

DAVID A. ROOZEN & JAMES R. NIEMAN, EDITORS

# CHURCH, IDENTITY, AND CHANGE

THEOLOGY AND DENOMINATIONAL  
STRUCTURES IN UNSETTLED TIMES

## **Theological Perspective and Reflection on the Vineyard Christian Fellowship**

**Don Williams**

Pp 163 – 187 in Roozen and Nieman (eds), *Church, Identity and Change: Theology and Denominational Structures in Unsettled Times* (Eerdmans, 2005). Also in *Church, Identity and Change: "A Short History of the Association of Vineyard Churches"* by Bill Jackson and "Routinizing Charisma: The Vineyard Christian Fellowship in the Post-Wimber Era" by Don Williams.

Resources from the *Organizing Religious Work Project* of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research  
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# CHURCH, IDENTITY, and CHANGE

*Theology and Denominational Structures  
in Unsettled Times*

Edited by

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Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.  
255 Jefferson Ave. S.E., Grand Rapids, Michigan 49503 /  
P.O. Box 163, Cambridge CB3 9PU U.K.

Printed in the United States of America

10 09 08 07 06 05      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Church, identity, and change: theology and denominational structures in unsettled times /  
edited by David A. Roozen & James Nieman.

p.      cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-8028-2819-1 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Protestant churches — United States — History. 2. Protestant churches —  
Doctrines — History. 3. United States — Church history.  
I. Roozen, David A. II. Nieman, James R., 1956-

BR515.C526      2005

280'.4'0973 — dc22

2004060785

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# Theological Perspective and Reflection on the Vineyard Christian Fellowship

*Don Williams*

When Western intellectual history is written, the end of the twentieth century will be remembered as the bridge from the modern to the postmodern age. Among many definitions of the latter, perhaps the best known is by Jean-François Lyotard: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives."<sup>1</sup> With the collapse of Marxism as a viable worldview and the absence of a rational explanation for the universe, we are in an age where pluralism, multiculturalism, and relativism reign. How will the church cope with this postmodern era? The major denominations' embracing of the modern age, popularly identified as the period from the fall of the Bastille to the fall of the Berlin Wall, makes this question critical. Modernism was the age of the Enlightenment, the age of reason and the triumph of the scientific method.<sup>2</sup> It was the age where mysticism, miracles, angels, demons, and su-

1. Jean-François Lyotard, "The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge," trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, in *Theory and History of Literature*, vol. 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. xxiv. Lyotard wrote, "[T]he society of the future falls less within the province of a Newtonian anthropology (such as structuralism or systems theory) than a pragmatics of language particles. There are many different language games — a heterogeneity of elements. They only give rise to institutions in patches — local determinism." While this is increasingly true in the West, it is not true in Africa and Asia, where metanarratives still determine large masses of humankind: animism, Marxism (China), monism (India), etc.

2. Spinoza wrote, "[T]he universal laws of nature are decrees of God following from the necessity and perfection of the Divine nature. Hence, any event happening in nature which contravened nature's universal laws, would necessarily also contravene the Divine decree, nature, and understanding; or if anyone asserted that God acts in contravention to the laws of nature, he ipso facto, would be compelled to assert that God acted against His own nature — an evident absurdity." "A Theologico-Political Treatise," in *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, vol. 1, trans. R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Dover, 1951), p. 83.

pernatural interventions were judged naive, the products of childhood fancy. It was the age of demythologizing the Bible.<sup>3</sup> It was the age of humanizing what was left of the "historical Jesus."<sup>4</sup> It was the age of the Constantinian imperial church, informally established in all its forms, adopting large-scale structures with hegemonic tendencies. It was the age of the National Council of Churches, its counterpart, the National Association of Evangelicals, and the World Council of Churches, seeking influence by lobbying Washington. It was the age of the Consultation on Church Union (COCU), where "bigger is better." It was the age of "the Christ of culture."<sup>5</sup> This age, however, is over.

The roots of the postmodern era lie deeper than the "beat generation" of the fifties, the revolutionary sixties, the decline and fall of the Soviet empire, and multinational globalization. Carl Becker asserted in his Storrs Foundation lectures at Yale in 1931:

What is man that the electron should be mindful of him! Man is but a foundling in the cosmos, abandoned by the forces that created him. Unparented, unassisted and undirected by omniscient or benevolent authority, he must fend for himself, and with the aid of his own limited intelligence find his way about in an indifferent universe. . . . It has taken eight centuries to replace the conception of existence as divinely composed and purposeful drama by the conception of existence as a blindly running flux of disintegrating energy. But there are signs that the substitution is now

3. See Rudolf Bultmann, "Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?" in *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*, trans. Schubert Ogden (New York: Living Age Books, 1960).

4. With all the continuing quests in the twentieth century, Albert Schweitzer's study is still unsurpassed: *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery (New York: Macmillan, 1910). For a scholarly critique of the continuing quest and the Jesus Seminar, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996). For alternative positions on the quest see Marcus Borg and N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1999).

5. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951), pp. 83f., wrote, "In every culture to which the Gospel comes there are men who hail Jesus as the Messiah of their society, the fulfiller of its hopes and aspirations, the perfecter of its true faith, the source of its holiest spirit. . . . Such Christians have been described psychologically by F. W. Newman and William James as constituting the company of the 'once born' and 'the healthy minded.' Sociologically they may be interpreted as non-revolutionaries who find no need for positing 'cracks in time' — fall and incarnation and judgment and resurrection. In modern history this type is well known, since for generations it has been dominant in a large section of Protestantism. Inadequately defined by the use of such terms as 'liberal' and 'liberalism,' it is more aptly named Culture-Protestantism."

fully accomplished; and if we wished to reduce eight centuries of intellectual history to an epigram, we could not do better than to borrow the words of Aristophanes, "Whirl is king, having deposed Zeus."<sup>6</sup>

Apart from the intellectual elite, however, it was the sixties, with the arrival of the Civil Rights movement, the murders of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, the burning of the ghettos, anti-Vietnam War riots, psychedelic drugs, the pill, and rock and roll where youth editorialized to youth, that ended cultural continuity.

The new youth culture was, among other things, an attack upon the modern era.<sup>7</sup> Timothy Leary, former Harvard professor and high priest of hallucinogenic drugs, asserted that "reason is a tissue-thin artifact, easily destroyed by a slight alteration in the body's biochemistry." In this context the generations were at loggerheads and all established institutions, including the churches, were under attack. The mainline denominations accelerated their protracted decline, a trend not followed by Southern Baptists and other more conservative groups.<sup>8</sup> Symptomatically, Sunday school enrollment dropped by more than half for many church bodies. The next generation absented itself. Churches grayed without replacements.

Longing for spirituality, the sixties generation turned east. It was led by the Beatles and other cultural icons who found Transcendental Meditation, chanting, and mind-altering mysticism more attractive than the formal liturgies of Christendom.

It is no surprise that, in the midst of this cultural revolution, a new Christian dynamic emerged. The press dubbed this the "Jesus movement."<sup>9</sup> By the late sixties, a significant proportion of the "Woodstock generation" renounced drugs and rebellion and turned to Jesus himself. They brought their counter-culture lifestyles of communal living and folk and rock music into the churches that would welcome them. If turned away, they started their own fellowships. Looking for a spiritual high better than drugs, they celebrated Jesus' love and the power of his Spirit, many becoming neo-Pentecostals or charismatics. In

6. Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932), p. 15.

7. Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1969).

8. Finke and Stark demonstrate that mainline decline has been a long process going back to the Revolutionary War period. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992), chap. 3.

9. For a scholarly summary, see Robert S. Ellwood, Jr., *One Way: The Jesus Movement and Its Meaning* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973).

this context the Calvary Chapel churches exploded under the fatherly guidance of a former Foursquare pastor, Chuck Smith. They were known for their informal style, Bible exposition, evangelistic fervor, and culturally current music born from the “rock generation.” They were also known for heavy preaching on the imminent return of Christ and the end of the age. In their “afterglow” services people stayed to be filled with the Spirit, receive the gift of tongues, and be healed or delivered from demons. Powerful manifestations of the Spirit marked the early Calvary movement and prepared the way for the Vineyard’s return to these emphases later.

Calvary Chapels were transitional from the modern age. While embracing the fervency of conversion and subsequent experiences of the Spirit, they also held to dispensational theology that chops the Bible up into separate economies for God’s dealings with Israel and the church. This is supported by a highly rational hermeneutic that claims to interpret the Bible literally. While Smith continued to validate tongues and other gifts of the Spirit, he soon backed away from what seemed to be the charismatic excesses of physical and emotional displays in public, from lifting hands in worship to falling under the power of the Spirit. A small number of Calvary pastors, however, wanted to continue the Jesus movement’s assault on the modern age. As elaborated in the Jackson historical introduction (pp. 132-40) and the Miller sociological case study (pp. 141-62), they gathered around John Wimber, a new charismatic leader who would build the emerging Vineyard Christian Fellowship.<sup>10</sup>

In many respects Wimber was a modern man. He started and managed many businesses. He served on the staff of a growing, evangelical Friends church. He consulted with hundreds of churches across America, becoming an expert in church growth sociological theory and practice. He could look at a church in terms of plant, location, visibility, and parking and make accurate judgments about its future, unrelated to its spiritual life. He had new pastors develop their “five-year plan.” When he taught healing, he used his five-step method for praying for the sick. In other ways, however, Wimber at his core was not a modernist. Rationalism had not indoctrinated him. While the modern church tried, it did not socialize him. It burned him out. He kept asking, “When do we get to do the stuff?” By the “stuff” he meant what Jesus did: minister to the poor, heal the sick, cast out demons, and even raise the dead.

10. Biographical material on Wimber includes: David Pytches, ed., *John Wimber: His Influence and Legacy* (Guildford, Surrey, U.K.: Eagle, 1998); Carol Wimber, *John Wimber: The Way It Was* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1999); Bill Jackson, *The Quest for the Radical Middle: A History of the Vineyard* (Cape Town, South Africa: Vineyard International Publishing, 1999). See also the autobiographical video by John Wimber, *I’m a Fool for Christ, Whose Fool Are You?* (Mercy Publishing, 1987).



Neither, of course, was Wimber a postmodernist. He probably would not have recognized the term. In fact, Wimber was more like a premodernist, a man at home in the Christian worldview and experience that dominated the church and the West prior to the Enlightenment. Wimber loved the Venerable Bede's *Life of Cuthbert* because he lived in a spiritual world similar to that of this seventh-century Celtic monk. Like Cuthbert, Wimber received prophecies and visions that directly influenced the course of his life and ministry. Like Cuthbert, Wimber healed the sick and drove out demons. Like Cuthbert, Wimber engaged in spiritual disciplines, contending against the devil. Like Cuthbert, Wimber experienced immediate, visible answers to his prayers. Like Cuthbert, Wimber ministered out of the fullness of the Holy Spirit.<sup>11</sup> Like Cuthbert, Wimber was a "bishop" to his parish and itinerant as an evangelist. When Bede says of Cuthbert that great numbers of people came to hear him, "attracted by his reputation for miracles,"<sup>12</sup> this could also be said of Wimber. When Bede says Cuthbert was "spurred on by his heavenly vision of the joys of eternal bliss,"<sup>13</sup> this could also be said of Wimber.

Living much of the time in a premodern spiritual world, Wimber positioned the Vineyard with the potential to minister effectively in the antimodern ethos of the emerging postmodern age. As a young, church-planting movement that also attracted adoptive, like-minded congregations, the Vineyard's theology and practice are uniquely wedded to Wimber's spiritual life. Here, in many respects, biography becomes theology and theology becomes ecclesiology.

### What Drove John Wimber and What Drives the Vineyard?

In general, Wimber was driven by his understanding of the kingdom of God. Jesus came in the power of the Spirit to evangelize the poor, heal the sick, drive out demons, liberate the oppressed, and build a people living under his lordship who will reflect his character and ministry in fulfilling his mission to the

11. D. H. Farmer, ed., *The Age of Bede*, trans. J. F. Webb (New York: Penguin Books, 1983). Bede wrote that Cuthbert came to release a woman from a demon. "[A]s they approached the house the evil spirit, unable to bear the coming of the Holy Spirit with whom Cuthbert was filled, suddenly departed" (p. 62). Cuthbert laid hands on new converts "so that the grace of the Holy Spirit might come down upon them" (p. 81). Again, "Cuthbert preached twice to the milling crowds and brought down the grace of the Holy Ghost by imposition of hands on those newly regenerated in Christ" (p. 83). The same could be said of Wimber.

12. Farmer, *The Age of Bede*, p. 71.

13. Farmer, *The Age of Bede*, 50. Wimber often said, "I'm just a fat man trying to get to heaven."

nations.<sup>14</sup> In Jesus the kingdom has come and is still coming. It will be consummated at his return. The church lives in a tension between these two realities, the already and the not yet.

Out of his grasp of the kingdom Wimber established a church-planting movement focused on worship (loving God) and compassion (loving the world). But where is the Vineyard today? A survey of pastors, designed by Don Miller and reported in his case study, gives a fairly objective sense of the current Vineyard. A review of the statistics makes it clear that the Vineyard mainstream lives out Wimber's kingdom values. A smaller wing is still committed to the prophetic-holiness emphasis of repentance preceding end-time revival that came into the Vineyard through the Kansas City Fellowship in the early 1990s. A "seeker sensitive" wing downplays overt manifestations of the Spirit in Sunday services, such as speaking in tongues, prophecy, and physical evidence of the Spirit's presence. They do this for the sake of attracting outsiders who would be "turned off" or confused by such displays. In the following review, we will look at what drove Wimber and then at what drives the present Vineyard.

First, Wimber was evangelistically driven. His radical conversion experience in the summer of 1963 and early "discipling" by a lay itinerant evangelist, Gunner Payne, put Wimber on the streets. He identified with the Friends church in Yorba Linda because of its warm fellowship and evangelical convictions. By his report he led hundreds of his friends to Christ over a several year period. Evangelism was always Wimber's passion and also his frustration, since in his view the Vineyard movement never realized its full evangelistic potential during its early stages. When Wimber became an advocate of "signs and wonders," a major reason he focused on the miraculous was that he believed it would reach those outside the church with what he called "power evangelism." If people experienced a manifestation of God's power (say, in physical healing), Wimber believed they would be more open to the data of the gospel message.

