

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Enjoying God Forever: An Historical/Sociological Profile of the Health and Wealth Gospel

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Enjoying God Forever! This partial response to the opening question of the Westminster Catechism would seem to describe the contemporary health and wealth gospel movement. The 1647 Catechism begins with the question. “What is the chief end of man?” The catechist responds, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.” Throughout the church’s history certain groups and movements have tended to over-emphasize one dimension of this response at the expense of the other. The health and wealth gospel appears to be a case in point. By accentuating the goodness of God (which is activated by a believer’s faith) the movement’s adherents are inclined to focus primarily on enjoying God over glorifying God. Evidence for the theme of enjoyment is seen in the promises of healing, financial prosperity, and general well-being.

The health and wealth gospel is an identifiable religious movement comprised of distinct teachings, key preachers, a particular clientele, conferences, massive publications, media ministries, local congregations that identify with the teachings and preachers, educational institutions, and a loosely-knit organization called the International Convention of Faith Churches and Ministries (ICFCM). Adherents have often labeled themselves “Word” or “Word of Faith Churches” as well as “faith movement.” Critics have utilized such phrases as “name it and claim it,” “the gospel of prosperity,” and “the health and wealth gospel.” Among the major leaders are Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, Jerry Savelle, and Fred Price—people with substantial followings not only in the United States but also, parts of Europe and the Third World. All share a common commitment to spreading the Word of God, a Word which they believe has been distorted and unheeded with regards to faith, healing and prosperity.

The themes of the movement are certainly not new. The emphasis, for example, on financial prosperity as a fruit of true Christian commitment, prayer, or faith has precedence within Christian history. During the Gilded Age in late nineteenth-century America numerous clergy espoused the notion that right thinking and right living could unlock the doors to bountiful wealth. William Lawrence (1858–1941), an Episcopalian

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Bishop of Massachusetts, taught that “in the long run, it is only to the man of morality that wealth comes ...Godliness is in league with riches.”¹

What is new among the contemporary faith teachers is the particular way in which they have packaged and framed their beliefs. Their roots and ideas can certainly be found in prior movements and historic figures, but the health and wealth gospel represents a new and distinct religious movement which is flourishing amidst the controversy which surrounds it. Though the movement is primarily pentecostal in its orientation, its impact is now being felt beyond the boundaries of traditional pentecostalism and the new charismatic movement.

This essay seeks to give an historical and sociological overview of the faith movement. After a brief overview of its major themes, we will survey the key figures of the movement and its historic roots. Finally, the essay will attempt to provide sociological analysis as to why the health and wealth gospel has emerged and flourished in twentieth-century America.

Major Themes

According to Bruce Barron, in his well-balanced book *The Health and Wealth Gospel*, there are three main themes which set the movement apart from traditional Christian understandings: healing, prosperity, and positive confession.² The faith teachers themselves are quick to point out that these are not the primary themes of Christian faith and that they must be understood in light of traditional Christian doctrines. Kenneth Hagin Jr. in a personal letter to me rejected any cultic or heresy labels and stated, “Our major tenets of faith are held in common by those in the evangelical world—beliefs such as the virgin birth and deity of our Lord Jesus Christ, the absolute necessity of the new birth through faith in the atoning work of Jesus on the cross, and other fundamental doctrines of the church.”³ Nonetheless, the themes of healing, prosperity, and public confession are highly significant for faith preachers and their followers and are clearly at the heart of the controversy surrounding the movement.

The themes themselves are generally understood to have their source in the Abrahamic covenant with its promise of great blessing. In the Old Testament these blessings included health and wealth to those who were faithful to God. The atonement of Christ is seen to

¹ William Lawrence, “The Relation of Wealth to Morals,” *Christian Social Teachings* (G. W. Forell; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966) 331.

² Bruce Barron, *The Health and Wealth Gospel* (Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity, 1987) 9.

³ Letter from Kenneth Hagin Jr., Executive Vice-President of the Kenneth Hagin Ministries, Tulsa Oklahoma, August 19, 1988.

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extend these blessings to all people on the basis of Galatians 3:13–14, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law... that the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ” (NIV). As Kenneth Copeland puts it, “You are an heir to the blessing which God gave to Abraham. This blessing, found in the 28th chapter of Deuteronomy, covers every area of your existence: spirit, soul, body, financially, and socially.”⁴ Not only does Christ’s atonement extend Abraham’s blessings to us, it also overturns the curse of the law, which included both poverty and sickness. It is from this framework that the faith teachers espouse healing, prosperity, and positive confession.

