



Chapter 5

Stop Worrying and Start Sowing! A Phenomenological Account of the Ethics of “Divine Investment”

Jonathan L. Walton

Introduction

Every summer thousands of evangelical Christians travel to Fort Worth, Texas, to attend the Southwest Believers’ Convention, hosted by Kenneth and Gloria Copeland. The convention is one of several revival-style campaigns organized across North America and Europe by Kenneth Copeland Ministries (KCM), arguably the premier Word of Faith ministry in America. This particular meeting is the largest as it is comprised of those whom many consider the Big Five of the Word of Faith: Jerry Savelle, Jesse Duplantis, and Creflo Dollar in addition to the Copelands. From early in the morning to the prime-time evening slot, these five evangelists rotate, taking the stage at the Fort Worth Convention Center. For those unfamiliar with the nomenclature of Word of Faith, this neocharismatic movement is better known for the theology it espouses, the prosperity gospel of divine health and material wealth. Ministry partners—those persons who commit to supporting Copeland’s ministry through prayer and financial support—as well as regular viewers take off work, organize vacations, and even coordinate family reunions to brave the region’s heat and humidity to hear a positive word of prosperity from one of their favorite television evangelists.

For five days in August of 2009, one speaker after another exhorted attendees on how to deal with the subject on the hearts and minds of the vast majority of those in attendance, the financial crash of 2008 that led to the greatest economic downturn since the Great Depression. “American households have lost 14 trillion dollars



in wealth,” evangelist Jerry Savelle tells the crowd. “But that will not affect me. Dow Jones is not my source. United States government is not my source. Social Security is not my source. God is my source of supply!” Savelle urges the assembly not to worry about the economy and even to ignore negative news reports. “Stop worrying and start sowing,” he says. And in explaining “God’s way” to handle the stress and strife of financial calamity, Savelle suggests, “If you don’t have enough money to pay your bills, sow a seed,” and “every time a worried thought about money pops up in your mind, the next thing you do is sow. This is spiritual law. Whatsoever a man soweth, he shall also reap.”¹

The constant allusions to God as supplier and copious scripture references to health, wealth, and sowing reveal a world of exuberant hope and unbridled optimism. The people gathered here in Fort Worth worship a God who can transform individual circumstances, nullify negative social conditions, and make it possible for believers to transcend financial constraints so they can gain a “supernatural financial breakthrough.” This is the Word of Faith movement. Evil is negated, fear is cast out, and poverty, sickness, and any other form of material lack are overcome by a commitment to the “covenantal” relationship between believers and God. Indeed these are the characteristics of many faith perspectives in general and Christian denominations in particular. But what stands out about the Word of Faith movement, like its charismatic antecedents, is the emphasis placed on God’s desire to provide supernatural solutions to the ills of life.²

This is also a world that cuts across race, ethnicity, class, and gender—at least on the surface. Middle-aged white men in leather Harley Davidson biker gear sit on the same rows as young African American men in doo-rags and Timberland boots. A group of Latina Pentecostal women pray over a twenty-something white male with bleach-tipped, spiked hair, who lies before them “slain in the Spirit.” And at one point the entire arena stands to their feet to honor a 106-year-old African American man sitting on the front row. Most gathered appear to take heed to the principle evangelist, Jesse Duplantis, who told the crowd one morning, “forget your color—but not your culture.”

For five days I entered this world in Fort Worth, Texas, worshipping, dining, and deliberating alongside conference attendees as a participant observer. I ascertained that despite the perilous economic times that many participants faced, preachers continued to appeal to the pre-established theological tenets of the Word of Faith movement.

In this chapter I show that these tenets and religious rationalizations correlate with the neoliberal economic policies that cultivated the conditions for the Great Recession to take place. I found that many adherents appreciated the theological consistency the Word of Faith movement offers, and they creatively interpreted core teachings to respond specifically to their particular circumstances. Hearing the teachings of leading Word of Faith teachers apart from the latter interpretations of attendees could lead to an overdetermined account of “hailed” subjects who embrace the ideology of said Word of Faith teachers wholesale.³ This is not the case. Participants possess their own religious aspirations, moral imaginations, and interpretive frameworks within this otherwise predetermined religious world.⁴

Informed by French theorist Pierre Bourdieu, this chapter seeks to demonstrate how persons negotiate structures and cultural rules within a given habitus in order to acquire resources such as material goods, social status, prestige, and/or privileged relationships.⁵ To paraphrase theologian Harvey Cox, religious persons in general, and Pentecostals in particular, improvise like jazz artists. There may be an operative chord structure or repetitive rhythmic refrain within the Word of Faith movement to which persons adhere, but adherents strategically riff and creatively improvise within the system.⁶ Such a theoretical framework, then, allows us to see the Word of Faith movement as determinative without being all-determining, restricting though never restrictive.

This chapter begins with a theological history of the Word of Faith movement and then turns to the adversarial relationship the Word of Faith movement takes toward “the world” in the contemporary moment. Here we see not only how the central tenets of the Word of Faith movement are deployed against perceived secular society but also the ways adherents negotiate multiple worlds and just how much the Word of Faith movement is informed by the same “world systems” it castigates. Moreover, due to this latter point, it will become evident how some adherents deploy the rhetoric of piety (over against politics) and appeals to spiritual authority (as opposed to fundamentalist allegiances) as a means of acquiring spiritual capital within a conservative evangelical habitus, which is informed both by neoliberal economic policies and a conservative theological agenda that ultimately depends upon mass appeal. Finally, considering Word of Faith messages in terms of strictness and/or authoritativeness illuminates additional ways in which the Word of Faith message functions—even in hard economic times—as a baseline that adherents then interpret and adapt.

