



STATEMENT DV020

ASSESSING THE WIMBER PHENOMENON

Vancouver recently experienced the "Wimber Phenomenon." John Wimber and a team of over one hundred people from his Vineyard Fellowship in California recently led a four-day conference entitled "Signs and Wonders and Church Growth." It attracted over 2300 delegates, most of whom paid \$150 (Canadian) for the opportunity to hear Wimber teach a popularized version of a course which he gives at Fuller Seminary's School of World Mission. Wimber is clearly becoming one of the "hottest items" on the charismatic circuit these days and attempts to appeal to a much broader cross-section of evangelicals than one might expect. What is this man saying and doing that attracts such attention? How is one to assess this phenomenon?

Background on Wimber

John Wimber is in his early 50s and was converted at the age of 29. A former rock promoter and successful businessman, he turned his back on his past and trained at a Bible College associated with the Evangelical Friends. (This would appear to be the extent of his formal theological training; the Fuller calendar lists him as having only a Bachelor of Arts degree.) After a rather discouraging time in a pastorate he gave up on local church ministry and worked with the Fuller Evangelistic Association as a lecturer on church growth, becoming a self-taught expert on religious movements. After three years of work with the Association, he returned to pastoral work in 1978. By this time he was heavily involved in the charismatic movement. In 1981, at the request of Peter Wagner of the School of World Mission, he began to lecture on the impact that miraculous works have had in promoting rapid evangelization of groups on the mission field. The idea of a "power encounter" between the forces of darkness and the Gospel is highlighted in missions thinking today (and especially by those who apply "Church Growth" principles to missionary work.) This sort of emphasis is one that can be found in the Old Testament (where Elijah confronts the prophets of Baal) and has long been important in the conversion of groups which have a strong belief in a spirit world (notably amongst animist tribes.)

Wimber's classes at Fuller soon began attracting large numbers of curious students. The classes included what Wimber terms "clinics" in which students are called upon to pray for one another for healing and other forms of ministry. The rather sensational aspects of the class have made it even more popular; recently Wimber has taken it on the road.

Positive Aspects of Wimber's Conference

Having attended one of his conferences, there are a number of very positive things which this writer can gladly affirm. Certainly evangelicals should rejoice that the work of the Holy Spirit is being given prominence. Speaking as a church historian, it is lamentable that the church has often tended to over-react to the excesses of those who have made much of the work of the Holy Spirit (such as the second century Montanists, the seventeenth century English Puritans, and twentieth century Pentecostalism.) What Wimber is doing in emphasizing the work of the Holy Spirit, is a good and helpful thing.

Secondly, his concern to equip believers for ministry is excellent. He wants to see individuals moving out in faith and trusting God to work in new and exciting ways. He is clearly picking up some of the emphases of the "body-life" movement (often associated in people's minds with Ray Stedman) which has done much in evangelical circles to emphasize the need for the "equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry." In this regard, Wimber has a strong emphasis upon the organic nature of the church and urges all of its members to develop their own gifts in ministry.

Thirdly, Wimber offers a good critique of traditional Pentecostal theology, and does not formulate his interpretation of personal spiritual renewal in terms of a "second blessing" which is characterized by speaking in tongues. Here he seems to be relying on George Ladd from Fuller Seminary, and upon the English theologian, James Dunn.

Fourthly, his vision is for the use of spiritual gifts (such as healing) in terms of evangelism and church growth. He regales his audience with story after story of how the manifestations of miraculous gifts have led to conversions and to the growth of the church.

Fifthly, Wimber has a strong appreciation of "spiritual warfare" and underlines the power of God to combat the forces of darkness.

Sixthly, when it comes to healing, he is careful to reject the teaching of some charismatic and holiness groups which maintain that physical healing is in the atonement -- that God has provided for the physical healing of Christians in the sacrifice of his Son. Furthermore, he admits candidly that many of those for whom he has prayed have not been healed, and he strongly encourages those who feel that they may have been cured to have a doctor confirm the fact before they go off any medication or suspend treatment. Would that others like him would give the same advice!!!

Finally, it was delightful to see how encouraged and enthused the vast majority of those who heard Wimber were. Many pastors and lay people were strengthened in their faith and challenged to trust God for greater things in the future.

