

[PRINT THIS PAGE](#) [CLOSE WINDOW](#)

RELIGION DECEMBER 2009

SPECIAL HOLIDAY OFFER
FREE GIFT SUBSCRIPTION
 BUY ONE—GET ONE FREE! [>> ORDER NOW!](#)



America's mainstream religious denominations used to teach the faithful that they would be rewarded in the afterlife. But over the past generation, a different strain of Christian faith has proliferated—one that promises to make believers rich in the here and now. Known as the prosperity gospel, and claiming tens of millions of adherents, it fosters risk-taking and intense material optimism. It pumped air into the housing bubble. And one year into the worst downturn since the Depression, it's still going strong.

by **Hanna Rosin**

Did Christianity Cause the Crash?

IMAGE CREDIT: MARK PETERSON/REDUX

LIKE THE AMBITIONS of many immigrants who attend services there, Casa del Padre's success can be measured by upgrades in real estate. The mostly Latino church, in Charlottesville, Virginia, has moved from the pastor's basement, where it was founded in 2001, to a rented warehouse across the street from a small *mercado* five years later, to a middle-class suburban street last year, where the pastor now rents space from a lovely old Baptist church that can't otherwise fill its pews. Every Sunday, the parishioners drive slowly into the parking lot, never parking on the sidewalk or grass—"because Americanos don't do that," one told me—and file quietly into church. Some drive newly leased SUVs, others old work trucks with paint buckets still in the bed. The pastor, [Fernando Garay](#), arrives last and parks in front, his dark-blue Mercedes Benz always freshly washed, the hubcaps polished enough to reflect his wingtips.

It can be hard to get used to how much Garay talks about money in church, one loyal parishioner, Billy Gonzales, told me one recent Sunday on the steps out front. Back in Mexico, Gonzales's pastor talked only about "Jesus and heaven and being good." But Garay talks about jobs and houses and making good money, which eventually came to make sense to Gonzales: money is "really important," and besides, "we love the money in Jesus Christ's name! Jesus loved money too!" That Sunday, Garay was preaching a variation on his usual theme, about how prosperity and abundance unerringly find true believers. "It doesn't matter what country you're from, what degree you have, or what money you have in the bank," Garay said. "You don't have to say, 'God, bless my business. Bless my bank account.' The blessings will come! The blessings are looking for you! God will take care of you. God will not let you be without a house!"

Pastor Garay, 48, is short and stocky, with thick black hair combed back. In his off hours, he looks like a contented tourist, in his printed Hawaiian shirts or bright guayaberas. But he preaches with a ferocity that taps into his youth as a cocaine dealer with a knife in his back pocket. "Fight the attack of the devil on my finances! Fight him! We declare financial blessings! Financial miracles this week, NOW NOW NOW!" he preached that Sunday. "More work! Better work! The best finances!" Gonzales shook and paced as the pastor spoke, eventually leaving his wife and three kids in the family section to join the

single men toward the front, many of whom were jumping, raising their Bibles, and weeping. On the altar sat some anointing oils, alongside the keys to the Mercedes Benz.

Later, D'andry Then, a trim, pretty real-estate agent and one of the church founders, stood up to give her testimony. Business had not been good of late, and "you know, Monday I have to pay this, and Tuesday I have to pay that." Then, just that morning, "Jesus gave me \$1,000." She didn't explain whether the gift came in the form of a real-estate commission or a tax refund or a stuffed envelope left at her door. The story hung somewhere between metaphor and a literal image of barefoot Jesus handing her a pile of cash. No one in the church seemed the least bit surprised by the story, and certainly no one expressed doubt. "If you have financial pressure on you, and you don't know where the next payment is coming from, don't pay any attention to that!" she continued. "Don't get discouraged! Jesus is the answer."

America's churches always reflect shifts in the broader culture, and Casa del Padre is no exception. The message that Jesus blesses believers with riches first showed up in the postwar years, at a time when Americans began to believe that greater comfort could be accessible to everyone, not just the landed class. But it really took off during the boom years of the 1990s, and has continued to spread ever since. This stitched-together, homegrown theology, known as the prosperity gospel, is not a clearly defined denomination, but a strain of belief that runs through the Pentecostal Church and a surprising number of mainstream evangelical churches, with varying degrees of intensity. In Garay's church, God is the "Owner of All the Silver and Gold," and with enough faith, any believer can access the inheritance. Money is not the dull stuff of hourly wages and bank-account statements, but a magical substance that comes as a gift from above. Even in these hard times, it is discouraged, in such churches, to fall into despair about the things you cannot afford. "Instead of saying 'I'm poor,' say 'I'm rich,'" Garay's wife, Hazael, told me one day. "The word of God will manifest itself in reality."