Likewise, in the Vineyard today over two out of three churches regularly extend "altar calls" for salvation. The rest do sometimes. Backing this up, about a third of the Vineyards showcased conversions with "salvation testimonies," either regularly on Sundays or at least several times during the past year. Half the Vineyard pastors report "leading someone to the Lord" a few times a year. One in five averages this once a month, and more than one in ten report two to three times a month. When asked about the importance of maintaining a strong emphasis on evangelism, almost 85 percent said it was either very important or extremely important. In sum, the Vineyard continues to be an evangelical movement.

14. See Luke 4:16-21.

Second, Wimber was Word-driven. He held to the absolute authority of the Bible as the standard and test for life. He measured all supernatural events, prophetic words, and ministry activities by the Scriptures. When in frustration a parishioner feared manifestations of the Spirit and asked, "How far is this going to go?" Wimber held up a Bible and replied, "No farther than this." He joked later that his response was not as safe as the man thought. Wimber interpreted the Bible from the vantage point of historical exegesis and evangelical faith. Scripture must be seen in its ancient context and understood in its grammatical sense without rationalizing away its supernatural worldview. George Ladd, professor of New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary, gave Wimber his kingdom theology grid. Wimber not only taught from the Bible, he listened to the Bible. He avoided the excesses of allegory and, at the same time, heard God speak currently with a "living word" through his devotional use of Scripture.

Like Wimber, most Vineyard pastors hold a high view of biblical authority. Eight out of ten consider Bible study either very important or extremely important. A little over half hear God speak through Scripture weekly or more often, and a little less than a quarter, two to three times a month. Almost 75 percent of all Vineyards devote from thirty to forty minutes to Sunday preaching. Another 15 percent give it forty-five minutes. Two-thirds of the pastors report that half or more of their sermons is devoted to biblical exposition. The Bible continues to have a foundational value in the Vineyard.

Third, Wimber was Spirit-driven. He viewed the mainline churches as "pneumatically deficient." He agreed with Gordon Fee that the early Christians were "Spirit people."<sup>15</sup> Intimacy with God was the heart-theme of his life. The road led through worship, obedience, and surrender to the Spirit. As the Vineyard came into being, Wimber's experiences of the Spirit increased. Power was unleashed as he prayed for people. They were often healed in his living room. Ministry became dynamic and at times unpredictable through the presence of the Spirit. One night at the Anaheim Vineyard, much to Wimber's surprise, the Spirit leveled hundreds of young adults, shaking them and gifting them. Wimber came to see that if Jesus ministered in the Spirit's power, he was foolish to think he could do without it.

Submission to biblical authority and the experience of the present ministry of the Spirit were always in creative tension for Wimber. He even taught a series to his church on raising the dead because this was in the Scriptures. To my knowledge, he never personally saw it happen. What the Spirit did sent him back to the Scriptures. What the Scriptures said sent him seeking the Spirit.

15. See Gordon Fee, *Paul, the Spirit and the People of God* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996).

More than once he changed course or corrected earlier teaching because of a better understanding of the Scriptures. This, not subjective experience, was his final court of appeal. Like the Reformers, Wimber refused to separate the Spirit from the Word and the Word from the Spirit. He expected to hear the Spirit through the Word and to respond in faith and obedience.

The Vineyard today continues to be Spirit-driven. With reference to the gifts of the Spirit, 98 percent of the pastors report receiving the gift of tongues (Spirit-given prayer language); 80 percent pray in tongues weekly or more often. Prophetic and healing gifts are also reported or implied. With reference to the signs of the Spirit, while about 50 percent report never being "slain in the Spirit" (a Pentecostal marker for being physically overcome by the Spirit), 40 percent experience this a few times a year. Ninety-five percent have experienced physical jerking or shaking from the Spirit. Over 30 percent do so at least a few times a year, and close to 15 percent monthly or more often. Close to 80 percent have either laughed or wept in the Spirit, half a few times a year and a quarter even more frequently. About half the Vineyards experience "singing in the Spirit" (singing with the gift of tongues) either regularly or sometimes. A little over half report rarely or never. Over 40 percent celebrate free-flowing dancing in the Spirit regularly or occasionally. For a little under 40 percent this is rare, and it is absent from about 18 percent of the churches. The Vineyards seem to be evenly divided between more controlled and more spontaneous expressions of worship. When asked if the gifts of the Spirit should be downplayed publicly, over 85 percent either disagreed strongly or simply disagreed. Only a bit over 10 percent would put a lid on such expressions. Almost 86 percent are happy with the corporate expression of the gifts. In sum, most pastors report a dynamic personal relationship with the Holy Spirit, and many report substantial Spirit activity in their congregations.

It is sometimes asked whether the Holy Spirit affects decision making for the larger church. About two-thirds of the pastors responded somewhat and a third responded greatly. This means that more than nine out of ten Vineyards expect some degree of the Spirit's leading in their ministries. Almost one out of three is highly dependent upon the Spirit for guidance. One aspect of being Spirit-driven is openness to change and renewal. As was documented in the Miller case study, a significant event in this process was the Columbus Accords that abolished much of the former Vineyard structure (now restored). When asked whether this was in line with God's will, over eight of ten pastors either agreed or strongly agreed.

Fourth, Wimber was prophetically driven. Although his elders theologically suppressed an early experience of speaking in tongues, Wimber always had an intuitive sense of what God was doing and went with it. Later, when a

woman prophet wept before him for half an hour, a frustrated Wimber asked her finally to deliver her message. She replied, "That's it" (i.e., the weeping). He felt as if he had been kicked in the solar plexus. In her tears he saw the tears of Jesus over him. Later God spoke to him, "I've seen your ministry (Wimber felt that it was shaky), now I'm going to show you mine." This launched Wimber into doing the "signs and wonders" kingdom ministry of Jesus rather than simply preaching Jesus' message as a typical evangelical.

Wimber led the Vineyard by hearing directly from God. This was not pure subjectivism. He wanted all he heard to be consistent with Scripture and tested by Scripture. He would change course in a sermon because, in the moment, "God told me to." He would wait for direction from the Spirit as he entered into a personal ministry time of praying for the sick. He operated in remarkable prophetic "words of knowledge," having the ability to identify people God was dealing with in a meeting and knowing surprising details about their lives and needs. He also heard from God in the crisis of making ecclesiastical decisions, often to the dismay of others. Later, when prophets from Kansas City appeared and redirected the Vineyard movement for a season (see the historical introduction), Wimber was ready to receive them because of the stream of prophetic revelation coming to him and moving through him. He was also ready to receive them because of personal issues in his life which they tellingly addressed. His openness to the living voice of God, confirmed with signs and wonders, also made him vulnerable to being derailed by others' agendas for him and the Vineyard. Not wanting to offend God, Wimber was cautious at this point. He often remarked that he let a bush grow to see its fruit before trimming it. That fruit had to be consistent with Vineyard kingdom values, biblically based. It also had to evidence Christlike character and promote the mission of the church in world evangelism. After the prophetic period, which focused on the gifted leader in ministry rather than on the gifted church in ministry, Wimber trimmed heavily. While the Vineyard needed church-planting entrepreneurs, it also needed franchise operators. The time was passing for maverick one-person shows.

