

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Prosperity Theology and the Faith Movement

ROBERT JACKSON*

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Several years ago, the author's thesis 'Christian Faith and Company Culture' was criticized for not dealing with the argument that all faithful Christians should automatically prosper as of divine right. At the time I was barely aware that such an attitude existed, but I thought it significant that the secular examiners were in a position to be able to hold it against me. Since then, however, this teaching has become well known in Britain, and together with its related dogmas, forms a corpus of beliefs which is increasingly taught and accepted around the world. Its birthplace is the United States of America, and the spread around the world seems to have been effected via two distinct routes. On the one hand, there are individuals who have travelled from America to establish new churches which preach this distinctive gospel. On the other hand, this gospel has been adopted by some established churches of the charismatic disposition.

It is the purpose of this article to trace the origins of this expanding world-wide movement and to deal with some of its tenets. I choose to call this particular corpus of beliefs *prosperity theology*, and the movement which adheres to it the *faith movement*. Neither of these titles is original to me, nor are they the only ones which are used, but what I mean by them should become apparent.

The origins of prosperity theology

An American, Daniel McConnell, has conducted a piece of research which is extremely illuminating in establishing the origins of prosperity theology.¹ His first move is to establish Kenneth E. Hagin as the father of the faith movement. Kenneth Hagin Jr. is quoted as writing of his father: 'Almost every major faith ministry of the United States has been influenced by his ministry.' Then, from correspondence with the major leaders within the movement, McConnell shows that Hagan Jr. is not merely boosting his father's ego. These leaders do in fact openly acknowledge Hagin as variously the human source

* The author serves as curate in St Augustine's, Bromley Common, England. His interest in this subject arose out of his earlier studies for a BA in Business Studies.

¹ D. R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel: The Cultic Nature of the Modern Faith Movement*, a MS presented to Hendrickson for publication in 1988.

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of their inspiration, the fount of their teaching, and their spiritual mentor. These men include Kenneth Copeland, Frederick Price and Charlie Capps.²

But, if Hagin is the father of the faith movement, then he is not the author of its teaching. Hagin's claim that the new teaching was given to him personally by Jesus through a series of divine visitations during the 1950s does not match the evidence uncovered by McConnell. He places side by side several passages from the works of both Hagin and a man called Essek W. Kenyon, and the overwhelming conclusion is that Hagin has directly plagiarized Kenyon. The word-for-word uniformity of the two men is beyond the bounds of coincidence, and McConnell writes that the passages he cites are merely representative ones drawn from just eight books: 'Many more could be cited'....³ All of Hagin's work postdates Kenyon's, who in fact died in 1948. Therefore McConnell sums up:

Whereas Hagin appears to have copied only occasionally from sources other than Kenyon, he has plagiarized Kenyon both repeatedly and extensively. Actually, it would not be overstated to say that the very doctrines that have made Kenneth Hagin and the Faith movement such a distinctive and powerful force within the independent charismatic movement are all plagiarized from E. W. Kenyon.⁴

Having isolated Kenyon as the source of prosperity theology, McConnell has one final surprise up his sleeve—that E. W. Kenyon was not a Pentecostal. Even though he may have influenced many of the post-war Pentecostal healers, the dominating influence on his theology is in fact the metaphysical cults which abounded at the turn of the century. He actually wrote that the Pentecostal movement was as destructive as it was instructive. Kenyon attended the Emerson College of Oratory in Boston, Mass., during the last decade of the nineteenth century, a college which was at the time immersed in the metaphysical cults, and the underlying *New Thought*. The influence of the metaphysical cults is clearly visible in his work, and while he claims to remain resolutely Christian, and indeed explicitly refutes elements of the metaphysical cults, yet he simultaneously, often in the same breath as his rebuke, asserts the foundational beliefs of these cults.⁵ Ern Baxter remembers that Kenyon spoke very positively of *Key to the Scriptures* by Mary Baker Eddy

² *Ibid.*, pp. 12f.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 19ff.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁵ Several good examples of this are found in Kenyon's book, *The Hidden Man: An Unveiling of the Subconscious mind* (Kenyon's Gospel Publishing Society, 1970), e.g.: 'We are not dealing with mysticism, philosophy, or metaphysics. We are dealing with realities ... we are dealing with the basic laws of man's being, the great spiritual laws that govern the unseen forces of life' (p. 35).

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(the mother of Christian Science), claiming that there was a lot that could be learnt from her.⁶

It is clear from merely the titles of Kenyon's books that his was a polemical aim directed against the established churches with whom he had become disillusioned. *The Two Kinds of Life, The Two Kinds of Righteousness, The Two Kinds of Knowledge, The Two Kinds of Faith, The New Kind of Love*, and so on, all express his desire to correct what he saw as being awry in the church of his day. Living at a time when the metaphysical cults were growing rapidly, this was Kenyon's 'Christian' response—a 'Christianized' metaphysical cult. The mainline churches were failing because they produced no signs and wonders and Kenyon was keen to redress an anti-supernatural tendency which was driving bored Christians into joining such people as Mrs Baker Eddy. He sought to establish a teaching which provided Christians with all the benefits of the metaphysical cults, while remaining within the Christian fold. The result was prosperity theology, which is, with a very few embellishments, the theology of the present-day faith movement!

