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A PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE VINEYARD MOVEMENT

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1. Introduction

The faculty of our seminary were having lunch with our graduation speaker, one of the foremost New Testament scholars in the evangelical world today. Understandably, given his world-wide ministry as a professor, preacher, and author, we were eager to pick his brains about the state of the evangelical church. So we asked him, "What do you see as one of the most striking trends in the evangelical world over the last 15 years?"

His reply was immediate. "There has been a massive decline in personal and corporate prayer. The evangelical church has achieved such power and prestige, it no longer feels the need to wait upon God in prayer."

Has the evangelical church lost its awareness of the need for God's enabling power? Is the Christian life as described in Ephesians 6:10-18 a thing of the past?

Recent years have seen something of a reaction to this downplaying of supernatural orientation. Much of the renewed interest in the place of spiritual power and spiritual warfare centres on John Wimber and the Vineyard movement associated with him. Since the emphases of the Vineyard share much in common with the charismatic movement (for example, the expectation that God will regularly demonstrate His power in remarkable ways in response to prayer), many of the (positive and negative) assessments of the charismatic movement tend to be applied to the Vineyard movement.¹

Others, however, maintain that the Vineyard is simply recalling the church to its neglected heritage. As John Wimber says, "The only reason I've talked so often on healing is that there is a dearth of good evangelical teaching in this area."²

How should we respond to the arguments for and against signs and wonders? Is it right to expect God to act miraculously in our every-day lives? Are we second-class believers if our Christian experience does not demonstrate such dramatic proof that God is at work?

In what follows, I would like to provide a framework for responding to the argument that signs and wonders should be a necessary, even normal, part of Christian living. From my friendships and contacts with Vineyard people, I am aware that this aspect of the Vineyard would be differently emphasized in different churches. Yet I see it as one of the key distinctives of the Vineyard, from a pastoral point of view. Whether or not we see signs

and wonders as *normative* has enormous implications for our approach to the Christian life.

Therefore, I am not attempting to respond comprehensively to all aspects of the Vineyard movement. My concern, rather, is to focus on the pastoral implications of expecting miraculous demonstrations of God's power in every-day Christian living. I begin with three affirmations which indicate ways in which the Vineyard has made a positive contribution to the church, followed by three correctives.

2. Three Affirmations

Affirmation 1 : There is a great need for the power of the Holy Spirit.

The evangelical church has been highly successful in the past fifty years. Its churches have been growing, its publishing houses have been booming, its seminaries have been bursting. It has even become a political force in the United States. Yet it is doubtful that this success has led to a decline in unbelief or godlessness.

What is often lacking, strangely enough, is a sense of God's presence and power. We make our plans (and very sophisticated and well organized plans they are, too, using the very latest techniques in market research and advertising). Then we ask God to bless our plans (since we know that Christians should pray). But I wonder if our prayers are really more than a request for God to put His stamp of approval on *our* plans. What would change if we left out the second step? In my opinion, very little.

To the extent that the Vineyard movement leads us to depend on God more consciously through prayer, it is to be welcomed. That prayer should be a priority is clear from Scripture. The early church was *devoted* to prayer (Acts 2:42). Believers are commanded: "*Devote* yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful" (Colossians 4:2). The famous Ephesians 6 description of spiritual warfare concludes with this pointed, all-encompassing admonition (verse 18): "Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints."

I frankly do not see any possibility of our Baptist churches recovering fresh spiritual vigour without a determined effort to make prayer a priority in our private and corporate life. Surely prayer is central to the evangelical tradition we hold dear. We often hear of missionaries who experience dramatic answers to prayer,³ or read of believers facing persecution who see living proof of the power of God when they pray.⁴ It is surely no accident that the early church (see Acts 4:23-31) found power to face a crisis of major proportion when they turned to God in prayer. We need to recover that same humble confidence in God. I am pleased that Wimber places a strong emphasis on prayer. In doing so, he is standing squarely in the evangelical tradition.

Affirmation 2: There is a great need to focus on the victory of Christ.

That evangelical forces are beleaguered seems paradoxical, in view of their apparent success. Yet the evangelical church seems powerless to shake off a pervasive weariness in the face of the rapid secularization of Western society, a numbing inaction in the face of resurgent world religions like Islam, and an anxious inability to understand the cultural forces that hold sway over the younger generation. The combined effect of these modern challenges to Christianity is that many churches and individuals I know are gripped by a fearful passivity. They are “hunkered down,” waiting for the Lord’s return and hoping it will be soon—not, it seems to me, so much from a love of the life to come, as from a strong desire to flee from cultural forces that threaten to overwhelm them.

