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Bethel's 'signs and wonders' include angel feathers, gold dust and diamonds

By Amanda Winters

Posted January 19, 2010 at midnight

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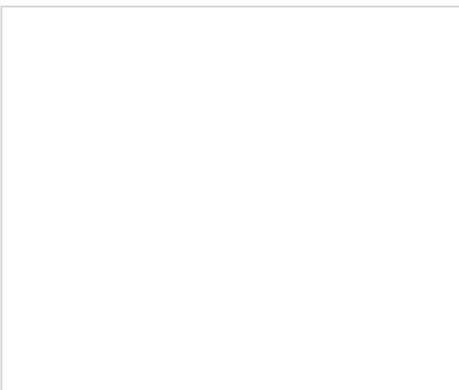


PHOTO BY GREG BARNETTE

Alan Wade, of Lufkin Texas, center, worships with others Sunday Nov. 29 during Bethel Church's 11 am service. Wade finished his ministry school last year and his daughter is in her first year and his wife in her second. Wade, who had to return to Texas for work, visits his wife and daughter and attends services several times a year.

Bethel Church has seen extensive growth over the past decade as the focus of the church has shifted to training people in prophesy, healing and other "supernatural gifts of God" taught under the leadership of Pastor Bill Johnson.

Though about half the estimated 2,200 people attending Bethel left when he took over in 1996, Johnson said now nearly every church service is full each week, including the Twin View campus and an overflow room, which could easily add up to more than 3,000 congregants.



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Ask Johnson about the affiliations, goals and purpose of Bethel Church, and he'll say the church has lots of "friends" who share in the pursuit of affecting the Earth with heaven, especially Pentecostals and those in the Association of Vineyard Churches.

Johnson said Bethel members believe Jesus is the son of God and died for the sins of humankind, which is the basis of Christianity. Bethel also believes in the second coming of Jesus when those who are saved will go to heaven and those who do not believe in him will go to hell, as it says in the church's "We Believe" statement.

Riding a Pentecostal wave



1 of 4

Bethel was part of the General Council of the Assemblies of God until January 2006 when the church membership voted to withdraw their affiliation, and today Johnson hesitates to link Bethel to a specific movement or group.

Those who examine the practices of Bethel identify it as being part of a larger movement known as the Word of Faith movement. Connected to prominent revivalists and prophets including Todd Bentley, Patricia King, Bob Jones, and the leadership of the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship, the Word of Faith doctrine teaches that faith is a force through which anything can be done, said John Wolf, founder of the Church Education Resource Ministries.

Wolf is one of Johnson's many critics and is no stranger to Bethel Church.

'Why wouldn't it be popular?'

Wolf grew up in the San Francisco Bay area and graduated from Simpson University in 2005 with a bachelor's degree in Church Education Ministries, he said, speaking by phone from his South Carolina office. It was during his time at Simpson that he first came across

Bethel Church and the teachings of Bill Johnson.

On his Web site, www.cerm.info, Wolf said the Word of Faith movement, which is closely intertwined with the Third Wave movement, blends mysticism and teachings from metaphysical cults. Mysticism is the pursuit of a divine connection with God through direct experiences and usually revolves around a practice to encourage and facilitate the experiences.

"The Bible does not teach that you alone have the power to do things," he said. "The Bible teaches that God is the one who does things."

The Third Wave movement is based on the belief that there have been three distinct historical periods in which the Holy Spirit has been extensively active. The first was the Pentecostal revival around 1906, the second was the Charismatic movement of the 1960s and the third began in the 1980s with a new commitment to signs, wonders and supernatural experiences with God.

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"Bethel thinks they can train people in the supernatural ministry and they can go out and heal people and raise the dead," Wolf said. "It's false teaching. Every healing I've heard a Third Wave person (talk about) can't be verified."

One of the core differences between these movements and mainstream Christianity is that most Christian denominations teach that miracles stopped with the original apostles of Jesus, while the Third Wave/Word of Faith teach that miracles and supernatural gifts continue today, Wolf said.

He said Johnson mocks the word of God with his conversational, comedic preaching style and believes the feel-good messages of prosperity and miracles are what keep people coming.

"He preaches a seeker-friendly message," he said. "He says what they want to hear. People go to that church because they want to get healed. People go there because they want to get a million dollars. Why wouldn't it be popular?"

Speaking out

After a strange experience with an erratic Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry student who baby-sat his children, Bart McCurdy of Cottonwood decided to find out for himself what was going on at Bethel.

McCurdy said he attended a Friday night service at the church, during which he saw people painting on stage, dancing and flailing around on the ground. He found their worship music unconventional when one line of the same song was played for at least 11 minutes, he said.

