

Wartburg College

The Word of Faith Movement: Theological Critiques and Reflections

RE 460 Church in the Modern World

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“If anybody, anywhere, will take these four steps or put these four principles into operation, he will always receive whatever he wants from Me or from God the Father.”<sup>1</sup>

Kenneth Hagin Senior claims that these words came from the mouth of Jesus the Christ during a God ordained vision. This and other revelations like it spawned what is called the Word of Faith Movement, or more commonly known as the health, wealth, and prosperity gospel.<sup>2</sup> The four steps (or principles) that Hagin’s Jesus conveyed inspired the highly criticized ‘word of faith’ teaching that is prevalent everywhere the Word of Faith Movement has spread. This “faith” teaching, along with many other doctrines that guarantee material prosperity and divine healing, are twisting and distorting Christianity all over the world. Such teachings completely displace Jesus from anything painful, dreadful, or weak. Christianity’s gospel of a suffering savior who invites his followers to take up the cross is replaced with a theology of glory that promises health, wealth, prosperity, as well as complete triumph and supremacy in life. The errors of the Word of Faith Movement begin and end with its doctrines. Therefore, word of faith doctrine and the movement’s message need to be analyzed, critiqued, and exposed as a distortion of Christianity: the theology of the cross and the idea of suffering love is exchanged for the theology of glory and victorious living. Before analyzing this movement’s teachings and claims, however, its conception and foundational concepts must be explored and understood thoroughly.

Many movements start under the influence of strong leaders and personalities. The beliefs and teachings of founders often have an authoritative and long-lasting effect on both subsequent leaders and followers of movements and denominations. This is certainly the case in the Word of Faith Movement. The typical person that is singled out as the father of the Word of

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Hagin, *Exceedingly Growing Faith*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Tulsa, OK: Faith Library Publications, 2007), 76.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Perriman, *Faith, Health and Prosperity*, (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2003), 2.

Faith Movement is a man known as Kenneth Hagin.<sup>3</sup> Hagin was born in McKinney, Texas in 1917. As a young boy he claimed to have suffered from an incurable heart disease that made him constantly ill and weak. When he reached the age of 15, his disease progressed, leaving him paralyzed and confined to bed. It was during this time that Hagin had his first spiritual encounter.<sup>4</sup> Before giving his heart to the Lord, and, therefore, becoming born again, Hagin claimed to have died on Saturday, April 22, 1933. What followed his death was a descent into hell three times and then a dramatic rescue by God who finally brought him back to life for good.<sup>5</sup> Several years after this event, Hagin became a Baptist preacher and eventually found his way into Pentecostal circles. His ministry eventually took a successful turn after a few visions and visitations from Jesus, who Hagin claims, imparted unto him revelation knowledge, and a prophetic and teaching anointing.<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Copeland, the most successful and well-known word of faith minister today, regarded Hagin as his greatest influence and teacher. Many of Copeland's teachings are taken directly from Hagin, making Copeland the true successor and front-runner of the Word of Faith Movement today, even over Hagin's son, Kenneth Hagin Jr.<sup>7</sup>

The nature of Hagin's revelation knowledge is the first concept that needs to be understood when discussing the Word of Faith Movement; it is their unique way of interpreting the Bible. Word of faith ministers, commonly called "faith teachers," do not interpret the Bible primarily from studying or referencing historical commentaries. Rather, they get their interpretation of the Bible from special revelation knowledge. The origin of many word of faith doctrines and interpretations of Biblical passages supposedly come directly from the mouth of Jesus. Revelation knowledge, as faith teachers call it, is the ultimate form of Biblical

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Hagin, *I Believe in Visions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Tulsa, OK: Faith Library Publications, 1984), 6.

