

MAN IS NOT A LITTLE GOD: AN EVALUATION OF THE WORD-FAITH  
TEACHING OF THE DEIFICATION OF MAN

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## MAN IS NOT A LITTLE GOD

Within the confines of the professing church of Jesus Christ, the Word of Faith movement represents doctrinal deviation and heresy at several basic points. What follows is an evaluation of their teaching of man as a ‘little god’ or ‘incarnation of God’<sup>1</sup> in comparison with Scripture. This subject was chosen due to its prominence in the current day as taught on Trinity Broadcasting Network.

### **Satan’s Offer in the Garden and Human History**

The original line offered by Satan to the perfectly created Eve was, “You will be like God” (Genesis 3:5). Eve believed Satan’s lie, and the proof of the lie was that she did not become like God. Sin entered the world, and ever since that time this lie has been behind the bulk of non-Christian religion. Pantheism, demonstrated most recently in the New Age movement, teaches that man is already God. Mormonism teaches that man may become God. Jim Jones, Charles Manson, Louis Farrakhan, and Reverend Moon have all laid claim to the mantle of Deity. It is thus clear from both Scripture and history that the lie of godhood continues to be offered to man by Satan.

### **The Testimony of Scripture**

Scripture is clear on many things. One of the many undeniable truths of Scripture is that there is but one God, a doctrine known as monotheism. Though an exhaustive review of passages teaching there is but one God is not possible, the concept is found in Deuteronomy 6:4, Isaiah 44:6 , and 46:9. In Jesus’ day, many Jews picked up stones to kill Him because according to their

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<sup>1</sup> The primary term used is ‘incarnation of God,’ found in E.W. Kenyon and Kenneth Hagin. Charles Capps argues that man is a god with a ‘small g,’ while Kenneth Copeland goes so far as to say, “I am.”

understanding of the Old Testament, Jesus committed blasphemy by claiming to be God.

### **The Word of Faith Doctrinal Paradigm**

Word of Faith is the name of a twentieth century movement within the ecclesiological sphere of the charismatic movement with origins that are still debated at present.<sup>1</sup> The founding father is usually considered to be a Free Will Baptist named Essek William (E.W.) Kenyon. Kenyon was a Bible schoolmaster, a preacher, and writer who attended Emerson College, a school of oratory affiliated with New Thought metaphysics. There is heated debate regarding what precise influence New Thought may have had on Kenyon, but the argument is misguided since proving Kenyon didn't teach New Thought is not the same as proving the orthodoxy of what he did teach.

The big name, however, in the advancement of the Faith theology is the late Kenneth E. Hagin (d. 2003) of McKinney, Texas. Hagin took Kenyon's basic doctrinal framework as true and added his own alleged visions of Jesus and Full Gospel background to formulate the central theology of the modern Word of Faith movement. He has been followed by many successors, most notably Kenneth Copeland (b. 1937), Charles Capps, and Fred Price.

### **The Word of Faith Biblical Argument**

E.W. Kenyon boldly declares, "Every man who has been born again is an Incarnation and Christianity is a miracle. The believer is as much an Incarnation as Jesus of Nazareth."<sup>2</sup> Hagin taught the same idea, using the exact same words unattributed in the December 1980 edition of

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<sup>1</sup> Three basic positions are held regarding New Thought's influence upon Kenyon. D.R. McConnell argued in *A Different Gospel* that Kenyon taught watered down metaphysics. Joe McIntyre, the President of Kenyon's Gospel Publishing Society, argues that Kenyon was *not at all* influenced by New Thought in his biography, *E.W. Kenyon: The True Story*. In the center of each of those two arguments is Dale H. Simmons, *E.W. Kenyon And The Post-bellum Pursuit of Power, Peace, and Plenty*. Simmons argues that both are at least partly correct and that the historic Faith Cure teaching is closer to New Thought than is often realized.

<sup>2</sup> E.W. Kenyon, *The Father and His Family*, 21<sup>st</sup> edition, 1998, p. 100.