The prophetic is still alive and well in the Vineyard. Over eight out of ten churches have prophetic utterances either sometimes or regularly in their services. As we have seen, the Spirit affects the decisions of over eight out of ten Vineyards greatly or somewhat. It is probable that this often comes through some means of prophetic revelation. On the personal level, over 45 percent of the pastors give a public prophecy a few times a year. Another 20 percent do so once a month, over 16 percent two to three times a month, and almost 5 percent weekly or more often. This means that close to 90 percent of Vineyard pastors receive and give prophetic revelation more than once a year. Four out of ten do

so at least monthly. When asked to value "a prophetic ministry," over half judged it somewhat important, close to a third very important, and over 5 percent extremely important. Like Wimber, the Vineyard continues to be prophetically driven, with a strong prophetic wing comprising over a third of the churches.

Fifth, Wimber was compassionately driven. He genuinely loved people. He knew how to listen before providing wise counsel. He cared for his family, friends, leaders, churches, strangers, outsiders, and people of all denominations, races, and cultures. He lived simply and opened his home, welcoming people in. He constantly gave ministry resources away. He would remark, "Whatever God has given to me, I want to give to you." He never used his ecclesiastical position to distance himself from pain and need. He poured himself out at great cost to his wife, his family, his time, his energy, and eventually his health. In a simple sense, from his heart, Wimber wanted to be like Jesus in every area of his life.

Compassion drove Wimber's commitment to Jesus' healing ministry. He believed in it not simply because it was utilitarian but because it was biblical. He believed in it because people's pain needed the power and compassion of Jesus, but he also believed in it because it worked.<sup>16</sup> His goal was to marshal the whole church into this aspect of Jesus' ministry,<sup>17</sup> and he personally prayed for thousands of sick and demonized. At the same time, Wimber experienced the strong, powerful presence of the Spirit in his meetings. In his words, he counted on God "showing up." When he taught on healing, he expected God "to back up his act." His concern was to divest the healing ministry from professionalism, emotionalism, hype, and exaggerated claims. When there were physical manifestations of power, he would often become humorous in order to defuse the tension of the moment. He wanted his churches to be "naturally supernatural." Wimber also spearheaded one of the largest relief ministries in southern California. His church in Anaheim served a million meals each year on-site and built a huge food bank to care for the poor and homeless.<sup>18</sup> He insisted that kingdom ministry must be directed to the dispossessed.

Wimber wanted to love the church Jesus loved and expended himself to

16. When I first met John Wimber, he told me that everything he knew about healing he learned from the Dominican priest Francis MacNutt, *Healing*, rev. ed. (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1999). A careful documentation of healings at Wimber's Harrogate Conference, November 3-6, 1986, is found in David Lewis, *Healing: Fiction, Fantasy, or Fact?* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989).

17. John Wimber and Kevin Springer, *Power Healing* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), chaps. 11-12.

18. David Pytches, "A Man Called John," in *John Wimber*, p. 28.

renew it. He took his healing seminars to Canada, Europe, Asia, and Africa again and again. His vision was not to be a healing evangelist but to equip the whole church to pray for the sick. His impact was so historic that the *Times* of London editorialized against the “Wimberites” who were undermining the traditionalism of the Church of England. Ironically, these were the very churches that were growing and still continue to grow in the United Kingdom.

In Vineyards today, over one out of five find ministry to the poor extremely important, and almost one out of two find it very important. This is a high value for over two-thirds of the churches. The other third judge this ministry somewhat important. Two out of three churches give 1 to 5 percent of their budgets to social outreach ministry. One in five gives 6 to 10 percent.

The healing ministry also delivers compassion in a kingdom context. Most Vineyard pastors personally pray for the sick. Fewer than 5 percent have never seen someone physically healed through prayer. Over 40 percent report such healings a few times a year, over 20 percent once a month, and a bit less two to three times a month. Over 8 percent see physical healing weekly or more often. No wonder almost three out of four Vineyard churches view praying for the sick as either extremely important or very important. The rest judge it somewhat important. To back up this value, almost 80 percent of the Vineyards had testimonies of healing/miracles in their services in the last year. It is not surprising, then, that almost 80 percent offer healing prayer in their churches regularly, and the rest offer it sometimes. Likewise, almost 70 percent offer prayer for deliverance from demonic influence either regularly or sometimes. Healing is alive and well in the Vineyard. Most churches live out the kingdom through praying for the sick and delivering the demonized. In the Vineyard worldview, when people are healed, Satan’s kingdom is undermined and God’s kingdom is manifested and advanced.

Sixth, Wimber was theologically driven. He was especially indebted to the kingdom theology of George Ladd at Fuller Theological Seminary.<sup>19</sup> Ladd’s primary launch point was that “God is King” and that “Jesus is Lord.” As sovereign, God is both creator and redeemer. The purpose of his redemptive work, starting with Abraham and climaxing with Jesus Christ, is the restoration of his sovereignty over a cosmos in rebellion. For Ladd (and Wimber), although Jesus inaugurated the present kingdom in his miraculous ministry, its full consummation lay in the future. Jesus brought a measure of “realized eschatology,”<sup>20</sup>

19. See George Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, ed. Donald Hagner, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

20. C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet and Co., 1936). Dodd wrote, “The eschaton has moved from the future to the present, from the sphere of expectation into that of realized experience. It is therefore unsafe to assume that the content of the idea, ‘The Kingdom

but he also ministered in the eschatological tension of a kingdom come and coming.<sup>21</sup>

Since the kingdom of God battles with the kingdom of Satan, Wimber saw that every convert reduces Satan's kingdom by one. Every healing proleptically restores a bit of God's good but fallen creation. Wimber not only taught about the kingdom, he also ministered to see the kingdom come. Unencumbered by the modern worldview, he wanted a church that would "go for it" in power ministry. In this sense Wimber was a pragmatic American. He wanted a "working theology." However, he always sought to discern whose power was operating. Was it God's Spirit or a demonic spirit? Here the witness of Scripture and the witness of the Spirit in the context of community were mandatory guidelines.

The kingdom, present as well as future, raised expectations that now many would be empowered and gifted by the Spirit, healed, and delivered from demons. This was reason enough for Wimber and his followers to embrace this aspect of Pentecostal or charismatic experience. The future aspect of the kingdom explained why all who were evangelized were not converted, and why all who were prayed for were not healed. Abandoning the triumphalism of much Pentecostal teaching (and its roots in Wesleyan holiness), Wimber moved the Vineyard into "faith healing" based on kingdom theology. Wimber also realized that faith could never force God's hand. He often recounted the statement in John's Gospel that Jesus could do only what he saw the Father doing (John 5:19). Wimber's task was not to command faith but to see what the Father is doing and participate in it or "bless" it. This distinguished his view from an Arminian view of ministry and made him more Calvinistic. It also prepared him for his own bouts with severe illness.