<sup>6</sup> Perriman, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 4.

interpretation because it comes from God himself.<sup>8</sup> Thus, God is handing down his own interpretation of scripture. Hagin explains how he received his revelation knowledge in these words:

“The Spirit spoke to me as I was waiting there in my church. The Spirit said, ‘I am going to take you on to revelations and visions.’ Immediately, revelations, in line with the Word—I’m not talking about something out of line with the Bible—began to come. Then in 1950 the visions began to come. Eight times Jesus Himself appeared to me and talked to me. There were also other visions.”<sup>9</sup>

With such a phenomenon, the Word of Faith Movement is trapped in a paradox. They hold that all personal revelations, prophetic utterances, and divine encounters are to be measured up to the teachings of the Bible, that they, in the end, control the interpretation of by their revelation knowledge. Emerging from this paradox is the problem of clergy being beyond correction and criticism. Faith teachers think that they alone know the true meaning of scripture and, therefore, hold an absolute and authoritative position as the true oracles of God.<sup>10</sup>

**Comment [c1]:** An excellent observation. Fundamentally, the movement dismisses the fact that we remain, even “in Christ,” paradoxically bound by sin. That bounded condition will effect any “revelations” and biblical interpretation that comes from that.

The Word of Faith Movement relies heavily on revelation knowledge handed down from Jesus to the earliest faith teachers, especially Kenneth Hagin. This situation alone makes it difficult for other Christians to engage in dialogue with faith teachers, let alone correct their often simple and faulty interpretations. The Word of Faith Movement is generally opposed to reason, putting it in the category of “sense knowledge,” which is easily trumped by nearly infallible “revelation knowledge.” The suppression of reason and sound judgment should alarm any person that stumbles upon such rhetoric. Faith teachers pit the mind and faith at odds with each other and constantly assure their listeners that it is God’s will to put faith first. Sound judgment and reason are grossly neglected and are replaced with an attitude that accepts child-like faith alone. Whatever seasoned faith teachers proclaim is not to be judged, it is to be

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Hagin, *How You Can Be Led By the Spirit of God*, (Tulsa, OK: Faith Library Publications, 1984), 101.

<sup>10</sup> Perriman, 97-98.

believed. If faith is compromised by “sense knowledge,” the blessings of heaven are shut up; only when unwavering faith is achieved are the promises of heaven said to rain down on believers.<sup>11</sup>

One blessing that is promised to manifest upon culminating enough faith is divine physical healing. Indeed, a relentlessly marketed doctrine of the Word of Faith Movement is bodily healing in the atonement of Christ. There are divisions in the body of Christ over whether or not miraculous healings occur through prayer, but the Word of Faith Movement claims healing as a guarantee for all true believers.<sup>12</sup> McCrossan sites Isaiah 53:4 as a main proof text for this claim which says: “Surely he [Christ] hath borne our griefs (*kholee*, sicknesses), and carried our sorrows (*makob*, pains).”<sup>13</sup> In the same way that Christ is depicted as sin bearer, he is also depicted as sickness bearer. Bosworth makes much of the Isaiah passage in forming this doctrine, along with Matthew 8:17: “...He Himself took our infirmities and carried away our diseases.”<sup>14</sup> Matthew’s quotation is viewed as being proof that Christ died not only for sins, but also for sicknesses.<sup>15</sup>

Also, a common theme among word of faith Christians is linking sickness with evil spiritual forces. Kenyon articulates this teaching in light of Acts 10:38: “You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil...”<sup>16</sup> Just as Jesus often healed people by casting out spirits and demons, disease is viewed as a spiritual problem over which Christians can have authority and victory. Since Jesus was proclaiming the will of God in his healing ministry, divine healing is seen as always being the will of God. Copeland articulates

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>13</sup> T.J. McCrossan, *Bodily Healing and the Atonement*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Tulsa, OK: Faith Library Publications, 1989), 11.

<sup>14</sup> *New American Standard Bible*. All subsequent Bible verses will use this translation.

<sup>15</sup> F.F. Bosworth, *Christ the Healer*, (Tarrytown, NY: Flemin H. Revell Company, 1973), 27.

<sup>16</sup> E.W. Kenyon, *Jesus the Healer*, (Lynwood, D.C.: Kenyon’s Gospel Publishing Society, 1996), 39.

this doctrine like this: “You need to fight the temptation to be sick just as you would fight the temptation to lie or steal. Satan will tempt you with sickness, but you don’t have to give in. You can resist him with the word of God like Jesus did.”<sup>17</sup> God is said to offer his best for his children—a long life full of perfect health.

