

BLESSED



A History of the American Prosperity Gospel

KATE BOWLER

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Prosperity Gospel*



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*To my parents,
for their loving home.
And to Toban,
for bringing it with us
on all life's journeys.*

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Introduction

THE VICTORIOUS FAITH CENTER sign blinked red. The church was squat and wide, an inauspicious storefront sandwiched between a nail salon and a payday loan office in a Durham, North Carolina, mini-mall. For years I had been studying churches with triumphant names like World Overcomers and Victory International to trace an emerging movement, famous for promises like the one before me in bright neon: Victorious Faith. The movement goes by different names, ranging from the slightly pejorative (Health and Wealth or Name It and Claim It) to the vaguely descriptive (Faith or Word of Faith) to the blunt shorthand, the prosperity gospel. Though it is hard to describe, it is easy to find. The prosperity gospel is a wildly popular Christian message of spiritual, physical, and financial mastery that dominates not only much of the American religious scene but some of the largest churches around the globe.

The pastor and first lady of the Victorious Faith Center agreed to meet to discuss my study of the prosperity movement, and I was eager to discover their connections to the larger ministerial networks that dominate this movement.¹ As I launched into a description of my study, I felt the emotional temperature drop. No, the pastor stated firmly, his teachings had no historical precedent; they were born from revelation. This was an independent, nondenominational church built on faith alone. “What about the church’s name?” I asked. It had come to him in a dream. The conversation lapsed into uncomfortable silence as I realized that this line of questioning violated his sense of integrity as a revelator. Flushed, I mentally tabulated the odds of quickly finding another church. Perhaps I should have visited Destiny Church down the street or found a recommended local ministry from a famous prosperity preacher’s website. In the yawning pause, a magazine on the coffee table caught my eye. It was *The Word of Faith*, the official publication of the flagship Word of Faith institution, Rhema Bible Training Center in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma. The sight of the magazine prompted a different line of questioning. Where did he go to school? Where did he turn for spiritual inspiration? What ministries did the church support? The hidden structures of the prosperity

movement began to emerge. Pastor Walton had spent several years learning from the televangelist host of *Success-N-Life*, Robert Tilton, at his Bible school in Texas. He has sustained the momentum of his ministry by reading prosperity publications and by taking intermittent trips to witness divine healer Benny Hinn's crusades. The local church "sows" money like seeds into the international ministries of celebrities like Creflo Dollar, Kenneth Hagin, and Joel Osteen. While Pastor Walton sees his insights and preaching bubbling up from the wellsprings of scripture and personal revelation, in song, sermon, and giving, his Sunday mornings at the Victorious Faith Center also closely resemble thousands of similar churches dotting the American religious landscape.

The seeming independence of churches like the Victorious Faith Center has puzzled pastors, scholars, and media pundits alike. Few know how to measure the breadth of the prosperity movement or even how to lay the tape. The prosperity gospel is not bounded strictly by region, as its celebrities hail from Seattle to New York, Houston to Chicago, and even around the globe. Denominational markers do not offer many clues, since most of its largest churches claim nondenominational status. Few leaders advertise themselves a "prosperity preacher," even if they sermonize weekly about divine finances. Congregational size also proves inconclusive: while famous prosperity-preaching congregations like Lakewood Church or World Changers Church International crowd the list of American megachurches, countless small congregations proclaim an equally fervent prosperity gospel. Likewise, these congregational estimates cannot account for the millions of Americans who spice up their spiritual lives by watching their favorite televangelists, reading their publications, or attending their conferences.

Common sense also sends researchers in the wrong direction. The prosperity gospel cannot be conflated with fundamentalism, pentecostalism, evangelicalism, the religious right, the so-called black church, or any of the usual suspects (though it certainly overlaps with each).² The prosperity message favors theological conservatism, and yet, organizationally it is unlike other conservative movements that tend to produce mandates and institutions with ironclad purpose. The prosperity gospel lacks the semblance of this well-oiled institutional machinery, leading many observers to conclude that its celebrities operate as theological and institutional independents, rising, persisting, and falling haphazardly. They appear to be solo evangelists—fireflies that flicker on and off, here and there, each burning brightly and then fading without consistency or connection.

This confusion is largely because the prosperity gospel thrives in diverse forms on the American religious terrain. In Houston, Joel Osteen, known as the “smiling preacher,” inspired his 38,000-member congregation through humorous and lightly theological sermons salted with insights from his latest self-help bestseller, *I Declare! 31 Promises to Speak Over Your Life*.³ Nielsen Media christened him America’s most-watched inspirational figure, with a weekly audience of seven million.⁴ T. D. Jakes, dubbed by *Time* magazine as one of America’s most influential new religious leaders, built a financial empire with his 30,000-member congregation, media conglomerate, and more than two dozen books on emotional healing.⁵ Creflo Dollar, pastor of Atlanta’s 30,000-member World Changers Church International, traded Osteen’s smiles for fatherly admonitions, urging his mostly black church members to increase their wealth by increasing their faith. The Ohio pastor Rod Parsley earned a national reputation as a prosperity preacher and self-proclaimed pit bull for the religious right. Frederick Price, the Los Angeles pastor of Crenshaw Christian Center, lambasted traditional Christianity as a “slave religion” and implored his 22,000-member congregation to use prosperity theology to overcome barriers to black upward mobility.⁶ Joyce Meyer eschewed a conventional church ministry altogether and toured America’s largest cities with a message of abundance and hope heard largely by audiences of white, middle-aged women. These independent ministers and others like them, taken together, operate as a major force in American religion, generating vast audiences and financial donations.