Now if there is one thing that the Vineyard offers people, it is a strong sense of the victory of Christ over *all* the powers that oppose God’s people. One charismatic friend summed up her perception of the difference between mainline churches and charismatic churches this way: “You teach people to live with their problems; we teach people to overcome them.” Read through Wimber’s books, and you will come away with a strong sense of the victory of Christ over every evil power. Satan is still a powerful enemy, but he is a *defeated* enemy. Satan’s evil influence can still be seen, but Christ has invaded the kingdom of darkness to bring forth a people for Himself against whom no weapon of the evil one shall prevail. The underlying rationale in much that the Vineyard does is this: Christ’s power has broken in a decisive way into human history to free those oppressed by the power of evil. The good news of the gospel is that God’s power is available to all who believe on Christ as Saviour and Lord.

This emphasis I find lacking in many Baptist churches. We need to rediscover the truth expressed in Ephesians 6:10-18. Human life is the arena of a mighty spiritual struggle, in which Satan and his cohorts, though decisively defeated at the cross and the empty tomb of Christ, nevertheless war against God’s people. But we can be confident in the midst of this warfare! God has provided His people with spiritual weapons, weapons moreover which can overcome all the flaming arrows of the evil one (Ephesians 6:16).

That such an important emphasis was disappearing from the basic mindset of the evangelical church was noted back in 1971 by Martyn Lloyd-Jones when he gave three addresses to an IFES conference on the subject, “What Is An Evangelical?” On that occasion, Lloyd-Jones noted that the IFES Statement of Faith needed to be updated to meet new challenges to the evangelical faith. He said:⁵

I want to make an addition to the basis of faith. I trust this will not surprise any of you. I am suggesting that we must make an assertion

that we believe in the existence of the devil and his spirits. It is amazing to me that we do not say this. There are so many people who really do not believe in the existence of the devil and they do not believe in evil spirits. There are people known to us who are entirely orthodox, but if you start talking to them about devil-possession and exorcism, they show quite plainly that they think you are talking nonsense.

Now we Fellowship Baptists are not in the position of formally denying the existence of the devil. Far from it. We state explicitly in our Statement of Faith (Article V) that the devil exists. But am I far from the truth to say that you can go to many of our churches without hearing much about spiritual warfare? To the extent that Wimber calls us to greater awareness of the warfare we are engaged in, we should be grateful to him.

Affirmation 3: There is a great need to experience a personal walk with God.

One reason for the attraction of the Vineyard movement is undoubtedly the sense of being in touch with the living God on a moment-by-moment basis. There is an expectation of receiving guidance and power from God that is tailor-made to one's situation. People in the Vineyard expect that God will speak, direct, and act in tangible, visible, and powerful ways for the good of His children.

It is helpful in this connection to read John Wimber's own account of the "discovery" he made in the early days of his Vineyard Christian Fellowship in California. He writes:⁶

As an evangelical I thought of personal Christian growth as having two components, doctrinal faith and faithfulness. Doctrinal faith comes as we grow in understanding right doctrine or correct teaching. We know that we are growing in doctrinal faith as we grow intellectually in knowledge about God, his nature, character, how he acts, and so on. Faithfulness is character growth or the development of the fruit of the Spirit in our lives (Gal. 5:22-23). And essentially I found this to be true, but incomplete. Through this ten-month period I became aware of another dimension of Christian growth, an exercise of faith for miracles such as healing, words of knowledge, and so on. (Perhaps this is the "faith" described in 1 Cor. 12:9.) Key to this was learning how to know when God's unction or anointing had come for a task like healing in a particular situation. Emphasis on doctrinal knowledge and character development is good; this other dimension of Christian growth adds much more.

Now what Wimber "discovered" is in some respects what evangelicals

have long known, that right *notions* about God do not necessarily mean that we *know* God in a personal sense. This was the thrust of J.I. Packer's best-selling book *Knowing God*.⁷ Packer downplayed the idea of guidance for believers through extraordinary manifestations of the Spirit, urging them instead to think through the implications of their faith for the challenges of daily living. But he did not in principle deny that such extraordinary guidance could sometimes occur.

Guidance through supernatural means, then, is something evangelicals can (and do) affirm. In fact, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in his 1971 address to the IFES, chided his hearers for neglecting this (one might almost say, charismatic) side of Christian experience. Referring to Ephesians 6:12 and the great supernatural struggle described there, he said: "Is there not a tendency on our part to become intellectualists and to regard these truths as almost abstract? We talk so little about 'leadings of the Spirit' as the fathers used to, or 'prohibitions of the Spirit', and the wonderful activities of the Spirit."⁸ Here is a man of great intellectual power and unquestionable spiritual greatness, sounding the same theme in 1971 that Wimber is sounding a decade later.

