

—1—

## The Man, the Ministry, and the Movement Transforming Churches Worldwide

God, I must have more of you at any cost!

—The apostle Bill Johnson<sup>1</sup>

IT WAS THE MIDDLE of the night. Bill Johnson was suddenly awakened from a dead sleep.<sup>2</sup> Unexplainable power began pulsating through his body, almost as if he was being electrocuted. He felt like he was plugged into a wall socket with a thousand volts of electricity flowing through him. His arms and legs shot out in silent explosions as if something was being released through them. He tried to stop what was happening. He felt embarrassed by it, even though no one else could see him. But it only got worse. It was the most overwhelming experience of his life.

Johnson soon realized what it was—the raw power of God. And he knew it was the answer to a prayer he had repeated for months: “God, I must have more of you at any cost!” That was his prayer, day and night: “I

1. Johnson, *When Heaven Invades Earth*, ch. 10.

2. Johnson recounts this experience in *When Heaven Invades Earth*, ch. 10.

wasn't sure of the correct way to pray, nor did I understand the doctrine behind my request. All I knew was I was hungry for God."<sup>3</sup>

God took him up on his offer. But the price would be high. While Johnson lay in bed, images passed through his mind. In one image, he was standing before his congregation, preaching from Scripture. Suddenly his arms and legs began to flail around as if he had a serious physical condition. Then the scene switched: he was walking down his city's main street when, again, he lost control of his arms and legs. He didn't know anyone who would believe that what was happening to him was from God. That's when Johnson realized that God was offering him an exchange—His increased presence for Johnson's dignity.

As tears flooded his pillowcase, Johnson came to a point of no return. He yielded, crying out, "More, God. More! I must have more of You at any cost! If I lose respectability and get You in the exchange, I'll gladly make that trade. Just give me more of You!" The power surges continued through the night, as he wept and prayed. They continued the following two nights, beginning moments after getting into bed.

The year was 1995. The church Johnson then pastored—an Assemblies of God church in the tiny town of Weaverville, California—was known for the manifestation of miracles, and in particular healings. In 1996, the leaders of another Assemblies of God church, Bethel Church in nearby Redding, California—formerly pastored by Bill Johnson's father, Earl Johnson—desired to see such miracles at their church.<sup>4</sup> So they offered him the senior pastor position. Johnson accepted, with one nonnegotiable condition: that his focus would always be the pursuit of revival, which, in his view, was inseparable from a pursuit of miracles.<sup>5</sup> The leaders unanimously agreed, though much of the congregation disapproved of the more extreme emphases Johnson had planned to bring to the church. Johnson recalls:

I remember when I first started pastoring Bethel Church in Redding, California. On one of the first Sundays, I announced that my lifestyle required the liberty to experiment. . . . I then announced that if the people in the church didn't like it when

3. Johnson, *When Heaven Invades Earth*, ch. 10.

4. Johnson is a fifth-generation pastor on his father's side and fourth on his mother's. See also Christerson and Flory, *The Rise*, ch. 2.

5. Bill Johnson Ministries, "Bill." Johnson's focus is reflected in Bethel Church's mission: "Bethel's mission is revival—the personal, regional, and global expansion of God's kingdom through His manifest presence." See Bethel, "About Bethel."

things didn't work well the first time around, I would make them very uncomfortable, and that they might want to consider attending one of the many other fine churches in our city. It wasn't as rude as it sounds in print. But it was honest. I believe this is my call in life.<sup>6</sup>

About half of the two-thousand-member congregation did leave—a portent of controversy that was to come.<sup>7</sup> But those remaining granted Johnson the “liberty to experiment.” And spiritual experimentation has since become a hallmark of his church. As Johnson writes: “For years, I have called Bethel ‘The Great Experiment.’”<sup>8</sup> His goal: to discover—through trial and error—what yields miracles at Bethel and create a “model” for miraculous ministry that (in his words) can be “exported” and “duplicated” in churches throughout the world.<sup>9</sup>

### A “Risk-Taking” and “Reckless” Church

Following the mass exodus, the church's remaining members voted to withdraw Bethel from the Assemblies of God in 2006. The official statement indicated that the church could not pursue Johnson's vision for experimentation while remaining within the denomination.<sup>10</sup> And today Bethel leaders boast that their church has a “risk-taking culture”: You “must be willing to fail to succeed.”<sup>11</sup> Acting “recklessly” is also valued, though outside Bethel that trait is generally viewed negatively. Johnson

6. Johnson, *The Way of Life*, ch. 3. (Note that this is the updated 2019 edition, not the original 2018 edition. Both are cited in this book.)