Many explanations have been offered for the housing bubble and subsequent crash: interest rates were too low; regulation failed; rising real-estate prices induced a sort of temporary insanity in America's middle class. But there is one explanation that speaks to a lasting and fundamental shift in American culture—a shift in the American conception of divine Providence and its relationship to wealth.

In his book *Something for Nothing*, Jackson Lears describes two starkly different manifestations of the American dream, each intertwined with religious faith. The traditional Protestant hero is a self-made man. He is disciplined and hardworking, and believes that his "success comes through careful cultivation of (implicitly Protestant) virtues in cooperation with a Providential plan." The hero of the second American narrative is a kind of gambling man—a "speculative confidence man," Lears calls him, who prefers "risky ventures in real estate," and a more "fluid, mobile democracy." The self-made man imagines a coherent universe where earthly rewards match merits. The confidence man lives in a culture of chance, with "grace as a kind of spiritual luck, a free gift from God." The Gilded Age launched the myth of the self-made man, as the Rockefellers and other powerful men in the pews connected their wealth to their own virtue. In these boom-and-crash years, the more reckless alter ego dominates. In his book, Lears quotes a reverend named Jeffrey Black, who sounds remarkably like Garay: "The whole hope of a human being is that somehow, in spite of the things I've done wrong, there will be an episode when grace and fate shower down on me and an unearned blessing will come to me—that I'll be the one."

I had come to Charlottesville to learn more about this second strain of the American dream—one that's been ascendant for a generation or more. I wanted to try to piece together the connection between the gospel and today's economic reality, and to see whether "prosperity" could possibly still seem enticing, or even plausible, in this distinctly unprosperous moment. (Very much so, as it turns out.) Charlottesville may not be the heartland of the prosperity gospel, which is most prevalent in the [Sun Belt](#)—where many of the country's foreclosure hot spots also lie. And Garay preaches an unusually pure version of the gospel. Still, the particulars of both Garay and his congregation are revealing.

Among Latinos the prosperity gospel has been spreading rapidly. In a [recent Pew survey](#), 73 percent of all religious Latinos in the United States agreed with the statement: “God will grant financial success to all believers who have enough faith.” For a generation of poor and striving Latino immigrants, the gospel seems to offer a road map to affluence and modern living. Garay’s church is comprised mostly of first-generation immigrants. More than others I’ve visited, it echoes back a highly distilled, unself-conscious version of the current thinking on what it means to live the American dream.

One other thing makes Garay’s church a compelling case study. From 2001 to 2007, while he was building his church, Garay was also a loan officer at two different mortgage companies. He was hired explicitly to reach out to the city’s growing Latino community, and Latinos, as it happened, were disproportionately likely to take out the sort of risky loans that later led to so many foreclosures. To many of his parishioners, Garay was not just a spiritual adviser, but a financial one as well.

MANY OF THE TERMS and concepts used by prosperity preachers today date back to Oral Roberts, a poor farmer’s son turned Pentecostal preacher. Garay grew up watching Roberts on television and considers him a hero; he hopes to send all three of his children to [Oral Roberts University](#), in Tulsa, Oklahoma. In the late 1940s, Roberts claimed his Bible flipped open to the Third Epistle of John, verse 2: “Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health. Even as thy soul prospereth.” Soon Roberts developed his famous concept of seed faith, still popular today. If people would donate money to his ministry, a “seed” offered to God, he’d say, then God would multiply it a hundredfold. Eventually, Roberts retreated into a life that revolved around private jets and country clubs.

Roberts’s fame had faded by the late 1980s, and prosperity preaching briefly imploded soon after. We all remember [Tammy Faye Bakker](#) and [her mascara tears](#), along with her husband, [Jim, and his various scandals](#). They took their place in a procession of slick, showy faith healers on Christian television who ultimately succumbed to earthly temptation.

