

A critique of the concept of spiritual laws taught by Kenneth Hagin and Kenneth Copeland

Mark Woodward, December 2010

A key belief of the Word of Faith movement to which the ministries of Kenneth Hagin and Kenneth Copeland belong is the need for faith in order to receive miraculous results. This essay will explore the role that faith plays in the belief system put forward by Hagin and Copeland, focusing particularly on their tendency to formulate spiritual laws which, when activated, are supposed to guarantee healing and prosperity.

Spiritual laws – explanation and source of teachings

Throughout the teaching of Hagin and Copeland there is an emphasis on the idea that following certain rules of faith will always bring about the desired results, whether they be in areas of physical healing or prosperity.

Hagin (1983, p76, cf. 1985, p25, pp89-92) talks of how he once had a vision where Jesus instructed him to write down four points, telling him 'If anybody, anywhere, will take these four steps or put these four principles into operation, he will always receive whatever he wants from Me or from God the Father'.

Copeland (1974, p19) explains that 'The law of the spirit life is the master law under which we operate as children of God. It supersedes the law of sin and death, and faith causes it to function. There are certain elements which, when combined, will bring forth the result God intends'. He considers God's promise of salvation, which is available to all who respond to it in faith, extrapolating this truth and making the much bolder claim that 'Any law that God has ever revealed to his saints will never

pass away. It will work every time it is put to work' (ibid., p21). These laws are seen to work for anyone who puts them in to practice, regardless of whether they consider themselves to be a Christian or not, with Hagin (1980, pp3-4) revealing that he has seen 'unsaved people getting results' by 'cooperating with the law of God – the law of faith'.

The Word of Faith teachers generally set out step by step exactly how the laws of faith should be followed in order to get the desired result. For example, Hagin (1983, pp76-85) claims that Jesus told him that the four steps were to 'Say it', 'Do it', 'Receive it', and 'Tell it'. Copeland (1985, p34) similarly claims that there are 'success formulas in the Word of God' which 'produce results when used as directed'. He goes on to quote Mark 11:23, commenting that 'Here Jesus introduced a spiritual principle – a spiritual law – that works'.

Source of beliefs about spiritual laws

These assertions concerning the laws of faith seem to be derived from two fundamental beliefs.

The Bible is completely reliable as the word of God

The first foundation of the laws of faith is the belief that God's word is unchanging, and that he is completely faithful to what he says. The Bible, which is taken to be God's word, is read as a collection of logical truth statements, with scant reference to any context or genre.

Hagin (1985, p8) exhorts his believers to have 'real faith', or 'heart faith', that the Bible is true in their situation, even when their 'head faith' leads them to believe otherwise. 'Real faith in the Word says "If God says it is so, it is so. If He says, '*By whose stripes ye were healed,*' I am healed." ... In other words, real faith simply says about one's self what the

Word says' (ibid.). He mentions a motto that he inherited from the Southern Baptists that says 'The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it', explaining that 'That means I believe what the Word says whether things seem like the Bible is so or not' (Hagin, 1993, p119).

Copeland (1974, pp19-20, cf. 1985, p34) similarly encourages his followers to see the Bible as statements of unchanging spiritual laws, asserting that 'The Bible says that God's Word is established forever and it is law (see 1 Peter 1:25). When God speaks, His words become law in the world of the spirit'.

The Universe is governed by spiritual laws

Secondly, the laws of faith are based on the belief that faith is written in to spiritual laws which govern the universe. Copeland (1974, pp18-19) explains what he calls the 'Laws of Prosperity', as being a consequence of the spiritual forces, including the force of faith, that govern the universe.

There are laws of the world of the spirit and there are laws of the world of the natural. ... The law of gravity would be meaningless if gravity were not a real force. It is the force of gravity which makes the law of gravity work. In the same way, spiritual law would be useless if the force of faith were not a real force; but faith *is* a real force. Faith is a spiritual force, a spiritual energy, a spiritual power. It is this force of faith which makes the laws of the spirit world function. When the force of faith is put to work, these laws of the spirit function according to the way God says they will.

One of Hagin's foundational teachings is that believers should possess the "God-kind" of faith. This is derived from his interpretation of Mark 11:22, normally translated as Jesus telling his disciples to 'have faith in God', as meaning to 'have the God-kind of faith' (Hagin,

1983, p95). He explains that God exhibited faith in order to create the world, asserting that the God-kind of faith

is the kind of faith that spoke the world into existence!

Hebrews 11:3

Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.