Millions of Americans fell in love with the prosperity gospel and its new kind of preacher. Charming though not effusive, polished but not slick, these favored few could as easily have appeared on *Piers Morgan Tonight* as behind their megachurch Sunday pulpits. Podcasts, Internet streaming, and daily television programming carried their sermons to millions. They cultivated their fame with personal appearances in sold-out arenas. The megachurch ministerial elite dominated not only religious media networks, like Pat Robertson’s Christian Broadcasting Network or the Trinity Broadcasting Network, but secular outlets as well, becoming mainstays on stations like Black Entertainment Television. Some climbed the charts of the *New York Times* bestsellers list, and all found their titles lining the religion/inspiration aisles from Walmart to Barnes & Noble. The Senate buzzed about these celebrities’ high profit margins, while bloggers and media pundits debated each ministerial expenditure.⁷ Loved or hated, they were never forgotten. At almost any moment, day or night,

the American public could tune in to see these familiar faces and a consistent message: God desires to bless you.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, a dozen or so prosperity preachers had become household names and powerful players in the American religious scene. To their congregations, they acted as pastors, prophets, and visionaries. They attracted spiritual tourists and members alike to their church complexes, thickets of offices, television production studios, classrooms, and sanctuaries. They put on hard hats and cut ribbons for their latest building projects and then quickly set a new goal in their church's sights. Their biographies—from their childhood, conversion, and family life to their rise to fame and their empire building—became the narrative glue of virtually every sermon, book, and piece of merchandise to emerge from their churches. To their fellow pastors, they were sovereigns of ministerial kingdoms, whose coveted endorsements, preaching platforms, and financial support fueled the aspirations of the thousands below them.

To the secular media, these prosperity leaders represented the Christianity of the American marketplace. With microphones pinned to their lapels, they preached upbeat messages of God's goodness and human potential. They knew the questions would naturally turn to their own wealth and defended their personal jets and real estate assets with examples of their altruistic motives. And to popular religious audiences, they served as America's counselors, self-help advisors as trusted as professional therapists. Audiences cheered as T. D. Jakes appeared easily alongside Dr. Phil on the psychologist's hit television show, two relationship experts with cures for the country's ills. In those roles, faith celebrities became leaders of a popular religious force. These ministers, and others like them, constituted the national leadership of the prosperity movement, commanding some of the country's largest spiritual audiences through pulpits and television cameras. Surveys continued to find popular support for its cause. A recent *Time* poll found that 17 percent of Christians surveyed identified themselves as part of such a movement, while 31 percent believed that God increases the riches of those who give. A full two-thirds agreed that God wants people to prosper.⁸ A Pew survey reported that 43 percent of all Christian respondents agreed that the faithful receive health and wealth. A 2008 Pew study found that three-in-four Latino believers, across all Christian denominations, agreed with the statement: "God will grant financial success and good health to all believers who have enough faith."⁹ American audiences had made this gospel their own.

This book seeks to show how millions of American Christians came to see money, health, and good fortune as divine. My attempt to answer how this took place follows three lines of argumentation. First, these chapters introduce readers to the major figures and features of the twentieth-century American prosperity gospel, from touring mesmerists and metaphysical sages to pentecostal healers, Reformed optimists, Episcopal ecstasies, and Republican stumblers. Progressing chronologically, I trace the movement's roots in the late nineteenth century to its flowering in the pentecostal revivals of the World War II years and maturity in the ripe individualism of post-1960s America.

Second, this book is an attempt to describe not only the rise of a discrete movement but also a transformation of popular religious imagination that has not yet ended. Americans began to question an ethic of self-denial as a stony orthodoxy barren of the Gospel's abundant promises. Believers of all stripes started to claim supernatural promises for joy, healing, sanctification, provision, self-worth, business sense, family unity, heavenly tongues, and Holy Spirit fire come down. But the movement did not simply foster hope. The prosperity gospel guaranteed a special form of Christian power to reach into God's treasure trove and pull out a miracle. It represented the triumph of American optimism over the realities of a fickle economy, entrenched racism, pervasive poverty, and theological pessimism that foretold the future as dangling by a thread. Countless listeners reimaged their ability as good Christians—and good Americans—to leapfrog over any obstacles.