In spite of this, McConnell is wrong to ignore other influences on the faith movement. For example, Kenyon rejected tongues as being altogether too subjective an experience,⁷ while for the faith movement, speaking in tongues is a necessary sign that one has been *baptized in the Spirit*. Charismatic Pentecostalism has also left its mark, especially so because such are the roots of many of those in the faith movement today. Thus, while the doctrines are undoubtedly those of Kenyon, very often the practices are those of the charismatic Pentecostals.

Attitudes to wealth

We need to realize that prosperity is the will of God. It is God's perfect will that everyone prosper in every area of life. Primarily, we are dealing with material and financial prosperity, because it has to do with tithes and offerings.⁸

When the subject of prosperity theology is broached, the immediate aspect of its teaching which springs to mind is God's guarantee of material wealth to *all* believers. But the question raised by the above statement is whether God does wish this financial prosperity on *all* believers. Conservative theologians would concur that the answer to this is no, and yet Price and his colleagues base their statements solely on biblical exegesis, and their efforts can be impressively convincing.

⁶ See D. R. McConnell, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

⁷ See *ibid.*, p. 49.

⁸ F. K. C. Price, *High Finance—God's Financial Plan* (Harrison House, 1984), p. 12.

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From the OT, Price takes the life of Abraham and shows how God made him *very* rich because he obeyed him (Gn. 13:2).⁹ Further, Abraham is more than a mere example because he is more than a mere man—he is the father of the faithful for he was justified by his faith. He thus becomes the representative of the faithful, demonstrating in his life the role of faith and the rewards for living a life of faithful obedience to the Word of God. That Abraham's wealth is material is revealed in Genesis 13:2: 'Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold.' The source of this wealth is described by Abraham's servant to Laban in Genesis 24:35: 'The Lord has blessed my master abundantly, and he has become wealthy. He has given him sheep and cattle, silver and gold, menservants and maidservants, and camels and donkeys.' God is no respecter of persons, continues Price, and so if a man is willing faithfully to obey God as Abraham did, he will be made materially prosperous just as Abraham was.

Deuteronomy also provides important passages for the prosperity theologians. Both Norval Hayes and Peter Gaunt draw great encouragement from Deuteronomy 8:18: 'But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today.'¹⁰ Deuteronomy contains the terms of the old covenant with Israel, in which she was promised, amongst other things, material prosperity in return for loyalty. Chapter 28 puts this over very succinctly and is referred to regularly, and Gaunt for one quotes at length from it. Stephen Matthew sums up this approach to the covenant when he quotes Deuteronomy 29:9: 'Carefully follow the terms of this covenant, so you may prosper in everything you do.,'¹¹

Another important passage is Malachi 3 which deals with the payment of the tithe, and from which are extracted the rules governing prosperity. Their exegesis of this passage involves the confident expectation that those who present their tithe will receive back from God more than they gave in the first place. Further, 3:6 says that the Lord does not change and therefore NT passages like Mark 10:30, Luke 6:38, and 2 Corinthians 9:6–11 are seen to reinforce this fact. They argue that those who don't receive the bountiful outpouring of the floodgates of heaven are either ignorant of what is available, or lack the faith to claim it successfully.

The Psalms and Proverbs contain passages which also promise material prosperity to the faithful people of God. In return for, variously, obedience to God, fear of God, hard work, and generosity of spirit, prosperity is to be found—see *e.g.* Psalms 1:2–3; 25:13; 112:1–3;

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 12ff.

¹⁰ N. Hayes, *Prosperity NOW!* (Harrison House, 1986), p. 61, and P. Gaunt, *Kingdom Businesses* (recording of a Downs Week 1985 presentation).

¹¹ S. Matthew, *Money Matters*, from the *School of the Word* study series (Harvestime, 1987), p. 48.

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128:1–4; Proverbs 13:21; 16:20; 21:5. The result of this and the rest of their interpretation of the OT, of which this has been a very truncated account, is the conclusion that God rewards all faithful Christians with material wealth.

Their NT exegesis also makes the same point but it does have a tendency to be over-literalistic at times. Such an approach is freely admitted and indeed justified by S. Matthew who writes:

At the start of this lesson, we posed the question: could we expect God to meet our every need on the strength of isolated texts like Philippians 4:19? Our answer must be *yes provided we are putting our faith to work*.¹²

Gloria Copeland therefore takes Mark 10:30 and writes:

Give one house and receive one hundred houses or one house worth one hundred times as much. Give one airplane and receive one hundred times the value of the airplane. Give one car and the return would furnish you a lifetime of cars. In short Mark 10:30 is a very good deal.¹³

That this interpretation cannot withstand scrutiny is plainly obvious since Levi did not become phenomenally rich, nor did James and John receive a hundred fishing boats, or one boat worth a hundred times as much. A closer examination of the passage seems to suggest that the rewards for sacrifices made for the sake of the gospel are realized in the common life of the church. Just as one's family is multiplied, one assumes not literally but rather through entry into the new family of God, so one's possessions are likewise multiplied as this new family holds all things in common.

Another new and interesting piece of exegesis concerns the person of Jesus Christ. Because God wants all Christians to be rich and Christ-like at the same time, it follows that Jesus himself must have been rich. Thus Price writes:

Jesus must have had plenty. He was never caught short. He was responsible for feeding five thousand people at one time. Remember, He had a staff of twelve men who walked with Him everyday. They did not work on any job that we have any record of for three and a half years. For that time, He took care of all their transportation, food, lodging, and clothing. He must have had something, somewhere, somehow, or He could not have had a staff of twelve.¹⁴

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 45f.