But since that time, the movement has made itself over, moving out of the fringe and into the upwardly mobile megachurch class. In the past decade, it has produced about a dozen celebrity pastors, who show up at White House events, on secular radio, and as guests on major TV talk shows. [Kirbyjon Caldwell](#), a Methodist megapastor in Houston and a purveyor of the prosperity gospel, gave the [benediction](#) at both of George W. Bush’s inaugurals. Instead of shiny robes or gaudy jewelry, these preachers wear Italian suits and modest wedding bands. Instead of screaming and sweating, they smile broadly and speak in soothing, therapeutic terms. But their message is essentially the same. “Every day, you’re going to live that abundant life!” preaches [Joel Osteen](#), a best-selling author, the nation’s most popular TV preacher, and the pastor of [Lakewood Church](#), in Houston, the country’s largest church by far.

Among mainstream, nondenominational megachurches, where much of American religious life takes place, “prosperity is proliferating” rapidly, says Kate Bowler, a doctoral candidate at Duke University and an expert in the gospel. Few, if any, of these churches have *prosperity* in their title or mission statement, but Bowler has analyzed their sermons and teachings. Of the nation’s 12 largest churches, she says, three are prosperity—Osteen’s, which dwarfs all the other megachurches; [Tommy Barnett’s](#), in Phoenix; and [T. D. Jakes’s](#), in Dallas. In second-tier churches—those with about 5,000 members—the prosperity gospel dominates. Overall, Bowler classifies 50 of the largest 260 churches in the U.S. as prosperity. The doctrine has become popular with Americans of every background and ethnicity; overall, Pew found that 66 percent of all Pentecostals and 43 percent of “other Christians”—a category comprising roughly half of all respondents—believe that wealth will be granted to the faithful. It’s an upbeat theology, argues Barbara Ehrenreich in her new book, [Bright-Sided](#), that has much in common with the kind of “positive thinking” that has come to dominate America’s boardrooms and, indeed, its entire culture.

On the cover of his 4 million-copy best seller from 2004, [Your Best Life Now](#), Joel Osteen looks like a recent college grad

who just got hired by Goldman Sachs and can't believe his good luck. His hair is full, his teeth are bright, his suit is polished but not flashy; he looks like a guy who would more likely shake your hand than cast out your demons. Osteen took over his father's church in 1999. He had little preaching experience, although he'd managed the television ministry for years. The church grew quickly, as Osteen packaged himself to appeal to the broadest audience possible. In his books and sermons, Osteen quotes very little scripture, opting instead to tell uplifting personal anecdotes. He avoids controversy, and rarely appears on Christian TV. In a popular YouTube clip, he declines to confirm Larry King's suggestion that only those who believe in Jesus will go to heaven.

VIDEO: Watch a clip from Joel Osteen's *Larry King* appearance

Osteen is often derided as Christianity Lite, but he is more like Positivity Extreme. "Cast down anything negative, any thought that brings fear, worry, doubt, or unbelief," he urges. "Your attitude should be: 'I refuse to go backward. I am going forward with God. I am going to be the person he wants me to be. I'm going to fulfill my destiny.'" Telling yourself you are poor, or broke, or stuck in a dead-end job is a form of sin and "invites more negativity into your life," he writes. Instead, you have to "program your mind for success," wake up every morning and tell yourself, "God is guiding and directing my steps." The advice is exactly like the message of *The Secret*, or any number of American self-help blockbusters that edge toward magical thinking, except that the religious context adds another dimension.

Your Best Life Now, which has fueled a TV show that Osteen claims is now seen in 200 million homes worldwide, opens with a story of a man on vacation in Hawaii. He was "a good man who had achieved a modest measure of success, but he was coasting along, thinking that he'd already reached his limits." While sightseeing, he and his wife admired a gorgeous house on a hill. "I can't even imagine living in a place like that," he said. For this bit of self-deprecation and modesty, Osteen pities the man: "His own thoughts and attitudes," he writes, "were condemning him to mediocrity," or what is known in the gospel as the "defeated life."

A few pages later comes the corrective, the model of a "victor" and not a "victim." Osteen and his wife, Victoria, are walking around their neighborhood in Houston when they pass a beautiful house being built. "Most of the other homes around us

were one-story, ranch-style homes that were forty to fifty years old, but this house was a large two-story home, with high ceilings and oversized windows,” he writes. “It was a lovely, inspiring place.” Victoria desperately wanted a house “just like it,” but Joel was worried about how stretched they already were. “Thinking of our bank account and my income at the time, it seemed impossible to me,” he writes. But this, of course, is an example of ungodly, negative thinking. With her unwavering faith, Victoria wouldn’t let it drop. Soon she convinced Joel and then he, too, started to believe that “God could bring it to pass.” There is no explanation of how they came to own such a house—whether Osteen worked hard to grow his ministry or got rich from his TV show or received an inheritance from his father’s estate. In this story they are standing in for an average middle-class couple who set their sights on a bigger house and believed, despite all the financial evidence, that God would bestow it upon them, like a gift. And he did.

