

The Appeal of the Word of Faith Movement

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Abstract

Theologians are often mystified by the popular appeal of the Word of Faith Movement. Although biblical scholars have deconstructed the movement's core teachings to the point where one would not expect the movement to retain a substantial following or exert significant influence, it remains the largest and fastest growing expression of Christian faith in many parts of Africa. The objective of this article is to explain the appeal of the Word of Faith Movement by using the theories of selected philosophers, sociologists, and theologians to furnish an explanatory framework.

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1. Introduction

Theologians are often mystified by the popular appeal of the Word of Faith Movement (also known as the Prosperity Gospel). Although biblical scholars have deconstructed the movement's core teachings to the point where one would not expect the movement to retain a substantial following or exert significant influence, it remains the largest and fastest growing expression of Christian faith in many parts of Africa. Despite its well-documented hermeneutical and theological deficiencies, the Word of Faith continues to appeal to the populace.

This paper explores why the Word of Faith Movement continues to attract a large following and exert great influence. The objective is to provide a theoretical framework that helps to understand the phenomenal appeal and influence of the movement. The explanatory framework is sought through a synthesis of the theories advanced by several philosophers, sociologists, and theologians. The work of William Bainbridge and Rodney Stark on the dynamics of cult formation, more recently supported by the research of Laurence Iannaccone, Robert Barro, and Sriya Iyer, provides insight into the economics of religion. Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance shows how the law of supply and demand can find its way into the spiritual and theological functions of the church. James Fowler demonstrates the dynamic link between individual faith and social interaction. William Avery and Roger Gobbel's study of how the preached word is perceived and received by church members sheds light on why the hermeneutical deficiencies of prosperity-gospel preaching are overlooked by the laity. By bringing together insights from several streams of research and theory, the paper proposes an explanation for the growth and influence of the Word of Faith Movement.

2. The Theory of Cult Formation

To understand how the Word of Faith Movement attracts adherents and exerts influence over them, it is essential to understand how a social or religious group forms and why it is susceptible to influence. The extensive research that Bainbridge and Stark conducted into the ways in which social and religious groups form may provide some insight (Bainbridge and Stark 1979, 1987). They refer to such groups as *cults*, which they define as social enterprises 'primarily involved in the production and exchange of novel and exotic compensators' (Bainbridge and Stark 1979:284). These movements may or may not be religious in nature, but they all offer 'innovative alternatives to the traditional

systems of religious' rewards (p. 284). Bainbridge and Stark propose three models of cults. The first two are initiated by a leaders who develop 'novel cultural responses to personal or social needs' (p. 285) and then form their group by offering these as rewards to their followers. The success of the cult depends on its ability to innovate so as to achieve product differentiation. In the third model, the cult forms without the driving influence of a leader. A group of individuals with a similar social, political, or religious needs dynamically interacts and collectively develops reward systems.

These three models cohere around the principle of supply and demand. The demand is placed by the group (the consumers). The demand is a need that is identified within the social network, which prompts their search for a compensator (reward). The leader functions as an entrepreneur on the supply end. Through personal experience or through observation, he (or she) identifies the compensator need and sets out to develop such a compensator. By matching the supply with the demand, both the entrepreneur and the consumer are adequately compensated, the entrepreneur through reward and the consumer by means of the appropriate compensator or need fulfilment.

Contextualising this sociological explanation of cult formation within a religious context, the development of innovative alternatives to contemporary religious thought arises from the need that drives the requirement for innovation. This need is expressed by the 'religious consumer' and is fulfilled by the 'religious supplier'.

Considering Word of Faith doctrine from this perspective, the interplay between supply and demand within the context of a need to innovate points towards the complicity of the minister (supply side) and the congregants (demand side) in the evolution of doctrines that diverge from Pentecostal and/or Evangelical beliefs and practices. The movement derives some of its influence from personal and social needs, and some of the followers within the movement participate in driving the development of its theology. The dynamics of our contemporary socio-economic society have entrenched a culture of entrepreneurship, which has now found its way into the realm of theological development. Miller (2002:456) astutely observes that the 'boundaries between religion and other industries can be blurry. Blurring occurs through secularization of religious organizations.' The rise of the Word of Faith Movement suggests that the differentiation between the spiritual and organisational functions of the church has become blurred. This

blurring allows a supply and demand culture to influence the theological development of the movement.

