

Praise for the First Edition

“The Prosperity Gospel is a false gospel, and prosperity preachers are false prophets. This book is as clear as that—and persuasive—but it is even more. Jones and Woodbridge have written a simple, careful account of the new religion that is sweeping Asia, Africa, and the Americas. And they’ve provided a fair, biblical, and searching critique. I’m sad to say that this book is desperately needed; I’m thankful that it’s now available.”

Mark Dever, senior pastor,
Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC

“The Prosperity Gospel is neither prosperous nor is it the gospel as defined by Scripture. Simply put, it is a false teaching and a dangerous heresy. This book, written by two superb biblical scholars, carefully and accurately investigates, critiques, and exposes the biblical and theological errors that pervade this movement. This is an important and valuable work. I pray for its wide distribution and reading.”

Daniel L. Akin, president,
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Jones and Woodbridge have given us the truth about the Prosperity Gospel. This brief survey is remarkably clear and concise, providing both the historical background and biblical critique of this movement. Their treatment is fair and balanced, penetrating to the heart, and it reveals the danger of the Prosperity Gospel. I highly recommend this well-written book.”

Benjamin L. Merkle, associate professor,
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary,
and editor of the 40 Questions & Answers series

“I praise God for the release of this book. It is a reliable resource for all who want to understand the destructive nature of the Prosperity Gospel movement. Jones and Woodbridge carefully point out [the prosperity movement’s] major biblical errors and call attention to the presence of erroneous concepts found in prosperity theology. By exposing these errors, as well as interacting with some of the leading proponents of the prosperity movement, Jones and Woodbridge have provided a wonderful resource to hand to those who’ve bought into a counterfeit gospel, and for pastors who desire to protect their flock from wolves. May God use this book to direct people to the only true gospel, and to the Savior, who is Himself our inheritance and our treasure.”

Tony Merida, teaching pastor, Temple Baptist Church,
and author of *Faithful Preaching* and *Orphanology*

“A great, balanced approach that is both biblically rigorous and in touch with current issues. An invaluable resource for those wishing to deal with this subject with accuracy and clarity. Very gospel-centered.”

J. D. Greear, lead pastor, The Summit Church,
and author of *Breaking the Islamic Code*

CONCISE ARGUMENTS TO COUNTER FALSE TEACHING EDITION

HEALTH, WEALTH, and HAPPINESS\$

How the Prosperity Gospel
Overshadows the Gospel of Christ



**DAVID W. JONES and
RUSSELL S. WOODBRIDGE**

 **Kregel**
Publications

*Health, Wealth, and Happiness: How the Prosperity Gospel
Overshadows the Gospel of Christ*

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PREFACE

THIS BOOK TRULY IS a collaborative effort between two authors, each of whom has long-standing interest, professional training, and vocational experience in ministry and finance. While we were each responsible for writing certain sections of this text, both of our fingerprints are on every page. We thought it would be helpful for us to give a bit of personal background, as well as some insight into why we wrote this book.

David W. Jones's Story

One of the earliest lessons I can recall my mother teaching me is “Money doesn’t grow on trees.” Over time, I came to embrace the Puritan work ethic that still pervades much of the New England culture. The ideas of hard work, saving, intentional giving, and frugality became cornerstones in my early view of finances, and I now find myself telling my own children, “Money doesn’t grow on trees.”

When I became a Christian as a young person, like many new converts, I viewed Christianity as an eternal life insurance policy—that is, I embraced the spiritual aspects of Christianity, but I did not fully grasp the material dimensions of the gospel. Eventually, however, I began to understand that Christianity is not simply about the fate of people’s souls; rather, the gospel is the message that Jesus died on the cross and was resurrected in order to redeem, restore, and reconcile all of creation on humanity’s behalf and for His own glory. Over time I saw that Christianity is a worldview that impacts all of life, and I realized that the view of economics I had learned as a boy was largely biblical. When I entered vocational Christian service as a young man, I purposed to make the material implications of the gospel an emphasis within my ministry.