Difficulties

While rejoicing in the positive aspects of the conference and of Wimber's ministry, it is important to mention the difficulties which this ministry creates for evangelicals. In the first place, the advertising for the conference is rather sensational and leaves one with questions about its integrity. The focus is clearly on "Signs and Wonders," which almost becomes an advertising slogan in Wimber's literature. There was a great deal of "hype," not only in the advertising brochures, but also on the first day of the conference. Initially Wimber gave the impression that it is commonplace for non-Christians who attend his church in Yorba Linda, California, to be converted one day, and the next to be out on the street casting out demons and healing the sick without even knowing John 3:16 (Wimber's illustration, not mine.) Yet on the second day of the conference there was almost a complete reversal of this impression, with Wimber acknowledging that they see many who are not healed and that some people for whom they pray, die rather than recover.

Secondly, one might well ask whether the strong focus upon "Signs and Wonders" is entirely Biblical? Hebrews 2:3-4 is cited as a proof-text: "God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will." But the text indicates that the primary focus is to be upon the Gospel: Christians are to be concerned with its proclamation first and foremost. The signs, wonders and so on were given to confirm the Gospel -- one needs to get the horse before the cart here -- the New Testament emphasis is always upon the proclamation of the Gospel. We are not encouraged to speculate about how God might choose to confirm it. To become sidetracked on signs and wonders is to be entranced by sensationalism and is not something which Jesus encouraged; in fact it was something which he discouraged probably because he was only too aware that people would seek him for the wrong reasons. Such an overdue concern with miraculous signs reminds one of Augustine's comment: "Jesus is usually sought after for something else, not for his own sake."

A third disturbing aspect of the conference was the strong anti-intellectualism which Wimber exhibited from time to time. His insistence that "At some point critical thinking must be laid aside" is nothing less than dangerous. Wimber several times equated critical thinking with unbelief, and his apparent inability to distinguish the two is most disturbing. At one point he asked: "When are we going to see a generation who doesn't try to understand this book [the Bible], but just believes it?" In effect, this is saying "When are we going to see a generation that believes my interpretation of this book without question?" This strongly anti-intellectual strain which shows through in Wimber is typical of nineteenth century American revivalism and is just the sort of thing that evangelicalism has been trying to live down in the twentieth century. It disparages God's gracious gift of our mind and reflects ill on a creator who chose to endow us with the ability to think critically.

At the same time as he disparaged the intellect, Wimber attempted to use intellectual argument to convince his listeners of his case. In a lecture on "world views" Wimber attempted to argue that the Western "Worldview" is the product of Platonic dualistic thinking, first introduced into Western theology by Augustine. Its growing acceptance "during the 17th and 18th centuries" caused a "new science based on materialistic naturalism" to emerge which resulted in a "secularization of science and a mystification of religion."¹ Wimber seems to have little appreciation that throughout the centuries Christians have struggled with these questions; for most in his audience this grossly-simplified explanation is enough. There was no acknowledgment of the extent to which Western thinking is rooted in a Biblical understanding. At this point it would be worthwhile asking if Wimber has given serious thought as to how other "world views" have affected his own, particularly when it comes to the methodology presented as regards to healing. In the seminar on healing, one of the phenomena one was instructed to look for was "hot-spots," a buzz-word in the New Age thinking emerging in California, which has a hearty blend of Oriental mysticism and Eastern religion.

Aside from these questions about Wimber's grasp of intellectual questions, there are some serious difficulties in his theology for a thinking evangelical. In the first place, his use of Scripture is highly problematic. His starting place seems to be his own experience and Scripture is drawn into proof-text his own position. This was particularly seen in his teaching methodology regarding healing. People

were taught a theology of healing based on the observation of phenomenological responses (shaking, stiffening, respiration, laughter, fluttering of eyelids, etc.) and were encouraged to use such subjective criteria as the basis on which to evaluate spiritual responses.

A second theological difficulty is Wimber's radical Arminianism (some might well argue it is Pelagianism). He seems to have little or no appreciation of the doctrine of the Fall and speaks of being involved in "restoring the Edenic state" in and through his ministry. He leaves no real place for an on-going struggle with the old nature in the life of a Christian which the New Testament teaches the believer to expect. In the long-run this can only lead to disillusionment because the promised state is not attained -- or to a refusal to face reality by denying one's own experience of temptation and sin.