How did God do it? God believed that what He said would come to pass. He spoke the Word, and there was earth. ... That is the God-kind of faith. *God believed what He said would come to pass, and it did!* (ibid., pp96-97, emphasis his)

Hagin believes that God's words, spoken in faith, had real force to create the universe, later stating that '*Words filled with faith are the most powerful things in all the world*' (ibid, p101, emphasis his). Copeland (1980, p4) similarly quotes this same verse from Hebrews 11, explaining that 'Each time God spoke, He released His faith – the creative power to bring his words to pass'.

Hagin and Copeland consistently teach that faith, and the laws of faith, are fundamental to how the universe operates, and that God demonstrated faith right from the creation of the world.

Discussion of spiritual laws

A Pathetic Puppet

Much of the criticism of Word of Faith teaching on spiritual laws centres around the perception that the teachers are suggesting that the laws of faith, rather than a personal

omnipotent God, are in fact governing the world. McConnell is very critical of the notion that faith governs the universe, and the resulting laws of faith that the teachers derive. Reacting to quotations from Hagin, Fred Price and the man he considers to be the father of the Word of Faith movement, E. W. Kenyon, McConnell (1995, p137) claims

The Faith theology in principle teaches a personal God. But in practice the Faith God differs little from the god of the metaphysical cults. Both must do the bidding of the spiritual laws that govern the universe. Neither is free to disregard these laws. It is precisely because of this universal system of spiritual laws that the numerous formulas of the Faith theology (supposedly) work.

Discussion of the similarities that McConnell alleges between the beliefs of the Word of Faith teachers and metaphysical cults is beyond the scope of this essay, but nevertheless, McConnell's assertion that in the belief system of the faith teachers it is in fact the spiritual laws that govern the universe, rather than the personal God of the Bible, is a serious one. While Hagin and others certainly acknowledge a personal God in their teachings, reiterating that it is God who works in response to faith, McConnell argues that their insistence that certain laws always hold, and the implication that God himself is bound by the laws of faith, is tantamount to saying that the laws themselves are god.

Hanegraaff (1993, p97) goes further in his criticism, saying that 'God is portrayed as a pathetic puppet at the beck and call of his creation. ... [H]e is bound by the laws of the spirit world and is dependent on the force of faith'.

Perriman (2003, p139) doesn't necessarily agree, however, that the teaching concerning laws of faith attempts to control God or usurp his authority. He observes that 'Faith still operates within a covenantal framework: the laws are underwritten by God and express the will of God'. Rather than seeing God as being helplessly subject to the laws of faith,

Perriman regards the Word of Faith exponents as teaching that God voluntarily restricts himself to acting in line with the spiritual laws. Bowman (2001, p203) likewise is reluctant to accuse Hagin, Copeland and others of 'depersonalizing God or of making him into our cosmic servant', although he does acknowledge that at times some Word of Faith teachers have treated God in these ways.

God and the laws of faith

It isn't entirely clear whether Hagin and Copeland believe that God is unwillingly subject to the laws, or the force, of faith that rule the universe, or whether their belief is that God has ordained to work in certain ways that can simply be described in terms of spiritual laws.

Critics have generally been sceptical of the notion that God acts through faith. Perriman (2003, pp139-140) argues against the translation of Mark 11:22 as 'faith of God' on the grounds of Greek grammar, and the fact that the Bible as a whole and this passage in particular portray faith as a response to doubt and uncertainty, and not as an attribute of an all-knowing, all-powerful God. Farah (1980, pp100-105) on the other hand believes that 'the faith of God' is a valid English translation of the Greek verse Mark 11:22, but far from meaning that God requires faith to act, he sees this verse as referring to the gift of faith that God gives to people (cf. Romans 12:3).

Another verse often used by the Word of Faith teachers to demonstrate that God acts through faith is Hebrews 11:3, which Hagin interprets as meaning that God had faith as he created the world. However this is surely an elementary misreading of the potentially ambiguous English King James Version translation of the verse, as demonstrated by Hanegraaff (1993, p92) who goes in to some detail driving home the point that 'Far from teaching us that God by His faith created the world, the text clearly states that *we by faith*

understand that God created the world' (emphasis his).

A crucial point here is whether Hagin and Copeland teach that the God *requires* faith in order to act, or if they believe simply that he has designed the universe in such a way that he, and his creation, are able to accomplish things through faith. This distinction seems to represent the fine line between a theology that goes against the vast majority of both mainstream Christianity and the biblical texts, whereby the spiritual laws or the 'force of faith', rather than a personal God, are ruling the universe, and a slightly less unorthodox position whereby God has deliberately ordained to limit himself to working in and through faith.

