

AN EXAMINATION OF THE WORD-FAITH MOVEMENT

by
Richard J. Vincent

"You don't have a god in you, you are one."(1)

"Pray to yourself, because I'm in your self and you're in Myself. We are one Spirit, saith the Lord."(2)

"I say this with all respect so that it don't upset you too bad, but I say it anyway. When I read in the Bible where he [Jesus] says, 'I Am,' I just smile and say, 'Yes, I Am, too!'"(3)

What group would say such outrageous things? What group would have the nerve to perpetuate such blasphemous doctrines? Could it be the Jehovah's Witnesses? the Mormons? the Unitarians? the New Agers? Could it be—the Christians?

The Word-Faith Teachers

The Word-Faith Teachers. This is the group that would seek to convince us that Jesus and His disciples were rich, that to be poor is a sin, to be sick is a sin, and that faith is a creative force that we can use to shape our world just like God supposedly created this world and universe that we live in through His "faith"!

Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, Paul Crouch, John Avanzini, Robert Tilton, Fred Price, and Benny Hinn (who at the time of this writing has authored the number one best selling Christian book in America, "Good Morning, Holy Spirit") are just a few that spew out this theological vomit.

A Sampling of Error

To name just a few of the more outrageous things that have been said by these so-called teachers will stagger the senses:

John Avanzini is convinced that "Jesus had a nice big house",⁽⁴⁾ "Jesus wore designer clothes",⁽⁵⁾ and "Jesus was handling big money".⁽⁶⁾

Fred Price also claims that Jesus was rich and that He left us with an example to follow. That is why Fred drives a Rolls Royce; he is following Jesus' example!

Mr. Price also communicates one of the more sickening beliefs of the Word-Faith teachers which shocks even those with a mild amount of common sense. He says, "How can you glorify God in your body, when it doesn't function right?...What makes you think the Holy Ghost wants to live inside of a body where He can't see out through the windows, and He can't hear out the ears?"⁽⁷⁾ This insulting and insensitive comment regarding the handicapped and crippled among us stirs up anger in even the most hardened of consciences. Yet this statement by Mr. Price is followed by exuberant applause and approval from his congregation (I would like to hear Mr. Price say this to Joni

Eareckson, or Tony Melendez).

These kind of statements boggle our minds and stagger our senses. It would seem that most people would see the error in these teachings, yet millions follow these men with a militant passion.

The Tip of the Iceberg

If this was as far as the teaching of these men went, if their only error was that they think everyone should be wealthy and healthy, then we could maybe shrug this movement off as a novelty and realize that soon people with an ounce of common sense will see the error in these teachings. Unfortunately, these teachings are but the tip of the iceberg. They are but the rotten fruit of a foul, putrid, blasphemous and heretical root. The erroneous actions of the faith teachers is but the symptom of their twisted and diseased teachings concerning the nature of man and the nature of God. I think you will see, after examining what they believe in these two key areas, that we are not dealing with a Christian sect gone awry, but that we are dealing with a non-Christian heretical group that is as deadly in their doctrine as any major cult.

The Error Begins

Who is God to the faith teachers? Kenneth Copeland will tell you first off that "God is the biggest failure in the Bible...the reason you've never thought that is because He never said He was one".(8)

Copeland also teaches us that "God is a being that stands somewhere around 6'2", 6'3", (9) intimating that God has a body, an error subscribed to by the Mormons. Copeland states, without any biblical warrant, that the earth we live on is a "copy of the mother planet" (10) which God lives on, again imitating a Mormon doctrine. Never mind that the Bible plainly states that God is spirit (John 4:24), never mind that the Bible never says a thing about this earth being a copy of any so-called mother planet. Yet these arguments don't work with the faith teachers because they have supposedly received these teachings by direct revelation from God. Therefore to oppose them is to oppose God. These men have lifted themselves above any critical investigation yet they have forgotten the biblical mandate that anything not in accord with the Word of God must be rejected. We will examine shortly their reactions to any kind of criticism.

After the faith teachers have thoroughly belittled God to slightly more than an exalted man, they then proceed to exalt man to the status of God. Adam, to the faith teachers, was an exact duplicate of God. Copeland teaches, "Gods reason for creating Adam was His desire to reproduce Himself. I mean a reproduction of Himself. He [Adam] was not a little like God, he was not almost like God, He was not subordinate to God even".(11) Copeland even states that "Adam is God manifested in the flesh", (12) a title that can only be truly applied to Christ Jesus alone.