Healing

The healing power of God is by no means a novel teaching. Christian theologians, preachers, and movements down through history have articulated in varying forms doctrines of healing. What sets the health and wealth gospel apart from mainstream Christian understanding is its emphatic insistence that God always intends to heal, and that healing is assured if Christians have the faith to believe it. Most of the movement’s teachers do not totally negate the role of the medical profession, but insist that divine healing is a higher way. As Fred Price put it, “Doctors are fighting the same enemies that we are, the only difference is they’re using toothpicks and we are using atomic bombs.”⁵ One exception to a secondary acceptance of medical help was the late Hobart Freeman, who while not being closely connected organizationally to the other faith preachers, nevertheless shared with them similar teachings. Freeman forbade any medical help for his followers, including eye glasses, and came to the national spotlight when it was reported that by 1984 over ninety unnecessary deaths had occurred in his Faith Assembly movement.⁶

The faith teachers believe that “healing is just as much a part of the plan of redemption as salvation, the Holy Spirit and heaven as your eternal home.”⁷ Since healing is perceived to be accomplished through Christ’s atonement, it is activated by faith alone. While the laying on of hands has been utilized in their healing campaigns, these preachers are quick to note that there is no power of healing in this symbolic act. Rather the ritual is a point of contact with someone who has faith in order to activate the faith of the person in need. The health and wealth gospel’s doctrine of healing is clearly stated by Jerry Savelie:

⁴ Kenneth Copeland, *Welcome to the Family* (Fort Worth: KCP Publications, 1979) 22.

⁵ Fred Price, *Is Healing for All?* (Tulsa: Harrison House, 1976) 113.

⁶ See Barron, *Gospel*, chap. 2, for a detailed account of the Hobart Freeman story. The Indiana-based preacher died in December of 1984 of bronchopneumonia and heart failure for which he received no medical treatment.

⁷ Kenneth Copeland, *You Are Healed* (Ft. Worth: KCP Publications, 1979) 7.

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Not only is it God's will to heal, it is God's will to heal all! Satan is the author of sickness and disease.

By the authority of His Word, God has made provision for our healing. It is not the will of God that anyone be sick with any sickness or disease or pain whatsoever — from hangnails to tuberculosis!⁸

Prosperity

The doctrine of prosperity, while the most controversial of the the movement's teachings, has certainly been a major factor in its popularity. The concept is understood in broad terms: "Prosperity is the condition of being successful and thriving in all areas: spiritually strong, physically strong (healthy), and mentally solid."⁹ But there is no question that for the faith adherents financial prosperity is a divine promise signifying God's blessing upon those whose faith is great enough to expect it.

Since material wealth was part of the Abrahamic covenant and since Christ has overturned the curse of the law which included, poverty, Christians are said to have a right to claim prosperity. Moreover, says Fred Price, "If the Mafia can ride around in Lincoln Continental town cars, why can't Kings's Kids?"¹⁰ The adherents of the movement find further support in the New Testament with passages like the KJV rendition of 3 John 2, "Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth."

Some of the faith preachers advocate a "success formula" which they assert to be a universal or cosmic law. Essentially, the formula claims that financial success will come to those who have the faith to believe it and who are themselves a giving people. Since it is a universal law it applies even to non-Christians who practice its principles. Speaking of a nonbeliever, Kenneth Hagin writes, "God didn't bless him because he was a sinner. He received God's blessing because he honored God. God has a certain law of prosperity and when you get into contact with that law ... it just works for you — whoever you are."¹¹

Part of the "success formula" is the promise of a hundredfold return based on Mark 10:29-30, "No one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields — and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life" (NIV). Commenting on this passage Gordon Lindsay

⁸ Jerry Savelie, *God's Provision for Healing* (Tulsa: Harrison House, 1981) 8.

⁹ Elbert Willis, *God's Plan for Financial Prosperity* (Lafayette, La: Fill the Gap Publications, n.d.) 15.

¹⁰ Fred Price, *Faith, Foolishness or Presumption?* (Tulsa: Harrison House, 1979) 34.

¹¹ Kenneth Hagin, "The Law of Faith," *Word of Faith* (November, 1974) 2.

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of Christ for the Nations Institute in Dallas says, "There can be no mistake, the promise includes temporal wealth. ... How much? An hundredfold! In other words he who gives up thousands in following Christ is eligible to receive hundreds of thousands."¹² In similar fashion Kenneth Copeland asks, "Do you want a hundredfold return on your money? Give and let God multiply it back to you "¹³

Many of the faith teachers emphasize that God brings financial reward not for selfish or greedy personal indulgence, but rather for the purposes of generosity towards others and the propagation of the gospel. As Gloria Copeland puts it, "Don't just believe God to meet your needs. Believe Him for a surplus of prosperity so that you can help others. We here in America are a blessed people financially. We have been called to finance the gospel to the world."¹⁴ Kenneth Hagin Jr. has responded with disgust towards those who follow the movement in order to get wealthy. Speaking to a gathering of students at his Rhema Bible Training Center he stated boldly, "If you came to this school with the idea that it is going to help you get more faith so you can have Cadillacs, I want you to resign today."¹⁵

In recent years further qualifications have been placed on the prosperity theme. For example, since 1985 Kenneth Copeland has acknowledged that prosperity is relative and in many contexts throughout the world may come in the forms of bountiful rain and plenty of food.¹⁶ Others have admitted that their teachings have been taken by followers to overshadow the main tenets of the Christian faith. Despite such confessions the movement continues to articulate the theme of prosperity in a "kingdom context," for prosperity they believe is clearly promised in the pages of Scripture. As Jerry Savelie puts it, "If I am not prospering, ... it is not God's fault, nor the fault of the Word of God — it is my fault."¹⁷

Positive Confession

According to the faith movement, healing and prosperity are primarily realized through evoking the third distinctive theme, positive confession. This concept can best be understood as a statement, made in faith, that lays claim to God's provisions and promises. To be healed, for example, a person must pray in faith with a positive affirmation that they are healed, even if the symptoms of illness linger on. Since it is "with your mouth that you confess and are saved" (Rom 10:10), it is with similar confession that humans can experience and enjoy God's other provisions. Positive confession is also

¹² Gordon Lindsay, *God's Master Key to Success and Prosperity* (Dallas: Voice of Healing, 1959) 46.