A third area of theological difficulty is Wimber's demonology; certainly most evangelicals would disagree with his assertion that a Christian can be "demonized." His view on this seems to contradict the assurance of Scripture that "if any man be in Christ, he is a new creation, behold, old things are passed away, and all things are become new." (2 Cor. 5:17) His concern with demonic activity does not seem to take seriously the Scriptural injunction that when Christians are afflicted by the power of darkness, a believer is to "resist the devil and he will flee from you." (James 4:7)

Two final aspects of his theology seem to be closely linked together: his eschatology (doctrine of last things); and his ecclesiology (doctrine of the church). It soon becomes clear listening to him that Wimber has a love-hate relationship with the church. He professes to love it in all of its expressions and is strong in his denunciations of divisions within it. Almost in the same breath, however, he is devastating in his criticisms: "The church has become wicked in its pride and separation;" "The church is an unbelieving and perverse generation today." He is also frequently cynical and disparaging in his references to other churches (including churches which major on Bible study and even on the charismatic gifts) and went as far as to compare the church to the relationship between David and Bathsheba.

None of these devastating criticisms were applied to Wimber's own Vineyard Fellowship, however. In his view Christ is now purifying the church and his "Fellowship" is in the vanguard of this work. Here his understanding of the last days begins to shine through. Wimber stated categorically that he did not believe in the imminent return of Christ for a church: the church is now being restored to its pristine purity, being made fit for her bridegroom. Christ will only come back for a church which is pure and spotless and that she needs to make herself ready. Such an understanding is not new, of course. Usually it is referred to as "restorationism": the church has lost a key aspect of the New Testament's pattern for it and that key is now being restored to the church. Often such restorationism is linked to the return of Christ: when the church recovers the missing key, then Christ will return. It should be of no surprise that restorationism was a common theme in 19th century American revivalism and produced a host of new denominations which were convinced that God was busy restoring the New Testament church in their midst. If the rest of the church only got on board, then all would be sweetness and light. Sometimes the key was felt to be the recovery of apostolic ministry (as with the Irvingites in Britain), sometimes there was an insistence on believer's baptism (as with Alexander Campbell's "Disciples of Christ") while at other times it was tied to a scheme of prophetic interpretation (as with the Seventh Day Adventists and the Church of the Latter Day Saints.)

Such restorationism is inevitably divisive and Wimber's version of it will eventually prove to be so as well. It was seen at the conference in a strong us-them mentality: those who are for "Signs and Wonders" and those who were just ordinary evangelicals (or even just run-of-the-mill charismatics.) Wimber seeks to extend his influence by reaching pastors and church leaders: he clearly gears his message to them. Testimonies were offered at the conference by pastors who had turned their backs on their own denominations or local fellowships and witnessed that God had greatly blessed their ministry through their willingness to embrace Wimber's teachings. (So much for the talk about the "heinousness of division.")

It is evident that Wimber is endeavouring to spawn a movement, but like other restorationists before him, he will succeed in only forming a new denomination. Whatever one might think about the need for yet another denomination, one certainly can object to its being done under the guise of a conference on "Signs and Wonders" and also to the credibility lent to Wimber by Fuller Seminary. It used to be that those who split churches were refused degrees from seminaries; it is rather an odd turn-up for the book that Fuller seems to be used to legitimize such division. [It is my understanding that since first writing this article in June, 1985, that Fuller has tried to distance itself from Wimber's excesses by no longer giving graduate credit for this course. I also have been led to understand that the school may take yet further action.]

If the positive elements in Wimber's conferences can be kept and balance be brought into other areas (Wimber makes it all too plain how much he hates the word "balance"), then this ministry could be of great blessing to the wider body of believers. With its present direction and emphases, however, the movement is likely to produce reactions among evangelicals which in the long run will be detrimental to the working of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian church.

Endnotes:

CRI, P.O. Box 8500, Charlotte, NC 28271
Phone (704) 887-8200 and Fax (704) 887-8299

1. John Wimber, Signs Wonders and Church Growth (Vineyard Ministries International, Placentia, California, n.d.), Section 3, p.7.
-- Dr. Don Lewis, Regent College

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