Reckless Christianity

Reckless Christianity

The Destructive New Teachings and Practices of Bill Johnson, Bethel Church, and the Global Movement of Apostles and Prophets

Holly Pivec and Douglas R. Geivett

The Lutterworth Press

Ⓛ

To my husband, Adam
I love you

- Holly

To Dorothea Weitz

- Doug

James Clarke & Co.
P.O. Box 60
Cambridge
CB1 2NT
United Kingdom

www.jamesclarke.co
publishing@jamesclarke.co

Paperback ISBN: 978 0 7188 9767 3
PDF ISBN: 978 0 7188 9768 0

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A record is available from the British Library

First published by Cascade Books, 2023

This edition published by The Lutterworth Press, 2025,
by arrangement with Wipf and Stock Publishers

Contents

Preface

"I've never been to Bethel Church, but I want to visit." "I've heard so many exciting stories about what is happening at that church." "God is obviously doing a great work there."

We've lost track of how many times people have said such things to us. It's gotten to where it's almost predictable. Once, while lecturing at Biola University, Doug shared this observation with his students. Then, during a class break, he bumped into a teaching colleague and Bethel Church came up in their brief conversation. Before Doug excused himself to return to class, his co-worker said, "You know, I'd like to visit Bethel Church when I get a chance. I don't agree with everything they teach, but God is clearly doing a work there." Doug wasn't sure his students believed him when he recounted this exchange.

When we hear this sort of thing—and we hear it a lot—we always want to know, what is it about Bethel's teaching that they find disagreeable? And what convinces them that God is at work at Bethel Church? These are important questions. These and like questions are the focus of this book.

It's somewhat perplexing to hear someone say, on the one hand, that some Bethel teachings just can't be believed, and on the other hand, that God's supernatural activity at the church is obviously real and palpable. Many people gladly believe reports of stunning events occurring at Bethel Church, though they are hesitant to give full assent to what is taught there. Oddly, while declining to agree with everything that is taught, they

often cannot say exactly what it is that they find so disagreeable. At any rate, while they may be cautious about what is believed and taught at Bethel, they express confident enthusiasm for supposed manifestations of God's presence at Bethel. What is this strange admixture of credulity and caution among those who observe Bethel Church from a distance? Do they suppose that the signs and wonders and miracles that are reported have nothing to do with what Bethel teaches?

Long-distance confidence that God is doing something amazing at Bethel rests on fantastical reports of miracles and unusual phenomena. Healings, glory clouds, and a little gold dust have secured Bethel's reputation as a center of divine activity. If such marvels are a daily occurrence, then what could be more obvious? It's a God-thing.

But is it?

How does anyone observing Bethel from a distance and hoping to visit someday know that God is doing a great work there? What justifies such confidence? Do they find secondhand or thirdhand testimonies of miracles compelling? Are they impressed by news of conferences that draw thousands of excited young adults? Is it the church's worldwide influence that convinces them? Are any of these good reasons for their assurance that God is working in a uniquely mighty way at this church?

When people speak in wonder and amazement of the doings and happenings of Bethel, we have to ask: *Do they know what Bethel leaders believe? Are they aware of the church's aberrant teachings and practices? Have they never heard what happened at Bethel with two-year-old Olive Heiligenthal? Do they know about "grave soaking" and "Prophetic Uno" and waking up "sleeping angels"?*

No doubt about it, something unusual *is* going on at Bethel. But it's not at all clear that what is going on is the work of God that so many think it is. There are compelling reasons to think it isn't that at all. Strong words? We know.

In two earlier books, *A New Apostolic Reformation?* and *God's Super-Apostles*, we documented the rise of a global movement of apostles and prophets intent on reconstructing the mission and the message of the Christian church.[1] In a more recent book, *Counterfeit Kingdom*, we explained the movement's practices, the concrete ways the New Apostolic Reformation is showing up in churches, ministries, and music. This

1. See Geivett and Pivec, *A New Apostolic Reformation?* (a heavily documented book) and Geivett and Pivec, *God's Super-Apostles* (a shorter book that includes anecdotes from people who formerly embraced New Apostolic Reformation beliefs).

movement is popularly known as the New Apostolic Reformation or NAR (pronounced NAHR).[2] NAR is not an organization or a denomination: it consists of churches and other Christian organizations that have developed intentional networks with one another in pursuit of a common mission that is rooted in shared beliefs and realized through distinctive practices.[3] The core belief is that present-day apostles and prophets must govern the church. These authoritative apostles and prophets purport to deliver new revelations that the church must have if it is to develop miraculous powers. Healings, resurrections, and other miracles—mightier than those worked by Moses and Jesus—are to spur an end-time global revival, positioning the church to establish God's kingdom on earth and usher in Christ's return. These recycled teachings of the post-World War II Latter Rain movement have much more traction today than they did in 1948 when a "revival" of sorts broke out in Saskatchewan, Canada. In the United States, about 3.5 million people attend NAR churches—churches

2. Many leaders in NAR do not use this label to describe their movement of apostles and prophets, though some certainly do, including the influential apostle Ché Ahn. Ahn is extremely clear that he views the "New Apostolic Reformation" as a movement through which "God is changing the expression and understanding of Christianity" and that "God is bringing about an apostolic reformation" led by apostles with "extraordinary authority." See Ahn, *Modern-Day Apostles*, introduction and chap. 5. And note the many influential apostles and prophets who endorsed Ahn's book, including Bill Johnson (who also provided the foreword), Kris Vallotton, Patricia King, Shawn Bolz, James Goll, Cindy Jacobs, and Lou Engle. Other apostles prefer to use no label (other than perhaps "charismatic" or "neo-charismatic") or another label such as "Independent Network Christianity" because of the negative connotations that have come to be associated with NAR. See, for example, Joseph Mattera (the head of the United States Coalition of Apostolic Leaders) explain his personal preference for the label "Independent Network Christianity": Mattera, Kelly, and Lipscomb, "Global Christianity Roundtable."

3. One influential network is the Revival Alliance, whose charter members include six married couples: Bill and Beni Johnson, Ché and Sue Ahn, John and Carol Arnott, Randy and DeAnne Clark, Georgian and Winnie Banov, and Heidi and Rolland Baker. NAR leaders, including Randy Clark, have responded to their critics, including ourselves, by accusing them of describing NAR in overly broad terms, thus classifying many people as NAR who really are not part of the NAR movement. (Clark makes this accusation in Lewis, Rowntree, and Clark, "The NAR Debate!" [10:00].) But we have not done this. We have made it clear that what defines NAR is the controversial belief in the present-day governing *offices* of apostle and prophet. This definition is not overly broad; it's laser-focused. And it's the one definition many NAR leaders keep skirting around. If a leader believes there should be apostles governing the church today, then he or she is NAR, whether or not the label is approved or accepted. Other teachings and practices are generally associated with NAR belief, but the *offices* are the core issue.