¹³ Kenneth Copeland, *The Laws of Prosperity* (Ft. Worth: Kenneth Copeland Publ., 1974) 67.

¹⁴ no reference given in original printed Journal

¹⁵ Kenneth Hagin, Jr., "Victory Words for Front-Line Battles," *The Word of Faith* (November, 1980) 7.

¹⁶ Noted in Barron, *Gospel*, 97.

¹⁷ Jerry Savelie, *Living in Divine Prosperity* (Tulsa: Harrison House, 1982) 77.

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seen to be grounded in Mark 11:23–24, “I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours” (NIV).

It is from this theme that the popular phrase, “Name it and claim it” is derived. In a widely circulated booklet Kenneth Hagin unabashedly affirms, “You can have have what you say.” Hagin goes on to note that people’s “word give them away. You can locate people by what they say. Their confession locates them.”¹⁸ Though Hagin puts some limits on what we can request from God, he also speaks forthrightly of writing your own ticket with God. He asserts that God has given to him four simple steps — say it, do it, receive it and tell it — which will enable anyone to receive from God what they confess.¹⁹

Kenneth Copeland describes this theme in terms of commanding God:

As a believer, you have a right to make commands in the name of Jesus. Each time you stand on the Word, you are commanding God to a certain extent because it is His Word. Whenever an honest man gives you his word, he is bound by it. It is not necessary to order him around because a truly honest man will back his word. When you stand on what he has said, he is commanded to do it.²⁰

Positive confession then is the vehicle through which God’s promises are effected for the faith preachers. To pray “If it be God’s will,” reflects a lack of faith and positive confession. Charles Capps, a retired farmer and now a leading exponent of the movement, states, “You have to believe that those things you say — everything you say — will come to pass. That will activate the God kind of faith within you, and those things which you say will come to pass.”²¹

Major Figures Of The Movement

There are clearly identifiable leaders within the health and wealth gospel movement. They are regarded by adherents as the teachers, inspirers, and figureheads of this clearly-demarcated religious entity.

¹⁸ Kenneth Hagin, *You Can Have What You Say!* (Tulsa: Kenneth Hagin Ministries, 1979) 6.

¹⁹ Hagin, *Exceedingly Growing Faith* (Tulsa: Kenneth Kagin Ministries, 1983) 76

²⁰ Copeland, *Our Covenant With God* (Ft. Worth: KCP Publ., 1976) 32.

²¹ Charles Capps, *The Tongue: A Creative Force* (Tulsa: Harrison House, 1976) 24.

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Kenneth Hagin Sr.

Kenneth Hagin has generally been acknowledged to be “the father of the faith movement” and “the granddaddy of the faith teachers.”²² Though younger faith preachers may outdo him in preaching he is the indisputable leader of the movement. Almost all the other faith preachers point in some way to the profound influence of Kenneth Hagin for their own spiritual development, understanding of faith teachings, and call to ministry. Historian David Harrell describes Hagin as “an able preacher with a homey and humorous Texas style,” who has “always been more a student and teacher than platform performer.”²³

Born on August 20, 1917 with a congenital heart defect and weighing less than two pounds at birth, young Hagin faced a life of hardship and unhappiness. His physicians said that he didn't have a chance in a million to live a long life. Hagin's physical incapacities were compounded by his father's desertion of the family at age six and the subsequent nervous breakdown of his mother. At age sixteen, after being essentially an invalid his whole life, Kenneth experienced a miraculous healing. He immediately began preaching as a Baptist evangelist in the rural and small town areas of his native Texas. After receiving “the baptism of the holy spirit” in 1937, Hagin was licensed with the Assemblies of God and served various of their churches in Texas until 1949. At this point he began an independent healing ministry as part of the post-World War II healing revival, a movement which included persons such as Oral Roberts, William Branham, and A.A. Allen. The ministry of Hagin at this juncture was never popular, as he seemed to lack the flair of other healing evangelists.

During the 1960's Hagin's ministry began to flourish as his healing emphasis was supplemented by themes of faith, prosperity, and positive confession. Radio programs, conferences, a monthly magazine, and then in 1974 the founding of Rhema Bible Training Center (under the direction of his son Kenneth Jr.) helped to establish Hagin's ministry as the hub of the faith movement. By 1982 there were over 11,000 students enrolled in Hagin's correspondence courses and today there are over 1500 students at the Rhema Bible Training Center in Tulsa. He has traveled throughout the world preaching his faith message, and by all accounts is the leader of the movement.

²² See D. L. McConnell, *A Different Gospel: A Historical and Biblical Analysis of the Modern Faith Movement* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1988) 3. McConnell gives an in-depth overview of Hagin's life and ministry. Much of the following material on Hagin and the other faith teachers is drawn from McConnell and Barron, *Gospel*, unless otherwise noted.

