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OFF THE MAP: BILL JOHNSON AND THE PURSUIT OF EXTRABIBLICAL AUTHENTICATION

by Bob Hunter

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Bill Johnson wasn't happy. The pastor of a successful church in Weaverville, California, he wanted more than just a sermon and worship choruses. He attended a conference in 1987 featuring the teaching of John Wimber but left discouraged. "The reason for my discouragement," Johnson explains, "was the fact that they had fruit for what they believed. All I had was good doctrine."¹ After careful reexamination of his personal priorities, he concluded, "There was a risk factor I had failed to enter into—Wimber called it *faith*. Teaching MUST be followed with *action* that makes room for God to move" (emphasis in original).² Immediate change occurred. However, he reports, "a number of healings and manifestations broke out and I didn't know what to do with it. I didn't object to it, I wasn't opposed to it; I just didn't know how to pastor it in a way that it would continue and increase."³ It wasn't long before Johnson became discouraged again because some weren't being healed. Finally, in 1995, he made a trip to the Toronto Airport Vineyard, where the Toronto Blessing had broken out the year before. Since then, he hasn't looked back.⁴

Previous to the seventeen years Johnson spent in Weaverville, he had been a youth pastor at Bethel Church in Redding, California, under the leadership of his father. In February of 1996, Johnson and his wife Beni became the senior pastors at Bethel.⁵

Bethel is a multifaceted church. Extensions include an inner healing and deliverance ministry called Sozo (which depends heavily on extrabiblical revelation),⁶ healing rooms,⁷ a prophetic ministry,⁸ and the Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry where, they state, "the school emphasizes the need for believers to return to the ministry of signs and wonders."⁹

A fifth-generation pastor, Johnson's teachings are solidly rooted in those of the late John Wimber and the former pastor of the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship, John Arnott. Frequent speakers promoted by Bethel include Randy Clark,¹⁰ whose 1994 appearance at the Toronto Airport Vineyard signaled the beginning of the Toronto Blessing, and Cindy Jacobs, a self-professed prophet¹¹ who once noted that the Holy Spirit resided in her left arm, having moved from her right arm.¹²

SIGNS AND WONDERS

As with other churches and individuals involved in what Hank Hanegraaff has coined the "Counterfeit Revival" movement,¹³ Johnson feels that miracles should be a sign of the presence of the authentic gospel. He writes, "Heaven is the model for our life and ministry. Jesus lived with this principle by only doing what He saw His Father doing. Learning to recognize the Holy Spirit's presence, and how to follow His lead will enable us to do the works of Christ, destroying the works of the devil. Healing and deliverance must become the common expression of this gospel of power once again."¹⁴ Indeed, "powerlessness is inexcusable," he insists. "Our mandate is simple: raise up a generation that can openly display the raw power of God."¹⁵

Concordant with that belief, in addition to the accounts of falling gold dust and angel feathers so commonly reported in the Counterfeit Revival movement, Bethel Church's website reports numerous instances over the years of miraculous healings, including people being raised from the dead.¹⁶ Johnson also tells of God's storehouse of body parts in heaven that one of his students experienced:

Years ago one of our students had an encounter with the Lord. It was really quite bizarre. In heaven she actually saw this room with spare body parts. You say, "Well that doesn't exist in heaven." I don't know. I haven't seen it. But she did. And she was with Chris ministering down in Santa Rosa, I think it was. And a gal came up who was in a head-on collision. Really messed up her legs. Used to be a dancer and had very little function....She says, "I don't even have a kneecap." Well, the gal who's seen the spare parts room in heaven says, "Well, I'll get one for you." That's got to be like the ultimate response ever! "Well, I'll get one for you." She reaches her arm like this [he gestures reaching for something above his head], she brings it down, lays her hand on her knee and within fifteen minutes she has a new knee cap.¹⁷

There are two noteworthy facts about the seemingly endless reports of miracles. First, although God certainly can and does heal today, these ministries never provide any documentation. When people come forward at a meeting for healing and leave claiming

to be cured, there isn't any documented follow-up to see if the purported healing actually occurred or was simply the result of wishful thinking on the part of the person supposedly healed. When someone feels they've been healed of cancer and then stops treatment as a sign of faith, the results can be horrific.¹⁸

Second, the theological paradigm undergirding Bethel's miracle claims contradicts biblical teaching. Illustrative examples abound, but the following one particularly reveals Johnson's worldview. At a Prophetic Fire Conference in 2008, he told his audience, "As you're praying over them, command now the spirit of affliction, 'Loose that hip, in Jesus' name.' Command that God just speak health into that hip. Some actually need a creative miracle. There's degenerative condition in the joint. So the worlds were made when God spoke them into being, so speak to that new hip."¹⁹ In short, to instruct followers to give God orders and to teach them to speak material objects into existence (as only God can do²⁰) is not merely unbiblical, it rises to the level of blasphemy.