¹³ G. Copeland, *God's Will is Prosperity* (Harrison House, 1978), p. 54.

¹⁴ F. K. C. Price, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

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This is in stark contrast to the picture that Jesus paints of himself in Matthew 8:20: 'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' Also, if the gospel involves the endowment of wealth, why did Jesus send out his disciples without money or spare clothes, and with instructions to depend on the charity of others (Mt. 10:9f.)? There is also some doubt as to whether it is right to refer to the disciples as 'staff', and whether Jesus was responsible for their physical well-being. Finally, I would love to ask Price what he thinks was needed to take care of 'transportation' in first-century Palestine.

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However, as mentioned above, there are passages in the NT which do support the claim of the faith movement, namely that if you give, then you will receive more than your gift in return. What is crucial however is the motivation of the giver, and not the certainty of material abundance by way of divine reward. The prosperity theologian believes that God makes his people rich so that they can give away lots of money; after all, God cannot ask a man to give £500 if he has not got it. This is surely a sound statement on the basis of 2 Corinthians 9:6–11, but there are aspects of the faith movement's teaching on this subject which are not so certain. One of the first things that is encountered when reading their books on money is the statement that God wants *all* Christians to be rich, and the reason for this is not only so that it can be given away. Price believes that God also wants Christians to enjoy being wealthy:

Yet by walking in God's financial plan, you can have the \$15,000 automobile, wear the \$300 suit, and buy the \$100 designer shoes. God does not care. He wants His kids to look good.¹⁵

Michael Bassett takes this one step further and says:

If you want a nice watch, why don't you give one away and be expectant for your nice one to come in? If you want a nice car, why don't you sow for one, then you can be expectant for a new car?¹⁶

Sacrificial giving is not a concept that they seem to embrace: 'you cannot give away much when your own needs are not met. You cannot do it when you are struggling yourself to pay your electric bill.'¹⁷ Wilful poverty is seen as a 'denial of all that Christ has won through his death', and the ignorance of this fact which prevents financial endowment, as tragic.¹⁸ Surely this is not what is implied by either Jesus in Luke 6 or Paul in 2

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁶ M. Bassett, *Expect the Best* (Network Media, 1987), p. 52.

¹⁷ F. K. C. Price, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

¹⁸ S. Matthew, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

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Corinthians 9. How can such an interpretation of Luke 6:38 be consistent with the beatitudes earlier on in the chapter, or Jesus' pity for the rich young man of Mark 10:17ff.? Also Paul, in the words of C.K. Barrett, 'is not so crude a thinker as to mean that the Christian is always assured of such a material standard of living that he will be able to act charitably to wards others—he knew in his own experience (2 Cor. 11:23–33; cf. Phil. 4:12) that this was not true'.¹⁹

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Thus, it can be powerfully argued that God does not wish all Christians to be materially rich, and yet it is an oft-observed fact that when a poor person becomes a follower of Christ, his poverty disappears. John Wesley wrote:

I do not see how it is possible in the nature of things for any revival of religion to continue for long. For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and love of the world in all its branches.²⁰

Wesley's solution was to give away as much as possible and he himself did precisely that, but the burning issue is which item of expenditure is a justifiable necessity and which is a luxury? Wesley's policy in this matter was to avoid raising his standard of living and giving away his ever-increasing excess of income. This is surely more in keeping with Jesus' teaching than the teaching of the prosperity theologians whose chapter titles reflect the nature of their message: *Steps to Prosperity, Avoiding Poverty Traps, Heavenly Banking with Tithes and Offerings, 20%—The Penalty For Robbing God, Deposits and Withdrawals, Prosperity NOW!*

Another subtle variation in the teaching of the faith movement on giving is that where as the Bible seems to lay an emphasis on charitable giving, it lays the emphasis on giving to finance mission. Gaunt says:.

The needs today are tremendous. We're talking in millions and millions of pounds for the spreading of the good news of Jesus, and satellite television is just one aspect ... so millions of pounds are going to be needed to see that the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God.²¹

S. Matthew completes the argument:

¹⁹ C. K. Barrett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (A. & C. Black, 1973), p. 237.

²⁰ J. Wesley, as quoted by K. Fullerton, *Calvinism and Capitalism*, from *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, translated and edited by R. W. Green, D. C. Heath and Co., 1959, p. 74.

²¹ P. Gaunt, *Kingdom Businesses*.

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Our aim is to be like Christ, to spread the gospel, to share his love with our needy world in a demonstration of power.... Our financial prosperity will finance its happening.... Money is needed to make it happen.²²

Thus, the gospel requires very large amounts of financial backing for it to be effective in drawing people to Christ, a stance which is controversial to say the least. Although Paul insisted that the full-time Christian worker was entitled to be paid by those whom he served, the only time that he actually made a collection was for alms and not evangelism, which as Paul and the apostles demonstrated, requires an active Spirit working through willing servants rather than 'big bucks'.

What therefore are we to make of the OT, and the fact that it seems to contain adequate grounds for arguing that God does want all Christians to be rich? In the first place, the OT must be used with extreme caution because, as Deuteronomy 8:18 says, the promises contained therein refer to the terms of the old covenant which was made with the sons of Abraham at a time when such sonship depended on physical descent. In other words, the covenant people of God in the OT are a national entity dwelling within geographical and political boundaries. This fact is fundamental to the understanding of the OT, and Deuteronomy in particular. The relationship between wealth and God's blessing was radically altered when the new covenant came into force with Jesus Christ, and to be a son of Abraham now involves not blood descent but rather having the faith which Abraham had. No longer are the people of the covenant distinguishable by nationality, and this renders inappropriate many of the promises made to the state of Israel, just as it does to many of the regulations laid down for her way of life.