Both men (along with Francis Schaeffer, whom I could quote at length in this regard) are warning us against a grave spiritual danger, namely, the over-intellectualization of our faith. Christianity, after all, is a *life* as well as a *message*. To say this is not to reduce Christianity to a social agenda devoid of supernaturally revealed truth, as the liberal churches did in the early decades of this century. But it is to recognize that that our new life in Christ is an ongoing, daily walk with a supernatural Person who will change us and lead us in some unexpected ways. As Philip E. Hughes once remarked to me, "You can't put God in a box."

This is not to say that God will act contrary to His purposes and character revealed in Scripture, but surely His ways do transcend the rational. There may well be times when we feel led to do or say things which at the time we cannot fully understand. I am not opening the door to bizarre behaviour, nor am I forgetting for a moment that we are commanded to test all things (1 Thessalonians 5:21), a test which surely includes our inner sense of being prompted by the Spirit.

My point is simply that it is not enough to conceive of the Christian life as assent to certain propositions about God (however vital those propositions may be for genuine faith, as in the letter to Galatians). We must always guard against a barren orthodoxy in which we maintain true beliefs about God while at the same time inadvertently failing to demonstrate in our daily lives the reality of the living God. It was this simultaneous commitment by Francis and Edith Schaeffer to *both* aspects of Christianity at L'Abri in Switzerland (rigorous intellectual defence of biblical truth *plus* daily demonstration of the reality of depending upon God) that proved so irresistible to a previous generation.⁹ It is time for another Schaeffer to arise to call the evangelical church to a *living demonstration* of the biblical truth we affirm.

In the meantime, we should be grateful that Wimber has reaffirmed the experiential side of biblical faith.

My appreciation for these positive emphases of the Vineyard is balanced by several correctives. In drawing attention to the following points, I am simply asking my brothers and sisters in the Vineyard to reaffirm certain biblical truths, truths which I fear are in danger of being either overlooked or denied.

3. Three Correctives

Corrective 1: God's work is not normally done through extraordinary manifestations of His power in human affairs.

I am not denying that God can or does act in dramatic ways which we would call miraculous. But I think He rarely chooses to do so, preferring instead to accomplish His purposes through more ordinary means. At issue is the degree to which we should *expect* displays of supernatural power (for example, healings) as a part of "normal" Christian living. My conviction is that displays of God's power are rare, and that to expect them as every-day occurrences leads to an unbalanced understanding of Christian discipleship.

In order not to misrepresent our brother at this point, let Wimber describe what he means by "power evangelism".

By power evangelism I mean a presentation of the gospel that is rational but that also transcends the rational. The explanation of the gospel comes with a demonstration of God's power through signs and wonders. Power evangelism is a spontaneous, Spirit-inspired, empowered presentation of the gospel. Power evangelism is evangelism that is preceded and undergirded by supernatural demonstrations of God's presence. Through these supernatural encounters people experience the presence and power of God. Usually this takes the forms of words of knowledge..., healings, prophecy, and deliverance from evil spirits. In power evangelism, resistance to the gospel is overcome by the demonstration of God's power in supernatural events, and receptivity to Christ's claims is enhanced. Power evangelism is evangelism in which supernatural knowledge of personal sin is used in evangelism. This demonstrates how far Christianity in Western society has drifted from experiences that were everyday occurrences in New Testament times.¹⁰

Now there can be no objection to the need for presentations of the gospel to be "Spirit-filled" and "empowered." But is it possible for these qualities to characterize a presentation of the gospel which lacks supernatural signs and wonders? I think so. In fact, the most gripping presentation of the gospel

I ever experienced had none of the signs and wonders which Wimber claims are an “everyday” part of gospel ministry. The occasion was Urbana 1973, and the speaker was Edmund Clowney, the self-effacing president of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Along with 15,000 other spell-bound students, I heard an address on “The Lostness of Man” that powerfully set forth the love of God for lost sinners displayed at the cross of Christ. Judging from the overflow crowd jamming into Clowney’s room the night after he spoke, I presume that many others besides myself were profoundly impacted by his message.

It seems wrong-headed to insist that God’s power to save is *on a regular basis* tied to supernatural demonstrations of the Spirit in the ways Wimber describes. The majority of Christians I know who give ongoing evidence of being genuinely converted were brought to saving faith in Christ without miraculous signs and wonders. But their conversions were no less genuine or supernatural for that. Wimber appears to be making the mistake (common to us all) of elevating his own experience (described earlier) to the status of a revealed truth. I have not the slightest doubt that Wimber-type conversions occur. I have not the slightest doubt that they are genuine. But to say that such “power” conversions are the *regular* pattern seems to be a case of pushing biblical passages beyond what they affirm—to say nothing of failing to square with the actual experience of countless Spirit-filled believers.

