



## Conclusions: Word of Faith and Evangelical Unity

*Taken from Faith, Health and Prosperity: A Report on 'Word of Faith' and 'Positive Confession' Theologies by The Evangelical Alliance (UK) Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals, ed. Andrew Perriman. Carlisle: Paternoster Press 2003.*

The primary objective of this report has been to present and evaluate, as fairly as possible, the biblical and theological teachings that give shape to the Word of Faith movement. These teachings have appeared defective in three general areas: first, a narrative of salvation history that is at odds with mainstream evangelical thinking at a number of crucial points; secondly, an idealized and prescriptive conception of faith that diminishes the relational and personal dimensions of Christian spirituality; thirdly, an enthusiasm for material prosperity as a concrete expression of the goodness of God towards his people that is difficult to square with the high value placed, for various reasons, on 'poverty' in the Bible, and which is likely to compromise the church's prophetic voice.

We have also argued, however, that Word of Faith teaching should not be assessed solely according to its errors. Although in many respects the outward form of the movement may appear outlandish to evangelical sensibilities, we would suggest that at its heart lie certain instincts and convictions that are fundamentally biblical and which deserve respect. The first question to ask, therefore, in this final chapter is: What options are available to us for describing and responding to the peculiar mix of truth and error that we find in Word of Faith teaching? Secondly, we will review those aspects of Word of Faith teaching and praxis that may be broadly affirmed and which may offer mainstream evangelicalism an opportunity to recover some neglected emphases. Thirdly, we will outline some general recommendations with a view to encouraging better understanding between these two movements and, one would hope, some form of constructive dialogue.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the appeal for a more constructive approach made by Jack Hayford in 'To Avoid a Modern Inquisition', *Ministries Today* (Sept.-Oct. 1993), 8ff (see Smail, et al., 'Revelation Knowledge', 75).

## The question of orthodoxy

One approach would be to accept that the core of Word of Faith doctrine is sound while insisting, nevertheless, that a number of dubious teachings have been added to it or inferred from it. The movement itself not only regards its teachings as an authentic expression of the Word of God but also believes that it shares the fundamentals with evangelicalism. Hollinger quotes Kenneth Hagin Jr.'s apologetic for the movement: '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.'<sup>2</sup> Douglas Moo appears to endorse this position: 'Most of the proponents of this movement do not seek to downplay the significance of spiritual salvation. What they believe about the basic doctrines of the faith is well within the parameters of orthodoxy. If, indeed, theirs is "another gospel," it is so not because any basic doctrines have been subtracted, but because certain questionable doctrines have been added.'<sup>3</sup>

A distinction is also readily drawn between a moderate faith-prosperity teaching and the more irresponsible and self-seeking forms that the argument has sometimes taken. Idealist movements invariably throw up extremists, some of them money-grabbing and unscrupulous, some of them merely self-deluding. Many evangelicals will want the option of affirming some of the fundamental assumptions about faith that have been elaborated into Word of Faith doctrine while distancing themselves both from the unbiblical augmentations and the excesses of some of the movement's proponents. Many Pentecostals and charismatics would probably feel much more comfortable with a 'faith' emphasis that lacked the preoccupation with an individualistic material prosperity. Charles Farah endorses many Word of Faith distinctives, only really drawing the line at the presumption that the principles of faith must work the same way in every situation.<sup>4</sup>

Robert Bowman believes that 'at least some of the leading teachers of the movement do teach heresy' but argues that the movement as a whole should be classified as 'aberrant or suborthodox'.<sup>5</sup> He lists a number of reasons for this ambivalent conclusion.<sup>6</sup> First, Word of

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<sup>2</sup> Hollinger, 'Enjoying God', 132. The Kenneth Hagin Ministries statement of faith can be found at [www.rhema.org/about/tenets\\_faith.asp](http://www.rhema.org/about/tenets_faith.asp) (accessed June 2002); the Copeland's statement of faith is given at [www.kcm.org/about/faith\\_statement/index.html](http://www.kcm.org/about/faith_statement/index.html) (accessed June 2002). Bowman quotes a statement by Michael Bruno, a Word of Faith writer, with reference to the Athanasian Creed: 'There is not a teacher of faith or a Christian I know who holds the doctrine of faith who would not agree with the above' (in Bowman, *Controversy*, 148). Evangelical individuals and organizations are sometimes mentioned with tacit approval – Billy Graham, for example (Henry, 'His Father's Business', 10).

<sup>3</sup> D. Moo, 'Divine Healing', 191.

<sup>4</sup> Farah, *Pinnacle*, 115-164.

<sup>5</sup> According to Bowman, the Word of Faith movement is 'suborthodox' in that 'its teachings in certain crucial respects fall below the standards of orthodoxy'; by 'aberrant' he means that in other respects they 'deviate from

Faith teachers do not explicitly reject orthodox doctrine. Secondly, they sometimes *affirm* orthodox doctrine. Thirdly, the movement belongs to a radical wing of an orthodox Christian tradition, namely Pentecostalism. Fourthly, the movement teaches 'patently unbiblical ideas about the nature of God, the nature of human beings, and the person and redemptive work of Jesus Christ'. Fifthly, some Word of Faith teachers 'have espoused blatantly heretical and even blasphemous ideas'. Lastly, Word of Faith teaching is 'demonstrably detrimental to a sound Christian life'. None of these reasons is considered by Bowman to be conclusive one way or the other; to all of them he appends important caveats. But the classification is reckoned to be flexible enough to permit us to acknowledge the significant deviations from orthodoxy without ignoring either the substantial overlap with more conventional evangelical teaching or the undoubted presence of many genuine believers within the movement. Bowman thinks that few adherents actually take seriously the more extreme teachings. For this reason, if for no other, he believes that the movement should not be regarded as cultic.<sup>7</sup>

Bowman's assessment is important because it constitutes probably the most careful attempt to classify the doctrinal status of the Word of Faith movement available to us. The factors on which the assessment is based, however, are almost entirely theological; and while exegetical and theological concerns must be at the heart of any serious critique, there are a number of practical and historical factors that should also be taken into account. The reason for doing so is not to downplay or excuse the heterodoxy of the movement but to ensure that the theological judgment does not prove an impediment to further dialogue.

**1. The life of the movement.** The issues raised by the Word of Faith phenomenon have as much to do with personality and *praxis* as with the details of biblical exposition. At this level evaluation becomes much more problematic. On the one hand, these are difficult matters to judge from a distance. How are we properly to determine the authenticity of a testimony or the integrity of a ministry without actually being part of the event? On the other, while the movement may have attracted more than its fair share of charlatans and profiteers, there are undoubtedly many who genuinely love God, who seek to walk in faithful obedience to his Word, and who have experienced the power of the Holy Spirit. It would be no easy task to determine to what extent this is *because of or in spite of* the distinctive emphases of Word of Faith teaching. Nevertheless, it is important that due weight be given to the *life* of the movement. There are some exceptions to the generalization that Word of Faith ministries have a poor record of social and humanitarian engagement. For example, T.D. Jakes has been

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orthodoxy in ways difficult to classify easily' (Bowman, *Controversy*, 227; see also R.M. Bowman, *Orthodoxy and Heresy: A Biblical Guide to Doctrinal Discernment*).

<sup>6</sup> Bowman, *Controversy*, 226-227.