McCurdy said the repetitive music, dancing, painting and excessive stimuli serve to get people worked up into an emotional frenzy where they're expecting to see miraculous things.

"They come looking for that feel-good feeling, that high, for supposed miracles, supposed signs and wonders, speaking in tongues, gold dust, diamonds, feathers. ... It seems like they're just ready for it," he said.

Once, as she ran through her house frantically searching for her journals, the baby sitter told McCurdy the anti-Christ was in her house and Jesus was in hell saving people, he said. Shortly after that, she went into a trancelike state and said she felt 20 feet tall before losing consciousness, he said. The behavior made him believe she was demon-possessed, he said.

McCurdy said he regularly downloads podcasts of Bethel messages and hasn't heard the Christian gospel message taught at Bethel. His Web site, www.heraldingtruth.com, is to educate people on what he believes are false teachings and challenge those involved in the movement, he said.

"I see Bethel and those in this movement as idolaters," he said. "They worship the 'gifts' or the signs and wonders, rather than the creator, or the savior."

Signs and wonders

When "angel feathers" first started to fall at Bethel Church, Bill Johnson thought birds had nested in the air conditioning ducts, he said.

"Then it happened in a restaurant and all different places - on an airplane," he said. "I don't know, I don't teach it, it just happens."

Johnson said he bases his belief that the feathers are a sign from God on a Bible verse that says, "there is healing in his wings," and he doesn't try to explain it.

"I don't want to be able to explain everything," he said. "Then I'll have a God that looks like me. That's not very impressive."

Bud Press, director of the Christian Research Service based in North Carolina, devotes his time to researching claims made by Christians for the purpose of debunking or confirming the claims. Bethel is part of the Signs and Wonders movement, within the Word of Faith movement, he said. Aside from claims of angel feathers, people in the movement say diamonds and gold dust show up at church and in their homes, he said.

Press said he contacted many church leaders, including Johnson, who claimed to have angel feathers, asking them to send some for a study. Most ignored him but one obliged and sent a package containing a few feathers, which Press said he took to ornithologists, scientists who study birds.

David H. Ellis, an ornithologist and chairman of the Union for the Conservation of Raptors' Science Advisory Board, was one such scientist. In his responding statement, dated Nov. 12, 2008, Ellis wrote: "The feathers you sent me are very obviously like normal bird feathers, and there is nothing about them to suggest they are other than bird."

Press said there is nothing in the Bible to back up the claims of angel feathers but there are a host of other explanations.

"Birds shed feathers all the time, even in flight," he said. "It's nothing to see a feather floating down from a building or something like that. But if you're caught up in the deception and went to church last night and they talked about feathers falling from heaven ... immediately you're going to think it's a feather from heaven."

Press said he believes the signs and wonders movement is spiritually dangerous and cited Bible passages that warn against it.

On his Web site, Press links to the story of a Washington man who was caught and later admitted to planting gemstones in an Arizona Vineyard church, claiming they were put there by God.

"Jesus himself warned that a corrupt generation, a deceptive generation, seeks after signs and wonders," he said. "Because individuals have been caught red-handed spreading around not only angel feathers but diamonds, precious gems, gold dust from heaven and all of that, it's very clearly deception."

Making Bethel home

Mary and Mark Morin moved their family to Redding from Colorado Springs, Colo., to go to Bethel Church, but not without reservations.

Bethel is well known for its connection with the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship (TACF) and the Vineyard churches, but both churches are controversial flash points in charismatic Christianity, Mary Morin, 51, said.

The TACF was one of the Association of Vineyard Churches, which is part of the Third Wave movement, until the Toronto Blessing revival in 1994. The strange behavior exhibited by those experiencing "the anointing of God" caused a rift between the Vineyard churches and TACF.

The Morins weren't sure what to think of Bethel's association with the two groups because they believed in God's supernatural powers but thought certain aspects of the movement might be too extreme for them.

"But they're the main ones seeing signs and wonders so it was always sort of a love-hate thing," she said. "Do we want to throw in our lot? This thing looks awful weird. ... But we're desperate."

The Morins attended New Life Church in Colorado Springs, Colo., while Ted Haggard was pastor and endured several years of drama after the pastor admitted to a homosexual affair and a gunman later opened fire outside the church as Sunday services were wrapping up.

When Mark Morin, 59, became sick with alkalosis in early 2008 after unintentionally overdosing on alkaline drops for a year, he and his son decided to drive to Bethel so he could be healed, he said.

Alkalosis is a condition where the body has too much alkali, which can cause muscle spasms, twitching, numbness, difficulty breathing and, in extreme cases, can lead to a coma. Mark Morin said he would put the drops in his green tea every day because he thought it would purify the drink and prevent levels of acid within his body from getting too high.