IF IT BE THY WILL

The Johnsons admit that sometimes people haven't been healed. One time the declaration was made that Redding would be a cancer-free zone, only to have someone die of cancer. Beni Johnson said, "You're going to have failures. We don't try to figure out the answers. We're seeing major breakthrough, and we just keep at it."²¹

It never occurs to them that the reason some people aren't healed is because it may not be God's will. In fact, in the "Questions and Answers" section of Bill Johnson's website, the question is asked if it is always God's will to heal someone. Johnson responds, "How can God choose not to heal someone when He already purchased their healing? Was His blood enough for all sin, or just certain sins? Were the stripes He bore only for certain illnesses, or certain seasons of time? When He bore stripes in His body He made a payment for our miracle. He already decided to heal....Take risk—pray for people (NOT—'if it be thy will' kind of prayer. In the thousands of people I've seen healed, I've never seen anyone healed from that kind of prayer)" (emphasis in original).²²

Johnson alludes to Isaiah 53:5, which in reality provides no promise of physical healing. In context, Isaiah spoke of our spiritual healing—Messiah was "pierced for our transgressions" and "crushed for our iniquities."²³ As Peter explained, "He himself bore our sins' in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; 'by his wounds you have been healed.' For 'you were like sheep going astray,' but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls" (1 Pet. 2:24–25). Furthermore, Jesus is quite clear that it is not wrong to pray "if it be thy will."

He Himself prayed, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42; cf. 2 Cor. 12:8–9). And John affirms, "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him" (1 John 5:14–15). Only God knows what is best for us, whether it be healing or not, and to teach otherwise is a false and dangerous teaching. As Hanegraaff often says, healing is provided for in the atonement, but it is not guaranteed prior to the general resurrection at the consummation of history.

CALLING OUR SALVATION INTO QUESTION

As error begets error, Johnson includes miracles, signs, and wonders in the works each and every Christian should be manifesting. In an excerpt posted on his website from his book *Release the Power of Jesus* (Destiny Image, 2009), he writes, "Works cannot save us, but without the fruit of good works in our lives, we lack the evidence that identifies us as a new creation in Christ. Just as God's nature is revealed in what He does, the evidence that we are being transformed into His likeness is that we reveal His nature in what we do." Johnson goes on to ask, "What are these good works?" He answers by quoting Jesus's statement in John 14:12: "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father.' *It can't be stated more plainly. Those who believe in Him will demonstrate signs and wonders*" (emphasis added).²⁴

This false and dangerous teaching that miracles ought to manifest in every believer's ministry as evidence of saving faith stems from how Johnson applies his doctrine of the "kenosis" (emptying) of Christ. He teaches that Jesus functionally "laid his divinity aside" in order to model what any ordinary Christian can and should do through dependence on the Holy Spirit.²⁵ Where, then, does that leave the committed Christian who isn't manifesting signs and wonders in his life? It may well leave him with a badly shaken faith, doubting his own salvation. And what about the salvation of millions of Christians who have never healed someone or raised a person from the dead?

TRUSTING IN SUBJECTIVE FEELINGS AND EXPERIENCES

Johnson writes, "Usually those who use the natural mind to protect themselves from deception are the most deceived. They've relied on their own finite logic and reason to keep them safe, which is in itself a deception. They usually have an explanation for all that's going on in their walk with the Lord, but criticize those who long for more. Our hearts can embrace things that our heads can't. Our hearts will lead us where our logic

would never dare to go.”²⁶ Elsewhere he asserts, “But to follow [the Holy Spirit], we must be willing to follow off the map—to go beyond what we know. To do so successfully we must recognize His presence above all.”²⁷ And again, he says, “It’s difficult to expect the same fruit of the early church when we value a book they didn’t have more than the Holy Spirit they did have. It’s not Father, Son and Holy Bible.”²⁸

The prophet Jeremiah, however, warned, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9). Countless people today endorse unbiblical practices, such as gay marriage, because it feels right in their hearts. A fortiori, it is perilous to trust in extrabiblical revelation that “will lead us where our logic would never dare to go.” As Hanegraaff has shown, a hallmark of counterfeit revivalism is the subjugation of critical thinking, as though the mind were an obstacle to spiritual illumination.²⁹ But the Holy Spirit always works through Scripture as our final authority in discerning truth, which entails the disciplined use of our critical thinking faculties.³⁰

THE MODERN CHURCH WANTS MORE

Sadly, much of today’s church isn’t satisfied with the gospel. For them, it isn’t powerful enough. Paul warned about this when he wrote, “For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths” (2 Tim. 4:3–5).

