

# BETHEL: THE DEEP DIVE

Dave Williams

**Bethel: The Deep Dive**

**Delving into the theology and culture of Bethel, Redding CA and the related movement**

**Dave Williams**

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## Contents

1. Introduction.....	3
2. How do you solve a problem like Bethel?.....	4
3. Introducing the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) .....	6
4. Invading Babylon .....	8
5. Kenosis and kingdom.....	12
6. Apostles and a culture of honour .....	16
7. Bethel Prophets .....	22
8. Prophecy is not social media data mining.....	24
9. Shawn Bolz and the elephant in the room.....	26
10. Prosperity, success, world changers and the dominion factor.....	27
11. They're only words.....	30
12. Rumpelstiltskin: Bethel and Prosperity.....	33
13. Calling out the gold.....	35
14. Ambiguity.....	40
15. My brother's keeper?.....	43

## 1 Introduction

Bethel, Redding CA hit the Christian news headlines in January 2026. Key people and the culture have been criticized following some shocking and disturbing revelations. These particular stories and scandals are not going to be my focus and are not the reason for writing. I began researching this before those stories broke. So, if you are here for an expose of a scandal you've come to the wrong place. Indeed, if you have come here for any kind of expose, I'm afraid that's not my gig.

I began doing deeper research into the theology of Bethel last year as I was looking at Christian Nationalism. Bethel are part of the New Apostolic Reformation which is one of the strands influencing that movement. So, my first reason has been to flesh out some of that area of thinking. I'm hoping to pull the Christian Nationalism stuff into something book length a bit later on.

However, the other factor is the extent to which Bethel's thinking and culture influences much of the wider Evangelical world in different ways, directly and indirectly. We sing their songs and read their books but we also see aspects of their thinking shaping wider culture and approaches and not just among charismatics. Whether that's because non-charismatics have picked up things directly from Bethel or because there are different but similar roots I'm not sure.

This becomes important for church planters because as you plant, you will be bombarded by different models and approaches. You will be told how to make your church a success. So, for church planters it will be helpful to understand the theology behind different approaches.

There have been all kinds of rumours and criticisms concerning Bethel over the years. Generally, they have come from the cessationist end of the spectrum and so it is easy to think of the church as being just an extreme charismatic church with some wacky practices. However, what I've found is a distinctive, though related theology that stands on its own. It's related because of the overlaps especially around the gift, worship music and terminology (though sometimes as with the concept of apostles words mean subtly or wildly different things). It's also related because if hoe thinking and practice has been influenced in the charismatic context and that is particularly on us charismatics to pay attention to. We will see though how it differs.

My methodology has been to watch a ton of talks and read books including from Bill Johnson, Danny Silk and Banning Liebscher (Jesus Culture). Primarily it's the written sources I cite.

i hope that you will find what follows helpful. By this I mean not an opportunity to gossip or gloat at others within God's family but to learn lessons about our own contexts both in terms of where some of the Bethel theology filters through but also about how our own theology shapes our cultures.

## 2 How do you solve a problem like Bethel?

Stepping into a discussion about Bethel seems like dangerous territory to step into because Bethel seems to be a marmite issue, you either love them or hate them. In terms of the marmite danger, Mike Winger who brought the Bolz scandal to the wider church's attention has taken some flak from some because he said that he wanted to see reformation at Bethel.<sup>1</sup> Other critics have insisted that it's not reformation that is needed but rather warnings because Bethel is a false church.<sup>2</sup>

It's that question I wanted to engage with here and not just to answer the question about Bethel but rather to help us think a bit more about how we engage with those that not only seem to sit at the opposite end of the spectrum to us but seem to exist beyond the acceptable margins. Whilst Bethel is the obvious candidate for those who are conservative and even cessationist around gifts, there may be churches and movements that exist beyond the margins on the opposite end of the spectrum to those of us within charismatic contexts. What do we do with some of the aspects of John MacArthur's church in Sun Valley and the associated ministry Grace To You? Or what about examples in the UK such as the Metropolitan Tabernacle. Then, in terms of the Christian Nationalism debate, we cannot ignore the big questions about Federal Vision and Christchurch, Moscow Idaho. Naming those names should also warn us that if we are quick to find specs in the extreme wings at the opposite end of the spectrum, people from a different perspective might be spotting a few logs in our own.

When it comes to Bethel and the wider movement connected to them, a lot of the focus previously has been on what are seen as wilder charismatic practices, the grave sucking rumours<sup>3</sup>, prophecy uno cards and that kind of thing. And to be honest, that's all I would have known about them so long as they were at a distance, a church with some wilder practices but some pretty banging worship tunes. However, for various reasons over time, they moved up and across my proximity/danger matrix and so I've had cause to do more of a deeper dive into the movement.

The red lights flashing for me are around the following theological areas.

1. Rheme/logos distinction. This is a common fallacy in prosperity teaching circles, though not exclusive to them. It makes an over distinction between the Greek words for "word" and gives one kind (rhema) an almost superstitious power.
2. The kenosis error. This is the idea that Jesus emptied himself of all deity whilst on earth and so carried out his miracles as a normal human being in the power of the Holy Spirit.
3. The NAR/Seven Mountain Mandate issues I've raised in previous articles.

It's worth observing at this stage that whilst each of those are concerning and whilst some would go out and out and refer to them as heresies, there have been people throughout church history who have been considered mainstream who have strayed to some extent into more than

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<sup>1</sup> See here [The skeletons in Bethel's closet are now going to speak](#)

<sup>2</sup> See for example this video: <https://youtu.be/Cle5E2DJj8> See also [Shawn Bolz, Bill Johnson And Kris Vallotton Exposed: The Charismatic/Prophetic Corruption » Justin Peters Ministries](#)

<sup>3</sup> Bethel leadership deny teaching this. See here [Does Bethel Church Teach Grave Soaking? | Rediscover Bethel - YouTube](#) However, it's important to be clear that what they deny is the idea that they would talk to/pray to the dead. Bill Johnson does however talk about seeking to honour revival figures of the past, visiting places associated with them, with a sense that such places are special. This combined with pictures of key people including the late Beni Johnson lying over graves leaves the matter decidedly ambiguous.

one of the above. For example, if you insist on singing the original lyrics of “And Can it be” then you are happily singing that Jesus “emptied himself of all but love.” It takes quite some gymnastics about poetic license to get around that one.

We also have to consider things that fall into the culture category as well though. For me, the first and most obvious red flag is the way that leaders describe themselves as shepherding a movement which to be honest feels more like a brand. There is a risk there that the brand/movement takes priority over the local church. This coupled with references to 18000 alumni and the idea of a global church are concerning, though, again, not unique to Bethel. Secondly, whilst listening to their messages I am concerned about the tone and, to borrow from others, a sense of how the mixing desk is set up, what is amplified, what is turned down etc.

So, for example, the volume is turned up high on the idea of being generational game changers and influencing culture. Now as is the case in most errors, I think there is some truth in there that God’s people are meant to be salt and light in the world around us and perhaps too, a little bit of inspiration to “attempt great things for God” isn’t a bad thing. Then, as I’ve listened to talks and read books, there’s something that has concerned me, something that it’s been hard to quite put my finger on. I think the best I can do is to say that the volume seems to have been turned down low on the work of the Cross, what it achieves in terms of paying the penalty for sin. More peculiarly, whilst there’s a big emphasis on miracles and gifts, it has also felt as though the volume has been turned down quite low on the Holy Spirit as a person as the volume has been turned up on power. It’s hard to completely pinpoint that. I’d be interested to know what others think.

Now, does that all add up to Bethel being a false church to be warned against, not reformed? Well, it’s worth observing that Luther, Calvin and co were raising very similar concerns about the Roman Catholic Church and the Pope as we hear cited against Bethel. Yet, their aim, for as long as possible was to reform the church. Eventually it became impossible and they were kicked out. I would suggest that that’s a pretty convincing sign, when the “church” in question refuses to recognise or engage with other Christians as churches and as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Crucially, I think that in Bethel’s case, whilst, as far as I can see, the volume on power and success is turned up well too high and the volume on the persons and deity of Christ and the Holy Spirit, as well as the atonement far, far too low, it is not that we are seeing outright denial. Further, it does seem to be that the marks of the church as historically understood are present, if at times ropey: Scripture, The Means of Grace/Sacraments and Church Discipline.

So, what I’m leaning towards is that this is something that looks decidedly unhealthy. That means we have got to be cautious. There’s a health warning around anything connected to Bethel and I would strongly discourage churches and movements from following their example, using their model or taking their advice. I’d exercise serious discernment around using their music and I’d not be stocking books from their leaders on the bookstall (not that most of us have one of those these days). However, if they are family, then we should have a concern for them and pray for them.

### **3 Introducing the New apostolic Reformation (NAR)**

My aim here is to give a summary introduction to a term and a movement. I suspect that it is something we will be less familiar with in the UK, both the term and the concept. However, we will be familiar with some names because people such as C Peter Wagner who was a key figure in the Church Growth movement of the late 20th Century and Bill Johnson have particularly been associated with it. Bill Johnson is of course the founding pastor of Bethel Church, Redding, California which has had a significant influence particularly on worship through a number of worship leaders and also through Jesus Culture, the youth movement that grew out of it.

One of the first challenges with understanding the term and movement is that we might associate it with the new church movement of the late 20th Century that emerged in the UK in the 60s and 70s. This included figures like Terry Virgo, Roger Foster, Bryn Jones and Keri Jones. It has sometimes been referred to as Restorationism because at its heart was the belief that apostles need to be restored to the church. Like many movements including both Pentecostalism and the Brethren, there was a desire to return to a more New Testament church culture and practice.

The challenge with that movement was exactly what was meant by “apostles” and “apostolic”. I get the impression that some elements in the early days did think they were restoring the church to its foundations with apostles equivalent to the 12. However, much of the movement would see a distinction between what we might refer to as capital A Apostles of Christ and small a apostles of the 12. The latter are seen more as missional leaders, planters and father figures to churches and movements with an “invited in” relational authority. It is fair to say that most church networks and movements including non Charismatic conservative ones would have a history of such people even if they do not use the term. For example, in the mid 20th Century conservative evangelicals and even some Charismatics looked to Martyn Lloyd Jones as a father figure and later to Stott and Lucas. In recent years we may recognise the influence of Piper, Keller, Carson and dare I mention John MacArthur. At more local level churches might invite trusted leaders in to offer wise counsel. Which not being able impose their will, such people often have more influence than just giving “take it or leave it” advice.

So, we would recognise the legitimacy of networks such as New Frontiers, Pioneer and Icthus. Indeed such movements have tended to be protected from excess by their accountability within mainstream evangelicalism and moreover have been a gift to the wider body in many ways.

However, whilst we can distinguish the 20th C Restoration movement from NAR, there may be potential relationships that we need to alert to especially on the extremes where there was at times an emphasis on authoritarian heavy shepherding and a tendency towards the dominionist thinking that we will come to shortly.

The potential for confusing these two phenomena may have slowed our ability to understand and engage the NAR movement. In particular, some of the earliest and quickest off the mark critiques came from those on the cessationists wing of conservative Evangelicalism and so tended to focus on gifts and emotionalism. Even non Charismatic Christians may be tempted to conclude that we are just dealing with an excessive extreme element within the charismatic movement.

However, I want to suggest that we are dealing with something a little different. The crucial matter is the issue I mentioned above of “dominionism”, sometimes referred to as “the seven mountain Mandate”. This is central to Bar thinking with the restoration of apostles being key to this. Whereas the new church apostolic movements was thinking about relational leadership within the church, this is more about the generals in a spiritual battle to extend God’s kingdom’s dominion on earth. It is about bringing heaven on earth.

And that means two things. First, it means that Christians are expected not just to have an impact but authoritative influence over those spheres or kingdoms referred to in the Seven Mountain Mandate: religion, business, arts, family, education and church. This should happen from this perspective on a number of fronts including:

1. Spiritual warfare: The spheres are seen as under demonic control and those spirits are to be driven out by prayer, fasting and worshipping
2. Hard power: Christians or those sympathetic to Christians gaining control of businesses, political parties, courtrooms and governments
3. Soft power as gifted Christians have an influence in their field and also as they shape minds and hearts through education, culture and media.