<sup>7</sup> Bowman, *Controversy*, 228.

accused (by Eugene Rivers) of 'promoting black middle-class consumerism', but his Potter's House church in South Dallas is developing a 'City of Refuge' that will offer help for pregnant teenagers, vocational training and support for former prisoners and drug dealers, a home for the elderly, schools, a youth ministry, and a performing-arts centre.<sup>8</sup>

**2. The fundamentalist imperative.** To a large extent the doctrinal errors apparent in Word of Faith teaching are historical in origin: they are the product of the confluence of different religious and philosophical traditions. But it could also be argued that the suborthodox doctrinal developments have been driven by the need to explicate and defend the fundamentalism of faith that lies at the heart of the teaching. The Word of Faith movement has pushed the logic of faith to an idealized and absolute conclusion and in the process has severely distorted the fabric of biblical teaching. The fundamentalism is misguided, but it arises out of something authentically Christian – a deep appreciation for what God has done in Christ, a desire to take the Word of God with the utmost seriousness, and, most importantly, a determination to defend the life of faith against the forces of secularism. What invariably happens, though, is that entrenched fundamentalist movements are unable to respond when the hostile circumstances that provoked – and arguably justified – the initial obduracy disappear. The world changes, the war moves on, but the old guard remains in its bunker, doggedly holding out against an enemy that is no longer there.

**3. The need to read the rhetoric.** The idealization of faith has manifested itself not only in idiosyncratic biblical exposition but also in the flamboyant and histrionic rhetoric of the Word of Faith teachers and in the showmanship of their ministries. Although mainstream evangelicals will no doubt find the packaging all too flashy and superficial, it is important to understand the underlying purpose. We have to ask how the rhetoric of faith and prosperity teaching functions *within the context of Word of Faith ministry*. As we peer through the screen of an unfamiliar culture, it is easy to jump to the wrong conclusions about what is going on on the other side.

The style and method of the Word of Faith ministries are geared towards actively enlisting believers to a life of radical faith in the promises of God. Such an existentially and psychologically precarious stance requires a high level of maintenance and motivational input, which goes a long way towards accounting for the obsessive and blinkered nature of the movement. The rhetoric of faith has to work very hard to shake people's grip on appearances and the dictates of common sense, to sustain conviction and resist doubt. There is a marked

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<sup>8</sup> See L.F. Winner, 'T.D. Jakes Feels Your Pain'.

desire to shock, which goes with the showmanship of the Word of Faith movement<sup>9</sup> but which may also echo the background buzz of polemic and debate with mainstream Christianity. Word of Faith teachers have a habit of making theologically provocative statements that may appear much less scandalous when unpacked. The tabloid theologizing is designed to disrupt traditional assumptions and generate excitement about the life of faith on a routine basis. It may appear vulgar, it is open to abuse, and it produces more heat than light; but it is precisely heat rather than light that is needed to sustain this level of expectation.

**4. Adaptation and development.** This study has, for the most part, treated the body of Word of Faith teaching as a coherent and static whole. This has been a necessary procedure for the sake of clarity, but in reality the movement is neither coherent nor static. It presents a range of views, and there is some evidence both of an internal struggle to maintain integrity<sup>10</sup> and of a capacity for adaptation and development. It seems likely that there has been some adjustment in the light of criticism from within mainstream evangelicalism and fundamentalism. William DeArteaga suggests, for example, that Kenneth Hagin has made changes in response to the criticisms made by Farah, though Hagin makes a point of never responding publicly to his detractors.<sup>11</sup> He also quotes Hagin's admission that the Word of Faith movement has neglected to teach about the positive role of suffering in the Christian life:

What's happened with the faith message is that we've told about the good things, but in telling only about the positive side, some people don't even realize that the suffering side exists. Certainly, we are to emphasize the positive aspects of walking in faith because there's victory in Jesus! But at one time or another, all of us suffer persecution, insults, and criticism that test and try us.<sup>12</sup>

Bruce Barron details the attempts of Hagin and Copeland to redress the balance with regard to prosperity teaching.<sup>13</sup> Moreno Dal Bello quotes the 1981 edition of Hagin's *Zoe: The God-Kind of Life*: 'Even many in the great body of Full Gospel people do not know that the new birth is a real incarnation'. The 1997 printing, however, reads: 'Even many in the great body of

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<sup>9</sup> Note Benny Hinn's admission that 'There is pressure to produce when you're up there on that platform – especially in a healing ministry. People don't come just to hear you preach; they want to see something' (Strang, 'Benny Hinn', 29).

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Harrell, *All Things*, 234: 'Every evangelist knew that some of their number had succumbed to the evil triumvirate—"women, money, and popularity." Admitted evangelist Kenneth Hagin, "It is no more than a con game with many."'

<sup>11</sup> DeArteaga, *Quenching The Spirit*, 272. Cf. Hagin, *Must Christians Suffer?*, 3: 'I just keep putting out the truth; I don't take time to answer critics.'

<sup>12</sup> K.E. Hagin, 'Suffering Unto Perfection: Part 3', *Word of Faith* (Nov. 1995), 16, cited in DeArteaga, *Quenching The Spirit*, 232.

<sup>13</sup> Barron, *Health and Wealth*, 95-98.

Full Gospel people do not fully realize that in the new birth they become one spirit with God (1 Cor. 6:17).<sup>14</sup> Hagin then develops the argument about the believer's 'union with God' in largely orthodox terms. R.M. Riss draws attention to Hagin's criticism of a self-generated faith: 'I do not understand how some people can go around spouting off things, endeavouring to believe, and calling it faith, when it is only presumption and folly.'<sup>15</sup> He also maintains that Hagin is candid about negative 'prophecies' which are not fulfilled.

Other Word of Faith leaders have also shown signs of a willingness to listen to their detractors. In 1995 John Avanzini published *Things that are Better than Money* (Tulsa, OK: Harrison House) in response to criticism. F.K.C. Price has apparently repudiated the belief that men are literally gods.<sup>16</sup> Kenneth Copeland's argument about God being a failure, which so upset Hank Hanegraaff, has been revised in his 1997 book *Managing God's Mutual Funds*.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, in a sermon in 1992 he went so far as to concede: 'I don't know all that much anyway. All I know is what I've learned and that's all I'm preaching.... I'm not 100 percent right. Dear Lord, I don't know what the percentage is, but I expect its [sic] probably pretty heavy on the wrong side.... there are certain things I am wrong about just simply because I don't know any better.'<sup>18</sup> Whether this admission should be read as a sign of humility or of irresponsibility is debatable, but it surely invites a more constructive response than mere condemnation and contempt.

**5. The problem of over-correction.** There is a case for saying, finally, that Word of Faith teaching has simply over-emphasized certain themes which have been neglected by mainstream evangelicalism. Price seems close to acknowledging the dangers inherent in attempting to redress the balance: '*That's the way the old ship of Zion has been going* – it has listed so far to one side with erroneous doctrine or no doctrine, false teaching and faulty instruction, or mixed-up and messed-up instruction, that you almost have to appear to be completely fanatical to right the old ship and get her back on an even keel!'<sup>19</sup> The inevitable effect of shifting such themes as healing, prosperity, and positive confession to the centre stage is that those doctrines that evangelicals would normally regard as being of primary importance to the expression of Christian faith have – intentionally or otherwise – become marginalized, though Word of Faith teachers have sometimes tried to correct this impression.

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<sup>14</sup> Hagin, *Zoe*, 42; Dal Bello, 'Atonement Where?'

<sup>15</sup> K.E. Hagin, *What to Do When Faith Seems Weak and Victory Lost* (1979), 25, cited in R.M. Riss, 'Hagin, Kenneth E.', 345. Cf. Hagin's comments on people who 'try to "make" the gifts happen': 'Instead of letting the Spirit use us, so often folks are trying to use the Spirit' (Hagin, 'Jesus Christ', 22).

<sup>16</sup> See Bowman, "'Ye Are Gods?'"

<sup>17</sup> Copeland, *Mutual Funds*, 92-93.

<sup>18</sup> Dal Bello, 'Atonement Where?'

<sup>19</sup> Price, *Prosperity*, 25. Cf. Hagin (*Authority*, 18): 'It seems like it's the most difficult thing in the world for the Church to stay balanced. You can take any subject – including the authority of the believer – push it to the extreme, and it becomes harmful and ceases to bless.'

