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A table of contents for *Vox Evangelica* can be found here:

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# THE RECOVERY OF MISSION *Vinoth Ramachandra*

In recent years the term 'religious pluralism' has come to be used not only in a descriptive sociological sense but also as theologically prescriptive. Within this new paradigm, traditional Christian understandings of Christ, conversion, evangelism, mission etc. have been radically re-interpreted. *The Recovery of Mission* explores the pluralist paradigm through the work of three of its most influential Asian exponents, subjecting each to a theological and philosophical critique. From biblical, patristic and contemporary theological writings, it argues for the uniqueness and decisiveness of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. The author seeks to show that many of the valid concerns of pluralist theologians can best be met by rediscovering and re-appropriating the missionary thrust at the heart of the gospel. The book ends with suggestions, challenging to pluralists and conservatives alike, as to how the gospel needs to be communicated in a multi-faith world.

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## LOOK BACK IN WONDER? REVIEWING THE POWER EVANGELISM OF JOHN WIMBER

DAVID GIBB

### I. INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

The name John Wimber has become familiar to many Christians in Britain in the last fifteen years. Although he has pastored a church in Anaheim, California, and spent most of his time there, his influence on the British church scene has been significant. The American leader of the 'Vineyard' movement (which has become synonymous with the 'signs and wonders' movement), Wimber has attracted a great deal of publicity, and not a little controversy. Much has been written about him and most of it is fairly partisan. For some, Wimber represents all that is wrong about an unhealthy preoccupation with the miraculous, whilst for others he is one of the few Christian leaders who offers hope for ordinary believers, encouraging them to experience the 'power of God'. With such a diverse reaction which has often been fuelled by extraordinary claims on either side the problem for many has been to discern who is right.

Wimber has recently spoken of his intention to retire gradually from the public scene, and so perhaps it is appropriate at this point to review some aspects of his teaching once more. His *Power Evangelism* was the first of his books to be published in this country and in it he set out his distinctive approach to the church's mission.<sup>1</sup> Eleven years and one revision after its publication we intend in this article to return to the subject: recalling Wimber's contribution and then posing a number of questions of his position.

### II. A SUMMARY OF WIMBER'S POSITION

Fundamental to Wimber's approach to evangelism, healing, church growth, spiritual warfare (and almost everything else) is his understanding of the kingdom of God. This is, largely speaking, one

<sup>1</sup> John Wimber with Kevin Springer, *Power Evangelism* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, orig. ed. 1985).

which many conservative evangelicals would happily embrace. Influenced by George Eldon Ladd, he believes that the kingdom of God has dawned and is at war with the kingdom of Satan. We await the final victory when the consummation of the kingdom will take place on the basis of the decisive work achieved by Christ on the cross. In this in-between stage believers are to advance the kingdom of God, aware that they are involved in war and conflict with the kingdom of Satan.

But this conflict or clash is a necessary part of the demonstration of the arrival of the kingdom of God. It is in this context that 'signs and wonders' occur. 'Signs and wonders' attested Jesus and the apostles, but they were also demonstrations of the kingdom's arrival and power. Similarly in the church's evangelism, 'signs and wonders' assume an apologetic function, and conversions in contemporary evangelism should be accompanied by 'signs and wonders' (which include exorcisms, healings and words of knowledge), and these are to be expected because they are a necessary by-product of the two kingdoms in conflict. That is not to say that such manifestations will occur *every* time the gospel is proclaimed, but it ought to be the norm.

This view of evangelism is perhaps *the* major contribution made by Wimber. Indeed it was his views on this issue, that 'power evangelism' is a necessary part of Christian witness, which led to his fame amongst evangelicals in the early 1980s.<sup>2</sup> Wimber claims that much of the west's evangelistic efforts are devoted to reaching the minds and hearts of people through message-centred communication, through rational debate or argument (what he termed 'programmatically evangelism'). Wimber sees the need for a different emphasis in evangelism altogether. He believes that instead of evangelising out of obedience to, for instance, the 'great commission' of Matthew 28:18-20, people should go when they are prompted to do so by the Holy Spirit. By depending on the Holy Spirit's guidance the result is likely to be more successful. In the first edition of his *Power Evangelism* he argued:

By its very nature and assumptions, programmatically evangelism tends to have as its goal decisions for Christ, not disciples. Many people who make decisions do not encounter God's

<sup>2</sup> It was primarily through the Anglican Evangelical David Watson that John Wimber was introduced to this country. Through Watson's book, *Fear No Evil* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984), which recorded his experience of suffering with cancer, Wimber became better known as it related his statement, 'I believe that God wants to heal you' (25). It was in 1985, the year after David Watson's death, that *Power Evangelism* was published in this country.

power and thus frequently do not move on to a mature faith. Because there is something inadequate about their conversion experience, later growth for many is retarded.<sup>3</sup>

He went on to claim:

My contention is not that programmatically evangelism has been wrong... My point is that programmatically evangelism is often incomplete, lacking demonstration of the kingdom of God in signs and wonders – but this in no way invalidates the gospel presentation.<sup>4</sup>

However, in the recently revised edition, Wimber has modified his position somewhat:

In the first edition we left the reader with the impression that we were criticising programmatically evangelism in its entirety. In fact, we believe in programmatically evangelism and practise it.<sup>5</sup>

But even if programmatically evangelism is not bad, the implication remains that power evangelism is still better. What characterises this form of evangelism is a conscious co-operation with the Holy Spirit<sup>6</sup> so that along with the proclamation of gospel truth goes the expectation and encouragement of miraculous activity. Wimber claims that:

In power evangelism, resistance to the gospel is overcome by the demonstration of God's power, and receptivity to Christ's claims is usually very high.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Wimber, *Power Evangelism* (orig. ed. 1985), 56-57. In this original edition Wimber offered various criticisms of 'programmatically evangelism': the heart of the evangelistic task was a presentation of several steps needed to enter a relationship with Christ; an emphasis on organisation or technique, usually a one-way communication and a prepared message given by a speaker to passive listeners; an assumption that if people understood the propositions they would decide to become Christians. In power evangelism people are vulnerable, whereas in programmatically evangelism people are sure about what they will say. 'In programmatically evangelism... we do something and then God works. In power evangelism, God speaks and then we act' (56-57).