Although it is true that God’s perfect will for his creation is a state of health and wholeness, it is astonishing that faith teachers can take an absolute stance on divine healing being possible for all people in all circumstances in the face of clear natural observations that say otherwise. There have been many devoted Christians throughout the ages who have endured chronic conditions their entire lives and have died prematurely from disease. Even today, countless Christians remain ill and die from sicknesses despite their devotion and faithfulness.

Theologically, however, they have more warrant for their claim, but in the end, they are far from proving divine healing as an assurance given in scripture and an absolute guarantee for anyone. Isaiah 53: 4-5 indeed describes how the suffering servant bore the sins and sicknesses of God’s people. It is important to note, however, that the “sicknesses” and “diseases” he bore, just like the scourging and piercing he endured, were a direct result of God’s judgment on a sinful group of people. The diseases in the curse of the law (Deuteronomy 28: 58-61) were the physical manifestation of God’s wrath on a disobedient and sinful people. The Isaiah passage must be viewed in light of the narrow Mosaic covenant of disease being the result of disobedience. Furthermore, Isaiah could have easily meant these passages to be a metaphor for the forgiveness of both Israel’s sin and the consequences of their sin. **Either way, Matthew attributed this prophecy to be fulfilled in Matthew 8:17.** **Matthew views the healing ministry of Jesus to be a sign of his power to remove sin and, therefore, the curse of sin—diseases. Divine judgment was being lifted, and people were being offered salvation. Mark 2:10 and Luke 5:24**

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<sup>17</sup> Kenneth Copeland, *Our Covenant with God*, (Fort Worth, TX: KCP Publications, 1987), 34.

**Comment [c2]:** Your observation is correct, of course, although it should be said that Matthew is virtually unique in the way he uses the O.T., counting all as prophecy to be fulfilled. In point of fact, the identity of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah remains obscure. But, if the prophet really did have Christ Jesus in mind, it would be a complete deviation from the way Israel’s prophet’s otherwise functioned. I doubt that Isaiah did so have Jesus in mind. On the other hand, the gospels do associate healing with the dawning of the Kingdom of God and Jesus did, evidently, heal people. But it is a stretch to go from that to the claim that faith guarantees health—as I now see you also note.

also tie the forgiveness of sins with the healing of a paralytic. Jesus' purpose for such demonstrations were to make it known that salvation had come to all people. Nowhere in the New Testament is there found a universal law that promises divine healing upon the forgiveness of sins. The atonement of Christ (according to the penal substitution theory) functioned as a means to reconcile God with humanity, making it possible for humans to be justified and sanctified before God. Believers become a new creation and are always being pulled toward holiness. The process of sanctification, however, is never to be completed on Earth, nor is the promise of complete and absolute physical healing.<sup>18</sup>

The effects of the fall of mankind remain, both in regard to sin and sickness. Paul makes it clear that: "...the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption..." and that, "...the whole creation groans..." and continues to groan in this present age (Romans 8:21; 22). As for miraculous healings that some may encounter in this age, it should rightly be thought of as a foretaste of the age to come. Divine healing is an act of grace, much like regeneration, that comes about as the spirit wills (John 3:8, 1 Corinthians 12:11). According to word of faith theology, however, a Christian's knowledge and faith level are the keys to whether or not healing is achieved.<sup>19</sup>

To better understand the relationship between faith and success in this movement, their cornerstone doctrine must be explored: the word of faith. At the heart of the Word of Faith Movement is their unique conception of faith as a force and spiritual law. In almost all of their teachings, whether it is promising health, wealth, or prosperity, a simple but nonflexible formula

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<sup>18</sup> Perriman, 127-131.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 99.

of three steps is rigorously established: claim it, believe it, and receive it.<sup>20</sup> The foundational set of passages for this word of faith doctrine is Mark 11:22b-24:

“...Have faith in God. Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the seas,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him. Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you.”