While I had been exposed to the Prosperity Gospel earlier in my life, it was not until I began my seminary training that I grasped the size and influence of the movement. I was amazed to find classmates and lay-people who viewed their relationship to God as a give-and-get transaction. They saw God as a kind of sugar daddy who existed to make them healthy, wealthy, and happy on account of service rendered. While God certainly does provide and care for His followers, the Prosperity Gospel is a corruption of His self-revelation and a distortion of His plan of redemption.

Early in my academic career, I published a brief article entitled “The Bankruptcy of the Prosperity Gos-

pel” in a rather obscure theological journal.¹ It was an attempt to communicate my objections to prosperity theology, as well as to give some direction to those caught up in the movement. While I have published more than a dozen articles and books since, I continue to get more feedback about my little Prosperity Gospel article than anything else I have written. Whether you are a church leader or layperson, a follower or opponent of the Prosperity Gospel, an expert in the field or just an information seeker, I trust and pray that the Lord will use this book to further conform you to Christ’s image.

Russell S. Woodbridge’s Story

Like my coauthor, I also grew up in New England. Throughout my upbringing, my parents encouraged me to work hard, to give, and to save. More importantly, they taught me about God and, as a young boy, I repented of my sin and trusted Christ. After graduating from college, I moved to New York City to work for a well-known investment bank on Wall Street. Two years later the bank transferred me to its office in Frankfurt, Germany, where I ended up trading stocks and options for a living.

God granted me success in trading but I was not satisfied. Money never satisfies. During this period of success, God changed my desires, and I left a lucrative

career behind and returned to the United States to attend seminary. I learned that the purpose of life is not about accumulated money, health, or a great career—it's about knowing God. This series of events helped form my view of biblical stewardship and success.

While in seminary I met Kevin, a man paralyzed from birth, and he told me his story about trying to get healed at a crusade. What I remember is how devastating this event was to his spiritual life. The false promises of the Prosperity Gospel crushed Kevin's spirit, and he spent years recovering. This was my first personal encounter with the teachings of the Prosperity Gospel.

After seminary I had the privilege of serving as pastor of a small church in North Carolina. When I discovered that several ladies in the church watched Joyce Meyer on television and read her books, I examined her core doctrines and teachings and found them to be false. I am sure that the women in my church were not aware of everything that Joyce Meyer believed. Until this experience, I was unaware that the Prosperity Gospel was so influential in conservative, Bible-believing churches.

Whenever I mentioned Joel Osteen or some other prosperity teacher in a sermon, people would come to me after the service to make comments. Occasionally they had questions about the Prosperity Gospel. More often, they told me they did not agree with the Prosperity Gospel but that they had friends and relatives

who did listen to prosperity teachers and send them money. My sense was that these concerned Christians didn't always know what to say to their friends and family about such teachers.

My financial background and theological training have created opportunities for me to teach courses on personal finance at seminary and college, at a Bible institute, and in churches. From this platform, I have been able to teach biblical truth about money and to critique prosperity theology.²

The Prosperity Gospel has tremendous appeal, and it is growing both in the United States and internationally. Millions of people follow famous prosperity teachers, and their souls are at stake. The deception of so many is a tragedy that I hope this book can help address. Ultimately, I hope this book will encourage you to “seek the things that are above, where Christ is” (Col. 3:1).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A NUMBER OF PEOPLE encouraged us to write our full-length book on this topic in 2011. Our wives, Dawn Jones and Ingrid Woodbridge, are our greatest encouragers. Without their love and sacrifices, as well as the patience of our children, this book would not be in your hands.

We are indebted to resources we have read on the topic of the Prosperity Gospel, as well as the numerous conversations we have had with students and colleagues over the years, yet several deserve mention for their special assistance, critiques, and editorial improvements. We would like to acknowledge the following who contributed greatly to the first edition of the book: James K. Dew and Russell D. Woodbridge, who reviewed several chapters for content; Billie Goodenough for reading the entire manuscript and finding our mistakes; Dawn Jones for thoroughly editing each chapter and conforming them to the Kregel style guide; and several others who looked over the manuscript and gave advice, including William

Aleshire, Benjamin Merkle, Andrew Spencer, Carrie Pickelsimer, and Ingrid Woodbridge.

