Foreword

"Abusive religion" is never far from the public imagination and the media gaze. Yet all denominations are prone to the charge at some level. Any glance at the media coverage of paedophile priests in Roman Catholic churches, for example, reveals a scale of abuse unimagined a quarter of a century ago. And of course, the problem is not confined to Roman Catholicism by any means.

Yet despite all churches aspiring to be arks of salvation, some Christian movements are prone to abusive behavior than others. And in this highly readable, yet also deep and scholarly book, Glyn Ackerley introduces us to the "Health, Wealth and Prosperity Movement" (HWPM)—sometimes known as the "Name It and Claim It" churches. Dr. Ackerley's carefully researched monograph arises out of his doctoral study, which in turn was prompted by his own pastoral concern for parishioners who turned up at his Vicarage door, with lengthy, exasperating, and occasionally tragic tales of religious abuse. His ministry—and now this book—are the mature fruits of his own investigations and reflections. Ackerley pursues his thesis with a measured and sober assessment.

Ackerley's work is much more measured than many studies of religious abuse—Roland Howard's more alarmist *Charismania: When Christian Fundamentalism Goes Wrong* (1997) come to mind. Like Ackerley, Roland Howard rubbed shoulders with prophets, healers, mega ministries, and charismatic preachers, but has not been impressed. Howard is an investigative journalist, and in his pacey and sharp expose, based on his experiences of the varieties and vagaries of contemporary Charismatic Renewal, he offers a sharp critique of abusive religion. It is a quite deliberate focus on some of the more colorful and absurd elements of a movement that has enjoyed widespread popularity. Both Howard and Ackerley's work serve as

critical counterweights to the more fabulous and favorable claims made by those who see this brand of Christianity as the "cure-all" for an over-rational and secular Western Europe. Howard, and now Ackerley, see it as a nadir, and pursue their theses with vigor.

Howard's method, for its time, was a simple, but effective. He offered a series of case-studies, most of which have at one time or another featured in national newspapers. The "Toronto Blessing" (RIP: 1994–97), sexual abuse at the London healing Mission, Morris Cerullo's ministry and uncorroborated accounts of healing, and dangerous dalliances with dubious doctrines of demonology were but a few. In each case, Howard offered a mixture of journalistic observation and analysis, eye-witness accounts, and some academic reflection. The totality of this made for some very disturbing reading, and alarmed critics and supporters alike. At times the critique was devastating and damming.

Ackerley's concerns are similar, but his method far more nuanced and scholarly than that of Howard. Ackerley knows there are plenty of sane and balanced people who operate quite happily within Charismatic Renewal, who neither perpetuate nor experience abuse. Yet the force of Ackerley's argument is to press a generic problem for all churches, namely that of accountability and trust.

What is so disturbing about the instances Howard cited was the corruption of power and authority. When, as in one case, some bizarre form of sexual abuse was being peddled as "ministry," the relevant authorities failed to act for fear of a scandal. No one, it appears, was willing to intervene in or stop an apparently successful ministry. Ackerley writes about abusive charismatic ministries too. What Ackerley really presents us with is a plea—a sort of mandate for accountability. Keeping the scandal at bay is the easy part. It is the ability to own our mistakes, face the truth and one another, which in turn requires maturity and trust, that is in the end, the making of the real church.

The focus of Ackerley's book is the "Health, Wealth and Prosperity Movement" (HWPM), which has gained a surprising degree of prominence in the United Kingdom during the twenty-first century, and can claim some limited influence within Christian fundamentalism, Evangelicalism, Pentecostalism, and Charismatic Renewal. Strictly speaking, there is no "Health and Wealth" movement *per se*. It is, rather, an ideology that can be traced to several seminal preachers and teachers, who in turn advocate and emphasize slightly different doctrines and practices that are connected with the health and wealth concerns of Christians. The range and variants of belief and practice are considerable. Some health and wealth exponents will argue that the Bible demands *tithing* (i.e., individuals giving 10% of income). Correspondingly, those who fail to do this, it is argued, could not expect

God to reward them with financial success, prosperity, and good health. Put another way, "godly giving" is the only real way of ensuring that God will bless the individual.

Other HWPM exponents have more complex and novel ideologies. Some argue that God will not only match the gifts of believers with assurance and blessing, but will actually *multiply* those gifts, and return them to the individual. Exponents of this teaching—such as Morris Cerullo—have suggested that believers can expect a "sevenfold" increase on their gift or investment. For every one dollar that believers donate, they could expect to receive the equivalent of seven back, either through promotion at work, good fortune, or other means. Ironically, Cerullo has appealed for such generous giving from supporters in order to help him evade the deepening debt that had threatened to curtail his ministry. A variant on this teaching would be the "seed faith" practice of Oral Roberts. Believers are encouraged to make their offering, even if (or especially if) they are in financial difficulty. Only by giving will believers be able to receive—"your return, poured into your lap, will be great, pressed down and running over" (Roberts, quoted in Hadden and Shupe, 1988, p. 31).

Others exponents have suggested that the gospel *guarantees* health and wealth to believers who have realized their sanctified and empowered status. Thus, all the believer needs to do is have the necessary amount of faith to claim their God-given heritage—a mixture of heavenly and earthly rewards. Correspondingly, poverty is seen as the outcome of a lack of faith. The ultimate premise of the health and wealth ideology—sometimes called "name it and claim it"—is that there is no blessing or gift that God would wish to deny [his] people, because God is a God of life, generosity, and abundance. "God does not want you to be poor" is the frequently cited mantra of the movement. Again, examples of this in practice might include Oral Roberts' advocacy of a "Blessing Pact"; in return for donations from believers, their financial, spiritual, relational, and health concerns will be addressed.

