

Why This Book?

It is my intention that this book will have a two-fold purpose. First, I pray it might be helpful to those who have recognized and turned away from distortions of doctrine and practice that have crept into the church today. Secondly, I hope it will be a warning and an eye-opener to those who are still involved with hyper-charismatic teachings or have loved ones who are. This book is not a diatribe against Pentecostalism. It is a sincere effort to reveal how any group can veer away from biblical Christianity by seeking the mystical and experiential rather than relying on the authority of Scripture.

My own intimate involvement with an aberrational group in no way negates all the good times of fellowship I've had with brothers and sisters whose desire to serve Christ took a dramatic detour from the Scriptures. The church cookouts, parties, and picnics that occurred on a regular basis lent themselves to a joyful expression of community, and the pain of relationships now lost is not a thing lightly endured. The fact that some messages from the pulpit were very good and encouraged biblical holiness makes this kind of public stand even more difficult. A large part of my life was taken up with the people presented herein, and the camaraderie we shared forged a bond broken only with the greatest reluctance and heartache.

This has not been an easy book to write, but the times demand

it. I need to make very clear at the outset that the issues presented herein, although intimately personal, are addressed not from any bitterness, but a heartfelt desire to see change. Both in the immediacy of my former congregation and worldwide, the truth must find voice, or many will turn the corner of faith and practice onto the wide avenue of heresy. This is no light thing. Many today have gone the way of Esau and for the sake of a fleeting sensuality are in the process of exchanging their incomparable inheritance in Christ for a bellyful of fleshly experiences.

This book is not an indictment against the heart attitude of pastors who find themselves and their practices mirrored in its pages. Many involved in the “River” movement,* both pastors and congregation members, are sincere, genuine believers who have earnestly desired to serve God and His people. Only God can judge the heart. Every true shepherd wants what is best for the church, and often a seeking church is unwary even when coming face to face with deception. Throughout church history sincere folks have been misled by appearances or good-sounding doctrine. Yet God calls His people back to Himself and promises restoration for those who repent.

The book is a sketch of years spent at my former congregation, including approximately five years as an elder. This is not an exhaustive testament. Should I attempt to catalogue every technique, movement, and ministry we followed and imitated, the resulting volume would be years in the making. The first chapters deal with my *Word of Faith* beginnings and initiation into the popular prophetic arena. The doctrines forming both are a strong part of the source from which the River movement flows. Although there were other tributaries, the Toronto Blessing’s *official* origin stems from a message preached by Randy Clark, who received his “impartation” from Rodney Howard-Browne, who himself was holding services in Kenneth Hagin Jr.’s Rhema Bible Church in Tulsa in 1993. Clark’s messages in January 1994, at what was then the Toronto

*The River Movement is an offshoot of the Latter Rain revival, which began in Saskatchewan, Canada in the 1940s. Many other movements sprouted from Latter Rain. Followers believe that the Latter Rain revival is the *latter rain* referred to in such scriptures as Jeremiah 3:3, Joel 2:23, and Hosea 6:3.

Airport Vineyard church, were the main catalyst for the doctrines, manifestations, and practices we see in the River movement today. In a later chapter we also take the whole issue further back to the “Latter Rain” movement of the late 1940s, which laid the historical groundwork for wide acceptance of “prophetic impartations”^{*} and the experience-based faith seen not only in much of today’s Pentecostal and charismatic arenas but also now surfacing in non-charismatic circles as well.

The movement that began at the 1995 Father’s Day service at the Brownsville Assembly of God in Pensacola, Florida has also flooded the United States with River doctrine. In spite of protests to the contrary, it is nonetheless the Americanized version of the Toronto Blessing, with nearly all the attendant bizarre manifestations and doctrine. Brownsville leadership long denied any connection with the Canadian outbreak, featuring itself as another sovereign move of God. But anyone who takes the time to study the two movements will see that the Brownsville phenomenon is merely a Toronto clone. Members of the Brownsville church, including Kilpatrick’s own wife, traveled to Toronto to experience the “renewal” firsthand.¹ Evangelist Steve Hill, who ministered the “anointing” that Father’s Day at Brownsville, received the “blessing” from the leadership of England’s Holy Trinity Brompton church, the British implant of the Toronto phenomenon (and the original home of the Alpha course).²

Prior to the outbreak of manifestations in Canada in 1994, Toronto pastor John Arnott was also prayed for by long-time friend Benny Hinn.³ Hinn’s doctrines and manifestations, a mixture of Word of Faith theology and his own extra-biblical interpretations, were a precursor to the full-blown “revival.” And of course, no background on the River movement is complete without the long-standing practices and doctrines of the Vineyard movement.

While the experiences related in this book are my own, these ministries and many others were strong contributing factors in the way my family and I viewed both God and Christian practice.

^{*} Note: Throughout this book, various terms are used that will be in quotation marks when they are first introduced. For the sake of readability, these marks will not be used every time the terms are mentioned.

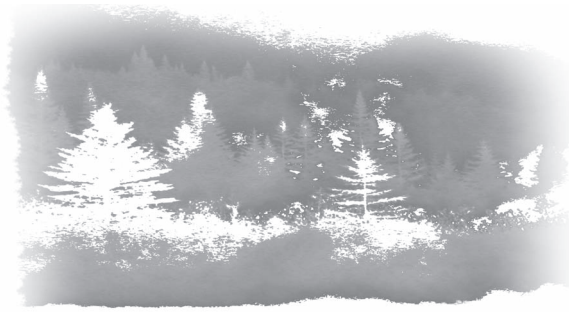
Since the Alaska ministry with which I was intimately involved was local and had no far-reaching consequences outside our own community, I did not think it necessary to name individuals. With the exceptions of my wife, my eldest daughter, and myself, the names of all local individuals are fictitious; however, the incidents, conversations, and practices discussed are real and accurately depicted. National and international ministers and ministries (like those of Rick Joyner and Kenneth Copeland), which directly affected me and my former group, I have named openly, along with specific references to their works and teachings.

Although not its actual name, New Covenant Fellowship is also real. It still exists, and its leadership, at the time of this writing, is yet intact. The name, New Covenant Fellowship, does not reflect on any other ministry with the same name or any ministry other than the one I had been affiliated with during the time covered in this book. As for the conversations and comments depicted in this book, while the exact wording may at times not be precise, the context in which they are presented and the issues addressed are accurate. I still own a small mountain of sermons on cassette, books from which we learned practice and doctrine, and videos of teachers whose doctrines we circulated. I also own workbooks and other materials that taught us through step-by-step instructions.

To those of my brothers and sisters at New Covenant Fellowship who read this book, please know I love you, and I do not desire in any way to cause pain. I would also exhort any who have become caught in the snare of spiritual deception to return to the Word of God in genuine repentance, for in this alone can there be healing of the grievous wound on the body of Christ.

My heartfelt prayer is that we may once again walk together in the fellowship of the truth.