*Word of Faith*, his official publication.<sup>1</sup> And Kenneth Copeland went further than either when he boldly declared, “When I read that Jesus said, ‘I Am,’ I just smile and say, ‘Yes, I am, too.’”<sup>2</sup> There is no doubt what Copeland clearly means when he says, “You don’t have a god in you, you are one.”<sup>3</sup> Paul Crouch, founder of Trinity Broadcasting Network, declared, “I am a little god.”<sup>4</sup> Word of Faith theology bases the claim to godhood on at least two biblical passages, Psalm 82:6 and John 10:30-35. The teachers also appeal to the phrase ‘partakers of the divine nature’ in II Peter 1:4 to make their case for man as a ‘god.’

### **The Word of Faith Theological Argument**

Though none of the main Word of Faith teachers has ever attended an accredited seminary or theological school<sup>5</sup>, some have attempted to use the claim that the Eastern Orthodox taught a doctrine of ‘apotheosis’ that exemplifies Word of Faith doctrine. Logic is used in combination with theology to argue that since ‘God is a Spirit,’ and (in their view) man is a spirit, man is equal with God in nature, though not equal in divine attributes.

### **Word of Faith Anthropology: A Critique**

Though I would argue that using the terms ‘little god’ or ‘incarnation of God’ are inherently wrong due to the misunderstandings they convey, such use is not necessarily biblically incorrect. What makes the Word of Faith position incorrect is not the verbiage so much as the

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Hagin, “The Incarnation,” *Word of Faith*, volume 12, December 1980.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Copeland, “Believer’s Voice of Victory” broadcast on TBN, July 9, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Copeland, “The Force Of Love” tape # 02-0028.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Crouch, “Praise The Lord” program, July 7, 1986.

<sup>5</sup> While researching this paper, I was confronted with the claim that Word of Faith teacher Joyce Meyer possesses an earned Ph.D. in theology from Life Christian University. Other Word of Faith teachers were prominently featured, most notably Kenneth Copeland. I contacted the registrar at Life Christian University on

meaning those words communicate. The Faith teachers clearly equate man with God as witnessed by Copeland's comment that one does not have a God within but man is a god. This mitigates the primary argument set forth by several 'after-the-fact' Word of Faith apologists, who claim the Faith teachers only mean that such persons are indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

The first text appealed to by those who defend the Faith doctrine of *deification* is Psalm 82:6. But a simple review of Psalm 82 shows an irony; this psalm of Asaph does not declare mankind or even the unjust judges it addresses to be gods by nature. Verse one declares that God judges among these particular people that the New International Version translates 'gods' in verse one. The emphasis of the passage is not on the internal nature of the judges, it instead concerns the centrality of God Himself as the judge of the 'gods' who are described in the following verses. And verses two through five make clear that not only are these rulers not 'gods by nature,' they are also not 'gods by character.' The divine description is of men who, because they are judges, act as mouthpieces for God but are doing a poor job because they show partiality in judgment (verse 2). The judgments they should render are contained in verses three and four, including vindicating weak, rescuing the needy, and delivering weak persons out of the hands of their oppressors. And God makes clear that judgment is coming even for those who are metaphorically called gods in this passage when verse seven tells us, "Nevertheless, you will die like men." Calling those who act as mouthpieces of God by the Hebrew term *Elohim* does not make them literally 'gods' any more than calling Satan a 'god' in II Corinthians 4:4 actually means that Satan is a god. After all, if there can only be one God by biblical declaration, all other

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September 20, 2006. The registrar named Tammy told me that neither had written a dissertation or defended it, but both were given Ph.D.'s because of their already extant work. A certain number of pages netted each Faith teacher a Bachelor's Degree, more pages earned a Master's Degree, and doctorates were awarded based on already published books. I only note this in case someone raises the objection that Faith teachers possess earned doctorates in theology. Their 'training' is little more than an honorary certificate that is not called such.

uses of the term must be regarded as metaphorical rather than literal. Man serves his own gods that are usually termed idols. But calling something a ‘god’ is a far cry from that something being *by nature* God. In Exodus 7:1, God declares that He has made Moses ‘a god to Pharaoh.’ But this declaration from the Almighty hardly constitutes an endorsement of Moses as deity. One would have to be completely misguided regarding the natures of man, sin, and the atonement to declare such a statement.