My concern at this point is with what J.I. Packer, in *Keep In Step With The Spirit*, calls “super-supernaturalism.” By this term Packer means the constant expectation that God will act in ways contrary to the normal course of things. To quote Packer: “For God to proceed slowly and by natural means is to [the super-supernaturalist] a disappointment, almost a betrayal. But his undervaluing of the natural, regular, and ordinary shows him to be romantically immature and weak in his grasp of the realities of creation and providence as basic to God’s work of grace.”¹¹

Packer draws attention to this same point in the 1990 *Christianity Today Institute* on “Wonder-working Power” with John Wimber and other evangelical leaders. On that occasion Packer shared the following story.

Miracles of coincidence (special providences that show God’s power and love) are just as truly miracles as are God’s works of creative power in which the happening cannot be explained in terms of what went before—like Jesus’ resurrection, and the raising of Lazarus, and the character-change involved in each Christian’s new birth. Here’s a story: Just after her conversion, my wife, standing at the bus stop to catch a bus to a meeting she needed to attend, realized she had no money for the fare. She prayed, felt it right to get on the bus anyway, took a seat, and found herself sitting next to her uncle, whom she had no reason to expect to see there, but who at once bought her ticket in the generous way that

uncles do. For her, that was a miracle—a miracle of coincidence, certainly, but no less a miracle for that; it was a wonderful sign, bringing her powerful encouragement from God, and that was what made it a miracle.¹²

Packer goes on to point out some important theistic implications of this story.

Cause-and-effect language [to describe God's "normal" means of bringing His purposes to pass in the world] makes me anxious, for it can so easily lead to the deistic thinking about the world that we need to get away from. The Western world has been talking of cause and effect since the sixteenth century, using the words to describe the regular correlations in the created order that God upholds, and there is nothing wrong with that as long as we think of the correlations theistically, as regularities directly upheld by God every moment, and not deistically, as facets of a world order that God withdrew from after he had set it going. But what needs saying in these deistic days is that God is involved in everything, and sometimes he acts in a way that calls attention to his presence, power, and purpose—whether through coincidence or some working of a regularity (a "natural law") of which the person at the receiving end has no understanding, or through genuinely new-creative exercise of his power. Every Christian's new birth should be seen as miraculous: it is the biggest sign and wonder that ever occurs anywhere since the resurrection of Jesus.¹³

Now the point Packer is making is that too strong a focus on acts of divine power which are discontinuous with the ordinary world are not intrinsically better revelations of God, since the created realm belongs to Him just as much as the "supernatural" realm. What we need (and we can thank the Vineyard for reminding us) is the confidence that God will lead and provide for His children, even if it is not usually in dramatic ways. The metaphors used by the apostle Paul to describe the Christian (farmer, soldier, athlete) point to a life of considerable toil and challenge, in which victory comes only with perseverance. We are indeed engaged in a supernatural life, but it is a seamless whole, in which the presence and power of God is displayed not only in miraculous signs and wonders (remember, we have never denied that such things occur!) but also in the more prosaic provision of strength, wisdom, and patience to meet the pressures God's people face in a fallen world.

In a word, the problem here is not that Wimber believes in signs and wonders, but that he does not give sufficient place to the less spectacular ways in which God accomplishes His purposes. This leads to my next corrective.

Corrective 2: Suffering is central to discipleship prior to glory.

This deficiency in Wimber's approach is noted by D.A. Carson in his book *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil*¹⁴ and more recently in his essay "The Purpose of Signs and Wonders in the New Testament" in the book *Power Religion*.¹⁵ In spite of some favourable comments about Wimber's understanding of the kingdom of God, Carson objects to a weakness in Wimber's concept of the Christian life.