THEOLOGICALLY, THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL has always infuriated many mainstream evangelical pastors. Rick Warren, whose book *The Purpose Driven Life* outsold Osteen’s, *told Time*, “This idea that God wants everybody to be wealthy? There is a word for that: baloney. It’s creating a false idol. You don’t measure your self-worth by your net worth. I can show you millions of faithful followers of Christ who live in poverty. Why isn’t everyone in the church a millionaire?” In 2005, a group of African American pastors met to denounce prosperity megapreachers for promoting a Jesus who is more like a “cosmic bellhop,” as one pastor put it, than the engaged Jesus of the civil-rights era who looked after the poor.

More recently, critics have begun to argue that the prosperity gospel, echoed in churches across the country, might have played a part in the economic collapse. In 2008, in the online magazine *Religion Dispatches*, Jonathan Walton, a professor of religious studies at the University of California at Riverside, warned:

Narratives of how “God blessed me with my first house despite my credit” were common ... Sermons declaring “It’s your season of overflow” supplanted messages of economic sobriety and disinterested sacrifice. Yet as folks were testifying about “what God can do,” little attention was paid to a predatory subprime-mortgage industry, relaxed credit standards, or the dangers of using one’s home equity as an ATM.

In 2004, Walton was researching a book about black televangelists. “I would hear consistent testimonies about how ‘once I was renting and now God let me own my own home,’ or ‘I was afraid of the loan officer, but God directed him to ignore my bad credit and blessed me with my first home,’” he says. “This trope was so common in these churches that I just became immune to it. Only later did I connect it to this disaster.”

Demographically, the growth of the prosperity gospel tracks fairly closely to the pattern of foreclosure hot spots. Both spread in two particular kinds of communities—the exurban middle class and the urban poor. Many newer prosperity churches popped up around fringe suburban developments built in the 1990s and 2000s, says Walton. These are precisely the kinds of neighborhoods that have been decimated by foreclosures, according to Eric Halperin, of the [Center for Responsible Lending](#).

Zooming out a bit, Kate Bowler found that most new prosperity-gospel churches were built along the Sun Belt, particularly in California, Florida, and Arizona—all areas that were hard-hit by the mortgage crisis. Bowler, who, like Walton, was researching a book, spent a lot of time attending the “financial empowerment” seminars that are common at prosperity churches. Advisers would pay lip service to “sound financial practices,” she recalls, but overall they would send the opposite message: posters advertising the seminars featured big houses in the background, and the parking spots closest to the church were reserved for luxury cars.

Nationally, the prosperity gospel has spread exponentially among African American and Latino congregations. This is also

the other distinct pattern of foreclosures. “Hyper-segregated” urban communities were the worst off, says Halperin. Reliable data on foreclosures by race are not publicly available, but mortgages are tracked by both race and loan type, and subprime loans have tended to correspond to foreclosures. During the boom, roughly 40 percent of all loans going to Latinos nationwide were subprime loans; Latinos and African Americans were 28 percent and 37 percent more likely, respectively, to receive a higher-rate subprime loan than whites.

In June, [the Supreme Court ruled](#) that state attorneys general had the authority to sue national banks for predatory lending. Even before that ruling, at least 17 lawsuits accusing various banks of treating racial minorities unfairly were already under way. (Bank of America’s Countrywide division—one of the companies Garay worked for—had earlier agreed to pay \$8.4 billion in a multistate settlement.) One theme emerging in these suits is how banks teamed up with pastors to win over new customers for subprime loans.

Beth Jacobson is a star witness for the City of Baltimore’s recent suit against Wells Fargo. Jacobson was a top loan officer in the bank’s subprime division for nine years, closing as much as \$55 million worth of loans a year. Like many subprime-loan officers, Jacobson had no bank experience before working for Wells Fargo. The subprime officers were drawn from “an utterly different background” than the professional bankers, she told me. She had been running a small paralegal business; her co-workers had been car salespeople, or had worked in telemarketing. They were prized for their ability to hustle on the ground and “look you in the eye when they shook your hand,” she surmised. As a reward for good performance, the bank would sometimes send a Hummer limo to pick up Jacobson for a celebration, she said. She’d arrive at a bar and find all her co-workers drunk and her boss “doing body shots off a waitress.”