In Him alone,
Kevin M. Reeves
Spring 2007



BEFORE THE BEGINNING

It was a cool evening for summer, and as the neighborhood was some distance out of town, the area was quiet and dark. The night and solitude worked in our favor, for the gathering itself was not of the barbecue fellowship variety, and I for one wished to avoid unwelcome stares from neighbors. I felt ill at ease in the evening atmosphere of the event. It just didn't feel right, like we were involved in a perversion of something.

About ten of us stood in the backyard of elder Bob Matson's house, knotted together in the gloom and listening intently to instructions. Jason Klein stood as the usual centerpiece. Handing out the bread, which in our case was individual saltine crackers, he reminded us of the importance of our presence there and of the power of what we were about to engage in. He began to pray, and with the bread in our hands, we bowed in agreement with him. I looked around. If others felt fear or nagging doubt, they didn't betray it. Maybe I was the only one out of sorts, just not as spiritual as I should have been. Again.

Putting the crackers to our lips, we ate half, then crumbled the other half and sprinkled it on the ground as we walked in single file around the perimeter of the property. We made a full circle and declared that the body of Christ sanctified the ground. We then did the same with the wine, or in our case grape juice, drinking half and

pouring the remainder onto the ground to conform to the property boundaries, thus forming a “blood line.” Then came the final prayer:

Now we give notice to all demons that have inhabited this area that your time is ended. We command you to go now, in the name of Jesus! This property has been claimed for the kingdom of God, so go!

Amid all the smiles and rejoicing, I had a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. I was glad to just go home.

Learned from Gwen Shaw’s book *Redeeming the Land*,¹ this practice was utilized in our church for “breaking the curse of the enemy” upon our town, as we liked to put it. This was one of a host of methods for removing the stranglehold of sin and religious stodginess over both the people and the land. As matriarch of End Time Handmaidens, a prophetic group composed mostly of women who minister throughout the world via publications and in person, Gwen Shaw spoke with authority. I met her once, when she was invited to speak at our congregation of New Covenant Fellowship, in the late 1980s, and I have to admit being impressed with her angelic face and what I then perceived to be a godly demeanor. An attractive woman probably in her fifties at the time, she spoke humbly, and as we sang some of the old hymns I love that were never a part of our group’s corporate worship, she won me over without a struggle. Attended by another older woman whose name I’ve long forgotten, Mrs. Shaw’s sermon focused on the doctrinal abuses within the Catholic Church, spotlighting the specific practices of certain penitent of the Roman clergy. Priests would abuse their bodies to the point of death with self-imposed penance in order to secure acceptance into heaven. Having spent twenty-four loyal years within the ranks of Roman Catholicism, even memorizing the Mass in Latin, I was understandably horrified. Yet I well knew that such abuses were indeed possible. The Catholic Church’s emphasis of salvation through an unceasing battery of good works was a fertile breeding ground for fanaticism.

So I was quite taken with Gwen Shaw. Were we purposely duped? I suppose it depends on your definition of the word pur-

posely. The sincerity with which she presented her case seemed genuine. And the books she brought with her for sale (and there were lots of them) seemed to speak powerfully to the need of our community. We were a *cutting-edge* church, and these were the tools to get the job done. In the back of one of her books, an advertisement showcased a supposed recording of the angelic host singing along with a choir—I was wowed and wanted to hear it. In *Redeeming the Land*, when Mrs. Shaw outlined a host of demonic entities, their specific abilities, and their assignments over geographic locations, I was enthralled. In that same book, she presented the testimony of one man who said he had died and was taken by the angel of the Lord to view and record all the demonic principalities and powers so that the church might more successfully prevail against them.² Hearing this, I craved more.

Although she obviously believed them, the very practices and teachings outlined in some of these volumes presented tremendous obstacles to a Bible-believing Christian. And the group's extreme preoccupation with angelic beings led to extra-biblical beliefs and manifestations, some of which are documented in the book *Our Ministering Angels*.³ This compilation of anecdotes and supposition mixed with a certain amount of Scripture merge doctrine and personal experience to convince the reader that people resemble their assigned "guardian angel,"⁴ that the "photograph" of angels over a coffin is genuine,⁵ that angels are seen in the most unusual places, such as a car hood,⁶ and that an angel joined in worship at the community of Engeltal.⁷ Mrs. Shaw claims she has had many interactions with angels. She writes that once while walking in Jerusalem's Garden Tomb area, she heard the spiritual hosts singing the resurrection hymn sung by them on the morning of our Lord's rising from the dead.⁸ Of course, she acknowledges that precedent for this cannot be found in Scripture, but she heard it nevertheless, and the reader is left with the impression that to argue with her is to deny spiritual reality. Hers seemed to be the voice of authority.

Her strange doctrines found willing ears and hungry hearts in my former congregation.

What needs to be understood is that most, if not all of us at New Covenant Fellowship, were truly desirous of serving the Lord and fighting the good fight of faith. Like so many other independent charismatic churches, we wanted to see souls saved and the miraculous power of God manifest in healings, deliverances, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. But there was an underlying factor, a premise woven throughout the fabric of our church probably from its inception—elitism. We were the fortunate ones, called to walk in the authority that the church was so bereft of in these last days.

Through its own incompetence and adherence to legalism and dead religious doctrines, we were repeatedly told, the body of Christ had surrendered the wisdom and power that came from knowing Him. It was up to us at New Covenant to demonstrate that God's kingdom power was real and available to every Christian in our town. This prideful mindset was a recipe for disaster. Our heartfelt desire to belong, a need to submit to spiritual authority, and the hidden agenda of the flesh to be one of the super-anointed took their toll on our church's scriptural integrity.

My former congregation was not alone in its beliefs then, nor are they now. All across the world, many groups like this are given over to the excitement of carnal manifestations, esoteric wisdom, and elitist mentality. In fact, this thinking within the charismatic community has grown so common as to minimize the legitimacy of those who simply want to serve Jesus and know the Word of God. Anymore, that's old hat. The "new thing" demands subservience to the experiential, and the current trend of gross subjectivism doesn't allow for old fashioned adherence to Scripture as the basis of faith and practice.

These are critical days for the body of Christ. We are in the epoch of church history spoken of by the apostle Paul as "perilous times" (II Timothy 3:1). What makes the danger all the more imminent is that not much of the church believes it. Many of us have owned the glorious but erroneous vision of an end-times remnant walking in unconquerable power, transforming entire societies. The result has been nothing short of catastrophic. How soon we forget. Every cult in the world has sprouted from the fertile soil of decep-

tion, always initiated by a drastic move away from the *primacy* of the Word of God into the nebulous, self-defining atmosphere of experience. At New Covenant, our desire to accumulate otherworldly wealth (i.e., supernatural power) had ushered us into a contrived system of personal spiritual elevation much like such active cults as Mormonism and the Jehovah's Witnesses.

In the case of my former congregation, our pre-supposed love of the Word of God, along with our ignorance of and opposition to nearly every scriptural warning about false doctrine and seducing spirits in the church, left us open to bizarre teachings and practices. As we embraced mysticism, our biblical parameters melted away. Yes, we were sincere, but what we were wanting was diametrically opposed to our relationship with Jesus Christ.

