

The 'Faith' Churches

An Overview of the Issues

Introduction*

For most of us, the WoF movement is represented by the teachings of Kenneth Hagin and Kenneth and Gloria Copeland. In addition, there has been a rumbling argument about the extent to which E W Kenyon can actually be viewed as the father of the movement, rather than Hagin. Others have also been influential and represent the loose fellowship which we cover with the term WoF. There is no single apostolic association, but rather a group of 'fellow travellers' who acknowledge one another and are happy to be associated on platforms together.

Prosperity teaching in the UK has not been very influential until recently. Perriman has a useful overview:

'The Word of Faith movement in America draws on powerful spiritual and philosophical currents that reach back into the nineteenth century. British religious sensibilities since the Second World War are the product of an entirely different social narrative. American culture is idealistic and aspirational, intolerant of weakness and failure. British culture, by contrast, tends to be suspicious of idealism, intolerant of the hypocrisy and pretension that so often accompany ambition, wary of the methods of the motivation industry, more focused on how things are than on how they might be, more willing to accept weakness and failure. A predisposition towards irony habitually pricks the bubble of any complacent attempt to think positively. A much stronger sense of individual responsibility for one's circumstances has made Americans more inclined to see personal wealth as a sign of divine approval. Lacking the traditional British embarrassment about money, Americans are more likely to see wealth as something to be invested and exploited. Americans are also more nationalistic than the British and are more likely to recognize themselves in the mirror of Old Testament religion.'¹

So prosperity teaching in the UK context has been relatively peripheral until recent years. The success of the black churches influenced by WoF teaching, especially Matthew Ashimolowo's in London, and the support of Kensington Temple for Maurice Cerullo and Rodney Howard-Browne have brought it more to the forefront.

The rapid growth of black churches has provided a much more receptive audience for prosperity teaching. No doubt its popularity can be attributed to many of the same cultural and sociological factors that have accounted for the success of the movement in Africa. I note in regard to this, that a recent (Dec 03) report in the Times quoted a figure

*Throughout this paper I shall use the shorthand WoF for the 'Word of Faith' movement.

of 51% for the proportion of London church-goers who are black.

But perhaps the most worrying development for main line evangelicalism has been the increasingly powerful influence of Christian television which is dominated by WoF teachers and programmes. Increasingly, susceptible church members have been drawing their outlook and subliminal theology from watching these channels. Indeed some spend many hours a week absorbing this material, including, it has to be said, many in our own ranks.

The danger for the theological and teaching authority of the local church is only too self-evident, and stories of members 'proselytising' on behalf of these programmes, bringing videos for distribution to friends at church, and the resulting tensions with the leadership, are becoming increasingly common.

One further preliminary thought - given the increasing success of Muslim evangelism and conversion rates, who is to say that the relatively aggressive WoF approach is not a God-induced response from a people whose Jesus said he is the only way to the Father? How intimidated are we by the aggressive evangelism of the Muslim population? At least now big mosques are being counter-balanced by big churches in some parts of London, for instance.

The questions we face

(i) The concerns

(a) Do we think that the WoF movement teaches authentic Christian doctrine?

(b) There is a suspicion that at least the application of doctrine in practice, if not the doctrines themselves, may have been subverted by a distinctly American political and cultural agenda rather than a biblical one. These doctrines and practice also chime in with cultural conditions in Africa, Russia and Ukraine at least.

(ii) The challenges

(a) On the first count, we, too, must identify what is biblical rather than the sum of our traditions and even our charismatic history.

(b) On the second, one of our goals is to re-apply the universal biblical culture of Christian living. If it is applicable at all times and in all places, it may require us to absorb an implied critique of our British Christian outlook that this American based movement uncomfortably provides.

The Crucial Areas

In order to grapple with the mass of material, there is a need to focus on the most important areas of concern. To help us, we can identify an informal framework which forms a background to their teaching.

The principle planks

(i) The substance of it is their view of the effect of salvation. Their principle plank is that, as we are reborn, we are restored to the position of the first Adam. In a sense we truly start again, but in conditions equivalent to those of Eden where we were (i) in close and direct communion with God and (ii) lived with rule and authority over all prelapsarian creation. The role of the Holy Spirit is now, crudely put, to fulfil these functions in us if we will grasp them.

(ii) Secondly, we grasp them by active faith. This is where we find the catch phrase ‘name it and claim it’ as a shorthand for what they actually view as God’s principles: name the promise from Scripture, believe it as His promise for you today, speak it out in verbal confession and behave in your life as if it is a present reality. God’s promises bind Him, by His own character, to their fulfilment, and, therefore, He will not fail to deliver. They are, in a way, His laws of life.

This gives us broadly two areas to look at – theology and practice. Obviously there is overlap and we will want to critique both in terms of the Word as well as in terms of practice. In order to shape something manageable in this seminar, we will look at these two areas under two headings.

The first heading is that of the key issues for us where we would want to challenge the WoF movement in terms of its theology and practice. The second heading covers the challenges we need to consider and be receptive to which come to us from the movement. That gives us a structure for the rest of the paper:

Key issues:

- (i) Soteriology
- (ii) The Christian life
- (iii) Health and wealth

Key challenges:

- (i) Predisposition to failure?
- (ii) Products of cynicism?

