



STATEMENT DP076

FAITH IN FAITH OR FAITH IN GOD?

by Hank Hanegraaff

In 1980 Harvest House published a book by Larry Parker entitled *We Let Our Son Die*. The book tells the tragic story of how Larry and his wife -- after being influenced by one of America's numerous "word of faith" (or "word-faith") teachers -- withheld insulin from their diabetic son, Wesley. Predictably, Wesley went into a diabetic coma. The Parkers, warned about the impropriety of making a "negative confession," continued to "positively confess" Wesley's healing until the time of his death.

Even after Wesley's death, the Parkers -- undaunted in their "faith" -- conducted a resurrection service instead of a funeral. For more than one year following their son's death, they refused to abandon the "revelation knowledge" they had received through the "word-faith" movement. Eventually, they were tried and convicted of manslaughter and child abuse.

Many other similarly tragic stories could be recounted. And yet, the carnage unleashed by this movement is not *limited* to physical death. Literally thousands are swallowing the spiritual cyanide dispensed by the word-faith teachers, leading to the shipwreck of their faith in God.

Much has been written over the past few years about the New Age movement and the threat it poses to historic Christianity. As real as this threat is, I have become equally concerned about the ominous threat that the word-faith movement poses to the body of Christ. If the New Age movement is the greatest threat to evangelical Christianity from *without*, I believe the word-faith or positive confession movement may well be considered its greatest threat from *within*.

No doubt many believers will contend that in writing about this subject, I am doing nothing more than splitting theological hairs. Yet the extent of the controversy is not merely an honest doctrinal difference among orthodox believers; it rather entails a confrontation between the gospel preached by the Lord Jesus Christ and *another* gospel.

Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble, but take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). In sharp contrast, the word-faith teachers promise unlimited health and wealth to believers who can conjure up their brand of faith.

Jesus exhorted His followers not to "labor for that which perishes" but to "labor for that which is eternal" (John 6:27). The prosperity gospel, by contrast, encourages Christians to focus on what they can receive from Christ in the here and now.

Much so-called Christian TV and radio programming today panders to what peoples' "itching ears" want to hear: the promise of earthly gain. Over and over again we hear the testimonies of businessmen who "turned on to" Jesus and saw their businesses double, or athletes whose statistics improved as a result of their faith formulas and Christ. Sacrifice and service have been traded in for self-fulfillment and self-aggrandizement. And while there is an element of reality in the message (e.g., faith is essential to effective prayer; Christ does meet our needs), sadly, the emphasis renders it merely the skin of the truth stuffed with a lie. Christ has become merely a means to an end, and believers are induced through slick Madison Avenue manipulation to come to the Master's table, not to experience fellowship and intimacy with the Master, but to enjoy what is on the Master's table. In sharp distinction to this message, the Jesus of the Scriptures is not a means to an end, He is the end (e.g., Phil. 3:7-8).

Jesus predicted for His followers poverty, rejection, and persecution. His disciples were willing to face the tyrant's brandished steel, the lion's gory mane, and the fires of a thousand deaths because they knew that they were not of this world. They were merely pilgrims and sojourners in a foreign land. Perhaps Charles Haddon Spurgeon said it best: "The Old Covenant was a covenant of prosperity, the New Covenant is a Covenant of Adversity whereby we are weaned from the present world and made meet [i.e., fit] for the world to come."

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In Hebrews 11, often referred to as the "Faith Hall of Fame," we read of those who were commended for their faith, yet were destitute, persecuted, imprisoned, and suffered torturous deaths. These men and women set examples for us, and yet their lives were characterized more by perseverance than by prosperity.

Certainly, this message will not sell well in a self-indulgent age. Nonetheless, we had better be glad that our heavenly Father decides what is best for us and not we ourselves, because only He truly understands what we need and what we can handle. One shudders to think of what would happen if God gave us everything we clamored for.

I do not wish to be misunderstood: I believe in divine healing and in God's provision for every detail of our lives. In addition, I do not associate piety with poverty. I thank God for those He has prospered who are dedicated to using their resources for the extension of His Kingdom.

But for the word-faith teachers, healing and prosperity became so important that they had to find some way to *guarantee* them, and they did this by exalting *man's* faith at the expense of *God's* sovereignty. Thus, they developed the doctrine that God created the world out of nothing by faith, and that He created men as "little gods" to exercise the same kind of faith. Faith therefore becomes a powerful force that gets results, whether in the hands of a believer or a nonbeliever.

On the basis of this virtual deification of human faith, the purveyors of the word-faith message promise health and wealth to those who exercise faith in their faith rather than faith in their God. As has been well said elsewhere, faith is only as good as the object on which it is placed.

Walter Martin used to say, "All faith is subsumed under the overarching biblical doctrine of the sovereignty of God." The Creator is the Lord of the universe, not a cosmic "gofer" at the beck and call of His creation. It is not our faith that sits on the throne, but our sovereign God (I Chron. 29:10-12).