²³ David Harrell, *All Things Are Possible: The Healing and Charismatic Revivals in Modern America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975) 185–6.

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Kenneth and Gloria Copeland

Kenneth and Gloria Copeland have developed a world-wide faith ministry that has won them significant influence and popularity among the health and wealth gospel followers. Converted in 1962, the Copelands experienced a rather uneventful life until 1967 when they headed to Oral Roberts University. "With only a dime in his pocket, Kenneth Copeland enrolled there believing that his commitment to the Lord... would help sustain him."²⁴ Since Kenneth was a trained pilot he quickly landed a job on the flight crew for Oral Roberts's cross-country crusade flights. Through this experience he gained first-hand experience in faith-healing ministries. It was not Roberts, however, that had the greatest influence on the Copelands, but Kenneth Hagin. After hearing a Hagin tape in 1967 they began to devote themselves assiduously to his teaching and a year later began their own ministry.

The Copelands carry on an extensive work through conferences, television, satellite, books and tapes. Their monthly magazine, *The Believer's Voice of Victory*, is said to have a circulation of 700,000. The Copelands' rising prominence is enhanced by their dynamic oratory skills and by Kenneth's popularity as a singer. While healing is a part of the Copeland ministry, the primary focus appears to be on laying claim by faith to the special rights and privileges of Christians, especially the material ones. As Kenneth Hagin gets on in years it would appear that the mantle of leadership will fall on Kenneth Copeland. In fact, McConnell claims that already "Copeland is now the ex officio leader of the Faith movement. Nevertheless, at least in spiritual matters, when Hagin speaks, Copeland still listens."²⁵

Jerry Savelle

Jerry Savelle received a call to ministry at age twelve while watching the healing ministry of Oral Roberts on television.²⁶ It was not until 1969, however, that Savelle began to experience spiritual renewal and went into the ministry. The impetus for change came through the preaching of Kenneth Copeland. Savelle, having overcome financial, spiritual, and emotional stress, joined the Copelands' ministry as an associate evangelist.

Eventually Savelle formed his own organization, the World Outreach Center, located in Fort Worth, Texas. He carries on an extensive preaching ministry, distributes nearly 300,000 copies of his own tapes and books each year, and is the founder of Overcoming Faith Center Churches, Medical Center, and Bible Training Center in Kakamega, Kenya.

²⁴ Quoted from a publicity pamphlet, "Kenneth Copeland Ministries: Living to Give."

²⁵ McConnell, *Different Gospel*, 4.

²⁶ Noted in a public relations resume "Dr. Jerry Savelle," sent to me by his ministries headquarters.

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The thematic focus of his ministries, which now extend to thirty-six different countries, is very similar to that of Copeland and Hagin, with the addition of strong evangelistic concerns.

Fred Price

Fred Price is the most prominent of a growing number of black faith preachers. After years of spiritual lethargy Price claimed that his contact with Hagin's teachings changed his life. He declares that "Kenneth Hagin has had the greatest influence upon my life of any living man."²⁷ In 1970 he began a church near Los Angeles called the Crenshaw Christian Center, a center at which Kenneth Hagin is still a frequent speaker. Price's church has grown from 150 members in 1972 to over 14,000 members today. His flamboyant preaching style and colorful language has made him a popular preacher in the faith movement circuit as well as on his own television program.

Other Leaders

Several other preachers in the health and wealth gospel movement deserve brief mention. Charles Capps, a former farmer from Arkansas, is particularly known as a teacher of positive confession. Robert Tilton of Dallas has become increasingly popular through his TV program Success-N-Life as well as through his Word of Faith Satellite Network which beams his seminars and revivals into nearly two thousand churches. Marilyn Hickey, one of a number of women preachers in the movement, is known for her radio program accentuating keys to prosperity.

There are other preachers who herald a gospel of prosperity but should be seen as distinct from the faith movement. Most notable is Rev. Frederick J. Elkerenkofter II, better known as Rev. Ike. Originally a store-front preacher in Boston, Rev. Ike now preaches and beams his TV broadcasts from Harlem. Over the years he has shifted away from Christian-oriented preaching and now embraces what he calls "Science Of the Mind." He is particularly known for his pithy prosperity slogans: "You can't lose with the stuff I use," and "The lack of money is the root of all evil."²⁸

Historical Roots Of The Movement

The contemporary health and wealth movement flows historically from two primary tributaries: Pentecostal healing revivalism and the influence of E. W. Kenyon (1867–1948), a New England preacher-educator who apparently imbibed the waters of nineteenth-

²⁷ Quoted in McConnell, *Different Gospel*, 4, from his taped correspondence with Price.

²⁸ Quoted in Harrell, *All Things Are Possible*, 235. For a brief overview of Rev. Ike see David Broersma, "A Definition and Analysis of Prosperity Theology," (MTh. Thesis; Dallas Theological Seminary, 1985) 39.

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century New Thought metaphysics. McConnell's *A Different Gospel* attempts to undermine the Pentecostal influence, giving primacy to the "Kenyon Connection." My own conclusion, however, is that we cannot minimize the role of the healing revivalist tradition.