The idea of reaching out to churches took off quickly, Jacobson recalls. The branch managers figured pastors had a lot of influence with their parishioners and could give the loan officers credibility and new customers. Jacobson remembers a conference call where sales managers discussed the new strategy. The plan was to send officers to guest-speak at church-sponsored “wealth-building seminars” like the ones Bowler attended, and dazzle the participants with the possibility of a new house. They would tell pastors that for every person who took out a mortgage, \$350 would be donated to the church, or to a charity of the parishioner’s choice. “They wouldn’t say, ‘Hey, Mr. Minister. We want to give your people a bunch of subprime loans,’” Jacobson told me. “They would say, ‘Your congregants will be homeowners! They will be able to live the American dream!’”

GARAY OFTEN TELLS his life story from the pulpit, as an inspiration to the many immigrants in his church, some legal, some not. He grew up an outsider—a citizen by birth, but living a marginal existence in a diverse, working-class neighborhood in Flushing, Queens. His mother left when he was 8, and he was raised mostly by two older brothers; he spent most of his time on the street. “I ate jars of peanut butter for dinner,” he says. The story of how he became a Christian begins in 1989, when he was 28 years old, and involves a large sum of money. He’d been selling drugs in Miami, then started using, and owed some dealers \$30,000 that he didn’t have, and they were going to kill him. He was on his mattress one night, in despair, when a picture of Jesus up on his wall “winked at me.” Soon after, he became a born-again Christian, and he told everyone about it. The dealers, he says, then went away. He doesn’t offer much explanation; he just says, “They were after me. They were going to kill me. And then they just backed off.” He credits Jesus.

Garay tried many churches, but they all felt alien and “dead” to him. “That’s not me, sitting quietly and saying ‘Thank you, God.’” Finally he came upon a Pentecostal prosperity church, much like the one he leads now. The church was full of miracles and real emotion, which drew him in, but it also offered practical benefits. The pastor pointed out Bible passages that referred to finances in specific terms, giving him images of wealth he could almost reach out and touch: “Give, and it shall be given to you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over”—a passage that’s now often read

at Garay's church during tithing time.

"Then it started happening. It started happening!" He enrolled in a community college and began selling roses from buckets in the backseat of his Honda ("no AC, no radio"). In no time, as he tells it, he had worked himself up to roses in plastic straws, laid neatly across the backseat of his Cadillac, with no water sloshing on the white leather. With this story, Garay hopes to convince his followers that God has a bounty for them, but that to get it they have to take the first step of faith. One analogy he likes to use is a box of gifts in heaven; if you never reach up to get it, then it won't come down to you. It's a curious mix of active (a step of faith) and passive ("It started happening!").

In Garay's testimony, his life proceeds that way: part hard work, part miracle. He applied himself, eventually got married, and had children. One day, for no reason, he quit his job as a social worker counseling addicted juvenile delinquents. "I almost hit him with a frying pan," Hazael, his wife, jokes. But the very same day, his mother-in-law walked into the house and said the bank was looking for a bilingual loan officer. He had no experience and had never used a computer. Yet he got the job and within a year was earning six figures. How did that happen? How did it all come together so neatly, one door opening the moment another had closed? When I asked him that, he smiled and pointed up at the sky.

Garay is like a father figure to his parishioners; I met a few who had named their children after him or his wife. Parishioners told me stories about his coming with them to their court hearings, showing them how to buy a phone card or find a good school for their children or, for the more entrepreneurial, invest in a small business. Oral Roberts's seed-faith concept is the source of much suspicion about prosperity churches; pastors, including Garay, ask their parishioners to give 10 percent of their income to the church. But to Garay, seed faith is the church's central tenet. The tithe, he says, is tangible proof that a believer has taken the first step toward God. It is the spiritual equivalent of spending three years selling flowers door-to-door. He often tells what's known as Jesus' parable of the three servants, from Matthew. A lord gives three of his servants money. Two invest the money and double their profit, and a third hides his in the ground. When the master returns, he declares the third "wicked and lazy" and a "worthless slave," and casts him into the "outer darkness." "To receive God's bounty, you cannot hide your head in the sand," Garay preaches. "You have to take a leap of faith."