This approach distinguishes NAR from other charismatic/apostolic movements. It also connects the thinking and methodology with the postmillennial theonomism associated with Federal Vision thinking.

Conservative and charismatic evangelicals here in the UK would do well to engage with the concept to get a better understanding of the movement and why it proves popular.

#### **4 Invading Babylon -more on the New Apostolic Reformation and Dominionism (Seven mountain mandate)**

If you want to dig a little further into the New apostolic Reformation teaching on Dominion Theology and the Seven Mountain Mandate then a good place to start is “Invading Babylon: The Seven Nation Mandate” by Lance Wallnau, Bill Johnson and others. This multi-author work in effect sets out the NAR manifesto.

Johnson begins the first chapter by saying:

“We have been given authority over this planet. It was first given to us in the commission God gave to mankind in Genesis (see Gen. 1:28-29) and was then restored to us by Jesus after His resurrection (see Matt. 28:18).”<sup>4</sup>

#### **Restoring the Creation mandate**

The starting point for Dominion Theology is that the Great Commission is a continuation or restoration of/return to the Cultural mandate of Genesis 1. Humans were given dominion over creation but the Fall impedes that sovereignty. Jesus’ arrival, ushering in God’s kingdom through his death, resurrection and ascension means that those who belong to his kingdom are called to fill and to subdue the earth, to exercise godly dominion again.

Johnson does insist that this dominion is different to normal human expectations. It is an authority not to “lord it over” but to serve.

18). But Kingdom authority is different than is typically understood by many believers. It is the authority to set people free from torment and disease, to destroy the works of darkness. It is the authority to move the resources of Heaven through creative expression to meet human need. It is the authority to bring Heaven to earth. It is the authority to serve.<sup>5</sup>

This is a theme that will be repeated through his chapter.

The Church is sometimes known for its willingness to serve, but usually with well-meaning spiritual agendas as the ultimate goal. It almost sounds blasphemous, but serving simply to get people saved is a religious agenda. As pure and noble as it may seem to us as believers, it is manipulative to the world and is viewed as impure service. The world can smell it a mile away. We put them on the defensive when we carry such reasons for serving into their sphere of responsibility.<sup>6</sup>

It is important to recognise this. Johnson will use a variety of examples to argue that we do best when we come in not to be seen to be taking over but rather to help those within the system. This may not fit with our expected image of Christian Nationalism and may look different from a

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<sup>4</sup> Wallnau, Lance; Johnson, Bill. *Invading Babylon: The 7 Mountain Mandate* (p. 21). Destiny Image, Inc.. Kindle Edition.”

<sup>5</sup> Wallnau, Lance; Johnson, Bill. *Invading Babylon: The 7 Mountain Mandate* (p. 21). Destiny Image, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

<sup>6</sup> Wallnau, Lance; Johnson, Bill. *Invading Babylon: The 7 Mountain Mandate* (p. 26). Destiny Image, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

lot of what we have seen in the US culture wars. There are still though a couple of questions around the approach. First of all, one may counter that whilst there is a nuance here, the aim is still to ultimately take control. Indeed if our concern is ultimately to have that control then isn't that just as manipulative as doing things to get people saved? Indeed, aren't we seeking their well being when we prioritise their salvation over our influence?

The other question raised at this point is one of over realised eschatology. Many Christians will recognise the connection between the Cultural Mandate and the Great Commission. However, reformed evangelicals would also recognise that our current experience is "now and not yet." We look forward to the day when Jesus is seen as the one, coming with the clouds, receiving authority from the Ancient of Days and so coming to reign as judge and king. Revelation portrays the new Jerusalem coming down to earth, Creation is restored, renewed, perfected into its ultimately glory but that is then, when he returns. In the meantime the focus of Matthew 28 is on making disciples and teaching them to obey Jesus. Whilst some have suggested that it is the nations that are collectively disciplined giving Christians political power, that it is after baptising disciples that we then teach them to obey makes it clear that the authority Jesus gives his followers is a spiritual authority for the church.

### **Storming the gates of hell**

Wallnau in his chapter recounts how Loren Cunningham and Bill Bright had claimed to have received the "seven mountain mandate" as a direct revelation from God at about the same time. He quotes Cunningham as follows:

First, we take territory from satan in the place of prayer, with the power of the Holy Spirit, through the mighty weapons available to us. We know that spiritual warfare involves pulling down strongholds of false reasoning. We pray against the enemy's influence in whatever area we are aware. Our prayers should be specific. Listening to the Holy Spirit in our minds, He will tell us how to pray. Regional and local matters should be part of our specific focus. Second, after we have prayed for a specific sphere of influence, be it government, a school system, an area of the media, or whatever, God may then choose to use us in the very sphere for which we have been praying. He may call us to penetrate that influential place for Him, placing us, like Daniel or Joseph, in a place of authority.<sup>7</sup>

Wallnau is in agreement with Cunningham that spiritual strategies are required. For him, this is about Jesus' promise that:

"...I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18 NKJV)<sup>8</sup>

However, this becomes an explicitly offensive strategy. It's not just that Hell will not be able to overcome the church, we are to take over the gates of Hell themselves. The so called "Seven mountains" of family, religion, culture, media, education, business, technology and politics are seen as those gates or gateways by which Hell and Satan seek to exercise their dominion. So

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<sup>7</sup>Cunningham cited in: Wallnau, Lance; Johnson, Bill. *Invading Babylon: The 7 Mountain Mandate* (p. 55). Destiny Image, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

<sup>8</sup> Wallnau, Lance; Johnson, Bill. *Invading Babylon: The 7 Mountain Mandate* (p. 56). Destiny Image, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

that these become kingdoms with kings, mountain kings, each “with a significant sphere of authority.”<sup>9</sup>

He argues that this means Jesus instruction to his disciples in Matthew 10 to find the person of peace was not about finding the nicest rabbi but finding the person who has authority. The “wolf king.”

In fact, if the wolf will cooperate, he will find that the One King who rules over all men and judges nations will help that wolf king succeed. This all-powerful One will drive out the influence of the powers of “spiritual wickedness,” that fester and thrive off of the chaos and control they exercise in that king’s domain. When wolf kings honor the King of glory, they do not become weak kings. Quite the contrary, they become truly great, and more so, they have authority to reveal the glory hidden within their sphere of authority.<sup>10</sup>

This is perhaps one of the most bewildering sections in the book and seems to be based on a confusion over what Jesus means when he says that he sends us out as sheep among wolves. The vivid imagery of our vulnerability in an evil world is over interpreted as an overt strategy to reach the wolves. This is confusing because Scripture presents wolves not as those to be served and co-opted but rather those that we are to lay down our lives to protect the church from. Perhaps this helps us to understand better some of the political strategies and tactics that we are currently seeing on both sides of the Atlantic.

Indeed, this links to an overall theme that arises out of such confusing. Scripture doesn’t focus on us seeking to occupy hell’s gates. That’s not our interest. Nor is the idea of invading Babylon really present. Babylon, both literally during the exile and figuratively in Revelation represents a worldly power which we have no choice to live under the rule of. Danile and his friends did not invade Babylon. They had no option but to serve the emperor because they were taken as exiles, as hostages. They no more were invading than Nicolas Maduro has invaded New York.

The theme of taking the gates of hell is continued in Alan Vincent’s chapter. The Seven mountains strategy is not just about exercising influence through gifting, wisdom or clout but is about spiritual warfare through prayer, fasting and exorcism taking on territorial spirits.

### **Kingdom prosperity, financing the war**

C Peter Wagner poses a question:

The question in the minds of many who are bold enough to probe beneath the surface is: Why haven’t we seen more of the reformation that we’ve been talking about?<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Wallnau, Lance; Johnson, Bill. *Invading Babylon: The 7 Mountain Mandate* (p. 58). Destiny Image, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

<sup>10</sup> Wallnau, Lance; Johnson, Bill. *Invading Babylon: The 7 Mountain Mandate* (p. 60). Destiny Image, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

<sup>11</sup> Wallnau, Lance; Johnson, Bill. *Invading Babylon: The 7 Mountain Mandate* (p. 99). Destiny Image, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

It's a good question and you might expect a number of possible responses. Could it be that there has been a lack of faith, or sin in the camp? Whisper it quietly but might it be that they've got their understanding of the Gospel and of God's mission wrong? No, Wagner's answer is money. He says:

We will not see measurable, sustained transformation of our cities or states or nations if those who are providing strategic leadership do not have access to large sums of money. Throughout human history, three things have contributed toward the reformation of society more than anything else, namely, violence, knowledge, and wealth. And the greatest of these is wealth!<sup>12</sup>

This statement should shock us but it has either been missed or accepted. Wagner unquestionably pushes us towards worldly strategies for accomplishing kingdom aims. For Wagner, the role of apostolic figures includes stewarding and directing financial resources towards ministries and networks.

There are two kinds of distributors, Narrow-Band Distributors and Wide-Band Distributors. If the link was divided in two, the Narrow-Band Distributors would be toward the right, in direct contact with the Field Marshals. Ché Ahn, John Arnott, Bill Johnson, and Heidi Baker would be Narrow-Band Distributors because they each oversee networks of Field Marshals.<sup>13</sup>

So, network leaders/apostles are the narrow band distributors whilst he offers himself an example of being a wide band, possibly the wide band distributor able to resource and command across networks with international reach.

When we realise that the aim is to fund an agenda and specifically to fund the leaders and their agendas then it also begins to make sense as to why there has been a prosperity gospel undertone to the concept. Wagner says:

Prosperity is the will of God, while poverty is the will of Satan. The spirit of poverty is Satan's agent assigned to infiltrate the Church with the pervasive notion that there is something very suspicious about prosperity.<sup>14</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Dominion or seven mountain mandate theology as expressed through the New Apostolic Reformation movement should be setting off some red lights. Coming through in the teaching is an over-realised "kingdom now" prosperity Gospel. This significantly misunderstands Scripture. It is also exactly the kind of teaching that is catnip to those promoting a Christian Nationalist agenda.

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<sup>12</sup> Wallnau, Lance; Johnson, Bill. *Invading Babylon: The 7 Mountain Mandate* (p. 100). Destiny Image, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

<sup>13</sup> Wallnau, Lance; Johnson, Bill. *Invading Babylon: The 7 Mountain Mandate* (p. 106). Destiny Image, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

<sup>14</sup> Wallnau, Lance; Johnson, Bill. *Invading Babylon: The 7 Mountain Mandate* (p. 101). Destiny Image, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

## 5 Kenosis and Kingdom: The problematic theology of Bill Johnson and Bethel

Bill Johnson's big argument in his book, *When Heaven Invades Earth*, is that we are meant to experience the bit in the Lord's prayer "Your kingdom come, on earth, as in heaven", here and now. What does this specifically mean? Well, very early on, in the first chapter, in fact, Johnson tells the story of a wedding at Bethel where he had been encouraged by the bride and groom to be ready to perform lots of miracles, to heal the sick who would be there. Johnson concludes after telling stories of healing after healing:

"Although that kind of wedding remains unusual, our church's deliberate pursuit of the poor and the miracles are common. This story is true, and it is closer to the normal Christian life than what the Church normally experiences. The lack of miracles isn't because it is not in God's will for us. The problem exists between our ears. As a result, a transformation—a renewing of the mind—is needed, and it's only possible through a work of the Holy Spirit that typically comes upon desperate people."<sup>15</sup>

Foundational to Bethel's ethos is the belief that the miraculous, and the experience of revival is meant to be the normal Christian experience. This is rooted in an understanding of who Jesus is and why he came. If Jesus came to bring God's kingdom, then that means that earth is meant to be like heaven and we are meant to be like Jesus. This leads to an understanding of what it meant for Jesus to come, what was the nature of his incarnation? Johnson states:

"Jesus could not heal the sick. Neither could He deliver the tormented from demons or raise the dead. To believe otherwise is to ignore what He said about Himself, and more importantly, to miss the purpose of His self-imposed restriction to live as a man. Jesus Christ said of Himself, "The Son can do nothing."<sup>2</sup> In the Greek language that word nothing has a unique meaning—it means NOTHING, just like it does in English! He had NO supernatural capabilities whatsoever! While He is 100 percent God, He chose to live with the same limitations that man would face once He was redeemed. He made that point over and over again. Jesus became the model for all who would embrace the invitation to invade the impossible in His name. He performed miracles, wonders, and signs, as a man in right relationship to God...not as God. If He performed miracles because He was God, then they would be unattainable for us. But if He did them as a man, I am responsible to pursue His lifestyle. Recapturing this simple truth changes everything...and makes possible a full restoration of the ministry of Jesus in His Church."<sup>16</sup>

Later, he will say:

"Salvation was not the ultimate goal of Christ's coming. It was the immediate target...the marker in the lane. Without accomplishing redemption, there was no hope for the ultimate goal—which was to fill each born again person with the Holy Spirit. God's

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<sup>15</sup> Johnson, Bill. *When Heaven Invades Earth: A Practical Guide to a Life of Miracles* (p. 22). Destiny Image. Kindle Edition.