Pentecostal Healing Revivalism

Pentecostalism in America is generally recognized as having emerged with the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles in 1906. Expanding on the earlier holiness emphases on a second work of grace and entire sanctification, Pentecostalism stressed the need for a baptism of the Holy Spirit evidenced by speaking in tongues. Healing and other miraculous signs were at the heart of the movement from its earliest days. Numerous faith healers traveled the pentecostalist circuit with a message that faith and the touch of the healer could evoke a miracle from God.

It was not, however, until after World War II that a distinct healing revival movement emerged. David Harrell describes It this way:

Since World War II, hundreds of ministers, most of them in the 1950s coming from the ranks of classical pentecostalism but later from a variety of backgrounds, established independent evangelistic associations. These associations lived or died with the charisma of the evangelist, and some became multimillion dollar organizations. Taken together, they were a powerful independent force in modern American religion and won the religious loyalty and financial support of millions of Americans. Little understood by the public, the faith healing revivalists were the main actors in the postwar pentecostal drama.²⁹

Among the key figures of this movement were William Bran-ham, Oral Roberts, Jack Coe, A.A. Allen, Gordon Lindsay, and T.L. Osborn. The ministry of these and similar healing revivalists received coverage in *The Voice of Healing*, a magazine which more than any other vehicle tied the entire movement together. The re-vivalists were essentially of one mind with regard to healing —God always intends to heal and it is up to the faith of the believer, activated by the laying on of hands or by anointed-cloths, to bring God's promise to fruition.

The theme of prosperity is found early on in the healing revival movement. Already in the 1930s a Thomas Wyatt made prosperity the foundation of his ministry.³⁰ In the 1950s the controversial A.A. Allen began to accentuate the financial blessing theme. Allen, who

²⁹ Harrell, *All Things are Possible*, 4.

³⁰ Ibid. 229.

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eventually died from alcoholism, was fond of telling a story about a \$410 printing bill which he couldn't pay. He had only a few one dollar bills in his pocket when suddenly the bills were transformed to twenties and the need was met. In 1963 Allen claimed to have received a revelation directly from God: "I am a wealthy God! Yea, I am not poor ... But I say unto thee, claim my wealth in thy hand, yea, in thy purse and in thy substance. For behold, I plan to do a new thing in the earth!"³¹

In 1947 Oral Roberts "discovered" 3 John 2 with its perceived emphasis on prosperity. Commenting on the passage, he said to his wife, "Evelyn, we have been wrong. I haven't been preaching that God is good. And Evelyn, if this verse is right, God is a good God." David Harrell notes that from this point the Roberts' began to explore the implications of such a message not only for a new car, house etc. but also for their larger world-wide ministry.³²

The prosperity theme of the revivalists was often placed in the service of fund-raising, and therein emerged considerable controversy. Already in the early 1950s the Assemblies of God leadership began to raise questions about such fund-raising efforts and their corresponding themes of prosperity. By 1953 the denomination's *Pentecostal Evangel* stopped printing the revivalists' reports, and three years later their General Presbytery issued a strongly-worded statement against questionable fund-raising techniques and promises of financial reward.³³ Clearly then, the emphasis on prosperity among contemporary faith teachers is nothing new.

By the late 1950s, as the healing revival movement began to wane, a new movement was about to be born — the new charismatic movement. This burgeoning religious force came to replace the old-style pentecostalism in popularity and influence. Some of the old-time healing revivalists made the transition to a less-separatistic and less-legalistic expression of faith; others did not. Among those who made the transition was Kenneth Hagin. As Barron sees it, the faith teachers "owe their success largely to their transformation from Pentecostal to charismatic."³⁴ The contemporary health and wealth gospel emphasis is linked to the older pentecostal healing revivalism both through ideas (healing, faith, prosperity) as well as through individuals who bridged the two movements, such as Kenneth Hagin.

Another significant figure to make that transition was Oral Roberts. Of interest at this point is his role in the faith movement. There are clear links between Roberts and the faith

³¹ A. A. Allen, *Power to Get Wealth* (Miracle Valley, Arizona: A. A. Allen Revivals, 1963) i-ii.

³² *Oral Roberts: An American Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) 66.

³³ See Harrell, *All Things Are Possible*, 108–9.

³⁴ Barron, *Gospel*, 11.

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teachers, but striking differences as well. We have already noted that in 1947 Roberts got excited over the 3 John 2 passage with its perceived implications for prosperity. In 1954 he introduced the “Blessing-Pact,” with a promised financial blessing for those who gave \$100 to his ministry. A year later he published *God’s Formula for Success and Prosperity* and in the 1970s he began teaching his “seed-faith” concept. According to this concept the OT tithe (give because you owe it to God) was replaced in the NT with giving in order to expect a blessing. God will supply, said Roberts, not just the bare essentials of life, but will give abundantly to those who give.