This may be regarded as a legitimate function provided that Word of Faith priorities are not allowed to set the whole agenda for the church and there can be some critical feedback into Word of Faith teaching. Kenneth Hagin Jr.'s complaint should be heard: 'The faith message is not the only message in the Word of God, but some people have latched onto the faith of God – what it can get them, and so forth – until they have perverted this greatest truth of God's Word.'<sup>20</sup>

Evangelicalism is bound to object to the centrality of even a reformed prosperity teaching, but the more tangential influence of a lobby within evangelicalism, having the aim of injecting a sound appreciation of the unique economy of God into the wider church, might prove acceptable.<sup>21</sup> Local Word of Faith churches in any case are often less strident and less fixated on a single issue than the propagandist parachurch ministries. Much of the extremism and many of the more esoteric teachings are quite naturally filtered out at the grassroots level. The Word of Faith movement is more than the sum of its teachers.

Could we then take the view that the Word of Faith churches are in effect testing the 'hypothesis' that God desires to bless his people materially as they seek to live faithfully in accordance with his will? Most churches tend to prioritize one aspect or other of collective devotional life and ministry: some emphasize charismatic experience, others place expository preaching at the centre of their ministry, others find their *raison d'être* in community service, and so on. We may not be entirely happy with the segregation and narrowness of focus which often results from these 'specializations'. But to the extent that we are willing to accept such a state of affairs as a function of evangelical diversity, it may be possible to regard prosperity teaching as an exploration of, or 'experiment' in, the economy of God. The extremism of the movement would then be recognized as being, in part at least, a consequence of its experimental character.<sup>22</sup> As an experiment it must also be open to rigorous evaluation in the light of Scripture and conscience, and subject to modification where necessary. But in the process it may become the means by which we bring into focus some important neglected aspects of biblical teaching.

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. K. Hagin Jr., *Itching Ears*, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Atkinson has defended the imbalance in Avanzini's teaching on the grounds that it is the result of 'God's individual calling on his life' (Atkinson, 'Prosperity Teaching').

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Donald Gee's remarks on the relation between the healing revivalists and the local Pentecostal churches: 'We need the extremist to start things moving, but we need the balanced teacher to keep them moving in the right direction. We need extremism for a miracle of healing, but we need balanced sanity for health. We need extreme fervor to launch a movement, but we need repudiation of extremes to save it from self-destruction. Only a wisdom from above can reveal the perfect synthesis' (cited in Harrell, *All Things*, 111). It is generally instructive to consider the current tension between the Word of Faith movement and mainstream evangelicalism in the light of the earlier conflict between the healing revivalists and the AOG (Harrell, *All Things*, 107-116).

## What can evangelicalism learn from Word of Faith teaching?

Although evangelicalism has usually been highly suspicious of the arguments of the Word of Faith teachers, we take the view that there is enough common ground to justify a more constructive and ecumenical critique of the movement – that it is worth trying to disentangle the delicate wisteria of truth from the rampant russian ivy of error. The assumption here is not just that the Word of Faith movement shares many of its core teachings with evangelicalism – enough to suggest consanguinity – but that there are some important lessons that evangelicalism might learn through dialogue and through exposure to the life of Word of Faith churches. Too little attention has been given to some important biblical emphases that can be found in this body of teaching. The challenge would then be to reconceptualize a theology of faith and prosperity, rescued from the current isolationism of the Word of Faith movement, stripped of the theological eccentricities and the cultural markers, and assimilated into the broader and more self-critical framework of evangelical theology.

**1. The priority given to the Word of God.** We have expressed serious concerns about the simplistic hermeneutic that governs the Word of Faith interpretation of Scripture and about the numerous exegetical errors that have been identified in this report. Nevertheless, we have recognized that Hagin and Copeland encourage a very thorough and practical commitment to be immersed in the Word of God and act in accordance with its precepts. In this respect the Word of Faith movement constitutes an extension of the Pentecostal/charismatic challenge to an evangelicalism which has become over-intellectualized, sanitized, reduced to something altogether too tame and ineffectual. The contractual hermeneutic has led to distortions, but it has also made the Bible a dynamic, authoritative and practical text at the centre of Word of Faith spirituality.

**2. Belief in a powerful God.** We may disagree with the methodology and the theological details in places and feel uncomfortable with the absolutism, but it is difficult to argue with the Word of Faith criticism of the widespread lack of commitment to the life of faith among Christians. Hagin makes the point: 'Our having to encourage believers to believe or have faith is a result of the Word of God's having lost its reality to us. We *are* believers.'<sup>23</sup> Many evangelicals, while committed to the intellectual truth of the gospel, would prefer to live out their faith within the normal parameters of everyday life. The Word of Faith movement is impatient with such constraints: it is a boisterous, self-confident faith that refuses to live

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<sup>23</sup> Hagin, *Foundations*, 63 (his italics).



within the confines of normality and must continually beat against the walls in order to extend its space. Moo's comment seems fair: 'the openness in this movement to the possibility of miraculous interventions of God may be more "biblical" than the skepticism that too many of us unwittingly share with our materialistic culture.'<sup>24</sup> We cannot properly evaluate the miracle claims in a study of this nature, but on the face of it many of the testimonies appear little different from accounts of divine intervention commonly heard within the ambit of charismatic and Pentecostal evangelicalism.<sup>25</sup> That there are also stories of disappointment and failure is an embarrassment to the Word of Faith movement but does not in itself invalidate the claims for miraculous healing and divine provision. It does, however, point to the need for strong faith to be accompanied by an equally strong gift of discernment, informed both by the Spirit and by the Word of God, exercised both by the individual and by the believing community. Faith cannot be arbitrary, thoughtless, or presumptuous.

**3. A thoroughgoing optimism.** Word of Faith teaching promotes a fundamentally positive outlook on life. 'Learn to live on the good side of life,' T.L. Osborn urges.<sup>26</sup> The focus on prosperity can be construed in very humanistic and self-centred terms and at times hardly differs from secular self-help ideology. But the optimism is also quite consistent with the belief that our Father in heaven will 'give good things to those who ask him' (Mt. 7:11). Evangelical Christians, not least British evangelical Christians, could probably learn a lot from the exuberance and confidence that finds expression in the idealism of the Word of Faith movement. It may easily be confused with American feel-goodism and self-assertiveness, but we ought to be able to differentiate between such culturally determined attitudes and the profoundly hopeful trust in a loving and creative and generous God that we find in Scripture. If Word of Faith teaching overstates the dynamic of fulness and abundance and victory in the Christian life, this is largely as a corrective to the apathy and negativism that dominates the Christian mind-set in the West. The Word of Faith movement sees many Christians as cowed by the forces of secularism and anti-supernaturalism and has sought to reinforce the Christian self-perception as children of the King, heirs of divine promise. Colin Dye recognizes that prosperity teaching often inclines towards an over-realized eschatology, but he argues that 'a more widespread problem in British and European evangelicalism is the opposite error of negativism'.<sup>27</sup> Despite his criticism of the faith movement Farah is careful to make the point

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<sup>24</sup> D. Moo, 'Divine Healing', 196. Similarly Barron notes that 'Even New Testament scholar Gordon Fee, no admirer of faith teachers, commends them for recovering this text [Mk. 11:23-24] from oblivion and rebelling against the typical style of prayer, in which people go through the motions but really don't expect anything to happen' (Barron, *Health and Wealth*, 103).

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, the testimonies in *Believer's Voice of Victory* 25.11 (Dec. 1997), 24-25.

<sup>26</sup> Osborn, *Message*, 63.