The following pages will follow this outline.

Key Issues

Soteriology

1. Who was Adam?

Adam is perceived as being so completely in the image of God that he is

- (i) 'a spirit, possessing a soul and living in a body'²
- (ii) 'the god of this world'³ This, of course, is only reinforced by the command to rule and subdue in Gen 1²⁶. This issue of rule is important for the way in which the WoF movement views the process of the Christian life today, where the restoration of such a rule is the keystone of the objective of a life of faith.

The fall entailed a transfer of nature from God to Satan. Henceforth mankind was ruled by Satan to whom he had ceded his God-given authority to be 'god of this world'. Copeland says: 'man takes on the nature of his spiritual father or lord' and thus takes on 'the nature of Satan'⁴.

The outcome is that Satan succeeds in becoming the 'ruler' and authority in the earth, through mankind's subservience. The logical extension of this outlook from Gen 1 is to view Adam as essentially of the same spirit and substance as Jesus. Copeland says 'Adam, in the Garden of Eden, was God manifest in the flesh'⁵. Heresy? If so, what exactly do we mean by the prelapsarian image of God, then?

What is clear, however, is that WoF teaching seems to err in its view of the prevailing spiritual authority structure on the earth. Their view of the fall, with man absorbing the nature of Satan and of God 'absenting' himself in some way, gives Satan substantial authority and power over the nature of man.

We would want to maintain, however, that God is always sovereign. Indeed, the story of the fall makes only too clear that it is God himself who defines the parameters of the fall in Gen 3 and continues to be involved with mankind from Cain in Gen 4 onwards. Satan is certainly described as the ruler of this world (John 12³¹) and the spirit now at work in those who are disobedient (Eph 2²), to take but two examples, but he cannot usurp God's own ultimate authority over nations or individuals. The OT is full of examples from Job to Cyrus and Jonah to Malachi. Even if we postulate that some sort of progressive re-engagement was part of the OT narrative, its beginnings certainly predated the covenant with Abraham (although we acknowledge the centrality of that covenant for the people of God), and must surely end with the incarnation. Jesus himself proclaims that 'now the prince of this world will be driven out' (John 12³¹).

However, for WoF preachers, what it does do is give a rationale for a world view that attributes sickness and adverse circumstances to the activity of demons. They are the ones to whom man has, after all, ceded dominion. It is the activation of faith therefore which overcomes the evil one's attempts to maintain a falsely based authority and captivity.

2. Who was Jesus?

There is an acknowledgement that he was indeed the Son of God, but that he functioned whilst on earth as a human. This is used as supreme encouragement for us, his disciples, in that we are able to be more emulative of him and the way he lived a life of faith than perhaps we had realised.

Their ‘downgrading’ of Jesus’ functional abilities may not, in practice, be as severe as we might suppose, given their ‘upgraded’ view of Adam. The corollary is that, when Jesus comes, he comes as the second Adam in a very real way. He is seen as the equivalent of Adam – the incarnate Son of God was simply a ‘carbon copy of the one who walked through the Garden of Eden’⁶.

To support this, there is an emphasis on Phil 2⁷ which is crucial for the construct. The view is that when Jesus came to earth he divested himself of all the attributes of God which were not seen in the first man Adam. In Copeland’s words:

‘Why didn’t Jesus openly proclaim Himself as God during His 33 years on earth? For one single reason. He hadn’t come to earth as God, He’d come to earth as man.’⁷

This doctrine is known as the kenotic theory of the incarnation, and has been behind much of the liberal theologian’s ‘quest for the historic Jesus’.

This leads us clearly into the heart of what the movement means when it is seeking to encourage people to live by faith in the Word of God. That is precisely what Jesus did when he was on earth, and that is all He did. He was a man who simply did what he heard God saying. The reason Jesus was able to operate in such power was because he simply spoke the Word of God into situations.

But what is the meaning of Phil 2⁶⁻⁸? Most evangelicals would intuitively start with the credal statements – fully God and fully man, two natures in one person - rather than with this scripture. The context is Paul’s attempt challenge selfish and self-exalting attitudes in his readers. He contrasts Jesus who didn’t grasp, but ‘emptied himself’ of those attitudes. The WoF teaching seems to say that he emptied himself of the *attributes* of being God, rather than the *attitudes* defining behaviour.

The counter to the WoF position surely lies in the first line of the passage. ‘Being in very nature God’ refers to an immutable fact about Christ’s nature. However, he takes, or accedes to, the nature of a servant – a voluntary and changeable position. So he ‘empties’ (Gk ‘kenoo’) himself, or pours his unchangeable self, into a servanthood toward God and human form. Motyer’s helpful analysis in his BST commentary on Philippians draws attention to the parallel phrase in Isaiah 53¹² – ‘he poured out his soul to death’.

The WoF position again tends to exalt man and to pander to our pride, rather than exalting Christ and the wonder of His humility. It seems to me that the attempt to define

Jesus' nature and personhood from this passage, rather than His obedience, humility and servanthood remains controversial.

