

What's Right About the Faith Movement

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Faith teachers have taken a multitude of hits in the last decade, but they've also blessed the church in some important ways. Let's not discard the message just because of some excesses.

When Kenneth and Gloria Copeland visited our campus chapel at Regent University, I sat in the third row near the center aisle. When Kenneth was finished preaching, I was pumped up and motivated to confront my passive Christian life and begin aggressively seeking God's face and moving out into the ministry I knew God had for me. I felt the contagious, joyful power of God infusing into me. I was ready to whip the world, the flesh and the devil.

"Isn't this what it's all about?" I mused to one of my colleagues as we were leaving. He agreed. I don't know what it is about theologians. Ask any one of them about faith teaching or the Word-Faith movement, and they immediately recite a laundry list of everything that's wrong with it. They can't see much, if anything, that's positive.

Well, I'm a theologian—at least Regent University pays me to theologize—and I happen to believe there's a lot of truth in faith teaching. If we can get past the imprecise and even reckless statements of some faith teachers and examine their words for what is intended rather than for what is said, then I believe there's a lot we can learn from these people.

What Is Faith Teaching?

Modern faith teaching, sometimes called "positive confession" or, more crudely, the "name-it-and-claim-it" movement, has several key figures. On a scale moving from fairly mild to fairly strong, some representatives of the faith teaching movement are: Oral Roberts, Kenneth Copeland, Kenneth Hagin Sr., Fred Price and Creflo Dollar.

The key features of this movement could be outlined as follows:

* The importance of faith and its crucial role in the Christian life. "Without faith it is impossible to please [God]" ([Heb. 11:6, NKJV](#)). Faith is a way of participating in God's very nature. Believers are in some sense "little gods," having been "made in His image and likeness," and therefore expressing God's presence and purposes on earth. We are "clothed" in the Spirit and have, by faith, become the very "righteousness of God in Christ" (see [Gen. 1:26](#); [2 Cor. 5:21](#)).

**The scope or purpose of faith. This not only includes salvation, but also applies to all of one's needs, as well as to one's God-directed ministries. God wants us to not only be faithful, obedient and heaven-bound, but also healthy and financially prosperous.

**The establishment of faith. Faith develops in relation to God's Word and in two stages: (1) the "logos" word (certain promises of Scripture), when properly "confessed" and affirmed with one's mouth, is then (2) confirmed by God's "rhema" word (inner witness of the Holy Spirit).

Faith involves “revelation knowledge” that is God-given and moves beyond “sense knowledge” of what we know from experience. So then, faith can be the confirmation and assurance that a specific biblical promise is to be actualized or fulfilled in a specific case, such as a healing or miracle.

**The strong act of willpower involved in faith. It is not a passive acceptance or hoping for something. Rather, faith involves taking the initiative toward aggressive, zealous, personal action. That is, stepping out in faith and in confidence that whatever is prayed for is going to happen. One early faith teacher said, “Don’t ever pray, ‘Thy will be done,’ since it destroys faith. It’s always God’s will to heal.”

Obviously this last statement is impossible to agree with. But what is behind that statement? What is this man’s experience with some people praying, “Thy will be done”? We need to examine what certain words and phrases mean to the speaker, but at the same time we need to understand how they impact us.

What Do We Make Of All This?

If we find ourselves outside the faith teaching movement, we may need to first understand our own upbringing and why we react the way we do. If we were raised Protestant or Catholic, we were probably immersed in certain tenets that should be re-examined in light of the New Testament.

Second, we may be uncomfortable with the bold claims of faith teachers when we subconsciously hold on to some traditional, and somewhat biblically unbalanced, religious ideas. We may need to closely examine our feelings toward traditional formulations, such as:

**God and Jesus are exalted far above us. We must be extremely reverent, even somewhat fearful, before God when we pray or come into His presence. Because we are sinful, it is blasphemy to compare ourselves with God in any way. Accordingly, we are uncomfortable with entering “boldly” into God’s presence or accepting the radical implications of God’s grace.

**Salvation from sin is the only real focus of the Christian gospel. Miracles of healing are only “signs” that merely point to the truth of God’s Word. We must never base our faith on miracles, but on Scripture. Even if we believe the gifts of the Spirit continue today, they are still a marginal and dispensable part of the Christian experience.

**Faith is understanding and accepting as true the essential points of the gospel. The Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin, clarifies the gospel message, and makes it real to us, but any further revelation than this is out of bounds for Christians, since this would involve adding to Scripture.

We must keep these half-hidden anxieties in mind when we ask the next question.