Not only have some of Roberts’s ideas seemed similar to the faith teachers, he has had intimate contact with them. Roberts has often attended and preached at Kenneth Hagin’s annual camp-meeting and has invited numerous of the faith teachers to preach at Oral Roberts University. Controversy over their message peaked in 1980 when Fred Price was preaching at ORU and a theology professor shouted “No” in response to Price’s teaching. Roberts was incensed by the protest and demanded an apology from the professor.³⁵

Despite personal interactions and similar ideas Oral Roberts seems to have distanced himself from the movement at certain points and is continuing to distance himself as the controversy intensifies. Roberts, for example, does not teach that God will always heal if one only believes and positively confesses. His own City of Faith blends medical healing with faith. In an article on faith healing in *Christianity Today* Rodney Clapp notes, “In visiting places like... Oral Roberts’s City of Faith hospital, I detected the unfolding of what I call a centrist view of healing.”³⁶ It is also significant to note that some of the sharpest critiques of the faith movement have come from within the university — Theology Professor, Charles Farah’s *From the Pinnacle of the Temple* and McConnell’s *A Different Gospel*, originally a Master’s thesis at ORU. Roberts, like other faith teachers, bridged the gap between the older pentecostal healing movement and the newer charismatic expression. At best, however, his link to the health and wealth gospel remains tentative.

The Role of E. W. Kenyon

It might appear unlikely that a New England preacher-educator with no organizational or personal links to Pentecostalism could influence a movement such as the health and wealth gospel. But there is undeniable evidence that E.W. Kenyon has played a formative role in the ideas propagated by faith preachers. McConnell (*A Different Gospel*) demonstrates how Kenyon’s ideas have shaped the thought of faith teachers, and how

³⁵ For description of this and surrounding events see Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 423–7.

³⁶ Rodney Clapp, “Faith Healing: A Look at What’s Happening,” *Christianity Today* (December 16, 1983) 13.

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Kenyon himself had been strongly influenced by New Thought metaphysics or Science of the Mind, a philosophy quite prevalent in late nineteenth-century New England. McConnell goes on to argue that “because of Kenyon’s historical connection to the metaphysical cults, the modern Faith movement teaches doctrines that are neither biblical nor orthodox. In other words, because the historical root is cultic, the theological fruit is cultic as well.”³⁷ McConnell can be vitriolic at times and is reluctant to acknowledge pentecostal healing revival-ism as one of the roots of the faith movement, but his work is extremely valuable in documenting the “Kenyon connection.”

Born on April 24, 1867 in Saratoga County New York, Essek William Kenyon became a self-educated student and avid supporter of education. He never earned a degree, but attended various institutions in New Hampshire and Boston. Though he was raised a Methodist, Kenyon joined the Baptists following his conversion during late adolescence. He became an evangelist and through his preaching helped start a number of Baptist churches in rural New England. Kenyon’s zeal for education led him to found Bethel Bible Institute in Spencer, Massachusetts, a school that eventually became Barrington College (now merged with Gordon College). He was the superintendent and driving force behind Bethel from 1900 to 1923, but eventually resigned from the school amidst a swirl of controversy which was never made public. From there Kenyon moved to the west coast where he pastored several churches, served as an itinerant evangelist, carried on a radio program, and wrote books and pamphlets until his death in 1948.

While living in Boston in the 1890s Kenyon attended the Emerson College of Oratory, a school that was closely connected with New Thought metaphysics. “New Thought was the brainchild of Phineas P. Quimby (1802–66), ... and it is generally agreed by scholars of the metaphysical cults that Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, was heavily dependent on the writings of P. P. Quimby, by whom she received a healing and under whom she later studied.”³⁸ A broad movement involving numerous metaphysical groups, New Thought accentuated among other things the immanence of God, the primacy of the mind as a cause of all effects, freedom from disease and poverty, the divine nature of humans, and the role of incorrect thinking in all sin and disease. McConnell believes that though Kenyon at times critiqued the New Thought movement he nonetheless drank deeply at its wells through his studies at Emerson College as well as through contacts with various people in Boston who had propensities in that direction. He writes, “Because he had no theological background in ... the Holiness-Pentecostal

³⁷ McConnell, *Different Gospel*, 19.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 39.

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tradition, in formulating his 'new type of Christianity' of healing and prosperity, Kenyon drew from the only background in these areas that he did have: metaphysics."³⁹

Kenyon's preaching reverberated with themes we have noted in the health and wealth gospel: healing, prosperity, and positive confession. Of the latter, for example, Kenyon thought that what one confesses with the lips controls one's inner being. In fact Kenyon is the source of the popular phrase in the faith movement, "What I confess, I possess."⁴⁰ Teaching that sickness is spiritual, not physical, Kenyon stated, "I know that I am healed because He said that I am healed and it makes no difference what the symptoms may be in the body. I laugh at them, and in the Name of Jesus I command the author of the disease to leave my body."⁴¹ He also emphasized prosperity, but was less materialistic in his understanding of it than the current faith movement.

Kenyon was not a Pentecostalist and even saw destructive tendencies in pentecostal teaching. Nonetheless, various pentecostal healing revivalists of the 1940s and 50s had read Kenyon's works and at times quoted from him. As the metamorphosis evolved from old-time healing revivalism to the new faith movement, one person more than any other propagated certain of Kenyon's emphases —Kenneth Hagin. Hagin has on occasion acknowledged his appreciation of Kenyon's writings,⁴² but McConnell shows far more extensive borrowing from Kenyon than Hagin admits. In fact McConnell documents extensive plagiarism by Hagin from Kenyon. His book contains four pages of column-by-column comparison of Kenyon and Hagin quotes and the evidence is overwhelming — it is virtually word for word borrowing without any acknowledgment. Hagin's plagiarism is contained in numerous articles and books over a period of eight years.⁴³

The use of Kenyon by the faith teachers has not gone unnoticed by those who were once close to the evangelist-educator. Speaking of the faith movement's little-acknowledged use of her fathers ideas, Kenyon's own daughter, Ruth Kenyon Houseworth, said, "His first book was printed in 1916, and he had the revelation years before that. These that are coming along now that have been in the ministry for just a few years and claiming that this is something that they are just starting, it makes you laugh a little bit."⁴⁴

³⁹ Ibid. 49.