Like physical signs of pain, there were signs in our church that something was terribly wrong. But just like the person who ignores the pain and avoids going to the doctor, we too ignored what should have been so obvious. That is, until it got so bad that avoidance was no longer an option.

Why do people ignore warning signs? It's like a motorist painting over his oil pressure gauge so he won't notice the depleting measure. But the reality of the situation will become evident enough when his engine seizes up, and the car comes to a sudden halt. I've discovered that in the spiritual arena most people will do exactly this: they take pains to look the other way when something bumps up against their doctrine. As a Christian, there's no quicker way to start a fight with a friend than to tell him that some of his most fervent beliefs are wrong. I know. I've lost my share of friendships that way. The problem comes when folks aren't willing to deal with the uncomfortable. And the horror of it is that in spiritual matters, we're dealing with eternal things. While the person who ruins his vehicle can at least purchase another, the human soul is irreplaceable.

What we believe and place our trust in will certainly determine our eternal destiny, regardless of our sincerity. The Mormon missionaries who have come to my house have seemed to be some of the most sincere people I've ever known, but they are hopelessly lost, believing

a perverse doctrine that, unless repented of, will surely deliver them to an everlasting hell. Their beliefs will turn them onto a distinctly hazardous route called the broad way (Matthew 7:13). As tightly as they cling to the hope of exaltation to godhood, it will not prevent them from slipping into a godless eternity. Their experience with *God*, exemplified by the “burning in the bosom,” has them so convinced that no matter what, they will not entertain doctrine that conflicts with their belief system. Part of it is fear, promulgated by “apostles and prophets,” whom they believe to be a living link to God Himself. They are firmly entrenched in the idea that, should they consider Joseph Smith to have been a false prophet, they are forever doomed.

In my own case, association with a cutting-edge group offered me security and personal power, and for years, the paranoia of offending God kept me from asking too many unsettling questions. It’s ironic that, in a fellowship that taught a watered-down version of the fear of the Lord, it was fear that motivated me to stay put.

Many other Christians find themselves in this same predicament, especially those with a genuine heart for the truth. When some doctrine foreign to biblical Christianity is introduced into the congregation, they want to inquire about its origin and validity, but fear holds them in check. If it comes from the pastor, who surely must be more spiritual than the rest of the group, then God must simply have approved it. Therefore, questioning or opposing the pastor or church leadership is seen as opposing the Lord Himself.

But God doesn’t work that way. Throughout the Bible are examples of those who love the Lord who questioned authority when it was wrong. And what’s more, “prove all things” is clearly God’s instruction to the believer (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

Those Who Resist

This manipulative pastoral attitude of squelching sincere inquiries was recently brought home in a frightening way. A friend of mine attended a local church service, knowing that the pastor was fully in support of the so-called Brownsville revival. She was nonetheless unprepared for the chilling threat from the pulpit. After re-

minding the congregation of the judgment deaths of Ananias and Sapphira for opposing the Holy Spirit, the pastor looked directly at the congregation and said, “If you think about questioning anything that goes on in this service ... well, you just be careful!”

Two plus two still equals four. His meaning was quite plain. If you want to end up like that evil-hearted couple, just go ahead and do some serious inquiry into the teachings or manifestations of this group.

Brothers and sisters, something is seriously wrong here. Brutalizing the saints with a threat from an angry heart is not the Bible way. But it is becoming quite a fashionable pastime for leadership to silence even well-intentioned criticism with threats and ridicule. It has been going on from both the Toronto and Brownsville pulpits for years and has spilled over into many other groups in the church today. Name calling and ostracizing are common methods to silence critics. Names like hypocrites, Sanhedrin, and God mockers are merely a sampling of the invective aimed at Christians who are concerned about doctrinal error. Nobody wants to be labeled a Pharisee or heresy hunter. But that is often the penalty for daring to step out and ask for a public, biblical accounting of doctrine and practice.

I know the feeling first hand. I have more than once been called legalistic and have been accused of “going down a hard path”—one of my own making, of course. I had been told repeatedly that I was spiritually immature and had not understood the importance of such works as Rick Joyner’s *The Final Quest*⁹—despite its un-biblical concepts and many outright contradictions to Scripture.

A current *river* is flowing, which many believe to be of God. Removed from its proper setting in the 47th chapter of Ezekiel, which speaks of a stream gushing out from the Temple of God, this passage in Scripture is today used to promote a last days vision for the church. In its proper context in Ezekiel, this wonderful prophecy is an encouragement that God has not forgotten His covenant people of Israel. But overstepping the sanctity of scriptural boundaries, this passage has been reshaped into the comfortable doctrines of the easy believism and sensual manifestations that mark a massive shift in the church. As believers, we have taken a hairpin turn from the

preeminence of the Word of God to a relative, experiential, and terribly apostate faith.

The River Revival movement—encompassing the Toronto Blessing, Brownsville Revival (or Pensacola Outpouring), Dominion, Latter Rain, Word of Faith, Rodney Howard-Browne’s laughing revival, the Kansas City prophets, and an arbitrary mix of all or some of the aforementioned—is flowing into congregations worldwide. Given impetus by these major doctrinal tributaries, this movement’s teachings have led multitudes away from the truths of the Gospel of Jesus Christ into a dangerous realm of subjective experiences, mysticism, and blatant heresy. Closely follow the curves of this *river* and you’ll find spiritual deviations at first overlooked. After all the hype, the wild manifestations, the wonderful testimonies, the flamboyant prophecies, and the earth-shaking visions, the discerning eye will gaze upon a farther shore, where an entirely different, frightening story unfolds—a story of broken lives and shattered faith, of rebellion and of merchandising a substitute “anointing.”

There is another side to all the fanfare, a glaring *something* that for the most part remains unspoken or deliberately avoided. There is indeed another side to the *River*. The story you are about to read is my personal journey in finding it. As believers, it is time we cross over and take a long, hard look.



THE EMERGENCE OF THE GOD-MEN

“In you dwells all the fullness of the Godhead in bodily form.”

Jason preached from Colossians 2:9 with his usual pacing, his face intense as he drove home the point. The problem was, he was not referring to Christ, “in you dwells all the fullness” but was instead referring to us, the congregation. For me, it was a new teaching, one I had never heard before. I didn’t know whether to be awed or scared. This corruption of the Colossians verse was to be the basis of much of what we sought to accomplish at New Covenant Fellowship.

We had to be built up, Jason said, and the way to do that was to really *know* who we were in Christ. The power, the authority, the life from heaven flowed from the throne of Almighty God to His own elect, and if we only realized the explosive potential resident within us, we would walk with ease in the supernatural realm. Miracles would be common, diseases would flee at a touch from our hands, and demons would hightail it to the nearest exit when we walked into a room. We could bind, loose, command angels and even order the elements around. This was only a smattering of what was proclaimed from the front of our meeting room on Sunday mornings and at mid-week meetings.

