

Bethel Church: God, the Bad and the Ugly

Kris Vallotton, a senior leader at Bethel Church in Redding, Calif., discusses the church's successes, failures and addresses its criticisms

There has been much written about Bethel Church in Redding, California, and the movement that we have had the privilege of being a part for more than three decades. Most of what has been said about us is positive. But a small yet influential coalition of people have shared negative reports about us.

These reports often include words such as controversial, unbalanced or even the word cult to describe us. To be frank, I can understand why certain religious leaders or unbelievers might view us through these perspectives. We certainly have made our share of mistakes, both as a leadership team and those who follow us. And we have such a high value for freedom and risk that it has created a kind of “research and development” culture where people are encouraged to take risks. I think this stems from the fact that we view ourselves much more as pioneers than settlers. Therefore, we celebrate creativity, revelation, invention and innovation above comfort, safety and security.

This R&D culture has attracted some of the most wonderful and extraordinary individuals on the planet. Of course, we’ve also managed to draw some very broken and strange people. It’s important to remember, however, that there are some really weird and broken people mentioned in the Bible who God used powerfully. Unique guys such as John the Baptist, Ezekiel and Hosea come to mind, as well as messed-up people such as Rahab and Samson.

Bethel has chosen to be a family, and as such we do our best

to love people wherever they are in life, regardless of their character, doctrine, political views or philosophical persuasions. Much like our natural families (whom we don't get to choose), God often assigns people to be part of our spiritual family who, like Jacob, walk with a "limp" yet still deserve to be loved. We work hard to try to understand these people, although we sometimes don't agree with their perspectives.

These factors have combined to form one of the most extraordinary experiences in our history, and yet it's also inspired many challenges. I have traced the majority of these challenges back to a few common themes. One of these themes is misunderstandings that are rooted in the way various people who hear our teachings apply them. Like any movement—be it spiritual, political or whatever the arena—people often take what you say and practice it in a way you never dreamt of. Sometimes the things people do in the name of something we taught are hilarious, while other times they are downright stupid. I cringe when these misguided people quote us as the catalyst for their crazy exploits.

Another major problem in our movement happens when people innocently take what we say out of context. This has happened to me, personally, on more occasions than I care to count. Many times someone will quote me on Facebook or post a YouTube video that is a 3-minute clip of an hour-long message I shared. It's difficult to tell people you didn't mean what they're crediting you for saying when they're simply basing it on a short video clip; but as with any conversation, the context often dictates the definition.

On the other hand, there are always malicious people who work hard to deceive the masses by intentionally ignoring the context of our teaching to make some distorted point. I don't understand how these people live with themselves when they intentionally twist something we teach to deface our character or undermine our ministry. Some people are so convinced we're

a cult that they are willing to sacrifice their own integrity “to keep people from going astray.” For example, we’ve had people write negative reviews about our books that they have never read, or blog about the source of our income or how we spend our money without even checking the facts. Disagreeing with someone is one thing, but lying to make your point is downright wrong.

We think it’s important to give people the freedom to disagree with what we teach or practice without feeling like they are being disloyal or dishonoring. We have strong feelings about certain subjects that are even contrary to what some of our good friends believe. But we don’t want to be right at the expense of being together. If Jesus only had relationships with people who were doctrinally perfect ... well, I would be the only one He would be hanging out with. (I’m only joking!)

There are a few subjects that come up over and over with people who are opposed to us or that misunderstand our position on certain issues. I thought I would try to clarify some of these issues for the people who truly care about our perspectives. I’m not writing an exhaustive theological dissertation on each point to try and convince our detractors that we are right; I’m just trying to make it clear, in simple terms, what we believe and why.

Signs, Wonders and Miracles

Signs, wonders and miracles seem to be a constant point of turmoil with people who oppose us. Some write about me, Bill Johnson or Bethel Church as if we were the originators of the idea that Christians should have a supernatural lifestyle. This is comical to me. People will often write something like, “Bill Johnson says,” and then go on to quote the Bible word for word.

Yet some Christians choose to live with less than Jesus paid for, and that is their prerogative. It’s common for Believers

to shrink back when some reporter asks with a sarcastic grin, "Do you believe you can do miracles or drink poison and not be harmed, or pick up poisonous snakes?" I personally hate snakes, but my response is that I believe everything that Jesus said about me! Let's face it folks, the world has some doctrines that take a lot more faith to swallow than we do. They believe in creation with no Creator, in fetuses that aren't people, and they are convinced that life with a purpose originated from a cosmic accident. It takes more faith to make God disappear than it does to live for Him.

