

## The New Apostolic Reformation: A Modern-Day Apostasy

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A modern-day movement centered in Redding, California, is making a huge impact around the world through the ministries of Bethel Church, Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry, and Bethel Music. Are the large numbers of people who are identifying with these Christian ministries a sign of true, heaven-sent revival? Or do they indicate something more deceptive and potentially dangerous? As Bible-believers, we are cautioned to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1), and that in the last days the church will witness teachings that have “a form of godliness but deny its power” (2 Timothy 3:5), and are, in fact, “doctrines of demons” (1 Timothy 4:1).

Bethel Church and its attendant ministries are part of a broader movement known as “The New Apostolic Reformation” (NAR). The NAR is a 21<sup>st</sup> century revivalist movement within Christianity that is being felt worldwide. Its primary focus is on reestablishing the offices of apostle and prophet in the church and on instituting dominion theology. Leaders in the NAR believe that the church cannot flourish without functioning apostles and prophets and their accompanying signs and wonders.

### **Origins of the NAR**

The NAR was the brainchild of C. Peter Wagner, former missionary to Bolivia, then professor of Church growth at Fuller Theological Seminary. Wagner was seen as a leader in the Church Growth Movement of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Initially enthusiastic about the “Third Wave Movement” of the 1980s (aka “Vineyard Movement”), Wagner felt that it had failed in its attempt to accomplish a worldwide revival. He concluded that what was lacking was a complete five-fold ministry as described in Ephesians 4:11 with the offices of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher. Wagner believed that bringing back the lost offices of apostle and prophet would bring about a worldwide revival. He said, “We are now living in the midst of one of the most epochal changes in the structure of the Church that has ever been recorded. I like to call it the ‘Second Apostolic Age.’”<sup>1</sup>

### **Bethel Church and the Johnsons**

Bethel Church in Redding, California under the leadership of pastor Bill Johnson is a major focal point of the NAR. For many years, Bethel church was a medium-sized Assemblies of God church, founded in the 1950s. In 1996 Bill Johnson came as the new senior pastor under one stipulation, that the church’s message would always be about revival. Johnson’s view of revival was strongly influenced by his attendance at a John Wimber signs and wonders conference in 1987 and through his involvement in the Toronto Blessing revival meetings of 1995. Around this

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<sup>1</sup> C. Peter Wagner, *Apostles Today: Biblical Government for Biblical Power* (Regal Books, 2006).

same time, C. Peter Wagner recognized Bill Johnson as an apostle and endorsed his ministry. Bill's wife, Beni, serves as a prophet. The church began to grow dramatically, and today boasts over 11,233 people who refer to Bethel as their home church.<sup>2</sup> The church opened the Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry (BSSM) in 1998, receiving students from all over the world, instructing them in revivalistic methods of healing, signs and wonders, and prophecy. In 2001, Johnson's son, Brian, founded Bethel Music which has since become a worldwide music ministry whose songs are featured today not only in NAR churches, but even in many non-NAR evangelical churches.

## **Apostolic Authority**

A controversial and highly publicized apostolic decree was made on June 23, 2008, when Todd Bentley was formally commissioned as an evangelist to lead the Lakeland Revival in Florida. Under Wagner's leadership, prominent apostles gathered for the ceremony, which was broadcast worldwide by GOD TV. The purpose of the ceremony was to decree the apostolic alignment of Bentley with three apostles—Ché Ahn of Pasadena, California; Bill Johnson of Redding, California; and John Arnott of Toronto, Canada. By becoming apostolically aligned with these three apostles, who represent an apostolic network called Revival Alliance, Bentley was agreeing to come under their authority. This is in line with the NAR teaching that all offices of the church, including the office of evangelist, must submit to apostles. During the ceremony, Wagner referred to Ahn, Johnson, and Arnott as “apostolic pillars of today's church.”<sup>3</sup>

These four: Bentley, Ahn, Johnson, and Arnott, are strategically placed roughly at four corners of the United States (Lakeland SE, Pasadena SW, Redding NW, Toronto NE). Each of these “apostolic centers” is responsible for planting NAR churches within their sphere of influence. Other apostles within the NAR movement today include: Rodney Howard-Browne, Heidi Baker, Lou Engle, and Mike Bickle (International House of Prayer).

## **Four Characteristics of the NAR**

Characteristics that truly distinguish the NAR are the following:

1. Restoring Apostolic Authority
2. Restoring Prophetic Authority
3. Dominion Theology
4. Signs and Wonders

## **Restoring Apostolic Authority**

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<sup>2</sup> Bethel Church's 2018 annual report.