Living the Higher Life: Historical Overview

The theological background of the Word of Faith movement blends evangelical, Pentecostal, and charismatic strands of the twentieth-century postwar era that built upon New Thought metaphysics and mind-science philosophies dating back to the late nineteenth century. The senior guard of today's Word of Faith cadre is connected to the ministry of the late Kenneth Hagin, Sr. of Broken Arrow, Oklahoma. The Texas native and Assemblies of God minister earned a positive reputation within Pentecostal and charismatic circles in the 1950s and '60s for his clear and coherent teaching style. Though he was a player in the technology of the Pentecostal healing revival sweeping the southern and southwestern regions, he neither maintained nor appeared to desire large campaign operations like William Branham or Oral Roberts. Rather, Hagin emphasized a teaching ministry, believing this to be more accessible in the short term and valuable over the long term than ministries led by charismatic and captivating personalities. This is not to suggest that Hagin did not take advantage of mass media technologies. His *Word of Faith* magazine, *Faith Seminar of the Air* radio program, audiocassette tapes, and scores of published books and pamphlets remain valuable commodities within charismatic circles even years after his death. Even here, however, his straightforward and precise presentation of scriptures to underscore divine health and validate material wealth served as the real attraction. In 1974 Hagin organized the Rhema Bible Training Center, which continues to train many of the leading Word of Faith teachers throughout the world.

The theological character of Hagin's teachings has a much longer genealogy that precedes and transcends the so-called healing revival of the post-World War II era. Hagin's appropriation of nineteenth-century New Thought metaphysic and positive-confession mind science through the writings of Essek William Kenyon is well documented, though it is unproductive to get bogged down in "heresy" versus "orthodoxy" debates as much of the popular literature on the Word of Faith movement has done. Rather, situating Kenyon, Hagin, and their many spiritual interlocutors in a larger cultural context of American metaphysics and its cross-pollination with Holiness, Pentecostal, and mainline traditions of the late nineteenth century and twentieth centuries proves more productive. Such an undertaking requires more time and space than allowed here. As for now, let us be content with highlighting a few undeniable connections between the "Higher Christian Life"/Keswick movements and New Thought metaphysics

of the nineteenth century. For instance, Charles Wesley Emerson's Faith Training College in Boston introduced a young E.W. Kenyon to both the Holiness teachings of Charles Cullis and developing New Thought philosophies of Ralph Waldo Trine. Emerson College president Charles Wesley Emerson had previously taught at Charles Cullis's Faith Training College in Boston, a Holiness movement institutional and educational epicenter, alongside leading nineteenth-century Holiness exponents such as William Boardman (the author of *The Higher Christian Life*), A. B. Earle, and William McDonald, then editor of the *Advocate of Christian Holiness* and the *Christian Witness*. And all first-year students at Emerson were required to take Trine's course on rhetoric with its "Christianized" New Thought inflections.⁷

It was this Keswick emphasis on the denial of self for the purpose of receiving the inward fullness of God that created the conditions that necessitate divine healing. In this vein, Kenyon and others took the traditional substitutionary atonement theory a step further, arguing that the finished work of Christ on the cross affords Christians all the privileges and power of Christ: "He became as we were, so that we might become as He is."⁸ Divine healing, having one's material needs met, and being able to speak to one's situation by faith, then, are spiritual entitlements of Christians. As in New Thought, a certain spiritual discipline and self-mastery are emblematic of a God potentiality latent in us all. Therefore, both Higher Life and New Thought reflect what historian Dale Simmons refers to as the "intuitionist impulse" of the late nineteenth century that emphasized the immanence and even inwardness of God. Building on the writings of eighteenth-century thinkers such as Emmanuel Swedenborg and Immanuel Kant, nineteenth-century transcendentalism contributed to religious and philosophical movements that turned increasingly within in order to deflect social chaos and economic pressures from without. Situated within a growing intellectual context of human progress, perfectability, and pragmatist approach, Higher Life, and New Thought were, according to Simmons, "fleeing legalism and pursuing the interior life of the spirit."⁹

The core theological tenets of the contemporary Word of Faith movement bear the marks of this multitraditioned religious history. There are essentially three main tenets of Word of Faith theology to which Word of Faith teachers remain wed. First, the Bible is conceived as a contract between true believers and God, and persons must come to know their own higher self in Christ according to the laws of the scriptures. Knowledge of one's divine right is contractually

agreed upon in the scriptures, which entitles persons to “name” into existence whatever they desire and “claim” it by faith. Second, the “name it and claim it” component is an act of positive confession. By faith, adherents know who they are in Christ and thus God’s contractual obligation to them as believers. Word of Faith teachers often cite Proverbs 18:1, “The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit,” to foreground positive confession as integral to faith. Words “unleash” faith into the atmosphere actualizing thoughts, ideas, and desires. Just as Christians “confess with [their] mouth” about Jesus being lord as a demonstration of the faith they “believe in their hearts,” so also should they “confess” the other entitlements and provisions the atoning work of Christ on the cross affords. Third, demonstrations of faith must move beyond positive confession (“naming and claiming”) to contractual giving, what Word of Faith adherents refer to as “sowing and reaping.” This is not sacrificial giving in any traditional sense. Rather, due to the preceding two theological principles, adherents are contractually bound to give (sow) just as God is obligated to return one’s gift at least tenfold (reap).¹⁰

This latter principle is among the more controversial and contested aspects of Word of Faith teachings. Seed-faith is more associated with Oral Roberts than Kenneth Hagin. The former pioneered this principle during the 1950s while attempting to subsidize his initial television pilots. As a part of his “Blessing pact” with radio listeners and ministry partners, Roberts taught that believers reap materially in sevenfold proportion to the seeds they sow in faith; namely, sow \$1 and you will reap \$7. This, for Roberts, is the natural order of God’s law.¹¹ Yet by the 1970s, seed-faith became the dominant theme in his teachings. By this point Roberts had developed three key components of seed-faith. First, according to Philippians 4:19 believers must understand that “God is [their] source.” God supplies abundantly, meeting more than just minimal needs. Second, citing Luke 6:38, “Give that it may be given unto you,” the key to receiving anything from God is first to give. And, third, “Expect a miracle” or what many refer to as a “breakthrough.” Since God is faithful to natural law, God, Roberts taught, will release a miracle according to the releasing of one’s faith.¹²