Jacques Ellul notes that in the majority of OT references to the rich, they are found to be under God's condemnation. Therefore he concludes that wealth was not a blessing in itself, but rather a tangible sign of the blessing, and as such, a sacrament *which was apt for four reasons*:

First, it implied the freedom of election.

Secondly, the fact that wealth is used as the sign implies that the grace which brought about this election is abundant and that, not content to restrict himself to the provision of daily bread, God gives wealth which gives rise to luxury, comfort, and ease.

Thirdly, it has a role in the final judgment. In Isaiah 60:4ff. (and Rev. 21:24–26), all the riches of the earth are to be brought into the heavenly Jerusalem. Thus, human accomplishment has a place in the final eschatological plan.

²² S: Matthew, *Money Matters*, p. 54.

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Fourthly, the glory of the heavenly Jerusalem is to be present in our midst through this wealth. This also acts as a reminder that all a man's work and the totality of human power belong to God.²³ Ellul however believes that wealth was not a permanent sacrament and continues:

Wealth, well suited to bringing the gift of the Promised Land to mind, is certainly not suited to reminding us of the gift of the Child in a manger. It is not an adequate sign; therefore we find it stripped of its true value. God thus puts an end to the sign's ambiguity. Wealth is no longer a sacrament because 'God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong' (1 Cor. 1:27). In Christ God chooses that which has no intrinsic value and makes it adequate to the work he is undertaking.²⁴

While some of the points that Ellul raises are not without their problems, his actual conclusion is matched by that of Thomas Schmidt who avoids the sacramental language of Ellul and introduces the means of acquisition as being important.

The OT declares that wealth is a confirmation of God's covenant with his people, a reward for keeping the terms of his covenant. Among the stipulations of the covenant are the justice imperative and the demand that man acknowledge God as the sole source of prosperity. The OT devalues wealth accrued in violation of these stipulations.²⁵

In fact if 'Bible' were substituted for 'OT', this statement would not be out of place in a prosperity theology publication. But Schmidt believes, as Ellul does, that Jesus changed all this. Schmidt's thesis is based on the synoptic gospels and he is struck by the repeated incidence of Jesus' followers either giving up everything to follow him, or being instructed to do so. In Mark for example, 'the commands in 8:34; 10:21, the statements in 10:28; 12:44, and the narrative accounts in 1:16, 18; 2:14 reveal a patterned or formulaic theological devaluation of wealth'.²⁶ It is impossible here to go into the details of Schmidt's work, but its well argued conclusion is that ...

'hostility to wealth exists independently of socio-economic circumstances as a fundamental, religious-ethical, tenet consistently expressed in the Synoptic Gospels'.²⁷

²³ J. Ellul, *Money and Power* (Marshall Pickering, 1986), pp. 65ff.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

²⁵ T. E. Schmidt, *Hostility to Wealth in the Synoptic Gospels* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), p. 60.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

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The NT's account of the teaching of Jesus simply does not support the contention that God wants all his children to be materially rich, since such wealth would then be a blessing. This is not consistent with Jesus who is to be found stating, both explicitly and implicitly through parables, that the kingdom of heaven is for the poor and that there is no future comfort for the rich who have apparently already received their comfort (e.g. Lk. 6:24). The parable of the rich man and Lazarus never actually states that the rich man was unrighteous, but nevertheless he is to be found in a reversed situation subsequent to his death (Lk. 16:19–31). It is also interesting to note that in the parable of the wedding banquet, the Jews are represented by the wealthy, and the Gentiles by the poor (Mt. 22:1–14).

Teaching on healing

When the Bible talks about suffering, that doesn't mean 'sickness'. We have no business suffering sickness and disease, because Jesus redeemed us from that.²⁸

The grounds for believing this particular 'truth' fall, broadly speaking, into three categories—Jesus' example, the recorded activities of the apostles, and the substance of the atonement.

(i) Jesus' teaching and example

The reason why all those who pray faithfully for healing will receive it is because Jesus in his earthly life healed all those who came to him to be healed. Matthew 4:23 demonstrates that Jesus healed all manner of diseases. Mark 1:32 further elaborates this truth, so making this divine healing available to anyone who would with 'faith' ask for it. This holds good today because after all, Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

This is a strong argument and yet it is not without its problems. Are we to believe that at the pool of Bethesda (Jn. 5:1–9), none of the other infirmed who gathered around it asked Jesus to heal them? Perhaps it is just conceivable that John did not bother to mention that Jesus healed them, but highly unlikely given the rest of the pericope (10–15).

(ii) Apostolic healing activities

After his resurrection, Jesus sent out his disciples to preach the gospel, and he endowed them with the power to heal. In Acts 3:1–8 Luke tells of Peter and John healing the cripple at the Temple gate. Further on, attention is drawn to the apostles performing miraculous signs and wonders, healing many (5:12–16). Philip did likewise in Samaria (8:4–8), and

²⁸ K. E. Hagin, *Must Christians Suffer?* (Rhema Bible Church, AKA Kenneth Hagin Ministries Inc., 1983); p. 2.