3. The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance

Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance explains how the law of supply and demand, which is being superimposed upon the organisational function of the church, can even influence the spiritual and theological functions of the church (Festinger 1957; Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter 1957; Festinger and Carlsmith 1959). The theory states that people are motivated to minimise the cognitive dissonance that occurs when two beliefs do not fit together. Festinger argued that people could reduce dissonance in three ways: (a) by changing their beliefs, (b) by changing their behaviour, or (c) by exposure to new information or views. When the choice is between changing beliefs or changing behaviour, the evidence suggests people are inclined to change whichever of the two they perceive will bring them the most reward. In essence, if the real or perceived reward demands or better fits a belief change than a behavioural change, then they will tend to change their beliefs rather than their actions.²

Prof. Nico Frijda, an authority on human emotions, contributes to the dissonance theory of Festinger. Frijda concludes that 'there thus are good reasons for thinking that emotions influence beliefs' (Frijda, Manstead, and Bem 2000: 4). He applies Festinger's theory within human emotional studies and demonstrates, as Festinger has, that the tension between belief and experience causes people to adapt their beliefs rather than their behaviour. According to Frijda,

a perceived discrepancy between two or more conditions gives rise to an uncomfortable tension-like state that motivates the individual to seek ways of reducing this discrepancy between cognitions. The reviewed research supports the notion that cognitive discrepancy produces negative affect, and that this in turn motivates attempts at discrepancy reduction. One way in which discrepancy can be reduced is through belief change. (Frijda, Manstead, and Bem 2000:8)

Revisiting Bainbridge and Stark's examples of rewards and compensators as part of a response to socio-economic and socio-political environments, against the backdrop of Festinger's theory, defines unrestricted influence within a dangerous framework. Where the socio-economic and socio-political environment produces a specific human need, influence is exerted through an agent that produces a product aimed at meeting the specific need. The

² The \$1-20 experiment conducted by Festinger and Carlsmith, 'Cognitive Consequences of Forced Compliance' (pp. 203-208), as well as the 'Counter Attitudinal Advocacy' experiments that were conducted by Leippe and Eisenstadt in 1994, as cited in E Aronson, *The Social Animal*, 9th ed. (New York: Worth Publishers, 2004), 166, provide some of the evidential support for this claim.

innovation that is employed differentiates the agent (organisation, community, or individual) from its competitors. The perceived or experienced benefit, if in opposition to an established belief system, challenges the individual's beliefs, which can result in the re-evaluation of the individual's beliefs. Such re-evaluation may result in an adaptation of the belief itself.

The implication of Festinger's statement within the context of the Word of Faith Movement is that the movement innovates a spiritual product that comes with the promise of a better life, which meets the felt need. The need and its associated emotional impact is so strong that people are prepared to alter their beliefs in the hope that the innovation will ultimately meet their individual needs. In essence, then, the desire for rewards can be so powerful that it results in people reshaping their theological beliefs to meet their physical, emotional, and social needs in people reshaping their theological beliefs to meet their physical, emotional, and social needs.

4. The Theory of Faith Development

James Fowler's influential theory of faith development also informs our understanding of group formation and cohesion in the Word of Faith Movement. Fowler theorised that an individual's faith might develop through six stages as the person matured, although it was recognised that individual faith development might stagnate in any of the six stages. The first three stages of faith development are characterised by an emphasis on stories, images, and experiences (stage 1), an anthropomorphic concept of God and a predisposition towards taking metaphors literally (stage 2), and conformity to authority together with a tendency to overlook or ignore conflicts and inconsistencies (stage 3). Only in the last three stages do people begin to struggle with inconsistencies and conflicts in their beliefs (stage 4) and to accept paradoxes as the limitation of logic (stage 5).