Raising the Dead

Another subject that has drawn a lot of attention recently is dead raising. I need to be honest; I have personally never raised anyone from the dead although I have tried twice. But here again Jesus said, *"And as you go, preach, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons....,'"* (Matthew 10:7-8). Contextually, Jesus is only speaking to twelve disciples, but the truth is that a large portion of what Jesus taught was only given to twelve guys. And almost all of Paul's epistles were written to specific groups of people, yet we still understand that most of what he penned applies to us today. Furthermore, Jesus commanded His guys to make disciples of all nations by, "teaching them to observe all I commanded you..." (Matthew 28:19-20)

Some of the students from the Supernatural School of Ministry read this verse and decided to go down to the morgue and "practice" raising the dead! Crazy? Maybe, but I admire their faith and their guts. It wasn't Bill or me who gave them the idea, they were actually inspired by reading the Bible. Evidently, they thought they should believe what Jesus said. They definitely have more faith and courage than I do. So far they haven't raised anyone at the mortuary from the dead, but it hasn't deterred them a bit. I have heard of some students from another school that started a DRT team. You guessed it,

the letters stand for Dead Raising Team! I really don't know if they have had any success yet. I do know of several Christians who have raised the dead. Radical? Yeah! But hopefully if you're born again, you believe that you will be raised from the dead someday so you can go to heaven.

Gold Dust and Feathers

I don't think we have taken more ridicule for anything than gold dust and feathers. It all began one day while someone was preaching, and these tiny white feathers started falling from the ceiling in the sanctuary. It wasn't raining feathers or anything like that (people tell tales), but they were very obviously there and easily seen. At first no one said anything. We all thought there were birds in the AC ducts or something. Then other leaders began to report the same phenomena happening in their churches. Our maintenance staff investigated the bird theory. No birds, feathers, or nests were discovered anywhere in the ductwork or the ceiling. It also started to happen in people's homes. It always happens when we are talking about the things of God. The phenomena tends to come and go. No one at Bethel has ever preached on feathers (that I know of), but at times it is nearly impossible not to mention them when we are teaching because several of them are falling right in front of the pulpit all at once. I have witnessed this myself a couple hundred times in several different buildings. I have had several skeptics ask me "if I believe in feathers." I want to say *no* because I understand that I sound like a kook, but I have seen them with my own eyes.

Then there is the infamous gold dust; again the phenomenon comes and goes. The first time I ever witnessed this myself was at a MorningStar conference more than fifteen years ago. The speaker released the "glory of God" in the room, and suddenly gold dust appeared on everyone's face and hands. You didn't have to try hard to see it; tiny flakes of something resembling gold glitter were everywhere. (There were several

hundred people in the room that night, so it's possible that some people didn't have gold dust on them as I didn't examine every individual.) Since that time, I have personally witnessed this hundreds of times. For some reason, the dust usually only appears on people's hands and faces. Sometimes it will just appear on a few people, and other times it will show up on hundreds of people all at once.

Why does God do these things, you ask? I really don't know. I have often been among different groups of leaders who are speculating about the purpose of these signs. I have heard many ideas that sound good and make me feel better about the things I have experienced. But the truth is, I really don't know why these things happen. Therefore, I do think feathers and gold dust qualify as "wonders."

Falling Down and Laughing

Another manifestation that is more prominent, but equally hard to explain, is people falling down or laughing hysterically for no obvious reason. We call the "falling down" experience "being slain in the Spirit." This happens often when we lay our hands on people to pray for them (although it happens in other situations also). Sometimes people just seem to fall over backwards as if they just passed out. Some are conscious, while others act as if they are asleep or in some sort of trance. They most often fall backwards (I have no idea why). It has been happening for so long that we now station "catchers" behind people when we pray for them so they don't get hurt when they hit the floor. When the people who have been "slain in the Spirit" get up off the floor, they frequently share testimonies of experiencing God in some incredible way. I personally have never had this experience myself, but I have watched thousands of people fall down when I am praying for them. Could they be faking? No question, some are. But if you have ever witnessed this phenomenon personally, you would see for yourself that many of these people fall in such a way that if someone didn't catch them,

they would bounce off the floor. In many cases it would be impossible to fake this kind of fall. Could it be the devil? If it is the devil, he is doing a wonderful job of helping people get closer to God. In almost every case where people have been “slain in the Spirit” they report being more convinced than ever of God’s love for them. This may all sound strange, but it’s no stranger than many things that people experienced in the Bible.

One of the manifestations that has been most offensive to people is something we call “holy laughter.” This condition occurs when, for no obvious reason, people just begin to laugh hysterically as if they are drunk. Some laugh so hard that they literally fall on the ground. These people report being overcome by intense joy that can’t be expressed with words. I have watched thousands of people all at once overcome by this manifestation. It’s fun to witness someone who is really serious encounter this experience. Again, I have never experienced this condition myself, but I have carried my wife out of several meetings when she was so “spiritually drunk” that she couldn’t walk. Weird you say? Yeah, I agree, it looks that way to me too. I love what Angela Monet said, “those who danced look quite insane to those who didn’t hear the music.” I think this quote applies here. Again, it’s very hard to attribute this to satan when the fruit of this manifestation is always positive in the people having the experience. I must admit that some who watch people having this type of encounter are offended.

Doctors and Medicine

There is a rumor that continues to resurface that Bethel Church doesn’t believe in doctors or medicine. Jesus said, “...*It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick.*” I don’t know of a single person on our staff that wouldn’t go to a doctor if they didn’t get well after prayer. We have a medical doctor named Dr. Andre VanMol who has been on Bethel’s church board for many years, along with a

physician's assistant named Julie Winters, who also serves on our board.