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finally Paul is used by God to the extent that everyday articles that had come into contact with him could heal people (19:11f.).

It is clear, though, that sometimes those prayed for were not healed. There is the case of Timothy who, in 1 Timothy 5:23, is instructed by Paul to take a little wine for his stomach condition. Then in 2 Timothy 4:20, Trophimus is described as having been left sick in Miletus. There is even Paul himself, who only preached to the Galatians in the first place because he was ill (Gal. 4:13f.).

(iii) *Healing as a consequence of the atonement*

This argument starts with Isaiah 53:4ff.: 'Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows ... and by his wounds we are healed', and then calls upon Matthew 8:16f. to show how this prophecy was fulfilled in the person of Jesus: 'When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed the sick. This was to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "He took up Our infirmities and carried our diseases." ' This latter passage demonstrates that healing is part of the work of the atonement carried out by Jesus Christ upon the cross and this fact is central to the faith movement for which healing is as automatic as the forgiveness of sins:

John Wimber, in his book *Power Healing*, includes a chapter that seeks to explain why divine healing is not always granted. In it, he usefully lists a number of theologians who disagree on whether healing is in the atonement.²⁹ If it is accepted that it is not in the atonement, then we need go no further in refuting the above statement. However, if it is included in the atonement, and I believe that it is, why is healing not as automatic as the forgiveness of sins? Donald Carson finds Matthew 8:16f. as convincing as the prosperity theologians on this matter, but he writes that:

From the perspective of the NT writers, the Cross is the basis for all benefits that accrue to believers; but this does not mean that all such benefits can be secured at the present time on demand, any more than we have the right and power to demand our resurrection bodies.³⁰

Hence, though forgiveness is instant in the present time, the fact that healing is not always granted can be explained in that while we are the new covenant people, yet we possess earthly and sinful bodies. When healing does take place, it is a reminder that Christians are a part of the new kingdom, it is a sign that God is supreme, and it is a portent of things

²⁹ John Wimber, *Power Healing* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1986).

³⁰ D. A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 8* (Zondervan, 1984), p. 207.

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to come. When healing does not take place, it shows that the new kingdom will not finally arrive until the second coming, and that until then, even Christians must face having to live in the domain of the evil one.

In the meantime, the faith movement has to deny that sickness can lead to premature death, and Price elaborates on life expectancy in a startling manner. First he quotes Luke 7:11–16, the raising of the widow's son. He continues:

This young man was *too young to die*. Do you know that in the accounts that we have in the Bible of Jesus raising the dead *He always raised young people*? Did you ever think about that?

Your minimum days should be seventy years, that's just the bare minimum. You ought to live to be at least 120 years of age. That's the Bible. God out of His mouth—in the Old Testament—said the number of your days shall be 120 years.

I didn't write it!

God said it. The minimum ought to be 70 years, and you shouldn't go out with sickness or disease then.³¹

The dualistic foundation of prosperity theology

Underlying prosperity theology is a dualism which has hovered around Christianity from the very beginning. This involves a belief in two mutually exclusive realms—the spiritual and the material. The former is the superior one, it is under the governance of the supreme God, and is the proper domain for people. The latter is ruled over by its own god, and is in eternal conflict with the former. All people start in the material realm, and the common aim in life is to aspire to the spiritual one, an aspiration that can only be satisfied with the aid of some outside agent from the spiritual realm. This scheme of things was adopted by a group of Greek sects in the first few centuries ad, many of whom took Jesus Christ as the outside agent of salvation. They were Strongly rebutted by the early church and became known by the title *Gnostic*. The faith movement today stands condemned by many of being Gnostic due to its dualism,³² but whether a dualistic foundation is enough to make this charge stick is debatable, and the out workings of

³¹ F. K. C. Price, *Is Healing For All?* (Harrison House, 1976), p. 104.

³² E.g. D. R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel*; J. Swaggart, *Hyper-Faith: A New Gnosticism* (Jimmy Swaggart Ministries, 1982), and A. B. da Silva, *The Theology of Glory Movement*, from *Religion Today* Vol. 1, Nos. 2/3, Oct/Dec 1984.

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doctrine do have some wide divergences, not least in the attitude to material things. Nevertheless, there are some marked similarities between the two.

Kenyon is thoroughly dualistic in his separation of revelation knowledge and sense knowledge.³³ The former is to do with the spirit and comes from the Spirit of God. The latter is worldly and is not only inferior to, but inhibits the development of the former. Sense knowledge comes from the five senses and so is limited to the physical environment. It is totally opposed to the things taught by revelation knowledge which is to be gleaned from the Bible. Kenyon displays a marked similarity to a second-century Gnostic named Marcion who championed Paul while omitting Matthew, Mark and John from his canon. Kenyon argues that revelation knowledge came only with the writings of Paul, and he denies that Peter and John knew the full details of eternal life.³⁴

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Price echoes Kenyon when he too speaks of two kinds of knowledge—faith knowledge and sense knowledge—which clash most prominently in matters of healing. 'Remember,' writes Price, 'Satan is the God of the world, which includes everything in the sense realm. If you allow your faith to be affected by your senses, you will be defeated in every encounter of life.'³⁵ Here is surely a hint of the demiurge of the ancient Gnostics. Satan is indeed the prince of the world but he is not its God. He did not create it, he simply enslaved it. He rules the world, but only for as long as God chooses to let him. He is not God of the world, he does not order the seasons neither does he have control over the rain which the Lord makes to fall on the righteous and the unrighteous alike. He is the polluter, not the fount of goodness. Christians have long been convinced that the hand of God can be seen in creation and many find what is officially termed *natural theology* to be a valuable aid to faith, revealing the glory of God through his handiwork.