The positions of Hagin and Copeland on this point don't seem entirely clear, with critics divided as to their teaching (McConnell and Hanegraaff believing they are essentially teaching that God is governed by spiritual laws, with Perriman and Bowman open to the possibility that the teaching allows God to retain his sovereignty). Part of the difficulty here is that the books of the Faith teachers tend to be highly rhetorical, often lacking rigour and precision. Perriman (2003, p143) explains that

The idea that faith is a substantive force or spiritual law... may be a departure from the orthodox relational understanding, but it can also be seen as a rhetorical strategy – a means of making a rather abstract and elusive notion more comprehensible.

If we agree with Perriman that spiritual laws could simply be a rhetorical tool to make abstract concepts more concrete and applicable to daily life, rather than a controlling force that governs the universe and even God himself, we must then ask whether the concept of spiritual laws is a useful and valid tool in describing the way God works. Is a spiritual force or law, delivering predictable results whenever certain faith-related conditions are met, a

reliable and useful metaphor to describe the way God interacts with his people?

Are Spiritual Laws a helpful tool?

In order to assess whether it is appropriate and helpful to talk about spiritual laws, we must reflect on the teachings of Hagin and Copeland in the light of the Bible and of human experience, to assess to what extent God's interactions with humanity are predetermined and able to be confidently predicted as the inevitable and immediate result of following certain steps of faith.

God's predictable consistency and faithfulness

DeArteaga(1996) believes that God is completely faithful to his promises to the extent that it is possible to represent his response to human faith in terms of unchanging laws. He argues that

if God's promises are reliable because of His character, they will always be executed when humans meet their conditions. If this is the case, then there is only a semantic difference between God's promises and spiritual laws. ... *His promises behave as laws* (ibid., p257, emphasis his).

As we seek to evaluate the teachings of Hagin and Copeland regarding spiritual laws, a key question arises. Are we able to know completely what God has decided to do in every situation where his people act in faith, such that we can be absolutely certain of the way he will act, provided we fulfil certain requirements? If so, DeArteaga, Hagin and Copeland are surely right that spiritual laws are indeed a helpful way of describing the way God works in the spiritual world, just as the law of gravity is helpful in describing the physical world.

But while DeArteaga is correct in asserting that God is completely consistent and faithful,

he is misguided as to the nature of God's faithfulness. The Bible gives witness to a God who is faithful, not so much to abstract truth statements, as to the personal human beings with whom he relates. God sent Jonah to tell the people of Ninevah that the city would be destroyed in forty days, but ultimately the Ninevites repented and God withheld his punishment (Jonah 3-4). Here we see that God was more concerned about being faithful to the people of Ninevah and showing compassion towards them, than to fulfilling his prior statement of intended judgement.

The biblical witness as a whole is of a God who is faithful in and through relationships with his people, rather than one who guarantees the truth value of every statement in an abstract logical or legal way.

The Now of Faith

A key assumption of Hagin and Copeland with regard to the application of spiritual laws is that once a believer fulfils the requirements of faith, God will always act immediately to grant their desire of health or wealth.

Hagin (1985, p9) is typical of the Word of Faith teachers when he emphasises that faith should always bring immediate results, asserting that '*Faith is now*. Faith says, "I'll receive the answer right now. I have it now"' (emphasis his). He justifies his belief that God always works to grant an immediate response when a believer acts in faith by referring to Hebrews 11:1. 'This verse says, "*Now faith is....*" If it's not now, it's not faith. Faith is *now* – it's present tense"' (Hagin, 1993, p75, emphasis his).

Here a mere cursory glance at the text will set alarm bells ringing that this is an unorthodox reading of the verse. A look at the Greek will tell that the word translated "now", is merely a connective particle at the start of the verse, and bears none of the connotations of

immediacy of the English word “now”. It is therefore ludicrous to suggest that this verse supports the notion that the results of faith are always immediate.

Brandon (1987, p39) believes that an understanding of faith as always bringing immediate results is misguided, looking at the example of Abraham, who Paul commends in Romans 4 as being full of faith. Abraham's faith was not a 'now' faith, Brandon contends, as he had to wait many years for God's promise of a son to be fulfilled.

We must conclude that while there are many examples in the Bible of God performing instant miracles in response to the faith of his people, there are enough counter-examples of people who didn't receive what they hoped for but are still commended for their faith, to suggest that God's response to a particular person acting in faith isn't always to immediately grant their request.