But—and it is a very important “but”—his framework is still not large enough. He has tried to establish a theology of healing and power encounter without a theology of suffering; he has a theology of victory without an adequate theology of the cross; he has a theology of life without proper reflection on the place of death. He sees the triumph of the kingdom when sickness is overthrown, and cannot see the triumph of the kingdom when people are transformed *in the midst* of sickness [original emphasis]. He discusses God's power, but rarely wrestles with God's predilection for displaying his power in the context of continuing weakness. He encourages triumphant faith, but does not establish a broad enough grid to show that triumphant faith may be exactly what is displayed where there is raw perseverance in the face of incredible suffering. He rightly sees that sin and suffering are intrinsically evil, but he nowhere thinks through how a sovereign God in some way stands behind them, even on occasion using them as instruments of needed discipline. In short, Wimber's framework is not big enough...Wimber's approach to pain and suffering is, in my judgment, cast within a framework so theologically narrow that although it initially seems impressive it not only ignores many contexts in the gospels themselves, but fails to locate itself within a larger biblical framework that deals with the problem of evil and suffering and death more holistically.¹⁶

As Carson forcefully points out, we must beware of any view of the Christian life in which suffering is not central. The symbol Christ chose for His followers, after all, was the cross—a symbol of suffering. Suffering is what believers are destined for in this life (1 Thessalonians 2:12; Acts 22:24). It is understandable that life in a world under the control (though not sovereign control) of the devil (1 John 5:19) should be full of “crosses and losses” as previous generations of Christians used to say. To be able to have deliverance from suffering *as an every-day part of discipleship* confuses the age to come (Revelation 22:4-5) with this present evil age, in which we groan as we wait for the redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:16).

It seems to me that our understanding of victory in Christ has been massively influenced by the false gospel of success. We measure our

spirituality statistically. The more visible success, the holier (has no one read Job?). We equate visible power with victory.

It takes but a moment of leafing through the Bible to see that we are tragically off course. For in the eyes of God, human strength is actually an impediment to spiritual strength. To enter God's kingdom, we must be poor in spirit; we must become like little children; we must humble ourselves at the foot of the Cross. The Bible is replete with examples of God using human *weakness* to demonstrate, by contrast, His great power. Remember Gideon (Judges 7), the destitute widow (Mark 12:41-44), the apostle Paul (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)? Paul displays the right attitude to suffering when he describes an overwhelming difficulty he faced at one point in his ministry (2 Corinthians 1:8-10). What lesson did he draw from such enormous problems? That he needed to depend on God. As he says (verse 9), "This happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead."

Now Paul does not mean here or in 2 Corinthians 12:7 (contrary to F.F. Bosworth¹⁷) that his weakness was changed to strength in the sense that he was removed from suffering. Rather, Paul points to the paradoxical tension that characterizes the life of the believer between the first and second comings of Christ: we indeed share in Christ's victory, but we experience His victory in the context of weakness and suffering. As Paul says in Romans 8:28, "*in* all these things we are more than conquerors." In what things? Pain, persecution, deprivation, stress, pressure, temptation, satanic attack, and death. It is precisely *in* all these kinds of difficulties that we experience the victory which Wimber sees by being delivered *from* such things.

In one of the most perceptive essays I have ever read on the place of suffering in the Christian's life, Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. explains why suffering is *basic* to the church's existence.¹⁸ He begins by looking at two passages (2 Corinthians 4:7-11; Philippians 3:10) and concludes that "they are both autobiographical, but the immediate and broader context of both shows that they intend to provide a paradigm, not only for other apostles or his own generation but for all believers until Jesus comes."¹⁹

On the first passage, Gaffin comments: "Paul intends to say, as long as believers are in 'the mortal body,' 'the life of Jesus' manifests itself as 'the dying of Jesus'; the latter describes the existence mode of the former. Until the resurrection of the body at his return Christ's resurrection-life finds expression in the church's sufferings."²⁰

On the second passage, Gaffin remarks:²¹

By virtue of union with Christ, Paul is saying, the power of Christ's resurrection is realized in the sufferings of the believer; sharing in Christ's sufferings is the way the church manifests his resurrection-power. Again, as in 2 Corinthians 4:10-11, the locus of eschatological life is Christian suffering; the mark—the indelible, ineradic-

ble impression—left on the existence of the church by the formative power of the resurrection is the *Cross*. And further, this is not some merely temporary state of affairs incidental to the circumstances of the church in the apostle's own day but is for all—the whole church in whatever time and place—who aspire to the resurrection of the dead (v.11) [original emphasis].

Gaffin then turns his attention to Romans 8:18ff. Here he sees a disclosure of the breadth of suffering Christians can expect before the Lord's return.

From this perspective, then, Christian suffering is literally all the ways in which this 'weakness-existence' (v. 26) is borne, by faith, in the service of Christ—the mundane, 'trivial' but often so easily exasperating and unsettling frustrations of daily living, as well as monumental testing and glaring persecution. Suffering with Christ is the totality of existence 'in the mortal body' and within 'this world in its present form [that] is passing away' (1 Co 7:31), endured for his sake. What has to be reckoned with here is the pervasive 'givenness' of Christian suffering—its constitutive nature for the existence of the church as a whole; suffering for Christ is the inseparable correlate of believing in him—the precise point of Philippians 1:29.²²

Gaffin also reminds us that suffering is a central theme in the teaching of Jesus. Suffering and discipleship are (to use a favourite Gaffin phrase) inextricably intertwined.