As much as Word of Faith teachers remain wed to theological consistency around these aforementioned tenets, the movement remains somewhat transdenominational. Notwithstanding their neo-Pentecostal roots, Word of Faith congregations such as those pastored by convention speakers are nondenominational and maintain

no affiliation with any Pentecostal fellowship. Hagin's protégés such as Kenneth Copeland (Fort Worth), John Osteen (Houston), and Fred Price (Los Angeles) built many of the largest Protestant ministries, both congregational and media-based, in the United States during the 1970s and '80s, just as Copeland subsequently mentored and launched the ministries of persons such as Creflo Dollar and Jesse Duplantis. Thus due to the influence, appeal, and spiritual authority the movement garnered by their sophisticated use of advanced media technologies in recent decades, the message has attracted followers from both independent and denominational congregations alike. At Word of Faith conventions one can meet groups from local Word of Faith congregations in their respective communities as well as individuals who otherwise attend Methodist, Baptist, and traditional Pentecostal congregations.

"The Word" over "The World"

Creflo Dollar steps to the podium in prime time on the second night of the convention. The Atlanta-based pastor and only African American evangelist invited to preach at this particular meeting is arguably the biggest draw aside from Kenneth Copeland himself. Dollar is highly regarded in neocharismatic circles for his popular books on prosperity and ubiquitous presence on religious broadcasting networks. "That is not our crisis," he tells the crowd to great applause. "The kingdom of God does not need a stimulus package. Heaven is not broke!" Dollar exuberantly declares to the crowd the theme of conferring "God's word" more weight than one's current circumstances. This is what it means to "honor God," and "when you honor God, God will honor you." He assures attendees that they should not be "tempted" not to tithe or allow the state of their finances to "weigh heavier than God's command." Citing Proverbs chapter 3:9 where it states, in part, "trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding," and "honor the Lord with thy substance," he forcefully prods the assembly to "lean not on your own budget." But rather by giving generously toward the offering, God will honor the faithful with a financial "breakthrough." Many nod their heads affirmatively as others scream "Hallelujah" with hands waving toward the sky. Dollar then invites the ushers and musical praise team to come forward, and to a heart-thumping chorus of "It's not by might, it's not by power, but by the supernatural power of the Holy Ghost," attendees place cash and checks in the distributed white buckets.

Though the offering period lasts nearly twenty-five minutes, with about half of that consisting of Dollar's aforementioned offertory appeal, participants appear anxious for the preached "Word," celebrating with rousing applause as Dollar returns to the stage. He then refers to 1 John 5:4 from the *Message* version of the Bible and reads, "Every God-begotten person conquers the world's ways. The conquering power that brings the world to its knees is our faith." Dollar begins by distinguishing between faith and trust. Faith breeds confidence, and trust breeds commitment. Dollar offers these as two sides of the same coin in the life of the believer. "Faith is how we live," he declares. And when persons have "real Bible faith" they are able to remain committed to God's word. For twenty minutes he repeats variations of these points with constant allusions to the media and other similar "worldly systems." And in contrast to what he depicts as the vacillations and insecurity of the "world's ways," those who have faith will remain "committed to the Word because of their confidence in the Word." Then Dollar makes explicit what up to this point had been only implied. "When there is a financial problem going on in our country, we just continue to do as we have always done. We sing in their face while they are crying because our God shall supply all our needs."

The following morning Jerry Savelle reiterated these same central tenets of the Word of Faith movement while demonstrating a discipline to stay on message that might make a White House press secretary jealous. Yet where Dollar foregrounded Word of Faith principles as a segue into the current economic crisis, Savelle named the financial elephant in the room from the outset. "Folks are upset with us because we won't join their recession," Savelle mockingly suggested. Then he exhorts the crowd, "Say with me, 'I'm in this world, but not of it. I'm not normal.'" And to the demonstrative praise of some and with scores of morning worshippers making their way to the stage to sow a financial gift at his feet, Savelle declares, "If you're not of it, you don't have to be affected by it. . . . I'm off limits to all this stuff." Savelle then cites the Old Testament character Isaac noting his success in Egypt during the great famine. "In the same year that everyone is having famine, God will empower you. . . . Isaac increased more and more as everyone else lost more and more."

These sorts of references to the trials and triumphs of biblical figures are staples of evangelical preaching. In interpreting the religious rhetoric of Jerry Falwell, anthropologist Susan Friend Harding notes that Falwell and his followers inhabited "a world generated by Bible-based stories," and Falwell's speech, like the Bible, took on

a generative quality. Those committed to his ministry interpreted Falwell's illustrations like a biblical text: "not as already true, but always coming true."¹³ In this regard, both Falwell and his community of faith became postbiblical characters extending the tales of the Old and New Testament into the contemporary moment. The biblical text, then, is not only the final authority on how persons should live but also an eschatological vision of what ultimately shall be. Word of Faith adherents, not unlike Falwell's politically based neofundamentalist constituency, situate themselves in the text to derive positive penultimate visions of realized victories in the here and now. A man sitting a few rows in front of me at the convention articulated this point. He introduced himself as Earl, an affable and engaging man who smiled with his eyes when he talked with a thick Cajun drawl. He and his wife Geraldine drove over from Shreveport with their pastor and other members of their local Word of Faith congregation. After revealing myself as a researcher interested in the Word of Faith movement, Earl became even more loquacious during the break between the morning sessions. In the past year Earl was laid off from his construction job. Like many in the construction industry, Earl confessed that at age fifty-seven he was not very optimistic about employment in the near future. His wife Geraldine had worked for a major automotive company for almost thirty years, but she, too, according to her husband, was quite nervous about her position. (Geraldine did not seem interested in holding a conversation with me, and even walked away. But she apparently did not have a problem with Earl sharing his thoughts with me as he searched me out on several other occasions throughout the week.)