The perceptive man can easily see that the problem here is a confusion about what it means to be made in the image of God. The faith teachers claim that being made in the image of God is synonymous to having the nature of God. To be made in the image of God is to be a "little god" they would admit. Yet is that what the church has commonly taught. The overwhelming consensus of the church has been that man is created in the image of God in the sense that he is a person as God is a person, possessing mind, will, and emotions, that he is reasonable, unique among creation, a ruler over creation, and capable of personal fellowship with God. We bear the image of God, but we do not share His nature or substance or make-up. We are not omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, or infinite. God is the only being that is holy in and of Himself (Rev. 15:4). We are made in His image and have dignity because of that, but we are not an exact duplicate of God in any sense of the word.

That status is reserved for the Lord Jesus Christ alone (see Col 2:8, Heb. 1:3, 2 Cor. 4:4).

The Error Grows

Beginning with this foul root of error, the faith teachers proceed into more putrefying departures from the Christian faith. The faith teachers claim that when Adam fell in the garden he forfeited the nature of God and took on the nature of Satan. This error is but a link in the chain that connects the faith teachers exalting of man and belittling of God. You see, salvation for the faith teachers is not the removal of sin through the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. Salvation for the faith teachers is not the forgiveness of sins and the restoring of a right relationship between God and man. Salvation for the faith teachers is instead the removal of the nature of Satan from man and the restoring of the nature of God in man.

How is the restoring of the nature of God in man to come about? The answer that the faith teachers give is that Jesus had to take on the nature of Satan on the cross. In fact, the whole sacrifice of Christ on the cross takes on a completely different emphasis and meaning for the faith teachers.

You see, it is not enough that Christ died physically in the theology of the Word-Faith teachers. In order to take away our Satanic nature and restore our God nature, Jesus Christ had to die spiritually as well as physically. He then had to descend to hell. Then while in hell he was born again and through His act of being born again He conquered the devil.

The Error Examined

You must follow the steps of this error very carefully for it is but the doorway into the single most blasphemous and heretical teaching of the Word-Faith teachers.

1) On the cross Jesus took upon Himself the nature of Satan. The Bible says that Jesus is God the Son, God manifest in the flesh. Jesus therefore possesses the attributes of deity such as omnipotence, omniscience, eternalness, immutability, etc. Though in His incarnation, He chose not to exercise all of His attributes, He still retained them. One of God's attributes which Jesus shares is His immutability. This means that God is unchangeable in His person. Although He acts in time, and establishes and changes relationships in time, His essence, which includes His perfect and holy attributes, never changes. God does not change (Mal. 3:6) and neither does Jesus. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb 13:8). But the faith-teachers begin their error by claiming that the Holy, undefiled, unchangeable Son of God became evil to the core taking upon Himself the nature of Satan. Blasphemy! Our holy God does not become unholy.

2) Jesus died spiritually. Again the unchanging God-man did not die spiritually, but physically. 1 Pet. 3:18 states that Jesus was put to death in the flesh but made alive in the Spirit. Jesus did not need to die spiritually as well as physically to gain our salvation. The offering of His body was enough. Colossians 1:13 states "He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death"; Hebrews 13:12, "therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood"; Hebrews 10:10, "We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ". Was Jesus lying when He cried upon the cross, "It is finished" (John 19:30)? Was there yet more to be done to secure our salvation? That comforting cry from the lips of our blessed Lord can be nothing but true and our salvation was completely bought and paid for at this most climactic moment of all of history!

3) Jesus descended into hell a mortal man. Seeing that there is no need for Christ to have done any more to procure our salvation then what had already been accomplished, this point becomes nothing

more than an embellishment to the truth. Jesus Christ did not suffer in hell. He descended to Hades, to the abode of the dead. There was no need for Him to do anymore for our salvation. Satan had already been defeated and conquered (Col 2:14-15). Also, Jesus was not, nor ever will be, a mere mortal human being. To be a mere mortal, He would have to stop being God, and that is one thing that is against God's nature and attributes.

4) Jesus was born again. Jesus had no need to be born again. Jesus was not a lost and hell-bound sinner who needed regeneration. He was the Almighty, Eternal, and Holy Son of God. The faith teachers will drag Jesus to the lowest depths in order that their teaching will have at least a hint of logic. This idea that Jesus was born again is the crucial link for the faith teachers that enables them to cry out at the end of their wicked formula for salvation, "I am a little god". Observe.