<sup>3</sup> R. Douglas Geivett and Holly Pivec, *A New Apostolic Reformation?: A Biblical Response to a Worldwide Movement* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014), 210.

The term “apostle” occurs in Scripture in both a technical sense (the twelve apostles, as in Matthew 10:2-4; Acts 5:28-29; Romans 1:1) and a non-technical sense, “an emissary sent out” (Epaphroditus, Philippians 2:25; others, 2 Corinthians 8:23). It is used in NAR to signify an office with the same authority as the twelve. C. Peter Wagner sought to restore the apostolic office mentioned in Ephesians 4:11. The one difference acknowledged between the apostles of the NAR and the New Testament apostles is that the NAR apostles do not claim to write Scripture. However, they do carry authority, and both churches and prophets are to submit to their authority. Though these apostles do not claim to write Scripture, they do produce a great quantity of written material. A recent internet search found 26 books either authored or co-authored by Bill Johnson, and these books, not the Bible, are taught at BSSM. I teach at a small Bible College on the other side of town from BSSM, and I can honestly tell you that we have had more than one student come to us from BSSM saying they had come to Redding to prepare for ministry, but when they realized they were not being taught the Bible, they sought education somewhere else.

## Testing Apostolic Authority

The Bible urges us to test those who call themselves “apostles” (see Revelation 2:2; 2 Corinthians 11:13). But how can one test this? If we believe, as most Christians do, that the office of apostle was restricted to the original twelve, this question is moot. But let’s assume, for the sake of argument, that the office of apostle is still active today; then, how would one test a claimant to that office? R. Douglas Geivett and Holly Pivec outlined five characteristics of a true apostle.<sup>4</sup>

- a. *An apostle must literally have seen the resurrected Lord (1 Corinthians 9:1).* NAR apostles claim to have seen the Lord in a vision, like Paul on the road to Damascus. However, Paul’s vision was an exception. It was verifiable, being witnessed by those with him, and confirmed by the Damascus Christians who witnessed his healing from blindness. The private visions of the NAR apostles are unverifiable and unconfirmed.
- b. *An apostle must have received a specific commission by Christ in the fashion of those first commissioned during the Apostolic Age (Matthew 10:1-5; Luke 6:13; Acts 1:21-26).* The NAR apostles receive their commissioning from men, whether C. Peter Wagner, or one of the other apostles.
- c. *An apostle must perform miracles that attest to his authority as an apostle of Christ (2 Corinthians 12:12).* Here is where the NAR apostles claim their strong point. Signs and wonders are a huge part of the NAR. However, the miracles performed by NT apostles were spectacular, verifiable, and without failure. Most of the reported so-called signs, wonders, and healings from NAR apostles are second-hand reports, unverified, and unspectacular. Many NAR attempts at healings are unsuccessful and are simply blamed on the lack of faith of the recipient.
- d. *Any new teachings or practices an apostle promotes must be supported in Scripture (Acts 17:11, Bereans).* Johnson, and other NAR apostles, adopt the unscriptural kenotic view of

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<sup>4</sup> Geivett and Pivec, 94.

Christ.<sup>5</sup> The kenotic view holds that Christ emptied himself of his deity while on earth, performing His miracles merely as a Spirit-filled man. This doctrine is important to the NAR, since they teach that any Christian who is Spirit-filled can do the same things that Christ did – raise the dead, cast out demons, heal the sick, etc. If Christ did it, then we should be able to do it, too. But Christ’s miracles fall into an entirely different class of things than anything we can possibly do.

- e. *An apostle must exhibit an exemplary quality of ministry and lives of the highest level of virtue and integrity.* Genuine apostles of Christ will be willing to endure great suffering in fulfillment of their commission, as did the apostle Paul (2 Cor. 1:5, 8–9; 11:23–28). They will not use methods that are deceitful or that “tamper” with Scripture (2 Cor. 4:2). They will be motivated by sincerity (2 Cor. 1:12) and marked by the character traits of self-sacrifice (1 Cor. 9:1–15, 19) and humility (2 Cor. 11:7). However, the NAR leaders are not known for self-sacrifice and humility. As one observer noted, “Many leaders in the movement are very wealthy (a blessing from God, in their view). They don’t have any problems driving around in an Aston Martin (e.g. Bill Johnson) while accepting the first fruits of church members on social welfare.”<sup>6</sup>

In each of these five tests, the NAR is judged to be “weighed in the balances and found wanting.” Or, to use the words of the apostle Paul, “Such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:13).