7. Johnson and Farrelly, “Episode 6” (1:20:00) and Christerson and Flory, *The Rise*, ch. 2.

8. Johnson, *The Way of Life*, introduction (updated 2019 edition).

9. Winger, “Bill Johnson's Theology” (10:00).

10. The statement explained that Bethel members had felt the church's call is “unique enough theologically and practically from the call on the Assemblies of God that this change is appropriate.” See Bill Johnson and the Leadership of Bethel Church, “Bethel and the Assemblies of God.” See also Johnson and Farrelly, “Episode 1” (1:00), in which Johnson explains that it would have been difficult for Bethel to “experiment” while remaining in the Assemblies of God.

11. Johnson, quoting Randy Clark, in *When Heaven Invades Earth*, ch. 10; Vallotton, *Heavy Rain*, ch. 2. See also Vallotton and Farrelly, “Bethel's Risk-Taking Culture.” A risk-taking approach to the Christian lifestyle is encouraged throughout Johnson's books. (See *When Heaven Invades Earth*, chs. 1, 4, 8, 9, 12, 16, 17; *The Supernatural Power*, chs. 2, 11, 12; *God Is Good*, chs. 5, 9, 10, 11, 12.)

urges his followers to pursue God with “reckless abandon.”<sup>12</sup> This alleged virtue even made it into the lyrics of a popular Bethel Music song, titled “Reckless Love.” The song generated controversy, since God himself is described as “reckless.” Critics say that God would never act without regard for the consequences.<sup>13</sup> The songwriter later clarified—he didn’t mean to say that God is reckless; rather it is “the way He loves” us that is reckless.<sup>14</sup> But a single poor choice of wording is not the real trouble with the song. It raised concerns because it reflects a guiding philosophy and a methodology at Bethel that is itself deeply worrisome.

Johnson admits that his church’s reckless, or risky, behavior “makes a lot of people nervous.” And it sometimes causes “messes” or failures.<sup>15</sup> He sees failures as inevitable.<sup>16</sup> Bethel seeks to experience “biblical realities that are no longer the norm” in the church at large. “Someone has to get the breakthrough so the others can benefit.”<sup>17</sup> Having to clean up “messes” is a small price to pay. Johnson contends that too much caution has held other churches back.<sup>18</sup>

At Bethel Church, Johnson’s risk-taking approach has paid off.

12. Johnson, *When Heaven Invades Earth*, chs. 9, 10, 17. Johnson says that “reckless abandon is not the same as spiritual carelessness.” (See chapter 10, note 10.) But he does not explain how the two differ. He says only that, as he pursues “dangerous things,” he “keep[s] accountable” to other people and “work[s] to protect [his] relationships on all levels.” (One might wish for greater clarity.)

13. To learn more about the controversy surrounding “Reckless Love,” written by Bethel musician Cory Asbury, see Boorman, “Sorry, Bethel Music”; Coats, “My Take.”

14. Hill, quoting Asbury, in “Defending God’s ‘Reckless Love.’”

15. Johnson and Farrelly, “Episode 2” (53:00); Johnson, *When Heaven Invades Earth*, ch. 15.

16. Johnson references Prov 14:4—“Where there’s no oxen, the manger is clean, but much increase comes through the strength of the ox”—in defense of the “messes” that are created by Bethel’s risk-taking culture. In other words, any time someone tries to accomplish something new, they will experience failures. (See Johnson and Farrelly, “Holy Laughter.”) We note that his quotation of the verse appears to combine wording from different Bible translations. You must read the passage for yourself to see if you agree with Johnson’s application of it. This is one of many cases illustrating Johnson’s slack use of the Bible.