We would also like to express gratitude to the administration of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, who provided support, resources, and time that allowed us to complete the book.

INTRODUCTION

CINDY, AN ACCOUNTANT IN Florida, listened intently to the prosperity preachers on television. She heard their message: be faithful in your giving and God will reward you financially. Inspired by their message, as well as their example, Cindy sent money to the ministries of Joyce Meyer, Paula White, and Benny Hinn, hoping to be rewarded for her faithfulness. She waited and waited, but the financial reward never appeared. Later she realized that the prosperity preachers' promises were just plain false. Today Cindy is understandably angry, bitter, and disillusioned.

Kevin is also disillusioned. Paralyzed from the waist down due to a congenital birth defect, Kevin wants to walk. When as a boy he heard that a faith healer was coming to a town nearby, he begged his parents to take him to the meeting. The message said that if he had enough faith, he would be healed. His hopes for healing were quickly dashed, however, when ushers prevented him from sitting near the front, despite his

disabled condition. Today, Kevin remains in his wheelchair, disappointed but alive—unlike others who have stopped medical treatments after being “healed” at a Prosperity Gospel meeting, and, in rare cases, have died shortly thereafter.¹

These may be sensational examples of the failings of the Prosperity Gospel, but there are many everyday examples. Churches are full of people who regularly watch Prosperity Gospel teachers on television. Viewers send money because they appreciate the positive teaching and could use a little bit more money to pay their bills. When an increase in income does not occur, these givers think that their own lack of faith is the problem, or they become disappointed and angry with God.

What happened? How did Bible-believing Christians come to believe that God is a way to achieve personal success and material prosperity? Over the years the message preached in some of the largest churches in the world has changed. A new gospel is being taught today. This new gospel omits Jesus and neglects the cross.

A new gospel is being taught today. This new gospel omits Jesus and neglects the cross.

Instead of promising Christ, this gospel promises health and wealth. It tells Christians to declare to themselves that everything they touch will prosper.

According to this new gospel, if believers repeat positive confessions, focus their thoughts, and generate enough faith, God will release blessings upon their lives. This new gospel claims that God desires and even promises that believers will live a healthy and financially prosperous life.

This is the core message of what is known as the Prosperity Gospel. This teaching has been given many names, such as the name-it-and-claim-it gospel, the health-and-wealth gospel, the word of faith movement, and positive confession theology. No matter what name is used, the teaching is the same.

Without question, the Prosperity Gospel continues to grow and influence Christians. Fifty of the largest two hundred sixty churches in the United States promote the Prosperity Gospel.² The pastors of some of the largest churches in America proclaim the Prosperity Gospel, including Kenneth Copeland, T. D. Jakes, Joel Osteen, Frederick Price, Creflo Dollar, Kenneth Hagin Jr., and Eddie Long. Through the Internet, television, and radio, the Prosperity Gospel reaches millions around the world every day. Joel Osteen's website notes that his television program is available in one hundred countries, while roughly one million people download his services each week. Likewise, Joyce Meyer claims that her television program, *Enjoying Everyday Life*, reaches two-thirds of the world through television and radio and has been translated into thirty-eight languages.³

The appeal of this teaching crosses racial, gender, denominational, and international boundaries. The Prosperity Gospel is also on the rise in Africa, South America, India, and Korea, among many other places. There are at least seven specific additional reasons why the Prosperity Gospel continues to grow, both in America and around the world.

First, the Prosperity Gospel contains a grain of biblical truth, although it is greatly distorted.

Second, the Prosperity Gospel appeals to the natural human desire to be successful, healthy, and financially secure. These desires are not inherently sinful, but they can become sinful if they supplant one's desire for God.

Third, the Prosperity Gospel promises much and requires little, portraying Jesus as one who can help believers help themselves. Instead of portraying Jesus as the one who made possible humanity's reconciliation with God, prosperity preachers tend to portray Jesus as the solution to material wants.