<sup>4</sup> Wimber, *Power Evangelism* (orig. ed. 1985), 57.

<sup>5</sup> John Wimber with Kevin Springer, *Power Evangelism* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, rev. ed. 1992), 16. All subsequent citations are from this revised edition.

<sup>6</sup> Wimber, *Power Evangelism*, 78-79.

<sup>7</sup> Wimber, *Power Evangelism*, 78-79.

Wimber finds this combination of 'proclamation' and 'demonstration' in Jesus' ministry. In fact, one of the three questions Wimber claims to have asked himself when he was thinking through the issue of 'power evangelism' was, 'how did Jesus evangelise?'<sup>8</sup> It is this assumption, that Jesus was involved in 'power evangelism', that led Wimber to conclude that Jesus commissioned his disciples to continue the ministry which he began.<sup>9</sup>

And this is a central element of Wimber's thesis. Jesus authorised his apostles, and through them churches, to do the works he was doing. He also rebuked them for their unbelief when they failed to do so, and held them responsible. Thus contemporary churches find themselves still mandated to continue this ministry of Jesus. But it is not merely that we *can* do what Jesus did. Wimber reads this as a command: we *must* do what Jesus did if we are to see dramatic church growth.

### III. REFLECTIONS ON WIMBER'S POSITION

#### 1. How far should the conflict between Jesus and Satan control our understanding of his and our ministry?

There is little doubt that Wimber is correct to highlight the importance of the theme of the kingdom of God in Jesus' ministry. Jesus understands his miracles and exorcisms to be direct results of the 'in-breaking' of God's saving rule into the world through him (Matt. 12:28-29). The exorcisms demonstrate the power of Jesus over the powers of hell. But Wimber is prone to see the conflict between hell and heaven behind *everything* that Jesus says or does, and in majoring on this he overdoes an important but, nonetheless, secondary theme. The following excerpt is a good example:

Jesus never met a demon that he liked, and he met them frequently. Demon-expulsion is a direct attack by Jesus on Satan, a primary goal of Jesus' mission. 'The reason the Son of God appeared', John writes in his first letter, 'was to destroy the devil's work' (1 John 3:8).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Wimber, *Power Evangelism*, 85. The other two questions were, 'how did Jesus commission the disciples?' and 'in the light of their commissioning, how did the disciples evangelise?'

<sup>9</sup> The four 'classic' texts that Wimber uses are Matthew 10:7-8, Matthew 28:18-20, Mark 16:9-20 and John 14:12.

<sup>10</sup> Wimber, *Power Evangelism*, 166.

Here Wimber links a verse that at first sight has a fairly general meaning with the specific activity of 'possession' (or as Wimber prefers to call it, 'demonisation'<sup>11</sup>). As a result, he is in danger of minimising Satan's work, seeing all references in the New Testament to Satan's activity as meaning 'demonisation', and so over-emphasising the role of exorcism, its only remedy.

It is Mark's gospel more than any other that emphasises Jesus' exorcisms, and Wimber uses Mark's demoniac in Capernaum (1:21-28) and the Gerasene demoniac (5:1-20) as examples. He also majors on the incident in which Peter is rebuked by Jesus (8:31-9:1), seeing a link here between Mark's use of *epitimēsen* (rebuke) and his use of the same word in Jesus' silencing demonic activity in the synagogue at Capernaum (1:25).<sup>12</sup> But on this basis it could equally be argued that Peter saw demonic activity in Jesus' words, for Mark uses *epitiman* to describe how Peter disagreed with Jesus. Perhaps it is a little facetious to ask why it was that Jesus didn't seem to think it necessary to perform an exorcism on Peter despite his harsh words!

Even in Mark's gospel, however, the exorcism motif does not dominate and is used in conjunction with other more prominent themes (especially that of conflict and opposition which leads to Jesus' rejection).<sup>13</sup> The primary function of the motif, it seems, is christological and serves to enhance other important themes in the ministry of Jesus. However, Wimber understands the Markan exorcisms to have prescriptive force for the church and to be the chief framework for understanding Jesus' ministry.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Wimber prefers to use this term because it has a broader scope of meaning than 'possession'; see his 'Deliverance: Can a Christian be demonized?', in *Spiritual Warfare, A Conference Reader* (Anaheim: Mercy/Vineyard Ministries International, 1988), 97-107.

<sup>12</sup> Wimber, 'Deliverance: Can a Christian be demonized?', 100.

<sup>13</sup> On Mark 1:21-28, for example, see E.K. Broadhead, 'Jesus the Nazarene: Narrative Strategy and Christological Imagery in the Gospel of Mark', *JSNT* 52 (1993), 7, who argues that 'the focus of the story falls not on bare power, but on the authority of Jesus' message'. The healing of the Gerasene demoniac (5:1-20) serves to develop the theme of Jesus' identity; it also shows something of his compassion (5:19) and his expectation that the healed man will 'declare' (5:19) to his family what 'the Lord' has done for him. The incident with the Syro-Phoenician woman (7:24-30) serves to show Jesus' concern for 'outsiders' and his power over demons even at a distance. The healing of the boy with a deaf-mute spirit (9:14-29) shows how powerful the unclean spirit is, how powerless the crowd, the scribes, and the disciples are, and how supremely powerful Jesus is in being the only exorcist able to succeed.

<sup>14</sup> E.F. Kirschner, 'The Place of the Exorcism Motif in Mark's Christology with Special Reference to Mark 3:22-30' (CNA: Unpublished PhD Thesis, 1988), in his study of the Markan exorcisms emphasises the uniqueness of Jesus' ministry: 'Jesus as an exorcistic figure is presented as unique. Even the disciples are not to emulate him. They

Elsewhere Wimber argues that Peter's denial in Luke (22:54-62) 'was the result of demonisation',<sup>15</sup> but despite Luke having already pointed to Satan's involvement in the falling away of the disciples during the events of the Passion there is no obvious indication in the text that Peter was demonised, and exorcism isn't offered as a remedy. Rather than seeing demons behind Peter's actions, the point seems to be that by putting his own security and welfare first Peter finds himself on the opposite side to Jesus – Satan's – a far more subtle and dangerous form of 'demonisation' than Wimber is committed to. Wimber seems unable to understand that the presence or mention of Satan in the text does not have to mean that he is possessing or 'demonising' anyone.