Third, the following chapters seek to familiarize readers with the unifying themes of the prosperity gospel and the diverse people who speak its language. The prosperity gospel, I argue, centers on four themes: *faith*, *wealth*, *health*, and *victory*.¹⁰ (1) It conceives of *faith* as an activator, a power that unleashes spiritual forces and turns the spoken word into reality. (2) The movement depicts *faith* as palpably demonstrated in *wealth* and (3) *health*. It can be measured in both the wallet (one's personal wealth) and in the body (one's personal health), making material reality the measure of the success of immaterial *faith*. (4) The movement expects *faith* to be marked by *victory*. Believers trust that culture holds no political, social, or economic impediment to *faith*, and no circumstance can stop believers from living in total victory here on earth. All four hallmarks emphasize demonstrable results, a *faith* that may be calculated by the outcome of a successful life, no matter whether they express this belief through what I call "hard prosperity" or "soft prosperity." Hard prosperity

judges people's faith by their immediate circumstances, while soft prosperity appraises believers with a gentler, more roundabout, assessment. (For an extended discussion of the term "prosperity gospel," see appendix B.) Though believers argue that Christian prosperity differs from worldly acquisitiveness, these Christians recognize that their message inscribes materiality with spiritual meaning. Inverting the well-worn American mantra that things must be seen to be believed, their gospel rewards those who believe *in order to* see. In their confidence that they are promised *faith, wealth, health, and victory*, they count themselves blessed.

A Caution

Given the controversies that swirl around the prosperity gospel, a few cautionary words should be kept in mind. First, I believe that, at a fundamental level, American desires for the "good life" are basic and ordinary. That is not to say that everyone has the same standards of adjudicating quality of life, but that when many people say "prosperity," they mean survival. People long for the necessities that sustain life and rejoice when those goods overflow. As an academic, writing in a scholarly world dominated by the upper-middle class, it is not unusual to see prosperity read pejoratively as indulgence or fetish instead of a humdrum part of everyday living. Writing beneath the neo-Gothic spires of Duke University, built as part of James B. Duke's tobacco empire, I am undoubtedly a beneficiary of a gospel of wealth. More than once, believers have reminded me that in studying the prosperity gospel, I have also been blessed and shown favor. As they prayed lavish blessings over my work, I could hardly forget how we all hope to see our small efforts multiplied.

Second, religion and money have never stood more than an arm's length apart. Economic status divides us all into strata, groupings of taste, habit, and lifestyle. It largely dictates where we live, with whom we associate, and what horizons we imagine for ourselves. Prosperity (and the fluctuating criteria by which we measure how much is enough) is both the substance of ethical debate and a deeply rooted means by which we adjudicate our place in the world. Religious beliefs, practices, habits, and institutions naturally assign value to these economic accidents or consequences, making prosperity a crucial arena of spiritual meaning making.

Third, this book examines only one of America's prosperity gospels; that is, there have been many forms of Christian thinking about money. This book might easily have begun with Max Weber's beloved Puritans,

ended with apocalyptic speculation about the effects of the recession, and still been incomplete. I have chosen a much narrower genealogy of one pentecostal offshoot dubbed “*the prosperity gospel*,” despite the fact that in American religious history, countless clergy and laypeople have speculated about the relationship between God’s favor and hunger or plenty. Recipes for success have contained a changing list of ingredients, and American religion could hardly exhaust its possibilities. It cannot serve as an organizing theme for the whole of American religious history because it rarely evoked a common response. American believers, at times, expressed ambivalence about the importance of wealth or declared it incompatible with virtue. Many Christians, peering through the eye of a needle, declared prosperity an undesirable end.

Fourth, the prosperity gospel, though much reviled by the media and academics alike, deserves sustained attention. After a public lecture, I am frequently told that there is nothing to study in the prosperity gospel except naked greed. There is good religion, and then there is *Bad Religion*.¹¹ While the faith movement strikes many observers as lying outside the bounds of respectable academic attention, I argue that the prosperity gospel is a decisive theological, economic, and social force shaping American religion. This is not a story about how a few brave souls smuggled money into pentecostalism, but about how American believers learned to use their everyday experiences as spiritual weights and measures.

A Personal Note

I was frantically trying to finish my final papers for my PhD coursework when my fingers slowed and stopped. Some kind of overuse injury had eaten up the strength in my arms and left me unable to perform everyday activities—typing, cooking, driving—I had taken for granted. After a mistaken diagnosis led to an ill-advised surgery and a bout of temporary paralysis, some unfortunate students received expressive emoticons that semester in lieu of final comments. My mother about lost it when the next batch of doctors chatted amiably about removing a rib or two. After the conventional doctors it was a revolving door of acupuncturists, physical therapists, occupational therapists, chiropractors, herbalists, and eventually magnet suppliers and detoxifying footbath specialists.

All the while, I was living my other life, my research life. I spent week after week in prosperity churches, healing services, and financial seminars, observing and interviewing believers in God’s abundant provisions.