Fourth, many advocates of the Prosperity Gospel have cultivated a winsome personality and a polished presentation of their message. Given that many Christians today value style over substance, prosperity advocates find the contemporary church to be fertile ground for their ministry.

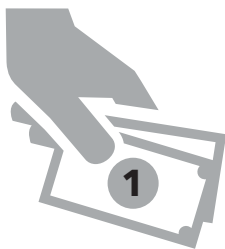
Fifth, many followers of the Prosperity Gospel have little knowledge of biblical doctrine. Therefore, they are ripe for accepting the distorted teachings of prosperity preachers.

Sixth, many people have experienced success and healing (or at least claim to have done so) and attribute it to the teachings of the Prosperity Gospel, thus “validating” its message. Modern Christians tend to be pragmatic in nature and incorrectly conclude that if a method works, it must be legitimate.

Finally, many in the church lack a general sense of discernment because they are more influenced by the secular culture than by Scripture. Christians view success in terms of status, wealth, and position rather than holiness, faithfulness, and obedience to God.

Incorrect theology will lead to incorrect beliefs about God, His Word, and His dealings with humanity. Most importantly, the gospel must be rightly proclaimed because it is a matter of life and death for those who do not believe. Teaching or trusting in a false gospel has eternal ramifications.

We want to inform you about the Prosperity Gospel movement and equip you to help those who have let the Prosperity Gospel replace the gospel of Christ. While this book will not answer every question that can be asked about the Prosperity Gospel, we trust that it will serve as a handy introduction that will demonstrate the bankruptcy of the Prosperity Gospel.



THE HISTORY OF THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL

IN ALL AREAS OF life, a failure to consider history can have profound implications for the present and the future. History can be a source of instruction and wisdom for the Christian. Christianity is inherently historical, based on supernatural acts in history and on a historical person, Jesus Christ. The Bible, both Old and New Testaments, reveals God working out His purposes in history.

History also assists in interpreting Scripture and forming doctrine. When we study what earlier Christians believed, we can learn from their understandings of Bible truth. When it comes to Bible truth, newer is not always—or even usually—better. It is encouraging when we realize our core beliefs are not new—early Christians formulated these same beliefs from Scripture.

Throughout history, novel ideas have given rise to

movements that eventually faded but later reemerged in a new, slightly altered form. This is true of the Prosperity Gospel. The Prosperity Gospel is built upon a quasi-Christian heresy known as the New Thought movement, an ideology that gained popularity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.¹ The Prosperity Gospel consists largely of the ideas of the New Thought movement repackaged with new faces, new technology, new venues, and a slightly altered message.

The New Thought Movement

The New Thought movement began in the 1800s and was known by several other names, including Mind-Cure, Mental Healing, or Harmonialism. In 1895 a New Thought group in Boston defined its purpose as “to promote interest in and the practice of a true philosophy and way of life and happiness; to show that through right thinking, one’s loftiest ideals may be brought into present realization; and to advance intelligent and systematic treatment of disease by spiritual and mental methods.”² While not a church or denomination, the New Thought movement was marked by religious beliefs not found in Scripture—that God is a force, that the spirit or mind is ultimate reality, that people are divine, that disease originates in the mind, and that thoughts can create or change reality. American psychologist and philosopher William

James noted in 1905 that New Thought drew not only from the Gospels but also from Hinduism, philosophical idealism, transcendentalism, popular science evolution, and the optimistic spirit of progress. New Thought was a mashup of pagan philosophies.³

To understand the Prosperity Gospel's errors, let's look at four influential New Thought writers: Emanuel Swedenborg, Phineas Parkhurst Quimby, Ralph Waldo Trine, and Norman Vincent Peale. As we summarize the ideas of these figures, it will be obvious that New Thought ideas permeate the Prosperity Gospel.