5) Jesus defeated the devil by being born again. We now have Jesus, a mere mortal man, suffering in hell. Jesus then decides to be born again. He defeats the devil and becomes the first-born among many brethren. Now here is where the Scripture twisting really becomes ludicrous. Copeland states that nowhere in the Bible after the book of Acts is Jesus called the unique and only begotten Son of God. He then twists Romans 8:29 to mean that Jesus is the first born again man. This first reborn man, Jesus, has set the pattern for a new race to come. And according to the Faith Teachers, we are that new race to come. We are equal to Jesus for we are born again just as He was. Do you see what has happened here? The faith teachers have so suppressed the deity of Jesus that they have, in essence, denied it. Copeland goes the farthest in this revelation He supposedly received from Jesus, "Don't be disturbed when people accuse you of thinking you're God. The more you get to be like Me, the more they're going to think that way of you. 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."(13)

The Jesus of the faith teachers has so little in common with the Jesus of the Bible that it is clear to anyone with a grain of discernment that the Jesus of the faith teachers is not the Jesus of the Bible but instead is the kind of religious decoy that Paul warned us to be on the lookout for. "But I am afraid, lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you put up with it easily enough" (2 Cor. 11:3-4). And we are putting up with it. We are taking this so calmly. Another Jesus, another gospel, another spirit is mocking the true Jesus, the true gospel, and the true Spirit and we are so tolerant of it that we allow it on our TV set and call it Christian!?

The Fruit Of The Error

Why is it so important for the Faith-Teachers to ignore such explicit passages as "It is finished," etc? Why must they have Jesus dying spiritually as well as physically, entering hell as a mortal man capable of failure, and being born again to defeat the devil? The reason is that the faith teachers have a diminished view of Jesus. When Jesus is downplayed as nothing more than an anointed man, it brings the faith teachers up to the level of Jesus. In fact, both Kenneth Copeland and Fred Price have publicly stated that if it was just the physical death of Jesus on the cross that saves us then anyone could have done it. Kenneth Copeland says, "And the whole New Testament calls Him the first-born....The word "born" began to ring in my spirit; it just began to roll around: born, born. I never had let Him go through that in my own thinking....And while I was laying there thinking about these things, the Spirit of God spoke to me. And He said, "Son, realize this: Now follow Me in this, don't let your tradition trip you up." He said, "Think this way: A twice-born man whipped Satan in his own domain." And I threw my Bible down. I said, "What?" He said, "A born-again man defeated Satan. The first-born of many brethren defeated him." He said, "You are the very image and the very

copy of that one." I said, "Goodness gracious, sakes alive!" And I began to see what had gone on in there, and I said, "You don't mean--you couldn't dare mean, that I could have done the same thing?" He said, "Oh, yeah, if you'd had the knowledge of the Word of God that He did, you could have done the same thing, 'cause you're a reborn man, too.'"(14) No mention is made of the sinlessness of Christ. No reverence is shown toward the unique virgin birth of Christ. See the depths to which the Word-Faith teachers have desecrated our Lord. Jesus Christ could pay for our sins because He was sinless, being uniquely born of a virgin, and thus not sharing in the sin nature of Adam and his descendants, a fact to which neither Copeland nor anyone can likewise boast of.

The sickening outcome of this wickedness is that the Gospel message is no more "Turn to the cross of Jesus, ye wretched sinners, and plead for God's forgiveness. Find rest for your sin and guilt beneath the blessed cross of the great and mighty Savior." Instead the faith Teacher's gospel message is, "You shall be like God"! The original lie of the devil is now the gospel message and is broadcast around the world for all to hear! He must be pleased! And the end result is the blasphemous cries of those who subscribe to this wickedness. Kenneth Hagin: "You are as much the incarnation of God as Jesus Christ was...the believer is as much an incarnation as was Jesus of Nazareth".(15) Benny Hinn: "Are you ready for some real revelation knowledge....you are god"(16) "You are a little god on earth running around".(17) Kenneth Copeland: "I say this with all respect so that it don't upset you too bad, but I say it anyway, when I read in the Bible where he [Jesus] says, 'I Am,' I just smile and say, 'Yes, I Am, too!'"(18) "You don't have a god in you, you are one."(19) Paul Crouch: "Do you know what else that's settled then tonight? This hue and cry and controversy that has been spawned by the devil to try to bring dissension within the body of Christ that we are gods. I am a little god. I have His name. I am one with Him. I'm in covenant relation. I am a little god. Critics be gone!"(20)

A Time For Action

Am I just theologically splitting hairs here? If this were a matter of when and how to baptize, or how many times a year should the Lord's Supper be observed, or whether the rapture was post, mid, or pre-trib, then I could rightfully be accused of that. Yet this is not a minor issue. At stake here is the very character of our God and Savior Jesus Christ and the great salvation that He has given us. If you have the wrong Jesus, you have the wrong salvation and it should be clear from the evidence presented above that the Jesus of the Word-Faith movement is a far cry from the Jesus of the Bible!