The lure of godhood for man is the oldest bait in the annals of history, dating from the serpent’s temptation to Eve in the Garden of Eden. The question “Yea, hath God said...” (Genesis 3:1) precipitated the greatest tragedy of the human race. And man has been

trying to get back to the Garden ever since. Even the church has not been immune to this desire. Sad to say, in 1988 neither was I. Suffering from the echoes of a season of backsliding, I wanted desperately to be led into a deeper walk with Christ—cemented in relationship to Him. I had the Word and the Holy Spirit to guide me, of course, but I was afraid that they alone weren't enough. I was ripe for accompanying *signs and wonders* to validate my calling. That's when I met Jason.

Master and Disciple

From our first encounter, I recognized that Jason Klein spoke with an authority, a charisma that drew people to him, particularly those of us who came from mainstream Christianity. Discontent had forged a common bond, for the core group had come from other area churches and clustered around Jason like cells to a healing wound. He had been sent from a large city to plant a church in our town, and although only a handful originally welcomed him in that endeavor, within two years the congregation grew to about seventy-five people. It was about that time, in the summer of 1988 that my wife Kris and I arrived.

Jason seemed to sincerely love people, and his giving heart sought out those in need. He was a toucher, lavishing congregants with hugs and handshakes, and always hunting an opportunity to fellowship closely with the people of God. But a thoughtful backward glance confirms other, disturbing characteristics that should have sent up red flags in my mind. He had a habit of getting uncomfortably close when speaking with a person, crowding the other's space. With his face only inches away and his eyes intense while he spoke, a subtle manipulation (perhaps unconsciously) herded you into a predetermined direction. As a hugger, he would embrace nearly anyone, at times to the recipient's discomfort. And there was never any real question regarding his authority in spiritual matters. He was always deferred to, for he seemed to *know*, even if his stance was skewed in relation to Scripture.

In conversations, he assured me that God was not to be feared, only loved and respected, something he reiterated endlessly from the pulpit. As God's children of the New Testament, the old "fear of

the Lord” was something pretty much of the past—non-applicable to the believer in Jesus. Disturbed because I’d read exactly the opposite in Luke 12:4-5, I once gently disagreed with him. Of course, I was immediately corrected, him proving me wrong with his irresistible authority; although I gave in, I was not fully convinced. The incident would prove to be one of many that I would file away for further analysis when the tide had turned.

Jason was the hub of the wheel, and so I guess that made us the spokes. We radiated out from him and his words, and we felt cohesiveness in him. His unchallenged strength was further abetted when he took someone under his wing, teaching what he believed were the deeper things of God, and helping the believer get established in other areas of his life.

I now believe Jason was a hurting man. His deep need for acceptance played out in his unrelenting judgment of the *legalistic* portion of the body of Christ, in his comforting of those in emotional or physical pain, his expansive generosity, and his need to control. There were areas outside the realm of New Covenant Fellowship where he did help Kris and me. He occasionally provided me with much-needed work, and allowed me to house-sit a couple of weeks in his spacious home during the time our young family lived in a freezing, sardine-sized travel trailer. He also took up several collections for us to purchase a vehicle when we owned none. I must honestly say that I grew to love the man; a part of me still does.

Unorthodox Introduction

Kris and I first met Jason in the summer of 1988. We came to the small idyllic town that spring on a second honeymoon and were taken with the beauty and wildness of the area. After praying about it, we decided the Lord was leading us there. Belonging at that time to a wonderful, biblically-solid group of people, we felt sad to move from our moorings, but knew it was time to go. With our little redhead Megan, we packed up what few belongings we could tote, and with a mixture of sadness and anticipation, we headed north.

From day one, there were problems. It was the height of the tour-

ist season, and some of the townsfolk saw us as outsiders and made us feel most unwelcome. A lot of people came to town in order to work summers and then flee south come cold weather—in other words, they socked away money garnered from a struggling community and then left with it. Folks didn't know we intended to remain; therefore, work was hard to come by, as was a place to stay. We finally settled on a tiny 12x15 trailer at the edge of a youth hostel, where I could work off the meager \$200 monthly rent.

I visited some of the main churches in town and just wasn't satisfied. I wanted a church that offered a Pentecostal-style atmosphere—that's when I stumbled across New Covenant Fellowship. Although there was a certain feel about the place that didn't sit exactly right with me, the worship seemed good, the gifts of the Spirit appeared to be in operation, and importantly, I was welcomed warmly. I brought Kris with me my next time around.

It was an interesting first service as a family. Our little squirmer Megan, not quite a year-and-a-half old, didn't take too kindly to the two-hour meeting. While standing in the back of the rented building, Kris and I quietly argued about who would take the baby home. In the midst of my attempts to lift Megan out of Kris's arms, we heard loudly from the pulpit, "Could you folks come up here, please? You have a word from the Lord."

We froze rather ridiculously, child in midair, arguments falling silently to the carpeted floor, faces no doubt grimacing in embarrassment as every eye in the place fell on us. We had no choice but to parade up to the front where Jason stood smiling, flanked by his two elders Bob Matson and Tom Smalley. They laid hands on us, and we received our first taste of "personal prophecy."*

Jason spoke for the Lord: "Don't be afraid, for I have called you to this place. I have seen your needs and will supply them all." I noticed that Jason didn't speak to me but to Kris, leaning close as she held Megan and saying things that a frightened woman in a rocky mar-

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riage in a strange place wanted to hear. Nevertheless, from that time the die was cast. We were officially received into the group, and I guess at the time we were relieved to finally have somewhere to belong.

The Copeland Connection

Although he worked it to the hilt, Jason cannot be faulted for the origination of this god/man heresy. He picked it up quite naturally from the Word of Faith works of Kenneth Copeland and his older mentor, Kenneth (“Dad”) Hagin, both of whom have taught for decades that the believer in Christ is literally a god on earth. Word of Faith’s doctrines—of Christ’s taking the nature of Satan on the Cross, His supposed rebirth in hell (the first born-again man!), and the completed atonement purchased not by the blood of the Cross but Jesus’ paying for our sins in anguished torment in hell—were things hidden from us during our stay at New Covenant Fellowship.¹ Had we been aware of these heresies, we both would have likely made an unceremonious exit.

Many years have now passed since the original proclamation of these doctrines by Hagin, Copeland, and company, but the men (and women) who have made these statements and many others like them have not repented. These teachings have been an intricate part of the whole pattern of false doctrine in these people’s ministries. In their eyes, Jesus becomes merely the “pattern Son”² who, although lip service is given to His uniqueness, beckons us to follow and through Him take up our own mantle of godhood.

Known as Word of Faith, Word-Faith, the Faith movement, Health and Wealth, the Prosperity Gospel, or sometimes Positive Confession, the basic doctrine is a hodgepodge of the fraudulent mixed in with enough truth to give it a scriptural veneer. To the initiate, which we all were at that time with the exception of Jason himself, Word of Faith’s basic doctrine hails from the idea that faith is an impersonal “force” that can be wielded by the believer (and even pagans) for personal benefit. If the Christian will simply believe, and speak aloud his desire, the result is guaranteed. A big part of this formula system is based upon a tremendous twisting of the words of Jesus, recorded in Mark 11:23:

For verily I say unto you, That whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, 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.