Emanuel Swedenborg: Grandfather of New Thought

Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) was an important eighteenth-century Swedish scientist and inventor. He is known for his contributions in the fields of mathematics, astronomy, economics, political theory, and medicine; yet, his most significant contribution was in religion. After a decade of searching for the human soul, he reported that God appeared to him and told him to publish new doctrine for the church, which he did in his work entitled *Heavenly Secrets*. Swedenborg claimed for himself the title “The Unique Revealer of the Lord.” In this capacity he claimed to have dialogued with the apostle Paul for a year, spoken several hundred times with the Reformer Martin Luther, and on at least one occasion had personal communication with Moses. Furthermore, he professed to

be a clairvoyant who, over a period of twenty-seven years, possessed the power to look into heaven, hell, and other dimensions of the spirit world.

At the root of these teachings is the belief that the ultimate nature of reality is rooted in the nonphysical, the spiritual, or simply in the mind.

Along with his claims of extrabiblical revelation, he also rejected orthodox Christian beliefs such as the doctrine of the Trinity, the deity of Jesus Christ, and salvation by grace through faith alone. A review of Swedenborg's key works reveals that his teachings included, among other things, belief in God as a mystical force, the notion that the human mind has the capacity to control the physical world, and the teaching of a works-based self-salvation scheme—ideas that later became core doctrines of New Thought. At the root of these teachings is the belief that the ultimate nature of reality is rooted in the nonphysical, the spiritual, or simply in the mind. Many of Swedenborg's writings were widely read in America, and over time, his teachings influenced the individuals who founded what became known as the New Thought movement.

Phineas Parkhurst Quimby: Father of New Thought

Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (1802–1866), the intellectual father of New Thought, was a clockmaker by

trade until he discovered the dubious art of “mesmerism” or hypnotism. Quimby met a man named Lucius Burkmar, who seemed to have clairvoyant powers when hypnotized. Under hypnosis, Burkmar appeared to have the ability to accurately diagnose various diseases. Observing this phenomenon led Quimby to pioneer and develop the idea of “mental healing.” The basis for Quimby’s theory was the idea that the mind possesses the ability to create and influence. Quimby claimed that he could cause a person to stop walking simply by thinking or visualizing that situation. Eventually, Quimby claimed to have developed his own clairvoyant powers and thereby became a successful hypnotist.

Quimby believed that sickness follows a disturbance of the mind; therefore, disease is really mental and the cure is to correct false reasoning or error in the mind. Quimby asserted that “if I believe I am sick, I am sick, for my feelings are my sickness, and my sickness is my belief, and my belief is my mind. Therefore all disease is in the mind or belief.”⁴ Like Swedenborg, Quimby believed that the mind creates and controls reality. With this theory, Quimby helped establish the foundation for New Thought.

“Disease is in the mind or belief.”

—Phineas Parkhurst Quimby

Quimby and other New Thought teachers placed little emphasis on the physical world. The idea that

the mind is the ultimate power that shapes reality led Quimby to deny the bodily resurrection of Jesus. If the mind or spiritual is good and matter is evil, it makes little sense that Jesus would be resurrected with a physical body. Quimby also argued that Jesus was just another man who had superior ideas. In order to cure people, He simply changed their minds with His teachings—the same method that Quimby himself practiced. Quimby's lasting influence came through his patients and students, who took his basic philosophy of mind-cure and developed it for their own purposes.

Among those influenced by Quimby were Warren Felt Evans (1817–1889), who became a prolific writer for New Thought philosophy; Mary Baker Eddy, who wrote *Science and Health with Key to the Scripture*, founded the First Church of Christ, Scientist, and birthed one of the largest Christian cults, known as Christian Science; and Julius Dresser, who conducted healing classes based on Quimby's teachings and gave formal organization to New Thought.

Starting in 1899, New Thought groups held conventions around the United States, and by 1914 the International New Thought Alliance was formed in order to serve all branches of New Thought followers, including groups such as Christian Science founded by Eddy and the Unity School of Christianity founded by Charles Fillmore.

Ralph Waldo Trine: Evangelist of New Thought

In the earlier years of the twentieth century, numerous books began to appear that incorporated New Thought ideas with the aim of helping people achieve health and success. Examples include Ernest Holmes's *Creative Mind and Success*, Napoleon Hill's *Think and Grow Rich*, and Wallace D. Wattles's *The Science of Getting Rich*, which opens with, "Whatever may be said in praise of poverty, the fact remains that it is not possible to live a really complete or successful life unless one is rich."⁵ In these New Thought works, one can discern some of the key recurring elements of the Prosperity Gospel: speaking the right words, invoking a universal law of success with words, and having faith in oneself.