Finally on this point, it is worth saying that there is no indication that the WoF teachers are denying that Jesus was the pre-existent Son of God. They are not denying the Trinity at all, simply the modus operandi of the incarnation and life of Jesus on earth. If he divested himself of divinity to become a man, he certainly took it up again in becoming 'the first born among many brethren', a power surely unique to the Godhead. In that sense then we must be careful not to exaggerate any cry of heresy.

There is also the emphasis on the second Adam. Does Christ point the way to a prelapsarian position for the believer? Essentially the answer must be no. Paul's argument in Rom 5 and 1 Cor 15 is surely strongly on the *contrasts* between the first and the second Adam. Just as the writer of Hebrews is keen to point to the similarities in order to bring out the glorious differences between the covenants, and point to the future, so Paul is contrasting 'living being' with 'life-giving spirit', a whole step into a never before revealed world. Further, it is the life-giving Spirit within us which points towards an eschatological future, and the wholly different realm of the new heaven and earth.

But then what does a new creation and heart of flesh rather than stone actually mean? Is walking in the Spirit in our terms quite close in effect to the spiritual rebirth identification with Christ/Adam of theirs? We should at least be able to define the difference.

3. What happened at the cross?

There is the clear statement that Jesus was living in such a position on earth as to ensure immortality – a second Adam again – and that only when God imputed the sin of the ages upon him did he become a mortal man. But that imputation resulted not just in mortality, but also in the transfer of his very nature. This is the counterpoint to Adam's original sin transferring him to the dominion of Satan. Jesus, too, is transferred to that nature so that it is not just a subservient Adam who hangs on the cross, but Jesus, in the image of Satan himself. Thus Satan's defeat is absolute. The basis for this is 2Cor 5²¹ – 'God made him...to be sin' – and John 3¹⁴ 'Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up'.

In addition to this is a similarly imprecise, but emphasised, concept of Jesus having suffered a spiritual death. I don't think there is any real temporal distinction between the physical and the spiritual deaths of Jesus in their minds. They are both essentially part of the same event – the death of Jesus seen physically on the cross and invisibly in the spiritual realm. Because sickness and sin are both spiritual in origin, and Satan is the author of both, so it is actually necessary in their construct for Jesus to die spiritually. His shed life-blood, insofar as it solely represents the *physical* death of Jesus, was not sufficient for our salvation – it had to be accompanied by a spiritual event. Fred Price says:

‘Do you think that the punishment for our sin was to die on a cross? If that were the case two thieves could have paid your price. No, the punishment was to go into hell itself and serve time in hell separated from God.’⁸

In raising Jesus from the dead, God moved through a process of spiritual rebirth as well as raising his physical body to new and immortal life. Thus, God’s own legal obligations towards sin were satisfied in Jesus’ death, descent and temporary captivity and subjectivity to Satan in hell – a second Adam. Consequently, *following* His spiritual death, He was free to be ‘born again’ before He was raised in bodily form. As God raises Him and brings Him to life, He becomes ‘the first born from the dead’ of Col 1¹⁸.

There is no doubt that Jesus ‘carried’ our sins; that our sin was ‘imputed’ to him; that he ‘became sin’ for us; or that he was a ‘sin offering’ for us. None of these concepts, however, can take us to the point of him having been transformed into a being having the nature of Satan. That doctrine seems to be propelled by the parallel misconstruction of Adam’s taking on a satanic nature at the fall, and an interpretation of an analogous event in Israel’s wilderness years, of the serpent being raised up on a pole (Numb 21⁴⁻⁹).

For some WoF preachers the creedal statement ‘descended into hell’ is a vital point, but for us a very controversial one. The problem for us, perhaps surprisingly for some, is the creed itself – is it biblical?

The biblical references are unanimous. Jesus died and on the third day rose from the dead – eg Mark 8³¹; Acts 2²³⁻²⁴; Acts 10³⁹⁻⁴⁰; 1 Cor 15³⁻⁴. ‘Christ’ and ‘cross’ go together so often in Paul that it becomes a sort of mantra – Christ crucified. The only approach to the creedal statement we see in the NT is in Eph 4 when he talks of Christ’s descent to the ‘lower, earthly regions’ (NIV – marg. ‘depths of the earth’). The context here suggests simply the earth and the comparison is between the self-emptying of the incarnation (again) and his exaltation in glory. Even the descent to hell to preach to the spirits there – a passage (1 Peter 3¹⁸⁻²²) that must be amongst the most difficult – seems to occur between the resurrection and ascension, not between the crucifixion and the resurrection. Further, it is quoted in terms suggesting that Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, proclaims His victory there. Christ was made alive by the Spirit, then, thereafter – the implication is – he went to hell to preach.

The challenge from the WoF position for us is that we need to be clear what it means for Christ to be ‘put to death in the body, but made alive by the Spirit’. Was the death he died purely a physical event with big implications? Are there dimensions to it that puts some substance to the cry of being forsaken by God himself which was wrenched out of Jesus on the cross? There is the point often made that Jesus died forsaken in order that we might never know what it is to be totally removed from God and forsaken and therefore never experience this second death (Rev 20¹⁴⁻¹⁵; 21⁸). What actually happened when Jesus died?

The Christian Life – contract or relationship?

