



Prosperity Gospel: Will Jesus Make You Rich?

| *A look at the theology and preachers of the Word of Faith movement*

Introduction

“Prosperity preaching” is a popular name for the preaching of the Word of Faith movement that contends God wants believers to be rich and enjoy good physical health. The Word of Faith movement is an American religious subculture made up of denominationally independent churches, ministries, Bible training colleges, mass media broadcast networks, and entertainment production facilities. These entities are bound together by an informal relational network based on a shared theology.

There is more to Word of Faith theology than simply its teachings about money and health. Word of Faith preachers preach about topics such as relationships, the Holy Spirit, personal holiness, love of God and neighbor, and faith. However, though Word of Faith preachers preach on many different topics, all of the teachings emphasize the responsibilities and benefits of Christianity for individuals instead of for communities. Conversion to Christianity is taught to be the antidote for all societal ills. The Bible is believed to be the inerrant Word of God. The power of the Holy Spirit for individual empowerment is revered.

In order for the prosperity gospel to have any validity, its proponents must argue that the central figure of the gospel, Jesus Christ himself, was rich. Without addressing Jesus’ socioeconomic status, they would have no hope of being taken seriously. In addition, by arguing that Jesus was rich, Word of Faith preachers can continue to teach hearers that poverty is a curse. Some Word of Faith preachers teach their hearers that Christ redeemed Christians from the curse of the law, which is threefold: poverty, sickness, and second death.



Word of Faith preachers believe that God put all of the disease of humanity on Christ, who has settled the disease problem forever through his work on the cross. Most of them preach that it is abnormal for Christians to go to physicians for healing.

Rights of Believers

Word of Faith theology was developed early in the twentieth century by evangelist, pastor, and teacher Essek William Kenyon. Kenyon combined New Thought teachings such as positive thinking and positive confession with more orthodox Christian teachings. For Kenyon, the New Covenant that God established with humanity through Jesus, unlike the Old Covenant that God established with Abraham, permanently restored the relationship between God and humanity, which Adam’s sin had broken. The New Covenant entitles believers to certain rights and privileges that, when claimed and acted upon, allow believers to live lives of victory and success instead of lives of defeat and failure. According to Word of Faith preachers, believers are entitled to status as the righteousness of God, material prosperity, authority to make confessions in the name of Jesus, victory over sickness and disease, and access to the divine economy.

Status as the Righteousness of God

Word of Faith preachers teach their hearers that when Christ was resurrected from the grave, he gave all humanity the ability to become the righteousness of God. *Righteousness* is the ability to stand before God's presence as if one has never committed sin. Since believers have been declared righteous, they have God's nature. Humanity no longer has to live with a sense of spiritual inferiority or with a constant sin consciousness; rather, the believer should now live with *Son consciousness*. Son consciousness creates within each believer the understanding that once she accepts Jesus Christ as Lord of her life, she has at work in her the same unlimited ability and wisdom of God as Christ had. Son consciousness is consistent with Kenyon's teaching that believers are as much incarnations as Christ.

Material Prosperity

Word of Faith preachers believe there is no excuse for spiritual weakness and poverty to exist among children of God. It is abnormal for believers to be in poverty and need help from the world. Believers are overcomers—supermen and superwomen whom God places in the realm of conquerors. Kenyon taught his followers that prosperity was not the accumulation of gold and political favor. Rather, prosperity was the believer's ability to use God's ability to help humanity. Kenyon's teaching has been distorted by Word of Faith preachers who tout material possessions and political influence as signs of divine favor.

Authority

Believers have access to all of the authority that Christ was given on earth and in heaven when he rose from the grave. Since they have access to Christ's authority, believers do not need to ask to be healed, to be made righteous, to be sanctified, to be wise, or to be redeemed. Believers need only claim their rights to these conditions by praying to God in the name of Jesus and believing that God will make their prayers reality. The name of Jesus was given to the church so that believers can use it. Through confession, believers can access not only their needs but also the desires of their hearts.

Positive Confession

Believers should never utter a negative confession. For example, even when Christians do not have money to

feed their families, they should never say they are poor. They should instead confess that they are fine and have all their needs met. Making positive confessions not only helps believers control their thinking but also activates their faith in God's omnipotence. The words that come out of the mouths of believers can either set them free and make them powerful or snare them and render them powerless.