Sickness, famine, poverty, and sin have all come about because of our rebellion against God, and they all find their *source* in Satan (i.e. *indirectly* Satan stands behind all of these evils). But it is not true to say that he stands behind each in exactly the same way, and even though he is their source I am not freed from my own responsibilities. The reader of Wimber's books is forced to see this conflict between Jesus and Satan as the *primary* framework by which he or she should interpret the world, and a Satan whose primary means of attack is by possession. It is this that encourages the pursuit of exorcism and healing. The Son appeared to destroy the devil's work (1 John 3:8), but it is also true that he appeared so that we could have fellowship with

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have to depend on prayer and faith (Mk. 9:18b-19, 28f.) to perform an exorcism whereas Jesus relies on his own resources (9:25) (209).

15 John Wimber with Kevin Springer, *Power Healing* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1986), 130. Wimber argues for this on the basis of Luke 22:31-32 where Jesus says, 'Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you (*humas*) as wheat. But I (*egō de*) have prayed for you (*sou*), Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.' A number of comments should be made here:

(1) Luke has Jesus using *humas*, so although Peter is to undergo some sort of 'testing' by Satan (perhaps calling to mind Job 1-2), Jesus does not mean that Peter is being singled out from the rest of the disciples for special treatment from Satan; rather it will be the common experience of all the disciples to undergo this 'testing'.

(2) Jesus goes on to say that he has prayed specifically for Peter (Luke uses *sou*), and the use of *egō de* serves to highlight Jesus' superiority to Satan and thus Peter's eventual success. But Peter is assured of this because Jesus intends for him to strengthen his brothers. Far from Satan singling out Peter for some special 'testing', then, it is Jesus who singles him out as the one disciple who will strengthen the others. On this, see Peter T. O'Brien, 'Prayer in Luke-Acts', *TynB* 24 (1973), 111-27 (esp. 115-16).

(3) Earlier in the narrative Luke has stated that 'Satan entered Judas' (22:3). Although Luke is willing to refer to Satan 'entering' Judas here, he does not refer to Satan's treatment of Peter and the other disciples in this way. We might conclude that whereas Luke seems to infer that Judas is possessed, he does not allow his readers to draw the same conclusion from Jesus' words to Peter and the other disciples.

the Father through the witness of the apostles (1 John 1:2-3). Satan's battle with God and his elect is an important theme in the New Testament but it is not the principal one.

## 2. How far should we imitate Jesus and the apostles?

The tendency to seek to imitate the apostles and the early church is illustrated by Greig and Springer in their apologia of Wimber and the Vineyard movement, *The Kingdom and the Power*.<sup>16</sup> In one of their appendices they state that although 'evangelism without signs and wonders is not substandard', nonetheless 'it is biblically abnormal to ignore or resist the way Jesus, the apostles, and the Early Church laity evangelized by preaching accompanied with the use of spiritual gifts and healing'.<sup>17</sup> Such comments we believe assume too much on the basis of too little:

(a) Because Jesus' ministry occurs before his work on the cross this necessarily distinguishes his ministry and that of the disciples from any ministry which occurs *after* the cross. We must carefully delineate the form of 'evangelism' he was engaged in, and we may well conclude that the two forms of ministry, though similar in some respects, are significantly different in both function and purpose.

(b) In the Acts of the Apostles it seems that the function of the material is to demonstrate through the accounts of the witnesses (specifically Peter and Paul – not *all* the apostles and certainly not the 'Early Church laity!') that such testimony is propelled to 'the ends of the earth'; that through the giving of the Spirit a new age is ushered in, one that was anticipated in Isaiah 44:3-5, Jeremiah 31:29-34, Ezekiel 11:19-20, 36:25-27, and Joel 2, and which is now 'for all flesh'. In short, Luke is concerned to show how Jesus fulfils the Old Testament's hope of the prophetic Spirit and the prophecy of John the Baptist (Luke 3:16; Acts 1:5). Thus Carson suggests that 'the way Luke tells the story, Acts provides not a paradigm for individual Christian experience, but the account of the gospel's outward movement, geographically, racially, and above all theologically'.<sup>18</sup> This does not mean that Luke provides us *simply* with a description, but that in the first place *he is not giving us prescription*.

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16 Gary S. Greig and Kevin N. Springer (eds.), *The Kingdom and the Power* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1993).

17 'Power Evangelism and the New Testament Evidence', in Greig and Springer (eds.), *The Kingdom and the Power*, 386-87.

18 D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 150.

(c) We might well agree that contemporary evangelism will occur with the use of 'spiritual gifts', but what leads Greig and Springer to conclude that the Sovereign God will always dispense only those more 'dramatic' gifts of healing and casting out demons?

Moreover, then we must consider the nature and purpose of the gospels themselves. The writers are not at all shy at setting out their agendas (cf. Matt. 1:1; Mark 1:1; Luke 1:1-4; John 20:30-31), and they seek to force their readers to decide how they will respond to Jesus. In other words, the gospels are *primarily* about how we must react and respond to Jesus' ministry. In this sense, Jesus is being held up as the one in whom we should trust and believe. As God's Son he suffers and dies for us; his unique 'position' and function 'distance' him from us.

The fact that 'the Word became flesh' necessarily means that a particular history becomes significant. At one level, once we accept that God has come in the flesh to a particular place and at a particular time we necessarily elevate that place and time and make it our reference point. If the New Testament's claim is that at one stage in space-time history God revealed himself to us, then those events are epoch-making, they are distinct, they are foundational. In this respect, the gospels' presentation of Jesus, the 'once-for-all' nature of the events that they refer to, and the very fact that the gospels were written at all point to a Jesus who is not primarily to be imitated, but to be confessed as 'Christ, the Son of God' (e.g. Mark 1:1).

