

Word and Spirit: The Gospel of Power

Bill Johnson assumed leadership of his parents' Assemblies of God congregation in Northern California's Central Valley in the mid-1990s. But he had no idea how God would use him to grow that local body—now known as Bethel Church—making it a household name around the world.

About 11,000 people now call Bethel Redding home and seek to be “a community of believers passionate about God's manifest presence.” Despite no intentions of becoming a church-planting movement, it has spawned five other church campuses in the past 15 years: Cleveland, Ohio; Atlanta, Georgia; Austin, Texas; Valparaiso, Indiana; and one overseas in New Zealand.

On April 22, 2018, the church took yet another step with the global launch of its “Arise & Build” capital campaign. The church is inviting everyone who receives encouragement and ministry from Bethel to partner toward a new campus in this expansion project. The church plans to build an Apostolic Resource Center “to accommodate the wave of salvations” it expects as its people pray “Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10).

Beyond the churches, Bethel established a music label, Bethel Music, in 2009 “to steward the songs coming out of our house and our worship leaders.” Bethel also invites worship leaders and musicians to come to WorshipU, an on-campus and online school hosted each year with teaching sessions from Bethel Music leaders. Churches across the globe employ Bethel songs to invite the presence of God into their services.

The church also hosts events such as a Leaders Conference and Open Heavens Conference. Bethel engages in a broad range of ministries that include Bethel Sozo International, Healing

Rooms Online, Heaven in Business and Jesus Culture, a revival ministry started by Banning Liebscher.

Often when visitors go to a church website, they'll see a "What to Expect" section to give them clues on the type of service they're going to and what they'll encounter when they visit a church campus.

Bethel welcomes visitors in droves, and what those visitors from around the world find when they come is a culture that is "characterized by worship, the presence of God, family, revival, miracles and healings, and a culture of honor," according to .

The church's mission is "revival—the personal, regional and global expansion of God's kingdom through His manifest presence." Bethel seeks to bring heaven down to earth through prayer and praise, worship and the Word in every service.

Family Ministry

One might wonder how "Bill" or "Pastor Bill," as he is known to his congregation, entered the ministry and became such a blessed leader. Now 69, he started his ministry at his parents' church, which is now Bethel. In fact, he's a fifth-generation pastor on his father's side of the family and a fourth-generation pastor on his mother's side.

"I was on staff with my dad from 1973 to 1978," he says. "They sent us out into a mountain community [in Weaverville, California] to pastor and then the leadership brought us back."

The church had "a couple thousand people or more," he recalls. "So that would be in the '70s, and we had a lot of charismatic renewal people. The Jesus People movement was huge here, so all of that was part of what shaped me. My dad was so hungry and open to people outside of our typical movement, from Catholic priests to Episcopalians to Baptist evangelists. He

just really valued diversity and celebrated it, and that was the way I was raised.”

Pastor Bill is thankful to have grown up in “a real healthy home and healthy environment,” he says. “One of the things that was modeled for me was not only the issues of integrity and devotion to Christ, and love for people, but also a real commitment to have a life of worship to honor the Lord as worshippers.”

Pentecostalism seems to be in his blood, but he felt a particular lack in his own life in the Spirit.

“My parents and grandparents on both sides of the family were Assemblies of God pastors,” he says. “We grew up with that influence of the Holy Spirit, who brings healing, deliverance, all of that, but I didn’t grow up seeing that in my own early years. I would talk to my grandparents, and they received under Smith Wigglesworth’s ministry, and also my uncle was a soloist for Aimee Semple McPherson. And so they all had those stories, but they were back then. And it seemed that that kind of lifestyle, in my thinking anyway—nobody told me this, but in my thinking—that kind of lifestyle of miracles was always reserved for a special person like Wigglesworth, Katherine Kuhlman or whomever, and it wasn’t until John Wimber that I saw that it was really for everybody, and that’s really what encouraged me. So I grew up in a real healthy lifestyle, but I heard the stories of the miracles, but they weren’t in my life. And so it was especially Wimber and some of those guys who really opened my heart up to see that this is a part of the gospel and it needs to be for now. The journey for me was seeing the impact of Jack Hayford, for example, on my dad in the subject of worship, and then on our lives, and then the influence of John Wimber and the Vineyard for us to pursue what had been in my heart all the time.”

One other preacher spoke in powerful ways in Bill’s life.

"I owe a lot to Mario Murillo, his preaching, in my formative years," he says. "He was an all-or-nothing preacher of the gospel, and I needed that. I needed that challenge to lay down everything for Jesus."

