

Word-Faith Movement

By Robert M. Bowman, Jr.

Founder/Founding Date: Kenneth E. Hagin is considered the “father” of the movement by its advocates. E. W. Kenyon, whom many critics have identified as the origin of the movement’s theology, may be considered its “grandfather.” Hagin founded what is now called Kenneth Hagin Ministries in 1963 and moved its location to Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1966.

Organizations: The International Convention of Faith Ministries (organized 1979), a ministerial association based in Arlington, Texas, is the closest thing to a Word-Faith denomination, though not all Word-Faith ministers belong to it. Kenneth Hagin Ministries operates the movement’s primary school (RHEMA Bible Training Center) and one of its leading publishing houses (Faith Library Publications).

Official Publications: None. Hagin’s *The Word of Faith* and Kenneth Copeland’s *Believer’s Voice of Victory* are two prominent magazines. Word-Faith teachers accept the Bible as the Word of God.

Other Names: Word of Faith; Faith movement; positive confession; the “health and wealth” gospel; prosperity gospel (a term that applies to a broader range of teachers)

HISTORY

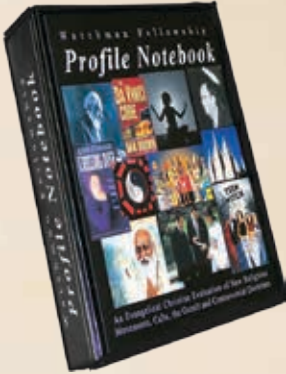
Much, though not all, of the distinctive theology of the Word-Faith movement is derived from the writings of E. W. Kenyon (1867-1948). Kenyon’s mentor was A. J. Gordon, a Boston-based Baptist pastor and “faith-cure” teacher through whom Kenyon became ordained in the early 1890s. Although Kenyon was also exposed to New Thought and Christian Science in Boston, the extent of the influence of these mind sciences (which are clearly heretical) is disputed even among Kenyon’s critics.¹ Kenyon, like modern Word-Faith teachers, regarded the mind sciences as demonic counterfeits of authentic supernatural Christianity. Over the years Kenyon became a popular evangelist, preaching, for example, in the churches of A. B. Simpson (a leading and radical advocate of the “faith-cure” message and the founder of the Christian & Missionary Alliance) and Aimee Semple McPherson (founder of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, a major Pentecostal denomination).

Kenyon’s lasting legacy has been felt largely through his influence on popular teachers of the “Latter-Rain” movement, a “healing” revival of the late 1940s and 1950s spearheaded by the heretical and highly controversial William Branham. One of the evangelists on the fringe of that movement was Kenneth E. Hagin (1917-2003). Hagin claimed to have been healed of heart trouble as a teenager, though reportedly he had recurring heart problems at various times throughout his life. For most of the 1940s he had served as pastor for several Assemblies of God churches, but in 1949 he launched his own itinerant evangelistic healing ministry. By 1950 Hagin had started reading Kenyon’s books and adopting some of Kenyon’s teachings as his own. In later years Hagin published articles and books heavily indebted to Kenyon, in several instances clearly plagiarizing from his books.²

The Word-Faith movement quickly grew in size and visibility, especially through the exposure provided by the Trinity Broadcasting Network, a TV network started by Paul Crouch in 1973. That same year Kenneth Copeland Ministries was founded; Copeland is widely regarded as the second most important teacher in the movement after Hagin.

Hagin passed away in 2003 after spending several days in a cardiac intensive-care unit, suggesting that heart troubles finally resulted in his death (albeit at an advanced age), and

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leaving his ministry under the leadership of his son, Kenneth Hagin Jr. The movement's most visible and influential teachers today emphasize prosperity and general well-being and deemphasize, though not deny, the movement's controversial theology. The new generation of Word-Faith teachers includes Joyce Meyer and Joel Osteen, both of whom (unlike Hagin or Copeland) are authors of bestselling books aggressively marketed to the general public.

DOCTRINES

What is presented here are the doctrines of the "full strength" Word-Faith teaching of Hagin and Copeland, with some references to the views of other teachers. Important biblical texts misinterpreted by Word-Faith teachers are also noted.