When I asked Earl whether this was "his recession," he appeared to contradict Jerry Savelle's sentiment. "Oh, we in it!" he declared. "Man, right now I'm broke!" But then he began to expound in a sermon-like though seemingly sincere way.

Satan was trying to pressure my mind with bills. The money I lost in the last two years... Shoot, if I didn't know Jesus, I would have shot myself in the head. I'm fifty-seven. I was trying to retire. But it got to the point where I couldn't sleep at night. That's why I had to go to my brothers in the church so they could pray for me. I'm in the recession. But our God supplies our needs. That's what I have to stand on... It's a true statement. Even though I feel it [the recession], yes we are going to go through things others go through, but we have to trust in God.

Earl shows adherence to the core principles of Word of Faith, but he uses his own interpretive framework. Affirming God's fidelity to the

promise of prosperity does not mean ignoring his own material conditions. There is no reason for him to live in denial concerning the fragility of his family's economic situation. In fact, with his admission of how he would have committed suicide if it had not been for his faith, Earl reveals an awareness of what scholars of religion refer to as theodicy and a sense of the tragic—both of which are traditionally considered absent from Word of Faith theology. But his belief in a covenantal relationship with a God of provision acts as an existential and conceptual life preserver providing buoyancy amidst a flood of financial difficulty. Earl even repeated proudly the convention mantra of the previous day, “God supplies our needs.” But rather than sounding like a compensatory plea or opiate-laced platitude, on Earl's lips the phrase came across as an earnest sentiment intended to inspire one to human action.

Similar was the case with Carlos and Annette. The couple made the two-and-half-hour trek to Fort Worth from the eastern part of the state with their friend Carolyn. Annette, who is currently unemployed but pursuing a doctorate of business administration from an online university, watches Kenneth Copeland and Creflo Dollar “two to three times per week.” And her husband Carlos, a licensed Baptist minister who is currently “underemployed” despite his master of science degree in marketing, shares a similar regular viewing schedule. Carlos seemed less comfortable discussing the couple's financial troubles. He spoke boastfully, clutching his Bible with pride. Like the Baptist preacher he is, the more he quoted scripture, and as biblical narratives poured effortlessly from his mouth, his confidence grew and his posture straightened. “With the word we don't have to hear about all that negativity. You don't have to be rich to die. You don't have to be saved to die. Anybody can die.” Yet Annette wanted to bring the conversation back to their finances. “We are having to budget through financial difficulties, paycheck to paycheck,” she said demurely while turning slowly toward her husband as if to both affirm him and hoping not to have embarrassed him. “I know this is our recession. We are in the middle of it. Yet God keeps blessing. For instance, my unemployment benefits being extended was the Lord. And at times that all the money was gone, the church let him [Carlos] preach. Our God is the source of our supply.”

But despite the emphasis on “victorious living” and “God as your source of supply” at the individual level, an oppositional tone was increasingly present among the preachers by midweek. Like Dollar's reading 1 John 5, referencing “the conquering power that

brings the world to its knees,” and Savelle’s allusion to Isaac, who “increased more and more, as everyone lost more and more,” speakers constructed an image of prosperity that relied on a defeated other. Not unlike the nineteenth-century Higher Life/Keswick writers, who faced charges of spiritual hubris, there appears to be an edifying dimension to the thought of “the world” in peril while “true believers” prosper. “The Word” was being deployed as a weapon against a number of named and unnamed critics, namely the media and the federal government. “They need to know that every time they try to touch us we get bigger. They think folks going to leave. They think our ministries will shrink. But they can’t understand why we continue to prosper,” Dollar tells the crowd to a rousing applause at one point in his sermon. And in this particular context one cannot help to think that Dollar is referencing the larger than normal negative media attention he and other select televangelists have received in recent years since the launching of Senator Charles Grassley’s investigations into ministry spending in 2007. Grassley, a Republican from Iowa and ranking member of the Senate Finance Committee, was interested in whether high-profile ministries were abusing their tax-exempt status. Thus, he issued individualized letters inquiring into the spending patterns of six evangelists: Benny Hinn, Joyce Meyer, Paula White, Eddie Long, Creflo Dollar, and Kenneth Copeland. Forever entertained by the salacious potential of religious scandal, the media weighed in. And when the toxicity of the economic crash appeared to discredit the central tenets of the Word of Faith message for many pundits, commentators, and scholars (myself included), Word of Faith teachers appeared to embrace the philosophy that the best offense is a better defense.¹⁴ By casting themselves (and vicariously the larger gathering) as prophetic, truculent martyrs standing on “the Word” against “the world,” Word of Faith teachers engaged in spiritual (and rhetorical) jujitsu, utilizing the power of the opposition as a weapon. Thus, in the face of economic uncertainty and failing “systems of the world,” commitment to the principles of the Word of Faith became even more of a virtue.

For instance, Jesse Duplantis, the comedic evangelist from Louisiana who has been referred to as the Robin Williams of the Word of Faith movement, raises the question, “Who would ever write a book against Faith?” It can be safely assumed that Duplantis is referring to the many publications that have sought to discredit the health and wealth gospel such as Dave Hunt and T. A. McMahon’s *The Seduction of Christianity* (1985), D. R. McConnell’s *A Different*

Gospel (1995), and most recently Hank Hanegraaff's *Christianity in Crisis* (2009). "You may get mad at us. But we just want you to do what Jesus said... Oh, ye of little faith," Duplantis laments as he rhetorically conflates both the verb and noun definitions of the word faith with the Word of Faith movement. And throughout the week Kenneth Copeland repeatedly referred to the US federal government as a "Babylonian system," referencing the wicked Old Testament empire. According to Copeland's jeremiad, this system is "man trying to meet his own needs without God." At the Wednesday morning session, Copeland argued that it began with Nimrod, the grandson of Ham and great-grandson of Noah. Since Noah's son's Ham and Japheth left Noah to "do their own thing, they produced the world's first king. And he was a jerk. And he brought in socialism, producing the tower of Babel. God capped that system with the tower of Babel. And every Babylonian, socialist system since then has grown up to a place and collapsed." After providing this "historical" foundation, Copeland made the direct link to the contemporary moment with a bold declaration. Speaking to the debate over healthcare reform that filled the media cycle at the time, Copeland declared, "No government can pay for healthcare for a nation full of sick people. Everybody that has tried has failed at it."