The ancient Gnostics believed that man was spirit trapped in a physical body and their latter-day counterparts are no different. 'You are spirit but you live in a physical body,' writes Price,³⁶ and Hagin concurs:

The real man is the spirit. The spirit operates through the soul: the intellect, sensibilities, and will. And the soul operates through the body. The real you (your spirit) and your soul live in a physical body.³⁷

³³ See E. W. Kenyon, *Jesus The Healer* (Kenyon's Gospel Publishing Society, 1968), pp. 5f.

³⁴ E. W. Kenyon, *The Two Kinds of Life* (Kenyon's Gospel Publishing Society, 1971), p. 81.

³⁵ F. K. C. Price, *Is Healing For All?*, p. 122.

³⁶ F. K. C. Price, *High Finance*, p. 55.

³⁷ K. E. Hagin, *Redeemed From Poverty, Sickness, and Death* (Rhema Bible Church, AKA Kenneth Hagin Ministries Inc., 1983), p. 25.

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The implications of such dualism can be frightening; in the case of divine healing they can be fatal. Because all diseases are physical manifestations of spiritual ailments, the former can remain after the latter have been dealt with—a deception of the devil so to speak and therefore to be denied. Price writes:

Remember you are *healed by faith*, and not by sight. *Faith is the evidence of healing—not the fact that the cancer has left your body. Your confession, between the time that you pray and claim your healing until it is seen in your body is what causes it to come ...* Now your body may *scream louder than ever* that you are sick. Fever, pain, nausea, lumps, etc. This is where *your confession* comes in. **YOU MUST CONFESS THE WORD OF GOD IN THE FACE OF EVERY SYMPTOM AND EVERY PAIN.** This is *faith* versus *sense* knowledge.³⁸

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Bryn Jones writes in a similar vein ...

Someone may feel ill, seek and receive prayer for healing, but because they still feel ill conclude that God has not worked on their behalf. Faith is not acting in conjunction with feeling. Faith *acts in obedience* to what God has said.³⁹

Denying physical symptoms in the belief that this will demonstrate the faith which in turn works the healing can be deadly. Andrew Brandon tells of the tragic and unnecessary death of a Cornish pastor who delayed seeking medical attention for an ailment which is only curable if treated during its early stages—he died!⁴⁰ There is also the chilling story of Larry Parker in *We Let Our Son Die* (Harvest House, 1980), who withheld insulin from his diabetic child after he had been prayed for by a faith evangelist. He and his wife even believed that it was merely Satan's deception when Wesley, the son, died, and they prayed fervently for his resurrection for over a year. They were convicted of child abuse and involuntary manslaughter.

Another consequence of this dualism is a belief in the nature of the Christian who, once baptized in the Spirit, becomes a fundamentally superior being since he takes on board the nature of God. The worrying aspect of this is that it ushers in a grading of Christians. Kenyon talks of Christians who have sold out to sense knowledge, and those who base their lives on revelation knowledge; both are saved, but the latter are superior—a clearly divisive dogma.

At first sight, because this process is said to involve the 'baptism of the Spirit', the heresy is shrouded because many Christians also believe in the baptism of the Spirit. But Paul

³⁸ F. K. C. Price, *Is Healing For All?*, p. 122.

³⁹ B. Jones, *According to Your Faith*, from the *School of the Word* study series (Harvestime, 1985), p. 21.

⁴⁰ A. Brandon, *Health and Wealth* (Kingsway, 1987), pp. 48f.

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Scanlon's *School of the Word* study on *Living in the Anointing* raises the veil. Like many Pentecostals, he believes that all 'baptised in the Spirit' believers must speak in tongues to verify their baptism, but more importantly, he argues that such a believer also receives divine power on a permanent basis: 'It is the difference between my allowing you to borrow my car occasionally and my giving you the keys to the same car and saying: "Use it any time you like."'⁴¹ Thus, we have the creation of the 'super-Christian' who is in all aspects (especially the tangible ones) superior to his non-tongue speaking, non-miracle-performing counterpart. This means that faith is made to depend on the tangible, thus placing the tangible at a premium and relegating faith to being the means of providing the tangible. A Christian who becomes ill and is not healed has his faith denied him. A Christian whose business goes to the wall has his faith destroyed because it was dependent on business success. How an oppressed Christian in Albania views himself in these terms is unimaginable, likewise the Sudanese Christian who, his crops destroyed by drought, is on the brink of starvation.

Finally, there is one extreme outworking of this dualism which is taught by many prosperity theologians. Because the spiritual is over the physical, the physical death of Christ on the cross cannot end our spiritual separation from God. Price argues that if this were not the case, then the death of one of the thieves would have been enough. Copeland bluntly states that 'when His blood was poured out, it did not atone'. The belief is that it was Christ's three-day spell in hell which culminated in a spiritual death that finally effected the atonement.⁴²

Positive confession

What is it you want to get from God? If you want healing, then sow healing seed! If you want a miracle, sow some miracle seeds! If you want to be unafraid, then sow some seeds along this line. If you want deliverance from fear, habits, Satan's power, then get the appropriate seeds and sow them in your heart.⁴³

'Name it and claim it' and 'Believe it and receive it' are phrases that trip off the tongue and they have become the catchphrases of the teachers of this 'slot-machine' concept of *positive confession*. The idea is that you find the appropriate texts in the Bible, sow them in your heart, and then claim the thing that you want and which they offer. By behaving

⁴¹ See P. Scanlon, *Living in the Anointing*, from the *School of the Word* study series (Harvestime, 1986), p. 10.