Now, every true believer knows in his heart that we simply cannot ask for anything we want and have it granted, regardless of the will of God. This is easily established by a reading of I John 5:14-15:

And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us: And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him.

Scripture is replete with examples of men asking, and receiving only when it is in accordance with God's own wishes, not ours. To deny this is to deny the very sovereignty of the Lord and His only written record:

Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts. (James 4:2-3)

But Word of Faith doctrine sidesteps the issue because its adherents are taught that the world belongs not to God, but to men. It is to men, they say, whom God has given *dominion* (remember that word), and to men that He has given authority to exercise on matters spiritual and temporal. As the reasoning goes, God's promises in His Word speak generously of material blessings upon His faithful, and, as God is a man of His word, if I remain faithful to Him, I can ask anything in the name of Jesus, and it will be done for me. Didn't Christ Himself say that very thing in John 14:13-14?

The main issue here is power. The Health and Wealth doctrine did not earn that name by default. I've never seen a television evangelist (at

least, not the ones regularly featured on the Trinity Broadcasting Network) wearing inexpensive shoes, suits, and watches. “Only the best for kids of the King,” is the monotonous refrain from people in the Word of Faith camp. Such beliefs are considered only the very basics in their form of spiritual instruction.

Power, Power, Who’s Got the Power?

These soulish cravings for power are hard to resist, even for the committed, knowledgeable Christian. By knowledgeable, I mean understanding and following the doctrine given in Scripture. Many believers love the Lord but attempt to follow Him in a way diametrically opposed to the way He reveals Himself in His Word. Biblical ignorance is fertile ground for the tiniest seed of heresy.

This was our biggest problem. At the time of our introduction into New Covenant Fellowship, Kris had been saved only briefly. I had accepted Christ a year-and-a-half earlier than she had, but a year of that had been spent in horrible backsliding. I felt constantly inferior and condemned because of my sin during that time, although I had repented. Word of Faith, along with its theological compatriots Dominion/Kingdom Now, stroked my battered personality. If God granted me power, I reasoned, then surely I must be forgiven.

Manifestations of the spiritual realm were the big issue; it was universally believed that these took place only under the *anointing*, and whoever happened to be the catalyst at the time was being greatly blessed and recognized by God. And while true humility would compel one to bow in adoration of God, a two-fisted grasping for power was actually the end result. I well recall when, having been “delivered” of a variety of demons, for the longest time afterward I went around shouting angrily at every “demon” in existence (and a good many which don’t exist), pleased at the authority of exorcism residing in me.

Some of the preaching concerning the grace of Christ helped me to be rid of the condemnation, but only as long as it was within scriptural bounds. That much did some good, and I believe it was preached out of love for the Lord and His people. Christ came the first time not to judge the world, but to save the world (John 3:17), and I needed to

be reminded that I was indeed forgiven. The major glitch came when we transposed grace into power, not power to live a holy life, but power to walk in the miraculous and what we viewed as the supernatural. While we are certainly given authority by Jesus, we in no way can match Him or become His earthly substitute. We were erroneously taught that in us “all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form,” and the result was predictable.

For instance, sickness was always considered an attack of the devil, and demons and their works were regularly cursed when the victims of ailments were prayed for. Not infrequently, a demon was commanded to leave the body of the sufferer. This was standard form, for demon inhabitation of Christians was considered the norm. As we believed this, exorcism among our membership was routine. However, the term exorcism had been replaced by the more palatable term deliverance, but given the concept of demonic inhabitation and the need to cast it out, the practice was really the same.

The Curse of Childbirth

As disciples with authority, we were tutored that we were redeemed from the curse of original sin, and all it entailed. As pain in childbirth was considered a part of the curse, and since we were redeemed, our wives should experience comfortable delivery. Jason told that very thing to Kris, and when our second child was born after a healthy set of painful uterine contractions, Kris felt that she had failed God. Her little faith, she reasoned, had shamed her Lord.

What a tragedy—to lay a burden of guilt upon a woman doing her level best to follow Christ, and leave her devastated with a manufactured failure! And for what? Experiencing pain in childbirth, of all things! Jesus refuted this heresy two millennia ago:

A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world. (John 16:21)

If Jesus considered childbearing pain a normal part of life, then who are we to argue?

That's not to say that Jason would have been unsympathetic to her pain. But he wouldn't have refuted his anti-curse stance either. While consoling those who didn't live up to the tenets of this "beyond the curse" doctrine, he nonetheless reaffirmed his unmoving position on it, counseling us to continue to strive to "just believe God." The thing is, it wasn't God in whom we had placed our faith. To a large extent it was Jason, whom we absolutely looked upon as the Lord's anointed. So we continued to strive, to bring our thoughts *into line* with what we believed to be thoughts of God, and to take dominion in His authority.

Whose World Is It Anyway?

This "dominionist" mentality also prodded us into some bizarre antics. One Sunday morning at church, Jason spoke about the poor year plaguing the local commercial fishermen and the financial hardship it had brought upon the community. Striding back and forth in the front of the building, he loudly declared, "In the name of Jesus, I command fish to come into the nets of the fishermen, so full that they are overflowing."

He continued in this vein for some time, "taking authority" over the sea life a stone's throw from our rented meeting house in order to have salmon and halibut hauled into boats by our fisher folk. He reasoned that if Jesus did it (Luke 5:4-9), then so could we. For me, this logic translated into the personal realm, and I know I didn't act alone. With shame, I have to admit I tried this same tactic many times when I went sport fishing, commanding the fish to come to my hook.

By the way—it didn't work. Surprise, huh? What I discovered was that asking in humility resulted in a much better track record of answered prayer.

In June of 1997, then-pastor Tom Smalley echoed Jason's belief. He stated in a sermon that as believers in Christ, we have been given dominion over the world, including the elements themselves. With zeal, Tom noted that God is calling His church to take back the dominion we have given to Satan. When Jesus rebuked the storm and

changed the weather, Tom said He was merely revealing to us the power God has breathed into us to do the same thing.

Now, that provokes a question—if Adam was granted dominion in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 1:28), why didn't he exercise power over the sky, wind, etc? In fact, the apostles never held this kind of doctrine, and they were responsible for setting out in orderly form the teachings revealed by the Spirit of God. What we engage in as Christians must be rooted in apostolic practice. If the apostles who knew our Lord—who ate with Him, touched Him, and were witnesses to His resurrection—had no concept of the ideas being promoted today, then we flirt with these power trips to our own disaster.