I asked Garay why his parishioner Billy Gonzales, who earns barely \$25,000 and has no money to fix his car, should donate 10 percent of his income. "Because it gives him a new mentality. It teaches him that money can breed more money, that you can have money in your pocket on Saturday morning even though you got paid Friday night. People who support the church week after week have a dedication. Those who just give \$5 or \$10 here and there, you'll hear them have the same problems week after week." Jackson Lears would add another explanation: tithing is like the moment the gambler lays his money down on the table—it "promises at least a fleeting opportunity to contact a realm where hope is alive," he writes. Without it, there's only the dull regularity of \$2,000 a month and a dead car.

During the boom years, Apostle Garay, as he is known in church, was brasher than he is now. He spoke in very specific terms during church services, promising that a \$100 offering would yield a \$10,000 return: "This is not my promise. It is God's promise, and he will make it happen!" he would say.

While it sounds absurd, this kind of message can have a positive influence, according to Tony Tian-Ren Lin, a researcher at the University of Virginia who has made a close study of Latino prosperity gospel congregations over the years. These churches typically take in people who had "been basically dropped into the world from pretty primitive settings"—small towns in Latin America with no electricity or running water and very little educational opportunity. In their new congregation, their pastor slowly walks them through life in the U.S., both inside and outside of church, until they become more confident. "In Mexico, nobody ever told them they could do anything," says Lin, who was himself raised in Argentina.

He finds the message at prosperity churches to be quintessentially American. “They are taught they can do absolutely anything, and it’s God’s will. They become part of the elect, the chosen. They get swept up in the manifest destiny, this idea that God has lifted Americans above everyone else.”

At Casa del Padre, the celebration of consumer culture is quite visible, along with a sense of boundless opportunity. The people in the church, for instance, tend to have very expensive cell phones—never the free ones that come with a calling plan, nor the sort that can be bought cheaply at a convenience store. “They start wanting what’s considered the best and the most technologically advanced in this country,” Lin says. Garay’s church, it seems to me, teaches them that they deserve these things, so they go about getting them, with few resources and infinite adaptability. Before the crash, one group of young men got a \$12,000 loan to start a landscaping company; another man bought a \$270,000 house. One of the church’s Bible-study leaders, who’d grown up in a remote village in Mexico with an abusive, alcoholic father, had become a very successful contractor by the height of the boom, managing 30 men on multiple jobs and winning contracts to paint luxury subdivisions in the exurbs.

The tenets of the prosperity gospel, and the practical advice that pastors often give their parishioners, help immigrants learn “not just how to survive but how to thrive; not just live paycheck to paycheck but handle money—manage complicated payrolls, invest in equipment,” Lin told me. Along the way, they become assimilated. “While they’re trying to be closer to God, instead they become American,” he says, from their optimism and entrepreneurialism to the very nature of their dreams.

THESE DAYS, GARAY’S MESSAGE is more subdued than it was at the height of the boom, but not substantially different. In a sermon on Father’s Day, he did not make specific claims of financial returns on investments but instead spoke vaguely about how his congregation’s prospects were “good and going to get better.” After church, I asked Garay about how the gospel was holding up in the recession. It was a hot summer day, and although he had just finished one of his feverish two-hour sermons, he seemed energized rather than drained. “Look,” he said, and rounded his hands as if to indicate a protective shield. “The recession has not hit *my* church.” He reminded me that when he had asked how many people were out of work, only four people out of about 100 there had raised their hands. But in a church where failure is seen as a kind of sin, it seems credulous at best to expect an honest response to that question. I later met at least one person—Billy Gonzales’s younger brother—who didn’t have a job but hadn’t raised his hand, because he thought he’d “have one lined up soon.”

Garay describes the recession as God’s judgment—for abortion, taking prayer out of school, bikinis on television, “*Desperate Housewives*, whatever.” But God is also giving us a two-year window to repent, he says. He calculates that we’ve had five years of extreme plenty and now the clock is running out, based on the biblical story of Joseph and the great famine—seven years of plenty followed by seven years of a failed harvest. If we don’t repent, we will experience “misery like we have never known it.” These days, if any parishioners or fellow pastors ask Garay for investment advice, he tells them to wait two years before making a move.

Like much of Garay’s advice, this recommendation is partly grounded in economic reality, and partly drawn from mystical notions about a biblical calendar. “I’m very real,” he once told me. “If you want to eat at Red Lobster, you better have a Red Lobster paycheck, and enough left over to pay your electric bill. But I’ve also seen miracles of God.” Later, during one of our talks over coffee, his wife echoed the sentiment. “If you can’t afford a house, you shouldn’t buy it,” Hazael said, when I asked whether the prosperity gospel might push people to take irresponsible risks. “But if the Lord is telling you to ‘take that first step and I will provide,’ then you have to believe.”