<sup>16</sup> Johnson, Bill. *When Heaven Invades Earth: A Practical Guide to a Life of Miracles* (p. 24). Destiny Image. Kindle Edition.

desire is for the believer to overflow with Himself, that we might "... be filled with all the fullness of God."<sup>17</sup>

It is important to highlight here that all of this has implications for Bethel's understanding of the Gospel and we will return to that later. However, before we come to that, I want you to spot the implications that this has for our understanding of Christ's identity (Christology) and more than that, our understanding of who God is and the Doctrine of the Trinity.

The crucial point is this. Johnson does not believe that Jesus did his miracles as God, rather, he did them as a man, from within his human nature. However, human beings cannot do miracles and so, Jesus could not do these in his own strength, therefore he was completely dependent on the Holy Spirit to be able to do anything miraculous.

Johnson is arguing for a form of "Kenosis theory. Later he will state that:

"Jesus lived His earthly life with human limitations. He laid his divinity aside<sup>3</sup> as He sought to fulfil the assignment given to Him by the Father: to live life as a man without sin, and then die in the place of mankind for sin."<sup>18</sup>

Kenosis theory is based on an interpretation of Philippians 2:5-8 which says:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,<sup>[b]</sup> <sup>7</sup> but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant,<sup>[c]</sup> being born in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup> And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

The flow of the argument there would point to us understanding the reference to Jesus emptying himself as meaning an emptying of status because the consequence of his emptying is that he takes "the form of a servant." However, the phrase has been interpreted to mean that Jesus emptied himself, if not completely of his divine nature, in some way of the attributes of divinity. This is not a new idea, think of the lyric "emptied himself of all but love" in the hymn "And can it be". Kenosis theory has been around for a long time and arguable shows up in popular thinking and teaching as well as old hymns. However, it is seriously problematic and so is considered at least error and probably heresy. Why? Well to help us understand that we need to consider two things about who God is and one thing about who Jesus is.

## **1. God is Simple**

You and me are complex entities. There are a lot of different ingredients that go into us. If something is complex, then it's possible to remove part of it and it can still function even if the function is inhibited. Despite what many Bradford City fans might have thought, Bradford City is not Andy Cook. The striker has played a significant role in the club's recent history, scoring many goals. However, take him out of the team and they are still Bradford City. In fact, the team

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<sup>17</sup> Johnson, Bill. When Heaven Invades Earth: A Practical Guide to a Life of Miracles (p. 78). Destiny Image. Kindle Edition.

<sup>18</sup> Johnson, Bill. When Heaven Invades Earth: A Practical Guide to a Life of Miracles (p. 88). Destiny Image. Kindle Edition.

coped pretty well without him and got promoted before climbing to the higher echelons of League One whilst he was out injured. I might not like the idea of losing a limb and so I do all I can to avoid freak accidents but if I did lose an arm, I would still be me. That's good news for many people who have had to have organs like kidneys removed or, like myself (corneas) receive transplants. I'm still Dave Williams, just with bits of someone else's eyeballs.

God is not like that. We say that God is simple. He is not made up of different body parts, in fact he is spirit. This also means that God's all attributes are essential to him. God is love, justice and holy. God is all powerful, all knowing and infinite. This is the God who does not change and indeed, God's simplicity is key to that because he cannot lose or gain attributes. God never lacks anything in himself.

This is important because whilst those who agree with kenosis theory might argue that Jesus kept some attributes, specifically love, once you have entertained the possible loss of some attributes, willingly or otherwise then you have created the possibility that God may not always be love, not always just, not always holy. Some have sought to counter this concern by arguing that love is God's one essential attribute. However, what that is to do is to reduce God to a concept, love becomes God.

So the idea of Jesus willingly letting go of aspects of his divinity leaves us with a reduced God. We are left asking the questions: 1. In what sense can we really still call him God? And what then was the purpose of him coming to earth as God. If this is so, then whatever is intended, it leaves us with difficult questions to answer about whether Jesus was really fully God and therefore whether it was a fully God and fully man that he went to the Cross.

## **2. God is Trinity**

At first glance, it might seem that Johnson honours the doctrine of the Trinity. After all, Jesus becomes dependent on the other persons, the Father and the Spirit. However, it is important to remember what we mean by the Doctrine of the Trinity. We mean that there is one God in three persons and this means that there can be no denial of God's oneness, the distinction of the persons and the equality of the persons. People tend to go wrong with their doctrine of the Trinity when they over emphasise one of these at the expense of another. Modalists, for example, over emphasise the oneness but lose the distinction between the persons. Kenosis theory leads to an over emphasis of the distinctions at the expense of oneness.

John 5, one of the passages badly misunderstood by Johnson is helpful to this. You see, Johnson makes a big thing of the bit that says "the son can do nothing" but does not pay enough attention to the implications of what comes next, "of his own accord" (John 5:19). Jesus goes on to say that the Son does only "what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father<sup>[e]</sup> does, that the Son does likewise." The point here being that he does the same things. Note that the Son gives life, just as the Father gives life.

Out of this arises two important doctrines, inseparable operation and perichoresis. The first means that the Father, Spirit and Son are not doing different works but the same work. The latter, that the persons of the Trinity mutually indwell each other, so that wherever one person of the Trinity is present, so too are the others. This means that when God made the World, Father, Son and Spirit created. It means that it is Father, Son and Spirit involved in the atonement and it means that when you invited Christ into your life, you welcomed Father, Son and Spirit in.

So, the idea that the Spirit has to help the Son out because he relinquishes something of his divinity is nonsense. The Father and Spirit always were fully involved in the work of the Son.

### **3. Jesus is one person with two natures**

We have got to be careful that we don't end up thinking of Jesus the person acting as some kind of interface with the world with two operating systems behind it, in such a scenario, the operator must decide which system to access through the interface, the divine or the human. No, Jesus lived as one full person, fully God, fully man and it is as that one person that he taught and performed miracles.

So, kenosis theory leaves us in an abject mess and is best avoided. One can understand what Bethel are seeking to achieve through using it but it just takes us into dangerous waters and is best avoided.

## 6 Apostles and a culture of honour

One of the big ideas we are picking up on as we do this deep dive into Bethel theology is the idea of “a culture of honour”. The key person behind this is one of the main, Bethel leadership team, Danny Silk who has written a book by that name.

Now, we might have an idea of what could be behind such a culture because we are familiar with the term honour culture. We associate that perhaps most negatively with the term “honour killing”. However, the concept is broader than that and may not necessarily involve such tragic atrocities but it does revolve around the idea of honour and shame. In such cultures, the issue is not so much about whether I’m guilty or responsibility, it’s whether my actions or indeed very existence bring shame on my community (note that this reflects why people with disabilities can become outcasts in such cultures).

However, in terms of Bethel theology, the idea is specifically linked to the belief that the church is meant to bring heaven down to earth. Or to put it another way. Silk says of his book:

“Within these pages you will find what one of my friends calls a “recipe.” The ingredients in this recipe are a set of beliefs and practices. The steps in this recipe combine these ingredients in such a way that they create something powerful—an environment that is uncommon on the earth today. It is an environment that attracts and hosts the presence of God. We at Bethel Church, in Redding, California, call this environment the culture of honor. By no means is our “recipe” the only one that creates a culture that hosts the presence of God, but we can tell you that it is one that works.<sup>19</sup>

If it is the case, that we are meant to be creating the environment of Heaven in order to enjoy God’s presence, we need some kind of conduit, a pipe or funnel if you like for bringing down the blessings, particularly the supernatural gifts. In order to do this, it is important that we honour the key parts of that conduit and that means naming them. Silk argues that:

Honor creates life-giving and life-promoting relationships. The key here is “accurately acknowledging who people are.” We can only do this when we recognize their God-given identities and roles.<sup>20</sup>

And adds:

“A culture of honor is created as a community of people learns to discern and receive people in their God-given identities. Throughout this book we will explore some of the “names” that have enabled us to establish very specific kinds of relationships in the Bethel community. These are the relationships that attract and sustain the outpouring of God’s presence and power in our midst. The names “apostle,” “prophet,” “teacher,” “pastor,” and “evangelist” and their distinctive anointings, mindsets, and gifts create a network of relationships designed to bring the focus and priorities of Heaven to earth. Names like “free sons” and “children of light” define the way we must honor and relate

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<sup>19</sup> Silk, Danny. Culture of Honor: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment (p. 25). Destiny Image. Kindle Edition.

<sup>20</sup> Silk, Danny. Culture of Honor: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment (p. 26). Destiny Image. Kindle Edition.

to one another, particularly when addressing areas of behavior and relationships that need discipline and restoration. Descriptive names like “royalty,” “wealthy,” and “benefactor” shape our relationships with our resources and with the wider community that the Church is called to bless and encounter with the love and power of Heaven.<sup>21</sup>

Dany Silk argues that the process flows through the fivefold gifts or offices given to the Church by the Holy Spirit at the Resurrection. Ephesians 4:11 says:

“<sup>11</sup> And He personally gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers,

Now, it’s worth introducing two side points here. First, many commentators would suggest that there are in fact four gifts here with pastor-teachers being one gift rather than two separate gifts of teaching and pastoring/shepherding. Secondly, the idea that the apostles and prophets mentioned here are the kind of roles seen in the contemporary church is even more controversial and with good reason. The context of Ephesians 4:11 with its immediate connection to the resurrection suggests that Paul is talking about gifts generally to the whole Church throughout history, not individual local churches. Additionally, apostles and prophets have already been mentioned in Ephesians 2:19-22:

<sup>19</sup>So then you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God’s household, <sup>20</sup>built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the cornerstone. <sup>21</sup>The whole building, being put together by Him, grows into a holy sanctuary in the Lord. <sup>22</sup>You also are being built together for God’s dwelling in the Spirit.

It is likely that Paul is talking about the same things in chapter 2 and chapter 4, especially when we remember that the chapter divisions weren’t there at the time. So, Paul is most likely to be talking about the foundational apostles, the twelve, or capital “A” Apostles who were with Jesus. The point is that apostles and prophets together bring revelation to hand over the Gospel or Scripture to us.

Now, that isn’t to say that there isn’t a type of gift within the church that has a part to play beyond the local church. In Romans 16, Paul refers to someone being outstanding among the apostles whilst Titus, Timothy and Barnabas seem to have a role which goes beyond local church leadership. So, many church networks today think in terms of people who have some kind of invited in, relational authority that goes beyond take it or leave it advice. In some cases, as with ours (New Frontiers) people are happy to refer to it as “apostolic” whereas other networks very clearly have such people but would stay clear of the label.

However, here’s the crucial point. Silk offers a definition of the role of apostle which is very different to that. He says:

“You have likely heard the term apostolic ministry used more in recent years. I am confident that we will hear and see more of it in the years to come. This term is

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<sup>21</sup> Silk, Danny. Culture of Honor: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment (p. 26). Destiny Image. Kindle Edition.

something that needs defining early in this book because I will make frequent references to it from here on. Through this term, I will be referring to the primary goals and objectives of the apostle's leadership, and therefore, the goals with which all the people under the apostle align themselves.