The only speaker who did not take this oppositional approach was Gloria Copeland. For the entire week she spoke to the theme of "talking to things," in reference to the central Word of Faith tenet of positive confession. Limited to the 1:30 p.m. time slot, the least attended hour throughout the week, Gloria Copeland reiterated the core principles of the Word of Faith. Yet she was least likely of the speakers to emphasize the supernatural and miraculous, opting instead for a message of "faith and patience." "If you speak to the car you want, it may take three years. But keep believing for the car. If you don't speak to it, where are you going to be anyway?" she asks the sparse afternoon crowd. "If it takes three years, so be it. You have a new car. Patience is the key." Moreover, unlike the other four speakers, Gloria Copeland continuously encouraged persons to reject debt, live within one's means, and "know the difference between need and want." Interestingly enough, like the previous quote, most of her examples involve some sort of luxury good such as a new car or home, but with constant reference to Mark 11:23, "whosoever shall say unto the mountain, be thou moved, and be thou cast into the sea; and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those things which he saith shall come to pass, he shall have whatsoever he saith."

The Politics of Spiritual Capital

The Word of Faith movement's relationship to politically active Christian groups such as the former Moral Majority and Christian Coalition in the 1980s or the Family Research Council and Christian Reconstructionists of recent decades is tangential at best. Word of Faith teachers have been successful at reaching across political, generational, and racial lines due to their emphasis on scripture, prophecy, healing, and wealth rather than hot-button political issues that have largely defined the American culture wars. This is not to say, however, that the theology of the Word of Faith movement is not consistent with conservative political currents. Abortion, homosexuality, the teaching of evolution, and any form of religious pluralism are all generally rejected as counter to their interpretation of scripture. At one point during the week Kenneth Copeland even asserted that he does not believe in kids going to public schools or state colleges and universities because "it tears down their faith." Several speakers offered theological interpretations of texts that directly and indirectly reinforced neoliberal economic and social policies.

Jesse Duplantis suggested that aside from Word of Faith teachings transforming the heart and self-conception of individuals, charity and justice issues amount to a fool's errand. "People are genetically altered to accept welfare," he told the assembly on Tuesday morning. Duplantis then offered an anecdote about "a friend" who went into a shelter immediately following Katrina and could not find one person out of 1,500 to accept a job on the spot. Without any reference to the traumatic effects of such a natural disaster, the devastating loss of personal property, and anxiety concerning missing family members in the wake of tragedy, Duplantis declared to the moans and supportive head-nodding of the crowd, "people have the attitude you owe [them]." After Copeland made the declaration that every nation that has attempted universal healthcare has "failed at it," he argued from the Word of Faith principles that "poverty is not a money problem. Sickness and disease is not a medical problem. They are spiritual problems." Referencing the Obama administration's healthcare plan that was being debated in Congress at the time as well as the opposition's talking points, Kenneth Copeland even told the crowd, "He [President Obama] is going to start pulling the plug on old people." And Creflo Dollar told the assembly on Thursday morning, "It's better to trust in the Lord, than to put your confidence in any man, 401k or stimulus package. The only stimulus package you need is wrapped up in this book. And if you need stimulating, grab you a scripture."

So in place of an explicit call for private enterprise, limited government, and a competitive open market ruled by the logic of an invisible hand, Word of Faith teachers offer a theological corollary: a private spirituality, a government that is irrelevant, and a world of unlimited possibilities for believers animated by their own faith and the logic of a supernatural, contractually bound hand of God. Nevertheless, aside from the central tenets of the Word of Faith movement, there are no other political (or doctrinal) commitments one need make. Thus one can get the impression that the Word of Faith movement is more politically conservative and even fundamentalist in profession than it actually is in practice. This disjunction between thought and action allows persons to adhere to “the Word” and even frame themselves as a righteous remnant while yet seeking mass appeal. The crowd is allowed access through the narrow gate. And Word of Faith teachers are able to affirm the first principles of their faith over against “the World” while simultaneously offering a vision of an alternative reality characterized by all of the pleasures and luxuries “Babylon” has to offer.

This reveals, then, the irony of and ambiguities within Word of Faith teachers taking this jeremiad approach. It is consistent with Sacvan Bercovitch’s assertions that the jeremiad form in America works within a particular myth system insofar as it can help to reify both the hegemony of laissez-faire principles and an ultimately limited national identity. As a ritual form, the jeremiad often works to situate communities back within unjust structures and to limit dissent from the masses. As Bercovitch states, “For leaders of politics and industry in the nineteenth century, the symbol of America was the key to social control. For revivalists, it was the link between religion and middle-class values. For reformers it was a way of fusing the millenarian impulse (which tended elsewhere to challenge the status quo in basic ways) with the concept of gradual improvement.”¹⁵ In other words, laissez-faire principles construed from particular mythic conceptions of reality are designed to “contain self-assertion.” Bercovitch employs the term containment in a double sense: a means of sustenance where it unleashes creative energies and visions while yet confining listeners’ imaginations within the boundaries of a given mythology.