The Vineyard today continues to be evangelical in its theology. When

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of God,' as Jesus meant it, may be filled in from the speculations of apocalyptic writers. They were referring to something in the future, which could be conceived only in terms of fantasy. He was speaking of that which, in one aspect at least, was an object of experience. . . . Here then is the fixed point from which our interpretation of the teaching regarding the Kingdom of God must start. It represents the ministry of Jesus as 'realized eschatology,' that is to say, as the impact upon this world of the 'powers of the world to come,' in a series of events, unprecedented and unrepeatable, now in actual process" (pp. 50-51). In some respects Wimber would take issue with the word "unrepeatable." "Realized eschatology" is the inheritance of the church.

21. For the structure of the new age intruding into the old age, see Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*, trans. Floyd Filson (London: SCM, 1951), p. 141. Wimber loved to use Cullmann's distinction between "D-Day" and "V-Day." "D-Day" established the beachhead for victory. "V-Day" ended the war. In the same way, the ministry of Jesus is "D-Day" and his return is "V-Day." The church lives, certain of his victory, mopping up the opposition.



asked if Christ is the only way to salvation, over 98 percent of the pastors surveyed agreed or strongly agreed. Again, over 98 percent either agreed or strongly agreed that the devil really exists. Most Vineyard pastors hold the foundational truths of kingdom theology. On the issue of authority, when asked whether the Scriptures are “inerrant, literally accurate,” almost 30 percent agreed and over 60 percent strongly agreed. Almost 90 percent of Vineyard pastors embrace the most conservative doctrine of biblical authority.

Seventh, Wimber was pragmatically driven. Having become an expert in church growth principles, he applied them directly to the Vineyard movement. He welcomed Calvary Chapel’s value of being culturally current through informal dress and contemporary music. Wimber’s services adopted a modified rock concert style with an extended set of songs. It was normal for the Anaheim Vineyard, which he pastored, to sing uninterrupted for half an hour.

As a professional musician, Wimber knew that music was a key to reaching and holding the boomer generation. He said, “It is our first priority to give God’s love back to him in worship.” With this, the congregation became the choir. Often Wimber would start with songs of high praise and conclude with quiet songs, designed to draw people into intimacy with God. Since worship had its own value, it was not used to warm up the crowd. As the worship of God went up, however, Wimber believed that the presence and power of God came down. He expected people to be converted and healed during worship. They were there to meet God in their singing. In my first experience watching this, there was hardly a dry eye around me. People sensed that the Presence was there. Wimber not only led worship from his keyboards, he also wrote some of the most enduring contemporary music in the church and enabled others to do the same. His lyrics often reflected biblical passages and moved from talking about God to talking to him. For example, this text reflects Isaiah 9:6:

Isn’t He beautiful, beautiful, isn’t He?  
Prince of Peace, Son of God, isn’t He?  
Yes You are wonderful, wonderful, yes You are,  
Counselor, Almighty God, yes You are, yes You are. . . .<sup>22</sup>

In an age of alienation, Wimber also knew the need for family. He knew that a network of small groups meeting weekly could stem migration from church to church. He called them “kinship groups,” highlighting the longing for belonging. He taught his leaders to grow the church from “the inside out.”

22. Wimber’s music is available through Vineyard Music Group, 5340 E. La Palma Ave., Anaheim, CA 92807. For historical and critical comment, see Matt Redman, “Worshiper and Musician,” in *John Wimber*, chap. 4.

As people commit to relationships and ministry, lasting church growth takes place. Wimber's goal was to make the priesthood of all believers more than Reformation polemic. He told the Vineyard, "Everybody gets to play," not just the up-front leaders and ordained clergy.

At the same time, Wimber was a leader of leaders. His clergy were to "equip the saints [believers] for the work of ministry" (Eph. 4:12) rather than doing it alone as professionals. They were player-coaches. Wimber had clinics and seminars where students learned the theory and then practiced it. The pastoral task was to teach, model, train, release, deploy, and monitor a growing lay army that would do the real work of ministry.

Wimber knew that for any movement to sustain itself it needed decisive leadership (which he provided), structure, authority, accountability, discipline, and continued training and relationship. His young pastors needed direction and vision. His planning methods helped them get organized, learn goal setting, and evaluate success and failure. Wimber was decisive without being autocratic (most of the time). Nevertheless, when he had to remove a pastor for immorality or a church for departing from his authority and direction, he did it. This caused him much pain, and in the case of severing the Toronto airport church from the Vineyard, not a little controversy.<sup>23</sup> It was the cost of leadership and he paid it.

To build leaders Wimber provided a wide variety of books, teaching tapes, videos, manuals, seminars, and conferences. He also encouraged his leaders to follow suit, which they eagerly did, extending the influence of the Vineyard far beyond Wimber himself. He also sustained and expanded his ministry through various profitable business ventures, including music recording and publishing. This is part of his enduring legacy.

What of the current Vineyard? It continues to be pragmatically driven. One in five Vineyards has a noncharismatic "seeker service," a response to the tension built into the Vineyard between evangelism and renewal. No survey is needed, however, to document the central place of worship in all Vineyard churches. This is a given, and Wimber's purposes for it are experienced on a weekly basis. Small-group ministry also continues to be central to the Vineyard. Close to 98 percent of all churches report having small groups, making them one of the highest Vineyard values and practices. Here the real pastoring of the church goes on. Small-group ministry facilitates Wimber's dictum "Everybody

23. The Airport church became a center of renewal and the source of the "Toronto Blessing." See Guy Chevreau, *Catch the Fire: The Toronto Blessing, an Experience of Renewal and Revival* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1995); and John Arnott, *The Father's Blessing* (Orlando: Creation House, 1995).

gets to play,” and becomes a central vehicle for worship, teaching, training, and relationship building. Here is where a continuing crop of lay leaders is grown.

Eighth, Wimber was ecclesiastically driven. He often said he loved the whole church. This came, in part, from his work with the Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth, associated with Fuller Theological Seminary. Such a wide exposure to congregations and traditions gave Wimber compassion and appreciation for the church in all its varieties. Being sociologically astute, he knew that successful ministries had to find their market niche. No single expression of faith reaches all. He was a grassroots ecumenicist, uninterested in formal moves toward church union but eager to “bless the whole church” wherever he found it. He often described the unity of the Vineyard as “centered-set.” The center is Christ, which leaves the boundaries open on issues like eschatology and the sacraments. Beyond the Vineyard, Wimber welcomed fellowship with all who were centered-set as well, regardless of their labels.

Wimber’s commitment to the whole church was especially evident in his worldwide renewal conferences. He taught equipping seminars in worship, healing, and church growth. Those who were raised in modern churches went through a paradigm shift when encountered by the power of the Spirit.<sup>24</sup> The presence of the supernatural became a part of their experience and was incorporated into their worldview. In the early days this resulted in numbers of churches transferring into the Vineyard. This influx was not always compatible with Wimber’s passion for evangelistic growth. Through his renewal ministry, Wimber had a substantial impact on the Church of England starting in 1981.<sup>25</sup> John Gunstone, canon emeritus of Manchester Cathedral, writes, “My guesstimate is that Wimber probably influenced to a greater or lesser extent around fifteen per cent of Church of England parishes, though a higher proportion of the clergy, especially the younger ones.”<sup>26</sup>

Wimber’s concern for the whole church continues to affect the Vineyard to some extent. When asked if Vineyard churches should network outside the Association of Vineyard Churches, over two-thirds of the pastors agreed or strongly agreed. Over one in three churches, however, hold a more exclusive attitude and disagree. One percent strongly disagree. They seem to have missed Wimber’s vision here and perhaps his centered-set welcome of all who believe in Christ and follow him.