It is a strange occupation to be a historian of divine well-being as your own is getting away from you. Any ethnographer worth her salt knows that the observer is inescapably a part of the lives she is trying to tell. Looking back on these eight years of research, I suspect it was, in part, owing to the faithfulness of pain that I listened so intently to the promises and the prophets of the American prosperity gospel. It bound me to the stories I heard and the questions I pursued. What is it like to be healed? Can life's circumstances mirror personal faith? Does God often do all things? What is the Christian language of hope? Christians gingerly parse that word, hope. We implicitly know that false hope is the poison in our veins, the log in our eyes. But what qualifies hope as Christian hope? Duke Divinity's Chuck Campbell once observed that hope is divine when it confounds us, even as it claims us, spoken in love, service, and words that no one will believe: words like, "All will be well." These words "posit eternity to those that only want an end, caught in the daily ritual of counting food and time." I am an outsider to the pentecostal tradition but an insider to Christianity and the stubborn assurance that for us, the Gospel is good news. Just how good is for readers and the faithful to decide.

I

Gospels

*Confident living rights every wrong;
dynamic power helps me be strong.*

“Confident Living,” Unity School of Christianity
(New Thought) Hymn

THE ROOTS OF the modern prosperity gospel are long and tangled. To understand the size, success, and diversity of today’s movement, we first need to understand certain ways of thinking about spiritual power that emerged and competed for attention early in the twentieth century. This thinking took many forms and went by different names, including mind-cure, success literature, positive thinking, self-help, and prosperity theology. Mystics, businessmen, Manhattan pastors, and storefront prophets alike sermonized its virtues. This was the core: *adherents, acting in accordance with divine principles, relied on their minds to transform thought and speech into heaven-sent blessings.* It focused on the individual rather than groups and emphasized the power of the individual’s mind. This chapter traces the development of this thinking about spiritual power in the metaphysical New Thought movement and its growth into more recognizably evangelical gospels of health and wealth. We might envision the prosperity gospel as composed of three distinct though intersecting streams: pentecostalism; New Thought (an amalgam of metaphysics and Protestantism discussed later in this chapter); and an American gospel of pragmatism, individualism, and upward mobility. In this chapter, we see how these divergent traditions flowed across the American religious landscape and into new conduits of health and wealth.

Though little known outside of pentecostal circles, the evangelist E. W. Kenyon serves as our journey’s leading guide. His evangelical appropriation of this concept of spiritual power channeled New Thought and pentecostal streams, shaping the prosperity movement into, to borrow a title from Norman Vincent Peale, “A Guide to Confident Living.”

New Thought's Mind-Power

Prayer beat the fluttering heart of humanity's connection to the divine. Christians have always sought to access supernatural power for their daily lives, and the chief way they tried to do so was through prayer: requests from helpless humans to an omnipotent God who heard these pleas and might—or might not—answer them as desired by the petitioners. This formula required the pray-ers to acknowledge their own weak position and rely on the One with unlimited bounties. Finding this method irksome, ineffective, or too passive, Christians often sought to *compel* the supernatural to produce their desired results. Many hoped to command (critics would say manipulate) the physical and spiritual planes through the interior world of thought, imagination, meditation, and prayer. The historian of metaphysics Catherine Albanese christened it *mental magic* (as opposed to *material magic*) for its use of vision, imagination, affirmative prayer, and an interiority that focused on self-mastery.¹ What Albanese called mental magic we will call *mind-power* because its discourse of control and efficacy centered on the role of thought and speech. Victorian America was a hotbed of mind-power, bursting with transcendentalism, spiritualism, Free Masonry, Christian Science, and, of particular interest here, an offshoot of Christian Science called New Thought. Out of this miasma came the thinkers who nurtured a particular species of mind-power, planting the seeds of the present-day prosperity gospel.

This type of mind-power surged in the late nineteenth century, accompanying confidence about the progress and potential perfectibility of the human race. The era after the Civil War, often known as the Gilded Age, witnessed a flood of religious ideals that bathed the period with hearty individualism and a bold pragmatism. Self-mastery became an art and occupation, as people sought to consolidate the era's advances with improvements to their own lives. An ethos of self-help prevailed. Personal sewing machines and *Popular Mechanics* magazine harnessed technology for house repair. Gymnasiums appeared in universities and city centers across the country, as people devoted themselves to the pleasure and pursuit of self-taught athletic conditioning. All signs seemed to point to the world's (and humanity's) hidden potential. New scientific inventions like the telegraph, electric light, and discoveries like Koch's Postulates—which demonstrated the role of germs in disease causation—introduced the American masses to invisible *causal* forces.

Ideas about the power of the mind ripened in this climate, the fruit of at least a half century of metaphysical speculation. Ralph Waldo Emerson's philosophical idealism, Swedish mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg's Neoplatonic theory of correspondence, and Helena Blavatsky's theosophical quest for uniform spiritual laws seeded the ground, but it took Phineas Parkhurst Quimby, inventor and healer, to bring ideas about mind-power to maturity.² Personal experience led Quimby part of the way. He attempted to cure his tuberculosis with some fresh air, but his carriage ride went awry when his horse balked, forcing him to run beside the horse. Surprisingly, the run offered relief of his symptoms, which signaled to Quimby that the mind could overcome disease. Quimby's suspicions about the power of the mind solidified as he shared his generation's obsession with mesmerism, a hybrid of healing practices and metaphysical thought, based on Franz Anton Mesmer's discovery of hypnosis. Quimby followed in Mesmer's footsteps as a touring mesmerist; later, as a successful physician, he stumbled into discoveries about the human subconscious, including the effectiveness of placebos and the "talking cure," a forerunner of modern psychotherapy. The New England physician eventually concluded that healing occurred because of mental and spiritual alignment, inspiring a generation of positive thinkers to follow the connection between thought and healing.