For instance, let us consider the cultural correlations between the prevalence of the prosperity gospel in recent decades and the housing and stock market bubbles that precipitated the crash. Both were fueled, in part, by ever-increasing super-sized conceptions of life that equate success with grandness of size and prosperity with pecuniary

gain. For the Word of Faith movement, it took the form of a realized eschatology that promised the believer “everything in this world” including the supernatural power of Jesus to “name and claim” the desires of one’s heart into existence. For Washington and Wall Street it took the forms of market deregulation and tax cuts that, by far, benefited the wealthiest Americans and cultivated the incentives to engage in what Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson refer to as “winner-take-all” politics and finance.¹⁶ Couple both of these with an optimistic telos of inevitable financial growth and one has the basic outlines of America’s most recent unsustainable gilded era. Mortgage lenders created exotic loans that were eventually rolled up into and sold off as high-risk securities, kicking the can of debt up and down the financial sector. Buyers assumed subprime teaser rates with confidence in inflated home prices and their capacity to refinance before balloon payments were due. Homeowners were using the apparent equity in their homes to pay down other debts, pay college tuitions, purchase new cars and fund luxury vacations. All the while television shows such as MTV’s *Cribs* or HGTV’s *Flip This House* and *Property Ladder* encouraged viewers that the game of acquisition is not only desirable but profitable. At the same time, persons within Word of Faith congregations testified to the “goodness of God” as a result of being “blessed” with a new home, luxury cars, and/or other luxury items that were often the result of easy credit and unmanageable debt.

It makes sense, then, that the cultural and economic climates of the past few decades have heightened a longstanding American mythology that both structured and animated the Word of Faith movement’s success. Whether it’s the ruling ideal of rags to riches, myth of American success, or America as a land of unbridled opportunity and economic plenty where one can amass infinite wealth by the sweat of one’s brow, Word of Faith teachers both cast and model this theological vision for adherents. If Wall Street CEOs and the American overclass can live the American Dream, then the faithful believe that God wants them, too, to prosper and be in good health, even as their souls prosper. The *doxa* that informs ardent devotion to these theological principles becomes largely indistinguishable from its socioeconomic, though no less religious, variant of free-market fundamentalism. This is the cultural habitus in which Word of Faith participants live, move, and have their being. True, these principles provide persons like Carlos, Annette, and Earl the conceptual tools to avoid making peace with unemployment, economic disenfranchisement, and overall existential angst. Nevertheless, these same principles also condition and thus contain adherents’ conceptual capacity to call into question the

established rules and rhythms of the habitus. In this regard, Word of Faith teachers are in a win-win situation, fueled by both evidence and anxiety. When economic times are good, this is evidence that the core principles of the Word of Faith movement work. And when economic times are bad, the same principles assist persons in allaying and alleviating the anxieties that come with economic uncertainty and financial fragility.

This is not to suggest, however, that participants operate in a closed, wholly determinist cultural system. According to Pierre Bourdieu, a cultural habitus provides coherence and consistency for an individual's practice, a practice that is often unreflective and takes place within a broader structural frame informed by the material conditions of existence characteristic of a class condition.¹⁷ The Word of Faith movement thrives on "forgetting history" and the assumed natural state of competitive, consumer capitalism (or at least the positive by-products afforded to the privileged). But I distinguish my analysis from Bourdieu insofar as his theory provides an overly deterministic account of religious experience and behavior. This is indeed one of the central and persistent criticisms of Bourdieu's theoretical vision. If you hold on to the derivative nature of the habitus too tightly, even with Bourdieu's allowance for unpredictable spontaneous behavior that is unconscious and prereflective, human behavior remains a mere reflection of the material conditions of existence. There has to be room for willful, volitional conscious behavior. To be sure, I have sought to articulate the many ways Word of Faith participants operate reflectively and unreflectively within a cultural frame. But to deny conscious motives and personal goals to human actors is theoretically flawed and methodologically untenable.

Here the insights of sociologist Bradford Verter are instructive. Verter thinks "with and against" Bourdieu insofar as he builds upon and moves beyond Bourdieu's notion of symbolic/cultural capital to posit a notion of spiritual capital. He believes the latter, whether as a spiritual disposition of piety or religious "tastes," can be a part of a larger competitive class struggle. Thus, "spiritual knowledge, competencies, and preferences may be understood as valuable assets in the economy of symbolic goods"; such spiritual capital, Verter contends *pace* Bourdieu, "might affect social dynamics beyond the arena of competition between religious professionals" within different fields.¹⁸

Viewing spiritual capital in relation to the fields of elite cultural production and political power provides one example. Certain religious practices such as mystical esotericism may be highly esteemed

within fields of elite cultural production due to their comparative rank within a hierarchical social order. The “tastes” of members of the privileged class determine and maintain their value. Similar to the ways an appreciation of art, music, and food are tied to social classes and thus used as a means of strategy in the game of social competition, the seemingly restricted nature of certain religious practices heightens their cultural value. The greater the cultural restrictions, the greater the cultural esteem. Religious esteem and spiritual capital are inverted, however, when it comes to the field of political power. The restricted, elite nature of esotericism has less political import due to its lack of wide cultural appeal.¹⁹ On the other hand, popular religious traditions, those which are culturally accessible and thus often denigrated within both the fields of religious and elite cultural production for their perceived chintzy tastes, are more in line with and esteemed by the field of political power, namely, the networks between the religious Right and the Republican Party or more recently Rick Warren and other evangelicals in relation to the Obama administration. So, according to Verter, whereas lack of accessibility becomes a positive attribute in terms of cultural production, more accessible spiritual capital is usually correlated with political power. And though spiritual capital is diminished among faith communities and as a cultural product when it is regarded as too popular and large scale (like televangelism), spiritual capital is increased in relation to political power.

Verter’s notion of spiritual capital thus provides us with a religiously informed variant of Bourdieu’s notions of symbolic/cultural capital. Rather than being contained within religious hierarchies (similar to education, race/ethnicity, and social networks), spiritual dispositions can be both products and instruments within a system of class relations. Spiritual capital invariably means that persons are able to appeal to and employ their religious identities in negotiating their world as they know it. Horace and Reba were attending the convention from Canada. Both originally grew up as Lutherans in Europe, but their “faith walk began when they received Kenneth Copeland ministry tapes from a friend.” Horace’s job as an engineer that “provides the financial resources for Reba to stay home and concentrate on the children,” expressed an utter indifference toward Copeland’s prosperity gospel, which is a real draw for many. Dining in the private clubroom of the swanky host hotel (which was not particularly populated by conference attendees), Horace states, “Health and wealth is just a part of his message. It’s a no-brainer that God wants us to prosper. But I listen to Kenneth Copeland to hear the truth.” When I pressed the