I asked Garay many times about a connection between the mortgage crisis and the gospel, but he does not really see one.

From everything he says about his time as a loan officer, it seems he was involved in the kinds of subprime loans that led to so many foreclosures. He was hired in Countrywide's emerging-markets division, which meant he was expected to target the growing Latino community in the area. Like Beth Jacobson, he had no previous experience, but was valued for his connections and hustle. He makes astute criticisms of the risky loans but, like many former loan officers, he does so with a curious sense of distance, as if he had been just a cog in the machine. Loans got "too easy," he says. "Mortgages would be \$1,500 a month, and that was all [the loan applicants] made in a month," he recalls, "but they figured they would rent the basement." He says sometimes he told people the loans were going to kill them, but they would plead, "Please help me, *please*. I want a house." Because he was becoming an increasingly prominent pastor at the time, many people who came to see him assumed he was the president of the bank and could protect them, he recalls.

Garay says as far as he knows no one in his church defaulted. But at a bare minimum, some of his parishioners have run into intense financial difficulties, sometimes defaulting soon after leaving the congregation. The man who'd bought the \$270,000 house threw a huge housewarming party and invited everyone from church. He gave a weepy testimony about the house God had given him, passing around the title for all to see. At the time, he was working as a handyman, putting up drywall, painting, roofing, and doing other odd jobs. Within three months he had three families living in the three-bedroom house, and he still could not keep up with the payments. After five months, he went into foreclosure and ducked out of the country. Tony Lin is careful—and of course correct—to say that neither immigrants nor Latinos caused the crash; adherents of every stripe exhibited the same sort of magical thinking about finances, as did millions of nonbelievers. Still, he recalls, "I wasn't very surprised when the whole subprime-mortgage thing blew up. I'm sure a loan officer never said, 'God wants you to have a house.' But you've already been taught that. Now here comes the loan officer saying, 'Sign here, and this house will be yours.' It feels like a gift from God. It's the perfect fuel for the crisis."

The guys who'd started the landscaping company also fared badly. They had a pretty good spring and summer in 2007, their first year of operation, and then business started to fall off. In church they kept giving positive testimonies, bragging about their success. But by October, they'd begun selling off their equipment; eventually they lost the business and had to go into hiding. The most interesting part of the story is the epilogue. One of the partners in the group, whom I'll call Luis, eventually moved to Richmond, and an acquaintance from Casa del Padre told me that he'd recently run into him there. Luis hadn't been embittered by the experience; he blamed the disaster on the fact that he'd started working on Sundays instead of going to church. Luis asked the man to come visit with some of the parishioners of his new church, to confirm that he had once been a great success. As they talked, he seemed happy and positive. "He wasn't angry that things didn't work out. He wasn't angry at God. He looked back at those days and thought, 'I can still have everything. Look what God gave me. That was a time when I had it all.'"

BY MANY MEASURES, Billy Gonzales does not have it all. He lives with his wife and three children in a tiny apartment on the back side of a development at the edge of town, where people hang out on the stoop until all hours. He works 45 minutes away and his car has been broken down for three months, and he does not have any money to fix it. Every day at work he is faced with a vision of what he does not have. He works for a man who just built a \$4 million house—one of four the man owns. Gonzales's job is to make sure every wine glass, garden statue, and book is dusted and in its proper place. Yet when I talked to Gonzales he was like a child hearing the ice-cream truck, or a man newly in love. "I'm crazy! Just crazy," he said, meaning crazy for the Lord, and giving little jumps out of his chair.

I visited Gonzales one evening after he'd had a long day at work; his brother had given him a ride home. Gonzales has a wide, earnest face that can look like a child's or, if he is tired, like an old man's. He sat in his favorite squeaky leather chair with his Bible in one hand and a soccer ball at his feet. The sofas in the tiny living room are actually backseats ripped out of cars, with

cushions thrown on them. He got the cushions from a man he once shared a trailer with, and they turned out to be infested with cockroaches. As we talked, the roaches crawled across the floor or on the sofas. Gonzales apologized but did not pay them much attention.

He told me he feels pity for his employer. He assumes the man must have been close to God at one point, or at least his family must have been, “because the rich are closer to God.” But now the man has lost his way. He laughs when Gonzales talks to him about Jesus, and he wastes his money, buying \$500 birdhouses and hiring Gonzales to clean them.