When Shirley MacClaine chants over and over on national TV , "I am God, I am God!" we evangelicals go into an uproar. Yet when those who claim to be in our own ranks say, "I am a little god", we don't even flinch, but rather applaud them and their supposed evangelical efforts. Michael Horton has rightly written, "It must cause our heavenly Father much grief that we would consider unity more important than the One in whom we are united. It must quench the Spirit to see Christians treating blasphemies, heresies, and scandalous statements as though they were no more than odd "emphases."

The simple fact is that it is not the ones that are zealous for sound doctrine and orthodoxy who are the divisive ones. The Word-Faith teachers are the ones who are guilty of being divisive. They are fully aware that what they are teaching is relatively new. They constantly ask us to put away our traditions and forget our creeds. Benny Hinn says to an audience, "Are you ready for some real revelation knowledge?" then proceeds to inform them "you are god".(21) Hinn also, after teaching his audience that God consists of nine distinct substances, boasts "You think you're in this church to hear things you've heard for the last 50 years?".(22)

The Word-Faith teachers expect everyone to accept their authority and teachings without criticism or testing. Whenever anyone challenges their teachings they promote division instead of discussion. Before his death, Dr. Walter Martin sought to dialogue with Kenneth Copeland over his teachings,

yet Copeland refused to meet with Martin. Fred Price has publicly stated that he will not meet with a critic unless he has as many followers as him. Last Spring, the Christian Research Institute, a very reputable and trustworthy counter-cult and apologetic ministry, devoted a week of radio programs to exposing the errors of the Word-Faith movement. Immediately after the shows were aired, Paul Crouch had this to say about CRI during his televised "Praise-a-thon" program amid shouts of "amen" and "you tell 'em brother" from the studio audience:

"I think God's given up on a lot of that old rotten Sanhedrin religious crowd, twice dead, plucked up by the roots. I think they're damned and on their way to hell and I don't think there's any redemption for them...the heresy hunters that want to find a little mote of illegal doctrine in some Christian's eye and pluck that little mote out of their eye when they've got the whole forest in their own lives and in their own eyes. I say to hell with you! Oh hallelujah. Get out of God's way, quit blocking God's bridges or God's gonna shoot you if I don't! I refuse to argue any longer with any of you out there. Don't even call me. If you want to argue doctrine, if you want to straighten out somebody over here, if you want to criticize Ken Copeland for his preaching on faith, or Dad Hagin. Get out of my life! I don't even want to talk to you or hear you. I don't want to see your ugly face! Get out of my face in Jesus' name."(23)

Notice that there is no desire to dialogue about the issues. Notice that Paul Crouch doesn't explain why they believe what they believe and subsequently why CRI was in error for presenting the programs. All that Paul does is attack the people, he does not give an account for the hope that is in him. The Faith teachers erroneous and blasphemous teachings are what are promoting division. It is not those who criticize them and seek to dialogue with them in a reasonable matter that are to blame. It is the childish and unresponsive Word-Faith teachers that are to blame.

But you say, what about the good they do? Dear friend, no one gets everything wrong! Even the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Mormons, the New Age, etc. get a few things right every once in while. But isn't that the substance of deception? The skin of the truth stuffed with a lie. An appearance of righteousness yet inside rottenness and dead man's bones. No, the evil propagated by these teachers so outweighs the good that we must reject them entirely. A little leaven leavens the whole lump.

I, for one, am embarrassed by the Word-Faith teachers and I am ashamed to be represented by them. These men represent Christianity to millions. They present a false picture of what it means to be a Christian and I think it is abhorrent. Michael Horton has rightly asked, "Do those who occasionally view televangelistic programming know that evangelical Christianity offers an intelligent interpretation of and hope for human existence? Does the average unbeliever come away from an ordinary telecast with a better grasp of the substance of the Christian faith?" The Word-Faith teachers and Trinity Broadcasting Network on the whole defeat their very purpose. They seek to evangelize but they are only preaching to the choir. The vast majority of people who watch already claim to be Christian, and the occasional non-believer that tunes in is quick to see the unreality presented and the apparent con-game that is going on. And to make matters worse, the sparse amount of teaching that is usually presented to the Christian is of the lethal type that we have been discussing and instead of strengthening the body of Christ, it poisons it.