When Jesus taught the disciples to pray, He brought a key phrase into their core values. He told them to pray, "Your Kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."<sup>4</sup> His instructions taught them to long for Heaven on earth. I believe this core value is the primary objective of the apostle's ministry. Apostolic leaders are focused on Heaven, and their mission is to see Heaven's supernatural reality established on the earth. They long to see the evidence of Heaven's touch in the environment they lead or influence. Having this motivation at the foundation of a church leads to an entirely different emphasis in the church's governing priorities. The apostle will make the presence of God, the worship of God, and the agenda of Heaven the top priorities in the environment. An apostolic government is designed to protect these priorities.

from which we derive the English word "architect." This perfectly describes the role of the apostolic ministry. It is as though God Himself has given blueprints to certain individuals to reproduce Heaven on the earth. Along with this blueprint, the anointing of the apostle contains a quality that stimulates and draws to the surface the diverse anointings in the people around him. As those around the apostle begin to manifest their own unique anointings, it creates an environment of "sub-contractors" who help the "master builder" to realize the blueprints of Heaven. The following are some of the key characteristics of an apostolic environment and culture: Worship and supernatural activity are priorities in the environment and the lifestyle of the saints, because God's presence is the top priority.

The saints are sent, as Jesus was, to destroy the works of the devil, including disease, sickness, and affliction. The saints live to demonstrate to all the people on earth that God is always the good guy and the devil is always the bad guy. The Kingdom of God is "joy in the Holy Spirit."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, church is to be a place of exceeding, abundant joy. God desires those who don't yet know Him to come into a relationship with Him where the primary emphasis is love, not merely service. The Body of Christ is being built up and equipped to become a glorious and victorious Bride, no matter how the conditions of the earth may presently appear. The Church is to create global awakening and impact. Successive generations must be equipped to carry and demonstrate Kingdom revelation.<sup>22</sup>

I wanted to give the full quote here so that we are absolutely clear about what Silk and Bethel believe about the role of apostle. We will come back shortly to why this matters and the impact it has but I want to do two things before that. First, I want you to observe that this is all completely made up. There is nothing here that is drawn from what Scripture has to say both in terms of its specific words about the 12 apostles or how it describes the work and ministry of anyone else in the church including those like Timothy and Titus who might be seen as most closely fulfilling the modern role.

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<sup>22</sup> Silk, Danny. Culture of Honor: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment (pp. 61-63). Destiny Image. Kindle Edition.

Secondly, I suspect that the retort would be something along the lines of “but you would say that because you are just a teacher in the church.” And so, it is important to see what Silk has to say about the role of teacher.

“Next we have teachers. As I mentioned, the teacher is generally accepted as the highest anointing level in the American church. But the truth is that it is not the highest anointing, but only the third level of anointing. It is a “C” in a grade scale, and it is what keeps the Church only average in its effects and influence. Our need and opportunity to upgrade the anointing to an “A” is growing. Before I get too far into this section about teachers, I need to confess that this will not satisfy the needs of the teachers reading it. For most teachers, this section would have to be a book in itself, because teachers need lots of information before they can conclude most anything. I respect that about teachers. I am not going to try very hard to convince teachers that I am right or they are wrong. I am simply going to present why I think we’ve made a big mistake in making the teacher the highest anointing operating in the leadership of the American church. Our current church culture has a high value for the security we feel when we are able to prove that what we have devoted our life to is right. In order to assert our faith, we assume that we must be able to argue a case to a logical conclusion. But the fact is that our need for so much certainty comes from great uncertainty. When Heaven stops manifesting itself in the Church, Christians have to prove somehow that they are reasonable for following Jesus. When the power of the Gospel is replaced by arguments, everyone should be concerned. When cancer, paralysis, tumors, and mental illness leave people’s bodies and minds, we do not require an argument. A person experiencing the touch of Heaven is proof enough that Jesus is who He says He is. But when the Church insists on having a logical culture, we demand a logical gospel, and therefore, we turn to the teachers. Most teachers today are fixated on the written Word of God. They believe that the Word of God is the source of life and truth on the earth. Their value for the Word is much higher than their need for the supernatural. These are the lawyers, scribes, and Pharisees of our day. They can wield the “Sword” with the best. The teacher has a deep, driving need to be right, and predominantly sees the world in terms of “scriptural” and “non-scriptural.” Because the teacher’s focus is on the Word, the anointing of the teacher influences the Church to focus on the Word. Please don’t misunderstand me; I am not trying to devalue Scripture. But I want us to understand how unimportant Heaven has become because of this dreadful error and disorder. The teachers, as the primary influence in the Church, have turned our attention to the law. When we focus solely on the Word, eventually we begin to fight amongst ourselves over the Word. We begin to pull apart the Body of Christ because there is a right and a wrong. Each teacher is compelled to be right. As Paul said to the Corinthians, we have “many teachers” in the Body of Christ.<sup>8</sup> And when the teachers disagree, and many do, there is division. Leader after leader begins to assert his or her case of doctrine and theology and builds a case to prove his or hers and disprove the others. What then is the role of the teacher in the church if it is not to prove that Christians are right to believe what they believe? In order for teachers to play their true role in the culture of the Church, they will first have to be willing to pursue a supernatural lifestyle. They will have to be dissatisfied with the armor of their arguments and the lifelessness of their theology. They will need to increase their courage to risk failure and live a life that is unable to answer all the questions of their world. The teachers must embrace mystery. The anointing on teachers will always cause them to have a high value for education. They will be those who

believe that most problems are solved through training and informing people according to Scripture. But the real change they want to see will come under the leadership of an apostolic and prophetic culture. In a supernatural culture, teachers will teach with supernatural results. When Jesus taught a crowd about the Kingdom of Heaven, He always showed them the Kingdom. His disciples were in a never-ending classroom experience. Jesus took “show and tell” to a whole new level. Our teachers must put the “show” back into their lesson plans. I’ve heard Bill Johnson say many times, “Jesus is perfect theology.” I agree. If we see Jesus doing it, then we are on to something good. If He wasn’t doing anything like what we are doing, we’d better ask ourselves, “What went wrong?” Teachers must take the passion and the revelation of the apostles and prophets and show us how it becomes truth that we apply to our lives. The role of the teacher is to help replicate the processes of the supernatural and then train and equip the saints to cooperate with those processes. The love of Scripture and the knowledge that teachers carry help them to communicate complex processes in simple analogies and applications. Randy Clark of Global Awakening is a prime example to me of someone with a teaching gift who uses it to help the world and the Church. understand the supernatural. Although he is an apostolic leader himself, his teaching gift operates in that higher anointing. Therefore, he uses his understanding of Scripture, history, theology, and people to connect mysterious revelations to practical daily life. His models for training people to pray for the sick are excellent and highly effective methods for mobilizing prayer teams to minister to large groups in his crusades. Believers who have never prayed for others to be healed in their whole Christian experience are, within a few hours of training, seeing miracle after miracle. A successful revival culture has teachers who are perpetuating the supernatural in it. The days of teaching our limited experiences are over. We now must learn to teach how and what Heaven is doing every day to everyone.<sup>23</sup>

Again, I wanted to make sure that you have the full statement. It’s pretty shocking isn’t it. Not only is this not in Scripture but it foes directly against Scripture. Silk claims that he does not want to downgrade the role of teacher or Scripture but that’s exactly what he does. First, he creates a hierarch within the church Timothy 3 where he recognises the high calling of eldership and insists that the primary qualifications of those responsible for churches is that they are self controlled, godly leaders of their own family, hospitable and able to teach. Secondly he dismisses a concern for safety when Paul explicitly makes that our first concern as elders in his commission to the Ephesian elders (in Acts 20). Third, he suggests that the only way to recover a place for teachers is if they see themselves as subordinate to Bethel’s apostles. In other words their job is to pass on the ideas and revelations of these apostles and prophets. This goes right against all that Paul has to say about not setting in place other foundations or preaching other gospels. This is just utterly wrong.

I said that I would come back to the impact and implications of Danny Silk’s view of a kind of process and of the different roles. So, here it is. First, I think you can see why such a culture is deeply uncomfortable with the idea that people can be challenged and confronted. Why

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<sup>23</sup> Silk, Danny. Culture of Honor: Sustaining a Supernatural Enviornment: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment (p. 67-7070). Destiny Image. Kindle Edition.

honour prevents disagreement. You see, the belief is that these people, the apostles and prophets, the big senior guys are the conduit that links heaven to earth and you don't want to cut yourself off from that. It feels like the kind of struggle people might encounter when they discover a leak or worse, the water coming out of the tap is gunky and brown. You really should shut the water supply off and find out what the problem is so you can fix it but you worry that then you won't have water.

Secondly, and this is the crucial point. What this theology and practice does is to place these men (it's usually men though occasionally some women) into an intermediary position between Heaven (God) and us. This is why it is important to be clear. There is no vacancy for that position. It's already taken by Jesus.

## 7 Bethel Prophets

I'm continuing to look at Danny Silk's book "Culture of Honour". In the last chapter, we looked specifically at Danny (and Bethel's) understanding of who apostles are. Here, I want to have a look at what he says about prophets. Silk writes:

The next vital piece in the government of a revival culture is the role of the prophet. This is the next piece of the plumbing that pipes Heaven to earth. The foundation is incomplete without the presence of the prophetic anointing. God emphasizes the vitally important role of the prophet throughout the Scriptures:<sup>24</sup>

As we have already seen, the Bethel worldview is that our job is to bring about heaven on earth and so, the church becomes the place, environment where this happens whilst leaders are the funnel through which it happens. I guess they are comparable to Jacob's ladder (seen at a different Bethel). Apostles are the first connection in the pipeline, prophets follow.

Success is built through the value we maintain for the prophetic voices in our environment, because our prosperity comes through our agreements with Heaven's culture, and the prophets clarify the reality of that culture for us and invite us to enter it.<sup>25</sup>

So, the prophet's role is to help bring the culture of Heaven here. There are two things we might want to pause and reflect on here. First, what do we mean by "Heaven's culture." My reading so far of Bethel literature suggests that primarily this is seen to be the spectacular supernatural, sings and wonders or miracles and healings. Secondly, the aim is "prosperity". We will want to keep an eye out for where that word is taking us, what is meant by it. At this stage though, the suggestion that the aim is "our prosperity" should at least have our antennae on alert.

Silk says that:

Apostles keep us believing, but prophets keep us expecting that God is coming. The dynamic ways in which God speaks to the prophet, including dreams, visions, and trances, create awareness of God's involvement with us. These supernatural tools introduce an infusion of sensitivity toward Heaven's activity and plans.<sup>26</sup>

This leaves us with some questions. Is it only in these ways that God comes, God shows up? Traditionally we have talked in terms of The Word, Communion and Baptism as "means of Grace". In other words, we expect God to show up in these seemingly very normal things.

Silk concludes:

The prophet and the apostle can get along famously because both are looking into Heaven and recreating what they see there on the earth. They should work together like

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<sup>24</sup> Silk, Danny. Culture of Honor: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment (p. 65). Destiny Image. Kindle Edition.

<sup>25</sup> Silk, Danny. Culture of Honor: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment (pp. 65-66). Destiny Image. Kindle Edition.

<sup>26</sup> Silk, Danny. Culture of Honor: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment (p. 66). Destiny Image. Kindle Edition.

a bow and arrow seeking the same goals. Doubtless, this is why they are the foundation of the New Testament church.<sup>27</sup>

How do we see what is in heaven? Silk and Bethel argue that it is through these people with a special gift to see into heaven and recreate it here. It is worth noting that Scripture says nothing of this kind of function. Indeed, the Apostle Paul makes only one reference to getting a glimpse into heaven of that kind of vision type but refuses to speak much further about it.<sup>28</sup> We of course have John's vision in Revelation but that is intended to show the big picture of what God is doing through history on earth rather than to give a blueprint of something to recreate. Surely though in terms of knowing what heaven is like, we have all that Scripture tells us and particularly we have Christ himself who came from Heaven. We should not be looking for something extra or different.