17. Johnson, *The Way of Life*, ch. 3 (updated 2019 edition).

18. Johnson writes: “Many leaders think their job is to discourage people from trying, so then they won’t fail.” But he clarifies: “When I speak of failing, I’m not referring to moral or ethical failure or experimenting with lifestyles that are contrary to the teaching of Scripture. I am referring to the God-given desire to learn how to represent Jesus well in purity and power.” (*The Way of Life*, ch. 3 [updated 2019 edition].)

Soon after taking the helm, he saw the answer to his prayer for “more” of God. Healings at the church, including multiple cases of cancer healings, were reported.<sup>19</sup> In the years since, other unusual phenomena have occurred during Bethel services: the appearance of gold dust dropping like rain; a glittering “glory cloud” floating overhead; “angel feathers” falling from the ceiling; and unexplained, indoor gusts of wind.<sup>20</sup> Videos of the glory cloud—appearing a reported twenty-six times over a period of eighteen months, beginning in 2011—went viral.<sup>21</sup> Accounts of these things rocketed the church and its leaders through the clouds, from relatively unknown status on the outer fringes of the churchosphere to their current reputation as social media influencers with followings in the hundreds of thousands.<sup>22</sup> Interpreted as a sign of God’s presence at Bethel, the glory cloud phenomenon is a major stimulus to the church’s staggering growth.

Today, more than eleven thousand people call Bethel Church “home.”<sup>23</sup> It’s known as a global hub for revival—a Christian “Mecca”—where people flock to experience physical or emotional healing and to

19. Bill Johnson Ministries, “Bill.” Johnson credits two individuals for having a major influence on the miracles occurring at Bethel Church today—John Wimber and the apostle Randy Clark: “When I heard John Wimber speak in 1987, I realized that a supernatural lifestyle was possible even for a normal person. . . . But I never met John. All I learned was from a distance, until I met Randy Clark. Randy has been the largest contributor to my understanding and experience of the miracle lifestyle. Before he came to Redding, we saw miracles weekly. After a few days with Randy, we saw the miracles multiply until they became daily happenings.” (See Johnson and Clark, *The Essential Guide*, Dedication and Acknowledgments.) Johnson also credits the “Toronto Blessing revival,” which began in 1994 at John and Carol Arnott’s Toronto Airport Vineyard Church, for influencing his focus on revival. (See Johnson, “Bill Johnson’s Testimony.”)

20. Multiple videos of the glory cloud, which first started appearing during Friday night meetings at Bethel in 2011, were posted online. Johnson addressed the glory cloud phenomenon, and skepticism about it, in the *Rediscover Bethel* video series. (See Johnson and Farrelly, “Glory Clouds.”) To hear Johnson describe the angel feathers, gold dust, and indoor gusts of wind, see Johnson, “Response to Glory Cloud.”

21. Johnson said the cloud appeared twenty-six times. See Johnson and Farrelly, “Glory Clouds.”

22. At the time of this writing, Bethel Church had 787,000 Instagram followers, Bill Johnson had 558,000 Facebook followers, and Kris Vallotton had 381,000 Facebook followers.

23. This number includes all Bethel Church attenders, members, BSSM students, and children, according to Bethel’s 2019–20 annual report. See “Movement Impact.”

receive a personal “word” from God.<sup>24</sup> Many of Bethel’s attendees are young people, which is remarkable at a time when Millennials and Gen Zers have left churches like buildings on fire.<sup>25</sup> The Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry (BSSM)—a center for training miracle workers—has an annual enrollment of more than two thousand six hundred students and has deployed more than thirteen thousand alumni (hailing from more than one hundred countries) throughout the world.<sup>26</sup>

Some BSSM alumni are very influential abroad. Awakening Europe’s director, Ben Fitzgerald, coordinates stadium events in major cities that include Vienna, Prague, Stockholm, and Nuremberg. These events feature Bethel leaders, enlarging their influence on that continent. And Bethel Music—a collective of worship leaders from Bethel and like-minded churches—dominates the Christian music industry. The record label produces songs played on radios and sung in churches across the United States.<sup>27</sup> Through this music, the church aims to “plant” the Bethel model into those churches, says Johnson.<sup>28</sup>

24. According to statistics provided in Bethel Church’s 2019–20 annual report, more than 5,800 Sozo inner healing and deliverance sessions were conducted locally at Bethel or at Bethel-affiliated ministries around the world; 14,977 prophetic words were given by the church’s prophetic ministry as well as 305 dream interpretation sessions, and 13,089 people received prayers for healing from Bethel’s Healing Rooms ministry. See “Movement Impact.”

