

Measuring Oral Roberts's Influence

Scripture: Galatians 1:8–9; 1 Timothy 6:9–10

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Oral Roberts died this week and the obituaries have been abuzz with analyses of his life and legacy. The *USA Today* headline summed up his contributions this way: "[Oral Roberts brought health-and-wealth Gospel mainstream.](#)" The *Los Angeles Times* gave a similar snapshot of the man: "[Oral Roberts dies at 91; televangelist was pioneering preacher of the 'prosperity gospel.'](#)"

But *Christianity Today's* lead blogger, Ted Olsen, disagreed. He responded with a post titled "[Why the Oral Roberts Obituaries Are Wrong.](#)" The long subtitle at the head of Olsen's post explained: "The 'faith-healer' (who hated the term) may have done much to mainstream Pentecostalism, but he was no architect of the Prosperity Gospel."

Olsen's argument, essentially, is that the real founder and mastermind of prosperity doctrine was not Oral Roberts but Kenneth Hagin, "who is far more widely recognized as the man who joined Pentecostalism with the Faith Movement (also called 'Word-Faith,' or derogatively, the Prosperity Gospel or 'Health and Wealth' gospel)."



Olsen, however, is wrong. He has evidently confused two categories. It is quite true that Kenneth Hagin is the main prosperity preacher who popularized **word-faith doctrine**—the notion that the words we speak determine the blessings we receive. Hagin borrowed that doctrine from an earlier, lesser-known preacher—E. W. Kenyon. (A mountain of evidence suggests that Hagin actually plagiarized large portions of his published works from Kenyon's writings.) Kenyon had been strongly influenced by the teachings of New Thought, a 19th-century metaphysical cult similar to Christian Science. So Hagin's word-faith doctrines had deeply cultic roots, but the idea fit perfectly with the prosperity doctrines that were already being taught by [A. A. Allen](#), Oral Roberts, [Jack Coe](#), and other faith-healers. The two ideas were natural complements to one another.

Still, word-faith doctrine and the prosperity gospel are not synonymous. (Even [the current Wikipedia](#)

[entry](#) acknowledges this: "Although [the Word of Faith movement] shares teachings in common with Prosperity theology, they are not the same thing.") **Prosperity doctrine** is the notion that God's favor is expressed mainly through physical health and material prosperity, and that these blessings are available for the claiming by anyone who has sufficient faith.

Oral Roberts was certainly the 20th century's leading advocate of *that* idea. His prosperity doctrine laid the foundation for an enormous media-based religious system, and Oral Roberts was indeed its chief architect. It is preposterous that *Christianity Today* would try to whitewash that fact. Prosperity teaching was what Roberts himself *wanted* to be remembered for.

In *Oral Roberts: An American Life*, biographer David Edwin Harrell, Jr., describes how Roberts discovered the prosperity gospel and how it became the centerpiece of his message. One day he opened his Bible randomly and spotted 3 John 2: "Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth." He showed it to his wife, Evelyn, and "They talked excitedly about the verse's implications. Did it mean they could have a 'new car,' 'a new house,' a 'brand-new ministry?' In later years, Evelyn looked back on that morning as the point of embarkation: 'I really believe that that very morning was the beginning of this worldwide ministry that he has had, because it opened up his thinking' [(Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 1985), p. 66]. Roberts testified that a shiny new Buick, acquired by unexpected means shortly after that experience, "became a symbol to me of what a man could do if he would believe God."

After he embraced prosperity doctrine, Oral Roberts's best-known and most far-reaching brainchild was [the Seed-Faith message](#). Roberts taught that money and material things donated to his organization were the seeds of prosperity and material blessings from God, and that God *promises* to multiply in miraculous ways whatever is given—and give many times more back to the donor. It was a simple, quasi-spiritual get-rich-quick scheme that appealed mainly to poor, disadvantaged, and desperate people. It generated untold millions for Roberts's empire and was quickly adopted by a host of similarly-oriented Pentecostal and Charismatic media ministries. The Seed-Faith principle is the main cash-cow that built and has supported vast networks of televangelists who barter for their viewers' money with fervent promises of "miracles"—and the miracles are invariably described in terms of material blessings, mainly money. [Elsewhere](#) I have compared this doctrine to the mentality of the post-WWII [cargo cults](#).

Tragically, the Seed-Faith message usurped and utterly replaced whatever gospel content there ever may have been in Oral Roberts's preaching. In all the many times I saw him on television I never once heard him preach the gospel. His message—every time—was about Seed-Faith. The reason for that is obvious: the message of the cross—an atoning sacrifice for sins wrought through Jesus' sufferings—frankly doesn't mesh very well with the notion that God guarantees health, wealth, and prosperity to the righteous. Our fellowship in Jesus' sufferings (Philippians 3:10), and our duty to follow in His steps (1 Peter 2:20-23), are likewise antithetical to the core principles of prosperity doctrine. The prosperity message is a different gospel (cf. Galatians 1:8-9).

One leading charismatic figure this week stated that without Oral Roberts's influence, ["the entire charismatic movement might not have occurred."](#) That may well be true. For that very reason, Roberts's legacy needs to be evaluated soberly, honestly, and carefully, under the stark light of Scripture. Was the message he proclaimed the unadulterated gospel? Though he eschewed the label, Roberts made his main reputation on television in the 1950s as a faith-healer, and he even [claimed to have raised multiple people from the dead](#). Were those "miracles" real and verifiable? [Did his best-known and most staggering "prophecies" prove to be true? Was he himself a credible man?](#)



The answer to all those questions is an unambiguous *no*. Oral Roberts's influence is not something Bible-believing Christians should celebrate. Virtually every aberrant idea the Pentecostal and charismatic movements spawned after 1950 can be traced in one way or another to Oral Roberts's influence. (What the *CT* blog fails to mention is that Kenneth Hagin and Oral Roberts often ministered together and affirmed one another's ministries. Furthermore, the heir to Hagin's standing as chief of the word-faith preachers is Kenneth Copeland, who went into television ministry after working as chauffeur and pilot to Oral Roberts. So even though it would not be quite accurate to portray Oral Roberts as an aggressive proponent of word-faith doctrines, he acted as more of an ally than an opponent to the movement. We might say his relationship with that movement was reminiscent of a benign grandfather who refused to correct an out-of-control grandchild.)



One thing all the obituaries agree on is that Oral Roberts paved the way for all the charismatic televangelists and faith-healers who dominate religious television today. He did more than anyone in the early Pentecostal movement to influence mainstream evangelicalism. He parlayed his television ministry into a vast empire that has left a deep mark on the church worldwide. In many places today, including some of the world's most illiterate and poverty-stricken regions, Oral Roberts's Seed-Faith concept is actually better known than the doctrine of justification by faith. The message of prosperity is now the message multitudes think of when they hear the word "gospel." Countless confused people worldwide think of the gospel as a message about earthly, temporal, and material riches rather than the infinitely greater blessings of forgiveness from sin and the eternal blessing of the believer's spiritual union with Christ.



All of those are reasons to lament rather than celebrate Oral Roberts's fame and influence. My prayer is that future generations will see the folly of those doctrines, renounce and turn away from them, and cling tightly to the sure word of God and the glorious, eternal promises of the true gospel.

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