The passages on suffering just considered, among others, expand on a fundamental dimension of Jesus' teaching on discipleship. The actual arrival of the eschatological kingdom in Jesus' coming means, until his return, suffering service. In the kingdom the measure of greatness is to be a servant (Mt 20:26; Mk 10:43): a key watchword of the kingdom is "very last and servant of all" (Mk 9:35). More specifically, Jesus announces as an absolutely requisite, "life-saving" condition of discipleship: "If anyone would come after me, he must take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk 9:23-24; cf. Mt 10:38; 16:24; Mk 8:34; Lk 14:27). Cross-bearing is a comprehensive description of kingdom-discipleship, as the qualification "daily" makes explicit. In response to the disciples' request for prominent kingdom status—kingdom "dominion," if you will—the only promise Jesus has for them (and us), this side of his return, is the "fellowship of sharing in his sufferings" (cf. Php 3:10): "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with" (Mk 10:37,39). John has got it just

right [in Revelation]: until Jesus comes again, the presence of the kingdom is bracketed by the realities of 'suffering' and 'endurance' (Rev 1:9; cf. 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20).²³

If Gaffin has correctly captured the nature of Christian discipleship, what becomes of the victory of Christ? Here again, Gaffin sounds an authentic New Testament note.

Most assuredly, the eschatology of the New Testament is an 'eschatology of victory'—victory presently being realized by and for the church, through the eschatological kingship of the exalted Christ (Eph 1:22). But any outlook that fails to grasp that, short of Christ's return, this eschatology of victory is an eschatology of suffering—an eschatology of (Christ's) 'power made perfect in weakness' (2 Co 12:9)—confuses the identity of the church. As Paul reminds the church...*not* 'beyond' or [only] after' but '*in* all these things' ('trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword,' [Ro 8] v.35), 'we are more than conquerors.' Until Jesus comes again, the church 'wins' by 'losing.'²⁴

Although Gaffin's essay was directed at theonomy, it strikes me as particularly relevant for the Vineyard. Wimber appears to have failed to grasp just how intimately related are suffering and discipleship. A lop-sided emphasis on deliverance from suffering does not square with the kind of discipleship described in the New Testament, nor does it ring true to the experience of millions of believers down through the centuries, including many in our own day.

We must acknowledge that God is glorified in two ways, and both ways are biblical. One way is by deliverance from suffering, as in Acts 12 (where an angel releases Peter from prison). The other way is by faithfulness in suffering, as in Acts 12 (where James is put to death; see John 21:19). Both deliverance and perseverance show the power of God, as the apt "two museums" illustration of Edith Schaeffer reminds us.²⁵

Corrective 3: Walking with God is primarily conformity to a person not a plan.

In other words, our top priority as Christians is holiness, not guidance. This is not to say that guidance is unimportant. Far from it. Indeed, one of the wonderful truths of the gospel is the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who makes real to us the presence and power of Christ. Our Lord is not only with us but in us by His Spirit (see John 14:17; Romans 8:9-11; Colossians 1:27). To be a believer is by definition to experience the moment-by-moment presence

of Christ.

The problem lies in thinking that this immediacy of fellowship with Christ will result in immediacy of guidance such as the disciples enjoyed when they walked and talked with Jesus. This is a misunderstanding of the walk of faith, which is after all not based on sight! Faith is a believing response to God's words to us (Genesis 15:4-6; Romans 4; Romans 10:17). Until the Lord's return in glory, His words are found in the Bible. This means that our primary source of guidance must be Scripture.

There is another problem with seeking immediate kinds of guidance. It fails to grasp that the essence of guidance is not conformity to a plan, so much as conformity to a Person. Romans 8:29 speaks of this overarching purpose of God in saving us. God wants us to conform to the character of His Son. In other words, guidance is needed so that we can understand the kind of people God wants us to be. The focus of guidance is therefore on being, not doing. J.I. Packer explores the thorny issue of guidance in a helpful chapter in his book *Hot Tub Religion*. He points out that the Bible word for guidance is *wisdom*—that is, discernment that grows out of a right use of Scripture. So "God's teaching in Scripture is our basic guide for living."²⁶ In this endeavour, the Holy Spirit uses the Bible to develop godliness in God's children. "The Spirit leads us by helping us understand the biblical guidelines within which we must keep, the biblical goals at which we must aim, and the biblical models that we should imitate, as well as the bad examples from which we are meant to take warning."²⁷ With these general statements, surely all Christians would agree.