Certainly some amazing miracles involving the weather did indeed occur in Scripture (Joshua 10:12-13, I Kings 17:1, 18:41-45), but God was petitioned in prayer for those events to take place. Plus, contrary to what believers are now told to expect in their daily lives, these recorded instances were not the norm, but the extraordinary. All three incidents referenced here apparently happened only once for Joshua and Elijah. Peter did walk on the sea with Jesus, but again, it is through Christ's power and not something "imparted" to Peter that these things took place. Yes, Peter walked on water, but only once. Yes, he walked on the waves, but only at the invitation of the Son of God. Had he stepped out of the boat with a dominion mindset, he would have quickly discovered his buoyancy quotient and crawled back into the ship dripping wet and perhaps a bit wiser.

From the Sunday pulpit also came a statement that I recognized immediately as counter-scriptural. This teaching still resounds today throughout many hyper-charismatic groups, that believers can actually call things into existence, to essentially create with a god-like power.

"We call those things which be not as though they were" (paraphrased from KJV). This incredible corruption of Romans 4:17 removes creative authority from its rightful place—with *God alone*. Scripture does not give Christians carte blanche in the supernatural realm. Although the glory for this power in us was ostensibly given to God, the doctrine derived its existence from the twisting of Colossians 2:9. The fact is we cannot create anything, and no amount of wishing or

positive confession will alter that fact. Although I kept my opinions to myself on this one, I never did add it to my statement of faith.

The basis of all this is the incredibly strange Word of Faith belief that even God, speaking on the first day of creation, had faith in His words to form worlds. Did you hear that? God had to have faith in order to create! Therefore, our faith could do the same thing, since He lives within us. It is standard Word of Faith doctrine that faith is a “force,” and anyone who knows the tricks can tap into this force and operate it to his own gain. Although this teaching is absent from the Bible, it *is* found within the writings of Mary Baker Eddy of Christian Science fame. This metaphysical cult has always taught the creative power of both the mind and positive confession.

Word of Faith also claimed that since Adam had been given dominion of the entire world in the Garden, when he fell that same authority had passed to Satan. God was then a helpless outsider who needed to scheme to regain from the hosts of hell what He had lost. The Messiah was God’s answer to the problem. When Christ came, these teachers say, He restored all dominion to His elect; thus we may claim the very authority of the Godhead in commanding the elements of nature into our desired order, and speak our desires into existence.

We need to get one thing straight. Contrary to Word of Faith theology, God never lost control of this world. He never was “on the outside looking in,” as some proponents have put it. The Almighty God created everything in existence, has always had complete ownership, and always had all authority to do with it just as it pleased Him:

The earth is the LORD’s, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein. (Psalm 24:1)

For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills. I know all the fowls of the mountains: and the wild beasts of the field are mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell thee: for the world is mine, and the fulness thereof. (Psalm 50:10-12)

Mine hand also hath laid the foundation of the earth, and my right hand hath spanned the heavens: when I call unto them, they stand up together. (Isaiah 48:13)

Doesn't sound too much like the impotent god of Word of Faith teaching. And that is exactly the point. Word of Faith denigrates the power and uniqueness of the one true God and at the same time elevates man to the status of godhood. This kind of religious persuasion is straight from the pages of the book of Mormon, with one minor exception. While Mormon doctrine promises LDS believers a *future* rulership of their own world, attainable only after death and subsequent exaltation, Word of Faith Christians get to do it here and now. That is, if you buy into this heresy.

Just How Positive Is It?

As Word of Faith adherents, we were taught never to confess the negative, only what we viewed as encouraging. “Positive Confession” was key to realizing kingdom benefits. If we had physical pain, we proclaimed, “[B]y whose stripes ye were healed.” (1 Peter 2:24). If in financial difficulty, we’d wield the confession, “Thank you, God, that You ‘rebuke the devourer’ for my sake because I tithe” (from Malachi 3:11). It is amazing how the “devourer” was always equated with some demonic entity trying to consume our finances! And, I recall one occasion that I still have to shake my head over, even though at the time it had me thinking: I once owned a red flannel shirt that I really liked. It was quite threadbare, but it was comfortable, fit well, and had a warmth of familiarity about it that just kind of sat well with me. Then-elder Tom Smalley happened to come to our house one day, and seeing me in this shirt declared in all seriousness, “You know, that shirt is a confession of poverty.” At first, I smiled and disregarded his words, but after he left the house, I began to mull it over. Was my choice of clothing actually inhibiting the flow of finances from the throne of God? It began to bother me. I certainly didn’t want to be guilty of robbing my family of financial blessing. This sounds funny in hindsight, but it gives a vivid illustration of the bondage this kind of

thinking brings on. If I had to surrender my preferred attire, what would be the next target—hobbies or my free time? Would I now have to choose between the things I enjoyed doing and what might be considered activities more appropriate to an inheritor of financial wealth?

You see, on and on it goes. It never really stops. Something as simple as a shirt became an obstacle to the freedom I should have been enjoying in Christ.

Now certainly we should not live sloppily and let vile things pour out of our mouths, but there is a major difference between simple, holy living, and being controlled by an outside entity (Positive Confession). One brings liberty, the other manipulation. I wonder what the apostles would say about all this, or how the Positive Confession group would receive them. According to some in the Word of Faith higher echelon (e.g., John Avanzini), Jesus wore rich clothing and carried around a moneybag with our present-day equivalent of tens of thousands of dollars.³ Would the apostles, who were considered scum by the world (I Corinthians 4:9-13), be welcome in Word of Faith/Positive Confession conferences? I doubt it, at least not without a shave, a bath, and appropriate designer apparel.

Sickness Be Gone!

Dominion/Kingdom Now/Word of Faith also has a lot to say about healing. I understand the Scriptures in relation to prayer and healing for our physical bodies, but that is not what we are dealing with in these heretical theologies, which teach that the believer in Christ should not only be healed of sickness, but walk in complete “divine health.” In other words, we don’t ever have to get sick. The reasoning behind this is a twisting of the scripture in II Peter 1:4, where the apostle states, “[Y]e might be partakers of the divine nature.”

In actuality, this particular reference has to do with our inheritance in Christ and being grafted into the true vine, which is Jesus (John 15:4-5). This has nothing to do with the supposed revelation that we are somehow divine and should not suffer the consequences of living in a fallen world. This false teaching is not new at all, but it was given greater voice in the 20th century church than ever before, and no doubt its

influence will continue to grow in the 21st century church. Some of the leading promoters of the Faith movement have stated that God and man were on equal terms in the Garden. Progressive reasoning dictates that if it was so before the curse, so it must now be with Christians, who have been redeemed from the curse of the law.

Equality with God? We need to think this one through. If Hagin and Copeland are serious, then no real distinction between Christ and us exists. And that is exactly the point of becoming a god on earth. The teaching has us literally becoming an incarnation, like Jesus. The upshot of this belief system is that if we are Christ, as Hagin has also stated, and have our own incarnation, then we should have all the attending benefits of that state of being, including perpetual freedom from sickness.

Can I tell you that in my many years in this movement, I have never once known *anyone* who did not suffer from a common cold, the flu, aches, pains, or infirmity? You won't hear this fact spread abroad, but the Word of Faith camp has just as much sickness, disease, and death as the staunchest fundamentalists.