Green and Hoffman (1989) support the claim of Chirban that there is a link between Allport's intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity and Fowler's stages of faith. Allport related extrinsic religion, which he called *religion as a means*, to prejudice. By contrast, he argued that intrinsic religion, which he called *religion as an end*, is free of prejudice (Hood 1998:246–47). Allport defined *prejudice* as a belief that is held without understanding. He calls it prejudice because holding beliefs without understanding often leads to an 'unreasonable attitude that is unusually resistant to rational influence' (Rosnow 1972:53). This kind of non-rational conviction

causes individuals with shared beliefs to cluster together and to exclude those who do not share these beliefs. This prejudice serves as the catalyst that binds certain individuals together within a worshipping community. Chirban (cited in Green and Hoffman 1989:247) identified the presence of prejudice as a motivating factor in faith stages 1–3, but noted that such prejudice was lacking in stages 4–6.

The prejudice that is present in faith stages 1–3 establishes unique communities. Faith communities form with a more simplistic approach to faith. There is a reliance on the group to provide validation for certain beliefs, which are not subjected to serious scrutiny. The group attaches a high level of reverence to leadership figures, which enforces the group synergy and diminishes the probability of critical examination of beliefs. Green and Hoffman point out that the literal interpretation of faith and beliefs in stage 2 leads to negative impressions of those who do not share the preferred interpretation. Stage 3 people tend to be heavily oriented towards their in-group, which inevitably involves negative attitudes towards those in the out-group (Green and Hoffman 1989:248). Beliefs and values that are appealing to members in faith stages 1–3 are reinforced through group synergy, which is strongly based upon the trust placed within a central authoritative figure.

These two theories—Fowler’s six stages of faith and Allport’s religion with prejudice—help to provide a theoretical framework for understanding how people become committed members in Word of Faith churches. The groups are formed by people in faith stages 1–3. They embrace a literalistic understanding of Scripture and an uncritical acceptance of their beliefs, which are reinforced by trusting allegiance to a charismatic leader. These characteristics lead to the formation of faith communities that have strong in-group ties, but are averse to out-group engagement. Their ‘prejudice’ insulates them; they defend an uncritical allegiance to the in-group beliefs.

5. The Theory of Minister Validation

William Avery and Roger Gobbel's (1980) research into ‘how the laity understand the relationship between the words of the preacher and the Word of God’ also helps to explain the reception of the Word of Faith message. This is their conclusion:

The laity closely identify the Word of God with the Bible. Sermons containing overt and explicit biblical material are judged to be a proclamation of the Word of God. Also, the interpersonal

relationship between clergy and laity was a major determining factor in judging sermons as a proclamation of the Word, frequently regardless of content of sermons. Where there were differences between clergy and laity concerning the Bible and matters of the Faith, there was a tendency for laity to rely on some unspecified individualistic, privatistic criterion. (Avery and Gobbel 1980:41)

They base their conclusions on several observations. Firstly, if the preacher quotes or cites much scripture, or if his (or her) language is salted with the words of scripture, then he is judged to be preaching the Word of God. Secondly, people look upon their minister as an expert who will rightly interpret the Bible. Thirdly, listeners filter sermons on the basis of personal needs; they hear the message selectively through their expectation that God will speak to them to provide guidance and comfort for daily life. Lastly, and most significantly according to Gobbel and Avery, congregants judge the sermon on the basis of their attitude towards the preacher. 'In determining the presence of the Word of God, relationships between the minister and the laity appear to take precedence over what is said in a sermon' (Avery and Gobbel 1980:51).

Gobbel and Avery's study sheds light on why members of the Word of Faith Movement often fail to perceive theological flaws in the preaching. The sermons, which intentionally speak faith and hope to people desperately seeking comfort, are saturated with biblical phrases and quotations. The preacher is typically esteemed as 'a man of God', who is revered by the audience as someone with direct access to the mind of God. The congregants feel privileged to have such a man of God as their pastor, and thus feel a deep allegiance to him.