⁴² This is a concept which I have not encountered in British publications, nor in American ones at first hand, though McConnell, while accepting some confessions over the matter, nevertheless provides convincing evidence that this is indeed believed by most of the major faith movement teachers: see *A Different Gospel*, pp. 204ff.

⁴³ J. Osteen, *How to Release the Power of God* (John Osteen Publications, 1978), p. 21.

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as if that which you have asked for has already been granted, you demonstrate the faith which will invariably be rewarded.

This attitude colours the faith movement's teaching on confession of sin. Whereas our Lord taught us to pray daily for the forgiveness of our sins, Kenyon argues that

When you confess your weakness and your disease you are openly confessing that the Word of God is not true and that God has failed to make it good.... The believer who is always confessing his sins and his weakness is building weakness, failure, and sin into his consciousness.⁴⁴

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Thus he argues that God requires a positive confession that as Christians we are 'not only clothed in the Righteousness of Christ but actually partakers of His Righteousness. This is a photo of our present walk with Christ'.⁴⁵

A girl with whom I worked in Bradford told me that the reason why she had left her evangelical Anglican church was that she had been convicted by the Harvestime fellowship in Bradford that confession of sins in church was wrong. Because she was in Christ, she knew instantly when she had sinned and could ask for forgiveness there and then. Hence, to confess them again in church was not only otiose, but also highly negative in that it focused attention on the devil's power in her life, thus hindering the work of the Spirit.

The faith movement today

The faith movement is well established in America. In 1979 Hagin's son-in-law, Doyle Harrison, founded the International Convention of Faith Churches and Ministers (ICFCM) and its founding officers include all the leaders of the faith movement in America. The ICFCM has over a hundred member churches, and more than 700 ministers. The ministers themselves have to have passed through Hagin's college, the Rhema Bible Training Center, and all must swear an affidavit submitting to the constitution, ethics, and tenets of faith of the Rhema Ministerial Association International, a body established in 1985 by Kenneth Hagin Ministries, Inc. The Hagin connection continues and Doyle Harrison is also the president of Harrison House, which is the faith movement's major publishing company.

In Britain, the faith movement is similarly structured and is beginning to gain a sense of permanency. If Hagin is the central figure of the movement in America, then Bryn Jones

⁴⁴ E. W. Kenyon, *The Two Kinds of Life*, p. 60;

⁴⁵ E. W. Kenyon, *Two Kinds of Righteousness* (Kenyon's Gospel Publishing Society, 1965), p. 38.

ICFCM International Convention of Faith Churches and Ministers

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fulfils that role in Britain. He is described as 'the founder and driving force behind Harvestime Fellowship, *Restoration Magazine*, the Dales and Wales Bible Weeks, School of the Word, Word to the World, Dales Television, and the International Christian Leadership Programme'.⁴⁶ Writing in 1985, Andrew Walker estimated that Jones' organization covered between 15,000 and 18,000 members plus children, in addition to several thousand who, while interested, remained in their own churches. Thus, after just ten years their numbers were virtually on a par with the Elim Pentecostals. He adds that these people are well organized, and led by powerful leaders who have a sound financial backing.⁴⁷

In South Africa, Ray and Lynda McCauley, 1979 graduates of Hagin's Rhema Bible Training Center, have founded *Rhema Ministries South Africa*. This organization is already a large property owner and employs many people. It has a training centre training out 300 graduates per year, and a distribution division sending out in excess of 10,000 tapes monthly. Elsewhere prosperity theology is preached, amongst other places, in Scandinavia, where Stanley Sjöberg and Hans Braterud have significant followings, Kenya and India where various Britons have established churches, and Argentina where Orvil Swindol operates.

In Britain, as in America, the faith movement is placing an emphasis on *televangelism*. Much money has been collected for this medium of outreach. Dales Television is just waiting for the chance to hitch a ride on the wave of satellite television. They have already produced thirty-eight programmes involving entertainers like Cliff Richard, which have been broadcast across Europe from the Oslo base of *New World*.⁴⁸

While the faith movement in Britain increases in size, influence and in its sense of permanency, yet it seems unlikely that it will ever grip the nation in the way that it appears to have done in the States. The reasons are cultural. In his celebrated religious history of America, Sidney Ahlstrom noted that even in the nineteenth century it was commonly acknowledged that those who suffered did so because of their sin and so were responsible for their own plights.⁴⁹ This was the corollary of the Protestant work ethic which saw wealth as a sign of election, and which dominated Calvinistic America. Thus, John D. Rockefeller judged his wealth to be a divine reward for his faith, and Andrew Carnegie wrote a book called *The Gospel of Wealth*. In spite of their scandalous business practices, there seems to be no doubting their sincerity. For a nation made up of individuals who believed that they had been elected by God, it was natural to assume

⁴⁶ See B. Jones, *According to Your Faith*, p. 6.

⁴⁷ See A. Walker, *Restoring the Kingdom* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1985), pp. 96ff.

⁴⁸ See C. Martin, *Here Come the Evangelists*, *The Times*, 22 February 1988, p. 20.