What should we do? I see at least three things that can be done and they are not minor operations. When a cancer is first recognized in a body, the procedure to remove it is quick, easy, and relatively painless if the cancer has been caught in its early stages. But when a cancer has gone unnoticed for years and has been allowed to nurture and infiltrate an entire body, then the procedure to remove it will be much more complicated, slow, and painful. The Word-Faith teaching is a spiritual cancer that has infiltrated the church to its very marrow. We must take action now and it will not be pleasant.

First, the most obvious thing to do is to not support any of these ministries monetarily. Don't watch any of the Word-Faith teachers programs and encourage and warn others to do the same. Don't buy

their books. If your local Christian bookstore carries their material let them know that you will not frequent their stores if they continue to carry this spiritual cancer.

Second, take a stand for Jesus! Why won't the church take a stand? I have asked myself that question over and over. Are we afraid to attack evil in the supposed name of unity? Is it that we are so far gone that we don't figure that it matters what you believe as long as you "love Jesus"? If so, let's quit calling other religions false and accept the cults into our fold. Let's bring in the Jehovah's Witnesses who love their Jesus (even though to them he is the archangel Michael, the first and greatest created being). Let's bring in the Mormons, and the Unitarians, etc. Let's say good-bye to the creeds and sound doctrine. Let's forget the stern warnings of the Apostle Paul to beware of false teachers and false doctrine which spreads like gangrene. Let's all just "love Jesus" (whoever that Jesus might be to us)? NO! We cannot forget the creeds, we will not abandon truth. We must obey our Lord when He tells us to "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits" (Mat. 7:15-16). The fruit of the Word-Faith teachers is none other than the fruit that the devil deceived our ancient mother Eve with. It is still as deadly and still as putrid in God's sight as it was then. The Word-Faith teachers and their movement must be actively opposed and rejected as non-Christian! Who will stand for Christ?

Third, this would not have come about if more Christians knew their Bible and what it taught. This would not have come about if more Christians knew what the Bible has to say about the nature of man, the nature of God, the doctrine of the trinity, etc. It is time to return to teaching sound doctrine so that the common Christian man can be armed against error. It is time to study the great foundational doctrines of our faith so that we won't be deceived by religious charlatans. Doctrine is not just for theologians. Words like propitiation, sanctification, justification, trinity, incarnation, predestination, redemption, etc. are not just useless theological words but are the very foundations of the faith.

It's time to use our minds again. It's time to quit being so emotional, mystical, and man-centered in our doctrine. It's time that Christians took some in-depth journeys into the wonder of the Holy Scriptures to find out about truth and reality. Christianity is truth, and as Art Lindsley has rightly stated, "There is nothing that produces emotion like the truth". Do you want a vibrant growing faith? Search the Scriptures. Do you seek truth, real truth? The kind of truth that infiltrates every area of your life with purpose and meaning and joy! You won't find it on a TV station. You'll find it when you spend time alone in an attitude of worship and prayer with an open Bible and the very God of the Universe teaching you and loving you through His blessed Holy Spirit applying His most Holy word directly to your life. Theology is not always entertaining but it is always enriching. It is a lot easier to turn on that TV and turn off your mind but you'll be at a loss because of it, and you will miss out on one of the most wonderful blessings of life: communion with the Living Lord.

Conclusion

Stated most simply, the error of the faith movement is that they exalt man and decrease God. They exalt man to God status and reduce God to man's status. They are aware that what they are teaching is unorthodox and controversial to say the least, yet they have no wish to change their tune. They refuse to be accountable to anyone.

No man is an island unto himself. These men who are spokesmen for the Christian faith to the public and represent the Lord Jesus to millions through their television programs are preaching a different Jesus, a different gospel, and a different spirit than what is revealed to us in Holy Scripture.

The Apostle Paul has some strong words for these men and with them I close. I pray we will take them to heart and that the Spirit that so moved Paul to action against false teachings will move

within us to produce in us a holy zeal for truth!

"I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed." (Gal. 1:6-9)

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