Ninth, Wimber was missionally driven. He was a “Great Commission

24. Thomas Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

25. Pytches, “A Man Called John,” pp. 33f.

26. John Gunstone, “An Anglican Evaluation,” in *John Wimber*, p. 225.

Christian,” believing that Christ’s call to the nations included all ethnic groups. As we have seen, this expressed itself in worldwide renewal conferences for established churches. Wimber wanted to see Christians come alive in the power of the Spirit and enter into Jesus’ kingdom ministry by evangelizing their own countries and subgroups. As these seminars multiplied, Vineyard churches materialized outside of North America. Intentional planting began in South Africa in 1982.<sup>27</sup> The first Vineyard appeared in England in 1986.<sup>28</sup> Commitments Wimber made not to plant Vineyards there could not be kept, and he later concluded that they should not be kept. In 1993 Wimber felt released to become intentional in international church planting and adopting existing congregations. His renewal ministry with existing churches had not produced identifiable evangelism. Wimber concluded that if these churches would not take the gospel to the streets, then the Vineyard would. By 1998 there were 370 Vineyards abroad in fifty-three countries.

Following Wimber’s lead, most Vineyard pastors are engaged in cross-cultural mission activity, locally or internationally. Almost half participate a few times a year. One in ten does so monthly, and another one in ten is even more active. This means that about three-fourths of all Vineyards are “Great Commission” churches. They also put their money where their mouth is. When asked if 3 percent of the local budget should go to national and international church planting, almost nine out of ten either agreed or strongly agreed.

Tenth, Wimber was devotionally driven. He talked openly, warmly, and passionately about his love for Jesus and expressed this in intimate worship. He lived in the Bible so that he could live like the Bible. He experienced the presence and power and gifts of the Spirit operating in his life. He called these gifts tools for ministry that the Spirit would provide on the job as needed. He referenced again and again an intimacy with God where he heard his voice, received revelation in visions, dreams, impressions, prophetic words, and biblical passages.

Wimber had a conversational or dialogical relationship with God. He often prayed with his eyes open. Out of the calling on his own life and his track record of ministry, he enjoyed tremendous spiritual authority. Wimber described himself as “a fat man trying to get to heaven.” This was his way of expressing the reality of the supernatural world in which he lived much of the time, especially in quiet devotion or hands-on ministry. His life was pointed beyond this world. Wimber’s radicalism was expressed in his classic statement and question: “I’m a fool for Christ. Whose fool are you?”

Most Vineyard pastors today are also devotionally driven. This is implied

27. Jackson, *The Quest*, pp. 256ff.

28. Jackson, *The Quest*, p. 260.

by their commitment to Bible study, experiences of the Spirit, praying in tongues, personal evangelism, prophetic activity, healing the sick, ministry to the poor, and cross-cultural missions. Wimber defined all of this as life in the kingdom. Pastors engaging in spiritual disciplines also demonstrate a strong spiritual life. Almost 40 percent observe "sustained silence" a few times a year, and close to 20 percent do so once a month or more often. This accounts for about six out of ten pastors. Almost 50 percent of Vineyard pastors spend a day or more in solitude a few times a year; 15 percent do so once a month, and over 5 percent, two to three times a month. Over 50 percent of Vineyard pastors fast several times a year. Close to 20 percent do so once a month, and almost as many do so two to three times a month or more often. Fasting is a part of the lifestyle of almost 90 percent of all polled. Another spiritual index is the hope pastors have for the future. When asked if "the best years of the Vineyard are still ahead," over 40 percent agreed and another 40 percent strongly agreed. Over 85 percent of Vineyard pastors face the future with optimism.

From this review, the conclusion is clear. The values, teaching, and modeling of John Wimber are still at the heart of the Vineyard's life. He has provided the Vineyard's "genetic code." For a large majority, the realized eschatology of the kingdom still defines ministry. Most churches are strong in biblical preaching. Most churches give calls for conversion. Most churches regularly pray for the sick. Most churches expect and experience prophetic ministry. Most churches are structured with small groups. Most churches are active in serving the poor. Most churches are committed to church planting and missions.

The Vineyard perseveres in this style and substance of ministry, despite mixed success and the loss of Wimber through debilitating illnesses. It lives out the eschatological tension of the kingdom come and coming. This cannot be stressed enough. George Ladd's kingdom theology, as interpreted by Wimber, determines both the values and practices of the Vineyard. Wimber succeeded in demonstrating that the church is "the eschatological people of God." This means necessarily that the Vineyard is open to the future, living both in the already and the not-yet. In Wimber's phrase, it is committed to "doin' the stuff."

## **The Theology of the Vineyard**

Wimber's faith was strongly evangelical and, at the same time, surprisingly open. As we have noted, he described the fellowship of Vineyard churches sociologically as centered-set, that is, with Christ at the center. Faith in him held the whole together. This contrasts with churches that are bounded-set, where

issues such as eschatology, cultural habits, or liturgical forms define the fellowship.<sup>29</sup> While some may object that music is the liturgical form that defines the Vineyard, this is reductionistic. Worship (constantly changing) and kingdom ministry are at the core of its values and practices.

While being theologically open on many issues, the Vineyard does have a statement of faith.<sup>30</sup> It is necessarily a statement rather than a confession. The statement defines the movement's theological position without forcing its members to confess the whole. At the same time, it is expected that Vineyard leadership will be in harmony with it.

The statement is structured by kingdom theology. It is cast in the context of God as King, exercising his reign which, while usurped by Satan, is restored first to Israel and then to the nations. This is effected by Christ, who overcomes the powers of darkness. As we have seen, it is the presence of the kingdom, in the eschatological tension of the already and the not yet, that dominates Vineyard thought and practice. It also determines the heart of the *Statement of Faith*. What then are its major influences?

First, there is the patristic period. Consider the opening paragraph: "We believe that God is the Eternal King. He is an infinite, unchangeable Spirit, perfect in holiness, wisdom, goodness, justice, power and love. From all eternity He exists as the One Living and True God in three persons of one substance, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit equal in power and glory."<sup>31</sup> Here the statement confesses the classic patristic definition of the Trinity. It later follows with the two natures of Christ: "We believe that in the fullness of time, God honored His covenants with Israel and His prophetic promises of salvation by sending His only Son, Jesus, into the world. Conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, as fully God and fully man in one person, He is humanity as God intended us to be."<sup>32</sup> These quotes clearly place the Vineyard within mainstream Christian orthodoxy. The Vineyard embraces the whole of Christ's church through the generations, separating itself from ancient and modern heresies concerning the doctrine of God.