Along with his family, the Lord brought in individuals from the outside to lead Pastor Bill along the way into a fuller Christian life and ministry.

"Living in the home that I did, I got exposed to a lot of different people that really helped to round out or influence my faith."

Today his wife, Beni, serves with him as a senior leader at Bethel, but her role is more people focused.

"She's not in the office every day, and that's not her role," he says. "Her role is more relational with people within the movement, more relational within, whether it be with staff, or she helps to give oversight to the prayer ministry of the church."

The Johnsons have two sons, Eric and Brian, and a daughter, Leah, who are all married and in ministry at Bethel. Eric and Candace Johnson are the senior pastors of Bethel Church; Brian and Jenn Johnson lead Bethel Music; and Leah is involved with worship teams, with her husband, Gabe running the second-year environment of Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry.

Bill and Beni also now have 11 grandchildren.

"Beni's great priority right now is grandchildren," he says. "She spends a good time just serving and loving that part of our family."

Revival Alliance

Bethel Church left the Assemblies of God denomination some time ago, but not because of a dispute or disagreement.

"We pulled out not because of a problem," Bill says. "In fact, we still give financial support to the Assemblies, and we just found that we felt we had a responsibility of influence outside of the Assemblies. It was actually greater than what we had on the inside. And we felt that it could hinder or affect the way we would serve the church outside of the Assemblies. And so we just really felt that that's what we were supposed to do, but it was not because of a conflict. We still have great relationships, and we still give support to the missionaries and the denomination itself. We actually do the same that we did when we were part of the Assemblies."

As an independent, interdenominational body, one might wonder to whom Bethel leadership is accountable. But the Johnsons have taken care to build into their lives support from trusted ministry leaders. Many people speak into their lives, but probably the closest of all besides Bethel staff are those in a group of couples Bill has formed called Revival Alliance. This group consists of John and Carol Arnott, founding leaders of the Catch The Fire Partners Network of Churches, based in Toronto, Canada; Randy and DeAnne Clark, who founded Global Awakening in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania; Rolland and Heidi Baker, missionaries in Mozambique with their own Iris Global ministry; Ché Ahn, president and founder of Harvest International Ministry, and founding pastor with his wife, Sue, of HRock Church in Pasadena, California; and Georgian and Winnie Banov, known as the "Joy Apostles," from their Global Celebration ministry based in Grand Prairie, Texas.

"All of these couples meet," Bill says. "We work together throughout the year many times. And then we actually take a portion of a vacation together just to spend time together, pray with each other, to encourage one another, find out what's happening. And so besides my own staff, that's probably the group that speaks into my life the most."

Ahn speaks highly of Bill as a fellow church leader in California.

“Bill is a tremendous man of God who exemplifies the character of Christ,” Ahn says. “It has been an honor to be in covenant relationship with Bill since 2000. He is a man full of the Holy Spirit.”

And Clark has known Bill for more than 20 years.

“I consider him one of my closest friends,” he says. “He is a great father and grandfather in the natural. He is one of the most loyal persons I know. He is of the highest integrity and character. He is a lover of God, the Bible, the kingdom of God, the gospel of the kingdom—which includes the good news of forgiveness of sins by grace through faith in Jesus—but also includes an understanding of signs and wonders are to follow this gospel, as the Bible makes clear. Though I doubt if he ever has read anything by N.T. Wright, there are similarities in their thinking. He loves the presence of God and is very sensitive to the Holy Spirit. He has dedicated his life to the gospel. He is one of the key leaders—like Rolland and Heidi Baker—in embracing an understanding of the gospel that is both personal and social, emphasizing the need for repentance and faith, conversion/regeneration and God’s concern about the social needs of communities. His church’s concern for its city, Redding, is demonstrated in many ways that benefit the local community. I love seeing Bill model how a church can embrace the whole gospel with its concern for personal redemption and societal redemption.

“Our relationship in the Revival Alliance is not based upon agreement in every point of theology, but in what we do have in common and our commitment to the move of God and the advancing of His kingdom,” Clark adds. “The six couples are aware of differences in our eschatology and other areas, but we have served each other for over 20 years in the cause of revival.”

Heidi Baker, co-founder of Iris Global, has known Bill for nearly two decades.

“He is a dear friend who has a huge, generous heart of love,” she says. “The thing that is most powerful about his life is his passion for Jesus Himself. He lives for God’s presence. I have seen Bill weep many times as the Holy Spirit moves him even closer to the Lord. He is a kind, humble, merciful, encouraging, honest family man, a teacher, a peacemaker and a true gift to the body of Christ.”