couple about the recession and its impact on people's lives, Reba, with no sense of smugness and evident compassion said, "Persons can and will come out of it. It's not the end. That's why we are responsible to help people see the truth. You have to have hope. And this is a message of big hope." Horace chimes in, reiterating his previous point, "Kenneth Copeland preaches the truth. And the truth will set you free." Yet in discussing their past lives of drug and alcohol abuse, rejection of sin—not prosperity—is the theme to which both constantly return. "Sin puts us on a dangerous path," Reba said. Horace followed, "They preach the truth. They preach the Bible. Kenneth Copeland helps me to stand on the word so I won't fall." It became evident that this "truth" is privileged more than visions of wealth. The couple's personal sense of religious piety, according to their account, has allowed them to transcend the troubled relationships and habits of their past. Thus, unlike many who identify with Word of Faith teachers due to their teachings on and displays of material wealth, Horace and Reba access and deploy Copeland's holiness message of sobriety from drugs and alcohol as both justification for and symbols of their economic security and family stability, a form of spiritual capital that is related though not reducible to the prosperity gospel message.

Piety over Politics and Authority over Allegiance

As noted earlier, unlike many conservative evangelicals, Word of Faith teachers have garnered mass appeal by avoiding what participants interpret as politically divisive issues. True to form, the greatest push-back from respondents involved the overt references to political matters. Earl, as an example, looked evidently uncomfortable during Savelle's Wednesday morning sermon, as the preacher made multiple digs concerning President Barack Obama and his administration. When Copeland immediately followed with the aforementioned comments concerning "a Babylonian, socialist system" and "pulling the plug on old people"—both sounding like talking points from a Fox News talk show—Earl rose to his feet, made a dismissive gesture toward the stage, and walked out of the arena. When I asked him during the next break why he had walked out, Earl said, "I just couldn't take it anymore. God establishes government." Earl continued. "We just had a historical moment: a black man became president of the US. And he's been ridiculed since day one. God said I appoint kings and princes. We play our part, but he was appointed president. The same respect you gave President Bush, give it to Obama. We don't

ridicule him. We pray for him. So I had to leave to get my composure. You see, if I had stayed, I would eventually miss my blessing.”

Once again Earl demonstrated his sophisticated and consistent understanding of traditional Word of Faith teachings. He was absolutely correct insofar as Word of Faith teachers have referenced Romans 13:1 in the past to either remain silent or tacitly support select presidential administrations and federal policies. “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God,” the King James translation reads. In 2004, Creflo Dollar posted an open letter on his Web site expressing “concern” about the number of Americans protesting the war on terror. Not only did the article suggest that protesters should pray for repentance, but Dollar also provided positive confessions to be spoken toward the president and armed service members, “If you have taken part in any protest or have allowed any corrupt communication to flow out of your mouth concerning the president,” the letter states, “repent and begin to show your support for him by calling his name before God.”

Carlos, Annette, and Carolyn expressed a similar disdain for what they considered inappropriate criticisms of President Obama. Carlos, like Earl, imputed a racial motive. “You’ve got folk who think they supposed to be ruling. I’m talking about white people. So I don’t like when they blame Obama.” Carolyn reaffirmed her faith in God in defense of Obama, “God can always make a way. Whoever and however God uses them,” she said. And Annette attributed it to “they getting away from the truth when they start getting into all that politics” demonstrating that she, too, holds on to the stark division between “the word” (the truth) and “the world” (politics). Horace and Reba shared this latter sentiment. In our final interview, after one of their declarations about how Kenneth Copeland speaks and teaches “the truth,” I inquired about outlandish claims made by Copeland that week such as, “97 percent of business school graduates are failures in business and life because of the world’s system” or that every nation that has tried to provide healthcare has failed. Horace initially remained quiet while Reba interjected, “We’re from Europe. We have excellent coverage. When he said that, I thought, ‘Canada has got that system. Many parts of Europe have that system.’” But she then makes an allowance for Copeland by suggesting, “I guess it was about his [Copeland’s] passion for the message of taking care of yourself. That is our first responsibility.” Then Horace declares, “When he preaches the Bible, he preaches the truth. He didn’t stick to the Bible.”

To be clear, though Word of Faith teachers are lovers of the Bible and stick to their core principles, that does not mean they are fundamentalists in any sense. Most adherents, as noted, come from multiple (sometimes competing) faith backgrounds, and they clearly reinterpret Word of Faith teachings in order to exercise their own forms of spiritual capital. Word of Faith teachers are conservative, though not necessarily strict. And they are authoritative though not fundamentalist. Part of the analytic problem may involve how scholars have equated terms such as strictness, conservatism, fundamentalism, and authoritativeness. For instance, Laurence Iannaccone's contemporary classic though much contested article "Why Strict Churches Are Strong" argues that strict churches strengthen congregations by screening out members who lack commitment and thus reduce the "free rider problem." Iannaccone defines strictness as "the degree to which a group limits and thereby increases the cost of nongroup activities such as socializing with members of other churches or pursuing 'secular past times.'"²⁰ Strict religious groups, Iannaccone argues, are able to mitigate members' participation in other groups by socially stigmatizing members by way of distinctive diet, dress, grooming, and other social customs that demarcate their bodies from the larger society. Moreover, even private activities such as drinking alcohol, smoking, and sex, can be curtailed by "limiting the size of congregations, holding meetings in members' homes, and demanding that members routinely socialize with each other."²¹

To be sure, this sort of conservative approach to the world, coupled with its resultant sectarian posture, characterizes religious fundamentalism. And the absolutist, bifurcating rhetoric that draws lines between "the Word" and "the world" among Word of Faith teachers appears, at face value, to be consistent with this sectarian posture. But we have already seen that the Word of Faith movement resists Iannaccone's definition of strictness in almost every way. First, the quest for luxury goods such as nice homes, fancy cars, and expensive clothes, not to mention the associated lifestyles, are individualized, nongroup activities that place persons at the center of many secular pastimes, particularly many of the associated trappings of leisure culture. Second, it is assumed by Word of Faith teachers that those who partner with their ministries and attend their mass meetings not only associate with but also are themselves members of other churches. And, third, since the primary means of ministry for Duplantis, Dollar, Sevelle, and the Copelands is religious broadcasting and large events across the United States, Europe, and Africa, home meetings and small social networks that monitor private behavior are not even

realistic options. Not to mention the fact that as opposed to “limiting the size of congregations,” Word of Faith churches are among the largest in the nation where many parishioners attend in anonymity.