The apostles, likewise, are different from us. It is not that they are more special, but that the historical position they held in relation to the Christ-event necessarily distinguishes and distances them from us. Functionally we are different because they were called by Jesus to carry on his ministry both during his lifetime and after in a way that the rest of Christendom is not. They are referred to as 'witnesses' and they had the responsibility of safeguarding the gospel and Jesus' teaching *before* any of it was written down. They lived at a different stage from us in God's revelation to humanity, for they witnessed Jesus' ministry and demonstrated their sharing in it to the various 'outsiders' (Matt. 10). They are the ones on whom the Spirit fell first (Acts 2) and who were given the mission of witnessing to these events beyond the racial boundaries of Judaism: taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. In all these respects they are different from us.

Does this mean, then, that the gospels do not invite us to imitate Christ? I think not. It is certainly clear that there are times when Jesus expects all his disciples (not just the Twelve) to follow his example. For instance, Mark records Jesus teaching his disciples that he will 'suffer

many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again' (8:31), and two verses later he tells his disciples that if a man wants to follow him, 'let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.' In this instance, Jesus' disciples imitate their master in suffering and dying, but Mark does not say that they too will rise again three days after their deaths, and nor does he claim that their deaths will achieve the same purpose that Jesus' death does, since he is 'the Christ' (8:29).

Similarly, later in Mark (10:42-45), when, after a disagreement, Jesus instructs his disciples on the importance of servanthood there are clear signs of continuity and discontinuity in the imitation of Jesus. Whilst the idea of service links the behaviour of the disciples with that of Jesus (10:44-45), *only* Jesus gives his life 'as a ransom for many'.<sup>19</sup> Hence the gospels at certain points *expect* and *invite* their readers to imitate Jesus, but where they do we must be careful to delimit them so that we avoid inappropriate or unwarranted conclusions. Thus, on occasions Jesus does encourage his disciples to imitate him, but where such invitations are made we must be careful to recognise the parameters which limit them.

Any attempt, then, to find continuities between the ministry of the contemporary church and the ministry of Jesus and the apostles must recognise these fundamental *discontinuities*. Our role, though important, is fundamentally different from that of Jesus and the apostles; although we witness to Christ through our own relationship to him (subjective) we also witness to the apostles' testimony (objective and historically particular) about Jesus which has been recorded for us in authoritative documents.

### 3. What should we make of the commission in Matthew 10?

One of the chief texts that Wimber appeals to is the commission of the Twelve in Matthew 10. He reminds us of the commission in Matthew 28:18-20 where Jesus tells his disciples to teach new disciples to 'obey everything I have commanded you'. Wimber asks, What had he commanded them? And he comes up with the commission of Matthew 10: to preach that the kingdom of heaven is near, to heal the sick, to raise the dead, to cleanse those with leprosy and to drive out demons.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> See Ernest Best, *The Temptation and the Passion: The Markan Soteriology*, SNTSMS 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990 2nd edn.), 155.

<sup>20</sup> John Wimber, 'Learning To Minister Like Jesus', in *Signs and Wonders and Church Growth Part II* (Anaheim: Vineyard Ministries International, 1985).



Wimber establishes a link between these two texts simply on the basis that Jesus, in Matthew 28:18-20, instructs his disciples to teach new disciples 'all' of his commands, and that in chapter 10 he sends the Twelve out with certain 'instructions'. But it is naive to suggest that such links exist simply because the earlier text included some of Jesus' commands to the disciples.<sup>21</sup>

On the same basis we might appeal to Jesus' 'commands' to his two disciples to go ahead of him to Bethphage to fetch the donkey and colt before his entry into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:1-3). If we are to follow Wimber's logic then we should treat such a command in the same sense that he expects Christians to treat other commands of Jesus. But, not surprisingly, we do not find him instructing people to visit Jerusalem to re-enact this particular incident, presumably because he recognises that the primary function of some texts (at least) is to *describe* what took place at a particular time, and not to encourage imitation.<sup>22</sup> Wimber is thus able to decide which commands are normative and which are descriptive. But on what basis does he do this? It might be argued that because Wimber has a certain agenda (to encourage the contemporary church to recover a miraculous ministry) his understanding of how these two texts relate to each other determines his treatment of them. In his desire to encourage the ministry of exorcism and healing, and because he genuinely believes that they are crucial to the church's mission, he concludes that these two passages are linked despite there being no mention of such a ministry in Matthew 28:18-20.<sup>23</sup> Such

21 Jon Ruthven, *On the Cessation of the Charismata: The Protestant Polemic on Postbiblical Miracles*, JPTS 3 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 118, contends that 'Jesus' charismatic mission (summarized in Acts 2:22; 10:38) continues in the commissions to his disciples (Mt. 10; Lk. 9 and 10 and Mt. 28:19-20, cf. 24:14) "until the end of the age". Ruthven takes issue with Colin Brown's assertion that because the commissions in Luke 9 and 10 were specific, brief and limited to the Jews at that time, the commands to heal and exorcise demons have no application to the contemporary reader, by claiming that this is not the pattern that emerges from Acts. But although miracles were a feature of the witness of the early church, their association in Acts is most often with the apostles. See Colin Brown, 'The Other Half of the Gospel? (The Role of Miracles in the Contemporary Church)', *Christianity Today* 33 (21 April 1989), 29.

22 This comparison might seem a little unfair; after all Jesus' commands to his disciples in Matthew 10 almost certainly seem to form part of the background to his later command to them in Matthew 28:18-20, whereas the instructions Jesus gives to the two to go to Bethphage seem to fit the category of a 'one-off' command that does not point to any other similar command. However, the question here is not so much 'are there links?' – for clearly there are – but 'what are the links, and on what basis do we decide that links exist?', i.e. it is important to discover by what criteria Wimber or anyone else might conclude that these two texts are linked and what exactly those links are.