<sup>27</sup> Dye, 'Prosperity Teaching'.

that the church 'owes a tremendous debt to these teachers because of their great emphasis on positive faith and a God who answers prayer in the now. In a wholly negative world, this is a refreshing and needed message.'<sup>28</sup>

The phenomenal popularity of Bruce Wilkinson's small book *The Prayer of Jabez* (the website claims sales of more than 9 million<sup>29</sup>) suggests that there is a significant degree of overlap between evangelical spirituality and Word of Faith teaching that could be exploited in the interests of ecumenism. Wilkinson does not endorse 'the popular gospel that you should ask God for a Cadillac, a six-figure income, or some other material sign that you have found a way to cash in on your connection with Him',<sup>30</sup> but the spirituality which he evokes is not far from the more moderate, holistic forms of prosperity teaching. One can easily imagine Hagin and Copeland saying 'amen' to Wilkinson's statement that 'God really does have unclaimed blessings waiting for you' and his argument that we are not selfish enough in our prayers.<sup>31</sup>

**4. The subordination of Mammon to the kingdom of God.** There is always going to be a tension, even without a doctrine of prosperity, between the possession and the renunciation of material things – between enjoying the good things that God has given us and giving up what we have in order to alleviate the suffering of others or support Christian ministry. However, evangelicalism has not been especially successful at reconciling the spiritual and material sides of modern life. Some have responded to the dilemma by giving or by following a path of service and ministry that offers very little in the way of financial rewards. But there are many wealthy Christians who have failed to integrate their spiritual and material lives. The Sunday morning offering constitutes a very inadequate connection between the spiritual and material halves of the Christian life. Moo argues that advocates of the health and wealth gospel are 'justified in criticizing the church in the west for too often unintentionally fostering an unbiblical anthropological dualism by confining God's concerns to the human soul'.<sup>32</sup> One has the impression at times that evangelicals feel that it is incumbent upon them to preserve the holiness of God by keeping him well away from the sordid business of earning, saving, and investing money. It is surely ironic, as Peter Gammons has complained,<sup>33</sup> that among the fiercest critics of prosperity teaching are the prosperous, middle-class churches.

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<sup>28</sup> Farah, *Pinnacle*, 136.

<sup>29</sup> See [www.prayerofjabez.com](http://www.prayerofjabez.com) (accessed June 2002).

<sup>30</sup> B. Wilkinson, *The Prayer of Jabez*, 24.

<sup>31</sup> Wilkinson, *Jabez*, 17, 19.

<sup>32</sup> Moo, 'Divine Healing', 202.

<sup>33</sup> Gammons, '30 Reasons': 'One Anglican Vicar announced that he could not support one of my conventions because one of the guest speakers "believed in prosperity". I satirically replied, "Not as much as your Bishop practices it!" I went on to explain that his Bishop lived in a medieval palace, with priceless oil paintings on the wall and was driven around by a chauffeur. My guest speaker had none of these and what is more, he preached prosperity for all! The Bishop preached against prosperity, yet he lived it!'

This dichotomy at the heart of our spiritual allegiance is not helpful. We accept as a matter of central theological principle that Christ lays claim to a person's entire life and that our economic activity, as much as any other area, must be restructured in accordance with the Word of God. But we have lacked the commitment to work this through as a matter either of theological understanding or of spiritual practice. DeArtega argues that it was the failure of mainline Protestant theology to provide a 'contemporary definition of godly motivation in the workplace' that allowed writers in the New Thought tradition to dominate the market for motivational literature.<sup>34</sup>

By stressing the intrinsic goodness of material things, the comprehensiveness of divine blessing, the requirement of righteousness, and the godly dynamic of giving and receiving, Word of Faith teaching has sought to shift prosperity from the kingdom of Mammon to the kingdom of God so that the believer may produce and enjoy wealth without being enslaved to it. In this way our economic life is redeemed. It is not merely that our wealth is consecrated to another purpose; it is redeemed in itself, and its intrinsic goodness restored, if only imperfectly prior to the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. There is some force to Copeland's argument that one of the main reasons why 'we've never won the world to Jesus is that we've never shown them how God could help them deal with the material monster that's eating them alive right now. Instead, we've acted like God was so far above material things that He wouldn't have anything to do with them.'<sup>35</sup>

Although the biblical arguments for debt-cancellation put forward by Word of Faith teachers are not fully convincing, it is undoubtedly the case that debt can be extremely detrimental to the well-being of believers and the effectiveness of Christian ministry. It is fair to say that prosperity theology is motivated to a large extent by the needs of people who have overreached themselves financially,<sup>36</sup> and in principle this aversion to debt should act as a brake on unbridled and irresponsible consumerism. There is a danger, of course, that people are attracted to the debt-reduction programmes purely for selfish financial reasons and not in order to achieve the spiritual freedom to pursue a more godly lifestyle. But the argument about the damaging effects of debt, both at the personal and the social level, certainly needs to be heard, and sound practical teaching about how to get out of debt is valuable.

**5. A theology of godly prosperity.** Historically the church has sought to address the complex challenges of poverty and wealth in one of three ways. The most radical approach – the classic religious response – has been to retreat from wealth and power into a lifestyle of simplicity and self-denial. Usually this has been accompanied by service to the poor and dispossessed.

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<sup>34</sup> DeArtega, *Quenching The Spirit*, 183-187.

<sup>35</sup> Copeland, *Mutual Funds*, 27.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Hinn, *Biblical Road*, 9-12.

Secondly, the so-called Protestant work ethic has, in various guises, endorsed work as a God-given means of social and personal betterment and as providing the basis for supporting the work of the kingdom. John Wesley's austere rule exemplifies the position: 'Gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can.' Thirdly, there has been a strong emphasis, especially in recent years, on the pursuit of equality through economic restructuring and the redistribution of wealth. In some contexts this has taken the form of a liberation theology, but Western evangelicalism has been wary of the ideological commitments that this has entailed and has generally sought to take a more politically detached and 'prophetic' stance. The practical objective has been, on the one hand, to influence public opinion through the normal channels of persuasion, and on the other, to alleviate deprivation through humanitarian agencies. An analysis of these responses is beyond the scope of this report, but we would suggest that there are components of a proper biblical understanding of prosperity that are not adequately encompassed in these models.<sup>37</sup>

The first has to do with how we value our wealth and material possessions and with the integrity of our involvement in the material world. If our theology teaches us that wealth is merely something to be given away, for example, how are we to evaluate what we keep? Is there not a danger, in the end, that we acquire and keep wealth as a matter of theological *neglect*? Most Christians in the West, whether they like it or not, are an integral part of the economic system and have organized their lives and their finances largely in accordance with the opportunities and demands that this system presents. If we are bound to accept this situation, the challenge faced by the church in the West is: How do we make the modern, affluent, middle-class Christian lifestyle *godly*? Is it enough to insist on giving and self-denial? Is it enough to speak out against the excesses and injustices of the modern economy? Is our wealth an embarrassment, an impediment to spiritual growth, an offence in the eyes of God? If we must regard it as a blessing, if we are able to thank God for the abundant good things that we have received from his hands, why should we feel so uncomfortable with the view that a generous and gracious God might wish to *add* to that blessing as increasingly we learn to walk in righteousness and obedience? Prosperity teaching may be able to contribute a paradigm that will keep our economic activity usefully within the purview of the kingdom of God.<sup>38</sup>

Secondly, we cannot ignore the fact that wealth is a positive resource. It is a hazardous resource, certainly, but within a *redeemed* community there should be the wisdom

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<sup>37</sup> On this issue see also Nash, *Poverty*, 156-171.