There are "anointed" apostles and prophets today: The church needs living apostles and prophets (cf. Eph. 4:11). Although they deny having the same authority as the canon of Scripture, such modern figures supposedly receive revelations, typically in the form of personal Bible studies with Jesus or the Holy Spirit. Hagin recounted several such personal tutorials in biblical instruction from Jesus in his book *I Believe in Visions*. Word-Faith teachers have often issued dire warnings against those who would criticize their "anointed" prophetic ministries. According to Hagin, a minister who "didn't accept the message" God had given Hagin "fell dead in the pulpit."³ Benny Hinn once claimed, "The day is coming when those that attack us will drop dead."⁴

God speaks words of faith with his mouth: Basic to Word-Faith doctrine is the idea that God created the world by *literally* speaking aloud words of faith (cf. Mark 11:22; Heb. 11:3). Thus, Hagin taught that "God created the world with words. Words filled with faith are the most powerful things in all the world."⁵ As Fred Price put it, "God believed in His heart that what He said with His mouth would come to pass, and He dared to say it."⁶ Consistent with this idea, many Word-Faith teachers, including Hagin, claim that God has a spirit body with a literal mouth with which to speak his words of faith.⁷ Copeland even offered a description of God's very human size, weight, and appearance—all taken quite literally.⁸

Human beings were created to be gods: According to the Word-Faith teachers, man is essentially a spirit being that possesses a soul and lives in a body (cf. 1 Thess. 5:23).⁹ They infer two important inferences from this doctrine. First, knowledge of God can come only through our spirits, not our minds or senses. Hagin asserted, "We don't understand the Bible with our mind, it is spiritually understood," and its truth "may even contradict human reasoning or physical evidence."¹⁰ Second, since both God and human beings are spirits, human beings were created in God's "class."¹¹ Hagin and other Word-Faith teachers have even said that Adam was originally created as "the god of this world,"¹² a position legally transferred to Satan when Adam sinned (cf. Gen. 1:26-27; Ps. 82:6; John 4:24; 2 Cor. 4:4). Man's original nature gave him a status that Hagin described as "equality with God."¹³ Notoriously, Copeland once said that Adam was "God manifested in the flesh."¹⁴

Jesus Christ is God incarnate—and so are we: Although Word-Faith teachers affirm that Jesus Christ was and is God, this affirmation is compromised by other elements of their teaching. Oddly enough, Hagin and other Word-Faith teachers deny that prayer may be addressed to Christ.¹⁵ Hagin, in a sentence plagiarized from E. W. Kenyon, wrote: "The believer is as much an incarnation as was Jesus of Nazareth."¹⁶ This is apparently what Copeland meant when he said, "When I read in the Bible where He says, 'I am,' I just smile and say, 'Yes, I am too.'"¹⁷ In a prophecy published in his magazine, Copeland quoted Jesus as saying: "Don't be disturbed when people accuse you of thinking you are God.... They crucified Me for claiming that I was God. But I didn't claim I was God; I just claimed I walked with Him and that He was in Me. Hallelujah. That's what you're doing."¹⁸ Copeland's point here is not that Jesus wasn't God, as he later explained, but that Jesus lived as a mere man in order to pave the way for us to live like he did.¹⁹ Indeed, according to Copeland, God told him that if he had known the Word of God as well as Jesus did that he—Copeland—could have done what Jesus did in defeating the devil.²⁰

Jesus died spiritually and was born again: The Word-Faith teachers maintain that Jesus died spiritually as well as physically. Jesus' spiritual death consisted on being separated from God (cf. Matt. 27:46), becoming sin (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21), and suffering in hell (cf. Acts 2:27, 31). Jesus was born again in hell and then rose from the dead (cf. Col. 1:18). Hagin put it this way:

“Why did He need to be begotten, or born? Because He became like we are, separated from God. Because He tasted spiritual death for every man. His spirit, His inner man, went to hell in our place.... Jesus is the first person ever to be born again.”²¹

We should speak words of faith like God does: Since words spoken in faith are inherently powerful (cf. Prov. 18:21), what we say, if we believe it, is basically what we get.²² This is a “spiritual law” that even works for non-Christians to some extent. Christians should have mountain-moving faith, like God has, the kind that calls things into existence, and have what they say (cf. Mark 11:22-23; Rom. 4:17). Faith claims to possess right now what it says (cf. “*Now faith is,*” Heb. 11:1) even if our senses tell us otherwise (2 Cor. 5:7). Word-Faith teachers urge Christians to “have faith in your faith.”²³