23 Since the days of the Baptist pioneer missionary William Carey (see his famous *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*

comments might seem facetious, but they raise important issues of interpretation and contemporary application.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, although it is true that the early Christians came to see in the miracles of Jesus evidence that the reign of God had at least begun among them, and despite their on-going proclamation of the arrival of that kingdom of God, it seems clear that the commission of Matthew 10 and its parallels (Luke 9 and 10) was not to be interpreted as a basis for the church to heal *all* the sick, or raise *all* the dead, or cleanse *all* the lepers, or cast out *all* the unclean spirits. If the command to raise the dead had been seen as a universal mandate then the early Christians significantly failed in this regard since none of them are around today! And if they had succeeded then such a consistent record of healing and raising the dead would hardly have gone unnoticed in the ancient world; we would surely have clear indications from both Christian and pagan sources of such miracles if they had occurred. This failure of the early Christians would have produced enough 'signs' to have convinced many that Christianity was no better than most first-century religious cults.

#### 4. What is the place of signs and wonders in the New Testament?

It is quite remarkable that even at the time of the New Testament the miracles that we have recorded were 'limited' to the apostles and a small group of those who were recognised by the apostles. The Acts of the Apostles certainly records miracles performed through the early Christians, but miracles and more specifically 'signs and wonders' (as a

[1792], conveniently reprinted in Timothy George, *Faithful Witness: The Life and Mission of William Carey* [Leicester: IVP, 1991]), these verses have inspired the modern missionary movement (see R.C. Bassham, *Mission Theology 1948-1975, Years of Worldwide Creative Tension: Ecumenical, Evangelical, and Roman Catholic* [Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1979]). Wimber himself (as the former founding head of the Department of Church Growth at the Charles E. Fuller Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth in Pasadena, and as a former adjunct Professor at the School of World Missions – Institute of Church Growth at Fuller Theological Seminary) would not be unaware of the historical importance that evangelical churches (and others) have attributed to Matthew 28:18-20 in this regard. This might explain his motivation in marrying 'the Great Commission' with the commission of Matthew 10, for if Wimber could persuade the same constituency that the one text assumes the other then he would see a significant change in approaches to evangelism along the lines he espouses.

24 Again, it is likely that Wimber would not hold to the belief that all of Jesus' commands *should* be adhered to today. Clearly some of Jesus' commands were temporary and particular to a certain historical and redemptive context. But this is precisely our point: it is naive to use Matthew 28:20 as a 'proof-text' for claiming a mandate to engage in a contemporary charismatic healing and deliverance ministry.

linguistic category at least) are frequently linked to the apostles and those closely associated with them.<sup>25</sup>

In Acts *sēmeia* ('signs') occurs eleven times to refer to miracles, including nine occasions where it occurs with *terata* ('wonders'). The first two occurrences of *sēmeia kai terata* ('signs and wonders') come in Peter's sermon, the first in citing Joel 2:28-32 with the promise of the Spirit of prophecy (2:19, actually *terata kai sēmeia*) and the second in describing God's acts amongst the people through Jesus (2:22). On this occasion, *sēmeia kai terata* is used to describe, on the one hand, what the Son has done through the Spirit, i.e. the work that he has done through the Spirit's ministry of prophetic endowment, resulting in Peter being able to interpret the Scriptures and the church being able to speak 'the word of God boldly'; and, on the other hand, what God has done through Jesus, i.e. the work that he has done on earth through Jesus' ministry, his death and resurrection, resulting in his ultimate vindication. In both cases the 'results' are seen to rest on the Christ-event, such that the use of *sēmeia*, as in the Old Testament (see further below), is linked to a significant redemptive-historical act.

Of the remaining nine occurrences of *sēmeia*, there are two clear references to the work done by the apostles (2:43; 5:12) and a possible third (4:30), two references to the work of Paul with his associate Barnabas (14:3; 15:12), two references to the work of Philip in Samaria (8:6, 13), one reference to the work done by Stephen (6:8) and one reference to the Exodus event in Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin (7:36).

This is not to suggest that miracles did not occur through other Christians, or to imply that miracles should not be expected in the contemporary church; it is simply to place the post-resurrection, post-Pentecost 'signs and wonders' in their context. Rightly understood, the focus is not so much on the apostles and their associates as *models*, though undoubtedly in many respects they are, but on the *message* of the Christ-event they uniquely testify to and pass on. In so far as the 'signs and wonders' they perform bear witness to this climax of salvation-history they remain peculiar to the apostles and those associated with them.

We have already noted that the phrase *sēmeia kai terata*, in Acts at least, is limited to describing some of the activity of the apostles, but we

<sup>25</sup> For more on this, see John Woodhouse, 'Signs and wonders in the Bible', in Robert Doyle (ed.), *Signs & Wonders and Evangelicals* (Randburg: Fabel, 1987), 30-35.

should also note that although the term often refers to works of God, it is also used by the gospel writers to denote the work of false prophets. John Bright's comments are instructive:

In the language of the Synoptic Gospels, at least, the miracles of Christ are never spoken of as 'signs and wonders' (*sēmeia kai terata*), i.e., self-authenticating exhibitions of divine power designed to prove the claims of Jesus in the eyes of the people. Indeed, such 'signs' (i.e., marvels) were precisely the sort of thing Christ refused to perform (e.g., Mark 8:11-12; Matt. 12:38-40). False messiahs are the ones who show off with 'signs and wonders' (Mark 13:22; Matt. 24:24), and for Jesus to have done likewise would have been, from that point of view at least, the flat disproof of his claim to be the true Messiah. On the contrary, his miracles are 'mighty works' ('powers,' *dunameis*) of the kingdom of God.<sup>26</sup>

It seems also that 'signs and wonders' should not, strictly speaking, be simply equated with 'miracles'. 'Signs and wonders' (or some variant) in the Old Testament usually denotes those miraculous redemptive acts of God, in particular the Exodus (e.g., Exod. 3:20; 7:3; 8:23; 10:1; 11:9, 10; 15:11; Num. 14:22; Deut. 4:34; 6:22; 7:19; 26:8; 29:3; Josh. 3:5; 24:17; Neh. 9:10; Ps. 105:27; 135:9; Jer. 32:21). In this respect, the 'signs and wonders' in the New Testament serve to remind Israel of similar times in their history when God revealed himself: notably the Exodus and the giving of the law at Sinai. Yet, together with Old Testament prophecies, they signify not just a new stage of revelation but the climax of it. In other words, the miracles serve to show both the commonality and continuity of Jesus with Israel's epoch of revelation. They demonstrate that in Jesus the Old Testament hope which God's previous revelation anticipated has been fulfilled. These signs and wonders identify Jesus as Israel's 'Anointed One' (Luke 4:18-21; Acts 10:38) and as such they are unique, peculiar and greater because they usher in the coming kingdom of God.