⁴⁰ E. W. Kenyon, *The Hidden Man: An Unveiling of the Subconscious Mind* (Seattle: Kenyon's Gospel Publ. Society, 1970) 98.

⁴¹ Ibid. 99.

⁴² See for example the preface of Hagin's *The Name of Jesus* (1979), in which he shows his indebtedness to Kenyon's *The Wonderful Name of Jesus* and even calls it revelation knowledge.

⁴³ McConnell, *Different Gospel*, 8–12.

⁴⁴ From a taped phone conversation McConnell had with Houseworth, in McConnell, *Different Gospel*, 5.

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Similarly, John Kennington, a pastor in Oregon who knew and on occasion ministered with Kenyon, states, "Today Kenyon's ideas are in the ascendancy. Via the electronic church or in the printed page I readily recognize not only Kenyon's concepts, but at times I recognize pure plagiarism, for I can almost tell you book, chapter, and page where the material is coming from."⁴⁵

The role of E.W. Kenyon in the health and wealth gospel is undeniable. Though Kenyon's link with the New Thought movement needs further historical investigation, McConnell's attempt to show the connection seems quite persuasive.

A Sociological Analysis

Why has the faith movement flourished at this point in time? What social and cultural factors have helped shape the forms and particular expressions of this religious phenomenon? To ask these and other sociological questions is not to comment on the theological validity of such a movement. All religious expressions are manifest within historical settings and are to some measure, whether for good or ill, shaped by their socio-cultural contexts. In this brief sociological analysis I intend only to suggest some possible human explanations for the popularity, forms and emphases of the health and wealth gospel. As of yet there are not statistical analyses of the health and wealth gospel followers to discern their religious, educational and social class backgrounds, nor data to assess the influence beyond the boundaries of the movement per se. Thus only hypotheses can be suggested. The following are only representative of the kinds of sociological explanations that might be offered to explain the movement's development. Others could undoubtedly be added to the list.

Deprivation Theory

One possible explanation for the popularity and particular emphases of the faith movement is what sociologists call deprivation or relative deprivation theory. It hypothesizes that "people join sects because they seek to redress the lack of deference and esteem they feel is rightfully theirs."⁴⁶ The deprivation or marginality perceived by such people may be economic, cultural, or psychological, but joining a particular religious group is one way to establish one's niche within society. By itself the theory is an insufficient explanation for human behavior, for it does not account for a number of realities: why people join one movement over another, why some people look to religion and others do not, and why the most disadvantaged in society often refuse to join

⁴⁵ Quoted in McConnell, *Different Gospel*, 5, from an unpublished statement by Kennington.

⁴⁶ Gary Schwartz, *Sect Ideologies and Social Status* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970) 40-1.

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organized religious groups at all. But deprivation can be seen as one salient factor among others for explaining religious behavior and expression.

Though no data is available at this time on the socio-economic status of faith teaching followers, the assumption of most observers is that they come from the ranks of working-class people who are seeking to find a psychological, economic and cultural home in middle-America. If that is indeed the case we can understand why such persons would be attracted to a movement which promises, in the words of Kenneth Hagin, that God “wants His children to eat the best, He wants them to wear the best clothing, He wants them to drive the best cars, and He wants them to have the best of everything.”⁴⁷

It is also significant that almost all of the movement’s leading preachers either grew up in poverty and hardship or at least at some point in their lives experienced destitution and feelings of powerlessness. R.O. Corvin, an influential pentecostal leader and educator since World War II, gives some feel for the background from which many of the leaders emerged:

Persecution against Pentecostals was both real and imaginary. Preachers who identified themselves with the churches entered the arena of life fighting ... They preached in school houses, under brush arbors, in store buildings, on street corners, under tents, in homes, on radios. They built inferior frame structures and large tabernacles.⁴⁸

Coming from such marginal contexts, the faith preachers have often despised their early poverty and deprivation. A gospel of economic and physical well-being was appealing to such persons and continues to provide hope for the thousands of followers who seek release from a life of socio-cultural disenfranchisement.

American Cultural Themes

Another possible explanation for the rise of this movement stems from cultural themes that are deeply embedded in American society. Notions of wealth and health (physical well-being) have long and powerful histories in this society, and it is therefore understandable that at times these values have become integral parts of religious expression. Like deprivation, these contextual themes alone cannot account for a movement, but they coalesce along with other explanatory variables.

Americans have historically been concerned with physical well-being, a passion that likely contributed in part to the rise of New Thought metaphysics (including Christian

⁴⁷ Hagin, *New Thresholds of Faith* (Tulsa: Faith Library, 1980) 54–5.