In his revealing article, "Death by Faith," missionary Mike Oppenheimer of Let Us Reason ministries catalogues the embarrassing frequency of sickness and death in the Word of Faith camp and its associates.⁴ E.W. Kenyon, one of the principal early expositors of Word of Faith theology, died of a malignant tumor. Joyce Meyer underwent medical treatment for breast cancer. Kenneth Hagin's sister and brother-in-law both died of cancer. John Osteen died after a battle with kidney and heart diseases. Kathryn Kuhlman died of heart failure. Jamie Buckingham, frequent contributor to *Charisma* magazine, died of cancer after repeatedly claiming himself healed. John Wimber of Vineyard fame died of complications due to his battle with cancer. "Prophetess" Ruth Ward Heflin, whose appearance on the international charismatic scene was heralded by the appearance of "gold dust" falling on her audiences, recently died of cancer. Faith healers Jack Coe, who died of bulbar polio, and A. A. Allen, whose official cause of death was cited as cardiac arrest, are often portrayed as pillars of charismatic Christendom. Oral Roberts,

who has perhaps laid hands on more people for healing than anyone in the last thirty years, experienced chest pains and was admitted to a hospital suffering from a heart attack that nearly proved fatal. At least Roberts doesn't forbid medical attention for his followers. In fact, the university named for him houses a medical school.

And now, Kenneth Hagin, Sr. himself died in September 2003, after several days in a cardiac intensive care unit.

The examples are manifold, but these few suffice. The very leaders of the divine health movement have had to resort to doctors in order to preserve their lives. For us, that should be clue #2, following hard on the heels of clue #1, which is the heretical nature of their doctrine in light of the Word of God. Those interested in an in-depth examination of the Word of Faith camp should check out D. R. McConnell's *A Different Gospel*.⁵ After more than twenty-five years, it is still the standard reference work on the subject, and rightly so. McConnell's piercing analysis exposes the falsehoods and scriptural gymnastics upon which the movement's doctrines are built.

The most oft-quoted text for healing is I Peter 2:24. If we knew nothing else at New Covenant Fellowship about our sickness being removed from us, we needed to have this verse as part of our claim on divine health—"by whose stripes ye were healed" became the catch phrase to deal with everything from headaches to cancer. Popularized by E.W. Kenyon in the early part of this century and utilized by Hagin, Copeland, and most of the leaders of the Word of Faith camp, this text got its strength from the supposed revelation that Christ's atonement removed not only sin but sickness from the believer forever. It is only up to us to claim the promise as divine right.

But a closer look at the full context of the verse shines a very different light on the subject:

Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed. For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls." (I Peter 2:24-25)

Everything must be understood within proper context; that is the most basic principle of scriptural understanding. Otherwise, massive confusion results, as is seen today in the erroneous Dominion proclamation that the church has now replaced historical Israel and all the promises of God's covenant nation now apply not to the Jews, but to us. Without proper context, the interpretive playing field is wide open.

Even a cursory examination of I Peter 2:24-25 indicates the apostle Peter is referencing the atonement and full forgiveness of sins. It has nothing whatever to do with the removal of sickness from the believer. The "healed" portion of the verse again is referencing every Christian being redeemed (healed) from the curse of sin, and the eternal punishment it warrants.

Further understanding is gained from a quick look at the Old Testament verse to which Peter had referred:

But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:5-6)

The context of this passage deals with the Suffering Servant, Christ Jesus, being a sacrifice for the sins of the world. Read on. The rest of the same chapter deals with the sin issue and Christ's blood atonement, not the healing of a person's physical body. We have altered this Old Testament promise of forgiveness of sins, and made it to be a panacea for all our physical ills instead.

One more New Testament verse bears close examination. Used extensively both in our congregation and Word of Faith groups, it does seem to promise healing of every sickness and offer the endowment of divine health. Again, context plays an important part in understanding the text:

When the even was come, they brought unto him many that were possessed with devils: and he cast out the spirits with his

word, and healed all that were sick: That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the prophet, saying, Himself took our infirmities, and bare our sicknesses. (Matthew 8:16-17)

Again, the scripture references the 53rd chapter of Isaiah, verse four:

Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.

Now, the word “griefs” in this passage does mean sickness, and therefore it did prophesy the healing ministry of our Lord. But—and this is critical—the New Testament indicates that the prophecy was fulfilled where Matthew states, “That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the prophet.”

This prophecy was fulfilled in Christ, in a set time and place, and cannot be used as a blank check for ongoing divine health in a believer. Again, Word of Faith teachers have taken out of context a prophecy of the earthly ministry of Christ that validated his claim as Messiah, and have applied it to Christians. And, not to every Christian, mind you, but only those who will have faith according to Word of Faith tenets.

Can we honestly believe that no one in the New Testament Church ever got sick? Isn't that the Word of Faith meaning of divine health? In fact, that is exactly what they teach. Not only should you never be sick, many of them state, but Christians should live out their full hundred and twenty years (Genesis 6:3) and only die by consent when those years are fulfilled. At New Covenant, we heard the same repetitive propaganda. Regular healing sessions after a Sunday or midweek service, punctuated by the recipients of prayer being slain in the spirit, served to verify in our own hearts that this doctrine was genuine. True to form, virtually any teaching, if accompanied by the standard “signs and wonders,” was adhered to by our congregation. Experience validated teaching. Warnings from the Word of God notwithstanding, manifestations took continuous precedence over the Scriptures we claimed to believe but never understood.

Coming Into “Alignment”

Back in about the early ‘90s, we went through a series of divine healing videos put out by Charles and Francis Hunter, or “The Happy Hunters.” At the end of each video, we put the teachings to the test—not the scriptural test for truth, mind you, but the “practical application” of what we had just learned. By laying on of hands, usually administered by Jason but sometimes by others in the group, we often *felt* things—sometimes a sense like an electric current running through the body, sometimes “drunkenness” (I experienced this one time where I literally could not speak without slurring my words), and sometimes in a very strange manipulation of the limbs. This was particularly powerful. Once (and I was not the only one so affected), according to the command on the video, I stretched out my arms and brought my hands together in order to see if my back was out of alignment. Well, according to the Hunters’ criteria it was, and when I asked for God to heal me, right there in that room with about fifteen other people, my back seemed to move of its own accord, my outstretched arms and shoulders slowly rotating as if there was another person inside me doing the motions. There appeared to be a definite power at work unlike any I had ever felt before. I was thrilled. Even elder Tom Smalley was impressed, pointing at me and exclaiming with a huge smile, “Look at Kevin!”

This manipulation went on for about ten minutes, when it gradually subsided and left altogether. We had seen many people on this video manifest in this way, so it was only natural that we should experience the same thing. Incidentally, I never did feel any lasting change in my back.

It wasn’t my spine that needed aligning—it was my heart. And that needed to be aligned using the plumb line of God’s Word. Although we could not find its precedent in Scripture, the experience was powerful, stimulating, and sometimes seemed to work. Even unbelievers who were occasionally brought to meetings testified of the power that coursed through their bodies and moved their limbs of its own accord. At least one, however, left our meeting hurting with worse pain than when he arrived.