Of all of the early twentieth-century New Thought writers, Ralph Waldo Trine (1866–1958) was the most prolific. Trine's book *In Tune with the Infinite: Fullness of Peace, Power and Plenty*, first published in 1897, sold millions of copies and was translated into over twenty languages. Trine's works were very popular, even among many professing Christians. Unfortunately, a survey of Trine's works reveals that his beliefs were not based on the Bible.

First, Trine rejected the uniqueness of Scripture by claiming that Buddha's writings were also divinely inspired.

Second, Trine advocated theological pluralism—he

did not believe that faith in Jesus Christ, or any other particular savior, is the only means of salvation. Instead, he held that every religion leads to God.

Third, although Trine mentioned Jesus throughout his works, he was more concerned with the moral teachings of Jesus than with the person and work of Jesus. In his best-selling book, *In Tune with the Infinite*, there is no mention of sin, repentance, or the gospel.

Finally, the way to peace with God was to become conscious of oneness with the Father. When people came to this point, Trine believed, the force and the laws that govern the universe were within their powers because infinite intelligence and power could then work through them.

Norman Vincent Peale: Pastor of New Thought

Another well-known advocate of New Thought was Norman Vincent Peale (1898–1993), pastor of Marble Collegiate Church in New York City. He is best known for his popular book *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952) that popularized New Thought ideas and techniques in America. While the writings of Peale have more of a biblical veneer than the works of some other New Thought authors, it is clear that New Thought philosophy greatly influenced him. Peale readily admits that he read various metaphysical teachers, and he freely quotes them throughout his works. That Peale accepted and became an advocate of New Thought is surprising in light of the fact that his church was part

of the Dutch Reformed Church, a historical, conservative, biblically rooted, Calvinistic denomination.

By his own admission, Peale was searching for a “practical and specific message for modern human beings that would really work when needed.”⁶ Although Peale claims to affirm the teachings of orthodox Christianity, his writings reflect a far more optimistic view of humankind than is presented in the Bible, thus demonstrating a significant problem with the Prosperity Gospel—it dangerously merges biblical ideas and secular thought.

The Pillars of New Thought Philosophy

In part because of the Christian veneer that it was often given by its founders, New Thought experienced success in America despite its nonbiblical roots. Here are five core tenets of New Thought that had an impact on the Prosperity Gospel.

Pillar One: A Distorted View of God

While not all New Thought writers have the exact same view of God, it is certain that the general teachings about God within New Thought philosophy diverge from the biblical doctrine of God. The gap between New Thought ideas about God and the Bible’s view of God can be highlighted with three observations.

First, most New Thought teachers reject the historic,

orthodox, Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Instead, they embrace God in His oneness and deny that God is three, distinct persons simultaneously.

Second, many New Thought advocates propose that God and the world are of one substance or that the world is simply an extension of God. These ideas are respectively known as pantheism and panentheism, both of which diverge from a Christian worldview.

Third, and most common among New Thought proponents, is the idea that God is an impersonal life force or creative energy that must be harnessed in order to be successful.

These teachings about God more closely reflect the concept of God in Hinduism than the biblical doctrine of God. Since New Thought believes that the world emanates from God and that every created thing is part of God to some degree, it is not surprising that New Thought conceives of God as an impersonal force, substance, creative energy, Infinite Spirit, or Life Giver. Supposedly, this beneficent force is present throughout the universe and establishes universal laws that govern life. These universal laws dictate that there is a force or energy that fills the universe and must be absorbed in order for one to become prosperous and healthy.

Within the New Thought system, once a person allows the omnipresent force of the Infinite to enter their minds, he or she will discover the universal laws that govern the world. The task of the New Thought believer, then, is to harness the universal laws already

present for humanity's benefit. These laws or ideas define reality; yet, if ideas are ultimate reality, then the material world is a malleable illusion.