Mary Baker Eddy, founder of Christian Science, filtered Quimby's conclusions through a Christological framework. As Eddy taught, Jesus came to save the world, not through his divinity, but by demonstrating right thinking. He saw the earth as it truly was: an illusory material realm where the mind tricked people into dangerous misperceptions. The heart of Christianity was knowledge, and believers must be reeducated in the new mental science. Her 1875 manifesto *Science and Health* pressed beyond Quimby's mental science by breaking with any lingering materialism. She disavowed the reality of illness and even death, arguing that suffering resulted from mental errors. Believers must rid themselves of misperceptions that blocked mental and physical restoration. Eddy offered a compelling vision of divine health that promised a true *Christian Science*, spiritual truth with repeatable results. Yet not all who insisted on the power of the mind were willing to call the material illusory. American popular religion came to favor the productive tension of mind and body it found in Eddy's rival and successor: New Thought.

New Thought represents a cluster of thinkers and metaphysical ideas that emerged in the 1880s as the era's most powerful vehicle of

mind-power. Three aspects of New Thought became foundational to the twentieth century's views of mind-power. First, it assumed essential unity between God and humanity, declaring that separation from the divine was only a matter of degree. The American religious terrain, plowed deep by the soulful individualism of Ralph Waldo Emerson, was fertile soil for a high anthropology (which is to say, an optimistic theology of human capacity.) As many New Thought authors worked inside a Christian framework, they explored "salvation" not as an act imposed from above by God, but rather an act of drawing out humanity's potential. Second, New Thought taught that the world should be reimagined as thought rather than substance. The spiritual world formed absolute reality, while the material world was the mind's projection. Unlike Christian Science, New Thought never denied the reality of the material world, but saw it as contingent upon the mind. Right standing with the divine required sacred alignment, a mystical connection that won the historian Sydney Ahlstrom's famous label of "harmonial religion."³ Third, New Thought argued that people shared in God's power to create by means of thought. People shaped their own worlds by their thinking, just as God had created the world using thought. Positive thoughts yielded positive circumstances, and negative thoughts yielded negative situations.⁴ These three features—a high anthropology, the priority of spiritual reality, and the generative power of positive thought—formed the main presuppositions of the developing mind-power.

In its infancy, New Thought was largely preoccupied with healing, the same issue that consumed Christian Science and the wider American culture. Like hydropathy, Grahamism, Adventism, homeopathy, and the burgeoning faith cure movement, New Thought offered a religious alternative to the often harsh regimen of standard medical treatments.⁵ Bloodletting, mercury-laced purgatives, and arsenic tonics formed common "cures," making orthodox medicine a potentially risky treatment. Warren Felt Evans, New Thought's first author, promulgated the physical benefits of this therapeutic brand of metaphysics with the publication of *The Mental Cure* in 1869. Evans, as a practicing healer and systematizer of New Thought, sought to explain illness as an imbalance resulting from wrong thinking. William James labeled these buoyant ideas, "the religion of healthy-mindedness."⁶

These gospels of health stood on one side of a blurry line between Christian metaphysics and metaphysical Christianity. One prioritized the method of mind-power, while the other concentrated on its relationship to Jesus' death and resurrection. And though pentecostals viewed metaphysics with

suspicion and contempt, its ministers who tarried on the subject of faith began to hover close to the line. A little known healer on the margins of pentecostalism, with his blend of evangelical and New Thought theology, first showed them how. His work introduced pentecostalism to a new Christian stream of mind-power.

E. W. Kenyon

Essek William Kenyon flatly rejected the “religion of healthy-mindedness” as counterfeit.⁷ In his 55 years as a revivalist, educator, and evangelist in areas of New Thought’s greatest influence, he railed against it as a substitution of gospel truth with abstract “principles.”⁸ Only Christians’ rightful use of divine principles could unlock God’s treasury of blessings, and Kenyon endeavored to teach them how. He called it “dominating faith.”⁹ His foundational works on spiritual power articulated a set of universal laws that electrified late nineteenth-century evangelicalism and its offspring, pentecostalism, with confidence in human capabilities.



FIGURE 1.1 E. W. Kenyon Pastor and radio evangelist E. W. Kenyon, pictured with an open bible, encouraged Christians to use their faith to dominate their circumstances. Date unknown.

Source: Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center.