Second, there is the Reformation. The statement is clear about salvation through Christ alone. It reads: "After dying for the sins of the world, Jesus was raised from the dead on the third day. . . . In His sinless, perfect life Jesus met the demands of the law and in His atoning death on the cross He took God's

29. Jackson, *The Quest*, pp. 244f.

30. See "Vineyard Statement of Faith" at the Vineyard USA Web site: [www.vineyardusa.org/about/beliefs/beliefs\\_index/statement\\_faith.htm](http://www.vineyardusa.org/about/beliefs/beliefs_index/statement_faith.htm). Subsequent quotations of the statement made within this section refer to paragraphs in that document.

31. "God the King and the Holy Trinity," par. 1.

32. "Christ the Mediator and Eternal King," par. 6.

judgment for sin which we deserve as law-breakers.”<sup>33</sup> The statement is also clear that the Bible is the written Word of God, the final authority for the Vineyard: “We believe that the Holy Spirit inspired the human authors of Holy Scripture so that the Bible is without error in the original manuscripts. We receive the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments as our final, absolute authority, the only infallible rule of faith and practice.”<sup>34</sup> These doctrines distinguish the Vineyard from the medieval church with its teaching of salvation through sacraments and good works and the supremacy of papal authority. The statement employs the phrase “without error” with respect to Scripture in order to define the highest commitment to biblical authority in an evangelical context. This clearly separates the Vineyard from neoorthodoxy and liberal evangelicalism.

Third, there is the eighteenth-century evangelical awakening. The statement speaks of the new birth or conversion: “God regenerates, justifies, adopts, and sanctifies through Jesus by the Spirit all who repent of their sins and trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.”<sup>35</sup> The church is one, holy, and universal, and is made up of “all who repent of their sins and confess Jesus as Lord and Savior” and who are “regenerated by the Holy Spirit and form the living Body of Christ, of which He is the head and of which we are all members.”<sup>36</sup> Regeneration then leads to a life of holiness. The statement says, “The Spirit brings the . . . presence of God to us for spiritual worship, personal sanctification, building up the Church, [and] gifting us for ministry.”<sup>37</sup>

Fourth, there is the influence of the modern missionary movement. The Vineyard stands under the marching orders of the Great Commission to take the gospel to the nations by planting churches. With John Wesley, the world is its parish, as seen by the Vineyard going international. The statement reads: “[Jesus] is the eternal Messiah-King advancing God’s reign throughout every generation and throughout the whole earth today,” and further, “The Spirit brings the permanent indwelling presence of God to us . . . gifting us for ministry, and driving back the kingdom of Satan by the evangelization of the world through proclaiming the word of Jesus and doing the works of Jesus.”<sup>38</sup>

Fifth, there is the impact of the biblical theology movement. As already noted, Wimber was strongly influenced by George Ladd of Fuller Theological Seminary. Ladd’s central teaching was the present/future kingdom of God in-

33. “Christ the Mediator and Eternal King,” par. 6.

34. “The Sufficiency of Scripture,” par. 8.

35. “The Power of the Gospel over the Kingdom of Darkness,” par. 9.

36. “The Church: Instrument of the Kingdom,” par. 10.

37. “The Ministry of the Holy Spirit,” par. 7.

38. “Christ the Mediator,” par. 6.

augurated in the ministry of Jesus. The whole *Statement of Faith* is cast in the framework of the kingdom, from creation to redemption. It is written as historical narrative. Salvation includes leaving one kingdom for another: "God regenerates . . . all who repent of their sins and trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. By this they are released from Satan's domain and enter into God's kingdom reign."<sup>39</sup> The statement draws to its conclusion by saying:

We believe that God's kingdom has come in the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ, that it continues to come in the ministry of the Spirit through the church, and that it will be consummated in the glorious, visible and triumphant appearing of Christ — His return to the earth as King. . . . After Christ returns to reign, He will bring about the final defeat of Satan. . . . Finally, God will be all in all and His kingdom, His rule and reign, will be fulfilled in the new heavens and the new earth, recreated by His mighty power, in which righteousness dwells and in which He will forever be worshipped.<sup>40</sup>

In the *Statement of Faith*, Wimber's evangelical theology is systematized in a kingdom context. It represents the conviction of his mind and the passion of his heart. When it was first read to the National Board, he wept. The statement in tract form is readily available in most Vineyard churches, answering the question: "What do these people believe?" It continues to inform outsiders and newcomers and provide a benchmark for pastors and leaders. It is universally accepted in the Vineyard and appears on many church literature tables.

### The Polity of the Vineyard

From its origin in Calvary Chapel, the Vineyard has been a loose confederation of congregations, sharing common faith, common values, and common practices. As a growing network of churches, there is a high stress on relationships. There are monthly area pastors meetings for worship, sharing, and mutual support. Program agendas are clearly secondary. No roll is called. No official minutes are kept. No votes are taken on the local level. Congregations are independent and individually incorporated, usually with a pastor and elders for plurality of leadership. Only the name Vineyard was trademarked by Wimber. Pastoral care and discipline are exercised in a personal way rather than by a judicatory. In comparison to the presbyterian system, there are no courts through

39. "The Power of the Gospel," par. 9.

40. "The Kingdom of God and the Final Judgment," par. 12.



which to appeal rulings. Discipline is enforced by local leadership with the area representative serving as a bishop, just as John Wimber and Todd Hunter served as bishops over the whole movement. This role is now taken by Bert Waggoner, a Vineyard pastor from Texas.

Wimber's ideal was "charismatic leadership," leadership called and gifted by God himself and raised up with a track record of ministry from the local church. Such leadership would be prophetically directed and affirmed by fellow leaders. Building off of Jacob's wrestling all night with an angel (Gen. 32:22-32), Wimber often said, "Never trust a man who doesn't walk with a limp." Wimber earned the trust of his fellow leaders and congregations because of his credibility and vulnerability. He kept them current through all the crises and struggles of his life. While Wimber carried unique authority, he was a churchman and a family man. He loved community; he was never a loner. He was submitted to his wife, Carol. She was his primary adviser and supporter through the years. Once the Vineyard came into being, Wimber quickly formed a national board. He sought to lead by consensus. At the same time, he had the final word. When the board debated adopting a church into the Vineyard, Wimber ended the discussion by saying, "You get into heaven through Jesus and you get into the Vineyard through me."

Unity, training, relationship, and direction for the Vineyard were built and sustained by national pastors conferences. The different phases of the movement and seasons of Wimber's life (church planting, healing, renewal, the prophetic, and missions) can be traced through these gatherings. They showcased the Vineyard, served as minirenewals and revivals, equipped pastors, and recruited new friends into the movement. They also displayed Vineyard values with extensive times of worship, seminars led by a large number of pastors on basic themes (such as evangelism, church planting, building a worship team, how to pray for the sick, building small groups, building children and youth ministries, reaching the poor, missions, etc.), and occasions for pastors to pray and prophesy over each other. Wimber saw these conferences as reunions. What was true for the local church was also true for the movement. Wimber said, "People come for many reasons, but they stay for the relationships."

Wimber resisted the temptation to create an administrative structure separated from the local churches. This kept a high degree of trust and support flowing from the national level to the local level and back to the national level. While the Vineyard networked congregations into area and regional groupings, all leaders must also be pastors. Up until his final years of ill health, Wimber himself functioned as the pastor of the Anaheim Vineyard. On the analogy of the early church, leaders were not professional administrators or therapists. They were bishops.