Pillar Two: An Elevation of Mind over Matter

New Thought argues that harnessing one's mind or thoughts is the key to being successful. New Thought defines thoughts as forces that can and do create reality. As a person opens up to the divine influx and begins to recognize the universal laws, thoughts can be focused with the aim of bringing about a desired state of affairs. According to New Thought advocates, this is the great secret of life—if you think a certain way, then you can change reality. Because thoughts, spirit, and mind are what are real, the physical world is an illusion. In other words, your mind is far more important than matter.

According to New Thought . . . the reason people are not successful or healthy is because they have negative thoughts.

Since the mind is the key to success, New Thought writers stress the role of the mind and its mystical powers. According to New Thought, then, the key to success is to think the right thoughts because they dictate the outcome of one's situation. The reason people are not successful or healthy is because they have negative thoughts. They are not in tune with the universal laws or supernatural forces that are available to humankind.

New Thought teachers believe that there are laws in operation in the universe, particularly the law of attraction, and the idea that people attract whatever they think. If humans can become one with the Infinite, understand the laws, and focus their thoughts, then good things will happen. The power to succeed is inside each person. It only has to be directed toward positive thoughts and success will become a reality. In other words, visualize what you want and meditate upon that picture, and you will create it in reality.

New Thought advocates teach that the mind—properly oriented—is the key to tapping into the divine power that is present throughout the universe. By implementing this process, which exalts humanity and demotes God, humans have the power to get whatever they desire—namely, success and prosperity in all realms of life. According to New Thought, the truth of mind over matter is the secret to controlling one's life and even changing the future. The potential powers that New Thought ascribes to individuals make him or her somewhat godlike.

Pillar Three: An Exalted View of Humankind

New Thought literature reveals a human-centered philosophy that asserts that people are intrinsically good, spiritual beings, with the potential for godlike—if not divine—status. People must harmonize with the divine energy or Infinite Spirit through properly oriented thought. Acceptance of the divine nature is

a mystical consciousness of being one with God, the life force and power. In New Thought terminology, people must open themselves to the divine influx. Through this encounter, a person not only becomes one with God but also becomes godlike. Within the New Thought framework, there is little to distinguish humans from the Creator. The key to success is to recognize that one is a spiritual being who is able to tap into the spiritual laws that govern the universe.

There is no mention of sin and redemption
in New Thought.

Of course, along with its teaching that humans can become gods, there is no mention of sin and redemption in New Thought. Since proponents of this philosophy acknowledge neither the deity of Jesus nor the inherent sinfulness of humanity, redemption is both impossible and unnecessary. If people are essentially gods, then what kind of redemption do they really need? In New Thought there is no place for a sinless Savior who died on the cross in order to make propitiation for sin. Humans can save themselves from their circumstances by using the divine energy in the universe. They are, after all, in control of fate.

New Thought's belief in the deification of humans is consistent with its belief that all is one and one is all. If all of creation is part of God or an extension of God, then people must be divine. To be clear, New Thought

does not teach that people are divine as the result of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit or as the result of being made in the image of God. The movement holds that God is not distinct from creation and is an impersonal substance that gives life and energy to all reality. There is no distinction between God and people. If one achieves unity with the god-force through a proper orientation of thoughts, then health and wealth are available for the taking.

Pillar Four: A Focus on Health and Wealth

New Thought believes that God is an impersonal life force, that the mind controls matter, and that people are (or can at least become) gods. By way of practical application, since the human mind is all powerful, this means that thoughts play a vital role in both permitting and removing bodily diseases as well as greatly affecting the achievement of financial success.

According to New Thought, if one is properly connected to the Infinite, sickness should not be experienced by the believer. How does a person, especially a follower of New Thought, become ill in the first place? If the Infinite Spirit cannot admit disease into the body, then the culprit must be your mind; you broke a universal law whether you intended to or not.