Mark 11:22b-24 and Hagin’s interpretation of these verses are pivotal in the formation of “name it” and “claim it” theology. Hagin thinks these passages describe the kind of faith God has, and actually regards the most correct translation of Mark 11:22b to be: “have the God-kind of faith.”<sup>21</sup> All the components of the faith formula can be seen in Mark 11:23-24. Christ commands that his followers make a *confession* to the mountain, *believe* that their confession is going to come true, and finally commands them to *receive* by having faith that it has already come to pass. According to one of Hagin’s encounters with Jesus, he was told by God that many people believe correctly but fail in their confessions. Hagin’s Jesus is quoted as saying: “My people are not missing it primarily in their *believing*. But where they’re missing it is in their *saying...faith must be released in words through your mouth*. You can have what you say.”<sup>22</sup>

Faith teachers are quick to point out the way Jesus speaks to situations, whether it is the demonic, a sickness, or nature. For instance, Jesus is said have “rebuked” the wind in Luke 8:24 and succeeds because he followed the faith formula he described in Mark 11:23-24. Hagin and others often teach people that they are not to pray to God about their problems, but rather are to speak to the problems themselves. The faith formula is depicted as a flawless spiritual law since

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>21</sup> Kenneth Hagin, *Mountain Moving Faith*, (Tulsa, OK: Faith Library Publications, 2006), 3.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 111.



God is said to be bound to his word. Their interpretation of Mark 11:23-24 empowers believers to move any “mountain” in the name of Jesus if all the steps are followed correctly.<sup>23</sup>

Faith teachers certainly move beyond the orthodox understanding of faith, describing it as an inward attribute. The error of this doctrine begins with their understanding of the origin of faith. Romans 10:17 which states: “so faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ,” is referenced countless times by faith teachers as the proof text for the idea of faith coming from repetitive reading and listening to the biblical passages.<sup>24</sup> Faith teachers, however, fail to realize what Paul is actually describing in Romans 10. He is talking about the *means* by which faith is delivered, namely, preaching. Passages like Ephesians 2:8, which state: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God,” are simply overlooked. Ephesians 2:8 clearly states that faith is a gift given by God; faith is neither described as an attribute that can be conjured up by repetitive reading and listening, nor is it portrayed as being established or built up by human efforts.

Hagin’s interpretation of Mark 11:23 and 24 wrongly turns faith into a spiritual power and force that can be used to manipulate reality. Paul references the “faith that moves mountains” in 1 Corinthians 13:2, and actually depicts it as a faith beyond what he can attain, putting it in the same category as knowing all mysteries and all knowledge. Mountain moving faith, as opposed to saving faith, is a spiritual gift given to Christians as the Holy Spirit wills. 1 Corinthians 12:9 lists this kind of faith as a special gift imparted to Christians along with other gifts like healing, working miracles, and prophecy.<sup>25</sup> Instead of a gift, word of faith theology regards faith as a power that is produced and improved upon by human effort, thus eliminating

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<sup>23</sup> Perriman, 148.

<sup>24</sup> Kenneth Hagin, *Mountain Moving Faith*, 31.

<sup>25</sup> John Piper. “What Do Answers to Prayer Depend On?” [Desiring God](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1981/278_What_Do_Answers_to_Prayer_Depend_On/). Accessed 18 February 2008. Available [http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1981/278\\_What\\_Do\\_Answers\\_to\\_Prayer\\_Depend\\_On/](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1981/278_What_Do_Answers_to_Prayer_Depend_On/)

much of the role of God as the giver and true origin of faith. In place of, “as the spirit wills,” faith, even mountain moving faith, becomes, “as I will.”

Driving this self-willed, mountain-moving faith is the outward expression of verbal positive confession. As word of faith theology says, whether people realize it or not, all spoken words put spiritual, and, therefore, physical, consequences into motion according to the spiritual laws of the universe. Examples of faith-filled positive confessions could be when word of faith Christians say they are rich when they are actually poor, or claim that they are healthy despite an ongoing sickness. Hagin says: “Never talk failure. Never talk defeat. Never for one moment acknowledge that God’s ability or power cannot put you over. If you’re talking failure and defeat with your lips, you’re acknowledging that God can’t and hasn’t put you over.”<sup>26</sup> Faith teachers can come down hard with this teaching, striking fear in the hearts of their followers who refrain from making any negative confession, **fearing that it will shift reality against them.**

**Comment [c3]:** So God’s power and ability to work good in the world or in my life is entirely bound by *my will and desire to appropriate it*? What does that say, finally, about God?