One basic issue before Wimber and now before the Vineyard has been how to sustain a renewal/revival movement into the next generation. Wimber rejected creating a denominational structure at the pastors conference in 1988. The Vineyard needed to be "free-flowing." Wimber sensed that if the church lost its cutting edge (in sociological terms, if it moved from being a sect to being a church),<sup>41</sup> it would no longer be a force for renewal, innovation, and contemporary, experimental ministry. It would no longer be Spirit-led; it would be law-led. Pastors would no longer be submitted to each other, they would be submitted to the structure. Too much order would quench freedom. Wimber wanted to live in the tension of having enough order to make community possible but also having that order serve the freedom of the Spirit. This, of course, is a classic problem, evidenced in the New Testament itself.<sup>42</sup> It is never fully resolved. Wimber lived in its ambiguity, which is perhaps another way of saying that he walked by faith.

### The Vineyard and the Twenty-First Century

How does the Vineyard look as it enters the twenty-first century? We have seen that Wimber's values and practices are largely intact. Vineyard kingdom theology determines kingdom practice. Now these values and practices are confronted by an age of pluralism, multiculturalism, and relativism. The modern age asked, "Is it true?" The postmodern age asks, "Is it real?" Any gulf between head and heart, theology and practice, or intention and action will be lethal for ministry. Any church claim, theology, agenda, program, or leader is subject to deconstruction. In our cynicism and skepticism, we want to know "what is really going on." Years ago Bob Dylan said it was his intention to take off the masks to see what is behind them. In "When He Returns" he asked, "How long will you falsify and deny what is real? How long will you hate yourself for the weakness you conceal?"<sup>43</sup> These are the postmodern questions that the church must answer.

While in many respects John Wimber was a modern man, he also had a core spiritual life which was more premodern. He shared the worldview held by most Christians for seventeen centuries. He took the ministry of Jesus in the Gospels at face value. He refused to explain away the miraculous or relegate it to another dis-

41. Ernst Troeltsch made this analysis in *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*. His work is excerpted in J. Milton Yinger, *Religion, Society, and the Individual* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), pp. 416ff.

42. See 1 Cor. 14.

43. On the album *Slow Train Coming* (New York: Columbia Records, 1979).

pensation. He embraced as his own Jesus' preaching of the kingdom "at hand," but he also wanted Jesus' agenda for ministry to be his and the Vineyard's.

A central text for Wimber was Luke 4:16-21, in which Jesus entered the synagogue, read from the Isaiah scroll, and announced that this Scripture is now fulfilled "in your hearing." What Scripture? The Scripture that proclaims the empowering of the Spirit: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me. . . ." This is the Scripture that calls for kingdom ministry: to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom to the prisoners, to proclaim recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Wimber not only devoted his life to this. He trained his churches to do the same. He insisted on both the message and the ministry of Jesus. The church is to be an instrument of the kingdom, experiencing, however imperfectly, the messianic age to come as it invades the present.

With the grip of rationalism broken, supernatural, biblical faith is competitive within a pluralistic culture when it is demonstrated in practice. Its reality cannot be hyped or faked. It must be seen as "naturally supernatural" and have transparent integrity. The Vineyard is well positioned for the new postmodern openness to the supernatural. It expects God to "show up" in worship and ministry times when the sick are healed and the demonized delivered. The oft-prayed "Come, Holy Spirit" is uttered with a high expectation that the Spirit will visit, sometimes dramatically and overwhelmingly. For the Vineyard the Spirit is not merely imminent but also transcendent, moving with empowering and gifting beyond our control. The Vineyard's theology of Satan and demons equips it to face the dark side of the postmodern world. The Vineyard rejects the illusions of humanistic optimism or inevitable progress. These old myths are dead. Kingdom ministry, however, does not breed cynicism or resignation before the powers of evil. It has its triumphalistic side. Jesus is Lord. His name is above every name. Postmodernism has a lingering idealism, hoping for change. Kingdom ministry meets this hope. Vineyard ministry will credibly reflect this as it touches the sores of society. Praying for the sick and hands-on ministry to the poor, the addicted, and the marginalized point the way to the presence of God's kingdom.

With Wimber's stress on community lived out in small groups, the Vineyard is ready to rebuild fractured family life, heal grief and loss, provide training and discipleship in ministry, and build accountability for the addicted. In our increasingly isolated and technologically sophisticated world, ministry without small groups will be no ministry at all. A challenge for the Vineyard at this point will be to go beyond evangelical individualism and catch a new vision for the church as the people of God. If it does this, it will help to arrest the consumer Christianity so rampant in our culture.

To be postmodern is to have “no metanarrative.” Everyone has his or her own unique story and small, fractured community where it is told. Part of the mission of the Vineyard is to subvert this assumption. It will be done not so much on an apologetic level but on the level of the manifest presence of the kingdom. In this “power encounter,” my story is intersected by Jesus’ story in the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. Moreover, Jesus’ story can be understood only in the context of the whole biblical story, cover to cover.<sup>44</sup> His story then makes sense of mine. Through this (word and deed), I am drawn into the Big Story, the metanarrative of the biblical worldview. Once again, existence is seen to be “divinely composed and purposeful drama” rather than “a blindly running flux of disintegrating energy.”<sup>45</sup> Rather than “Whirl is king,” Jesus is Lord.

As the Vineyard faces postmodern pluralism, major issues surface. They include the full empowering of women as ordained pastors and church planters,<sup>46</sup> the empowering of the next generation of leaders without unnecessary educational credentialing, American multiracial and multiethnic churches that share Vineyard theology and values but not “Vineyard” (American) culture, and the demand for justice for oppressed minorities. If the Vineyard is locked into seventies’ and eighties’ white, middle-class ministry and fails the postmodern challenge, it will be apostate from its own mandate to be culturally current. It will also be apostate from its own kingdom theology which sees the Spirit moving and the kingdom coming in and for each generation in time and space. The Vineyard must learn again, as Wimber would say, to “see what God is doing and bless it,” and then, of course, jump in with both feet.

Success is always a threat to the Vineyard. One saving grace is that the Vineyard churches are no longer the new kid on the block with the privileged position that this implies. Wimber’s eagerness to give away all that God gave him has empowered thousands of non-Vineyards “to do the stuff” and worship Vineyard-style. This forces Vineyards to have kingdom vision for what God is doing in their communities rather than harbor the arrogance of being on the cutting edge alone. Another threat to any renewal movement is familiarity. As Luther says, “What is gospel today becomes law tomorrow.” The challenge before the Vineyard will be to break from the familiar again and again

44. For a scholarly presentation of this position, see N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Is and Was* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1999). For a popular critique of current alternative views of Jesus, see N. T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* (London: SPCK, 1992).

45. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*.

46. This is currently the option of each local church in the United States.

and let the fresh winds of the Spirit blow without trying to produce them or control them.

All renewal movements easily accommodate to the mass culture, especially as they get position, money, and temporal power. What will prevent the Vineyard from moving from sect (high tension with the world) to church (low tension with the world)? There is no easy answer. A saving grace may be for each Vineyard leader to repeat after John Wimber again and again, "I'm a fool for Christ. Whose fool are you?"