From this view of the way the Spirit guides God's people through Scripture, Packer assesses the place of direct guidance.

The issue here is not whether a person's life in the Spirit is shallow or deep, as if the further one advances spiritually the more one will seek and find guidance through prophecies and inward revelations. Nor is the issue whether God has so limited himself that he will never communicate directly with present-day Christians as he did with some saints in biblical times. In my view there is no biblical warrant for correlating spiritual maturity with direct divine guidance, or for denying that God may still directly indicate his will to his servants. The real issue is two-fold: what we should expect from God in this regard, and what we should do with any invading impressions that come our way.²⁸

What should Christians do, then, when they think they have received direct guidance from God? Packer offers three guidelines.

1. If anyone today receives a direct disclosure from God, it will have no canonical significance. It will not become part of the church's rule of faith and life, nor will the church be under any

obligation to acknowledge the disclosure as revelation; nor will anyone merit blame for suspecting that the disclosure was not from God...

2. Guidance in this particular form is not promised. For it to occur is, as we have said, extraordinary, exceptional, and anomalous. No Scripture leads us to hope or to look for it...The idea that spiritual persons may expect this sort of guidance often, or that such experiences are proof of their holiness or of their call and fitness to lead others, should be dismissed out of hand.

3. Direct communications from God take the form of impressions, and impressions can come, even to the most devoted and prayerful people, from such murky sources as wishful thinking, fear, obsessional neurosis, schizophrenia, hormonal imbalance, depression, side effects of medication, and satanic delusion, as well as from God. Impressions need to be suspected before they are sanctioned and tested before they are trusted. Confidence that one's impressions are God-given is no guarantee that this really is so, even when they persist and grow stronger through long seasons of prayer. Bible-based wisdom must judge them.²⁹

Some might feel that Packer's three guidelines for dealing with direct guidance are unduly restrictive, but they strike me as wise words fully consistent both with openness to promptings of the Spirit, and with the supreme place of Scripture for guidance in the Christian life.

Some might also feel that to single out godliness (conformity to God's holy character) as our top priority as Christians is a misplaced emphasis in relation to guidance. Does God really see character development as the most important aspect of doing His will? Yes, to judge from a year-long study of the New Testament undertaken by a friend. As she read through the New Testament, she wrote down every command which clearly indicates God's will for His people. Here is what she found (some are individual references, some are extended passages).

| | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|----|
| Commands to evangelize (verbally) | - | 18 |
| Commands to pray | - | 28 |
| Commands to honour/obey Christ | - | 30 |
| Commands to guard against heresy | - | 39 |
| Commands to honour/obey God | - | 39 |
| Commands to live by the Word of God | - | 49 |
| Commands to do good to others | - | 53 |
| Commands to live a holy life | - | 75 |

Even granting some statistical inexactitude, my friend's survey strikingly illustrates the priority God places on character formation. It appears that displays of *godliness* rather than displays of power should be the

preoccupation of believers. Godliness is the supreme goal of Christian living. We are right on target when we make godliness our aim (1 Thessalonians 4:3).

4. Conclusions

An observation of Francis Schaeffer seems appropriate as we assess the Vineyard movement. In *The Great Evangelical Disaster* he wrote: "In this fallen world, things constantly swing like a pendulum, from being wrong in one extreme way to being wrong in another extreme. The devil never gives us the luxury of fighting on only one front, and this will always be the case."³⁰

What are the extremes we should avoid in assessing the Vineyard movement?

First, we can refuse to acknowledge the good that has come out of this movement. Here is the testimony of Wayne Grudem, an elder in the Vineyard Christian Fellowship in Mundelein, Illinois, who is a professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Grudem states his experience of the positive contribution of the Vineyard this way.

There have been thousands of new Christians brought into the kingdom, and hundreds of non-Vineyard churches have experienced a reawakening of evangelism, a new expectation of seeing God work in miraculous ways to confirm the proclamation of the gospel, a renewed Christ-centeredness and genuineness in worship, a strengthened ministry of prayer for healing, and an 'every member' emphasis on the use of spiritual gifts.³¹

When this kind of blessing has resulted from the Vineyard, we should praise God and give Him the glory.

