

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Kingdom Come in California?

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Some visitors of Bethel Church claim to be healed. Others claim to receive direct words from God. Is it “real” —or is it dangerous? I visited the campus as a curious skeptic, and this is what I heard and saw.

I HAVE SEEN a man dance holding a trans-lucent scarf, the fabric billowing around his spinning form like a garment made of stars. I have prayed for strangers' healing from high-blood pressure and unspecified neurological disorders. I have wept with salt-faced abandon as four women prayed over me; I have walked through a “fire tunnel”; I have seen a woman bob in Hasidic fashion over the Bible app on her smartphone.

I EXPERIENCED ALL this at the increasingly famous (and, to some, infamous) Bethel Church, and I did so as an evangelical Christian of Reformed persuasion. My parents named me for the Welsh pastor-theologian Martyn Lloyd-Jones. My father is a pastor in the Christian and Missionary Alliance, Jonathan Edwards is one of my guiding lights, Wheaton College is my alma mater, and I attend a Presbyterian church in Toronto where I have never heard anyone speak or pray in tongues.

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Yet Bethel has been on my mind since a friend prayed for my healing at a campground in Wisconsin in 2010. She introduced me to the teachings of Bethel's senior pastor, Bill Johnson, and gave me a few of his books. As Bethel grows, you might very well hear from a few people in your congregation who have traveled to Redding to find out if Bethel is "real" — and who come back proclaiming that revival is under way.

When I set out for Bethel Church—a hub of a global revival movement—I half-expected to discover a rogue organization of hucksters intent on subverting the faith. And I half-expected to discover a community of believers more earnest and devoted to God than anyone I'd ever met. In the end, what I discovered in Redding, California, didn't fit either narrative neatly.

BETHEL CHURCH SITS atop a hill with a view that encompasses the mountains of Northern California. International flags flap at the ends of tall poles lining both sides of the road up the hill. I take a left just after passing the Israeli flag and enter the parking lot. The sky is bright and striped with a handful of skinny clouds. In the distance, Mount Shasta interrupts the surrounding range, its profile sharp like the beak of a bird of prey.

Four sizable ministries share a joint foundation here. Founded in 1952 by Robert Doherty, Bethel Church was affiliated with the Assemblies of God denomination from 1954 until 2006, when the church voted with near unanimity to become an independent entity. With an average weekly attendance of 8,684 and a yearly operating budget of over \$9 million, the church provides offices and facilities for Bethel's other ministries.

Among these, iBethel is the church's international platform, and it has given Johnson and company considerable influence among charismatic Christians all over the world. Those who follow Bethel's teaching at a distance come to Redding to enroll for anywhere between one and three years in the Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry (BSSM), an unaccredited program where students are trained to become "revivalists." Johnson and Kris Vallotton founded the school in 1998 with 36 students; today more than 2,000 from 57 countries and 45 states are enrolled.

In addition to iBethel and BSSM, Bethel Music was founded on this hill. The worship team produces tracks that rival Hillsong's in their uplift and production values; at the time of this writing, one of its live albums was the No.1 album on iTunes, above Adele, Justin Bieber, and Coldplay.

Revival is the unifying theme at Bethel, and the word means far more here than increased personal piety. At Bethel, I had heard, people are healed all the time. The church keeps a log of healing stories on their website. YouTube videos seem to show glittering clouds of material falling from the ceiling that Bethel people identify as "gold dust." They also

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report an occasional admixture of “angel feathers” and a “Shekinah glory cloud.” There are those here who cast out demons and raise the dead.

At least they claim to. Throngs of Christians argue that Bethel is a damaging presence in the American church, and that the miracles are false. Bart McCurdy, an evangelical in Redding, told me that in the church’s preaching and teaching, “there is never a call for repentance or faith in Christ—never. It is all about experience and signs and wonders.”

At John MacArthur’s 2013 Strange Fire conference, dedicated to exposing excesses of the charismatic movement, Phil Johnson said of Bethel, “There’s so much nonsense coming out of Redding that I frankly don’t have time to catalogue it all for you.” When I later asked him to elaborate, he said Bethel “constitutes a whole different message from biblical Christianity” that is “totally devoid of any true and consistent proclamation of the gospel.”