What's Right About Faith Teaching?

1. Faith teaching more fully grasps the radical biblical insights concerning our position as believers. Through Christ, we can enter boldly into the holy of holies (see [Heb. 10:19](#))—an idea that was absolutely blasphemous to most religious people when this was first written. Jesus called God “Abba” or “Daddy,” something that chokes in our throat at the irreverent over familiarity. Yet the “Daddy” response is the primal witness of the Spirit in our Christian experience (see [Rom. 8:15](#); [Gal 4:6](#)).

An oft-quoted verse demonstrates the radical nature of our salvation: “You are the righteousness of God in Christ” (see [2 Cor. 5:21](#)). The idea of standing before God claiming to be as good as Christ makes us squeamish. But if we are not as totally righteous as Jesus Christ in God’s sight, then we cannot stand before God at all. It’s all or nothing. The death, atonement, and resurrection of Jesus gave us the “all.”

When faith teachers talk about believers being “little gods,” it makes theologians shudder. This phrase may be explosive, and can even go over the line. But these preachers are pounding home a valid insight. It’s based on the creation story that emphasizes mankind being made in the image of God, who breathed His very own breath into Adam.

Moreover, Jesus creates a new race of people when He replicates God’s act by breathing on them the life-giving Spirit (see [John 20:22](#)).

2. Faith teaching challenges us to believe God to “supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus” ([Phil. 4:19](#)). For years, it has been easier to say, “Your sins are forgiven,” rather than “Rise up and walk.”

Accordingly, the church’s theology shifted focus from what the disciples were commanded to do—“Heal the sick there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you’” ([Luke 10:9](#))—to a dispensing forgiveness by a hierarchy of clerics. This is a historical case of the church’s basing theology on experience—or lack of it—rather than on the Word of God.

In the last 50 years the biblical theology movement, and increasingly evangelical scholars, have begun to understand that the gospel Jesus presented came “not in word but in power” ([1 Cor. 4:20](#)). Miracles and spiritual gifts do not simply “prove” the gospel, they express it.

What did Jesus actually spend time doing in His public ministry? Here’s the percentage of space devoted in the Gospels to His miracles: 44 percent in Matthew; 65 percent in Mark; 29 percent in Luke; and more than 30 percent in John. The disciples continued this emphasis: 27 percent of the book of Acts—not just their public ministry—is miracle accounts. That’s more space than the sermons in Acts! In today’s traditional scholarship, it seems we have a religion about Jesus, but not from Jesus.

Traditional theology downplays the “power encounter” message of the Gospels and Acts in favor of Protestant themes in the epistles, which in turn have been largely sanitized of their charismatic expressions.

For example, in his “Preface to the New Testament” of 1522, Martin Luther distinguishes the “true and noblest books”—that is, the epistles of Paul and 1 Peter—from others in the New Testament. Luther’s sole criterion for selecting “the heart and core of all the books” is that “these do not describe many works and miracles of Christ, but rather masterfully show how faith in Christ overcomes sin, death and hell, and gives life, righteousness, and blessedness.”

The discerning Christian prefers the Gospel of John over the synoptics simply because, according to Luther, it contains the fewest miracles. Calvin never developed such a “canon-within-a-canon,” but his bias against miracles and spiritual gifts is clear.

Scholarship is moving away from classic Protestantism’s narrow focus. For example, Gordon Fee’s massive new book, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*, shows that the emphasis in the Gospels and in Acts on God’s charismatic power continues in the epistles.

What is the bottom line? By simply reading God’s Word and being faithful to the experiences of divine power through which God has led them, faith teachers have come to the same essential conclusion as mainstream biblical scholarship: The God of the New Testament is a God of charismatic power, who will in fact “supply all our needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”

But these blessings in our lives are realized through faith—a personal act that requires cultivation and diligence.

3. Faith teaching establishes or builds faith. Here we need to sort out what is right and what is wrong with faith teaching. Faith teaching is right in that it has discerned what is perhaps the most important emphasis in the Bible: Faith is absolutely central to our relationship with God. Beyond that, faith teaching’s emphasis on developing and having faith is commendable.

The problem is how faith develops one’s faith. Some early faith teachers stressed that faith amounted to applying a promise of Scripture to a problem and by sheer force of will, believing it until the promise was visibly realized. Any evidence to the contrary was denied as “lying symptoms” of the devil.

A later development of this theme was a similar move: applying a biblical promise to a need, then “confessing” that promise until the confession reached the “spirit man” at which time the inner confirmation or assurance came. At this point the “manifestation” or fulfillment of the promise would be visible.