I think the rumor may have started because of the way we warn people about what they might experience from their doctors after they have received a miracle in their bodies. Many doctors simply won't believe in miracles. Therefore, when someone gets instantly healed of a medically verifiable disease and then goes back to their doctor for verification, sometimes the physician refuses to acknowledge their healing, even though all the tests come back negative and their symptoms are completely gone. (Frankly, I think some doctors are simply afraid of being sued for a misdiagnosis, or thought of as being crazy by their peers). Because faith plays a huge factor in miracles (Jesus often said, "...*your faith has made you well,*"), it is imperative that the people who are recipients of divine healing don't start doubting that they are well and then end up sick again. Therefore, we tell people that they should consult their physician to verify their healing, but they should be aware that this dynamic is fairly common among the medical community.

Broken People

Nothing troubles me more than what is often reported about our view of the grace of God and what is perceived as a lack of conviction for holy living or great character. Actually, we have such a passion to see people live holy lives that I wrote a book entitled *Moral Revolution*. We also started a ministry by the same name to help seed this morality into the very fabric of the nations.

Bill and Beni Johnson have been our spiritual leaders for more than 33 years. They are some of the most honest, integrous, kind and holy people I have ever met in my life. Their INTENSE passion for the presence and purity of God caused Kathy and me to give up four businesses (that we spent 20 years building) to follow them to Redding.

We believe, however, that the core message of the gospel is that Jesus loves sinners. Not only does Jesus have intense passion for them, He has the power to transform anyone no matter how deeply they have fallen or how often they have failed. This has been the central theme of our ministry and message for more than three decades. Jesus demonstrated this best when He chose Judas to be the treasurer of His ministry although He knew he was a thief. Why would He do that, you ask? Because Jesus believed in people BEFORE they deserved it, which caused eleven men to become world changers, and one man to hang himself. (Of course, even one of His world changers fell away for a season and denied knowing Him. But Jesus took Him back and made him one of the pillars of the church, and a foundation stone of the heavenly temple).

I am a living testimony of God's amazing grace being extended through the Johnsons. Although I wasn't living in sin when I met them, I was a very broken young man. Bill chose to believe in me when I didn't deserve it. He spoke strength into my weakness, extended kindness to me although I was often harsh, and empowered me to lead with him, while many very public flaws remained in me. In short, his faith in me transformed my life.

Our families grew up together in a little country church nestled in the northern California mountains, about an hour from society. This wilderness experience became a laboratory where these core values took root, and were lived out in our daily lives. Over the years, this culture of mercy and grace attracted many broken and virtue-less people. Like David's mighty men, many of them were transformed and became great believers. Others that we had trusted crashed and burned badly, leaving a path of destruction in their wake. Yet we chose not to let the people who failed dictate our core convictions. But each time someone fell, we would try and learn how to do a better job of restoring, empowering and leading people. As the years passed, our leadership skills

improved quite dramatically, yet some still chose to destroy their lives and the lives of the people around them with sin.

We naturally brought this culture of mercy and grace with us to Bethel Church. The only difference is that God has given us a much larger platform, and consequently our core convictions are being displayed to the world. This empowering culture has commissioned thousands of believers to bring the Kingdom of God to the four corners of the planet. A relatively few people, however, have taken advantage of our faith in them and abused our freedom. They've suffered shipwreck and hurt many people.

We have had a lot of leaders come to us for help, some of whom are very well known. We have dealt with most of these leaders secretly and have had great success watching God restore many of them. A few of the leaders that have reached out for help have had very public failures. Believing in these people in the midst of their crisis can look irresponsible or naive. This is especially true when we choose to confront them privately but empower them publically. Unfortunately, the Internet is filled with the stories of these few people who we love and are working with. The conclusion that people (who have no history with us) draw about us is interesting, troubling and hurtful at times. They often ignore our personal lives, our healthy marriages and our own effort to live with integrity, honesty and authenticity. Instead, every word, action or attitude that has ever been displayed by the people we are helping is attributed to our core convictions.

Have we done everything right in the restoration of people? NO! We have learned over the years that there are great principles that help to restore people, but there are no magic formulas that work every time. We do our best to love people and to discern whether or not their repentance is authentic. The problem is that some Judas's look like Peters, and then again, some Peters resemble Judas's. We do have a tendency to err on the side of Peters until they sell us out for thirty

pieces of silver. Of course, by that time people are convinced that we are easy on liars and thieves.

What is our sin? Extending mercy to people who don't deserve it? Trusting people who are still messed up? Maybe! Or is it that we give people hope who deserve to be punished? Probably! Are we too easy on sinners, don't emphasize sacrifice enough, and refuse to acknowledge bad news as acts of God? Some think so. Or could it be that we are simple-minded and childish in our zeal to see God demonstrate His love and His fascinating wonders among us? Guilty as charged! {eoa}