Joseph Tamney and Stephen Johnson counter the strict churches thesis by teasing out the difference between strictness and authoritativeness. Their survey of over 650 conservative, largely white and African American Protestants of diverse age groups from Indiana reveals that while strictness in terms of antimodernist conceptions of society, maintaining a distinctive lifestyle, and stringent moral codes of inclusion are more appealing to older and less formally educated persons, strict churches are not more popular across the board. Only 9 percent of respondents affirmed strictness as an ideal characteristic of their church. On the other hand, the leading characteristic of an ideal church among survey respondents (67.8 percent) was “truth,” defined as a pastor who speaks with certainty. Thus Tamney and Johnson show that persons distinguish between strictness and authoritativeness. This is instructive when assessing the Word of Faith movement. Strict, fundamentalist, politically conservative churches are always authoritative. Yet authoritative and even politically conservative churches need be neither fundamentalist nor strict and restrictive. For the latter group, those who “prefer a church led by a pastor who is certain that what he [sic] teaches is the truth may not believe that the pastor should demand uncritical acceptance of what the pastor understands to be the truth.”²² This is an additional reason why Word of Faith teachers seem not to go wrong sticking to the core principles of the Word of Faith. The seeming clarity and coherence of the Word of Faith message provides the authoritative baseline from which persons, like those represented in this chapter, can then appropriate, negotiate, and religiously interpret on their own terms.

Conclusion

This paper sought to provide an account of how leading Word of Faith evangelists successfully appeal to the core tenets of the health and wealth gospel amidst the worst national economic crisis since the Great Depression. Clear and consistent Word of Faith principles lend themselves to the authoritative system of “truth” that many evangelicals find convincing and compelling. During times of economic uncertainty and fragility, pious devotion to these principles is worn by many as badges of faith and fidelity. Yet these are not closed ethical systems. We see that conference attendees and prosperity gospel participants appropriate, negotiate, and contest Word of Faith

teachings based on their own cultural locations, personal experiences, and spiritual aspirations. And rather than a means to deny or obscure harsh material realities such as unemployment, financial strain, or social chaos, the Word of Faith movement offers a theological chord structure from which persons can theologically riff and spiritually improvise.

Endnotes

1. All undocumented quotations in this paper derive from field notes taken at the Southwest Believers Convention, Fort Worth, Texas, August 2009. All names of interviewees have been changed to protect their identities, even as I would like to thank the many conference attendees who were so generous with their time and so thoughtful concerning their own testimonies. I would also like to thank the members of my “Pentecostalism and Prosperity” seminar at Harvard Divinity School. Samantha Fong, Quaime Lee, Chelsea Shover, and Katie Lazarowicz are not only phenomenal students and thinkers, but they proved to be valuable intellectual interlocutors as I sought to complete this article.
2. Scott Billingsley, *It's a New Day: Race and Gender in the Modern Charismatic Movement* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008), 6.
3. According to Louis Althusser, individuals are subjected into a dominant ideological system by a hailing process which he refers to as interpellation. A mass-mediated message, for instance, calls out (hails) viewers with the end result being the total acceptance (subjectification) of a particular ideological proposition. Persons may resist the interpellation process with the understanding of being placed outside the system as rebels. There is little room for polyvalent interpretations or resistance within the ideological system itself. Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Lenin and Philosophy, and Others* (London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 174–75.
4. To be sure, this project is theoretically informed by the “lived religion” approach that, according to historian David Hall, is concerned with “representing our subjects as they live with and work through multiple realms of meaning.” It is the way persons practice their faith in complicated and even contradictory ways that disrupts the “official” prescriptions of any given faith community. Practice, to again cite Hall, “bears the marks of both regulation and what, for want of a better word, we may term resistance. It is not wholly one or the other.” David D. Hall, ed. *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), xi.

5. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology 16 (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 42–46.
6. Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley Pub, 1995), 147.
7. Dale H. Simmons, *E. W. Kenyon and the Postbellum Pursuit of Peace, Power, and Plenty*, Studies in Evangelicalism 13 (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1997), 14.
8. *Ibid.*, 29.
9. *Ibid.*, 91.
10. Milmon F. Harrison, *Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 8–11.
11. Oral Roberts, “Do You Want God to Return Your Money Seven Times?” *America’s Healing Magazine* (April 1954).
12. David Edwin Harrell, *Oral Roberts: An American Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 461–62.
13. Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 27.
14. Deborah Potter, “Prosperity Gospel,” in *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, an online companion to the weekly television program, (PBS, 2007); David Van Biema, “Maybe We Should Blame God for the Subprime Mess,” *Time* (October 3 2008); Jonathan L. Walton, “Tax-Exempt? Lifestyles of the Rich and Religious,” *Christian Century* (January 29 2008); Hanna Rosin, “Did Christianity Cause the Crash?,” *The Atlantic* (December 2009).
15. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 180.
16. Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).
17. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 78–79.
18. Bradford Verter, “Spiritual Capital: Theorizing Religion with Bourdieu against Bourdieu,” *Sociological Theory* 21:2 (2003): 157.
19. *Ibid.*, 160–62.
20. Laurence Iannaccone, “Why Strict Churches Are Strong,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 99:5 (1994): 1182.
21. *Ibid.*, 1188.
22. Joseph Tamney and Stephen Johnson, “The Popularity of Strict Churches,” *Review of Religious Research* 39:3 (1998): 219.