Even in John's gospel – 'the Gospel of signs' – where revelation is bound up with significant miracles, it is perhaps surprising the extent to which signs are portrayed *negatively*. For instance, it is not sufficient for Jesus to cleanse the temple, for the Jews there demand a sign (2:18);

<sup>26</sup> John Bright, *The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and Its Meaning for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1953), 218.



although 'many people saw the signs he was doing and believed in his name' (2:23),<sup>27</sup> nevertheless Jesus perceives their faith to be faulty (2:23-25);<sup>28</sup> Nicodemus recognises that 'no-one can perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him', but Jesus has to rebuke 'Israel's teacher' because he does not understand (3:1-15). In this respect, 7:3-5 is helpful. Here Jesus' brothers believe that he could perform miracles, yet John tells us they 'did not believe in him'. In other words, the brothers had 'faith' of some sort but because it was misplaced it was not authentic. Similarly, the crowd who come to seek Jesus after his feeding of the 5,000 do so not because they 'saw signs' but because they ate

27 Here we modify the NIV text which, for some reason, prefers to translate (or interpret) *sēmeia* as 'miraculous signs', which rather begs the question!

28 Wayne Grudem, 'Should Christians Expect Miracles Today? Objections and Answers from the Bible', in Greig and Springer (eds.), *The Kingdom and the Power*, 92, 94, 108, n.59, n.63, takes issue with D.A. Carson's assertion (in 'The Purpose of Signs and Wonders in the New Testament', in Michael Scott Horton [ed.], *Power Religion: The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church?* [Chicago: Moody, 1992], 101), that this is an example of 'spurious faith'. Grudem believes that this is a statement about positive, authentic but uninformed faith. However, three points should be noted here:

(1) These verses come hard on the heels of 2:22 where we are told that (despite their belief in 2:11) it was only after Jesus was raised from the dead that the disciples came to understand the significance of his teaching with regard to the destruction of the temple = his body (2:19-20) and believed the Scripture and his word. This eventual and persistent faith of the disciples serves as a contrast to the faith of those who believe on the basis of the signs.

(2) It is difficult to see how one can view Jesus' attitude as being anything other than cautious, for we are told that 'he did not trust himself to them because he knew all men' (2:24-25). Although 'many believed in his name' (*polloi episteusan eis to onoma autou*, 2:23), Jesus does not return the compliment (*autos de Iēsous ouk episteuen auton autois*, 2:24)! The parallel is striking and leads to the conclusion that such faith in Jesus is inadequate.

(3) These verses prepare us for the Nicodemus narrative and, as such, their meaning becomes clearer in the light of the following verses. We are told that Jesus knew all men (*anthrōpou*, 2:25) and that he knew what was in a man (*anthrōpō*, 2:25), and the opening words of the Nicodemus narrative (*ēn de anthrōpos*, 3:1), indicate that Nicodemus was one of the *polloi* in 2:23. Equally, Nicodemus approaches Jesus on the basis of (a) the signs (3:2), which points back to the *polloi* again of 2:23 who saw the signs, and (b) his knowledge of Jesus (*oidamen hoti apo theou elēluthas didaskalos*, 3:2) reminds us of Jesus' knowledge (*autos gar eginōskan ti ēn en tō anthrōpō*, 2:25), and is in fact something which Jesus picks up in his rebuke of Nicodemus as 'Israel's teacher' (*ho oidamen laloumen kai ho heōrakamen marturoumen*, 3:10-11). That Nicodemus is rebuked by Jesus is evident from this language but becomes clearer still with the words *kai tēn marturian hēmōn ou lambanete* (3:11). See Mark W.G. Stibbe, *John, Readings: A New Biblical Commentary* [Sheffield: JSOT, 1993], 49-57. In the light of these considerations, both the immediate context and the surrounding verses, we conclude that Carson is correct to understand the faith of the *polloi* in 2:23-25 as spurious.

their fill of the loaves (6:26), and such faulty understanding persists even when Jesus points this out (cf. 6:30).<sup>29</sup> Carson comments:

In the nature of the case, therefore, signs by themselves cannot guarantee such faith... John 11:40-47 neatly preserves the ambiguity: although many saw the sign-miracle, only those who believed really saw the sign-glory of God.<sup>30</sup>

'Signs and wonders' in the New Testament, then, are by no means a panacea for unbelief or a 'lost key' that, if recovered, will automatically unlock the door to dramatic growth amongst churches. Signs may have led some to authentic belief, but for many they resulted in spurious faith; even in the New Testament they are performed primarily by Jesus and the apostles, not by all believers; and they serve to demonstrate the continuity between the Old Testament revelation and God's final self-disclosure in his Son (Heb. 1:1-2).

