

Banning Liebscher: Why Bill Johnson Didn't Immediately Shut Down Grave Sucking

In a new interview, Jesus Culture founder Liebscher addressed several controversies surrounding the Redding, California, church—including grave sucking. His comments here were part of a larger conversation between Liebscher and Preston Sprinkle, starting at 13 minutes into the interview.

“I’m not a proponent for it, I’m just saying like there’s an anointing on Elijah or Elisha, there’s an anointing on his grave that made the guy come back to life, and maybe there’s an anointing [here],” says Liebscher, the founder and director of Jesus Culture. “And then it started getting to where like, I don’t know man, I don’t know what students were doing. But it was weird. But that’s the stuff that all of a sudden has blown up all over the place.”

Grave sucking, sometimes called grave soaking, is the process by which someone lays on the grave of a deceased Christian in order to absorb their mantle or anointing.

“We have a real passion for history and revival history and men and women of God, so whatever it is—the Whitfields and the Wesleys and the Luthers and the Booths and for us, the John G. Lakes and the Kathryn Kuhlman,” Liebscher says. “We read that stuff, love that, stirs us, inspires us. I don’t know who would be a good example—I don’t know who would’ve been over there. John Wesley. Going to John Wesley’s grave if you’re over in England or Booth’s grave, just going and visiting it and just praying at the grave like ‘Lord, what General Booth did in the Salvation Army, God, do it again in our day and let us see a transformation happen in society like he did.’ We’d go visit that and people might pray or whatever. And

then—again, these are students—and then it kind of starts going like, alright, well now they're lying on the grave."

The practice stirred up significant controversy and garnered international responses.

Apostolic leader Joseph Mattera called out the practice sweeping through charismatic circles in recent years.

"Many charismatics want shortcuts to the anointing and desire results from an instant microwave experience or a one-time event. Instead of wasting their time traveling to 'grave suck,' they should discipline themselves to seek God, pour over His Word and dig down deep in His presence," Mattera says.

When the move wasn't immediately publicly shut down by Bethel founder Bill Johnson, there was some outcry. But Liebscher says Bethel doesn't police its students, even in activities that go against standard charismatic behavior. Johnson did address some controversies in an interview with Dr. Michael Brown.

But rather than policing student activities, Liebscher says Johnson's heart is for revival and pleasing God.

"And at some level, in all honesty, and this is not a negative, he just doesn't care what people think," Liebscher says. "People can speak into his life, but he just wants to please God. That's his main passion. ... "And Bill is a supernatural guy. He believes in the power of God. He believes in the supernatural working of God. He believes in healing. He believes it is part of the atonement, and it's available, and deliverance and all that stuff."

That revival birthed the School of Supernatural Ministry where thousands of students have pursued the presence of God and been filled with the Spirit. Supernatural activities flood the environment, and sometimes people can get carried away.

"We were in staff one time and these students—I don't even know where this came from—but I was getting emails from this from my pastor friends from around the nation," Liebscher says. "And social media puts it all out there right now. But they were like putting coins on the wall, and they were staying. And they're like, 'Oh man, this is God. This is supernatural.' Because the coins were staying on the wall. This is literally what happened."

"And we're in a staff meeting going, 'What? That's weird. Why are you doing that?' Somebody go pastor them and talk to them. Students that are trying to walk through walls, because it's in the Bible, right? So they walk through walls. They're trying to practice walking through walls. And we all are like 'Uhhh, yeah, that's a little out there.' ...

"But the deal is that Bill is not going to get up in the pulpit because Bill doesn't mind a little bit of mess. Bill's like, 'Where there's oxen, there's mess.' So I'm not going to get up, because he doesn't want to shut down those that are really seeking and those that are really trying to press in for more of God, he doesn't want to shut that stuff down by starting to get up and police everything from the pulpit."

When students start embracing the, well, weird, Liebscher says Bethel has a specific, private process to address the issues.

"Bill does not want to control things. Students may be out in kind of the fringe. They're pressing into the supernatural in a way that's like, 'OK, that's weird man. That's weird.' But Bill's not going to publicly get up and start reprimanding everybody. We pastor it one on one."

And when Bethel is put in the spotlight over odd practices, Liebscher says he believes it boils down to a simple attitude.

"Much of the controversy surrounding Bethel is actually just people who have a problem with charismatics," Liebscher says. "Our theology is a charismatic theology, like many other

churches. Bethel would just be more visible or Bethel would have more of that supernatural happening kind of deal, which is messy.”