Was it of God? What do you think? Its absence from the ministries of Jesus and the apostles should sound warning bells loud and

clear. This was a formula prayer, the same thing Jesus had in fact warned against in Matthew 6:7.

“Do this, and this will happen.” How many times I heard that kind of spiritual reasoning in our congregation eludes me. But God simply doesn’t act that way. Jesus healed differently for different people, based on heart attitude, not a specific agenda, method, or ritual. One of the main points of the video, which fell right into line with our own doctrine, was that Christians should not be suffering under sickness. Well, if we believe that, then we will have a very hard time explaining away the sickness of sincere believers like Timothy (I Timothy 5:23), Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25-27), and Trophimus (II Timothy 4:20). In congregations today that follow these doctrines of men, the many who suffer sickness, sometimes chronically, are placed in the position of being healed or being condemned for their lack of faith, either by church leadership, the congregation, or their own feelings. They believe they have failed God. Or worse, that God has failed them.

Headed For the Reefs

Once corresponded with a man who had been in prison for a number of years, sentenced to hard time for armed robbery. He was born-again in prison and had a genuine heart to serve the Lord, but he had a chronic back condition that gave him regular pain and apparently inhibited his freedom of movement to the point that he could not exercise regularly. Unfortunately, he was given some Word of Faith material and cleaved to the teachings of Kenneth Copeland. He also subscribed to Voice of Victory material, put out by Copeland’s ministry. After reading the instructions for some time, he took the teachings at face value, “confessed his healing” despite the steady pain, and even wrote asking me to pray a prayer along with him for thirty days, after which time God would certainly restore him to fullness of health. I hesitated to do this, as I had suffered many years from physical problems as well and was beginning to believe that God had His own plans regardless of our desires. But I reluctantly agreed, and for the next month, prayed for my brother’s healing.

The prayer, which he had written out for me, went something like this:

I thank you, Father, that I am healed by the stripes of Jesus Christ, and that you laid all sickness on Him. Thank you that sickness shall not have place in my body or my life, and that I am even now experiencing the health of Christ.

It went on, of course, but you get the idea—no petition, no humble requesting, merely the insistence that he was already healed because of the work of the atonement. I probably don't need to relate the outcome. My friend was not healed, and consequently grew very angry and accusative toward God. He blamed the Lord, not Kenneth Copeland. His faith floundered from that point, suffering near-shipwreck.

My friend's story is by no means the exception. I have known others personally whose faith was battered when God did not heal according to Word of Faith formulas. Their confidence in God was sorely shaken, and they have these doctrines and those promoting them to thank for it.

Some of us still remember the frightening book, *We Let Our Son Die*, in which the parents involved in a positive confession church group withheld life-giving insulin from their diabetic son.⁶ The boy succumbed, and the grieving parents were thrown into the horrifying realization that God had no part in the tragedy. The father of the boy, Larry Parker, rose courageously to tell his own story as a warning to others.

When I mentioned wanting to lend this book out to others after having read it sometime in the mid-1990s, then-pastor Tom Smalley cautioned me against doing so. It might have a damaging effect on some people's faith, he said. In his mind, it was perhaps more dangerous to actually warn of destructive error than it was to let it go unchecked.

How many others have died because of religiously following Word of Faith formulas? As New Covenant Fellowship members, we were taught that sickness and physical pain were just a cover-up from Satan to rob us of our divine health. How many times I heard, "Don't believe your symptoms. Believe God!" I cannot count. One visiting min-

ister repeatedly told us, “Your sickness is a fact; your healing is the truth.” What is that supposed to mean? There *is* no difference between fact and truth. Christ’s blood shed for the forgiveness of my sins is a fact, and it is also the truth. His resurrection is both.

As far as the demon factor is concerned, while it is true that the devil and demons can inflict sickness on the body of a Christian, it is not always their doing. And while the promises of God are real and supernaturally powerful, claiming absolute perfect health all the time is just not possible this side of heaven. We forget that we live in a fallen world. *People who live here get sick.* There’s no crime in admitting that. In fact, it can bring great release to a chronic pain sufferer. After being told for years that it was *his fault* that he wasn’t healed, or that he didn’t have enough faith for his diabetic daughter to throw away the insulin, what freedom for a poor beleaguered soul to realize that sickness in this life is just part of the package!

Quadriplegics like Joni Eareckson Tada present a great problem to the Word of Faith camp. They are in fact an embarrassment because, according to Word/Faith doctrine, either they are in sin or their faith is too weak to effect healing. And don’t kid yourself—there are lots of us out there, folks who have been pummeled senseless by this teaching on top of having to struggle with the daily physical pain of chronic illness. How many have walked away from faith in Christ because they just couldn’t take it anymore—no one will ever know until the accounting at the end of the age.

The dangerous nature of this doctrine is exemplified in an occurrence at New Covenant. Sometime in the early ‘90s, the husband of one of our members began suffering from recurrent, blinding head pain. Jason went to pray for him, and supposedly saw a vision of an octopus-like demon with tentacles wrapped around the man’s brain. Whenever it squeezed one of the tentacles, Jason said, the man had tremendous pain, which sometimes knocked him to the floor. Jason rebuked the “demon,” but the man was not healed. He was shortly thereafter diagnosed with a brain tumor. Surgical removal of the cancerous growth provided immediate relief, and he is doing well today as a prominent member of our community.

The moral of this story should be obvious. It wasn't a demon causing the pain. You can't surgically remove a demonic spirit. The simple fact is that a brain tumor had developed and needed to be extricated. The scary part is that the man could easily have died had he heeded the supposed word of knowledge and the imagined vision of our pastor. At the time, Jason was insistent about the accuracy of his revelation, and despite the glaring evidence, I never heard any public refutation of it or apology to the congregation for the vision's fraudulent nature. I witnessed this practice over and over in our congregation.

If something doesn't work, or proves embarrassingly contrary to the situation's outcome, simply ignore it. Hush it up, and the congregation will eventually forget.

But should it be this way? Why be afraid to bring failure out into the cleansing light of Christ (John 3:20-21, I John 1:7)? Months before I left our congregation of twelve years, my pastor's wife told me that her greatest fear was that I would go public with what I knew and had seen. She was concerned about the possible division such revelations (which she believed were my own interpretation) might bring. But such reasoning should not even be an issue. What happens in our church groups should be out in the open for anyone to see. Personal confession of sin aside, secrecy has no place in the body of Christ.

Although a definite hierarchy of power prevailed, with Jason being at the top of the pyramid, I think his motive in preaching all these things was to lead us into a more full relationship with God. There factors in, however, an undeniable attitude of superiority, reflected in the prevailing mindset of both leadership and membership that, as a congregation, we were on the cutting-edge of what God was doing in the world. As far as we were concerned, the other congregations around town were missing out.

After all, when you believe that the fullness of the Godhead dwells *in you* in bodily form, a pronounced sense of superiority is the only reasonable outcome.