<sup>38</sup> There is a parallel here with the debate over creation-centred spirituality: evangelicalism has generally found it rather difficult to affirm and enjoy the products of divine and, more importantly, human creativity.

and grace available to handle wealth responsibly.<sup>39</sup> Copeland quotes Proverbs 1:32 ('The prosperity of fools shall destroy them') but he asks: 'Does that mean you too should avoid being prosperous? ... No! It means you should avoid being a fool!'<sup>40</sup> If we are unconvinced by the argument that vast sums of money are needed to pay for mass-media evangelism on a global scale in the run up to the Second Coming, we can surely think of other ends to which the resources of a prosperous 'divine economy' might be put. It is perhaps a little odd that we constantly bemoan the lack of funds available to the church yet are so wary of a movement that believes that God is willing and able to bless his people financially as they learn to walk in faith and obedience.

The third gap in the traditional response to wealth and poverty has to do with the power of God. The problem is that all three traditional strategies simply presuppose the conditions of ordinary economic activity. They offer various answers to the question, What should we do with the wealth that we have acquired, or have the capacity to acquire, for ourselves? Do we give it away and opt out of the system? Do we work to produce more wealth to support Christian ministry? Do we campaign for a fairer distribution of wealth within society? Ron Sider's influential book *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* presents a well-developed theological critique of global economic injustice, but no mention is made of those New Testament texts (or for that matter the many Old Testament texts) which seem to promise some sort of *material* return on our giving.<sup>41</sup> The notion of 'abundance' is interpreted only in terms of the unselfish sharing of resources within the community.<sup>42</sup> It would be wrong to say that these approaches are merely humanistic or ungodly, but we miss an appreciation of the generosity of God and of his active involvement in our economic life. The Word of Faith movement has taken the course of seeking to demonstrate the viability of a positive, faith-based model of divine prosperity – an alternative to the secular economy but no less productive.

What prosperity teaching might help us grasp more effectively, therefore, is the possibility of being a wide conduit for God's material blessing – not a large container that has no outlet, but not a *narrow* conduit either. We have the prospect of enjoying prosperity *as it*

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<sup>39</sup> Roger Forster argues that the church is slowly learning to react more positively to the perennial hazards of sex, power and money (audio tape 'Debt and Money', Ichthus Media Services, 2001). Traditionally the solution has been avoidance and abstinence, often to the point of asceticism and withdrawal from the world. The church has loosened up somewhat and is now willing to promote a much more positive understanding of the role of sex within marriage. We have remained much more wary of power and wealth, but the option is there for the church to redeem these things, to exercise godly power and maintain a godly economy.

<sup>40</sup> Copeland, *Mutual Funds*, 11.

<sup>41</sup> See especially Lk. 6:38; 2 Cor. 9:10-11, and the discussion in chapters 9 to 11 above. Similarly, Meilaender, 'Problem', 79-80, whose reasonably balanced argument about possessions nevertheless can envisage only simplicity, renunciation, and generosity as the outcome of a theology of possessions. We can enjoy and we can give up material things, but the reciprocal dynamic is missing: the active, responsive generosity of God is factored out of the equation.

<sup>42</sup> Sider, *Rich Christians*, 78-80.

*passes through our hands.*<sup>43</sup> This is Wilkinson's argument – that faithful and righteous people, whether in the ministry or in the secular world, should expect to receive greater opportunity and greater resources to influence the world for the glory of God: '*Everything you've put under my care, O Lord—take it, and enlarge it.*'<sup>44</sup> This could be a very powerful vision – a life of innocent and godly abundance, set free from the psychological and financial bondages of the secular economy, that counters the prevailing negativism, cynicism, and greed of contemporary culture; an economy of righteousness, that is not self-seeking but which generates and invests and redistributes wealth according to the purposes of God; a sanctified willingness to manage significant funds in order to support missionary work, relieve suffering, train workers, and bear witness to the goodness of God.

Does this simply ask too much of human nature? The Word of Faith teachers would argue that in the kingdom of God human nature has been radically transformed, brought back under divine sovereignty. Evangelicalism is likely to be less sanguine about the thoroughness of this transformation. Here again we encounter the fundamental divergence between the idealism of the Word of Faith movement and the more realistic and pragmatic stance of mainstream evangelicalism. It is the tension that emerges repeatedly in Paul between the indicative and the imperative of salvation, between those statements which affirm the spiritual transformation of the believer and the accompanying exhortations to put an end to sinful and worldly behaviour: 'once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of the light' (Eph. 5:8); we have been 'raised with Christ', and yet the reality is that we still struggle to keep our minds on 'things that are above' (Col. 3:1-2).

### *Both poverty and riches...?*

There remains, however, a real tension between the wealth-affirming ethos of the Word of Faith movement and the more ascetic, anti-materialist, ethos of mainstream Christianity, including evangelicalism. To some extent this tension may be resolved simply by the two sides moving closer together. But an alternative, and more creative, approach suggests itself, which may allow us to see in the conflict between these seemingly incompatible perspectives on prosperity an oscillation between two states of being that is intrinsic to the historical existence of the people of God. For it could be argued that underlying the tension between these two approaches to wealth is a real and important biblical distinction between two modes of discipleship: an unsettled discipleship of the road, on the one hand, and a settled discipleship of home and workplace, on the other.

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Copeland, *Laws of Prosperity*, 27.

<sup>44</sup> Wilkinson, *Jabez*, 31.

The first is a characteristically, though not uniquely, New Testament model, shaped by the course of Jesus' ministry, the crisis of the kingdom of God, and the missionary activity of the early church. It requires the abandonment of previous securities, a radical trust in God to provide for material needs – Abraham setting out from Haran or the Israelites fleeing Egypt in response to a divine calling would count as valid precedents for this mode of discipleship. The provision of manna in the wilderness (Ex. 16:11-35) – no more than was needed for each day – may be taken as a paradigm for the Christian's reliance on God to provide sufficient for her material needs,<sup>45</sup> but we should not overlook the fact that this was a supernatural provision in a time of transition and crisis. It is not how God provided for the settled community. Jesus taught the disciples to pray for their 'daily bread' (Mt. 6:11; Lk. 11:3), but the context is again one of extreme insecurity. It is a form of discipleship that often has to deal with the prospect of persecution or martyrdom; it is where a 'theology of the cross' finds its most natural setting. Much of the teaching about self-denial and suffering in the New Testament, as Word of Faith teachers have been quick to observe, presupposes this context and pattern of discipleship. In terms of classical spirituality, we are on the *via negativa*. In such circumstances a theology of material prosperity appears irrelevant; wealth is likely to be a hindrance or distraction; a lifestyle of poverty may seem more consistent with the spiritual and emotional demands of following Christ. The rich young ruler was confronted with the challenge of this sort of discipleship. Jesus instructed him to give away his wealth not primarily for the sake of the poor, as a matter of economic justice, but *for the sake of discipleship*. To those who have left everything is promised substantial relational and material compensation in the present age – and, of course, much more in the age to come.

The second mode of discipleship is better represented by Old Testament patterns of spirituality. It is the discipleship of a settled community with more or less reliable means of income and potentially a high standard of living. It is the discipleship of the New Testament churches when they are relatively free from the threat of persecution (cf. 1 Tim. 2:1-2).<sup>46</sup> This sort of discipleship requires a contextually appropriate theology of prosperity that emphasizes the need not only for economic justice but also for the active recycling of wealth through the virtuous circle of God's economy. There may not be the same sense of having abandoned everything for the sake of the gospel, and the scope for radical faith may be restricted, but the demand for a fully God-centred lifestyle is no less urgent. Prosperity is seen less as a product of a worldly economic system or a measure of personal success and more as a gift of grace, given for enjoyment and well-being of the people, just as other gifts are given to individuals for the benefit of the body. Concern for the poor and oppressed as an expression

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<sup>45</sup> Cf. J.V. Taylor, *Enough is Enough*, 49-50.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Price, *Prosperity*, 73-74. We do not have to agree, however, with Price's contention that 'Things should get progressively better as the influence of the Gospel dulls the edge of the sword of the wicked one.'

of the righteousness that is ours in Christ becomes a goal in its own right – a quite natural extension of the Old Testament ideal. It is within this context, too, that a theology of work finds its place: the dynamic of giving and receiving does not replace the more mundane process of acquiring wealth through labour.<sup>47</sup> A divine economy is not an alternative to the secular economy but rather an extension and heightening of it. There is also much greater scope here for the development of a creation theology that is able to affirm the intrinsic value of material things, work, culture, creativity, and so on (cf. 1 Tim. 4:4-5; 6:17; Tit.1:15). Here we are on the *via positiva*. There is no reason why our definition of 'prosperity' should not be expanded beyond the narrow economic definition that has traditionally characterized prosperity theology to include social, environmental and aesthetic values. Indeed, this brings us back to the Old Testament idea of *shalom*: a holistic notion of prosperity that encompasses not only peace with God but also relational and material well-being. We are not bound to accept the restrictive definition foisted upon us by the historical anomaly of contemporary American prosperity teaching.