The roots of the "Health and Wealth" movement are complex. Culturally, they can be traced to the very origins of American entrepreneurial frontier religion—the independent preacher that went from town to town, "selling" the gospel, and establishing networks of followers who supported the ministry by purchasing tracts and subscribing to newsletters that tended to develop distinctive and novel teachings that were not found within mainstream denominations. Fused together with "New Thought," pragmatism and materialism, the movement is, in a sense, distinctively American. Indeed, the HWPM gospel can be said to be rooted in a distinctive "American dream" (success, prosperity, etc.), even though the movement is now encountered all over the world.

Key influences upon the movement have included Norman Vincent Peale ("the power of positive thinking"), whose legacy was most obviously manifest in Robert Schuller's ministry and the once startling Crystal Cathedral in California. Another obvious influence upon the movement, sociologically, is a belief in an ever-growing economy. Although exponents of health and wealth would not explicitly articulate such a view, their actual assumption about investment and return assumes a pattern of economic growth. Correspondingly, a serious recession tends to lead to a downturn in the fortunes of health and wealth exponents, although we should note that some individuals will try and give more during times of hardship, as they believe that this will be their best means of returning to prosperity.

HWPM teaching has become and enduring feature of the Protestant Evangelical and Pentecostal landscape of North America. Pat Robertson, Kenneth Copeland, William Branham, and Oral Roberts are names that have commanded respect. Whilst Jim Bakker, Morris Cerullo, and Jimmy Swaggart have suffered from financial and personal crises that have cast some doubt on the movement as a whole. Further afield, Paul Yonghi Cho, pastor of the world's largest church in Seoul, South Korea, offered a distinctive brand of health and wealth teaching fused to Korean culture and its newly modernized economic expectations. In Brazil, Edir Macedo's Universal Church of God's Kingdom claimed more than six million followers spread over eighty-five countries. Macedo, a former sales assistant in a lottery shop, headed a church that owned a bank, a soccer team, and various media outlets (radio, TV, newspapers, etc.), with the organization once having an estimated annual turnover of over $1 billion (USD). HWPM churches are successful, in financial terms; and they like to talk about their success, and encourage followers to share in that success "that God wills for his own."

Steve Bruce (1990) identified three distinctive emphases that characterize the movement. First, health and wealth teaching is linked to a revival of the Pentecostal emphasis on physical healing and well-being. Second, the teaching is linked to the "discovery" that the Bible proclaims not only spiritual salvation for the believer, but also material and physical prosperity. Third, the teaching emphasizes "positive confession"—a crude cocktail of confidence and assertion, under the guise of faith, that claims that in order to receive healing or wealth, the individual must *first* believe and act as though the miracle has already been reified, even if all the evidence still points to the contrary. As Kate Bowler's masterly thesis points out (2013) the favored biblical text that underpins this dogma is found in Mark 11:24: ". . . whatever you desire, when you pray, believe that you shall receive them, and you shall have them . . . ." It is on the basis of this last point that the health and wealth movement is dubbed "name it and claim it'

"Unsurprisingly, the health and wealth exponents have had many critics within Christianity. Liberation theologians have attacked the movement for its absorption with material prosperity, and its capacity to exploit the poor and vulnerable in developing nations and poor communities. Others have attacked the movement for its deficient hermeneutics, and for the psychological and pastoral damage that can be done to those who fail to receive either health or wealth, and are forced to conclude that this is their own fault, due to a lack of faith. Others regard the movement as a deviant form of Christian orthopraxy that is disreputable and highly manipulative. Others, that its teaching is heterodox. In their defence, health and wealth exponents defend their stance as a "daring" theology that testifies to the generosity and goodness of God. They speak of the "universal law of divine reciprocity." Or, as the old Pentecostal mantra puts it, "as you sow, so shall you reap."

These points aside, the teaching of the movement continues to have a beguiling and almost mesmerizing effect upon its followers. It offers a worldview—a kind of "theological construction of reality"—that is remarkably resistant to a reckoning with any antithesis, which is in turn centered upon a world that offers promises and guarantees about health and wealth, despite evidence to the contrary. To reify their blessings, all the believer need do is "plant the seed of faith," and give.

Thus, committed believers who follow the health and wealth teachings may find that they believe they will be cured of cancer, even though the disease is in their liver, and they have only days to live. Others will believe that by giving away their money, they will receive more. On a personal note, I can recall a conversation with a young man in 1987, who was a follower of Reinhardt Bonnke. The follower explained to me that after the prayer rally at which Bonnke was speaking, he was going outside to collect his new car—a large Volvo estate—which God had promised him, to help him with his new, emerging ministry. In prayer, God had apparently told him that all he needed to do was believe, and he would receive. As an act of faith, God had asked him to choose a color scheme for the car, so he would recognize it as his. When he stepped out of the meeting, there was indeed a brand new Volvo parked outside the main exit. But as the follower explained to me afterwards, he knew it wasn't his—"because it was the wrong color."

Ackerley's perceptive book helps us to understand the role of HWPM churches and their leaders. It is a distinctive and brave thesis that probes and presses the issue of abusive religion (i.e., bad faith), and thereby constantly invites another question: what might good faith actually look like?

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Further Reading:

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Bruce, S. *Pray TV: Televangelism in America*. London: Routledge, 1990.

Hadden, J., and A. Shupe. *Televangelism: Power and Politics on God's Frontier*. New York: Holt, 1988.

Howard, R. *Charismania: When Christian Fundamentalism Goes Wrong*. London: Mowbray, 1997.

McConnell, D. *A Different Gospel: A Historical and Biblical Analysis of the Modern Faith Movement*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988.