Farah exposes the way in which this assumption of immediate results is misguided, explaining that the Bible generally paints a picture of God's Kingdom being here, but at the same time not yet fulfilled.

The kingdom is here; yet it is not here. It is among us; yet it is to come. ... That means that you and I dwell in the kingdom in measure. It cannot be completely fulfilled until the King returns. Those who look for perfection in the here and now are doomed to disappointment: the kingdom has not yet fully come (Farah, 1980, pp97-98).

Prosperity and Suffering

The consistent message of the Faith teachers is that we can, and should, obtain here and now all the blessings of God's Kingdom, of which material wealth is one. Copeland (1974, p13) takes 3 John 2-4 as teaching that God wants all Christians at all times to be

materially prosperous, quoting John as writing 'Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as they soul prospereth'. Copeland interprets this verse as John writing that 'we *should* prosper and be in health...' (ibid. p14, emphasis his).

However, this is a prime example of the one-dimensional reading of Scripture frequently practised by teachers such as Hagin and Copeland. In his interpretation Copeland gives no regard to the fact that John is writing in a specific cultural and historical situation, to a particular person, Gaius, or to the genre of the text, which is a personal letter. What could be read simply as a friendly greeting at the beginning of a letter is taken by Copeland to mean that every Christian universally should believe in faith that God wants them to prosper (which he interprets to mean financial prosperity) and be in health.

Endurance of hardship and suffering, however, far from being a symptom of lack of faith, is often portrayed in the Bible as being an essential part of a life of faith, and vital to its growth. Hebrews 11, a chapter so often quoted by the Word of Faith teachers, climaxes with the following tribute to men who believed in faith, but did not in their lifetime receive what they were waiting for:

But others were tortured, refusing to turn from God in order to be set free. They placed their hope in a better life after the resurrection. Some were jeered at, and their backs were cut open with whips. Others were chained in prisons. Some died by stoning, some were sawed in half, and others were killed with the sword. Some went about wearing skins of sheep and goats, destitute and oppressed and mistreated. They were too good for this world, wandering over deserts and mountains, hiding in caves and holes in the ground.

All these people earned a good reputation because of their faith, yet none of them received all that God had promised. For God had something better in mind for us,

so that they would not reach perfection without us. (Hebrews 11:35b-40)

It is ironic that a chapter that (in parts) is quoted so frequently by Hagin and Copeland should finish with such a clear example of the 'now but not yet' of God's Kingdom, and the possibility of faithful believers not receiving material prosperity in this life.

Health and Sickness

While Scripture is clear that God wants every person to experience healing and life to the full, bearing witness to many miraculous examples of God bringing this about, it is also clear that God at times allows hardship in order that his people may be refined.

Paul tells how he was given a thorn in his flesh (believed by many to be a physical ailment) that God didn't remove, to keep him from being proud and to teach him that God's grace was sufficient (2 Corinthians 12:7-9). James also writes 'Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow' (James 1:2-3).

Farah tried to reconcile the prophecy in Isaiah 53:3-5, a passage often claimed by Hagin and Copeland as guaranteeing immediate physical healing as well as forgiveness of sins, with the reality that sickness does still afflict believers in the New Testament.

Paul does not seem unduly troubled by Trophimus' illness, Timothy's stomach weakness, or his own buffetings by Satan – which undoubtedly involved physical discomfort. Instead he went right on preaching the gospel in the midst of his afflictions to everyone everywhere... Granting the equal universality of salvation and healing theologically... the actual experience of healing is not (even in New Testament times) enjoyed as universally as the grace of salvation by those who believe. (Farah, 1980, p85)

Again it seems that while God does often miraculously heal people in response to their faith, as is seen on numerous occasions in the gospels in particular, there is no general law at work guaranteeing that genuine faith will always bring immediate physical healing.

Faith or Presumption?

Farah (1980) believes that to assume that we can always know what God desires to do is to gravely misunderstand the nature of how God speaks and works. He considers that in the Bible one can make a distinction between the Greek *logos*, God's universal, objective, eternal word, and *rhema*, which is a particular, subjective, contemporary word, spoken for a particular occasion.