While he wasn't healed on the trip, what the Morins found instead was a strength in the presence of God unlike they'd found anywhere else, Mark Morin said.

Since they started attending Bethel, their children have experienced prophetic gifts and holy laughter, he said.

"I believe with all my heart God wanted us to come to Bethel," he said. "We were happy, we were in our dream house and we had a successful business. God used alkaline drops that I misused to get me to Bethel."

Responding with love

Bethel's mission is to change society by being a blessing to Redding, bringing prosperity, healing and God's supernatural powers to Earth "as it is in heaven," Johnson said.

He's heard it all. He's heard people say Bethel is a cult, that he's a false prophet and that he tries to model after healing evangelist Benny Hinn.

"I don't have a high value for how I'm labeled by somebody else," he said.

People come to Bethel because they're desperate for something real and the passion sometimes scares people, he said. But at the end of the day, all that matters to him is that he was honest to his heart, he said.

"There's too many people to touch in this world," he said. "Why shoot at each other?"

Reporter Amanda Winters can be reached at 225-8372 or awinters@redding.com.

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January 19, 2010
12:23 a.m.

TheWatchman writes:

How could this cult be called a "Blessing to Redding?" More like a curse with all these loonies around, Now along with all the itinerants attracted to Redding by all the freebies it's a strange place to live

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January 19, 2010
12:29 a.m.

Yourneighbor writes:

WHY are there soooo many articles about Bethel? Its not very fair to the smaller churches in Redding. All I can figure is they are recruiting new people to brainwash.. Just dont drink the Punch!! This "church" is far from a blessing. On Sunday its a mass migration of feeble minded people to be told how act by a business man. Yet its still called a church.. Go figure..

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January 19, 2010
12:31 a.m.

ghosthunter writes:

in response to **TheWatchman**:

How could this cult be called a "Blessing to Redding?" More like a curse with all these loonies around, Now along with all the itinerants attracted to Redding by all the freebies it's a strange place to live

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I agree and I dont believe you have to act like a whacko in order to go to heaven either.

January 19, 2010
12:46 a.m.

raideragent writes:

Hi, I'm Bart, one of the guys mentioned in the article. Please go to www.heraldingtruth.com and read the article under the tab labeled, "Bethel Church". I hope it will encourage you to think more about the Gospel, the purpose of the Cross. And feel free to contact me via my site. Thanks

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www.needgod.com

January 19, 2010
12:54 a.m.

jwolf6589 writes:

I would recommend to the readers the following books. Reporter did not have time to include these in her articles.

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The Jesus You Cant Ignore
Charismatic Chaos

Christianity in Crisis

The first one teaches the believer to respond to false teaching the way Christ did. I wish that the churches in Redding will stand out against Bethel the way Christ would if he were walking the earth.

January 19, 2010
1:11 a.m.

jwolf6589 writes:

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Hello I am John one of the guys in the review. Please go to this link for more information on Bethel Church and Bill Johnson (http://www.cerm.info/bible_studies/Ap...)

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You also can hear comments like how Bill believes that Jesus was "born again."

Or my review of Bill's latest book where Bill makes this comment

"God cannot be properly or even accurately represented without power. Miracles are absolutely necessary for people to see him clearly"

Such a statement is false teaching as it denies the sufficiency of the scriptures. Bill is basically saying that Churches that do not preach his "theology" are false.

Oh and the information where I got some of my quotes came from the book Promise Unfulfilled by Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary.

<http://www.amazon.com/Promise-Unfulfi...>

John

January 19, 2010
1:15 a.m.

Axe writes:

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Ed Roberts who is currently in custody for an alleged child Crime. Went to Bethel and was a leader in their church I believe it was ROI Realm of Influence. The church (Bethel) is supporting his family, and are counseling him. Now I truly believe something is up and RS is going to find it. Bethel has an Iron curtain, you can't get to the leadership. They are always "To Busy". Seems like a cop out. They say and do allot for the community but only to promote them (Bethel). When some one has an idea For the community and they believe Bethel could help. Bethel and it's followers will not help unless they know them or it is all Bethel's Idea. Bethel's followers would not do anything unless the Bethel leadership gives their blessing! Kinda close to Religion to me for a church that claims no religion. I said it once before and I will say it again they are dirty! Welcome to Bethel! It's no longer welcome to Redding. Their pride will be their down fall. And this is the beginning. For a non profit how much of their church tithe goes to Widows and orphans? what percentage of the church budgets goes to the Redding community? How much of it goes to wages? Something is amiss. I believe all nonprofit organizations should make their financial workings public! When a church and the leadership hides, something is wrong!

January 19, 2010
1:19 a.m.

crickett2213#267783 writes:

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Getting sick and tired,of seeing Bethel, on the front page for 2 days already. Move on to move important things.

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