

Third Thesis

Wealth and health are not manifestations of God's blessing.

As with most things, test the premise by its opposite: are poverty and sickness God's curses on people? If so, is that the type of god you'd want to worship? If wealth and health are God's blessings, why would God withhold them from anyone?

This third thesis is really only a corollary of the second and, to some extent, I have addressed it in that article. Because this is only ancillary to the second thesis, this article will be shorter (is anyone still reading? Has anyone ever?). Also, just a caveat, I have hesitated to come out with these first several articles so quickly in succession because I fear that creates unrealistic expectations. I'm sure the steam will run low eventually.

Where I have difficulty asserting that God does not personally intervene in human affairs, as I explain in the article on the second thesis, I have no qualms whatsoever about this derivative of that statement. One of the more repulsive aspects of modern conservative Christianity, to me, is its tendency to espouse a theology of wealth. God wants you to be wealthy. God wants you to be healthy. God, somehow, has a deep-seated need to have followers who have financial heft. My neuroses flare even while I write about this sacrilege – and I am angry that persons who claim the name “Christian” present this portrait to the world at large.

Because if you believe that the reason you are rich or healthy or pretty is because God blessed you with those things, then I can't see how you could avoid the question, “Why?” Why did God bless you with wealth, health or beauty, etc.? You never see a rich person pondering the happy life of poor vagabonds while musing aloud, “God blessed them with such illuminating, enriching poverty.” It's like discussions by persons who claim they remember past lives. You never hear one of them say they were once a two-bit hooker in the black hole of Calcutta. They were all queens, kings and knights or shahs, sheiks and shamans.

Megachurches that preach a wealth dogma have spread like syphilis in the USA. You have preachers who assure their followers that if they follow all that preacher's teachings, God will bless the follower with wealth and other so-called blessings. I suspect that part of the teaching is to give generously to the church (i.e., the pastor's salary fund), but my stomach has always revolted before I could get that far in any examination. And, as I pointed out in the article on the second thesis, once you believe that God has made you wealthy (or whatever other blessing you claim), then no matter how humble you believe yourself to be, you can only believe that you have a divine right to that wealth. Sure, you may say that God expects you to use your wealth wisely, but you don't find many fabulously wealthy persons evangelizing their wealthy neighbors with a theology that would require them to give all their wealth away. They just give large sums (but small percentages) to what they deem worthy causes.

Then, of course, there's also the converse situation to consider. The blessed among us never bring this up directly, but their claim to blessing has an unavoidable opposite. If wealth and health are blessings, then aren't poverty and sickness God's curses (or at least God's refusal to

bless)? Surely it's possible that poverty could also be seen as a blessing as I allude to above. Many persons who are poor, or even just lower middle class, are happy and healthy – and no doubt they refer to their condition as blessed (at least, perhaps, the lower middle class).

But what about the stinking poor? What about people who have no idea how they're going to feed their children? What about people without the luxury even of considering whether they are blessed because they're too busy trying to find tomorrow's crust. Has God cursed those people? Does God love the residents of Ballantyne more than those who live in Grier Heights? If so, there are a good many folks in the 28277 zip code God hasn't met – because, as far as I can tell, the corner of Johnston Road and Ballantyne Commons Parkway is Mecca for the narcissistic, wasteful and selfish – it even looks like a temple to conspicuous consumption, voracious greed and unbridled debt. Does God really love those folks more than a struggling grandmother on Barringer Drive? If so, I don't care to have much to do with that God.

And what, I wonder, do the wealth-preachin' Christians do with all those stories about a poor Jesus? A Jesus who had to add fish-and-bread miracle helper to feed the 5000? A Jesus who told the rich young man to sell all he had and give the proceeds to the poor? A Jesus who said that to follow him you have to leave behind all you have – including your family – and follow? What do they do with that beautiful prose from the Hebrew scriptures, "Consider the lilies of the field..."? How do they handle Zaccheus, who encounters Jesus and then sells his goods and gives his money away (admittedly to those he had taken it from – but the story by no means should suggest to us that his booty was ill-gotten)? What is their response to Jesus' injunction to, if you are asked for your worldly goods, give more than is requested? (How's that for a split infinitive?)

Additionally, I sometimes wonder how conservative Christians who adhere to a "gospel of wealth" philosophy explain the nexus between bank accounts and religious belief? First, how much money you have doesn't seem to me to be a sufficient basis upon which to build a spiritual weltanschauung. That would result, I believe, in many of us having spiritual well being that ebbed and flowed in direct correlation with the Dow or S&P. Second, how then, if you were a conservative Christian, would you explain wealthy pagans? or Jews, or Muslims, etc. Has God blessed the owner of the BMW with the vanity plate "WICCA" that just whizzed past me on the highway this morning? Will the Blumenthals be seated next to the McColls at the heavenly repast? (I think, if there is such a meal, they will be, but will it be because they could afford the tickets?)

And if the answer that conservative Christians give to such situations is that not all wealth is a blessing from God, just their wealth, then what sense does that make? And then is all Christian wealth an intentional blessing from God? or only some? Is the wealth of the Bush empire a blessing from God, but the Clintons' wealth the result of their own actions? Of course, conservative Christians may argue that the Clintons and I are not "real" Christians, but that still begs the question of whose wealth is a blessing and whose is not. If you postulate that the wealth of "real" Christians is a blessing from God and the wealth of everyone else is just coincidence or, God forbid, hard work or, more likely, luck or manipulation – then "blessing" ceases to have any real meaning, doesn't it? It ends up sounding much more like "luck" than "blessing". We're

very wealthy and pretty, we've been blessed – begins to mean something more like “We've been damn lucky.”

I understand why people of faith are apt to attribute all goodness in their lives to God or Jesus, or Mohammad, Buddha or whatever appropriate figure there is in their faith system. Although I recognize that while I have many things for which to give thanks (to whom?), others are not so, well, blessed! In my life, I am grateful for the many good things that I have or that happen to me and, when I'm most honest, I admit to thinking of them as blessings. And they are blessings, surely – just perhaps not the intentional act of a deity who chose to give them to me rather than someone else. What are they? Luck? Circumstance? Serendipity? Probably. I spoke with a friend the other day who posits that everything is how it is because it can't be any other way – i.e., that every thing is determined by chemistry, physics, etc. Determinism may have some strong philosophical arguments for it, but for me, as long as I can't perceive how it operates I'm not sure it matters to me. That is to say, okay, if everything is determined, but I can't understand that system or how it works in the world, and I perceive myself having to make decisions and, worse, having to live with the consequences of my decisions, then even if it were a fact that determinism is, it wouldn't matter to me. Call me Aristotle.

What, then, would constitute a blessing from God? I have to confess that I have a hard time with the concept. I just don't know right off what a blessing from God looks like. And here's where I have my second deist strike, I think. I think that the watch may be the blessing. That is, I think that the world being set up as wonderfully as it is may be the Prime Mover's blessing. I think the fact that the world evolves and absorbs and adapts, that humans have the built-in capacity to eradicate smallpox, and that black marks written on a white sheet can take humans to flights of wonder are blessings of a sort that could be divine. I think that the fact that sex is both procreative and pleasurable, that whales sing, that beauty is wasted on the short lives of Monarchs and that natural disasters are relative – i.e., good for some, bad for some – are all divine blessings. Even to me this all sounds very pantheistic or perhaps even wiccan – but it is in the universal good that I can perceive divine intervention, not in the peculiarities of individual needs or wants.