On the home team, Kris Vallotton has worked with Pastor Bill for 42 years. He is senior associate leader of Bethel Church and co-founder of Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry and the nonprofit organization Moral Revolution.

“Bill is the most honest, generous and believes-in-other-people person I’ve ever met in my life,” Vallotton says. “He gives grace to people long before they deserve it and believes in people before they prove themselves.”

Ministry Mandates

In considering his role and his church’s role in the community and the larger body of Christ, Pastor Bill is clear about his mission. The word that stands out in this conversation is “mandate.”

“We have a mandate for the gospel to be demonstrated in power,” he says. “The healing, the miracles that are throughout the Scripture must happen today. I would think we probably have a measure of influence there. It is vital for us that we maintain not only miracles in our lives but the purpose for the miracles, that they always bring glory to Jesus and demonstrate the power of the gospel, which is the resurrection of Christ. So that’s probably a huge part of what our influence is.”

“Revival” is another word often associated with Bethel’s ministry.

“We carry a real mandate for revival continuously, so we give

ourselves to that," he says. "So I would think that the unwillingness to change the subject regardless of circumstances, whether it be pandemics or conflict or criticism or whatever it might be, is that we hold true to what God's called us to do. And that's really to be carriers of the move of the Holy Spirit that brings people to repentance, brings them into life, to freedom and then into positions of transformation."

But perhaps the greatest mandate of all relates to bringing heaven to earth.

"I think the greatest commission we have is the prayer commission Jesus gave us to pray on earth as it is in heaven, Your will be done on earth as in heaven," he says. "That's the mandate that everything else yields to and that's what God's called us to do. He is good, He is righteous, He is holy. I tell people He's as good as He is holy."

But, he cautions, God's goodness doesn't mean he condones sin.

"Some people distort grace. I tell our folks, 'Listen, if your understanding of grace doesn't lead you to a righteous lifestyle, then you don't understand grace.' So it's not an excuse for sin."

Bethel seeks to stay centered in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

"But we're not willing to compromise in areas of revival and demonstration of power. Those things are very central to us. So all of those overlap in the theme of how we do life. I guess probably one of the main things that I feel responsible for is that we, through teaching, are to help people have a renewed mind and ourselves to come into a place of a real renewed mind where we truly live out of the mind of Christ. And that's the mandate, to influence how people think and see. And that's the great joy for us."

Pastor Bill takes seriously the need to disciple the city

where the church is located but also the larger body of Christ, as well as ministry, business and political leaders through Bethel's popular conferences and his books, of which there are many. They include *Face to Face With God*, *The Supernatural Power of a Transformed Mind* and *When Heaven Invades Earth*.

In his latest book, *Born for Significance*, he asserts that every person on the planet was created by God to make a difference in His kingdom, a theme that ties back to what he learned from Wimber, that a lifestyle of miracles is for every Christian, not just the special ones.

Bill and other Bethel leaders also seek to mentor others, including key leaders, in a variety of ways.

"We try to create a schedule that gives us opportunity to spend time with the leaders in different spheres of influence, and we mentor them that way," he says. "Some of our team will do Zoom and or FaceTime calls, and they'll do that kind of mentoring from people from another nation. We're on constant calls with people. Especially now during the pandemic, we've really had to increase the online presence, where we mentor people in that way. So we have the personal relationship, we have the events that are focused on that, and then, of course, most of our team travels when it's permissible. We travel, and we spend time in other churches with other streams."

Mentoring also takes place through his books and online content, including Bethel TV streaming. Most of all, Pastor Bill has an audience of one. He is also conscious of the fact that leaders have influence on those they don't know.

"There's an impact that our faith can have on people that we actually never meet," he says. "And so we have a responsibility to make sure that our faithfulness to the Lord can be spoken of in a manner that brings God glory."

Pastor Bill knows he has been blessed to be a blessing to

others.

“Our approach to promotion, our approach to blessing, really determines how we will impact the world around us,” he says. “If I think God promotes me or blesses me just for self-indulgence, then I’m going to level off in my growth, but if I realize He’s positioning me to serve more effectively and impact the people around me, then there’s more He can do in me and through me. That’s the purpose. The purpose is that we impact the world around us.”

It’s a purpose Bethel Church and all of its ministry branches are living out from Redding to the rest of the world.

READ MORE: Learn more about Bethel Church and the ministry of Pastor Bill Johnson at .

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