Kenyon took a circuitous path to ministry. He showed early promise when, as a teenager, he served as a preacher and deacon in the Methodist church of Amsterdam, New York. When his spiritual ambitions fizzled, he embarked on a career as an organ salesman, and then as an actor, before he enrolled in dramatic studies at Boston's Emerson College of Oratory. The college's theological impact on Kenyon is a subject of ongoing debate. Yet his tenure at Emerson, home to the New England sage Ralph Waldo Trine and other metaphysical teachers, certainly brought him into contact with the New Thought movement.¹⁰ In 1893, Kenyon married Evva Spurling, an agnostic and divorcée nine years his senior. Shortly after marriage, Kenyon and his new wife embraced the teachings of Keswick Higher Life (a branch of the Holiness movement) and took up the ministerial mantle. For almost a decade, the Kenyons lived as faith healers and ministerial nomads. Kenyon held various Baptist pastorates in Massachusetts, and the couple traveled as evangelists. He became increasingly committed to living by faith, surrendering his livelihood and his possessions for common use. In 1900, Kenyon founded Bethel Bible Institute in Spencer, Massachusetts, using as a model the Faith Training College of faith cure leader Charles Cullis. In 1914, Evva died after a prolonged illness; the same year, Kenyon married a young Nova Scotian named Alice Maud Whitney. In the early 1920s, the Kenyon family, now expanded with a son and daughter, left their fledgling school for California, where he again bounded between pulpits and evangelistic meetings with restless intensity.¹¹ In 1931, he departed for Washington state where he founded the New Covenant Baptist Church and a radio program *Kenyon's Church of the Air*. In Washington, Kenyon's legacy found its home. His newsletter *Herald of Life* and Seattle Bible Institute began there. Apart from *The Father and His Family* and *The Wonderful Name of Jesus*, Kenyon published most of his major works during this period.

The scaffolding of E. W. Kenyon's theology stood on the bedrock of late nineteenth-century evangelicalism. Kenyon's evangelical piety would have passed muster in the Great Awakening, giving priority to the authority of the Bible, the experience of "new birth," the subsequent need for sanctification, and the necessity of evangelism. Radical evangelicals—and Kenyon with them—argued that sanctification conferred greater power than Christians had yet realized.¹² In Christ's death and resurrection, believers could expect not only the new birth that marked the start of the Christian life but also the transformation wrought by entire sanctification. The doctrine of entire sanctification sprang from the work of the

eighteenth-century Englishman John Wesley, who taught that God's grace might set believers on the road to perfect love for Christ by freeing them from the inclination to sin. The doctrine gained new significance in (Wesleyan) Holiness and Reformed circles in the mid-nineteenth century, when believers began to depict entire sanctification not as a process, but as a calculable moment. This baptism of the Holy Spirit, as it was, offered Kenyon a powerful vision of Christian victory over sin.

Quarrels over the timing of the sanctification experience later became one of the early pentecostal movement's thorniest debates. Did it accompany or follow salvation? For E. W. Kenyon, the real question was one of power: What victories could the redeemed Christian expect over sin? Kenyon confidently claimed that Christ had secured not only sanctification but also a plethora of other blessings in the atonement. He preached this view to William H. Durham, who (whether it was because of Kenyon or not) embraced it. Durham's 1910 sermon, later published as "Finished Work of Christ," ignited a firestorm of controversy that, by 1920, had won most pentecostals to the view that sinners found salvation—justification and sanctification—in a single soteriological work of grace.¹³ Christ's atoning work may be finished, but for Kenyon this was not the end of the story.¹⁴ His theology held that this profound ontological shift from sinner to saint signaled only the first phase of redemption. To explain, Kenyon appropriated New Thought's focus on mind, spirit, and universal laws to show that Christians could look to the cross not as a promise of things to come, but as a guarantee of benefits *already* granted.

Christ's substitutionary atonement, according to Kenyon, underwrote a series of spiritual and legal transactions. In language reminiscent of New Thought, God was a spirit who created a spiritual universe. The physical world was a shallow material reflection of this preeminent and preexisting spiritual universe. Though clothed in the "temporary dwelling place" of flesh and bones, humans too were *primarily* spirit.¹⁵ Though the priority of spirit seemed a peripheral theological detail, Kenyon drew it into every beginner's course on the gospel. Without it, the cross became difficult to understand. In the Fall, Satan gained legal authority over Adam and became humanity's spiritual father, the consequences of which were sickness, poverty, and death.¹⁶ Without Christ, humanity resembled the inhabitants of Plato's cave, devoid of the light of revelation and "dependent upon [their] senses for [their] protection and life."¹⁷ Their dulled senses could not perceive or access the storehouse of blessing God intended for them. Christ's resurrection united humanity's spiritual

nature with God's own, restoring their spiritual vision and legal rights to dominion over the earth. This bifurcation between spiritual and physical worlds lent added meaning to Jesus' death. According to Kenyon, Satan "took Jesus' spirit with him down to the pit of hell where Jesus during three terrible days and nights suffered the tortures of hell's cohorts."¹⁸ The power of sin was broken. Clear-eyed believers henceforth possessed God's ability and authority to rule over the material world.