⁴⁹ See S. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (Yale University Press, 1972), p. 798.

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that God would bless the nation in a special way, raising her up to dominate world politics. 'In God we trust' is therefore not so much a statement of fact as a claim to God's blessing. Thus, national and personal wealth have always been acknowledged as signs of God's blessing in America. This is not the case in Britain where money remains a taboo area, especially when it abounds. People love to be outraged when the *Mirror* newspaper publishes lists of Britain's top earners, and while things are gradually changing, it is still considered unsophisticated to flaunt wealth. Hence, S. Matthew has to write:

We need not be ashamed of our wealth or try to hide it.... Don't be embarrassed about God's blessing — welcome it.⁵⁰

In spite of this, the preaching of the gospel of wealth is driving some people away, and it seems that it was responsible for splitting the faith movement's church in Bath.⁵¹

Another big difference is that in America, all fundamentalist denominations including the faith movement are soaked in nationalistic fervour, America being seen as God's mighty instrument in proclaiming his gospel to all nations. The following prayer illustrates this point:

Father, in Jesus' name we pray your wisdom will come to our president, his advisors, senators, representatives, all other government and business leaders. We pray for the economy of the United States and for the prosperity of this country. Father, we remind you this day that:

This country has always given to those in need and has never hidden her eyes from the poor;

This country has given to the furtherance of the gospel in allowing full freedom for preaching, teaching, and evangelizing;

This country has given to the furtherance of the gospel in that her citizens, more than the citizens of any other country, have moved out over this world to win the world for Christ;

This country's economic system has given to the gospel the equivalent of millions of dollars by exempting property used in the proclamation of the

⁵⁰ S. Matthew, *Money Matters*, p. 59.

⁵¹ In a note on p. 296 of *Restoring the Kingdom*, Walker writes: 'A former member of R1 has told me that I have underplayed the Americanisation of Bryn [Jones]'s team. Since 1979, he claims, Bradford has become less of a community and more of an American style mid-Western teaching centre. He also claims that the fact that American prosperity doctrines have recently split R1's Bath Fellowship shows that such doctrines are increasingly finding their way into Restorationist teaching.'

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gospel from property taxes, by exempting the income of organizations which preach the gospel from income tax, and by exempting the tithes and offerings of God's people from income taxes;

Furthermore, the prosperity of this country has generated billions of dollars to be used in the spread of the gospel, and the continued prosperity of this economy represents the best hope of financing the evangelization of the world in this generation.

We therefore boldly agree, according to Matthew 18:19, that, in Jesus' name, the United States economy will experience a regeneration:

That research and technology will make sudden and dramatic breakthroughs;

That energy and dependence on foreign nations will come to an end and that the flow of dollars to heathen nations for oil will cease, releasing billions into the gospel;

That the crippling effects of inflation will be reversed and that the United States dollar will regain strength and honour in the world;

That communication capabilities will expand to the point that the entire world can be reached with the gospel message;

That believers all over the United States will receive the revelation of God's plan for prosperity and will give in abundance to the effective ministries for Jesus Christ in the earth.

For we pray as you have commanded as in 1 Chronicles 16:35: 'Save us, O God of our salvation, and gather us together, and deliver us from the heathen, that we may give thanks to thy holy name, and glory in thy praise.'⁵²

Reports are also filtering through on to our television screens of collaboration between right-wing fundamentalist Christian mission societies in Central America and the US Foreign Office, the latter seeing the former as a potent pro-US force in an area where the rise of anti-US socialism is a constant headache: Ironically, in Britain where one of the churches is a major part of the establishment, fundamentalism does not seem to inspire nationalism.

⁵² A. Houghton, *Power of Agreement* (Logos International, 1981), pp. 115f.

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In the light of these transatlantic differences it will be interesting to see how the faith movement fares over the next few years. For example, how will the British viewing public take to *televangelism*? Will they be willing to finance it as Americans do? Will the traditionally reserved British character be able to cope with charismatic renewal if, as the faith movement demands, this is the only way forward?

Conclusion

In the end, prosperity theology is fatally flawed, and those who preach according to its tenets are surely guilty of being the teachers whom men gather around themselves 'to say what their itching ears want to hear' (2 Tim. 4:3). Not only do they preach an unbiblical gospel, but, and perhaps most significantly, they do not preach the uncomfortable message of Christ crucified, the one unifying factor of all Christian churches. In the blurb on the back cover of all Hagin's books is written the following 'Mark 11:23 and 24 keynote Kenneth E. Hagin's life, and ministry'. Look them up, and then compare what you read with what Alister McGrath writes in his book, *The Enigma of the Cross*:

The cross continually raises questions for the church, which dares to call itself 'Christian' after the one who was crucified and rose again, and yet seems to prefer to look for the grounds of its identity and relevance elsewhere than in the crucified Christ.⁵³

Perhaps the sheer attractiveness and ease of it all should be enough to set alarm bells ringing because after all, Jesus taught that the narrow gate is the right one, though it is the hardest one to get through. Being a Christian does not ease one's life, rather it involves carrying a cross. To preach a Christian lifestyle that must involve perfect health, enough wealth to live off the fat of the land, and the ability to call, at whim, upon God to interfere with history on one's behalf, is to preach a faith that has no true biblical precedent. Prosperity theology is therefore heretical because its claim to be Christian cannot be substantiated, and the faith movement is to be rebuked wherever it is encountered.

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