New Thought proposes that people become sick because of negative thoughts or on account of the fact that they are not properly attuned to the Infinite. People *allow* disease to enter their bodies, thus giving disease

its power. The solution to illness is to think about being healthy and have faith that the law of attraction will work. In other words, the cure for disease is simply an application of mind over matter.

Not surprisingly, this teaching of mind healing can be traced back to the grandfather of New Thought, Emanuel Swedenborg, who equated disease with ignorance. Swedenborg wrote, "Sickness is simply a malady which, because of sin or error or a failure of understanding, attacks the temporary or unreal man; the spiritual man can have no cognizance of disease."⁷ People are spirits or minds trapped in physical bodies. Since reality is the mind, nothing can invade or attack people unless there is something wrong with their thinking.

New Thought promises not only good health with right thinking but also financial prosperity and personal success. Whether the topic is related to health or wealth, the method is the same: control thoughts and success will materialize. Visualize and meditate about wealth, and eventually prosperity will come.

In New Thought philosophy, fulfillment is not possible without money. Everything exists in order to assist people in their pursuit of money. How does one attain the use of things? By the proper use of the mind and the exercise of faith. Thoughts will actualize desires in the physical realm. One has to form clear, mental images of what is desired, whether that is a house, a job, or some form of personal success. This

positive thought, then, is the correct method to achieve material wealth.

According to New Thought writers, then, in order to attain health and wealth, you must form a clear, distinct mental image of health and wealth and then take mental ownership of that picture. You must have faith that the object of your desire is already yours. If you want to be healthy and wealthy, then first realize that health and wealth are your right. Then you must think positive thoughts about your health and wealth. Within the New Thought system, the only reason you do not have the health and wealth you desire is because you think incorrectly. Since your thoughts and even your words create reality, simply visualize, believe, speak the right words repeatedly, and you will see your circumstances change.

Pillar Five: An Unorthodox View of Salvation

In light of the previous four pillars, it is not surprising that New Thought writers advocate a form of works salvation. Many New Thought writers, however, go beyond advocacy of salvation by works to outright denying the historic, orthodox doctrine of salvation by grace alone through faith. According to New Thought, religion is not redemption from sin but simply the process of learning to love one's neighbor. Jesus was not the Son of God but merely a religious man whose spirit was raised from the dead.

New Thought philosophy also rejects the uniqueness

of Jesus as the only way to salvation. The end result is that all religions are the same as they afford humanity the opportunity to discover the Infinite. According to New Thought, true religion will be attractive to all and repulsive to none. The gospel of New Thought is acceptable to everyone because it omits sin and each person defines the gospel for him or herself. Salvation is a self-generated mystical experience with the Infinite, which entails channeling the divine influx for personal health, wealth, happiness, and success.

Conclusion

While New Thought has been adopted and espoused by some who claimed to be Christians, it is clear that New Thought ideas are not rooted in the Bible; rather, New Thought shares common ideas with Hinduism, Oriental philosophy, the occult, and a general self-centered, pagan approach to life. New Thought distorts the biblical doctrine of God, emphasizes mind over matter, and exalts humans to the point that they can become godlike, if not divine. Moreover, New Thought teaches that the key to health and wealth is thinking, visualizing, and speaking the right words. Within this self-centered system, there is no place for Jesus's life, death, and resurrection.

While the differences between New Thought and Christian doctrine ought to be obvious, for many

believers the lines are blurred. One reason for this is because New Thought ideas are often taught using biblical words and are justified by distorting Scripture. Many of the New Thought proponents were adept at taking pagan ideas and wrapping them in Scripture.

Summary Points

- The Prosperity Gospel is built upon a quasi-Christian heresy, popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, known as New Thought.
- Key New Thought thinkers include Emanuel Swedenborg, Phineas Parkhurst Quimby, Ralph Waldo Trine, and Norman Vincent Peale.
- New Thought is marked by a distorted view of God, an elevation of mind over matter, an exalted view of humankind, a focus upon attaining health and wealth, and an unorthodox view of salvation.
- New Thought teaches that the key to health and wealth is thinking, visualizing, and speaking the right words.
- New Thought ideas are often taught using biblical words and are justified by distorting Scripture.