Freedom from Sickness and Disease

Since believers will never rise above their confessions, they should never make a negative confession about disease or illness. If believers talk about their illnesses or diseases, they are glorifying Satan, who has the ability to put the disease on them. However, since God has redeemed believers from Satan's reign, Christians should confess that Satan has no right to reign over them with sickness or disease. When believers make their confession that "By his stripes I am healed," they must truly know that they are healed even though the symptoms of their diseases have not left their bodies.

The Divine Economy

Material prosperity is realized in the lives of believers when they give of their resources in accordance with the requirements of the divine economy. The divine economy is an economic system based on the belief that God will provide God's people with material prosperity if believers are willing to give their money, time, talents, and other resources to God. This system was created and popularized by Oral Roberts in the 1960s and is taught by Word of Faith preachers today.

Oral Roberts taught his congregants and all those listening to his television and radio broadcasts about the biblical mandate of sowing and reaping. According to Roberts, whatever believers give freely to God becomes a seed for God to multiply back to the believers in the form of their needs. When believers sow seed of any kind (by giving of their talent, time, love, compassion, or money), they will receive those things in return. If believers want God to supply their financial needs, they should give seed-money to God for God to reproduce and multiply. Roberts is very careful to differentiate seed-faith giving from tithing. Seed-faith giving is done before the miracle is manifested or the need has been met. Tithing is giving after one has been blessed by God financially.

What Other Christians Believe

Though there are many differences between the theology of the Word of Faith movement and the theology of other Christian denominations and communities of faith, there are also some similarities. For example, while some Christians do not believe in the doctrine of atonement, there are many Christians who do believe (as Word of Faith preachers do) that Christ's death atoned for all the sins of humanity (past, present, and future). However, unlike Word of Faith preachers, other Christian preachers teach that though Christ's death atoned for the sins of humanity, believers must continually be aware of and confess their sins. In addition, many Christians do not believe that humans are as much incarnations of God as Jesus Christ. Word of Faith teachings about Son Consciousness may sound like secular humanism instead of Christianity to those outside the Word of Faith movement.

There are Christians outside the Word of Faith movement who would agree that Christians should not be poor. Some Christians believe that when people accept Christ, they should also accept their Christian duty to work hard. If one works hard, one will not be poor. However, there are also many Christians who openly acknowledge the existence of social and economic conditions that create and perpetuate poverty. Word of Faith teachings on material prosperity completely overlook the existence of systemic injustices such as corporate greed, classism, racism, and sexism as factors that often contribute to poverty. Many Christians serve as advocates for the poor and marginalized by working in church ministries and in the public square for equal rights for all people.

There are Christians outside the Word of Faith movement who believe that sickness and disease are an unfortunate part of life. A person can be a faithful Christian and still be diagnosed with cancer, heart disease, or a neurological disorder. If a Christian is diagnosed with a disease, she or he can and should pray to God to be healed while believing that God is able to heal people.

For some Christians outside the Word of Faith movement, the teachings of positive confession, sickness and disease, and the divine economy conflict with the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. Each of these Word of Faith teachings asserts that God is obligated to fulfill all of the promises of God found in the Bible as interpreted and taught by Word of Faith preachers. However, many Christians believe that God is not obligated to perform in any particular way or according to any particular interpreta-



Oral Roberts taught his congregants that whatever believers give freely to God becomes a seed for God to multiply back to the believers in the form of their needs. By "giving to God," Roberts and other Word of Faith preachers mean giving to a ministry or individual to whom God directs the believer.

tions of the Bible. God does as God wills in all situations. Therefore, though Christians should pray to God for help and believe that God can do all things, they should also believe that God is not obligated to do anything.

Christians throughout the history of the church have taught that Jesus was poor. The circumstances of Jesus' birth to lowly parents in a manger and Scriptures such as Matthew 8:20, where Jesus states, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (which served as a warning to a scribe who wanted to follow him), have served as evidence of Jesus' poverty. For Christians in marginalized and oppressed communities, Jesus' poverty demonstrates that he can identify with their plight in a way that a rich Jesus could not.

How Word of Faith Preachers Justify Their Theology

The theology of Word of Faith preaching was developed by Essek William Kenyon using proof texting. Proof texting is the practice of treating each sentence of Scripture as a truth without taking into account what is happening in the passages immediately before and after the cited Scriptures or the historical, political, and social circumstances and cultural norms of the people in the text. Carl F. H. Henry, who served as the first editor of *Christianity Today*, classified this particular view of Scripture as *propositional revelation*. Henry defined *proposition* as a verbal statement that is either true or false; it can be believed or it can be doubted. Henry argued that the Bible was God's propositional revelation that God supernaturally communicated to chosen people in the form of "cognitive truths." Therefore, for Henry, the Bible is divinely inspired information that is expressed as propositional revelation in sentences that do not contradict one another. Word of Faith preachers currently adhere to this type of biblical interpretation.