The Bible does actually seem to emphasize a positive attitude in the speech of believers (Proverbs 4:24; 18:21; Matt 12:37), but these passages should not be interpreted as a universal spiritual law. It seems unlikely that God would operate in such a manner. The best way to interpret the emphasis on positive speech is the fact that words articulate what comes from the heart (Matt 12:34). Therefore, constant negative confession would signify a lack of trust in God. Prayers should be offered up in positive and trusting words to God. Confession is not so much an activator of spiritual laws as it is a conveyer of the heart. If someone is trusting God, he or she should be more prone to affirm that trust through positive speech as opposed to constant proclamation of doubt. The doctrine of the ‘word of faith’ and its restrictive formula quickly

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 114.

falls apart in light of these observations. Any teaching that puts this kind of reality changing power in the hands of humans is wide open to criticism—and rightly so.<sup>27</sup>

The doctrine that receives the most criticism, however, is prosperity teaching. According to faith teachers, Jesus himself was a wealthy man, having received large funds from the magi, and also walked around in a designer “seamless tunic” as described in John 19:23.<sup>28</sup> The main support for this teaching, however, is found in Galatians 3:13-14: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, ‘cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’—in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.” From here, faith teachers are quick to turn to Deuteronomy 28 and the list of curses and blessings found in this text.<sup>29</sup> Since Abraham was blessed spiritually as well as materially, born again believers (those redeemed from the curse of the law) can expect to be blessed in a likewise manner.

Paul’s argument, however, does not follow Hagin’s and other faith teachers’ interpretation of Galatians 3:13-14. His aim is to support the idea that through faith, Gentiles become children of the promise and receive the blessing of Abraham, which is salvation by faith; he is not arguing for the impartation of material blessings to those who believe.<sup>30</sup> It is noteworthy, however, that Hagin understood prosperity teachings to promise a full supply and an abundance, not an over abundance. He was against any teaching that promised extreme wealth, especially for selfish reasons.<sup>31</sup>

In the midst of prosperity teaching is the idea of the divine economy, which is powered by sowing and reaping. Hagin teaches that just as there are natural laws, like gravity, there are

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<sup>27</sup> Perriman, 146.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>29</sup> Kenneth Hagin, *Biblical Keys to Financial Prosperity*, (Tulsa, OK: Faith Library Publications, 2007), 9-13.

<sup>30</sup> Perriman, 125.

<sup>31</sup> Hagin, *Biblical Keys to Financial Prosperity*, 19.

also spiritual laws such as “give and you shall receive.” To drive this point home, Luke 6:38 is continuously cited: “Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure—pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return.” The law of sowing and reaping is often compared to the law of gravity among word of faith teachers. Just as everyone is affected by the law of gravity, everyone is also affected by the law of sowing and reaping, even non-Christians.<sup>32</sup>

In this principle, the most unwholesome component of the word of faith movement is found. The faithful are called to give money in order to receive. If people want to prosper financially, be healed of a disease, or desire a greater spiritual anointing, they are urged to give money, usually to word of faith ministries, in order to reap their blessing. Of all the formulas preached in this movement, this is the most straightforward and obeyed. Word of faith ministries become very affluent through the divine economy.<sup>33</sup> Letters upon letters filled with checks pile up in the mailrooms of word of faith churches that proclaim this teaching; however, other letters filled with criticism and corrections, also follow ones filled with money.