Silk's understanding of both apostles and prophets is different to what we see in Scripture. This is true whether we think of capital A and P Apostles and Prophets who reveal Scripture or wider roles. Prophets in Scripture simply pass on what God tells them. We are told that "the spirit of prophecy is Jesus." In other words, it's job is to point us to him.

Silk uses Bible words and indeed words that other charismatics will recognise but I would submit that he means something quite different by them.

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<sup>27</sup> Silk, Danny. Culture of Honor: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment (p. 67). Destiny Image. Kindle Edition.

<sup>28</sup> Silk, Danny. Culture of Honor: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment (p. 67). Destiny Image. Kindle Edition.

## **8 Prophecy is not social media data mining**

How would you feel if someone who was a complete stranger to you came to you and began to tell you things about your life, perhaps significant anniversaries, key events, memories, details about your life and your family that you did not expect them to know and there didn't seem to be any way of them knowing. It seems that only God could have revealed these things to them. You might be a bit freaked out by it, you may also be amazed and you may be inclined to take seriously what they have to say to you.

How would you respond if they then began to encourage you to do things that seemed unwise or put you in danger, spiritually, emotionally, physically? And then how would you feel if one day it turned out that the Lord had not revealed those things to them at all. Rather, they were actually picking up information about you through research. Perhaps they had seen your Facebook profile or had picked up information from observations or overhearing things others were saying and then using clues to build up a picture and make some safe guesses. I suspect that the answer is that you might feel betrayed.

Keen observers will recognise that the scenario I've set out bares a lot of similarities to a scandal that has sadly recently hit the church relating to a man with a prophetic ministry called Shawn Bolz. He has been accused, among other things of using social media data mining tools to find out information about people before sharing "words of knowledge" and prophetic insights with them. I don't really intend to get into the Bolz case here. I do not know enough to make any assessments and besides I don't think that the case is unique. There have been too many Christians with big name ministries who have fallen and had their reputations destroyed. Bolz isn't the first and he won't be the last.

However, I do want to pick up on some issues around the allegation of social media data mining. You may be familiar with the idea of a "mentalist", a magician who appears to have the ability to read people's minds. Obviously, in most cases, as with other magicians, we are meant to know that it's a trick, the person cannot read minds but they have learnt methods to observe people and pick up on clues. It's all a bit of fun. However, there are also fraudsters around who genuinely claim to be able to read minds, just as there are those who claim the ability to see into the future, clairvoyants and such like. When Christians share words of knowledge are they doing just the same, are they no better than con merchants ?

Well, the first thing to be clear about is that there are fraudsters who prey on church contexts and that means that they will claim spiritual gifts that they do not have, often with an agenda of gaining recognition, influence and money. However, the existence of false prophets does not invalidate the reality of true prophets and prophecy just as we don't reject the idea of true teachers because there are false teachers.

Furthermore, I would suggest that there are ways in which people can get drawn into deceptive behaviours. If we see the purpose of such kinds of words and messages as a kind of sign, to prove prophetic credentials and gain a hearing, then it can become a performance and for those who have built a whole ministry around it, whether large or small scale may feel the pressure to keep the act up. What if one day, the insights don't come? Better then maybe to have a back up plan ready and do some research.

However, I would argue that this is neither what words of knowledge or prophecy are about. Indeed, whilst I believe that it is possible to have unexpected insights and information that must have come directly from God, I'm not sure that when Paul talks about words of knowledge that

he means this. Rather, he is simply talking about the knowledge , wisdom and the ability to speak these things as gifts.

Furthermore, I would argue that when we are given such insights, the aim is not to show off a gift, nor even to use it as proof, a sign if you like that what we has to say is from God and must be obeyed. We need to examine and evaluate everything anyone says and treat it on its own merits. Rather, the purpose is to being insight into a situation to enable spiritual breakthrough. This should help us to relax. There may be all kinds of ways in which we are given insight into a person's life. All are valid as long as there is transparency and permission. it doesn't matter where information comes from, is it available because I've read your Facebook posts (with permission), because I've read something in your facial/body language/tone/repeated words and phrases, because the Holy Spirit has revealed it to me? Actually none of that matters, what matters is hearing God at this point.

So, don't worry about whether or not you are getting special information from God about someone, seek rather to know what is helpful and godly to say in a particular situation. And if someone seems to have special insight into your life, don't automatically assume that you have to accept what they say.

## **9 Shawn Bolz and the elephant in the room**

I've mentioned in one previous article the issues around Shawn Bolz and specifically false claims of prophecy when it comes to words of knowledge that were apparently based upon social media data mining. Now, as it happens, I think that there is a potentially charitable view of how someone could get into such a situation. I can see how someone might start out having genuine prophetic insights but then the pressure to deliver, to have those big words of knowledge, week in, week out might kick in. In such a scenario, you can see how someone might be tempted to start to rely on some resources like social media and convince themselves that this is okay.

Yet, this begs the question about where that pressure would come from. It seems to some extent that the supposedly supernatural insights were the stamp of authentication giving this man permission to go on and speak into people's lives. What we are also hearing is that some of the advice he gave, dressed up as prophetic words was outright destructive and wrong.

And this begs a further question. This is the elephant in the room. How have we reached the situation where people, in large numbers opt to take the advice of a man on a platform in a large auditorium because that man is able to give them some facts and stats about themselves? Surely the test of what he had to say was not in whether he knew your postcode but whether the advice was itself wise and in line with God's Word. Why were his words prioritised over the words of those who knew the people and were walking the journey of life with them. That might be good friends and relatives, small group leaders and/or the elders and pastors that were responsible for them.

This is not about the rights and wrongs of a prophetic gift. I believe in prophecy and have seen its value. Rather, it is first about how we discern and check what people say and secondly about the kinds of people we prioritise. Do we prioritise the celebrity with the small 'c' charismatic flare or do we prefer the solid safety of the local church?

## 10 Prosperity, success, world changers and the dominion factor

Banning Liebscher opens his book, "Rooted" with this claim:

"Deep inside every follower of Jesus is a desire to have a visible, lasting impact in the world."<sup>29</sup>

Is this true? There are two parts to this. First, is that what everyone really wants, and second is it what we should want. Your first reaction might be to say "Well actually, no that's not my desire. I really just want to survive at times and if we move beyond that, I want to be faithful, live a godly life, love my family and serve Jesus well." The claim of "lasting impact" seems to be an overreach. But maybe Liebscher might be inclined to push back on that pointing out that he had stated "deep down". In other words, surviving and being faithful might be the best you can hope for at the moment but deep down, that longing is there, just waiting to be awakened. However, it also seems to go against the ethos promoted by Count Nikolaus Von Zinzendorf, the 18<sup>th</sup> century Moravian leader.

"Preach the gospel, die, and be forgotten"

Again, perhaps there is a way of reconciling the two approaches. After, all, preaching the Gospel will have an impact, even if you personally are forgotten. To make a decision though, we need to dig into what Liebscher means by his claim. He goes on to say:

This desire was born in us when we believed the gospel. We who have tasted "the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16) not only want to see that power at work in our lives, but we want to see it working through us, bringing the life and hope of Jesus to a broken world. This desire for lasting impact is not our idea; it is God's. In John 15, Jesus announced that He chose and appointed us to bear fruit: I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing...You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. (verses 5, 16, NIV) If you are a follower of Jesus, then your calling and destiny are to be fruitful. Fruit is not a bunch of spiritual or religious activities like going to church, reading your Bible, keeping the Ten Commandments, or even preaching the gospel. Fruit means that when people taste your life, you taste like Jesus. If you are fully grafted into Jesus, the vine, then He says your life should produce tangible results that make people say, "Now that is Christlike."<sup>30</sup>

At first glance this looks like something we might possibly agree with. Yes, we do want to see the power of the Gospel at work in the lives of people around us, yes we are meant to be fruitful. However, Liebscher goes on to say:

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<sup>29</sup> Liebscher, Banning. Rooted: The Hidden Places Where God Develops You (p. 1). PRH Christian Publishing. Kindle Edition.

<sup>30</sup> Liebscher, Banning. Rooted: The Hidden Places Where God Develops You (p. 2). PRH Christian Publishing. Kindle Edition. <sup>30</sup>

“Abundant, enduring fruitfulness is the mandate on your life. Ultimately, enduring fruitfulness in your life and the rest of the body of Christ is the key to seeing nations transformed, cities impacted, and culture shaped.”<sup>31</sup>

Here is perhaps just a little hint that Liebscher means something different to Zinzendorf. It is important to hear him from within the context he speaks and writes. Liebscher is the founder of Jesus Culture, originally a youth ministry of Bethel, Redding, CA, now functioning as a church in its own right but very much part of the movement. So, “impact” needs to be heard in the context of The Seven Mountain Mandate to achieve dominion over culture, politics, education and business. It also needs to be heard in the context of the belief that our aim is to recreate Heaven on Earth and that the church with its fivefold ministry of apostles, prophets, evangelists, teachers and pastors is the conduit or funnel through which this happens.

We often get a feel for what people are seeking to communicate by the personal testimony they back it up with. What does impacting the world mean personally for Banning Liebscher? Well, he tells us:

My early twenties were a season of seed planting in my life. At the time, I was serving as youth pastor at Bethel Church in Redding, California, where exciting things were happening. By the hundreds, people were coming to know God, coming back to God, receiving healing of their hearts, minds, and bodies, and being filled with incredible joy and hunger for more of Him. The environment seemed to stir and awaken people’s hopes and dreams for what God wanted to do in and through their lives. It showed up in our sermons, our prayers, our worship songs, and our conversations—everyone was catching a vision for something God was calling them to do. I was no different. I dreamed about the impact I would have on the world. Practically every minister who came through town and preached at our church called me out in meetings to confirm what God was calling me to do and pray things over me regarding my future. It felt like I was being barraged with encouraging words from people about my destiny. It was both exhilarating and terrifying to grab hold of the vision God was building in my heart and say, “Yes, God! Let’s do this!”<sup>32</sup>

He then tells us that he had to first go through twenty years of preparation using the examples of Moses and Joseph to back this up. Why does this matter? Well, the implication that it is what Liebscher is doing now which is fruitfulness. For that 20 years he had to live in a place of dissatisfaction, if he was being fruitful, then it was nowhere near the kind of level that he expected. And let’s face it, most people will not be claiming the kind of impact Liebscher was having during that time even at the peak of their vocation. So, does that mean that most Christians fail? Does it mean that God is dissatisfied with them? Or isn’t it just possible, that the growth in holiness that should be happening, the putting to death of sinful desire and the production of love, kindness, joy, patience etc is the abundant fruitfulness.

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<sup>31</sup> Liebscher, Banning. *Rooted: The Hidden Places Where God Develops You* (p. 3). PRH Christian Publishing. Kindle Edition.

<sup>32</sup> Liebscher, Banning. *Rooted: The Hidden Places Where God Develops You* (p. 7). PRH Christian Publishing. Kindle Edition.

Leibscher does go on to say that success is defined in terms of heart alignment and what lasts eternally rather than short term results. However that doesn't undo the impact of his own biographical examples. Additionally, in another, book, *Journey of a World Changer*, Leibscher offers daily readings to help people become world changers. Each daily reading includes some testimony from exemplary world changers. These are all stories of people being called to be revivalists, working miracles, achieving prominence, saving thousands etc.

Is there a place in Liebscher's world for the person who goes into the office each day, from time to time gets to pray for a colleague or invite a friend to the Alpha course? What about the mum at home, praying for her children early each morning before waking them, preparing their breakfast, taking them to school, cleaning up their mess, collecting them from school, reading and playing with them, telling them Bible stories, praying with them and tucking them in?<sup>33</sup> What about the guy who goes round each day collecting bins with a smile on his face despite the anxiety he has struggled with? Then there's the grieving widower who lost his wife and still mourns her but turns up to open the church building and welcome people each Sunday? How about the lad who every day says no to pornography? Aren't these bearing much fruit.