The god of this world is ruling it and defining it against the Christian's interests. This is particularly so in the areas of wealth creation and health. The wider body of Christianity is seen as poor and even sadly wrong in their perception of the real issues and very weak at overcoming. They are locked into a rational scientific worldview with an overlay of Christian thought, and are therefore predisposed to a lack of faith in day to day life.

So the crucial issue for the believer is to understand that there are two areas of reality – firstly the spiritual and secondly the physical. The spiritual is the superior realm and influences the physical. The believer is to understand that the real 'them' is their spirit, and they live in a body temporarily, over which they can exercise authority in faith. Now we are restored to a prelapsarian condition, Hagin says 'the kind of faith that spoke the universe into existence is dealt to our hearts'⁹.

The next stage is to see that there are some certainties about this on which we can rely. Starting from the infallibility of the Bible as God's word, we are soon enmeshed in a systematised attitude to faith that has a very mechanistic feel to it. In essence it becomes a formula, a legalism, a set of rules with which to manipulate circumstances and futures. It is simply a sort of contract with God:

- (i) Find the promise in the Word
- (ii) Believe in your heart
- (iii) Confess with your lips
- (iv) Behave at all times as if it is a reality

(i) *Find the promise*

There is undoubtedly a challenge to us here – when someone grasps at a promise our pastoral thought processes immediately run to the caveats and exclusion clauses, the questions of legitimacy and the feeling that we need to prepare people for failure. As the WoF ministers would say, we are those of fear not of faith. Our poor track record on faith has brought us under the dominion of Satan again.

Copeland's comment here is interesting: 'Fear activates Satan the way faith activates God'¹⁰. We tend to see the mechanistic and manipulative in this comment immediately. We would also be uncomfortable with the pervasive Armenian attitude in the WoF world view that man has a pre-eminence. But the challenge remains: in practice, how much do we cede to the Devil by default and a failure to challenge attitudes in ourselves? How much do we actually stretch ourselves and others in steps of faith? Do we easily crumple to Satan's temptations to ditch steps of faith? Does our theology collapse to a form of pragmatism in the face of God's call to arms?

(ii) *Believe in your heart – (Visualisation)*

WoF teachers focus on two major helps to this process: firstly, soak yourself in the positives for the believer – ‘The Word has to be put in for faith to come out’ – and, secondly, look to the future and visualise the outcome of your step of faith in your mind. In other words, create an image for yourself of your desired future. Impose revelation knowledge over sensory knowledge – put off the old, put on the new! Yonggi Cho has put it like this: ‘you can incubate your future and hatch the results’¹¹.

Of course, my mind immediately jumps to an Aston Martin - we all have our secrets in these areas! But the purpose of this exercise – and it is genuinely viewed as an exercise – is simply to do something creative in terms of the promise and overcome our instinctive ‘old man’ negativities, and to create space for real faith to fill. We are renewing our minds and in so doing we free God to act. The Arminian basis of all this is obvious.

By comparison, Eph 2¹⁰ springs to mind. We would be looking to hear a specific and directive word in terms of God’s revealed will for our life before even beginning to think about faith. WoF people would tend to look to abundance of provision to achieve the promises of the Word.

The dangers of visualisation, in particular, are so obvious as to not need any delineation here. There is an easy slip from preaching encouragement to preaching another mechanistic principle. It is subtly and unwittingly transformed into a necessary step towards a successful conclusion. But do we even preach any form of faith into circumstances people face?

(iii) *Confess with your lips*

Firstly, God himself ‘spoke’ and creative power was released. There must be a spoken word: Rom 4¹⁷ God ‘calls things that are not as though they were’.

Secondly, there are the references to speaking out in the NT. The key verses for the WoF position are in Mark 11²²⁻²⁵. Here Jesus talks about moving the mountain and is explicit ‘what he *says* will happen’ (my emphasis). Similarly, ‘whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours’. (We note that ‘prayer’ for Jesus would have been understood as spoken out loud, although his communion and conversation with the Spirit must have been also on so many occasions a ‘mind thing’). This is exactly the objective of the WoF system, or rules of faith – to bring people to a point where they can do exactly what Jesus says in this passage. The objective of the set of rules is to release an untrammelled faith!

The challenge for us is, of course, our tendency to explain away and minimise the effect of such passages with caveats and warnings. These can soon slip into what WoF people call ‘negative confession’. Hagin quotes a typical tirade against that attitude: ‘You said you could not, and the moment you said it you were defeated. You said you did not have

faith, and doubt rose up like a giant and bound you. You are imprisoned by your own words. You talk failure, and failure holds you in bondage' ¹².

(iv) *Behave at all times as if it is a reality*

There is shorthand for this, too. It is called corresponding action. We must behave in a way which corresponds to the visualisation. Whilst we wait for the physical world to catch up with the spiritual reality as the confession causes the power to activate, we must behave as if we have received the outcome. Not to do so is to immediately create a countermanding negative 'confession' and will stop the action of faith.

If the outcome of our confession of faith doesn't happen then there are three broad reasons why not:

- (i) We need to be patient. The symptoms of sickness may persist, but patience will produce the experience of healing.
- (ii) We actually only had a mental assent to the promise in the Word, and this is a very ineffectual thing compared to a real assurance. It's hope rather than certainty. The onus is on me therefore to improve my faith.
- (iii) We succumbed to the voice of Satan taunting us at the delay, however long or short that delay was. We tacitly or even explicitly agree with Satan's taunt 'Nothing's happened - it hasn't worked', and we are undone; we have failed to persevere in believing it has happened in the spiritual realm.