6. Conclusion: Towards an Explanation

Although there may be many more competing and supporting variations of the theories describing the dynamics of influence, the small selection presented above seems to represent a firm understanding of the dynamics.

Bainbridge and Stark showed that groups form to address people's immediate and social needs. Influence is an exchange between the influencer and the influenced. The relationship is dependent upon the success of the influencer in identifying and meeting the felt needs of individuals. The concept of felt needs is important, because the influence is not necessarily tied to the influencer's ability to meet the needs. If the influencers can persuade the

influenced that they have a solution, the person may buy into the transaction.

Festinger showed that individuals respond to a tension between their beliefs and their experiences by adapting their beliefs in terms of their perceived or real reward. He demonstrates that the physical reality associated with experience can be utilised to challenge and change the beliefs of an individual. In other words, the desire for a better life can be so strong that people will believe someone who gives them the hope of attaining it. In relation to Bainbridge and Stark, Festinger's observation has the potential to allow an influencer to exert sufficient influence over the individual, through meeting social and personal needs, to change longstanding beliefs without proper evaluation and validation.

It is easy to see how the dynamic interplay of these two theories—(a) Bainbridge and Stark and (b) Festinger—plays a role in the acceptance of the health and wealth gospel. Recognising people's felt need for physical and emotional health and their desperate desire to escape from poverty, the Word of Faith preachers have innovated a theological message that promises to meet adherents' felt needs for personal well-being and economic freedom. Their persuasive propaganda coupled with the enticing power of their promises is sufficient to cause many to accept their message without subjecting it to rigorous intellectual evaluation.

Avery and Gobbel show how powerful the relationship between the spiritual leader and the listener can be. The dynamic that they observed demonstrates how surrogate validation is used by individuals, and how this allows these individuals to be influenced. Avery and Gobbel's case studies fit Fowler's hypothesis that there is a segment of people who rely on literal interpretation in the development of their beliefs: they do not subject their beliefs or new beliefs to serious scrutiny and at the same time place their trust in a central authoritative figure.

Avery and Gobbel noted that listeners interpret the validity of what they hear in terms of the fact that scripture has been quoted. These individuals also accepted as true what they heard from a trusted spiritual leader, and did not necessarily subject what they heard to scrutiny. Again, as with Bainbridge, Stark, and Festinger, understanding and acceptance was contextualised in terms of individual and private needs.

What is evident is that personal needs play a vital part in the process by which people understand and accept what they are taught by a spiritual leader. In terms of theology, an influencer may structure a doctrine aimed at addressing a specific need, and

in doing so depart theologically from the truth. This is seldom intentional. The spiritual leaders are themselves influenced by the quest for solutions to felt needs—either their personal needs or their need to ensure the success of their ministry through innovation. The leaders themselves are not immune to the power of felt needs to influence theological convictions. They need a high level of spiritual and emotional maturity to submit new teachings or ideas to rigorous intellectual evaluation. They also need a deep commitment to a Christocentric approach to theology.

What is equally evident is the influence that a spiritual leader can exert over a listener through an established trust relationship. The observation by Avery, Gobbel, and Fowler that such a trust relationship results in acceptance without rigorous scrutiny opens the door for exploitation.

In context, it is clear that the relationship between the influencer and the influenced is not a one-way exertion of power of the influencer over the influenced. There exists a subtle dynamic of mutual response. On the one hand, the influencer responds to the needs of the individuals who willingly accept the influence, due to the fact that they derive a reward or benefit from it. Their acceptance validates the actions of the influencer. The trust relationship between both parties strengthens, and the influencer is empowered by the influenced to exert even more influence. This is a symbiotic and not a parasitic relationship, and in my view is best described as the economics of religious influence. Using the term economics contextualises influence in terms of a mutually acceptable exchange that is, at the time, considered by the parties as mutually beneficial.

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