Later, Francis MacNutt and John Wimber emphasized the need for “listening” prayer for healing—to try to tune in to what God is revealing while praying and then responding appropriately to God’s leading.

I believe this latter approach is the core of how to develop faith. Believers perceive what God wants to do and then “pray through” to the assurance that He will do it. To pray properly, then, “Thy will be done” certainly does not destroy faith. Instead, it’s absolutely crucial to developing

faith, discerning God's plan, and following up in prayer and action. Unless we find out what God wants, we certainly won't get His assurance (faith) that it will come to pass.

What's Wrong And Right With The 'Faith Formula'?

There's a good reason why we can't apply a promise of Scripture to anything we believe is appropriate: God may not think it's appropriate, despite general promises about healing and deliverance in the Bible.

To develop a comprehensive understanding of faith in the New Testament we need some grasp of the complexity of the issue. The most common word for "faith/believe" is the *pistis* family of words—some 436 references. But understanding faith cannot be limited to a single word family. There are dozens of others in the larger so-called "semantic field" with varying relationships to the Greek *pistis*—that is, trust, confidence, hope, knowledge, seeing, courage, boldness.

Beyond this, many narratives describing faith appear in the Gospels and Acts and have much to teach us about the nature and acquisition of faith. Moreover, some broader New Testament concepts, such as, "Holy Spirit," "kingdom of God," and "righteousness" have much in common with "faith," and indeed may even be alternate ways of talking about it.

Having said all this, however, it appears that the most crucial accounts for understanding faith are the two temptation stories: one for Adam and one for the second Adam (see Gen. 3, Matt. 4; and Luke 4). The temptation narratives bear a complex and extensive relationship with each other, but one common idea is that they appear at the point of "maturity" in the lives of Adam and Christ. The issue in the two temptations is identical: Do I gain power by "a hearing of faith" or by following my own (and satanic) "principle"? Satan's temptation to Jesus was powerfully seductive—an attempt to turn the "word" of Scripture against the immediate "Word" of God (*logos* vs. *rhema*).

Essentially Satan was asking Jesus to pre-apply or misapply scriptural promises to His life and ministry. Satan first tempts Jesus to follow the tradition of Israel in the wilderness for 40 years (days). "If you are the Son of God," he taunts, "why don't You have miraculous bread like that provided in the past?" Jesus' answer is true for the other temptations as well: A person lives "by every word that comes from the mouth of God." That is to say, I don't simply apply a promise to my situation—I wait to hear from the Father directly.

Next, Satan is more direct: "Jesus, step out in faith upon the holy, authoritative Word of God. Doesn't the Word promise: 'He will command His angels about You, and they will lift You up in their hands, so that You will not strike Your foot against a stone'? Can't You say, 'God said it! I believe it! That settles it!'" Jesus interpreted this as trying to arrogantly bully God into action by misapplying the promises of His Word.

Finally, Satan took Jesus to a "very high mountain" with the perfectly scriptural proposal that all nations should be His, as was scripturally due Him as Messiah. But this was to pre-apply a Scripture—Jesus must first be obedient and endure rejection and the cross. Misapplying or pre-

applying Scripture, then, is the equivalent of falling down and worshipping Satan, as was Adam's act of seeking knowledge apart from God.

This great test for Jesus was also intended as a test for every Christian. By independently "claiming the promises" do we sometimes ignore God? Do we manipulate God? Or even abandon God to follow the tempter?

Faith teaching is right in that it strongly encourages Christians to stretch their faith, but wrong if it succumbs to the temptation to misapply Scripture. True faith happens only when we have the assurance of where God wants the promises to apply.

This is the bottom line: If you want to build your faith, seek God in prayer to find out what God wants in that situation. When you receive the assurance of faith, and you have received it accurately, God will fulfill His Word.

What's Right With Faith Teaching?

So what's right with the faith message? I believe faith teaching:

- * understands the centrality of aggressive, joyous faith for the Christian life.
- * has a profoundly biblical grasp of how majestically the believer stands before God, clothed in His righteousness, and how powerfully he or she can confront the world.
- * communicates that our faith, like God's anointing, doesn't just "happen." It must be emphatically encouraged and built up if God is going to work in power.

Faith teachers know they cannot get away with merely theologizing about faith; they must powerfully model it to people, even transfuse their own faith into the lives of their hearers. This takes spiritual guts and exhausting effort, but they rightly understand that "the kingdom of heaven experiences violence and the violent take it by force!" *

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