How are we to evaluate this? Firstly, we need to consider seriously the assertion made in WoF circles that it is because of the very character, personality and nature of God that we can expect Him to act in accordance with his promises and His word. His own truthful and consistent character gives us the assurances we need to trust Him. What we are doing when we step out in faith is simply 'taking Him at His word'. In these circumstances, therefore, there is inevitably a parallel with the certainty of systematic law. DeArteaga puts it like this: 'The key element is that God's character is so righteous, and His power so awesome, that His promises behave as laws.' ¹³

We, however, as people of a grace emphasis, recoil from anything that smacks of a set of rules. How can this adequately train and equip Christians to discover the rich diversity of God's interventions into our personal histories? Our desire is to encourage people to live walking in the Spirit, living moment by moment listening to the Spirit's promptings rather than by mindlessly following a set of rules without any real personal relationship.

Secondly, much is made in WoF teaching of the famous words at the beginning of Hebrews 11. But the wider context of that chapter is the vision and faith of the many witnesses who looked forward to something which would only be completed in us who have the privilege to live in the Church and Spirit age.

Indeed, we could say that the thoughts of the writer are flowing through from chapter 10, where he discusses the need for perseverance (10³⁶), to stand our ground in the face of

suffering (10³²), accepting the confiscation of property because we know we have ‘better and lasting possessions’ (10³⁴). And, as the exploits of faith are recounted, we are struck by the widest possible variation in experience described, from conquering kingdoms to being sawn in two! The listing from 11³⁵ on includes phrases like destitute, persecuted and mistreated - hardly the health and wealth so confidently proclaimed. Further, it is interesting that they didn’t even receive the promises they had faith for. 11⁴⁰ holds the key: God had something better planned for us – so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

The problem seems to be that we are forced to agree that the character of God must be defined in terms of consistency, truthfulness and ability to act, but we are nervous at reducing Him to anything that looks even slightly robotic or mechanical. We want to maintain the uncertainties as well as the strengths of a personal relationship with Him, especially the ability to function in that relationship, from our side at least, in a fallen and imperfect world.

Here we hit the crunch again; the WoF world view is rigidly polarised between good and evil and we are uncomfortable with that. We want to emphasise the ‘now and the not yet’; we want to make room for a not yet fully realised perfection of our ability to hear Him let alone to respond to Him; and for a less than perfect understanding both of our circumstances and God’s ways in this age. His ways are beyond us, at a very minimum God’s plans for us involve the interweaving of our lives with others, so we looking in such a self-centred way at our issues will inevitably be incomplete.

The clash which flows from this fundamental: WoF looks back to living in a restored prelapsarian condition of communion with God; we look forward from a place of incompleteness to one of final perfection at His coming. The consequential two world views do not mesh because God’s purpose has always been for something better and beyond Eden, and it is towards that that we reach.

It could all be summed up as:

- WoF people have a contract – and a certainty of God’s character
- We have a relationship - and an uncertainty as to whether his sovereign will has been fully revealed.

Perhaps the contribution the WoF attitudes should make is to provoke us to evaluate our excuses in periods of ‘failure’ more self-critically and rigorously. You do not need to see perfect theology to accept that challenge.

Health and Wealth

Essentially, these are two areas of specifically applying the general rules we have already seen. But because they form such a prominent caricature of the movement, they deserve some separate discussion.

Health

A life characterised by sickness and poverty cannot be a life which either honours God in the sight of others, or is 'godly' in and of itself. Hagin asks: 'Could God get any glory out of the body, the temple of the Holy Spirit, which is deformed or defaced with sickness?'¹⁴ It depends, of course, on your definition of what might constitute gaining glory from God's perspective. We would want to suggest that there are many circumstances and illustrations of sick people doing just that.

There is a desire to encourage faith and correct the misconceptions in mainstream Christianity which they see as murderous to the exercise of healing faith. Prominent in this is the denial that God ever intends to use the believer's suffering in ill-health in any way. Price has gone as far as to call it 'one of the biggest stumbling blocks in all Christianity. It is really a satanic doctrine'¹⁵.

Suffering for the gospel is the only legitimised suffering in the WoF construct. If your suffering arises from the effect of persecution then it is seen as sharing with Christ and supported by the NT. Similarly if your sickness is identifiably from the dangers you have placed yourself in as a result of mission then it can be viewed as legitimate suffering. Both conditions are, presumably, also somewhat limited in their time frame as the ultimate overcoming is grasped. I have found no statement as to where martyrdom stands within all this.

The theology centres on a few verses:

*Isaiah 53*⁴⁻⁵

This is the main plank of their theology where the suffering servant is seen as carrying our infirmities and, crucially, 'by his wounds we are healed'. They see no justification for making metaphors of the stripes and wounds, and turning the power of the words towards an analogy for the general curse of mankind's sin. This is a fact of redemption, this is applicable in the here and now, it is simply made available by the cross for those with the faith to reach out and grasp it.