25. According to a 2014 Barna poll, “59 percent of Millennials who grew up in the church have dropped out at some point.” A 2018 poll revealed that only 1 in 5 members of Gen Z said attending church is “very important” to them. See Barna Group, “Americans Divided”; Barna Group, “Atheism.” See also Deckman, “Generation Z.” According to Deckman, “A truism of the American religious landscape is that Americans are becoming more religiously unaffiliated and that this tendency is especially pronounced among the Millennial generation (born between 1981 and 1996).” She shows that, so far, Gen Z Americans are following suit.

26. See “Movement Impact.” BSSM was launched in 1998 with just thirty-seven students.

27. According to Bethel’s 2019–20 annual report, Bethel songs were streamed more than 249 million times that fiscal year and three of their recording artists were named in the Top Fifty Christian Artists. (“Movement Impact.”) Jesus Culture, another well-known Christian music group, was started at Bethel in 1999, in the church’s youth group. See Jesus Culture, “About Jesus Culture.”

28. Winger, “Bill Johnson’s Theology.” Bethel Church emphases found in Bethel Music lyrics include the notion of bringing heaven to earth, making “prayer declarations,” and working miracles, including resurrections. Bill Johnson has stated, “Music bypasses all of the intellectual barriers, and when the anointing of God is on a song, people will begin to believe things they wouldn’t believe through teaching” (quoted in Pivec and Geivett, *Counterfeit Kingdom*, ch. 8, titled “Toxic Worship Music”).

Bethel has planted numerous churches in the United States and abroad: Bethel Atlanta, Bethel Austin, Bethel Cleveland, Bethel New Zealand, Bethel Valparaiso, and Bethel New York. Other pastors—seeking to replicate the Bethel experience in their own churches—utilize Bethel-produced music and books, invite Bethel speakers into their pulpits, and have even launched their own schools of supernatural ministry.<sup>29</sup> And thousands of people travel to Redding each year to attend annual conferences, such as the School of the Prophets.<sup>30</sup> At this event, aspiring prophets receive training to “accelerate” their “prophetic calling” for \$425 a person.<sup>31</sup>

With conference rates like these—not to mention the tithes and offerings received by the church, music royalties, and revenue from BSSM and Bethel’s other businesses—the church pulls in loads of money. In 2017/2018, leaders reported an overall income of \$60.8 million.<sup>32</sup> Also in 2018, they launched a fundraising campaign to build a new \$96 million, 171,708-square-foot campus to accommodate the growth.<sup>33</sup>

## **Extreme Teachings and Practices**

Of course, with this success has come much controversy. Though Bethel describes itself as a “charismatic” church, its teachings and practices go far beyond what would be considered typical for charismatic churches, starting with its peculiar take on the Great Commission.<sup>34</sup> Through the

29. Many of these schools utilize a curriculum produced and sold by BSSM. In addition, BSSM has a School Planting division, which provides support to churches that launch their own BSSM affiliates. And recently Bethel launched BSSM Online.

30. Those who can’t attend Bethel conferences in person can watch them on Bethel TV, which streams Bethel content online.

31. This was the price for in-person or online attendance for the 2022 conference. See Bethel, “School of the Prophets.”

32. Pierce, “The Really Big Business of Bethel Church, Part 1.”

33. Chandler and Benda. “Ask the Record Searchlight.”

34. Bethel holds that its doctrine is “consistent with Charismatic/Evangelical churches.” (See Bethel, “Bethel Statement Regarding Christalignment.”) Yet, if that were the whole story—if it were a standard charismatic church whose teachings were, more or less, in line with evangelicalism—it is unlikely that it would generate the controversy it has. Most people believe that something new is going on there. Also, as we will show in this book, what Bethel leaders say about their beliefs often seems inconsistent with their practices. And, finally, we note that a few statements affirmed in the church’s “statement of faith,” as outlined in the church’s 2017 bylaws, seem to go beyond historic charismatic beliefs. The statement reads: “The victorious redemptive work of Christ on the cross provides freedom from the power of the enemy—sin, lies,