Christians, now unburdened by sin, hovered only a little lower than angels. Kenyon's anthropology outstripped the boldness of even Higher Life teachers, who, as Kenyon biographer Dale Simmons observed, held up divine union with God as a distant *goal*. Kenyon understood it to be the *starting point*.¹⁹ Jesus' death and resurrection had shifted believers' ontological status, making them legal shareholders of certain rights and privileges. At times, Kenyon's Holy Spirit-filled Christians hardly could be identified as human at all, as their total identification with God approached deification. "The World has not known that there is a superman in their midst today," Kenyon marveled. "They don't know that every new creation is a superman in the embryo."²⁰ Believers could not rise to the heights of spiritual supermen without the second phase of their redemption.²¹ The next step would be epistemological, as believers learned the inner workings of faith.

Kenyon's theology of faith took inspiration from his involvement with the late nineteenth-century divine healing movement.²² Alternatively called faith cure, the movement thrived among evangelical Protestants, ordained and lay, from a variety of traditions. Charles Cullis, author of *Faith Cures, or Answers to Prayer in the Healing of the Sick* (1879), inspired a generation of leaders (particularly those in Higher Life and Holiness circles) to take up healing as another provision of the atonement.²³ Kenyon's personal experience with healing paved the way. His conversion and subsequent healing within the Keswick Higher Life tradition made him into a preacher, eager to see life as an unfolding victory over sin, but not a healer.²⁴ Shortly after his conversion in A. J. Gordon's church, he relates that his "poor, sick, wrecked body was instantly made whole."²⁵ Still, Kenyon was a reluctant minister for the gospel of health, worried about being called a fanatic.²⁶ Eventually Evva Kenyon's sheepish attempt at faith healing changed them both, when a tuberculosis-ridden man begged for and received healing after Evva's reluctant hands touched him.

In faith cure, Kenyon discovered the collaboration of belief, mind, and health. Through healing services, published treatises, and the founding of

“faith” homes for the sick, advocates sought to overcome illness through the cultivation of faith.²⁷ Illness, they taught, perished when a patient believed and then acted as one whom God has already healed. Practitioners were encouraged to pray the “prayer of faith,” holding God to his guarantee of restored health for all who believe. As the historian Heather Curtis noted, devotional practices of health put faith in motion, “training the senses to ignore lingering pain or symptoms of sickness and disciplining the body to ‘act faith’ by getting out of bed and serving God through energetic engagement with others.”²⁸ This mental and physical exertion energized the work of faith, translating spiritual fervor into physical wholeness. Kenyon wholeheartedly agreed that Christians must live out their faith in contradiction to their senses. As Kenyon argued, humans, bombarded by “sense knowledge,” must be trained to see the spiritual truths (“revelation knowledge”) buried beneath.²⁹ Faith laid claim to these hidden spiritual realities. Kenyon went even further and prescribed more than a faith cure to illness. Believers must not only nourish belief through action; they must unleash the spiritual forces that commanded the universe. Faith, as he defined it, was the “confident assurance based on absolute knowledge that everything is already provided through the operation of certain immutable laws.”³⁰ To explain how this came to be, Kenyon turned back to the beginning, creation. The story of creation accounted for both how God used faith and how humans were created for faith.

“In the beginning was the Word.” This familiar opening of John recapitulated the Genesis creation account, and, for Kenyon, summed up creation’s most enduring feature—the spoken word. God *spoke* the world into existence, creating light with the words, “Let there be light.” In this, Kenyon shared a common New Thought premise that God established the “original Creative Word” in Genesis, making the spoken word the template for activating power.³¹ Kenyon, however, stipulated that the divine power poured into the container of words could be called only one thing: faith. “Faith-filled words” not only brought the universe into being but also governed the world as an invisible force.³² The power of the spoken word simply carried faith to its desired ends.

The “Word” became a signifier with many referents. Kenyon accepted the customary meaning of Jesus Christ as the Word, both God himself and God’s message to the world. Scripture housed God’s written Word. Yet Kenyon gave priority to the *spoken* Word above all as the source of God’s power. Believers speaking God’s own Word gained access to the creative power that laid the foundations of the earth. He urged believers to use

spoken words, called positive confessions, to tap into this spiritual power. “Faith never rises above its confession,” he often repeated.³³ Though Kenyon lambasted New Thought adherents for their proclamations of “I am well, I am well, I am happy, I am happy,” he chided their content, not their method. Kenyon advised them to repeat instead: “I am a child of the Living God.”³⁴ New Thought employed the right process with the wrong theology. God sought speakers, not simply believers. Even the unsaved, Kenyon mused, might enjoy the benefits of positive words.³⁵

Just as the atonement transferred legal authority from Satan to the faithful, the name of Jesus held forensic significance. Kenyon taught that Jesus transferred the “Power of Attorney” to all those who use his name. Prayer took on binding legal qualities as believers followed Jesus’ formula: “If ye shall ask anything in my name, I will do it” (John 14:14). Kenyon replaced the word “ask” with “demand,” since petitioners were entitled to the legal benefits of Jesus’ name.³⁶ The Holy Spirit became merely an assistant as Kenyon gave the credit for casting out demons, speaking in tongues, and curing disease to the rightful use of the name of Jesus.