McCurdy, Johnson, and other critics believe Bethel to be instrumental in leading some Christians to embrace tenets of the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR), a movement known for dominion theology and a belief in the continuing ministries of apostles and prophets alongside those of evangelists, pastors, and teachers. Bill Johnson is regularly listed as an NAR leader. He believes in the apostolic and prophetic ministries, but says the church does not have any official ties to the NAR.

Even still, more local controversies have involved Bethel from the moment in the mid-1990s when Johnson assumed his role and led the church’s singular, unyielding emphasis on revival.

In 2008, a decade after Johnson cofounded BSSM, two students were involved in an accident that left a man stricken at the base of a 200-foot cliff. Believing the man had died after falling off the cliff, the students spent hours trying to reach the victim in order to pray for him to be resurrected. They waited until the next morning to call emergency services. Recovered from the bank of the Sacramento River, the victim survived but remains paralyzed.

More recently, Beni Johnson (Bill’s wife) and other Bethel leaders have been said to practice “grave sucking” or “grave soaking,” purportedly a means of absorbing the spiritual anointing of deceased Christians by lying atop their graves. Accusations of mixing New Age practices with Christianity are also common. Accusations in general are common.

THESE ARE THE stakes—and scandals—of Bethel. They are on my mind as I leave Bethel’s campus not long after arriving. The service happening at the church is private, but I have

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just learned that another Bethel event happening across town is not. In the Redding Civic Auditorium, first-year BSSM students are putting on a talent show.

On the walls 30 feet above the auditorium floor, banners hang down with images of people holding signs reading, "I am revival." Above these figures are messages such as "God is still speaking." This is the room where Bethel's 1,100-plus first-year students come for class four days a week. In 2011, city officials voted to lease the auditorium to BSSM until 2021.

McCurdy says some Bethel students have been kicked out of Redding stores for their erratic behavior, but others say their presence has been positive. Sarah Sumner, a theologian and Redding resident, says the mayor estimates Bethel's pro bono work has saved the city the cost of five full-time jobs a year.

BSSM dean Dann Farrelly tells me that the school exists to train revivalists: "leaders who are ... willing to pay any price to live in purity, power, and community because they are loved by God, whose manifest presence transforms worlds, lives, and culture." The website states that its goal is that "every student would know how to drive out demons, heal the sick, and preach the kingdom."

"We are unapologetically and happily charismatics," says Farrelly. "If you don't like charismatics, you are not going to like us."

Prospective students complete a standard application form, submit references and a passport photo, and complete an interview. Accepted students often raise support from their home churches for the \$4,550/year tuition.

Matriculated students are organized into "revival groups" of about 60, where they come under a pastor and recent graduates who coach them through nine months of training. First-year students meet Mondays through Thursdays in this auditorium, spending two hours in worship before receiving several hours of teaching from staff and visiting speakers. Weekly assignments include large amounts of Scripture reading, although the school is not meant to function as a discipleship program. "We're hoping that folks have already been through discipleship before they come into our program," Farrelly says.

I ask Farrelly about the cliff tragedy in 2008. Were those BSSM students acting out of beliefs they had acquired at the school when they tried to resurrect their friend? "It was very, very sad," Farrelly says via email. "If someone gets sick or hurt in our environment, we call 911, look for medical help, and pray for healing.... They were not acting in accord with our teaching or practice that night."

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The school's website advises prospective students coming out of addiction to reconsider applying because "there is too much freedom in our environment for those struggling with self-control." That freedom—and all the risks that go along with it—is evident during tonight's talent show.

The first act to leave an impression is a spoken-word poet. "Something has conditioned us to take so few risks," she says. "The American dream—counterfeit—has taught us to seek comfy couches upon which we can lounge." ("Preach!" my friend Alyssa says from a couple seats down.) "Church is big business with vision plans to captivate, motivate, and emulate empowered living with kingdom themes. Too afraid to actually let the King be king of, like, everything."

Soon a man in a denim vest and tank top walks onstage. Tattoos cover his arms down to his knuckles. As a fellow performer plays guitar, he bobs about the stage, a bushy mass of hair tied behind his head, and freeform vocalizes. He is about to do some very impressive rapping over the rhythmic guitar, but first, he says: "I've always wanted to do this, so I'm just going to do it right now."