## 5. What happens when God does not heal?

Wimber claims that God gives gifts to the church to 'equip the saints', but Paul insists that although the most helpful gifts are to be sought for the good of the church, it is the Lord who sovereignly dispenses his 'grace gifts' as he sees fit (1 Cor. 12:4-11). On the one hand Wimber claims that it is God's will to heal and that we must be obedient, but on the other he explains that God often does not get his way in the world, that his will is regularly thwarted because of us. However, as Packer so neatly points out:

My God is not frustrated by any failure on man's part (as Wimber suggests). I think that is the Bible's view of God: He is a sovereign God... God works out all things according to his own will (Ephesians 1:11). God does whatever he pleases (Psalm 135). And if you are going to lose sight of that aspect of the matter, well then, your doctrine of God is out of shape.<sup>31</sup>

29 Overall, this feature is quite striking, for out of the 17 occurrences of *sēmeion* in John, 12 are either used negatively or prove to be ineffective in the ensuing verses: 2:18, 23; 3:2; 4:48; 6:2, 14 (cf. 15), 26, 30; 9:16 (cf. 41); 11:47 (cf. 53); 12:18 (cf. 37), 37. The remaining five are either neutral or positive: 2:11; 4:54; 7:31; 10:41; 20:30 (cf. 31).

30 D.A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1981), 177.

31 J. I. Packer, 'Signs and Wonders: Interview', *Touchstone* (January 1986), 7, cited in David M. Lewis, 'An Historian's Assessment', in James R. Coggins and Paul G. Hiebert

At this point Wimber does not speak clearly, for he seems to claim that the church can only do what God is doing. Even where there is faith, if God is not doing anything then nothing will occur. Yet equally he claims that faith as a grain of mustard seed will move mountains and thus the church should make miracles occur by stepping out and taking risks.

It is this ambiguity that leads one to ask, Who is in control of Wimber's world? If it is God's will that all should be healed, then why are not *all* healed? At the same time, if it is God's will to heal all, why do we need to be prompted by the Spirit to pray for some and not for others? Here Wimber is close to emulating the first-century Jewish healer, miracle-worker and teacher, Hanina ben Dosa of whom it is said,

... when he prayed for the sick he used to say: This one will live and this one will die. They said to him: How do you know? He replied: If my prayer is fluent in my mouth, I know that he [the sick person] is favoured; if not, I know that [his disease] is fatal (*mBer.* 5:5).<sup>32</sup>

This is foreign to the New Testament's teaching on both prayer and faith. Jesus encouraged his disciples to pray for God's will to be done, and taught them that their prayers should be characterised by the concerns of the kingdom of God (Matt. 6:9-15). The epistles show little concern for prayers to be offered for the sick (with the notable exception of James 5:15 where the sick person seems to be dying, the promise ambiguous and limited by the teaching of 4:15-16), and nowhere encourage believers to perform signs and wonders. They do, however, encourage growth in spiritual illumination to understand God's purposes better (Eph. 1:17-23), in progress in godliness (Phil. 1:9-11), in perseverance (2 Thess. 1:11-12), and in the proclamation of gospel truth (Philm. 6).

Miracles, then, of healing or otherwise, will only happen in accordance with the will of God, sometimes where faith that it will happen exists and sometimes where it does not. For faith does not seem to depend on its subject so much as its object. And in the gospels the object of faith is Jesus, for only he can bring about God's purposes for

(eds.), *Wonders and the Word: An Examination of Issues Raised by John Wimber and the Vineyard Movement* (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1989), 58.

<sup>32</sup> For a full study of Hanina Ben Dosa, see Geza Vermes, 'Hanina Ben Dosa', *Journal of Jewish Studies* 23 (1972), 28-50.

good. And it is only as we lay hold of the one who has made promises to us or who has commanded us to act in certain ways that we can be assured our prayers will be answered. Outside of this we are no longer dealing with faith but with presumption.

#### 6. Is there a place for a theology of suffering?

Whilst healing is expected to be a part of the church's ministry in the New Testament (Jas. 5:15), Christians suffer not just from persecution but from illness as well. So Paul has to pray three times for his 'thorn in the flesh' to be removed, and accepts God's decision to humble him through it (2 Cor. 12:7-10). It is precisely because they are ill that Paul is able to preach the Gospel in Galatia (Gal. 4:13), and Trophimus has to be left behind by Paul in Miletus (2 Tim. 4:20). Paul seems to suffer from poor eyesight (Gal. 4:15; 6:11) and even prescribes wine for Timothy's frequent stomach complaints instead of something more 'spiritual', and that after he has just instructed Timothy on the 'laying on of hands' (1 Tim. 5:23)! In other words, if in the New Testament church apostles and their associates suffered from physical illness and there is no indication that these illnesses were healed or were expected to be healed, is it not possible that Wimber and others in the healing movement have exaggerated the extent to which the church should be taken up with this practice today?

Any theology of healing, if it is to be robust, must surely encompass a theology of suffering. But as far as evangelism and healing are concerned this seems to be almost absent from Wimber's framework. Sin may cause suffering; the devil may cause suffering; but there is little room for what might be called 'the redemptive or sanctifying value of suffering'.<sup>33</sup> Wimber seems unable to accept that through pain, illness or persecution believers may mature and become more humble and obedient than they might otherwise have been. If I am sick then I, or others, must pray for God's healing: that is the only response Wimber can offer.

No one can doubt Wimber's enthusiasm for the ministry of prayer for the sick, but what lies behind his reticence for encouraging prayer for the dead to be raised?<sup>34</sup> Why will Wimber appeal to the commission

<sup>33</sup> Packer, 'Signs and Wonders', 7.

<sup>34</sup> Although Wimber includes a brief chapter on raising the dead it is quite different from the rest of his material. He recalls one incident at length and explains why western Christians find it difficult to believe that God will raise the dead. Curiously, in contrast to his other chapters, Wimber does not explicitly encourage or discourage the practice

of Matthew 10:6-8 for the former but conveniently under-play that part which explicitly encourages the disciples to raise the dead? One cannot help but feel that sheer realism and not a little pragmatism lies behind this strange inconsistency. If the Vineyard movement embarked on encouraging such a ministry how long could it survive?