⁴⁸ R. O. Corvin, “Pentecost in Three Dimensions,” *World Pentecost* (first issue, 1971) 12.

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Science) in the nineteenth century. Two recent books describe the current American preoccupation with wellness and our bodies: *Worried Sick Our Troubled Quest for Wellness* by Arthur J. Barsky, and *Bodies: Why We Look the Way We Do (And How We Feel About It)* by sociologist Barry Glassner. Barsky, a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, observes that “because health has become synonymous with overall well-being, it has become an end in itself, a paramount aim of life.”⁴⁹ Could it be that the health and wealth gospel is a reflection of such an ethos?

Similarly, wealth and prosperity have been part of the American character for centuries. Some of the earliest European descriptions of the New World focused primarily on its wealth and economic opportunity. In *Eastward Ho*, a comedy written in 1605, one of the characters says of Virginia, “I tell thee, gold is more plentiful there than copper is with us ... Why, man, all their dripping pans are pure gold: and all their chains with which they chain up their streets are massy gold.”⁵⁰ Summarizing our whole history David Potter writes:

The factor of abundance, which we first discovered as an environmental condition and which we then converted by technological change into a cultural as well as a physical force, has not only influenced all the aspects of American life in a fundamental way but has also impinged upon our relations with the peoples of the world.⁵¹

Countless other analysts have described the profound impact that the pursuit of wealth and prosperity have had on American social character. It would appear that the contemporary faith movement is another chapter in that cultural history.

The thrust of the health and wealth gospel is also a reflection of another American cultural theme, individualism. In Robert Bellah’s widely read *Habits of the Heart*, personal fulfillment and financial success are portrayed as major expressions of the American ethos of individualism. “Americans tend to think of the ultimate goals of a good life as matters of personal choice. The means to achieve individual choice, they tend to think, depend on economic progress.”⁵² Such attitudes have become commonplace in American religion with its privatized, therapeutic bent which often seeks not the good of others, but primarily the good of the self. Its narcissistic tendencies are well captured by Bellah in an interview with a young nurse named Sheila: “My faith has carried me a long way. It’s

⁴⁹ Quoted in “A Nation of Healthy Worrywarts?” *Time* (July 25, 1988) 66.

⁵⁰ Quoted in David M. Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954) 78.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 141.

⁵² Robert Bellah et al, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1985) 22.

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Sheilaism. Just my own little voice ... It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself."⁵³ While the faith movement tends to stand over against American culture at one level, at another level it may well have acquiesced to the lure of American individualism and personal success. For it is the enjoyment of God, not the glory of God, which seems to have captivated the hearts and minds of the faith teaching followers.

The Fund Raising Factor

There is a rather pragmatic factor that has likely played a significant role in the prosperity-emphasis of the faith teachers — their need to raise money to maintain their ministries. As Barron has noted, “Many well-known faith teachers do not pastor a church of their own, so they have no list of members whose donations they can count on receiving consistently. If they do not continue to successfully solicit contributions and sell their books and tapes, they have no guaranteed income against which to borrow.”⁵⁴ The competition is fierce and the cost of TV programs, satellite networks, and travel is immense. In such a context the temptation to accentuate economic promises for giving to God (via their particular ministry) is overwhelming. From a functionalist perspective, the selected theological distinctives of the movement serve to ensure their financial solvency.

As noted earlier, fund-raising tactics that included financial promise received attention and critique already in the 1950s by the leadership of the Assemblies of God. Though some of the faith preachers have attempted to moderate their appeals, others have not. One young health and wealth gospel preacher told his audience:

Now there are fifteen people here tonight in this tent ... because God has told me that he is going to give you an unlimited blessing. God told me that. God is going to speak to fifteen people to write a check even if you have to postdate it for thirty days, God is going to talk to fifteen people to write a check or give \$300 ... Now, if you don't believe he can do it for you, then you're not going to be one of them.⁵⁵

Most faith preachers are not quite so overt, but the covert message can be read between the lines. One can only speculate what would happen to the movement if promises of prosperity and health were suddenly removed.

⁵³ Ibid. 221.

⁵⁴ Barron, *Gospel* 139.

⁵⁵ Harold Woodson preaching in Cincinnati, Ohio, July 7, 1972. Quoted in Harrell, *All Things Are Possible* 229.

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Conclusion

Enjoying God forever! Proclaimers of the health and wealth gospel appear to be doing just that, at least for the moment. This dynamic and flourishing movement has played a more significant role in shaping the American religious landscape than has been previously acknowledged. Key teachings and tenets have subtly infiltrated the thought and vocabulary of preachers and lay persons not otherwise identified with the movement. Statements like, “You can’t outgive God,” and “God doesn’t want his people to go second class,” reverberate well beyond the formal boundaries of the movement itself.

The future of the health and wealth gospel is hard to predict. There are signs that certain leaders are beginning to moderate some of their teachings in response to widespread criticism. Simultaneously, new preachers and teachers with even more crass approaches are appearing on the scene. What can be said from a sociological standpoint is that the health and wealth gospel resonates in profound ways with some of the deeply embedded cultural themes of American society. Therein lies much of its success.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ *The Trinity Journal* 9:2 (Fall 1988), pp. 151-170.