He picks up a streamer and waves it in a timid arc over his head. Cheers go up as he begins to wave with enthusiasm. The long, narrow banner of cloth shines in the light and dances in the air. He starts leaping in his combat boots, dancing with the streamer.

TRUE HEALING MAKES you look more yourself," Alyssa tells me. A cold, mean drizzle is falling outside as we nurse cups of coffee from HeBrews, the café located outside Bethel's sanctuary. "It hit me when I was 14, 15," she says. "I was like, I want something real."

I know three people who have attended BSSM. All are artists; two work primarily in a performance medium while the third (Alyssa) creates abstract oil paintings. All three are talented, ambitious, and smart women. All three went to Wheaton College in Illinois.

"I even felt from a young age that there was something more to God," Alyssa says. "I mean, Jesus went around and healed people. What is salvation actually about? Why am I only pursuing one shade of salvation?" Like many evangelicals who end up at Bethel, Alyssa says her Christian upbringing centered on correct doctrine and upright living, but didn't prepare her to live radically for Jesus. "I looked the same as Christians, but I didn't look any different from the world."

Our conversation turns to behavioral tics I've noticed among Bethel students and staff. Shuddering motions during prayer or worship are known as "manifestations." One of Alyssa's friends who gave me a word of knowledge—a truth that God apparently reveals to the speaker in the moment—punctuated her words with erratic movements of her head

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and whispers of “whoa.” It appeared as though someone was gently prodding her with a live wire.

Alyssa says she experiences manifestations, too. “When a finite body is coming into contact with an infinite God—that’s when Mary gets pregnant. Elisha’s bones made somebody come back to life.” The effect isn’t physical only, she adds: “Sometimes I feel the Lord is shaking me out of things I can’t shake out of myself.”

Alyssa pauses to greet her friend Billy. He immediately gives me a prophetic word. In this case, it’s a single word: *strategy*. “If you have questions about where resources are going to come from or how your dreams are going to come to fruition, I just see God bringing you into a season of ease with strategy.” I think ahead to the structure of this article, and nod.

Alyssa chuckles after Billy leaves. “I’m going to keep doing this to you,” she says, glancing around the room.

Alyssa came to Bethel angry after a series of disappointments in her former Christian community. She also came with a lot of questions: “What about all these evil things that are happening in the world that are out of control? Consumerism, materialism ... what are we doing about environmental issues? Race issues?” Alyssa brought up these concerns during her BSSM application process and didn’t find the response convincing. “But,” she says, “sitting in class, every one of those issues has been hit.”

The next day, we are seated in the back of the sanctuary for Bethel’s weekly Friday night service. Chris Gore will be speaking, Alyssa tells me. Gore, a mainstay in the charismatic movement, is reputed to heal people through sheer proximity. Tonight’s message is about peace.

Gore riffs on Christ’s calming of the waters—“Peace, be still!”—and encourages us to pronounce peace over affliction, sickness, and conflict. Near the end, he addresses healing for neurological disorders. “Don’t ask them what the condition is,” he tells us, “and don’t command anything to come out of anyone. Just pray for peace for those standing around you.”

At this moment, I feel a hand grip my left shoulder. I turn to see a woman standing behind me, eyes closed. I turn back to the front while her fingers dig into the muscle. I don’t know what to do; then, after a beat, I place my right hand over her locked knuckles and start to pray.

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She finally collapses into her seat, releasing my shoulder as she falls. I stand and begin to pray for her. Gore instructs us to place our hands on the heads of those receiving prayer, and I cradle her head in my hands. She weeps. “Peace, peace,” I say.

Soon, three or four others—including a toddler I take to be her son—have placed hands on her and are praying in at least two languages. The toddler mimics everyone around him, placing a hand on her leg and saying things I can’t make out over the voices all around. The woman stops shaking. I return to my seat. I realize that I never learned her name.

After the service, Alyssa gathers a couple of friends to pray for me. “You’re going to want to record this,” she tells me. Then, for a half hour, the four women lay hands on me and prophesy about my future.

Every person who receives a word of knowledge or prophecy has a choice. Either you open yourself up to what you are hearing, or you close yourself off. The second option can be important for maintaining mental and spiritual integrity for anyone who doubts that God speaks through prophetic words. But I have been softened all week for this moment, and my defenses are down. Within minutes, I am a blubbering mess.