Kenyon’s articulation of “overcoming faith”—evangelicalism sparked with mind-power—acted as a flint stone for generations of followers. Kenyon’s theology preceded and then overlapped with pentecostalism, and as it did, it brought underlying themes into sharp relief. Faith-filled believers became powerful conduits through which God’s power could flow. His amplified anthropology, together with a priority on spiritual reality and the power of thought expressed in word and deed, provided the theological groundwork for some of the most radical pentecostal claims to atonement power. Kenyon’s Finished Work theology, as articulated by William Durham, left a lasting imprint on pentecostal ontology. Oneness pentecostals (who understood Jesus alone as God) widely embraced his book *The Wonderful Name of Jesus* (1927) as an articulation of Jesus’ singular expression of God’s power.³⁷

Kenyon’s theology represented only a minority strain within pentecostalism. In his lifetime, Kenyon’s Bethel Bible Institute, correspondence school, and evangelistic revivals earned him modest fame. Yet the wide reach of his books, periodicals, and national radio ministry gave him lasting theological influence. By the time of his death in 1948, Kenyon’s *Herald of Life* boasted a circulation of more than 20,000 people in nearly sixty countries.³⁸ More indirectly, though no less consequentially, his imprint on pentecostal healing practices bore his legacy to full maturity.

Pentecostalism's Mind-Power

Early pentecostals stood with their feet firmly planted in the material world. Though better known for their heavenly minded experiences of ecstatic worship, speaking in tongues, and focus on the Lord's imminent return, pentecostals also distinguished themselves with radical claims about God's terrestrial blessings. Like their radical evangelical predecessors, they preached a "fourfold" gospel of divine healing, personal salvation, baptism of the Holy Spirit, and Christ's soon return. They claimed the human material body as a primary focus of divine action. As the Zion City evangelist John G. Lake observed, salvation was "an all-inclusive word, including all that God does for the spirit, soul, and body of man."³⁹ It is not surprising then that many pentecostals found Kenyon useful. Kenyon's relationships with some of the greatest pentecostal leaders of the day—William Durham, Aimee Semple McPherson, John G. Lake, and F. F. Bosworth—led many to mistake him for a pentecostal. He had attended the Azusa Street revival and even applied for ordination by the Assemblies of God in the mid-1920s. For unknown reasons, he never followed through.⁴⁰ Though Kenyon kept pentecostalism at arm's length, a strong minority of pentecostals adopted Kenyon's instrumental vision of faith.⁴¹

Fred F. Bosworth, healing evangelist and radio pioneer, borrowed elements of Kenyon's ideas to form one of the most influential theologies of health.⁴² In the 1920s, Bosworth spread his message through popular revivals across the United States and Canada, as well as through his Chicago-based radio program, *National Radio Revival Missionary Crusaders*. This famous deliverance evangelist attracted 12,000 attendees to a single crusade in Ottawa, Ontario. His bestselling manifesto, *Christ the Healer*, popularized the utterly confident view of divine health that all right-thinking Christians may lay claim to perfect health. In the first edition, Bosworth taught readers to "appropriate" healing through faith by belief, action, and praise (rather than "confession.") Like Kenyon, Bosworth urged readers to pray the "prayer of faith" and to act on their healing "while every sense contradicts Him."⁴³ The body served as a site of healing, blessing, and empowerment. By the edition in 1948, Bosworth offered a simple prescription to "act faith, speak faith, and to think faith."⁴⁴ Kenyon's vision of overcoming faith impacted him significantly, and he received permission to include Kenyon's work directly in a new chapter entitled "Our Confessions." What Kenyon called "dominating

faith,” Bosworth called “appropriating faith” and “victorious faith,” “*taking and using* what God offers to us.”⁴⁵

Bosworth shared Kenyon’s conclusion that healing was a legal right, secured by Christ, and accelerated through spiritual effects of positive words. Confession, he wrote, “puts God to work fulfilling His promise” and brings believers’ words into reality. He likened the process to a game of checkers: “Our move is to expect what he promises . . . before we *see* the healing. . . . He always moves when it is His turn.”⁴⁶ A believer’s move forced God to move accordingly. They never cried out: “Lord, heal me if it be thy will!”—the qualification marred God’s self-imposed promise with doubt. Bosworth parroted Kenyon’s words: “A spiritual law that few recognize is that our confession rules us.”⁴⁷ Pentecostals would have to put their lips, as well as their hearts, to use.

Bosworth’s gospel of health would later become an important pillar of the healing revivals of the 1940s. Bosworth worked tirelessly alongside the revival’s biggest names as a mentor and specialist in the outworking of faith. He regularly appeared before famed healer William Branham for morning and afternoon “Faith Meetings” to raise their expectations for healing.⁴⁸ Gordon Lindsay’s *Voice of Healing* frequently reprinted Bosworth’s theology of faith, and the young guns of the revival would crowd



FIGURE 1.2 Fred F. Bosworth A dapper crowd poses for a shot of F. F. Bosworth’s 1931 revival in Chicago, Illinois. The evangelist (pictured in the gray suit and tie on the platform) was famous for his healing manual, *Christ the Healer*, and his packed crusades.

Source: Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center.