### 7. Is too much promised?

Equally, we might well ask why it is that the sorts of healing the New Testament describes are very rarely seen today, even amongst those who put such an emphasis on it. There is much rhetoric but, unlike Jesus' healings which Wimber and others attempt to imitate, there is a notable absence of organic healings. Indeed if there was just *one* well-documented and medically convincing case it would be hard to quell the interest which would inevitably be aroused. Dr Peter May has recognised this problem:

If someone in Britain could heal AIDS instantaneously and completely... the crush would be enormous. The congestion at Heathrow from multitudes flying in from Africa and the USA would be headline news. But they cannot... Why is it that so many of the reported healings seem to be at a purely trivial and subjective level, such as backache, while cleft palates or proven secondary cancers such as David Watson's remain uncured?<sup>35</sup>

If the progress of the kingdom of God depended on the success of the ministry of healing then we would rightly wonder whether God was as powerful as we might have thought. But we need not reach this conclusion, for as we have argued, the ministry of healing was never intended to produce the results that Wimber expects. One cannot help thinking that healing is more important to Wimber and his followers than it is to God. Wimber promises much but not even he can deliver, and although he successfully raises expectations the sad truth is they are rarely satisfied.

(although the inclusion of this chapter surely must indicate that he does expect it to happen). See Wimber, *Power Evangelism*, 182-85.

<sup>35</sup> Peter May, 'Focusing on the Eternal', in John Goldingay (ed.), *Signs, Wonders & Healing, When Christians Disagree* (Leicester: IVP, 1989), 42.

### 8. Does an interest in healing spring from biblical or cultural expectations?

According to the gospels Jesus' ministry was conspicuous because of his authoritative teaching and dramatic miracles which, for those who had eyes to see, authenticated his person and mission. But it is also noticeable that the people to whom Jesus ministered were often the poor, the oppressed and those who were marginalised by their society. By contrast Jesus challenged, denounced and rebuked the religious élite of his day. Jesus' ministry was aimed at those who knew their helpless state, their need for deliverance and who were therefore more likely to humble themselves before God. In that sense he came to the lost, the sick, and the broken-hearted, and it was as he healed them that they came to see their hope for finding peace and security with God depended on him. Those who were rich, proud and content had far more to lose and were less likely to embrace Jesus' counter-cultural message. Such a strategy challenges the values and priorities of any church in its evangelism and mission. As Nigel Wright comments:

The offering of healing by Jesus to the sick who were also poor and politically oppressed signifies something in the way that a similar offer to wealthy, self-indulgent and economically powerful westerners does not... The issue is not only does the church heal, but whom is the church healing? Putting it bluntly, the world is unlikely to be impressed if we only heal each other. When we heal the AIDS sufferers and the marginalised, it may have something to talk about.<sup>36</sup>

In so far as Christians have joined Wimber in his quest for healing we should ask to what extent contemporary churches reflect the world's preoccupation with health and its fear of death. Are the values that we attach to good health a sign that we have forgotten how great is our eternal hope? Why is it that remaining in this world seemingly 'at all costs' is more appealing than being with the Lord? The report issued by Fuller Theological Seminary after it cancelled Wimber's 'The Miraculous and Church Growth (MC510)' course at the School of World Mission neatly summed up one of the problems that underlies

<sup>36</sup> Nigel Wright, 'Asking the forbidden questions', *Renewal* 153 (February 1989), 11.

the healing movement by criticising the 'narcissistic assumption that health is the highest of all goods'.<sup>37</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Whilst we would distance ourselves from the vitriolic attacks and personal criticisms that Wimber has sometimes experienced from those who disagree with his teachings, we must not ignore the fact that at the heart of his views lies a different understanding of fundamental Christian truths to that which evangelicals have traditionally held. His teaching affects such subjects as the purpose of divine revelation, divine sovereignty, and the role and function of authentic Christian witness. Wimber is the innovator. He has openly challenged churches to improve on their evangelistic enterprises by adopting his methodology. One may admire his courage and his commitment to his 'mission', but crucial issues are at stake here and Christians should not allow them to be eroded without a fight.

<sup>37</sup> Lewis B. Smedes (ed.), *Ministry and the Miraculous: A Case Study at Fuller Theological Seminary* (Pasadena: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1987), 58.

## THE BILLY GRAHAM GLOBAL MISSION SERMONS: THE POWER OF BELIEF

MARK GREENE

### I. THE SCOPE OF THE ESSAY

Billy Graham is almost certainly the world's most famous preacher and undoubtedly the most effective evangelist of the post-war period. Although much has been written about his life,<sup>1</sup> his contribution to the unity of the church, global and local,<sup>2</sup> little has been written, in Britain at least, that analyses or even comments on his methods of sermon preparation or delivery. The major books on preaching and evangelistic preaching hardly mention him – Buttrick, Craddock, Lloyd-Jones, Loscalzo, Stott are all almost silent.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, *The Handbook of Contemporary Preaching* includes no work about or by the evangelist in its extensive bibliography.<sup>4</sup> Robert Williams (RW), Director of International Ministries at the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association's (BGEA) Headquarters, has himself completed an informal analysis of 140 of Graham's sermons but is not aware of any published work on the subject.<sup>5</sup> Have we really nothing to learn from Dr Graham?

The 1995 Global Mission (March 16-18) is no exception to the analytical silence, with commentary focusing on results rather than delivery.<sup>6</sup> Here was an extraordinary challenge – technological and homiletical. Technological, in that the logistics of independently setting up satellite venues in over 180 countries and over 2,000 different

<sup>1</sup> E.g. William Martin, *A Prophet with Honor: The Billy Graham Story* (New York: Quill, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> See e.g., Ian Randall, 'Conservative Constructionist: The Early Influence of Billy Graham in Britain', *EvQ* 67:4 (1995), 309-33.

<sup>3</sup> David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (London: SCM, 1987); Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985); D.M. Lloyd-Jones, *Preachers and Preaching* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1971); Craig A. Loscalzo, *Evangelistic Preaching That Connects: Guidance in Shaping Fresh and Appealing Sermons* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1995); John R.W. Stott, *I Believe In Preaching* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1982).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Duduit (ed.), *The Handbook of Contemporary Preaching* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Structured Telephone Interview, 4 December 1996. 'I don't think anyone has done any analytical work on him as a preacher.'

<sup>6</sup> Cf. e.g., *Baptist Times* (27 March 1995), with the headline 'Mixed results...'