*Matt 8*¹⁶⁻¹⁷

There is an emphasis on the fact that Matthew takes up this prophecy and applies it clearly and specifically to the ministry of Jesus. We might wish to point out that these miraculous ministries of Jesus were confirmations for his contemporaries of His claim to be the suffering servant and Messiah. They do not necessarily speak of his inaugurating a kingdom in which physical health is normative. Traditional theology says that there is

healing in the atonement and it will be fully demonstrated in the future to come. There is an in-breaking of that future into the present on occasions because of the Kingdom.

1 Peter 2²⁴; Prov 4²⁰⁻²²

Peter also picks up the Isaiah phrase, but we might note that the direct link in Peter's mind is to sin generally, rather than to sickness. For WoF theology, however, there is the direct link, because sin has brought with it disease and the dominion of Satan. To claim back dominion from Satan under the power of the cross is to claim back the 'right' to health in our new circumstances as a believer. Hagin also brings Prov 4²⁰⁻²² in support of this position, where the writer has 'my words...are health to a man's whole body.' This is not to be taken as metaphorical, but once again a promise for the obedient which is characteristic of the covenants and of the character of God.

3 John²

John's prayer for Gaius that he may enjoy good health is often quoted. The probability that this was a form of greeting like 'Hope you are well' doesn't seem to be discussed in WoF circles. Maybe, like Timothy, Gaius was frequently ill and this was John's normal friendly enquiry and assurance of support. Whatever, it seems somewhat flimsy.

Critique of the health gospel

The brief analysis of the verses above gives some hints of the weaknesses of the WoF position. In general, we would have to differ with them over the framework in which they do their exegesis.

Once again we could be confused into thinking that we are hitting an over-realised eschatology. That is not the case; the theology is infused with a prelapsarian outlook. Healing is our right as part of the salvation package as we take back authority from Satan's realm. So the insistence on health as a present day possibility is not based on drawing on our future perfection and new bodies and new environment, but on the victory of the cross being totally effective over Satan's realm in the here and now.

We would want to emphasise the eschatological dimensions to the salvation story, and focus in on the now and the not yet. Our approach opens the way to allowing for the effect of the following six issues:

- (i) The sovereignty of God in the life of the believer, particularly as it affects the plans He has for us, rather than the plans we have for ourselves. These plans may include suffering and ill-health.
- (ii) The relationship with a personal God through the indwelling Holy Spirit, which cannot be diminished to a set of rules, especially such self serving ones.
- (iii) The fact that we work out our salvation in the midst of an unregenerate world, where the physical effects of the fall in particular are clearly stated to have not yet been redeemed even for the believer (see, eg, Rom 8¹⁸⁻²⁵).

- (iv) The fact that there are cases of believers in the NT being sick and recovering (or not) through the ‘natural’ processes. Indeed Timothy was often sick and was viewed as having a weakness in this area requiring a change of diet! (1 Tim 5²³). Paul, of course had poor eyesight and whatever was the thorn in the flesh.
- (v) The fact that not all people are healed, in *either* the NT or in our present day experience, even after much faithful prayer and even after invoking James 5¹⁴⁻¹⁵, with its unequivocal ‘the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well.’
- (vi) The rather mundane fact that people are still destined for ageing and death, that Christian women still suffer pain in childbirth, and that we are not immune from infectious disease passed on by the unregenerate, all suggests that we are still in the not yet. The effects of the Fall on creation are not reversed, nor will they be, but they will be replaced by a new heaven and earth. (Rev 21⁴; Is 65¹⁷⁻²⁵).

Wealth

Just as we are in the line of faith from Abraham, so also we are to inherit with him the promise of rich blessing in the area of the material world as well as the spiritual. This promise is for us (Gen 17¹⁻⁹). This blessing is enumerated as personal wealth later in the story (Gen 24³⁵). The WoF preachers also focus on Deut 8¹⁸ as it encapsulates the theological idea – that God gives you ‘power to get wealth’ – the NIV translates it as ‘the ability to produce wealth.’ Additional material comes from Prov 10²² ‘the blessing of the Lord makes rich’ (NIV ‘brings wealth’).

As a good example of the legalism that it engenders Hunter says: ‘He designed the law (*sic*) to work wonders for us and to give us the greatest prosperity in our neighbourhood.’¹⁶ God has to be true to His Word when we fulfil the condition of faith. Copeland says ‘The covenant cannot be established in your life unless you believe God’s Word concerning prosperity. Let there be no doubt about God’s will. God’s will is to establish His covenant in the earth. Prosperity is a major requirement in the establishment of God’s will.’¹⁷

Mark 10²⁹⁻³⁰ records Jesus making a key promise to his disciples, promising a return of one hundredfold on anything given up for Him. The promise is explicitly to be fulfilled ‘in this age’ (NIV). Gloria Copeland takes it to mean monetary returns ‘in this life’ (as KJV), although it is set in a broader context of families, homes and fields in the text. We dishonour God, then, by refusing to see that this is His desire for us: in this life to give us prosperity, and ‘in the age to come, eternal life’¹⁸. Sovereignty over the resources of the earth has been restored to the people of God through the victory of the cross. Economic dominions have been switched again from Satan to the race of the second Adam, and we are in consequence to enjoy abundant life.