And the New Testament passage, John 10:34, does not prove what Copeland and others say either. In verse 30, Jesus makes a claim to Deity. The Jews listening to Him picked up stones in order to execute an Old Testament judgment upon Jesus for blasphemy. Jesus confronts them, however, by quoting the passage from Psalm 82:6. Again, it is in the form of irony. It is the same kind of statement invoked in I Corinthians 4:8 when the Apostle Paul declares that the carnal Corinthians have ‘become kings.’ Just two verses later, Paul declares that he and Apollos are fools while the Corinthians themselves are wise. Obviously, neither point is even remotely close to spiritual reality, but sarcasm is employed as a rhetorical device. It draws the readers’ attention to the fact that they are being mocked and are, in fact, not kings but abusers of spiritual gifts. Neither the term king nor the term god should be taken literally.

### **Other “Gods” in Scripture**

It must be conceded that there are a few other Scriptures usually not cited by the Faith teachers that appear to refer to humans as ‘gods.’ All are irrelevant to any doctrine of deification or apotheosis, but are included here for the sake of short discussion. In at least three texts (Acts 12:22, Acts 28:6, II Thessalonians 2:4), the term ‘god’ is used to describe humans including an unbeliever (Herod) and an apostle (Paul). On the other hand, Isaiah 31:3 makes clear that at least some humans (Egyptians in this context) are not God and Ezekiel 28:2 further clarifies that the

King of Tyre is not a ‘god’ but is a mere man. Given this passage seems to have dual application to both the king of Tyre and Satan, it should give those who argue man is a ‘little god’ pause since this passage states ‘you are a man and not god’ (verse 3). Do those who argue man is literally a ‘god’ apply the same woodenly literal hermeneutic to the Apostle Peter when Jesus calls him ‘Satan’ in Matthew 16:23? One is inclined to wonder how a person can both be a ‘god’ as well as Satan at the same time. Some might wish to argue that Jesus was both ‘God’ and an ‘angel of the Lord’ at the same time, but this avenue of argumentation is not available for Kenneth Copeland, who declared, “(Man) has a uniqueness about him *that even angels* do not have.”<sup>1</sup>

There are also a few texts including the previously cited ones that indicate that Israelite judges are ‘gods.’ Psalm 82:6 is already mentioned but the same concept is taught or implied in Exodus 21:6, Exodus 22:8-9, and I Samuel 2:25. Thus even if we were to understand the term ‘gods’ literally, it has a distinct and limited application to one group of people, Israelite judges. But it is equally clear that since there is only one God (Deuteronomy 6:4), this can only be true in the sense that the judges functioned as mouthpieces for God on earth. That is a far cry from being a literal god.

### **Partakers of the Divine Nature**

And what is to be made of the phrase ‘partakers of the divine nature?’ An analogy should suffice. In just a few weeks, I will celebrate a birthday. On that day, I will partake of my birthday cake. However, I will not assume the constituent elements of the cake. Nor will I assume the nature of the cake. Peter’s epistle is written to Christians (verse one), and his declaration is that we partake of the divine nature through promises. This seems to be the same truth referenced

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Copeland, “Praise The Lord,” Trinity Broadcasting Network, 5 February 1986.

when Paul wrote that man is a ‘new creation’ (II Corinthians 5:17).

The verses following the declaration that we are partakers of the divine nature make clear that redeemed man can reflect the *moral character* of God by adding to faith such divine attributes as knowledge, virtue, perseverance, and a host of other attributes. The contrast is made between the corruption of the world through lust (verse four) and the virtue added by our reflection of the divine moral character of the Lord. The fundamental failure in the Word of Faith argument is its failure to understand that the believer is a *reflection* of God not a *reproduction* of God. A similar analogy may be drawn between the sun and its rays. The rays reflect the glory of the sun much as the believer reflects the glory of God. But the ray is not a complete reproduction of the sun, either. In fact, the image is shattered (cf. I Corinthians 13:12).

