions For Future Research

1. *Religious Background of PDI Adherents:* It is important to gather empirical evidence on the religious backgrounds of individuals who attend personal development seminars. While anecdotal evidence suggests that many attendees have a Protestant background, it is crucial to measure this aspect quantitatively to confirm this claim. An additional question may be raised: are certain Protestant sects more likely than others to adhere to PDI rhetoric? By understanding the religious orientation of PDI adherents, we can investigate how religious ideas impact their attraction to self-help programs.

2. *Multi-Cultural Populations and PDI Adherence:* The PDI’s appeal to those from third-world or non-Christian contexts raises questions about its multi-cultural impact. The perspectives of religions outside Christianity, such as the Muslim, Buddhist, or indigenous practices, can inform our understanding of the impact of this industry. Additionally, exploring these perspectives can provide insights into the meaning of personal development across different cultures.

3. *Gender and Sexuality Issues in the PDI:* Given the significant number of males in leadership in the PDI, the impact of gender on the PDI ought to be explored. Research should investigate whether the industry perpetuates male/female stereotypes and reinforces the idea that women need male guidance to achieve material success. Additionally, exploring whether female/non-binary leaders in the industry accept predominantly “male” ideas regarding personal development can provide insights into gender dynamics in the industry.

4. *PDI Ethos:* The PDI is a multi-billion-dollar industry that uses wealth to increase adherence, and as such, questions should be raised about the ethics of the industry, and
subsequently individual leaders. Research should investigate the industry’s marketing tactics and whether they use false claims to lure vulnerable individuals. Additionally, exploring the industry’s certification process and the qualifications of personal development coaches can provide insights into the PDI’s ethical standards. Finally, future research ought to investigate if the industry’s focus on individualism and self-fulfillment can lead to an ethical dilemma of self-interest at the expense of others or communities. Does it create a moral vacuum by encouraging a competitive drive for material accomplishments? Understanding these implications will help individuals make informed decisions about whether to invest in such programs.

5. *The Future of the PDI and American Politics*: Scholars of theology and religion ought to study the PDI for its recent growth and influence, as previously mentioned throughout this project. The PDI not only impacts the practices and perception of religion and religious authority, but it also has begun to affect American politics. This intersection of power and authority brings with it potential danger of PDI and religious rhetoric influencing American politics without the consideration of other religions and perspectives, and therefore should be monitored by scholars as society progresses beyond the unsteady period between 2020-2023 as a result of the recent pandemic.

*Section Summary*

It is my prediction that many more future research projects will come to fruition as a result of the PDI. There can be no denying that the industry has an impact on the role of religion in American society. An increased body of literature on this subject would address the decrease and/or shift in *societal trust of religious authority in America*, and provide further resources for
religious scholars and theologians to challenge the role of religion in U.S. social and economic systems.

The Bible has been used to justify all sort of capitalistic endeavors, from the prosperity gospel to the exploitation of natural resources. And yet, the central message of the Bible (if it is possible to claim only one) is about valuing all of creation, and working towards a sustainable and just future for every being.\textsuperscript{331} Despite its importance, this is a much larger conversation, requiring an interdisciplinary approach that is beyond the scope of this thesis. Because of the pressing nature of this work, I have provided some initial resources in the notes below for the beginning stages of future projects.\textsuperscript{332}


movements intersect and influence one another, we can gain a better understanding of the broader cultural, social, and political developments that are shaping America today.
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