The problem with Liebscher's approach is that whilst he wants to eschew the world's ways of measuring success, it still slips into that kind of thinking. In that respect, it is a form of prosperity gospel. He writes:

Today God is raising up a movement of world changers who have a new mindset that nothing is impossible. They have rejected the lies of the enemy (such as God does not heal or intervene in situations anymore), and they are pressing forward to see how much of God's glory can invade the earth in their lifetime. This new breed understands their authority and acts on it. They are unstoppable. In fact, they are so convinced about who they are and so passionate about bringing Heaven to earth, that nothing else matters (Liebscher, 52).<sup>34</sup>

If traditional Prosperity Gospel is about individual success and Christian Nationalism offers a form of national prosperity teaching, then the Bethel vision is for a form of generational prosperity. It is the promise that there is something special about a generation and also tends to be framed in a form of end-time thinking.

The truth is that Scripture doesn't tell us that we have got to be world changers. The Gospel is a world changer and indeed the work of the Church as a corporate worldwide entity might be described as such but the role of world changer isn't a burden that Christ places on us individually. So take a breath, relax, stop working about the great things you still haven't achieved, throw away the bucket list and start enjoying Jesus.

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<sup>33</sup> For clarity that could be a mum or a dad!

<sup>34</sup> Liebscher, Banning. *Journey of a World Changer: 40 Days to Ignite a Life that Transforms the World* (p. 43). Destiny Image. Kindle Edition.

## 11 They're only words: Banning Liebscher on Rhema

In his book, *Rooted*, Banning Liebscher says:

Jesus made a tremendous promise in John 15:7. He said, “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.” Asking what you desire and seeing God do it for you is called faith. Faith gets an answer from God. But faith is connected to something—the words of Christ abiding in you. What does that mean? If we take a look at the original language, we find that the Greek word translated “words” is *rhema*, which means “that which is or has been uttered by the living voice.”\*1 The words of Jesus include what He has said and what He is saying. The word “abide” is the Greek word *meno* , which means “to be held, kept, continually.”\*2 Putting this all together, we see that the realm of faith is accessed first by drawing close to Jesus and hearing Him—for faith comes by hearing (see Romans 10:17)—both through what He has spoken in Scripture and through what He is speaking today.<sup>35</sup>

He adds:

I think we are to do more than just pray “over” things. I think we should use Christ’s *rhema*—both what He has said and is saying—to pray about them. I don’t pray over my finances, children, nation, and future; I pray what He has said about my finances, children, nation, and future.<sup>36</sup>

This idea of “*rhema*” as a distinct and different translation of “word” from “*logos*” is significant within Word of Faith/Prosperity thinking. For example, Kenneth Copeland writes:

The Greek word *logos* is the written Word of God. We learn, grow and are instructed through reading His Word. But maybe you’ve experienced this—a situation arises, and you know you need a word from the Lord. So, you go to the Bible and flip through the pages searching for the answer, but you can’t seem to find the word that fits your situation. That’s when you need a *rhema* word.

The Greek word *rhema* is a quickened, specific word from the Holy Spirit directly to you. It will help you see a single scripture in a whole new light and apply it to your life. It will tell you exactly how to respond to your specific circumstance. It will bring a small correction to your life that will change your entire situation almost instantly. A *rhema* word is designed to guide you and impart life to you.

One small *rhema* from the Lord has great power and can accomplish amazing things. If you’re facing a situation today and you need an answer on how to handle it, it’s time to ask God for a *rhema* word. Even if you aren’t looking for a specific answer, a *rhema* word from God will propel you forward in your faith like nothing else! Here is a prayer to receive a *rhema* word from God you can pray in faith.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Liebscher, Banning. *Rooted: The Hidden Places Where God Develops You* (p. 121). PRH Christian Publishing. Kindle Edition.

<sup>36</sup> Liebscher, Banning. *Rooted: The Hidden Places Where God Develops You* (p. 123). PRH Christian Publishing. Kindle Edition.

<sup>37</sup> [A Prayer To Receive a Rhema Word From God | Kenneth Copeland Ministries](#)

Now, the first and most important thing to know about the *rhema/logos* distinction is that there isn't one, not in terms of a theology defining way. It is true that words may have subtle differences and an overlapping semantic range which broadens meaning. However, this does not give us permission to treat words like this as meaning two completely different things.

So, what we might see in terms of the semantic range is that *rhema's* emphasis is on individual utterances, the meaning of *logos* extends to include the whole revelation of God so that Christ is the *logos* in John 1. However, what we see is that usage overlaps: For example, in both Matthew 5:37 and Matthew 12:36 there is reference to a word spoken meaning a specific individual utterance, in the second instance, the Greek work is *rhema* but in the first instance, it is *logos*.

In Ephesians 6:17, Paul says that "the sword of the Spirit" is "the word, or *rhema* of God." The context here where other parts of the armour are listed as truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace and salvation, points us away from treating *rhema* here as individual utterances but as a similarly holistic entity. Lincoln suggests that the aim is to focus our attention specifically on the Gospel noting that Romans 10:17, "faith comes from hearing the word" also uses *rhema* where the reference is clearly to the Gospel. We might observe that in the end all elements of the armour of God, both defensive and offensive boil down to the Gospel. The defensive aspect is that the Gospel believed and remembered protects, the Gospel proclaimed takes us on the offensive against the Devil.

This is important because Liebscher misunderstands Romans 10:17, ripping it from its context. The question being asked at the start of this section is concerning the salvation of Israel (10:1) and so Paul insists that salvation requires preaching, the proclamation of the Gospel (10:14) so that they might believe in their hearts, confess Jesus as Lord and so be saved (10:9). Liebscher incorrectly treats "faith" here as being faith for specific answers to prayer and particular to prosperity. *Rhema* becomes specific promises and words from God that we must hold onto in faith and believe in if they are to come to pass.

"But it's not enough to just hear the Lord's words; we must carry them. We must hold and keep His words at all times and allow them to abide in us. Carrying His words is what shapes our desires and our prayers so we get answers from God. Carrying His words is what gives us access to faith.\*<sup>38</sup>

We should be seriously concerned about the link between *rhema* and Word of Faith Theology/Prosperity Gospel. Furthermore, there are two other challenges. First there was a tendency in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, following Karl Barth to think of the Bible as containing God's Word as opposed to being God's Word. There is a risk that Scripture becomes a source book and loses its life as God's actual Word when we think like that. *Rhema* theology takes us down the same line.

Secondly, Liebscher's treatment of *rhema* sits in the context of Danny Silk's argument that teachers are there not to teach God's Word, Scripture but rather to teach the words of modern day apostles and prophets

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<sup>38</sup> Liebscher, Banning. Rooted: The Hidden Places Where God Develops You (p. 122). PRH Christian Publishing. Kindle Edition.

The Rhema theology coming through in Liebscher's teaching is concerning because it places too high a weight on individual words, moving them to a place of infallibility and plays into the legalistic/mechanistic approach of Prosperity teaching. It is also dangerous because it undermines Scripture and indeed gives permission to the loose and destructive approach we see in Liebscher's own teaching where verses are plundered out of context and used contrary to their actual meaning to serve his argument.

There is one final and particularly disturbing concern though. It should distress and grieve us, dare I say it should anger us with righteous anger when someone takes Scripture that is specifically about the wonder of the Gospel and makes it about something else.

## 12 Rumpelstiltskin: Bethel and Prosperity

I would like to pick up on a quote I shared from Danny Silk's book, the Culture of Honour, in a previous chapter

“Success is built through the value we maintain for the prophetic voices in our environment, because our prosperity comes through our agreements with Heaven's culture, and the prophets clarify the reality of that culture for us and invite us to enter it.<sup>39</sup>”

I want you to notice there that Silk talks explicitly in terms of “prosperity”. As I said previously, this should activate our antennae. This is a call to examine all that Bethel does and says carefully through that lens. I'm not going to do that extensively here but what I want to do at this stage is focus in on some specific arguments that Silk makes here and how they link to Prosperity teaching.

Remember that one of Silk's big themes in terms of honour culture is that we name people correctly. He says:

““A culture of honor is created as a community of people learns to discern and receive people in their God-given identities. Throughout this book we will explore some of the “names” that have enabled us to establish very specific kinds of relationships in the Bethel community. These are the relationships that attract and sustain the outpouring of God's presence and power in our midst. The names “apostle,” “prophet,” “teacher,” “pastor,” and “evangelist” and their distinctive anointings, mindsets, and gifts create a network of relationships designed to bring the focus and priorities of Heaven to earth. Names like “free sons” and “children of light” define the way we must honor and relate to one another, particularly when addressing areas of behavior and relationships that need discipline and restoration. Descriptive names like “royalty,” “wealthy,” and “benefactor” shape our relationships with our resources and with the wider community that the Church is called to bless and encounter with the love and power of Heaven.<sup>40</sup>”

One justification he uses for this are these words of Jesus:

“He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward. And he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward.”<sup>41</sup>

He sees this as the evidence that we are to name and honour people correctly in order to receive the right reward. Now, one of the important things to remember when reading Scripture is that you need to read the whole statement to get to the punchline. Here it is:

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<sup>39</sup> Silk, Danny. Culture of Honor: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment (pp. 65-66). Destiny Image. Kindle Edition.

<sup>40</sup> Silk, Danny. Culture of Honor: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment (p. 26). Destiny Image. Kindle Edition.

<sup>41</sup> Silk, Danny. Culture of Honor: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment (p. 26). Destiny Image. Kindle Edition.

“The one who welcomes you welcomes Me, and the one who welcomes Me welcomes Him who sent Me. <sup>41</sup> Anyone who <sup>[a]</sup> welcomes a prophet because he is a prophet <sup>[a]</sup> will receive a prophet’s reward. And anyone who <sup>[a]</sup> welcomes a righteous person because he’s righteous <sup>[s]</sup> will receive a righteous person’s reward. <sup>42</sup> And whoever gives just a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is a disciple <sup>[a]</sup>—I assure you: He will never lose his reward!” (Matthew 10:40-42).

The statements about prophets are framed by two things. First, that those who welcome us are welcoming Jesus. Second that the one who gives just a cup of cold water to a little one, the least of disciples won’t go unrewarded. In other words, the stuff about prophets and even righteous people is not about the need to correctly honour such people. Rather, it is that even the least act of welcome to the least of people is in Jesus’ name and so as much to be rewarded as the big boys, the prophet and those with righteous status. It seems that the point Jesus intends to make takes us in the opposite direction to the point Silk makes.

This whole idea of honouring by naming fits in well with prosperity thinking. That’s where we get the idea of “name it and claim it” from. It’s the idea that you can have whatever you claim but you have to name it right. Prosperity Gospel is the Rumpelstiltskin of the Church. You can have whatever you want but you have to have the right thoughts and go to the right person at the right time, in the right place, with the right amount of money (tithe) so that all your dreams may come true. This is so different to what Jesus actually says.

### 13 “Calling out the gold” Bethel and Restoration

One of the themes in Bethel's approach to pastoral care is that you don't so much respond to someone's sin because that doesn't truly reflect their identity. Instead you should seek to honour and name correctly who they are now, their new identity.

This is sometimes referred to as "calling out the gold". This very phrase is used in the response statement from Bethel to the Shawn Bolz case where they say that people have been "calling out the gold" in them. The leaders say:

We want to especially thank our alumni, by God's grace, there are 18,000 of them all over the earth, and many right here in our church. Frankly, it was their communication and agitation 18 months ago, and since, that drew our attention back, and subsequently other national voices, to the necessity of finally and appropriately addressing this. They were calling us to live up to what we taught them: calling out the gold in us.<sup>4243</sup>

On one level, this sounds all well and good. There is something positive and encouraging about speaking to the person we want to be and could be. Further, it is helpful to recognize that we are new creations in Christ. On the flip side, if there is nothing good in us, of our righteousness is Christ's righteousness, then what is the gold that is called out? So, we are left in an ambiguous and confused situation. We have one of those beautiful phrases but what does it actually mean in practice?