Similar verses in this theme are the expected ones: Luke 6³⁸ – ‘give and it will be given to you’; Gal 6⁷ – ‘you reap what you sow’; 2 Cor 9⁶⁻¹¹ – sow generously, reap generously, you will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion; Phil 4 19 – ‘and my God will meet all your needs.’ These are key verses in the dual cry to faith: your God wants and is able to be abundant in blessing towards you; reach out, therefore, by giving generously and selflessly into the kingdom.

It is also true that the motivation for the operation of this spiritual principle is to be that of generous giving. We desire to bless others. (Often, in practice, the implication is to the WoF ministries firstly, but then we would want our people to put their local church first in their giving). We are confident that we will be a winner in the transaction because of God’s grace towards us. This is further expanded as we look at Matt 6²⁰ and Jesus’ command to store up treasure in heaven. Copeland views this as a deposit account in heaven, to be drawn down when required on this earth. The comparison with holding riches here in this life is that they are insecure here, but totally secure there. With God you have security and multiplication. Your heart is in heaven – put your money where your mouth is, then.

WoF teaching encourages us to plunder the wealth of the nations as has been promised and foreshadowed in the Exodus. They see a more radical division of the ultimate ownership of wealth on this earth than we are accustomed to. Here is a picture of God, through the victory of Jesus, returning to the blessing priorities of the covenant with Abraham. The recipients are those in the faith inheritance through the grace of God - us.

There is no doubt that WoF teachers want to encourage generosity as a life-style. But within that they are also encouraging an enjoyment of God’s valid blessing on your life. There is obviously a considerable clash of motivations and more than one possible life-style here. Additionally, it is worth noting in this context the WoF emphasis on self help. There is the thread of pressure to work, and work hard, in order to stay clear of debt, and to put oneself on a footing where God’s blessing can flow from your obedient lifestyle. The American lifestyle of self sufficiency and a suspicion of slackers can be too easily identified in this, but so, too, can the words of Paul – eg if you don’t work you don’t eat.

The wealth gospel – critique

It is undoubtedly a challenge to us as we look on. WoF doctrine in this area takes some Scriptures more seriously than we are used to or comfortable with, but there are not so many exegetical caveats for us to fling around, particularly regarding the NT quotes. That is the positive challenge to us. But there is a huge negative gateway arising from these doctrines inviting a loss of integrity amongst the ministries. And we have seen some slide very publicly through. That should be for us only a caveat though. The fundamental questions involve how far these doctrines should challenge our weaknesses within our own attitudes towards the distribution of wealth and seeking the legitimate blessings of God.

There were undoubted promises of blessing to Abraham, but as we have seen above, although they were fulfilled in some sense in his prosperity on earth, it was in response to leaving all that he had, and, as Heb 11 assures us, there is a further fulfilment to the covenant, only in conjunction with us, which they never saw themselves except through faith. None of this negates, however, the professed motivations or position of the WoF doctrine. They are clear that they are living in just such times of blessing and fulfilment. What we need to do is to grasp it in faith.

Similarly, we can say that the blessings of Moses come from within the framework of obedience to the law. Here, again, the WoF teaching is unambiguous – these things are for those who are obedient to the Word of God. They are clear that the first thing you do is seek the kingdom of God in your life. Then all these things will be added. They are not denying first priority to the kingdom in their teaching, maybe they are just a lot stronger on the ‘will be added’ than we are.

Overall, the problem is the confusion of a doctrine of faith and grace with a doctrine which mechanises God’s responses and lays them open to a charge of legalistic manipulation of outcomes. In their desire to right the balance of what they see as an unscriptural approach to personal wealth, there is an emphasis on certain verses which leave out of consideration (except in the parentheses of their doctrines) whole swathes of our concerns. These would centre on:

(i) The need to focus on relieving poverty.

Although we must note that Jesus affirmed that ‘the poor you will always have with you’ (Mark 14⁷) inferring perhaps that there would never be, on this earth, a level of social justice sufficient to eradicate poverty. Nevertheless, the care of the poor is always a fundamental concern. The early church was told to ‘remember the poor’ (Gal 2¹⁰), and, as an example, there was the logistically difficult but successful collection for the churches in Judea (eg 2 Cor 8-9).

(ii) The redistribution of wealth exemplified in the early church.

It is clear that Acts 2⁴⁵ was a response to the pressures of the cultural situation faced by this sudden influx of believers, but it was also a principle the early church lived by. Acts 5 gives us another example. Both are examples of the ‘normal’ generosity of richer members, not, as is so often supposed, of community living. Even the ‘daily distribution of food’ of Acts 6 signifies that a fairly sophisticated redistribution of wealth was systematically in place early on.

(iii) Satisfaction with God’s sovereignty.

Perhaps the most vivid example of this is the statement Paul makes in Phil 4¹¹⁻¹². ‘I have learned the secret of being content’, he says, ‘whether living in plenty or in want’.

(iv) Sowing and reaping.