God wants us to be healthy and wealthy now: Word-Faith teachers maintain that because Christ by his atoning death has freed us from the curse of the Law (cf. Gal. 3:13), we are in principle now freed from all disease and poverty (cf. Deut. 28). They also argue that healing from disease or illness is assured in the atonement (cf. Is. 53:4-5; Matt. 8:16-17; 1 Pet. 2:24). One simply needs to “claim” the blessings of health and prosperity, just as one claims forgiveness of sins, because these are the rights of all Christian believers. Anyone who continues to be sick has simply not believed God’s word. Hagin asserted: “Jesus has already borne them [your diseases] and by His stripes ‘ye *were* healed.’ Get your believing in line with what God’s Word says.”²⁴ Hagin claimed that when he would feel a headache, he would say, “In the name of Jesus...I do not have a headache,” and the pain would go away.²⁵ Word-Faith teachers apply the same principle to matters of finance and prosperity. Joel Osteen, for example, credits his wife Victoria with “speaking words of faith and victory” that led to their eventually building themselves a large, elegant home.²⁶

CHRISTIAN/BIBLICAL RESPONSE

Modern revelations should be viewed with skepticism: Apostles and prophets, in the sense of men speaking authoritatively for Christ, were foundational offices (Eph. 2:20; 3:5) in the first generation of the church, in a separate category from evangelists, pastors, and teachers (Eph. 4:11). The latest New Testament writings urged believers to avoid false doctrine by remembering what the apostles *said*, not by listening to what new apostles might say (2 Pet. 2:1; 3:1-2; Jude 3-4, 17). Revelations at odds with Scripture are to be rejected (1 Thess. 5:19-22).

God does not need to speak “words of faith”: God does not have a body (1 Kings 8:27; John 4:24) except in the Incarnation (John 1:14-18). Anthropomorphic language in the Bible (describing him as having eyes, mouth, hands, feet, etc.) is figurative (e.g., Is. 40:12; 66:1). Biblically, God does not have “faith,” which is a confidence beyond what one can see. (God sees all and knows all from eternity past to eternity future.) God is the proper object of faith (Mark 11:22-24; Heb. 11:3-31), not the one who has faith. Nor does God need to speak audible words with a literal mouth to do anything. Biblical statements about God creating the world by or through his “word” mean that whenever God wants to do something he simply wills it to happen (e.g., Ps. 33:6-9).

Human beings were never gods and never will be gods: Man is not essentially a spirit, but is a material being (Gen. 3:19b; Is. 31:3; 1 Cor. 15:47-48) existing in a duality of body and soul or flesh and spirit (Matt. 10:28; Rom. 7:22-25; 2 Cor. 4:16; 7:1; on 1 Thess. 5:23, cf. Mark 12:30). Human beings were created in God’s image, not after God’s kind (Gen. 1:11-12, 21, 24-27). We are not and never will be gods (Isa. 43:10). Since Adam wasn’t god, he couldn’t transfer legal title to being god over to Satan. Rather, Satan is the rebel “god” of this age (2 Cor. 4:4). Psalm 82:6 in context is referring not to human beings as actual deities but to the unjust judges/rulers of Israel (v. 1) who failed to fulfill their God-given duties (vv. 2-5). That they were not true gods is proved by verse 7, which states that they were going to die like ordinary men. Jesus quoted Psalm 82:6 not to prove that all humans are gods but to contrast those wicked rulers with himself as the holy and true Son of God (John 10:34-36).

Jesus is uniquely God incarnate: Jesus Christ, God’s only divine Son, did what only God can do (John 1:14-18; 5:17-23). It is true that both the Father and the Spirit worked through Jesus (John 3:34; 14:10), but this is because all three persons of the Trinity are involved in *all*

of God's works. To say that anyone with enough knowledge of the Word of God could have done what Jesus did, then, is simply nonsense.

Jesus did not die spiritually and was not born again: When Jesus died physically, he lived spiritually and went immediately to the abode of the dead (Luke 23:43; 1 Pet. 3:18). By his physical death on the cross Jesus overcame Satan (Col. 2:15; Heb. 2:14). In his death Jesus did not become sin, but took upon himself the curse of our sin, suffering for our sin so that we might be blessed with his righteousness (2 Cor. 5:18-21). Jesus suffered the experience of God-forsakenness on our behalf (Matt. 27:46, citing Ps. 22:1), but he knew God was with him. Jesus rose from death to life, and as risen became the source of life in the new birth (Col. 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:3); but he was not "born again."