The distinction between these two forms of discipleship is not a hard and fast one. If it can be explained in terms of a contrast between an Old Covenant spirituality and a New Covenant spirituality, this is merely an historical, not an absolute, distinction: it is simply that one model is better illustrated from the New Testament, the other from the Old. They should be regarded as complementary rather than as contradictory modes – though any discipleship of prosperity will always be dependent for its life and authenticity both on Christ's eschatological self-giving and on our own willingness, in the final analysis, to lose everything for the sake of the gospel. Churches and even individuals will shift from one to the other according to circumstances. We might venture, then, to amend Craig Blomberg's slogan ('neither poverty nor riches'), which was intended in its original context less as the expression of an ideal attitude to wealth than as a prudential safeguard against sin: 'give me neither poverty nor riches; ...or I shall be full, and deny you, and say, "Who is the Lord?" or I shall be poor, and steal, and profane the name of my God' (Prov. 30:8-9). If, in Christ, prosperity need not lead to denying God nor poverty to stealing, can we not affirm instead *both poverty and riches*? Even under the difficult circumstances of an itinerant apostolic ministry Paul could say: 'I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need' (Phil. 4:12).<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> P. Mills ('Christians and Financial Security', 191-192) asks whether the birds of the air who are fed by God (Mt. 6:19, 26) are more spiritual than the ant which works hard to gather food for itself (Prov. 6:6-8).

<sup>48</sup> Mills ('Financial Security', 199) puts forward a similar argument for a contextualized theology of wealth: "when witness is to be given of the imminence and power of the kingdom of God, a 'reckless' attitude towards wealth and possessions is entirely appropriate in order to display more powerfully Christian love and faith. However, greater prudence is required when physical conditions are more hostile and endurance is the order of the day." The



Too often, however, the model of eschatologically oriented discipleship that is found in the New Testament is imposed quite unrealistically on Christian communities for whom the prospect of eschatological crisis is little more than a vague theological hypothesis. The church does not always face upheaval, dislocation, or persecution. The fundamental mistake of the Word of Faith movement could also be diagnosed as a mismatch of these two modes of discipleship. The movement has taken a *radical* notion of faith that properly belongs in the context of an insecure and unsettled discipleship and linked it to a definition of prosperity that is only really workable under settled conditions. The result is that both faith and prosperity are misapplied. Radical faith is made to serve mammon rather than the kingdom of God; and a divine economy that blesses through industry and giving is subjected to the uncertainties and liabilities of a misplaced faith. Ironically, the sort of faith advocated by the Word of Faith movement becomes relevant at precisely the moment at which we are called to abandon the life of the prosperous settled community and walk the fateful road from Galilee to Jerusalem.

Finally, we might consider how the dynamic of giving and receiving, underwritten by the goodness of God, might bind these two modes of discipleship together. There is much to be said for the Word of Faith vision of a busy and productive economy of giving and receiving, on the one hand, as a means of introducing grace into our daily lives and of generating resources for ministry and mission, and on the other, as an antidote to the prevailing individualism and selfishness of modern life. Jacques Ellul writes that giving is 'the penetration of grace into the world of competition and selling'.<sup>49</sup> But when properly understood, this is no less true of receiving – because God is no less a giver than we are.

If the basic argument about giving and receiving is correct, then we may begin to grasp how our economic life, or at least a large part of it, may take on a fundamentally godly dynamic: by giving generously we draw into the whole process the much greater generosity and resources of God; we activate grace in our lives. The receiving from God makes this more than just an individualistic and unilateral act: it is productive, interactive, it engages others, it promotes interdependence and community. It overcomes the alienation of wealth: we do not give to an indifferent God, we do not simply pour our money into a void, we do not stand outside the system injecting money in. We have become part of it and we are blessed by it. We must be careful not to reduce the interaction to an automated and formulaic process, the predictable operation of spiritual laws to the exclusion of a sovereign and intentional deity. Ellul warns against making 'God's kingdom an object of shrewd calculation, for God does not

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historical perspective, however, is missing, and a certain ethical caution is evident in the affirmation of 'prudence' rather than of prosperity.

<sup>49</sup> Ellul, *Money*, 110.

like schemers, and he never gives them what they have banked on'.<sup>50</sup> We must also be clear in our own minds that the economy of God is never an escape from servanthood and compassion. But we must also not lose the challenge of faith, which motivates the church to centre itself around a good and generous God.

## **Towards a final position**

If there is to be a worthwhile rapprochement between the Word of Faith movement and mainstream evangelicalism, then a number of steps need to be taken on both sides towards overcoming the current stand-off. What we are recommending, therefore, is a constructive or progressive dialogue. Too often when we attempt to deal with divisions of this nature within the church, we are presented with a stark choice: either a superficial unity or doctrinal soundness.<sup>51</sup> We do not at all wish to downplay the significance of the doctrinal differences between Word of Faith and traditional evangelical teaching. But we would argue, nevertheless, that there is a large enough overlap between the two to justify a serious commitment to work together to understand and resolve the causes of division. There is no need for self-deception in such an undertaking; but there is no need either for a defensive, judgmental ideological separatism.

## **The challenge to those outside the Word of Faith movement**

1. In the first place, we would suggest that those outside the Word of Faith movement need to recognize and resist the pressure to prejudge matters. The problem is perhaps less acute in Britain than in the US, but there is still a widespread tendency to condemn the movement on the basis of an ingrained and largely unexamined moral revulsion. Much of what passes for doctrinal integrity, however, is often little more than spiritual snobbery and disdain for what appears to be the uneducated, status-seeking vulgarity of Word of Faith religion.

2. The Word of Faith movement should be recognized as being *at its best* a serious attempt to explore and be blessed by the generosity and faithfulness of God. If there is to be any progress in dialogue, evangelicals must be ready to affirm those aspects of Word of Faith teaching and practice that coincide with their own biblical convictions. Evangelicalism has become so sensitized to the doctrinal shortcomings of the movement that we find it difficult to

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<sup>50</sup> Ellul, *Money*, 41.

<sup>51</sup> See, e.g., Ankerberg and Weldon, *Facts*, 13-14.

acknowledge the large body of general teaching that is biblically centred, that exalts Christ, that inspires faith in God, and that encourages a lifestyle of integrity and righteousness.

3. Evangelicalism generally should take up the challenge of developing a more positive understanding of the role of wealth within the divine economy. The argument about giving and receiving has often been overstated and twisted by the Word of Faith movement, but the core of the doctrine is sound and may offer a powerful way to reintegrate our economic and spiritual lives. The Word of Faith critique of the prevailing 'poverty gospel' has some force to it and should be a stimulus to a renewed examination of Scripture.

