

Word-Faith Movement

(Positive Confession Movement)

History, Beliefs, and Practices

Identity: A movement (not a denomination as such) whose proponents teach that divine health and prosperity are the rights of every Christian who will apply enough faith to receive them. Popularized by television evangelists, the Word-Faith movement urges the appropriation of faith through the making of a “positive confession.” The movement is otherwise referred to as “Prosperity Gospel,” “Health and Wealth Gospel,” and “Name It and Claim It.”

Founder(s): The movement has no “founders” as such, though Essek William Kenyon (1867-1948) is often credited with laying the foundation for the Word-Faith movement. Identified as subscribing to Word-Faith teaching are personalities such as Paul and Jan Crouch (Trinity Broadcasting Network), David Yonggi Cho, Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, John Avazani, Joel Osteen, T. L. Osborne, Robert Tilton, Marilyn Hickey, Frederick Price, Benny Hinn, Oral Roberts, Jerry Savelle, Morris Cerullo, Casey Treat, Dwight Thompson, Rodney Howard-Browne, and Kenneth Hagin. Word-Faith ideas are featured and promulgated through television principally by the Trinity Broadcasting Network.

Statistics: No statistics on the number of followers is available.

History: The beginnings of the Word [of] Faith or Positive Confession Movement can be traced to the writings of the radio preacher and Methodist minister William Essek Kenyon (1867-1948). He wrote about fifteen books in which he “stressed the power of words spoken in faith and the supremacy of a so-called revelation knowledge over knowledge obtained by the senses: ‘A strong confession [of positive faith]...brings God on the scene...Faith counts the thing done before God has acted. That compels God’s action.’”¹ He attended Emerson College of Oratory in Boston, noted for its promotion of a New Thought metaphysic and Mind Science. Kenyon’s ideas directly influenced a number of preachers within the Pentecostal/charismatic movement in the 1960s. The movement grew rapidly in the 1970s, in large part through the promotion of Word-Faith preachers by the Trinity Broadcasting Network founded by Paul Crouch in 1973. Kenneth Hagin has been among the more well-known promoters of Word-Faith teachings. Oral Roberts has also been viewed as influenced by the movement. In recent years, names such as Joyce Meyer, T. D. Jakes, Creflo Dollar, Juanita Bynum, and Randy and Paula White have been associated with aspects of the Word-Faith Movement, and also publicly criticized for amassing enormous wealth through donations given by followers.² In 1974 Kenneth Hagin founded the RHEMA Bible Training Center in Tulsa, OK, to offer training programs that include Word-Faith teachings and practices.

Texts: The Bible; the writings and media resources of other TV evangelists

Beliefs and Practices:

Word-Faith preachers (especially the more extreme), it has been argued, have departed from fundamental teachings of the Christian Church and must be regarded as false teachers.³ Instances are cited where these preachers hold to views directly at odds with historic Christianity, such as

¹*Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 611.

²Bill Smith and Carolyn Tuft, “TV Evangelists Call Signals from the Same Playbook,” *St. Louis Post Dispatch* (November 19, 2003), A1, 12-13.

³See, for example, Hank Hanegraaff, *Christianity in Crisis* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1993); D. R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995).

the possibility of redeemed believers becoming “gods” equal in power to the earthly Jesus or that Jesus “died spiritually” when crucified and went to hell until he was “born again” in the resurrection.⁴ Space does not allow a full discussion of the wide range of views—often idiosyncratic—among Word-Faith promoters. Common to most Word-Faith or Positive Confession preachers are the following emphases:

- Faith is a force, released by words, by which one can create reality: “The force of faith is released or activated by words. Faith-filled words put the law of the Spirit of life into operation.”⁵
- The “force of faith” is activated by speaking or positively confessing what one desires and requests from God: “Your right confession will become a reality, and then you will get whatever you need from God.”⁶ Negative words create negative realities in one’s life.⁷
- God wills that every Christian have financial prosperity; in fact, it is a right to be claimed by the Christian (hence, “Name It and Claim It” is another term used for the movement). Poverty is not God’s will for Christians, but represents a Satan-defeated life.⁸
- God wills that every Christian have perfect health and experience complete healing: “God intends for every believer to live completely free from sickness and disease.”⁹ God has obligated Himself to heal every sickness for those who have faith. The promise to heal is part of Christ’s atonement. The failure to be healed is evidence of a lack of faith. To pray “thy will be done” is to destroy faith.¹⁰ In fact, when people die they bear some of the blame, because did not have enough faith.¹¹

A Lutheran Response

Lutherans understand the Scriptures to teach that faith in its essence is confidence or trust in the promises of God, most especially His promise to be gracious to us for the sake of Jesus Christ. In the words of the writer to the Hebrews, “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (English Standard Version). That is to say, faith is heartfelt trust in the Gospel of Christ, in which He gives grace and forgiveness, life and salvation, for Christ’s sake (things we do not literally see, but which we believe belong to us now) (Mark 1:15; 2 Cor. 1:20; Eph. 1:13; John 3:38, etc.). Faith is the instrument by

⁴See, e.g., Bruce Barron, *The Health and Wealth Gospel* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1987). *Dictionary of Christianity*, 427.

⁵ Kenneth Copeland, *The Force of Faith* (Ft. Worth: Kenneth Copeland Publications, 1983), 16. See also Copeland’s *The Laws of Prosperity* (Ft. Worth: Kenneth Copeland Publications, 1974), 18-19.