Whilst the phrase itself doesn't appear in the book “A culture of honour” by Danny Silk, the themes of “culture of honour” and “calling out the gold” have been linked by Bill Johnson.<sup>44</sup> We also see multiple examples of what Silk believes this looks like in practice in the book. Early in the book, he cites an example involving second year students on the Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry (their in house seminary programme for training leaders). Silk sets the scene:

“To set the stage for this story, I need to mention that every member of our staff shares a great mutual delight in our First Year graduates. We are so proud of their zeal and love for revival. After each summer break, our staff interviews the graduates returning for Second Year, and this always reignites their excitement to spend another year with the amazing people we call our students. These Second Year students are the cream of the crop and are leaders to our fresh batch of First Year students.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> [An Important Letter from Bill, Kris, and Dann on Behalf of Bethel Leadership | Bethel](#)

<sup>44</sup> It seems to have been coined by Bill Johnson and is apparently used in his book, Raising Giant Killers, This is not a book I've read yet but he is cited as using the term and saying ““most people live aware of the things they wish were different in their lives, with a heightened awareness of their own weaknesses and idiosyncrasies. What many usually don't know is their significance, gifting or value to others.” See [Call out the Gold – whispers and fringes](#)

<sup>45</sup> Silk, Danny. Culture of Honor: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment (p. 30). Destiny Image. Kindle Edition.

Notice immediately how this is being framed. The second year students are being set up to have an elite status. They are “the cream of the crop” and “leaders” to others. So what happens next?

“One year we had two First Year students, amazing people, who were leaders in worship and other ministry activities. After graduating from First Year, they decided to get married in December while attending Second Year. So they applied for Second Year and were accepted. Of course they were—they are amazing! Shortly after Second Year began, Banning Liebscher, the Second Year pastor, came to me and said, “We have a problem. I have two students who have confessed to me that they had sex over the summer.” I asked him what he was going to do. Banning then said, “Well, if having sex was all that was going on, that wouldn’t be as much of a problem. They stopped about a month before school started and are truly repentant. And I really believed this guy when he told me that.” “What else is going on?” I asked. “I just found out that she is pregnant,” he said.”<sup>46</sup>

Let’s highlight three things here. First, not only are the students part of the cream of the crop but even in their cohort, they are seen as standouts. Silk is building up how amazing and special they are, the anointing they have, the blessing they bring. This will be part of a pattern for how Silk reports cases. In another example he shares that:

“I want to tell you a story that encapsulates what heavenly restoration looks like. A friend of mine, a pastor and teacher—one of the most capable, brilliant teachers that I personally know—called me one day and said, “I have a situation. I have a worship leader who just confessed to his wife about an immoral relationship. It’s been going on for four years. It was with his wife’s best friend. He and his wife were actually mentors to this woman and her husband when the couple came into the church and took a staff position working with our youth. He just told his wife, and they leave on vacation tomorrow.

“We don’t know what to do, because this isn’t just your run-of-the-mill worship leader. This guy is amazing. He has been taking our church to new places in God. Over the last four years, the anointing on our house has increased. We’ve started a school of ministry, and he and his wife run our school of ministry. This is our third year. We’ve almost doubled the enrolment of our school in three years. This couple is leading in creating an amazing environment.”<sup>47</sup>

Now, sadly, these kinds of stories are not unusual. How often have you heard of a church hoping to appoint someone as an elder and then finding out that there was serious sin going on? If you are an elder/pastor yourself, you will have faced that crushing hurt and disappointment when you see someone who you’ve invested in and who seemed to be showing gifting and maturity fall and end up in an absolute mess. The question is whether or not those things are relevant to how you handle the situation. This is what the Bible says:

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<sup>46</sup> Silk, Danny. Culture of Honor: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment (pp. 30-31). Destiny Image. Kindle Edition.

<sup>47</sup> Silk, Danny. Culture of Honor: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment (p. 101). Destiny Image. Kindle Edition

“You shall not pervert justice. You shall not show partiality, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous.”<sup>48</sup>

The phrase translated “partiality” in the ESV and other modern English translations could literally be rendered as “do not regard (pay attention to/regard) the face.” In other words, justice is meant to be blind towards the status and relationships of the individuals. Once again, the “culture of honour” goes in the opposite direction to Scripture. Just in case we are tempted to see this as an Old Testament, Old Covenant idea, James 2:1-7 says:

“ My brothers,<sup>[a]</sup> show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. <sup>2</sup>For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, <sup>3</sup>and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place,” while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or, “Sit down at my feet,” <sup>4</sup>have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? <sup>5</sup>Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? <sup>6</sup>But you have dishonoured the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? <sup>7</sup>Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honourable name by which you were called?

Secondly, I am interested by the way in which the way that Banning Liebscher’s demeanour is presented. He comes to Danny Silk with a problem and the tone is that this is a big embarrassing problem for the ministry that needs resolving. By the way, if I were reviewing the book, I would pick up that consistently throughout, Silk presents himself as the wise guru who through gentle questioning draws people into the right place whilst other flounder around him caught up in a mixture of anger, legalism, frustration, fear and embarrassment. This includes his colleague Liebscher in this case, the pastor of the other church in the second scenario and even his own wife when he shares examples from his own family.

Thirdly, notice that the big problem is that the woman is pregnant. They can’t hide the issue. They can’t deal with it just in the room with the students. If she had not been pregnant, the implication is that following the conversation with Leibscher, nothing further would have happened.

Well, what happens next in both stories is that the couples concerned are brought into a meeting with Silk and he then proceeds to question them as to what the problem is. In summary, he identifies underlying psychological issues that need healing. Then in the case of the students, they are brought in front of the other students to confess and experience forgiveness before continuing with the Bethel programme.

I want to observe a few more things here before we think about implications. First, notice that this is not church discipline. This is taken right out of the context of the church family and treated as a “school” issue. Secondly, keeping them on the programme becomes the priority. Sadly this can become a thing and I’ve seen this with parachurch situations where a way is found for someone to stay on the programme. It’s important to note though that this is not just about the programme. It’s about how leaders and potential leaders are treated. The aim is to restore people back into the same position.

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<sup>48</sup> Deuteronomy 16:19.

This gets us to the nub of the issue. If you think that your job in such pastoral situations is to “call the gold” out of people, then your actions and words are going to be determined by how you see people in terms of status. Once you have a hierarchy where some as apostles and prophets are more heavenly, then those will be the ones who will have more gold to be called from them. It becomes harder with younger, less mature, or perceived as less gifted Christians to do that. That’s the point when you risk becoming focused on restoring fallen leaders at the expense of others, including those who might more properly be described as the victims in the situation.

I raise this implication here because Bethel leaders have acknowledged that this may have been a failing on their part in terms of the Shawn Bolz situation. However, these failings did not happen in a vacuum but reflect an underpinning theology and culture.

## 14 Ambiguity

I want to pick up here on one of the challenges with critiquing Bethel's teaching. It's the challenge of being able to say with certainty what their position is on a number of points. I don't think it is impossible but it can be tricky at times. Here I'm going to pick up on two examples from Bill Johnson that we've engaged with in our deep dive into Bethel's theology.

### Does Bill Johnson teach Kenosis theory?

In a video interview with Dean Farrelly, (Associate Pastor at Bethel), Johnson responds to the question, "Do Bethel believe that Jesus was fully God and fully man?"<sup>49</sup> This is in response to the statement Johnson has made in the past that in the incarnation, Jesus "laid aside his divinity." It's worth noting that this isn't actually the criticism made of Johnson. The specific question is as to whether, by making that statement, Johnson had slipped into the error of the Kenosis theory (the belief that in some way, Jesus emptied himself of certain attributes in terms of his sovereignty).

Now, the problem with Kenosis theory is, as we saw when we looked at it, that because God is simple, not made up of parts, every aspect of his nature is essential to him so that he cannot give up characteristics, permanently or temporarily without losing what it means to be God. In other words, "laying aside his divinity" is an incredibly accurate description of the impact of Kenosis theory. However, we can recognise that as the affect, the logical implication of the theory whilst recognising that this wasn't the intention of those advocating that position. If Johnson holds to Kenosis theory whilst seeking to also hold to the full humanity and divinity of the Son then he is in good company with many other believers throughout history.

However, when people are publicly teaching, then it doesn't matter whether or not their intentions were good and orthodox what actually matters is the public content of what they said. This is particularly so, when what they are saying is not an off the cuff, one of verbal comment but is a position that has been thought out and committed to writing.

In this video, Johnson says that he recognises that the language of Jesus "laying aside his divinity" was unhelpful. He says

"Oh it's misunderstood a lot. I would write it differently because of how it's heard."<sup>50</sup>

Notice that he isn't acknowledging that the statement is in and of itself wrong. He's not saying that he now accepts that Jesus didn't lay aside his divinity. This suggests that he doesn't fully grasp what the problem is with the statement. He simply thinks that people have been misunderstanding him and that of course puts the responsibility and blame back on the audience not on him. Later, when asked what he meant, he says:

"oh I meant exactly what I said."<sup>51</sup>

Johnson says:

"All, I was trying to do was put language to Philippians 2."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> [Kenosis and Jesus' Deity - Was Jesus Fully God and Fully Man? | Rediscover Bethel](#) (0:22).

<sup>50</sup> [Kenosis and Jesus' Deity - Was Jesus Fully God and Fully Man? | Rediscover Bethel](#) (4:19).

<sup>51</sup> [Kenosis and Jesus' Deity - Was Jesus Fully God and Fully Man? | Rediscover Bethel](#) (12:50).

<sup>52</sup> [Kenosis and Jesus' Deity - Was Jesus Fully God and Fully Man? | Rediscover Bethel](#) (4:52).

Now, it is worth observing at this point that we don't need to put language to Philippians 2. Philippians 2 states clearly what it intends to and isn't saying anything close to what Johnson says. It's nothing to do with Jesus giving up attributes, it's not a comment on his nature. Rather, it's to do with status, it's about stopping down as a king to be a servant. Indeed, as becomes clear in the interview, Johnson isn't so much trying to put language to Philippians 2 as he is trying to explain the question of how Jesus' infinite divinity comes together with his finite human nature. Moreover, he is doing that with a motive because his aim is to motivate people to seek after miraculous experience by following that aspect of Jesus' example.<sup>53</sup>

On a side note, at this point they share that the change has come in response to a scholar friend of Johnson's contacting him privately to suggest that he might want to word things differently. Farrelly says:

“Let me get this straight. A scholar, instead of writing a blog post against you or going on and developing a whole ministry or industry about your words actually personally contacted you and said, ‘did you mean to say this.’”<sup>54</sup>

Notice the cynicism here. To disagree with Bill Johnson means that you are seeking your own personal gain and agenda. Remember, again that Johnson had not made these comments, one time, in private, off the cuff. These are things he has said more than once, in public. We are permitted to deal with the actual public words, to respond to them in public. That's not to attack a person's motives, nor is it unloving.

And the crucial thing here, is that whatever Johnson did not mean, he has been clear in his arguments that Jesus limited his divinity in some way, that he did miracles as a man, relying on the power of the Holy Spirit. In order to draw this conclusion, he also has to misquote John 5 and has Jesus saying “The son of man can do nothing of himself”.<sup>55</sup> In fact, Jesus simply refers to himself as the Son at this point and his sonship is understood by his opponents as a claim to divinity. Jesus isn't describing the limits of his humanity but rather giving us an insight into the wonderful relationship between The Father and the Son in the Godhead. He is defending his claim to unity and equality with the Father.

You can see here the challenge. Johnson denies that he is saying something that is in fact, the unavoidable, logical implication of what he has said, whilst at the same time insisting that he did mean, exactly what he said. He wants to tell us that Jesus laid aside his divinity but also that Jesus did not cease being God. This is at best confused and ambiguous.

### **New Apostolic Reformation**

In another video, Chris Vallerton responds to the suggestion that Bethel are associated with NAR (New Apostolic Reformation). Farrelly claims not to know what NAR is and only have found out by being shown the Wikipedia article. Vallerton insists that Bethel are nothing to do with this. That boils down to him reporting that people seeing apostles as “like kings” and having controlling authority. He wants to insist that this is not what Bethel are like at all. He argues that they are very empowering.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> [Kenosis and Jesus' Deity - Was Jesus Fully God and Fully Man? | Rediscover Bethel](#) 6:25.