4. To some extent it lies in our hands to dismantle the caricatures and stereotypes into which the church and the secular media have tended to box Word of Faith and prosperity teachers. Caricatures help to highlight excess and hypocrisy, but they are an indiscriminate instrument of polemic. They make it much more difficult to identify and approach those more moderate leaders who seek to be effective, responsible and faithful ministers, and much more difficult to maintain good standards of integrity.

5. Evangelicals need to be sensitive to the impact that an aggressive critique may have on ordinary believers within the Word of Faith movement. The danger is that such an approach will either reinforce the position or will undermine faith altogether. The point has been made more than once that there is more to the teaching of Hagin and Copeland than is found in the one-sided analyses of their opponents; and there is more to the Word of Faith movement than is found in the ministries of its most prominent evangelists.

### **The challenge to those inside the Word of Faith movement**

1. The leaders of the Word of Faith movement clearly need to reverse the tendency towards isolationism. They are not entirely to blame for this state of affairs: whenever evangelicals have sought to engage with the Word of Faith movement, it has generally been with a view to censuring some aspect or other of its teaching and ministry. John Ankerberg and John Weldon accuse Copeland and others of spiritual pride because they have refused to 'enter into dialogue with other Christian brothers who have, out of love, attempted to correct the Faith teachers'.<sup>52</sup> One wonders whether, instead of attempting to correct, an offer to pray together or worship together or minister together might not have borne more fruit. Dialogue on the basis of criticism only, where there is no trust, is only likely to exacerbate the situation.

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<sup>52</sup> Ankerberg and Weldon, *Facts*, 15.

Nevertheless, the suspicion remains that these high profile organizations find it advantageous to maintain their outsider status, not least because it allows them to preserve a distinctive (and marketable) identity within the highly competitive world of global Christianity.<sup>53</sup> But if Word of Faith teachers genuinely believe that their message about faith and prosperity needs to be heard by the whole church, they must begin to dismantle some of the ideological and organizational distinctives that underpin their separatism, even if in the process they risk losing something of their own identity.

2. The Word of Faith movement must take steps to engage in serious biblical scholarship in dialogue with other evangelical scholars. There is no question that Word of Faith theology is fundamentally flawed at a number of critical points, to the extent that we can hardly avoid applying to it some such label as 'suborthodox' or 'heterodox'. We believe, however, that a serious and open-minded conversation between the two communities and a greater interaction between students and scholars across the boundaries will lead to the resolution of many of these disagreements. But the Word of Faith movement must demonstrate a willingness to be heard as one voice among many others within evangelicalism, in dialogue with others, open to reproof and correction. Tightly-controlled, exclusivist, and strongly doctrinaire training institutions are an anomaly today and an unnecessary means of safeguarding the deposit of biblical truth that has been entrusted to us. The development of critical Pentecostal scholarship in recent decades offers a valuable precedent and model for the sort of change that is needed (see above page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**).

3. The Word of Faith movement must address the ethical and pastoral dangers that are inherent in the practice of radical 'faith' ministries. When expectations regarding the efficacy of faith and the availability of material blessings and physical healing are raised to such a great height, pastors and evangelists will find themselves under pressure to *make* faith work, to create the *appearance* of success, and to conceal failure. This will not always be the case, but the risk of slipping from faith to presumption, from grace to legalism, from transparency to deception, is inevitably much greater when the credibility of the ministry appears to be so dependent on getting results from God. Great faith must be matched by great integrity. This requirement of integrity, of course, applies to all aspects of Word of Faith ministry, which is too often discredited by financial and pastoral controversy.

4. Although some allowance can be made for a rhetoric that may not always mean quite what it appears to mean, which frequently aims to provoke rather than to inform, and which is

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<sup>53</sup> See Barron's sensitive discussion of this issue in *Health and Wealth*, 137-139.

often cited out of context by opponents, the question must still be asked whether such rhetoric is helpful. Is the provocation really necessary? We can hardly avoid the conclusion that the power to motivate faith has been gained at the expense both of the general theological project and of Christian unity.

5. Serious questions must be asked about the dominant role models found in the Word of Faith movement. If prosperity teachers appear wealthy and successful, we should not forget that their wealth and success has been acquired through Christian ministry – they are the beneficiaries of the generosity of their supporters. That is a unique position to be in: it cannot be emulated by ordinary Christians and is clearly open to abuse. More importantly, whatever the motives and intentions of the particular minister may be, it is all too easy for the image of the prosperous, high-profile, charismatic leader to replace Christ as the object of adulation and imitation. Hank Hanegraaff quotes the words of the former wife of a televangelist:

I know a lot of people were blessed and sincerely ministered to by what we sang on TV, and by what we said—but the overall picture, I'm afraid, seemed to say, "If you follow our formula, you'll be like us," rather than, "If you do what Jesus says, you'll be like Him." It was certainly more exciting to follow us, because to follow us was to identify with success, with glamour, with a theology that made everything good and clean and well-knit together. To identify with Jesus, however, meant to identify with the Cross.<sup>54</sup>

6. If the Word of Faith movement is to remain committed to the ideal of godly prosperity, then something must be done to dissociate this in the public mind – and not least in the evangelical mind – from the materialism and hedonism of contemporary Western culture. On the one hand, there must be an unequivocal critique of economic injustice and excess; on the other, any godly prosperity must be manifestly associated with righteousness, compassion, and a willingness to give to the poor and invest wealth in the kingdom of God. The church cannot afford to have its prophetic voice compromised by an appearance of greed and indifference to economic injustice. We would hope to see develop a more balanced and holistic understanding of 'blessing' that sets material prosperity firmly within the context of relational, developmental, and spiritual prosperity.

We do not wish to underestimate the extent of the gulf between the Word of Faith movement and mainstream evangelicalism. But it would be foolish to assume that this situation cannot change. Neither the Word of Faith movement nor Western evangelicalism is a fixed ideological

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<sup>54</sup> Hanegraaff, *Crisis*, 192.

entity: both are in a state of flux and this should encourage an openness on both sides of this controversy to work towards some sort of resolution of the points of disagreement. This will not happen without a commitment on both sides to drop the prejudgments, suspend the antipathies, and re-evaluate the relation between prosperity teaching and mainstream evangelicalism. Such a re-evaluation does not have to be naïve or uncritical. But it does need to be generous, less hasty to condemn than in the past, capable of discerning and affirming what is right and good, and committed to creating mechanisms for mutual understanding and respect.

## **Appendix 1**

### **Declaration of the World Evangelical Fellowship on Prosperity Theology and the Theology of Suffering (1995)**

#### **Definition**

A distinction should be made between 'prosperity theology' and the biblical teaching on prosperity. The former expression refers to a contemporary theological teaching stressing that God always blesses his people materially, with wealth and health, as well as spiritually when they have a positive faith and are obedient to him. It is a teaching that is found frequently, though not exclusively, in some charismatic and Pentecostal circles, where it is also frequently criticized. The accent is not placed on the stewardship of the wealth that God has given to a person, but rather on understanding the biblical concepts of faith, prayer, and blessing, and the consequences of this teaching for one's daily life. A biblical theology of prosperity, on the other hand, would emphasize the responsibilities of the successful or prosperous to use their wealth for the glory of God and for the alleviation of the suffering of the poor and the weak.

#### **Biblical teaching on Wealth and Prosperity**

The Old Testament is full of promises of blessing to the person who walks obediently before the Lord and keeps his commands. The book of Deuteronomy, for example, promises the people abundant material blessing in their lives in the land of Canaan if they remain true to the Lord. At the same time, there are checks and balances written into the biblical laws to prevent those who become wealthy from failing to share from their abundance with the poor – for example the laws of the gleanings, the sabbatical year, and the Year of Jubilee. The ideal in ancient Israel was that there should not be a very big gap between the rich and the poor, though in time, this ideal seems to have been lost sight of by many of the rich families in Israel and Judah. This neglect of the poor and needy called forth the scathing denunciations of the prophets of the Lord.