But there is a second extreme to avoid. *We can neglect to test this movement's teachings and emphases by the teachings and emphases of Scripture.* When so tested, as for example by such men as D.A. Carson and James Boice in the book *Power Religion*, it becomes evident that certain emphases of the Vineyard fail to present a deeply biblical view of the gospel message. As Carson notes in his thorough essay "The Purpose of Signs and Wonders in the New Testament":³²

We may gratefully concur with the Vineyard movement that genuine signs and wonders (in the generic sense) *sometimes* [original emphasis] in the New Testament become occasional causes of belief, and that they may do so today as well. But on the evidence of Scripture, it is doubtful this theme is anywhere near as central as some think. Occasional causes of faith include any number of personal experiences: personal tragedies, a kind deed performed by a friend, a good argument, a deep friendship, a

sudden bereavement, some Christian music, an exorcism. But biblical evangelism is not substandard when any one of these phenomena is lacking—and it is not substandard when no genuine sign or wonder is performed. Serious imbalance in this area is in danger of distorting the gospel itself.

We may probe further into this problem of proportion and ask if the emphasis on signs and wonders in the Vineyard makes it difficult to articulate and teach a theology of suffering, a theology of faithfulness, a theology of perseverance, a theology of the Word of God, a theology of the cross, a theology of the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit—all of which are far more central to biblical thought, and far more important to Christian maturity, than the power of signs and wonders to serve as an occasional cause of faith.

What we need is balance. We must be open to the working of the Holy Spirit while *simultaneously* testing all things by the written Word of God. After all, the divine Author of Scripture never leads us to discount what He caused to be “written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we may have hope” (Romans 15:4).

¹For a sympathetic yet shrewd appraisal of the charismatic movement, see J.I. Packer, *Keep In Step With The Spirit* (Old Tappan: Revell, 1984), 170-199. For some illuminating comments regarding the social and religious factors that have shaped the charismatic movement, see Jonathan Muether, “The Theonomic Attraction,” in *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*, edited by William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 246-252. Muether sees some close parallels between theonomy and the charismatic movement (251): “Both urge believers to ‘name it and claim it,’ to take control and have dominion over their lives. Charismatics have tended to apply this thinking to their personal lives; it is for some charismatics the key to their health and wealth. Theonomy is teaching charismatics to extend dominion thinking to the political and social realm as well.”

²“Wonder-working Power,” *Christianity Today* (March 19, 1990), 34.

³In connection with the power of prayer, Elisabeth Elliot in *A Slow And Certain Light* (Waco: Word, 1973), 81, tells the following story: “I have never forgotten hearing Dr. Virginia Blakeslee of Africa tell how angels delivered her from hostile people (I think they were cannibals). She did not know at the time what it was that drove them back as they charged into the clearing where her hut was. She only knew that as she was praying and they were dancing around the hut with their weapons in their hands, something made them flee. This happened on several different nights. Finally the leader of the group came to her in the daytime asking her to be allowed to

see the men who were guarding her. Bewildered, she said there was no one. The man searched her hut, and finding nothing, described to her the strong men with swords who had come out of her hut as the cannibals danced.”

⁴See the story of Georgi Vins in his *Konshaubi: A True Story of Persecuted Christians in the Soviet Union* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988).

⁵Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *What Is An Evangelical?* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1992), 80.

⁶John Wimber and Kevin Springer, *Power Evangelism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 43-44.

⁷Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1974.

⁸Lloyd-Jones, *What Is An Evangelical?*, 45.

⁹The story of the Schaeffer's life and ministry is told by Edith Schaeffer in *L'Abri* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1969) and *The Tapestry* (Waco: Word, 1981).

¹⁰Wimber, *Power Evangelism*, 35.

¹¹Packer, *Keep In Step*, 194.

¹²“Wonder-working Power,” *Christianity Today*, 31.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990.

¹⁵Edited by Michael Horton (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992).

¹⁶Carson, *How Long?*, 124-126.

¹⁷See F.F. Bosworth, *Christ The Healer* (Old Tappan: Revell, 1973), 195-196.

¹⁸Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., “Theonomy and Eschatology: Reflections on Postmillennialism,” in *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*, 197-224.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 211.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 212.

²¹*Ibid.*, 213.

²²*Ibid.*, 214.

²³*Ibid.*, 215.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 216.

²⁵See Edith Schaeffer, *Affliction* (Old Tappan: Revell, 1978), 67-110. Schaeffer posits two museums in heaven as a way of describing the two-fold way in which God demonstrates His power in the lives of Christians. One museum shows how God answers the prayers of His people through granting them deliverance; the other shows how He answers by granting them perseverance.

²⁶J.I. Packer, *Hot Tub Religion* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1987), 119.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 123.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 125.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 125-127.

³⁰Francis Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1984), 150.

³¹Wayne Grudem, “The Vineyard's Response to The Standard,” *Vineyard Position Paper #3* (Anaheim: Association of Vineyard Churches, 1992), 23.

³²Carson, “The Purpose of Signs and Wonders in the New Testament,” in

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