A failure to distinguish these two, Farah believes, leads many people to act on God's general *logos* promise of healing in Scripture, for example in Isaiah 53, in a specific situation, without having received a *rhema* that God wants heal in that particular time and way. Later he explains that

There is always an X factor in healing, an unknown quantity that God does not choose to reveal. Healing is a divine mystery and humility is our best approach to unraveling the answers. Otherwise, if we knew all the answers it would no longer be a mystery. We would be as gods and have no need for a faith dependency. (Farah, 1980, pp75-76)

The problem with the spiritual laws, according to Farah, is that they presume to know what God wants to do, leaving no room for the 'X factor', whereby God chooses to work according to his sovereign will. Farah gives the example of the Israelites launching a disastrous unauthorised campaign into the promised land, when God had intended them to take the land by faith just a few days earlier (Numbers 14, *ibid.*, pp6-7)), and of Saul acting

as priest when it was not his role (1 Samuel 13, *ibid.*, p5). Both of these actions, in other situations, were commanded by God, but in each case God is clearly outraged by the presumption of people acting in ways that he hadn't commanded them at that particular time.

Perriman (2003, p141) concurs with Farah that God speaks in specific ways to particular people concerning their own contexts, and that it can be presumptuous to automatically transfer his promises in the Bible to ourselves without consideration of the context.

Conclusion

While in many ways the Word of Faith teachers are to be commended for their desire to take seriously some of the foundational teachings of Jesus they perceive to have been ignored by the mainstream church, they have nonetheless made several key errors through their eccentric and often one-dimensional interpretation of Scripture. These errors are magnified by a stubborn refusal to entertain any possibility of alternative interpretations, a lack of tolerance for any ambiguity, and a refusal to seek a creative tension between apparent paradoxes in Scripture. As a result their teachings are at best a significant distortion of biblical Christianity and at worst a dangerous imitation religion capable of leading astray the poor and uneducated, the very people with whom Jesus was particularly concerned.

We have seen that a biblical worldview must totally dismiss any concept of God being bound to work in response to human faith according to predefined laws, but at the same time the believer must be careful not to overreact by tending to the opposite extreme, rejecting any possibility of miraculous divine intervention. The Bible, and our experience, tell us that we cannot expect God to be at our beck and call, ready to heal or provide

miraculously whenever we ask, but at the same time we see in Scripture that surprisingly often God does in fact respond by answering prayers of faith from his people, even when they seem to be contrary to his original plans (for example Exodus 32:7-14). The sign of a mature Christian life is the ability to hold in tension the incomprehensible unpredictable sovereignty of God with the knowledge that he enters into a genuine relationship with humanity, to the extent that he listens to, and in many cases acts upon, humble requests submitted by those whose faith is in him.

In Job 38-41 God responds to the protests of Job that the world doesn't work as it apparently should, not by providing answers, but by giving an awesome glimpse of himself as beyond anything that humanity can ever begin to imagine. Instead of seeking out principles of faith that expect God to act according to certain spiritual laws, the believer must instead look to the unfathomable God who loves to bless and relate to his people, often in miraculous and unexpected ways, as they seek him in faith.

4,464 words.

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The Concept of Law is a 1961 book by the legal philosopher HLA Hart and his most famous work. The Concept of Law presents Hart's theory of legal positivism—the view that laws are rules made by humans and that there is no inherent or necessary connection between law and morality—within the framework of analytic philosophy. Hart sought to provide a theory of descriptive sociology and analytical jurisprudence. The book addresses a number of traditional jurisprudential topics such as the nature of law of spiritual insight, even arhat, the same as men -prevalence of male monastics did engender fears of contact with women -in early mahayana texts, women are recognized more favorably even on a basis of equality with men -often venerated as heroes and bodhisattvas -heroine depicted as changing to male body before achieving enlightenment -teachings of sunyata: emptiness and no traits. A member of the church -there are theocratic tendencies in christianity among small conservative and fundamentalist groups that call for a return to a christian nation - often want the church of a religious group to approve laws. state church. There is also the teaching of basic religious culture in schools in the list of building measures of spiritual security proposed by Victor Zorkaltsev. A. S. Zapesotsky defines the spiritual security in the following way: "Spiritual security is the conditions that allow culture and society to keep their vital parameters which are within historical norms." Different scientific directions interpret the phenomenon of spirituality ambiguously. The concepts of "spirit" and "spirituality" are ancient by their origin and have rich traditions in history, science and culture. The scientific interpretation of these phenomena has changed since the 1990s of 20th century. The students are supposed to understand the logic of the Natural Law and Divine Command Theory and to be able to classify the major approaches. Classical legal positivism from Bentham to Austin is based on very similar logic, which the students are supposed to grasp. They will also know the major theories belonging to the trend. The students are supposed to know the basics of the modern theories of legal positivism and be able to compare the major theories. The students shall know the basic works of Dworkin and be able to characterize them. The students are able to characterize the specificity