⁶Kenneth Hagin, *Right and Wrong Thinking for Christians* (Tulsa: Kenneth Hagin Ministries, 1966), 30. Charles Capps, in his *Dynamics of Faith and Confession* (Tulsa: Harrison House, 1987), writes: “God’s Word conceived in the heart, then formed with the tongue and spoken out of the mouth becomes a spiritual force releasing the ability of God” (33). Marilyn Hickey has said to an audience: “Say to your body, ‘You’re whole, body! Why, you just function so beautifully and so well. Why, body, you never have any problems. You’re a strong healthy body.’ Or speak to your leg, or speak at your foot, or speak to your neck, or speak to your back; and once you have spoken and believe that you have received, and don’t go back on it. Speak to your wife, speak to your circumstances; and speak faith to them to create them and God will create what you are speaking... What do you need? Start creating it. Start speaking about it. Start speaking it into being. Speak to your billfold. Say, ‘You big, thick billfold full of money. Speak to our checkbook. Say, ‘You, checkbook, you. You’ve never been so prosperous since I own you. You’re just jammed full of money.’” Quoted from an audio tape in Hank Hanegraaff, *Christianity in Crisis*, 63, 351.

⁷Kenneth Copeland, *The Power of the Tongue* (Fort Worth: KCP Publications, 1980), 20-23. See Jason Byassee, “The health and wealth gospel: Be happy,” *Christian Century* (July 12, 2005): 22-23.

⁸New Testament theologian Gordon Fee, in *The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels* (Beverly, Mass.: Frontline Publishing, 1985), describes this “prosperity gospel” in this way: “God wills the (financial) prosperity of every one of his children, and therefore for a Christian to be in poverty is to be outside of God’s intended will; it is to be living a Satan defeated life. And usually tucked away in this affirmation is a second: Because we are God’s children... we should always go first-class—we should have the biggest and the best, a Cadillac instead of a Volkswagen, because this alone brings glory to God...” (4).

⁹Kenneth Copeland, *Welcome to the Family* (Fort Worth: Kenneth Copeland Ministries, 1979), 25; quoted in Walther Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults*, ed. Hank Hanegraaff (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1997), 511.

¹⁰Benny Hinn, in his *Rise & Be Healed* (Orlando: Celebration Publishers, Inc., 1991), writes: “Ladies and gentlemen, saint of God, healing is the will of God for you. Never, ever, ever go to the Lord and say, ‘If it be thy will...’ Don’t allow such faith-destroying words to be spoken from your mouth. When you pray ‘if it be your will, Lord,’ faith is destroyed. Doubt will billow up and flood your being. Be on guard against words like this which will rob you of your faith and drag you down in despair. It is His will. Jesus said, ‘I will’” (37).

¹¹Martin, *Kingdom*, 513-14.

which we embrace Christ and His grace, a gift worked in us by the power of the Holy Spirit through His powerful Word of grace (Phil. 1:29; Eph. 2:8-9; John 6:28-29; Rom. 10:14-17). Word-Faith most often presents faith as an exercise or performance of human beings that *empowers God* to do what believers demand by their words.¹² Lutherans reject as unscriptural the teaching, either explicit or implied, that faith is in its essence a human work or quality that humans perform in order to cause God to provide what they need or desire.

Word-Faith teachers selectively and non-contextually use certain texts that they believe teach that God intends all His children to be rich in material possessions (e.g., 3 John 2; John 10:10). The New Testament teaches, however, that “one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions (Luke 12:15). St. Paul models great faith when he says: “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:11-13). Similarly, in Hebrews 11 some who were destitute are nevertheless held up as models of heroic faith.

Word-Faith teachers often use texts such as Gal. 3:13 and Isaiah 53:4-5 to argue that God promises healing to all believers as part of Christ’s redeeming or atoning work. Thus, the failure to be healed is regarded as a lack of faith in the fullness of Christ’s redemption. While Christ’s redemption frees us from the curse of the law (Gal. 3) and restores us to a right relationship with God, God has not promised *in this life* that we shall be free from all the consequences of the Fall into sin, including illness and other human suffering. In fact, God works through suffering to work His good purposes (Rom. 8:29-30; 2 Cor. 12:1-10), until that time when we shall be free from the bondage to corruption (Rom. 8:18-25).

For Further Reading

- Goff, James F. “The Faith That Claims.” *Christianity Today* (February 19, 1990): 18-21
- Fee, Gordon D. “The Disease of the Health & Wealth ‘Gospels’.” Beverly, MA: Frontline Publishing, 1985 (Reprinted, in part, in *SCP Newsletter* [Spring 1985]: 18-22).
- Hanegraaff, Hank. *Christianity in Crisis*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1993.
- Lochhaas, Philip. “The Theology of Positive Confession.” An evaluation available from the office of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (1983).
- Martin, Walter. *The Kingdom of the Cults*. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1997 Revised, Expanded and Updated Edition (pp. 494-516)

Links and Websites

- <http://www.watchman.org/profile/wordpro.htm>
- <http://www.equip.org/free/DP077.htm>
- <http://www.myfortress.org/WordofFaith.html>
- <http://www.mtio.com/articles/bissar51.htm>

¹² One Word-Faith preacher has claimed that Jesus told him, by revelation: “...if anybody, anywhere, will take these four steps or put these four principles [“Say it, Do it, Receive it, and Tell it.] into operation, he will always receive whatever he wants from Me or from God the Father.” Kenneth Hagin, *Zoe: The God-Kind of Life* (Tulsa, OK: Kenneth Hagin Ministries, Inc., 1989), 35-36, 41.