### **Ramifications of Word-Faith Anthropology**

The problems of Word of Faith anthropology are numerous, and their anthropology is the slippery slope from whence their unique doctrines gradually deviate from orthodox (all Word of Faith teachers believe in the Trinity) to heretical (man as a little god and Jesus as a born-again man). To use an old phrase, Word of Faith anthropology is the ‘first pebble in the rock slide’ of the unique Faith teachings.

For starters, the teaching contradicts the basic biblical truth that there is only one God. That Jesus is not teaching man as a literal God in John 10:34 is made even clearer when one notes in Mark 12:29 that Jesus taught there was but one God when He quoted Deuteronomy 6:4. It is further noted that Jesus never mentioned the name of another ‘god’ as deity during His ministry either. There can obviously not be only one God while at the same time there is more than one God since each teaching is mutually exclusive. The Faith teachers also clearly profess to believe there is only one God. In profession, they declare one God, but in practice it is

difficult to see how this can be reconciled with their declaration that redeemed man is a God. In theological terms, they profess monotheism but seem to practice henotheism.<sup>1</sup> God also makes clear His uniqueness in a number of places including Exodus 9:14 when He declares, “There is none like me in all the earth.”

### **A Critique of Claimed Eastern Orthodox Deification**

The last few years have seen an increase in the number of people who claim that Word of Faith teachers are following the Eastern Orthodox Church and some early Church Fathers who allegedly taught the divinity of redeemed mankind. But these arguments fail as well by failing to take into account that the Eastern Orthodox do not teach man as a constituent little god; they hold that believers are ‘divine’ by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Robert Bowman covered this subject aptly in the *Christian Research Journal* when he noted, “In keeping with monotheism, the Eastern orthodox do not teach that men will literally *become* "gods" (which would be polytheism). Rather, as did many of the church fathers, they teach that men are "deified" in the sense that the Holy Spirit dwells within Christian believers and transforms them into the image of God in Christ, eventually endowing them in the resurrection with immortality and God's perfect moral character”.<sup>2</sup> Further complicating this problem is that the lack of theological acumen among the Faith teachers causes one to wonder just how many Eastern Orthodox church fathers they have read. This argument seems to be another attempt at ‘after-the-fact’ justification than an effort to determine truth. None of the Faith teachers who make this

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<sup>1</sup> Henotheism is the belief in more than one god but that only one of those gods is to be worshipped.

<sup>2</sup> Robert M. Bowman, Jr., *Christian Research Journal: Winter 1987*. <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/crj/crj-jrnl/web/crj0018a.html>. Accessed 2 October 2006.

claim reference any of the early church fathers who allegedly taught this in their published works.

### **Conclusion and a Final Observation**

The Scripture is abundantly clear. There is one God, and there will always only be one God. Man will never be a god even upon his entrance to the eternal palace. The claims made within the professing church of Christ that man is a ‘god’ cannot be reconciled with any evaluation of the biblical evidence. Using the principle of harmony of biblical passages, man is not by nature God though man may reflect portions of the character of God.

A strange irony is that after proving that both biblically and theologically man is not a God, one can support the concept that man is not a God by a simple read of Genesis. Satan’s original lie to Eve was that she would be ‘like God.’ If Adam and Eve were *already* gods, this is not only an exercise in futility for the devil; it also means that the temptation could never have been a genuine temptation in the first place. Yet the Faith teachers make clear that man was created as ‘god of this world’ and forfeited that title to Satan when he committed ‘high treason.’<sup>1</sup> Though none of this fairy tale is true, either, even the corruption of Scripture inherent in their argument demonstrates decisively that man is not a god. And the use of ‘incarnation of God’ in conjunction with man should be dropped to avoid confusion with the teachings of cults.

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<sup>1</sup> Exhaustive documentation of this is not possible here but see Kenyon’s works, “*The Bible In The Light of Our Redemption*,” “*The Father and His Family*”, “*The Two Kinds of Righteousness*”. See also Kenneth Hagin’s works, “*The Art of Intercession*” and “*Zoe: The God-Kind of Life*,” and Charles Capps, “*Authority In Three Worlds*,” and “*God’s Image of You*.”

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McIntyre, Simmons