Gonzales was once lost too. He came from a big family in Guatemala so poor “that the poor people would call us poor.” For a while after he came to the U.S., he sent money home, but then like many of his friends he lost the rhythm of work. Instead, he was snorting cocaine and getting drunk four nights a week. “I hated Americans. I *hated* them,” he said, and I had trouble believing him, given his now-innocent, open demeanor. He says that back then, he spent most of his days fantasizing about killing his brother-in-law, whom he hated for no reason he can remember. His conversion came two years ago, in the form of a sudden vision like Garay’s. One night, in a drugged-out haze, he saw a polished, shimmery stone. He later realized it was a jewel, one of the many treasures in God’s vast storehouse, destined for him. Eventually he made his way to Garay, whom he now calls his father.

When I mentioned Gonzales to Garay, the pastor praised him as a model congregant. Indeed, by any standard Gonzales is an admirable man. He is 24, married, works hard, and limits his extracurricular activities to Bible study and soccer. It took me a few visits to realize that two of the three small children in the house are not his. He married a woman with two sons and takes care of them. They call him Papa and he reads to them at night and speaks to them gently, exactly the way he speaks to his own baby son. He has every reason to be frustrated with his circumstances, but I never once saw him express anything but delight. The gospel obviously grounds Gonzales in a very concrete way. But I can also see how, one day, it might send him floating into the air.

“I want to buy a house,” he confessed to me one evening this summer. It turned out his lease was almost up, and he needed to move in the fall. “Not a small one but a really huge one, a nice one. With six bedrooms and a kitchen and living room. I know, it’s crazy! But nothing is impossible! God, you saved my life,” he said, no longer speaking to me. “You saved my life, and now you will give me a gift. Now I’m crazy!” Last I heard, he and Garay were house-hunting together.

A year or so after the crash, there are signs of a new sobriety—higher savings rates, for example, and a reduction in conspicuous spending. But it’s hard to imagine Americans reverting to frugality the way, say, the Japanese did during the “lost decade” after their economy crashed. If by stereotype the Japanese are savers, then Americans are consumers, and ever hopeful. Already, countless “entrepreneurs” are finding a silver lining in the mortgage crisis, buying up foreclosed lots—often sight unseen, based on Web listings alone—in desolate parts of Cleveland and Phoenix and other places where abandoned houses can sometimes be had for a few thousand dollars or less. The buyers pay these bargain-basement prices eagerly, in the belief that the houses must be great deals, when they are just as likely to be overtaken by mold, or have every one of their doors and windows missing and the roof caving in. In America there is always a next play, another opportunity, an “unearned blessing” that can make up for a lifetime of disappointment.

It is not all that surprising that the prosperity gospel persists despite its obvious failure to pay off. Much of popular religion these days is characterized by a vast gap between aspirations and reality. Few of Sarah Palin’s religious compatriots were shocked by her messy family life, because they’ve grown used to the paradoxes; some of the most socially conservative evangelical churches also have extremely high rates of teenage pregnancies, out-of-wedlock births, and divorce. As Garay likes to say, “What you have is nothing compared to what you will have.” The unpleasant reality—an inadequate paycheck, a

pregnant daughter, a recession—is invisible. It’s your ability to see beyond such things, your willing blindness to even the most hopeless-seeming circumstances, that makes you a certain kind of modern Christian, and a 21st-century American.

There is the kind of hope that President Obama talks about, and that Clinton did before him—steady, uplifting, assured. And there is Garay’s kind of hope, which perhaps for many people better reflects the reality of their lives. Garay’s is a faith that, for all its seeming confidence, hints at desperation, at circumstances gone so far wrong that they can only be made right by a sudden, unexpected jackpot.

Once, I asked Garay how you would know for certain if God had told you to buy a house, and he answered like a roulette dealer. “Ten Christians will say that God told them to buy a house. In nine of the cases, it will go bad. The 10th one is the real Christian.” And the other nine? “For them, there’s always another house.”

The URL for this page is <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200912/rosin-prosperity-gospel>

[PRINT THIS PAGE](#) [CLOSE WINDOW](#)

SUBSCRIBE TO THE ATLANTIC TODAY!

Take advantage of our great rate to subscribe to a year of The Atlantic Monthly.

Go to the following Web address to sign up today:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/subscribe12>

All material copyright The Atlantic Monthly Group. All rights reserved.