There are, in fact, biblical grounds to support the notion that charity in turn blesses the giver, but the way faith teachers articulate this message is misleading. Tithing turns into a self-serving affair.<sup>34</sup> Giving financial support to a local church or ministry is a great and practical way people can live out their faith. Prosperity teachers, however, seem to completely miss the meaning of giving in the New Testament. Giving is supposed to be a self-denying, self-sacrificing act of love (Luke 12:33; 14:33). Christians should expect blessings for giving (Luke 6:38, 2 Corinthians 9:6-8), but not in the cause and effect way prosperity teachers broadcast. This teaching leads many people into financial ruin. Convinced that they will reap far more than

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 118-119.

<sup>33</sup> Perriman, 50-51.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 53-54.

they give, many people donate beyond their means and often fail to receive the blessing or wish that they expected.<sup>35</sup>

All of the theologies described are the driving power of this influential and ever-growing movement. The number of converts to this type of Christianity is staggering; millions are indoctrinated with word of faith rhetoric which completely engulfs, or at least shapes, their conception and understanding of God and Christianity.<sup>36</sup> This movement is the poster child of the theology of glory. Hagin sums up the overall word of faith message in these words: “The trouble with [the church] is that we’ve preached a ‘cross’ religion, and we need to preach a ‘throne’ religion. By that I mean that people have thought they were supposed to remain at the cross....The cross is actually a place of defeat, whereas the Resurrection is a place of triumph.”<sup>37</sup> People are instructed to step out and demand their rights and authority over the tragedies of life. All followers are promised a long, healthy, satisfying, and exciting life upon submission to and implementation of word of faith doctrine. As can be expected, innumerable amounts of people are drawn into this movement.

The kinds of Christians, however, that are produced by the Word of Faith Movement would steer clear of any form of Christianity that focused on the cross or preached contrary to the message of authority, power, and success. Therefore, faith teachers would easily consider the theology of the cross a doctrine of demons because it promotes suffering and sacrifice. Theologians like Douglas John Hall hinge their whole understanding of Christianity on the meaning of the cross. To Hall, the cross of Christ is the perfect example of how God works in the world—through weakness. This is the exact concept that Paul refers to in 2 Corinthians 12: 9 when he cites God as saying: “My power is made perfect in weakness.” Some of the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 189-191.

<sup>36</sup> Perriman, 5-9.

<sup>37</sup> Kenneth Hagin, *The Believer's Authority*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Tulsa, OK: Faith Library Publications, 2005), 16.

implications of the theology of the cross, as Hall points out, are that Christians are to follow in Christ's example by letting go of self-interests, preeminence, power, and dominion. Instead, Christians are to emulate their Lord with a life of *agape*, or self-suffering love.<sup>38</sup>

Unlike the Word of Faith Movement, Reinhold Niebuhr reiterates the message and actions of Christ by prompting Christians to throw themselves wholeheartedly in a life of service and care for others, as opposed to a life full of comfort and happiness. Indeed, instead of seeking health, wealth, and prosperity like much of the world, followers of Christ are to be acquainted with personal loss, sacrifice, and tribulations. The love taught in the Word of Faith Movement is very self-seeking because it relies on a reward system to get people to follow Christ. This depiction of love is contrary to how Niebuhr views the love of Christianity, which he describes as self-sacrificing; it is love that is ready to love and care for others without any expectation for reward. The true love of Christianity is ready to conform to Christ's example for the sake of others, not for the sake of rewards.<sup>39</sup>

Walter Brueggemann's illustration of people selling their lives back to "Pharaoh" is a perfect portrayal of what word of faith converts are doing.<sup>40</sup> The new "Pharaoh" becomes word of faith ministers and concepts, which both require a staggering quota of "bricks." In exchange for exhaustive mindsets of unwavering faith and obedience, as well as ridiculous tithing requirements, followers are promised the ultimate human desires—health, wealth, and prosperity. These benefits and comforts come, of course, at a large price and after a lot of hard work. To quote Hagin again: "Never talk failure. Never talk defeat..."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Douglas Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2003), 82-83.

<sup>39</sup> L. Miller and Stanley Grenz, *Fortress Introduction to Contemporary Theologies*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 29.

<sup>40</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Mandate to Difference: An Invitation to the Contemporary Church*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 132.

<sup>41</sup> Hagin, *Mountain Moving Faith*, 114.