What is the exact meaning of Paul's correlation between what we give and how we will receive. Is it cash for cash, so to speak? But the discussion of the blessings accompanying the giving is less prescriptive. Later he talks about the grace of God abounding to you so that you will abound in every good work, which suggests a very wide interpretation of the sorts of reciprocal blessings to be expected. Similarly, 2 Cor 9¹⁰⁻¹¹ widen our outlook further to include harvests of righteousness and being made rich in every way – which presumably leaves absolutely nothing in life out!

(v) Economics.

It is not part of the scope of this paper to get into this huge subject, but we need a word about it at least. What is clear is that the Fall introduced scarcity and hard labour, and the science of economics was born. Inequality, therefore, has to be seen as a result of sin, and how to alleviate inequality and maximise the general good has been the concern of economics ever since. The transactional and property rules of a society will be the context of individual lives lived out within it. Thus the poverty of individuals is not necessarily directly connected to their personal sin, but the system under which they suffer is an imperfect response to the indwelling sin in all of mankind, rich and poor. There are innumerable references in Scripture to God's attitudes on this. He favours the poor who have been treated unjustly within their societies, and He is against the rich who have gained their wealth unscrupulously and who have oppressed and downtrodden the poor they should have lifted up.

(vi) The traps of wealth.

1 Tim 6⁹⁻¹⁰ offers a straightforward statement of the dangers of seeking riches. Paul is concerned to warn Timothy about the love of money: such desires lead the unwary into temptations, traps, and foolish and harmful desires.

Key Challenges

So what, then, are the challenges that face us as we consider the WoF movement? What are the areas where we must take seriously their outlook on the Christian life and faith?

Predisposition to failure?

There is one broad challenge that runs through all this which we ought to face even if we disagree with the theology from which it arises. It is simply put: are we accepting conditions of life that are second best in God's economy? Do we have a British predisposition to failure? It seems to me that the greatest challenge to us as a movement is to rouse ourselves to grasp something of the straightforward faith that says 'God can' rather than our predisposition towards 'God can, but probably won't.' Mark 11²²⁻²⁵

remains a major challenge to us in day to day leadership – are we selling our faith short to our people?

Other points follow:

- (i) Has God in mind greater goals for us in terms of wealth creation and distribution?
- (ii) How much do we draw on the general principles of the victory of Christ when we are facing sickness?
- (iii) How much persecution – in sickness and otherwise - is directly demonically inspired and is our response to this normally blind and weak?
- (iv) If their theology is questionable, what are we doing amongst our churches to counter it and put truth into our people?

Products of cynicism?

A final question worries me. Exposure to another culture in the Russian speaking world and learning to filter culture and the effect it has on Scriptural and practical issues of church life has sensitised me to this. There is much in WoF theology and outlook which we can criticise as reflecting the values of the American culture more than Scripture. The question now is: how much of our response, and, indeed, our way of life, reflects our cultural predispositions, and influences our application of Scriptural truth? Are we too British – cynical, prone to pull down with envy rather than encourage and emulate, and more concerned with theological ‘t’s’ and ‘i’s’ than with accessing the power of a life of faith?

This cynical tendency can be identified in the following sorts of challenges the WoF movement presents us with:

- (i) How much do we really believe that we can move mountains, and that He will do whatever we agree on or ask?
- (ii) Do we instinctively judge the richer amongst us in surreptitious envy, or do we desire an increasing personal ability to give? Is our attitude to *Christian* wealth ambivalent and even unscriptural? Do we encourage the rich to work for the kingdom?
- (iii) Are we even now generous givers? For example, from my involvement with Russia, the comparison between our puny efforts to translate and distribute literature and the WoF flood of materials is frustrating. The situation could be so different with more financial resources. Lack of resources never seems to be much of a problem to WoF ministries.
- (iv) Should we expect more blessing in return? Do we have a poverty spirit?
- (v) How do we react to these churches and, indeed other more mainstream churches like Hillsongs, which are very large. Why do people flood to them?

One cynical answer is the fickleness and easily led nature of the average British Christian! Another is that they offer positive and dynamic outlooks we may be finding it difficult to generate.

Conclusions

How do we live with the evident numerical success of churches based on what we would see as false doctrine?

Firstly, we need to understand that the WoF movement was birthed in traditional Pentecostalism and is not a charismatic culture in our terms. For example, there is little or no discussion of participatory meetings, and debate about Eph 4 ministries, where it exists, tends to focus on 'labels' for the prominent ministries. But they have moved from traditional Pentecostal and mainstream theology in several areas:

1. They believe that man is a spirit dwelling in a body.
2. They focus on the full restoration of the prelapsarian conditions as the principle effect of salvation in the here and now.
3. They have an essentially Gnostic approach to the acquisition of 'revelation' knowledge.
4. They have a kenotic view of the incarnation.
5. They view Jesus' death as only fully effective in atonement when Jesus' spirit went to hell.

From these positions, particularly the second which seems to underpin everything else, flow the more 'in your face' material which we find difficult to support.

Secondly, we are challenged to learn the lessons of faith in the 21st century, but within our context and our values.

1. How do we encourage people, how do we set an example, how do we maintain a dynamic life of the Spirit's activity in our churches?
2. How do we avoid the British cultural invasion into our own thinking as leaders of negativity and cynicism?

We have to lead by example, be more biblical than British, and teach to encourage others to do so also. That might be the most significant result of this discussion.

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