Faith means trusting in God for the future, not claiming rights for the present: The faith that "moves mountains" is a special spiritual gift (1 Cor. 12:8; 13:2), not the normal Christian experience. Faith is trust in God, not confidence in a spiritual law (Mark 11:22-24; John 14:1). Abraham believed *God*; it was God, not Abraham's faith, that produced Isaac (Rom. 4:17-23). Faith primarily trusts God for the future based on God's promises (as all of Hebrews 11 makes clear). "Now faith is" in Hebrews 11:1 just introduces a description of faith, not a statement about faith making claims for the present. Faith does not mean denying our senses (as a misreading of 2 Cor. 5:7 out of context might suggest) but trusting God for future redemption (2 Cor. 4:16-5:10). Our words cannot make things real (Prov. 14:23) except as we or others act on them (Prov. 18:21). God's word, unlike ours, always produces results (Is. 55:6-11). Indeed, what we "confess" may be false (Rev. 3:17).

Christ's redemption assures us of perfect health and wealth—in the resurrection: Freedom from the curse means spiritual blessings now (Gal. 3:13-16). The curses of Deut. 28 were extraordinary plagues and the like that God threatened to bring on Israel if it was unfaithful as a nation to the covenant. The passage is not, then, saying that believers should be free of all sickness. Christ's atonement *does* guarantee perfect health and well-being, but only in the resurrection of the body (Rom. 8:10-11, 23; 1 Cor. 15:42-45). God heals people today when and as he chooses as a foretaste of those future blessings (Matt. 8:16-17).

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Notes

- ¹ The case for a mind-science origin of the Word-Faith doctrine was made in D. R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel: A Historical and Biblical Analysis of the Modern Faith Movement* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1988; rev. ed., 1995). For the case for viewing Kenyon as an aberrant teacher originating from the evangelical faith-cure movement, see Robert M. Bowman, Jr., *The Word-Faith Controversy: Understanding the Health and Wealth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), esp. 23-84.
- ² McConnell, *Different Gospel*, 6-12.
- ³ Kenneth E. Hagin, *I Believe in Visions* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1978), 115.
- ⁴ Benny Hinn, "Miracle Invasion Rally," Anaheim Convention Center, 22 Nov. 1991.
- ⁵ Kenneth Hagin, *New Thresholds of Faith* (Tulsa: Kenneth Hagin Ministries, 1972), 76. All subsequently cited works by Hagin were published by Kenneth Hagin Ministries.
- ⁶ Frederick K.C. Price, *How Faith Works* (Tulsa: Harrison House, 1976), 93.
- ⁷ Hagin, *New Thresholds of Faith*, 30.
- ⁸ Copeland, "Spirit, Soul and Body," tape #01-0601 (Fort Worth: Kenneth Copeland Ministries, 1985). All subsequently cited works by Copeland were published by Kenneth Copeland Ministries.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 31, 32.

- ¹¹ Hagin, *Zoe: The God-Kind of Life* (1981), 3.
- ¹² Hagin, *New Thresholds of Faith*, 53-54.
- ¹³ Hagin, *Zoe: The God Kind of Life*, 35.
- ¹⁴ Copeland, "Following the Faith of Abraham," tape #01-3001 (1989).
- ¹⁵ Hagin, *Prayer Secrets* (n.d.), 3, 8.
- ¹⁶ Hagin, "The Incarnation," *The Word of Faith*, Dec. 1980, 14; E. W. Kenyon, *The Father and His Family: The Story of Man's Redemption* (Lynnwood, Wash.: Kenyon's Gospel Publishing Society, 1937), 118.
- ¹⁷ Kenneth Copeland, recorded on TBN, August 9, 1987.
- ¹⁸ Copeland, "Take Time to Pray," *Believer's Voice of Victory* (Feb. 1987), 9.
- ¹⁹ Copeland, "Question & Answer," *Believer's Voice of Victory* (Aug. 1988), 8.
- ²⁰ Copeland, "Substitution and Identification," tape #00-0202 (1989).
- ²¹ Hagin, *Name of Jesus* (1979), 29-30.
- ²² E.g., Hagin, "You Can Have What You Say!" (1979).
- ²³ Hagin, *Having Faith in Your Faith* (1980); Charles Capps, *How to Have Faith in Your Faith* (Tulsa: Harrison House, 1986).
- ²⁴ Hagin, *The Real Faith* (n.d.), 25.
- ²⁵ Hagin, *Name of Jesus*, 44.
- ²⁶ Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential* (New York: Warner Faith, 2004), 7.



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