Brueggemann notes how dominate culture relentlessly proclaims that successful people are self-made, and that those who fail to succeed can only blame themselves; the mentality of “it’s their fault” is a rampant explanation of why people fail at life.<sup>42</sup> Likewise, the Word of Faith Movement manifests this attitude in their message, constantly ensuring their listeners that they are only a couple of positive confessions, or a couple hundred dollars of tithing away from receiving success. If one fails to succeed it is because of a lack of “faith”; failure is deemed as being one’s own fault.

The God of the Word of Faith Movement brings people back to “Egypt” and the bondage of slavery, despite Hagin and other faith teachers’ promise that Christians will “reign as kings” in life.<sup>43</sup> This teaching is actually a false promise that leads people back to gold-filled Egypt, where they again become enslaved. Christians are taught that they must work toward freedom with their own efforts, driving people to rely on themselves instead of God. This is in direct contrast to the teachings of the Bible, which is summed up nicely in Jeremiah’s words: “Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind and makes flesh his strength...Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord and whose trust is the Lord” (Jeremiah 17:5;7).

Instead of the promoting a “do-it-yourself” attitude like the Word of Faith Movement, Christians are to reach out and help people who can not help themselves. Marcus Borg describes the kingdom of God as: “what life would be like on Earth if God were king and the rulers of this world were not.”<sup>44</sup> Large social justice programs and social policy changes are going to help a lot more people than faith doctrine. By assuming that the current age offers perfect health and

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<sup>42</sup> Brueggemann, 136.

<sup>43</sup> Hagin, *The Believer’s Authority*, 39.

<sup>44</sup> Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 132.

divine prosperity, the Word of Faith Movement is very uninterested in the politics that shape the world.<sup>45</sup>

The Word of Faith Movement seems to fall into the same trap as Solomon did when he built his kingdom. Brueggemann describes Solomon as embracing a worldview contrary to God's own. Instead of helping the poor, broken, marginalized, and outcast, Solomon constructed a kingdom of glory, which revolved around gold, prestige, and power. Rather than seeking God and his worldview, Solomon went after mankind's self-centered desires and aspirations. Eventually Solomon becomes an apostate and chases after other gods.<sup>46</sup> Likewise, the Word of Faith Movement has left Christ's principles, trading them for glory and power. Faith teachers have uprooted the cross of Calvary, coated it with gold and diamonds and have mounted it on top of the highest peak for all people to view. Unfortunately, many find this gold-covered, authority-giving, tragedy-conquering cross irresistible.

In all actuality, word of faith Christians are far from a relationship with God outside of knowing him as the resource they use to change reality. Hall hits the mark when describing the Jesus of the televangelists. They portray Christ as perfect, carefree, and so divine that he can not relate to the typical human being.<sup>47</sup> Any notion of Jesus being human or participating in the human condition is beyond their grasps. To them, Jesus is the source of power and blessings; God is a means to pursue selfish desires. The life of Jesus is thought to be an example of how Christians are to live—with authority and power over sickness, material circumstances, and spiritual forces. In direct contrast, Hall depicts the true Jesus of the Bible as one who fully participated in the human life and became well-acquainted with all the anxieties and despair that come with it. Instead of conquering the world, Jesus endured it just like his people. He can

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<sup>45</sup> Perriman, 205.

<sup>46</sup> Brueggemann, 16-25.

<sup>47</sup> Douglas Hall, *Why Christian? For Those on the Edge of Faith*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 53.



hardly be portrayed as a lover of the world if he utterly rejected and conquered it. The true Jesus of the Bible is one who came to Earth and truly lived among human beings as one himself.<sup>48</sup>

The supernatural life that faith teachers promise their followers is a result of simple hermeneutics and a fundamentalist(?) view of the Bible. Theologians like Rudolf Bultmann who consider it necessary to offer a demythologized version of Christianity and the New Testament naturally create a backlash of hard fundamentalism. Many people are quick to fear and oppose anyone who starts eliminating traditional elements of Christianity, including its supernatural elements.<sup>49</sup> Higher criticism of the Bible and anti-supernaturalism has pushed the Word of Faith Movement into almost total isolation. Faith teachers almost never answer their critics, claiming their non-response to be an act of love.<sup>50</sup>

