

The Health and Wealth Gospel

One of the most questionable features of the charismatic movement may well be the "prosperity" or "faith message" proclaimed by proponents such as Kenneth and Gloria Copeland and Kenneth Hagin. The latter is of Baptist origin; Copeland is the product of Oral Roberts University and Hagin's influence. Historically the USA is viewed as the geographical home of the prosperity message. It emerged as one of the many religious expressions of basic American optimism about the inexhaustible potential of the New World; a place where all dreams and hopes are being realized and fulfilled.

I became acquainted with the teachings of Copeland while I was serving as a missionary in Negros Occidental, one of the poorest islands of the Philippines. The suffering of the poor was horrid. The exploitation by the rich was an appalling shame. The membership of our churches largely belonged to the massive culture of the poor. We have seen their toil, witnessed their hardships, tried to share their burdens, and saw their great faith in the Lord. And in those circumstances I read Gloria Copeland's *God's Will is Prosperity*. She assumes that physical disorder and discomfort are not ordinarily God's will for His children. God's will is financial prosperity, abundance and good health. The atonement of Christ includes provisions for health and wealth. He delivered us from our sin, poverty as well as sickness. Copeland makes this clear: "He (the Lord) made me realize that Jesus bore the curse of poverty at the same time He bore the curse of sickness. I already knew it, but I saw that I was not acting on it to the fullest. You can believe for divine prosperity just as you believe for divine health. Both blessings already belong to you. You should refuse lack just as quickly as you refuse sickness." Her favorite verse is: "And beware lest you say in your (mind and) heart, My power and the might of my hand have begotten me this wealth. But you shall (earnestly) remember the Lord your God; for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your father, as at this day" (Deuteronomy 8:17-18, Amplified Bible). On the basis of this text she claims that God made a covenant of prosperity. And you can only be in the covenant when you believe God's Word concerning prosperity. Of course prosperity does not come automatically. You must be spiritually ready to prosper.

Power Words

One of the foundational teachings of the "faith message" is the "Positive Confession" principle based on Mark 11:22-25, "You can have what you say." The emphasis is placed on the power of the spoken word. Copeland says, "Words are the bridge between the physical world and the spiritual world ... what you say ... is what you are going to get – even though you might desire something else."

The law of prosperity will only work when you are obedient to God's Word. Does this mean that you obey God only for gain? This teaching can certainly lead to this conclusion. What if you don't prosper? Are you then disobedient? Do you lack faith? Copeland says, "The answer to Why is always UNBELIEF. The Bible tells us WHY God's people are sick, broke, tormented by fear, oppressed, and WHY they die young.

'My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge' (Hosea 4:6)." Not all within the movement are of the same opinion. Some reject outright suffering and persecution in a believer's life, others don't. Copeland says, "Every believer who embraces suffering certainly makes Satan's job . . . much easier . . . If there is one false teaching in the Church that can defeat you permanently, it is that God is making you suffer in order to teach you." This view is not shared by Hagin, who does not reject the place of suffering and persecution. Copeland even rejects the need for medicine and a doctor. She writes, "To walk in divine health, you begin with a decision to no longer allow Satan to put sickness on you . . . I am just not willing to be sick. I am willing to be well! Jesus paid the price for me and I am taking advantage of it."

"Me First" Mentality

The health and wealth gospel has created further division within the already greatly divided charismatic movement. In an interview with *Christianity Today*, G. Raymond Carlson, general superintendent of the Assemblies of God, condemned the "name it/claim it" teaching as being "steeped in a very humanist, me first, materialistic kind of orientation rather than an orientation on Christ and him crucified." Ray Hughes, former head of the Church of God (Cleveland, Tenn.) commented that Pentecostalism has a special calling to avoid materialism: "Most of us classic Pentecostals came from the blue-collar, working-class group. And the thing that made Pentecostalism grow was that they took the gospel to the poor. We must never forget our roots, regardless of how the gospel has lifted us materially." This critique is well founded. And what of the poor Filipinos with whom we lived and worked? Was their faith not strong enough? Was their extreme poverty due to their disobedience to God? The have-nots are blamed for their own poverty by such likes as the Copelands.

The prosperity gospel is not only unbiblical but also downright dishonest. The Christian faith is rapidly spreading among the poor in Africa, Asia and South America but declining in North America and Europe. The poor have followed the Lord gladly. They choose for Him who had no place to lay His head. Habakkuk's question of why do the righteous suffer is not answered by the prosperity gospel. Neither is much attention given to the persecution of Christians, nor to the positive value of attending the school of suffering. Faith in the Lord has turned into a works/righteousness. The prosperity gospel proponents tend to think their faith gets the job done. If you believe hard enough God will honor your efforts. And there is also the subtle danger that faith is often measured in terms of results. Success, healing and wealth are primarily seen as a favor of God obtained by faith. North American Christians shy away from the positive benefits of suffering. But our faith is not vindicated by what we are given materially. We discover God's faithfulness and love in the midst of our pain. Some of the greatest saints of God have been those who deeply drank from the cup of suffering. Margaret Clarkson, whose whole life has been marked by intense physical suffering, wrote:

O Father, You are sovereign

In all affairs of man;
No powers of death or darkness
Can thwart Your perfect plan.
All chance and change
transcending,
Supreme in time and space,
You hold Your trusting children
Secure in Your embrace.

O Father, You are sovereign,
The Lord of human pain,
Transmuting earthly sorrow
To gold of heavenly gain,
All evil overruling,
As none but Conqueror could,
Your love pursues its purpose
Our souls' eternal good.

Not the prosperity gospel but the Gospel of sovereign grace will meet the needs of mankind.

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