While the Old Testament promises abundance, including both spiritual and material blessings, to the faithful, this emphasis must be balanced by other Old Testament texts that warn the people concerning the accumulation of great wealth and the neglect of the needs of the poor, namely, the widow, the orphan, the alien, and the physically disabled. God is the champion of the poor, and God's people are called upon to manifest his love and graciousness in reaching

out to the needy (Ex. 22:22; Deut. 10:18; 14:29; Isa. 1:17; 10:2; Jer. 22:3). Both the Old Testament and the New Testament teach that a faith that does not care for the weakest members of the human community is no faith at all (Is. 1:11-17; Jas. 1:27; 1 Jn. 3:17).

While the Bible teaches that all wealth comes from the Lord and is his possession, it does not teach that those who have wealth are more godly than others who are not. God in his providence causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends his rain on the just and the unjust (Mt. 5:45). The wicked frequently prosper (Ps. 72:3-12) and the righteous are frequently poor even though they are rich in faith (Rom. 15:26; 1 Cor. 1:26; 2 Cor. 6:10; Gal. 2:10; Jas. 2:3-6). The consequences of the fall have permeated the created order so that all are affected, yet God is still the benevolent creator who showers his blessings upon all (Ps. 127:2).

The good news of the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus and ultimately made real by his death, burial and resurrection is good news for the whole created order (1 Cor. 15:1-5). He did not preach a message of the salvation of the soul after death but of the fullness of life; he announced good news to the poor, the imprisoned, the blind, the hungry, the weeping and the persecuted (Lk. 4:18; 6:20-22; Mt. 5:3-11). And he demonstrated the power of the kingdom by restoring people to wholeness, (Heb. shalom) in their relationships with God and with their neighbours (Mk. 2:1-12; Lk. 19:9; 7:36-50), by driving out demons (Mk. 1:23-28; Mk. 5:1-20), and by healing the sick (Mk. 1:40-45; 10:46-52; Lk. 7:18-23). What Jesus promised by his Kingdom proclamation, he wrought through his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead.

The values of the kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus were set by a radical commitment to the double command to love God with all one's being and to love one's neighbour as oneself (Mk. 12:29-31). To trust God completely frees the disciple of Jesus from being overly concerned about material things. The desire to accumulate wealth, to have security and personal happiness represents the values of the old order, which is passing away (1 Jn. 2:15-17). To share what one has with others is a core value of the new community of the kingdom of God (Lk. 3:11; 12:33; 18:22; Acts 2:35; 2 Cor. 9:2, 7, 11; Eph. 4:28). The disciple of Jesus is called to a life of self-denial and servanthood, following the example set by the Lord himself (Mk. 8:34-35; 10:45; 1 Pet. 2:21).

Both Testaments teach that everything that exists belongs to the Lord and that anything anyone of us possesses is held in trust from the Lord. Thus, no followers of the Lord should regard anything they possess as their own. What we have is blessing from God, but It is not



ours to use in any way we desire. We are responsible for using whatever wealth we have for the Lord, particularly in the service of those who are in need. Our motivation for giving is gratitude, rather than to gain more. God has lavished his love upon us by his many gifts to us, the greatest of which is the life of his Son (Rom. 5:8; Eph. 1:7-8; 1 Jn. 3:1). Therefore, we find it natural to respond by sharing what he has given to us with others who have less of this world's goods than we have.

If our wealth comes from God, why is it that so many people, including many Christians, are poor? The bible suggests a variety of reasons. Some are poor because they are lazy (Prov. 10:4 *et passim*). But many others are poor because of circumstances totally outside of their control – because of injustice being done against them by people more powerful than themselves, because of war or famine, because of the death of the husband and father who is able to provide for his family. As it was in the Old Testament period and in the first century church, so it is today.

The Scriptures teach that it is the responsibility of those who have to share with those who have not, and thus to fulfil God's command to love our neighbour as ourselves.

The kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus and inaugurated by his healing mission, death, burial and resurrection has brought salvation to all who come to God through him; however, our experience of salvation is only begun in this life. Christians live between the ages – the age dominated by sin and rebellion and the age of the coming new world order that will be established at Christ's return. At the present time, we experience a foretaste of the age to come through the liberating power of the Holy Spirit, by signs and wonders, by the fruit of the Spirit, the experience of joy and the assurance of the hope that we have in Christ. Jesus' saving work has touched our lives and transformed them, and he, through us, reaches out to bring health, wholeness, and well-being to others; yet we must still resist the temptation to live selfishly and to invest our energies in matters of less importance, giving greater priority to spiritual matters. Hence the New Testament writers constantly urge believers to live in the light of the *eschaton*, the day when each and every one will experience full health, wealth and eternal prosperity (Mk 10:25-31; Col 3:1-4; Heb 12:1-2; 2 Pet 3:11-13; Rev 21:1-4).

### **A Search for Balance**

The Bible does not, unlike some other religious and philosophical traditions, denigrate the physical and material. Wealth is not per se a negative. Viewed and handled properly, it can be an instrument for great blessing. On the other hand, it should not be given too high a value. Wealth can become a substitute for God; it can become an idol. Therefore, the Lord Jesus

frequently warned his disciples concerning the dangers of riches (Mk 10:25; Lk 6:24; Mt. 6:4; 16:19-23 etc).

It is imperative that the church be taught a balanced perspective on wealth and prosperity. While there may have been times in the past history of the church where there was a danger of denigrating material things, that does not seem to be the present problem of the world Christian community. Rather, with the development of modern industrial and consumer capitalism, all too many Christians are obsessed with material things. Moderation is the true biblical perspective; 'Better is little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble with it' (Prov 15:16). 'Give me neither poverty nor riches..., or I shall be full and deny you..., or I shall be poor, and steal, and profane the name of my God' (Prov 30:7-9). 'Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that' (1 Tim. 6:6-8). Scripture teaches 'those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God' and 'to do good, be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share' (1 Tim. 6:17-18). Through the writings of Proverbs, scripture teaches the poor to learn the disciplines of careful planning, hard work, frugality, and honesty, so that they will 'have something to share with the needy' (Eph. 4:28).

### **Conclusion**

Wealth and prosperity can be a blessing from God, but they can also be Satan's temptation (Lk. 4:5-7). Wealth can be used in a manner that brings great glory to the Lord and great blessing to his people, or it can subtly supplant the place of the Lord in one's life. Jesus warns us that we cannot serve both God and Mammon (Wealth) (Mt. 6:24). This message is as urgent in our day as it was in the first century and must be heeded. In the model prayer (Mt. 7:11; Lk. 11:3), Jesus taught us to trust God for our daily bread, ie. the necessities of life rather than the luxuries. Moderation and sufficiency mark the lifestyle of the biblically sensitive Christian. Paul had learned the secret of being content with whatever he had, whatever circumstances came his way, even in prison (Phil. 4:11-14). In another passage, Paul reminds us of 'the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich' (2 Cor. 8:9).

Jesus thus provides the Christian with a model of sacrificial and truly altruistic love (*agape*). Whatever wealth an individual Christian or a Christian community has provides an opportunity for *koinonia*, for sharing. All the world's wealth belongs to the Lord. And if God's people could learn to be content with what is sufficient for a full and healthy life rather than

the excesses that mark the overly developed world, there would be more than enough to go around. The earth is rich enough to support all those who are alive today and who will be born in the near future at a level of sufficiency but not at the level of prosperity and affluence presently attained by only a few. Both the creation ethic of the Old Testament and the kingdom ethic announced by Jesus call those who would be true worshippers of the living God to take steps to see that the basic needs of all are met. As God blessed Abraham so that he could make him a blessing to the nations (Gen 12:2), so God has blessed rich Christians to make them a blessing to others.

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