They hold their interpretation of the Bible and their conception of faith as so infallible that it could easily be considered as idolatry. Hall is harsh but fair in his rationalization of unbending doctrine being a form of idolatry. Jesus is supposed to be the foundation of Christianity, not doctrine. By putting too much emphasis and energy toward doctrine, Jesus is lost. Any attempt by humankind to pin God down with absolutes quickly leads to false representation and idolatry. The living Christ is exactly that—living! Just as no person can completely define another, no man or woman can pin down God with doctrine.<sup>51</sup> The Word of Faith Movement is immensely guilty of this very act; God is both fully explained and is said to conform to spiritual laws that are unfailing. The idea of “faith” as a force is not the faith of the Bible or Christianity. Faith teachers are preaching by sight, not faith; their constant rhetoric of absolutes can be explained in no other way. As Hall relentlessly expresses, the foundation of the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 55-56.

<sup>49</sup> L. Miller and Stanley Grenz, 51-52.

<sup>50</sup> Perriman, 232-233.

<sup>51</sup> Douglas Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*, 114.

Christian life: "...is faith, not sight..."<sup>52</sup> Moreover, the apostle Paul says: "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face...but now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13: 12-13).

Instead of love, however, the Word of Faith Movement focuses on indoctrination and teaching "faith," thinking that the implementation of doctrine is the answer to life's problems. Any teaching on compassion, social justice, or global awareness would be foreign to this movement. Faith teachers would rather have people master their teachings and faith formulas. Jesus once rebuked some Pharisees with a similar mindset: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness" (Matthew 23:23). The consequences of an ideology that says "change your circumstances by your faith" is prone to produce a lack of compassion for those who never muster up enough "faith," and therefore never change their circumstance. The majority of faith teachers and their ministries are **very** uninterested and unconcerned in the matters of social justice and global poverty. Not only that, but many in the Word of Faith Movement spend their money **very irresponsibly**. Their lifestyle and actions undermine and **disgrace the gospel of Christ**.<sup>53</sup>

**Comment [c4]:** This word rarely enhances your prose and is almost always best omitted.

**Comment [c5]:** Interestingly, the Vatican recently included "obscene wealth" as a deadly sin.

The Word of Faith Movement is unblinkingly fixated on individual salvation, satisfaction and comfort in life, and material prosperity. To them, bringing in the kingdom of God is the continual indoctrination of faith doctrine, which will "free" individuals to have a life of success, economic affluence, and perfect health.<sup>54</sup> Many other Christians, however, would be entirely dissatisfied with the Word of Faith Movement's definition of bringing in the kingdom of God;

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>53</sup> Perriman, 205.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 204.

faith teachers fail to see that the current age is still fallen; the groaning creation is waiting to be set free from its pains in the age to come (Romans 8:21).

Word of faith theology, teachings, and rhetoric are shipwrecking the mission of the church in the modern world. Vessel by vessel, convert by convert, people are being persuaded to go after different “gods.” Instead of embracing suffering *agape* love, or proclaiming God’s offer for a reconciled and abundant life, the word of faith audience is being convinced that health, wealth, and prosperity are the chief aims of the gospel. The doctrines and teachings expressed are a distortion of the true gospel and turn the meaning of discipleship upside-down. The Christian life is turned into a self-serving, hedonistic affair. Christians are called to openly criticize and correct this movement and its false teachings. The love of many is growing cold as they are becoming convinced that the poor and marginalized are in their situation because of a lack of faith. This of course, is not so. The true God of Christianity is associated with weakness, the lowly, and the cross. It must be known and proclaimed that the God-Man, Jesus the Christ, accomplished so much more in his life, death, and resurrection than the Word of Faith Movement gives him credit for. The abundant and eternal life that he offers, the cross-bearing lifestyle he calls people to follow, and the social-transforming message he declares, are so much better and more satisfying than the meager promise of health, wealth, and prosperity for a few faithful followers.

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