Just like noted snake handler Jamie Coots, who recently died of a rattlesnake bite, many pastors feel they must authenticate their ministries and the gospel by performing signs and wonders. But since the death of the first-century apostles and the closing of the biblical canon, Scripture stands on its own and doesn’t need these miracles to defend itself. Hebrews tells us, “For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Heb. 4:12). Indeed, in the story Jesus told about the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man asked that Lazarus be sent back to warn his family so they wouldn’t end up in torment. But Abraham’s reply was, “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead” (Luke 16:31).

Contemporary signs and wonders are not necessary to win people to Christ, but the Holy Spirit, working through the Word of God, is essential. It’s time that the church abandon sensationalistic teachings and get back to doing what it’s supposed to be doing.

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NOTES

- 1 Bill Johnson, *When Heaven Invades Earth: A Practical Guide to a Life of Miracles* (Shippensburg, PA: Treasure House, 2003), 88.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 C. Hope Flinchbaugh, "Ignite the Fire," *Charisma*, February 28, 2007, <http://www.charismamag.com/site-archives/146-covers/cover-story/2172-ignite-the-fire>.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 See "About Bethel Sozo," <http://bethelsozo.com/about/>.
- 7 "Healing Rooms," <http://bethelredding.com/ministries/healing-rooms>.
- 8 "Prophetic Ministry," <http://bethelredding.com/ministries/prophetic-ministry>.
- 9 "BSSM Mission," <http://bssm.net/about/mission>.
- 10 Randy Clark recently held a School of Healing and Impartation event from January 29–31, 2014, <http://www.ibethel.org/events/2013/09/randy-clark-school-of-healing-impartation-700-auditorium-dr-redding-ca-96001>.
- 11 Jacobs led an event February 26–28, 2014, at Bethel Church on "Developing Prophetic Communities," <http://www.ibethel.org/events/2013/09/developing-prophetic-communities-933-college-view-dr-redding-ca-96003>.
- 12 See Doug LeBlanc, "Fivefold Ministry Makes a Comeback," <http://www.equip.org/articles/fivefold-ministry-makes-a-comeback/>.
- 13 Hank Hanegraaff, *Counterfeit Revival*, expanded ed. (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2001).
- 14 "About Bethel," <http://www.ibethel.org/users/billandbenijohnson>.
- 15 Johnson, *When Heaven Invades Earth*, 27–28.
- 16 See "Testimonies," <http://www.ibethel.org/testimonies>.
- 17 "Bill Johnson, You Are a Gate of Heaven, Part 2," [n.d.], video clip, accessed August 28, 2014, YouTube, <http://youtu.be/XVVQV70y1Es> (three-minute, nine-second mark).
- 18 See, e.g., Hank Hanegraaff, *Christianity in Crisis: 21st Century* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 257.
- 19 "Bill Johnson, July 11, 2008, Prophetic Fire Conference, Friday," video clip, accessed August 28, 2014, YouTube, <http://youtu.be/R0UDFJpp8M> (fifty-nine-minute, forty-eight second mark).
- 20 See Isa. 40:12–13; 44:24; 45:12; John 1:3; Rom. 4:17; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:15–19; Heb. 1:3.
- 21 Flinchbaugh, "Ignite the Fire."
- 22 Bill Johnson, "Is It Always God's Will to Heal Someone?" <http://bjm.org/qa/is-it-always-gods-will-to-heal-someone/>.
- 23 All Scripture quotations are from NIV.
- 24 Bill Johnson, "Spending The Inheritance," posted January 14, 2013, <http://bjm.org/2013/01/spending-the-inheritance/>. In reality, Jesus' teaching in John 14:12 was fulfilled in the ministry of the apostles as recorded in Acts and continues today: through His church He reveals His salvation to all people, culminating in "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language" (Rev. 7:9).

- 25 See Johnson, *When Heaven Invades Earth*, 29–30, 79, 138; “Alabaster House.flv,” [n.d.], video clip, accessed September 8, 2014, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQX6HK5GC9M#t=150>.
- 26 Bill Johnson, “The Value of Mystery,” posted January 14, 2013, <http://bjm.org/2013/01/the-value-of-mystery/>.
- 27 Johnson, *When Heaven Invades Earth*, 76; cf. 44, 79–85, 87–88, 92–94, 138.
- 28 “Bill Johnson, Friendship with God,” [n.d.], video clip, accessed August 28, 2014, YouTube, http://youtu.be/P4RZ_ctiwIE.
- 29 See Hanegraaff, *Counterfeit Revival*.
- 30 See Don Kistler, ed., *Sola Scriptura!* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995).