<sup>54</sup> [Kenosis and Jesus' Deity - Was Jesus Fully God and Fully Man? | Rediscover Bethel](#) (6:39).

<sup>55</sup> [Kenosis and Jesus' Deity - Was Jesus Fully God and Fully Man? | Rediscover Bethel](#) (15:10).

<sup>56</sup> [Does Bethel Church Belong to the New Apostolic Reformation \(NAR\)? | Rediscover Bethel](#) (4:01).

Vallerton goes on to talk about how people come to Bethel, looking for the leaders there to be their father figures. He claims to have lots of emails with such requests. Now, it may well be the case that Bethel's leaders have no interest in providing "father figures" at a distance, however, it is the case that they do allocate father figures to people who join Bethel, especially through the School of Supernatural Ministry.

And this again is another example of the kind of mixed signals and ambiguity that we see from Bethel. Whilst Vallerton wants to insist that Bethel are not part of NAR, he couches that denial in terms of New Apostolic Reformation as other people seem to perceive it and describe it..

On the other hand, Bethel not only agree with the idea of a continuing apostolic and prophetic ministry, as do many churches and networks within the charismatic movement, the specific definitions they choose to describe those roles fit with the NAR understanding. The NAR concept of an apostle as someone who brings heaven and supernatural ministry to earth, is very different to how other movements define the role as someone, often involved in planting churches, who through relationship to them has an invited in authority.

Further, by denying intention to start a denomination or being part of NAR in some formal sense, Vallerton ignores the fact that like with many movements, NAR is not so much about formal institutions as it is about informal relationships and alliances. Indeed, it is that kind of informality that provides another form of ambiguity and potential confusion as it has proven unclear at times as to whose apostolic covering different people are under. Was Shawn Bolz, for example accountable to Bill Johnson or Che Ahn? He seems to have fallen down the crack between the two apostolic figures.

Further, whilst Vallerton tries to play down the connection to C Peter Wagner, recognised as the founding father of New Apostolic Reformation (it just happens that some of us were taught at seminary by him and we agree with some core principles he taught), the relationship, theologically and culturally is much closer. The same people share the same platforms together, recognise one another's' authority, are guests at each others' churches etc. In Bill Johnson's case, he is the co-author of a key book on Dominionism (one of the central tenants of the movement) with C Peter Wagner and other key figures in the movement.

### **Grave Soaking**

I've alluded earlier to the reports of "grave soaking" or "grave sucking." It's not something that I've made a major part of this deep dive. I'm not so much concerned about reports of the weird and wonderful on the fringes. However, this is another example of where we have this challenge with ambiguity.

Grave Sucking or soaking is the idea that people can pick up, soak up or suck up the anointing of past leaders by sitting by or even lying on their graves. Dann Farrelly in a Rediscover Bethel video is adamant that this is not a practice that is practiced or taught by Bethel. He says:

"We never have taught this experience that I've heard described as grave sucking. We've never taught it, never done it."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> [Does Bethel Church Teach Grave Soaking? | Rediscover Bethel](#) (4:40)

There's a little bit of a problem with this. This is that there's actual photographs of people from Bethel laying across graves, appearing to participate in the practice, including Bill Johnson's late wife, Beni.<sup>58</sup>

Now, this is what Bill Johnson says in response

“It may in part come from the fact that I feel strongly from the Lord that we are to honour those who have gone before us. And it's a big part of our culture. We are going to be building this Revival Museum, Library/House of Generals where we give honour to people who have gone before us....And so I've gone to graves and I've prayed but I don't talk to the dead, I don't try to get something from the dead.”

Notice that he takes time to deny something here, again, that I don't believe is at the heart of the concern. I don't think the issue is whether or not people are praying to the dead, or even that necessarily that the Bethel leaders are themselves seeking to get something directly from the dead. The risk is more that first, there might be something slightly awry here and that this might lead to others beginning to pick up unhelpful and unhealthy practices, exactly because of potential misunderstanding. There does seem to be something here in terms of an expectation that places and people carry some kind of spiritual significance that can in some way be caught. This is particularly a possibility in a culture that sees that spiritual power as something that can be caught and passed on.

It is also worth noting that in setting the context for this specific discussion, Farrelly and Johnson use the analogy of research and development. They argue that you cannot design new products without allowing for some defects. So, they say that they want to take risks in terms of new spiritual experiences and allow for defects in order to experience something they believe God has to offer.<sup>59</sup> This leaves me wondering whether or not there have been things that have been tried in this kind of area, experimentally. By the way, a rule of thumb in design and engineering is that you iron out the defects in beta testing, not in actual production.

## Conclusion

There is a history of ambiguity to what Bethel's key leaders have to say and that creates further ambiguity and confusion about what they believe. Whether or not this is an intentional, studied ambiguity or reflects sloppy thinking is not for me to say. However, I would observe first of all, that those who seek to lead should aspire to clarity of thought and word. Secondly, whilst the ambiguity may make it harder to assess underlying motives and intent, this is not our concern when engaging with Bethel theology, at least for our purposes here. Rather, our concern is with what they actually have said and done and how those things are understood by the ordinary, reasonable person. Thirdly, it is arguable that this tendency to ambiguity has played a part in causing some of the high profile problems that Bethel are currently facing.

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<sup>58</sup> [Facebook](#)

<sup>59</sup> [Does Bethel Church Teach Grave Soaking? | Rediscover Bethel \(1:44\)/](#)

## **15 My brother's keeper: Why does Bethel matter to us?**

When God speaks to Cain, asking him about his brother Abel in Genesis 4, Cain retorts, "Am I my brother's keeper? Of course, the implicit and obvious answer is meant to be "Yes you are?"

We've been conducting a deep dive into the theology and culture of Bethel, Redding, CA. It might be tempting to argue that we are not our brothers and sisters' keeper. Our responsibility is surely to our own churches. Does what happens over there have anything to do with us?

Well, I want to suggest that yes it does. This is not a call to be busy bodies but we cannot ignore what happens to one part of the family. Furthermore, in any case, what happens at Bethel does have an affect on what happens in our own local churches.

### **The heart of the issue**

There have been lots of issues raised concerning Bethel over the years. I would argue that the key issues are as follows. There are four key areas of belief that matter.

1. Kenosis theory - Johnson has said on more than one occasion that Jesus laid aside his divinity in order to do miracles as a man, in the power of the spirit so we can follow the same example.
2. Culture of honour. Our role as the church is to bring heaven (the supernatural) to earth. In order for this to happen, we need to properly name and honour the 5 fold roles. Crucially the definition of apostles and prophets is substantially different to our understanding. They are those who are more engaged with Heaven. They see into Heaven and so have the blueprint to recreate it on earth. Teachers are just a level c gift. They can get in the way if this by their desires to be correct. Teachers play the correct role by teaching the church to implement what the apostles and prophets say.
3. Dominionism. This is sometimes referred to as The Seven Mountain Mandate. We are to bring in the kingdom now by taking control of the key spheres in society, politics, education, entertainment, religion, science and business. This is a key component to Christian Nationalism with both indirect and direct links to the UK version of this. This is significant because whilst I don't know whether or not the particular form of Christian Nationalism we have recently seen with its overt links to the far right will continue, there's a sense that like with the ebb and flow of the tide, even if we see a movement back from those political streams, the underpinning ideology has advanced in terms of its influence into church culture.
4. These feed into the kinds of issues that we have seen in terms of culture, most notably around the Shawn Bolz case where the concerns raised are that although Bethel leaders may have confronted Bolz privately concerning allegations around his conduct and especially evidence of fraudulent practices behind his prophetic claims, however, Bethel failed to warn others about concerns and even until recently were endorsing his ministry. Then there are questions around the handling of the situation regarding Ben Armstrong. His case has been held up as an example of restoration. Following an affair, not only did Armstrong's marriage survive but he was swiftly restored into senior public ministry. However, following the disclosures about Shawn Bolz, further questions have been raised about whether issues concerning Armstrong, particularly given that the affair seems to have been with an intern assigned to him were properly addressed.

What we believe affects how we live and arguably, concerns about how sin is handled and accountability of leaders links to those underpinning beliefs as we have seen. Specifically, a concern to protect the mission at all cost, of bringing heaven to earth and exercising dominion, combined with a culture of unquestioning honour for leaders leads to a lack of accountability and transparency.<sup>60</sup>

### **Be alert – our responsibility**

Addressing the Ephesian elders at Miletus, the apostle Paul said:

“<sup>28</sup> Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock that the Holy Spirit has appointed you to as overseers, to shepherd the church of God,<sup>[h]</sup> which He purchased with His own blood. <sup>29</sup> I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. <sup>30</sup> And men will rise up from your own number with deviant doctrines to lure the disciples into following them. <sup>31</sup> Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for three years I did not stop warning each one of you with tears.”<sup>61</sup>

Schools can fail an Ofsted inspection if the answer to one question is “no.” Students are asked “do you feel safe here?” Churches are not inspected in the same way, however, those of us who are elders need to remember that our responsibility is to provide and protect, to lead the flock to pasture, to feed them good food from God’s Word and to lead them to shelter, to protect them from harm. Fellow elders, our first responsibility is to keep the church safe.

Notice that whilst there is a danger of wolves coming in from the outside, Paul sees the biggest danger as coming from within and so, the call to be alert means keeping a watch on what is happening within a local church starting with elders keeping a watch on themselves through self-examination and mutual accountability.

With that in mind, I would highlight the following areas where we need to be alert, specifically in relation to the danger caused by Bethel culture. These are the three questions that I would be encouraging the eldership team in any church to ask:

1. Self reflection - are there aspects of Bethel culture that we have picked up ourselves?
2. What exposure do our congregation have to Bethel culture, directly and indirectly?
3. What aspects of the same culture have been picked up within our own movement/network? This may be direct from Bethel or it may be from different sources

Now, I write from within a charismatic context and so I think that some of those challenges may be have a specific urgency within our context. Bethel has had a more direct and obvious influence into the culture (theology and practice) of charismatic churches. However, there are good reasons for non-charismatic, conservative evangelicals to pay heed too. First because members of your churches may be picking up on the same teaching through books and YouTube videos. Secondly because some of the same ideas may well have come into your own culture with the more charismatic flavoured aspects trimmed off. Thirdly because there may be

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<sup>60</sup> I believe it is better to state things in this way whilst noting that some have directly accused Bethel of cover up. I believe that we have to be careful and cautious in this regard and recognise that we cannot judge underlying motives and intent. A cover up culture implies that there is an intentionality, a maliciousness to the agenda. I do not believe that we have the evidence to assert this.

<sup>61</sup> Acts 20:28-31.

different issues with your own culture but they are likely to be there and culture problems tend to be caused by belief and teaching problems.

What this means is that Bethel culture holds up a mirror to our own cultures and helps us to reflect on the challenges we face. Let's be open with each other here. Even for those who are resistant to the whole package, those who quickly dismiss the rumours of glory clouds and grave soakings, those who are most adamant that claims of healings are likely to be fake without the receipts, there is still something that pulls at the human heart strings isn't there. There's a desire to have an equivalent impact and influence. We are not so far away. In the words of Belinda Carlise, "we dream the same dreams, we want the same thing." If we look into the mirror and there isn't an alertness to our own need for repentance, then that's an even bigger warning sign than all the others.

## **Conclusion**

Responding to a movement that is popular within church circles but whose influence and impact may not be as benign and positive as assumed is no easy task. We want to get the balance right, we don't want to unfairly malign brothers and sisters. We may worry perhaps too that challenging unhealthy beliefs and practices may prove divisive and unpopular. Perhaps we need to be braver.

There is though a remedy, help and encouragement. After commissioning the Ephesian elders with their daunting task, Paul concludes with words that we need to be reminded of, words that will strengthen us.

"And now<sup>[1]</sup> I commit you to God and to the message of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you an inheritance among all who are sanctified."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Acts 20:32.