## **Restoring Prophetic Authority**

Wagner also saw the necessity of restoring the office of prophet. The significant role of prophets in the early church is unquestionable. Prior to the completion of the New Testament, around the end of the first century, prophets were necessary in order to provide the infant church with the revelation that would eventually become available in the New Testament. The apostle Paul recognized this work as being foundational to the Church (Ephesians 2:20). Once this foundational work was complete, the offices of apostle and prophet passed off the scene. In attempting to restore these offices, the NAR is attempting to lay again a foundation that was already laid (1 Corinthians 3:10-11). Throughout the history of the church such attempts have been frequent, but never long-lasting. These attempts include Montanism in 2<sup>nd</sup> century, the Zwickau prophets in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Irvingites in the 1830s, the Kansas City Prophets in the 1980s, and the International House of Prayer in the 1990s. There is really nothing “new” about the “New Apostolic Reformation.”

## **Testing Prophetic Authority**

While the prophetic office was still active in the church, there was always a problem with false prophets. The New Testament, therefore, urged Christians to test those claiming to be prophets (1 John 4:1; 1 Corinthians 12:10; 14:29; 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21; 2 Thessalonians 2:2;

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<sup>5</sup> Bill Johnson, *When Heaven Invades Earth* (Destiny Image, 2005), pp. 87-88.

<sup>6</sup> “New Apostolic Reformation,” *Be Watchful*, September 19, 2015 (<https://bewatchful.org/new-apostolic-reformation/>). Accessed 5/19/2021.

Revelation 2:20). The apostle John urged, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1). The two-fold test of a prophet is clearly established in Deuteronomy: The Test of Fulfillment, and The Test of Doctrine.

*The Test of Fulfillment.* If a person claims to be a prophet, and his prediction fails to come true, he is to be regarded as a false prophet (Deuteronomy 18:20–22). NAR prophets sometimes make predictions that come true, but have also made significant predictions that did *not* come true. For example, NAR prophets have predicted that COVID-19 would not become a serious worldwide epidemic, that president Trump would not be impeached, and that president Trump would be reelected. It really doesn’t matter how many times a false prophet guesses some future event successfully; if he fails in even one prediction, the verdict must be: False Prophet.

*The Test of Doctrine.* Even if a prophet succeeds in making a successful prediction, his legitimacy is to be judged by the doctrine he teaches (Deuteronomy 13:1–3). If the doctrine does not correspond to the teaching of the Bible, he is to be judged a false prophet. With NAR prophets, it has already been stated that they teach the kenotic doctrine, that Christ emptied Himself of deity while on earth. When NAR prophets insist that Christ’s miracles were done as a Spirit-filled man, rather than as deity, they deny the clear teaching of Scripture that His miracles actually proved His deity (John 20:30-31; Luke 8:39). The very verse that kenotic theorists use to uphold their doctrine (Philippians 2:7) follows a verse that states that Jesus “existed in the form of God.” If He was ever God, He could never cease to be God, or alter any of His divine attributes, since one of God’s attributes is immutability (Hebrews 13:8). The deity was eternal. Deity, by definition, cannot change!

Another significant doctrinal error of the NAR is the teaching of perfectionism. Bill Johnson asserts that the present-day believer can attain a status “completely free of the enemy’s (i.e., the devil’s) influence.”<sup>7</sup> This teaching is linked to NAR’s dominion theology. Their “kingdom-now” approach views the believer as already living in God’s kingdom in which Satan is bound. The Scripture is clear, however, in teaching that the believer will never be completely free from sin until the resurrection (1 John 1:8; Proverbs 20:9).

Applying these two Old Testament tests to the prophets of the NAR, it is readily seen that they are false-prophets whose teachings must be rejected.

## **Dominion Theology**

Dominion Theology is a form of Postmillennialism which sees the church’s mission as establishing the Kingdom of God on earth by Christianizing all aspects of society. It takes the Great Commission’s “make disciples of all nations” to mean that we need to make the nations into Christian nations. Postmillennialism was first popularized in Christianity in the 4<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>7</sup> Bill Johnson, *The Power that Changes the World* (Minneapolis: Chosen Books, 2015), 167-168.

by Augustine in his *City of God*. Much of Christian history is characterized by failed examples of such attempts (Byzantine Empire, Holy Roman Empire, Schmalkaldic League, Calvin's Geneva, Cromwellian Church-State of Britain, etc.). The NAR bases its approach to dominionism on what's called "The 7 Mountain Mandate." This is outlined in Wallnau and Johnson's book, *Invading Babylon: The 7 Mountain Mandate*, in which the church is called upon to "occupy the spiritual gates of our cities." These "gates represent the spiritual powers that rule over geographical areas."<sup>8</sup> The seven mountains that the NAR seeks to control are:

1. Education
2. Religion
3. Family
4. Business
5. Government/Military
6. Arts/Entertainment
7. Media

In April 2017, Bethel Church offered to donate \$500,000 to the city of Redding to assist in funding the salary for police officers. Some community members thought the church was trying to pay off the city for future building permits, an assertion Pastor Kris Vallotton refuted at a city council meeting. The city ultimately voted to receive the donation. Seven months after receiving the donation, Redding City Council unanimously approved a \$96 million new Bethel campus, despite dozens of formally submitted citizen concerns.<sup>9</sup> It probably was *not* an effort toward bribery, but was likely designed to exert control over one of the 7 mountains.

Contrary to the dominionism of NAR, the Bible teaches that Christians are to pray for, and be in submission to, government leaders, while we continue proclaiming the gospel to the lost (1 Timothy 2:1-4; Romans 13:1-4; 1 Peter 2:13-17). Is it right to try to influence the "7 mountains" in a Christian way? Of course it's right. It's part of being salt and light in the world. But it should happen as a natural consequence of our lifestyle, not a focused campaign of the church. The church's commission is not to establish the kingdom on earth, but to invite sinners to salvation in Jesus. The Church and human government are both institutions of God, but they operate in separate spheres (Matthew 22:21).

## Signs and Wonders

True to its background in the Third Wave Movement, NAR focuses heavily on signs and wonders. BSSM teaches its students how to perform miraculous healings and sends its students out into the streets and shopping malls of Redding to find people who look like they're in need of healing. Then, these eager students attempt to practice their ability to pray for healing. Other extraordinary signs and wonders have been reported occurring in services at Bethel Church, such as the Glory Cloud (a visual phenomenon appearing like sparkling gold dust floating in the air),

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<sup>8</sup> Lance Wallnau and Bill Johnson, *Invading Babylon: The 7 Mountain Mandate* (Destiny Image, 2013), 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Record Searchlight*, April 2017, December 2017.

angel feathers wafting down on worshipers from the ceiling, diamonds and gems being discovered under the seats in the church auditorium. One generally hears of these things only by second-hand accounts. One of the most bizarre phenomena is referred to as “Grave Soaking” (sometimes called “Grave Sucking” or “Picking up a fallen mantle”). Though not officially taught at BSSM, Bill Johnson described the practice as visiting the graves of deceased evangelists and praying, “God do through us what You did through him.”<sup>10</sup> However, YouTube videos and Twitter photos posted by Beni Johnson show a more intense type of contact with these graves. Bill Johnson explained the rationale behind Grave Soaking in terms up picking up the fallen mantle of a deceased evangelist in his book, *The Physics of Heaven*.<sup>11</sup>

“A group of students from Bethel’s School of Supernatural Ministry is willing to go (according to the website) ‘to the funeral home, morgue or family’s home where the deceased is being kept’. The team claims to have seen at least 12 resurrections of dead people through its prayers.”<sup>12</sup> I live in, and am well-connected to, the Redding area, and have never heard of a single resurrection taking place. There is no independent confirmation of any of these accounts that I am aware of.

On December 14, 2019 a talented young couple, Andrew and Kalley Heilingenthal, lost their two-year-old child, Olive. The girl simply stopped breathing early December 14, 2019, and when she arrived at the hospital, she was declared dead, and her body taken to the morgue. The young grieving couple, members of Bethel Church in Redding, believed that God might perform a miracle and restore Olive’s life. The church supported them in this hope and organized a series of highly public prayer events seeking to raise the little girl back to life. Bill Johnson said during a sermon on December 20, “We have done this in accordance with the Bible.”

## **Conclusion**

The New Apostolic Reformation is not really “new.” It is another attempt at bringing back foundational offices that are no longer functioning in the Church. It is not “apostolic,” for its apostles fail the Biblical tests of apostleship and prophecy. It is not a “reformation,” for it is offering to gullible, young Christians unbiblical and unsound doctrine. Its false eschatology (dominionism) and focus on signs and wonders detracts believers from the Great Commission left to us by our Lord Jesus. Surely, this is part of what the New Testament describes as the apostasy of the end-times. Come quickly, Lord Jesus!

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<sup>10</sup> “The Line of Fire with Dr. Michael Brown,” May 11, 2019 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uCes2PZVFC4>

<sup>11</sup> Bill Johnson, *The Physics of Heaven* (Destiny Image, 2012), Chapter 4, “Recovering Our Spiritual Inheritance.”

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.premierchristianity.com/Past-Issues/2015/January-2015/Profile-Bill-Johnson>.