Word of Faith preachers take a different approach to justifying their teaching that Jesus was rich. They attempt to fabricate Jesus' wealth by citing circumstantial evidence. For example, as evidence of Jesus' wealth, they reference the story in John 1:39, when two of John's disciples follow Jesus and ask him where he is staying. In this text, Jesus advises the disciples to "come and see" where he is living. The disciples follow him and stay with him for the rest of the day. Word of Faith preachers tell their hearers that since the disciples stayed with Jesus the entire day, his house must have been very nice. These preachers do not seem to consider the possibility that the disciples stayed with Jesus because they were enthralled with his teachings or because the presence of the Spirit of God dwelled within and around him.

In many Christian communities, preachers are trained in seminary and believers are taught in churches that the Bible should never be interpreted outside of its context(s). Critical interpretation of biblical texts that takes into account the plethora of contexts is called *biblical exegesis*. The danger of interpreting the Bible out of context is that the Bible can be made to mean anything. For example, when taken out of context, Ephesians 6:5–6 has been and could continue to be used to justify slavery of African Americans in the United States, and 1 Timothy 2:15 could be used to teach women that they can be saved only through childbirth.

Prominent Preachers

Though Kenyon developed the theology of the Word of Faith movement, Kenneth E. Hagin is known as the father of the Word of Faith movement. In 1962, Kenneth Hagin began preaching and teaching that reality is "created in the minds and affirmed in the speech of believers." Though Hagin claimed that the Holy Spirit inspired his teachings, it is believed that Hagin actually plagiarized his teachings from Kenyon. Hagin published his teachings in the *Word of Faith Magazine*, and it is still in circulation today. Word of Faith subsequently became the name of the movement. Hagin also published over 120 books and numerous audiotapes. In Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, Hagin founded the Rhema Correspondence Bible School in 1968 and the Rhema Bible Training Center in 1974. Through these educational endeavors, Hagin trained thousands of new Word of Faith preachers. Hagin died in 2003.

Prominent Word of Faith preachers include Kenneth Copeland, founder of Kenneth Copeland Ministries of

Fort Worth, Texas; Ira V. Hilliard, pastor of the New Light Christian Center of Houston, Texas, which has 20,000 members; Joyce Meyer, founder of Joyce Meyer Ministries headquartered in Fenton, Missouri; Jesse Duplantis, president and founder of Jesse Duplantis Ministries and Covenant Church in Destrehan, Louisiana; Keith Butler, a Rhema graduate and pastor of the 18,000-member Word of Faith International Christian Center of Southfield, Michigan; Creflo Dollar Jr., pastor of World Changers International Ministries of College Park, Georgia, with a membership of 23,500; and Frederick K. C. Price, founder of the Crenshaw Christian Center in South Central Los Angeles, with current membership of over 22,000.

One of the primary vehicles of the Word of Faith message is the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN). Paul and Jan Crouch founded TBN in 1973 in association with Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker. TBN is featured on over 5,000 television stations and delivered to 92 million U.S. households annually. Word of Faith preachers can also be experienced on the Word Network, the Angel Network, and local television networks throughout the United States and abroad.

The Beneficiaries

The people who most consistently profit from Word of Faith theology are the preachers. Hundreds of Word of Faith preachers live extravagant lifestyles supported and financed by adherents of Word theology. Some prominent preachers own Rolls-Royces, jets, multimillion-dollar mansions, and penthouse apartments. While many Word of Faith preachers teach that money given to God through their ministries is used to build the kingdom of God, they use a good deal of the money to enrich themselves and their families. Word of Faith preachers do not try to hide their extravagance. Instead, they tout their lifestyles as living proof that Word of Faith theology works and is biblical and sanctioned by God. However, this argument is faulty. Since most hearers of Word theology are not pastors and do not have hundreds or thousands of followers who give money to their ministries—money that in turn is used to pay ministerial salaries and/or purchase homes, cars, and airplanes in the name of the ministry—they will probably not attain the wealth of the preachers.

About the Writer

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