I find the pronouncements brutally affecting. Finances, relationships, the whole tragic dimension of life: the four women speak to every raw nerve of mine. They pass my phone back and forth, an app recording their words. Later, I’ll be prophesied over in a pizza shop parking lot. Everyone who speaks a word of knowledge or prophecy over me is a Bethel student.

The Theology That Drives Bethel

MAINSTREAM EVANGELICAL CONCERNS about Bethel Church run parallel to their concern about the “realized eschatology” found in parts of the charismatic movement. This theology holds that while the kingdom of God has a future reality in the New Jerusalem, it is already an invisible, spiritual reality, fully functioning now, as promised by Jesus (John 14:12–14).

Consequently, some charismatics strive to bring theocratic rule to bear on their nation (this aspect is called “dominion” or “kingdom now” theology). Others teach that all believers can be blessed with financial prosperity and physical health—thus the fervent belief in miraculous healing as normal. The miraculous is also experienced in ecstatic movements of the Spirit, such as speaking in tongues, being slain in the Spirit, and holy laughter.

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In an article on the history of realized eschatology, theologian Fred Sanders affirms “the ongoing presence of miraculous gifts among God’s people,” including healing. But he adds,

[Miraculous healing] happens when and how [the Holy Spirit] chooses, not according to any guaranteed promise of healing in this age. In this age, our life is to be cruciform, patterned after the cross and the example of Jesus, not triumphant. The triumph comes after suffering, in the age to come.

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Theologian (and self-described charismatic) Sam Storms acknowledges that “much of mainstream evangelicalism can become mired in an under-realized eschatology that breeds defeatism, passive acquiescence to the status quo, and a loss of the joy ... in Christ.” Thus most evangelicals see the charismatic tradition overall as a blessing and gift. And as this story attests, many people have had transforming experiences at Bethel. But Storms also warns that “the charismatic tradition can be guilty of an over-realized eschatology that breeds naïve triumphalism, presumptuous prayer, and an unrealistic expectation of spiritual and physical blessings.” —*Mark Galli, editor*

By 11 pm, walking toward my car, I tell Alyssa I’m shaky and spent. “You’re drunk on the Spirit,” she tells me.

WE CONSIDER JESUS to be perfect theology, and he didn’t say it would end when he left; he said, ‘Greater works than these will you do,’ ” the person seated across from me says. “A miracle is just any time God steps into the picture and does what is humanly or naturally impossible.”

Are all Christians called to perform miracles? He replies, “Every Christian is supposed to do this.”

Bill Johnson is a fifth-generation pastor whose father, Earl, led Bethel from 1968 to 1982 before becoming an Assemblies of God superintendent. Bill sits on an overstuffed couch in his low-lit office. I lean toward him in a leather armchair he described as “the best seat in the house” before encouraging me to take it.

Johnson came to Bethel in 1996 from Mountain Chapel, in nearby Weaverville. He accepted the position on the premise that the church would support his singular vision of revival, one that emphasizes God’s supernatural presence through signs and wonders. In his early years, the church lost a thousand congregants over this vision.

“So, what are your thoughts on the New Apostolic Reformation?” I ask.

“I’m not completely clear on what it is.”

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I laugh with incredulity, but he seems sincere. Farrelly will later say that he doesn't know about the NAR either.

"I've seen my name on the list, but if it's what I think it is, all we're saying is, we want the culture around us to change," Johnson says. For him, that looks like a kingdom accrual of soft power in the world. "My job is: this person's in pain; this person's broken. I step in and bring the kingdom: the dominion of Christ in this situation."

A distinctive of Johnson's ministry is his interpretation of Ephesians 4:11–12: "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry" (ESV). Johnson believes these verses outline five gifts, or ministerial functions, for Christians today. Believing that apostles and prophets are meant to serve the church today is controversial. It is also one of the beliefs associated with the NAR.

"The nature of apostolic ministry is to target the shifting of culture ... thus the prayer, 'on earth as it is in heaven.' That's an apostolic prayer, actually," Johnson says. Farrelly later says that Johnson has the apostolic gift among Bethel leaders. Johnson himself says he's far less interested in the title than the vision-casting function.

After apostles come prophets; the prophetic gift enables an individual to see what others can't. "Kris often sees in the spiritual as you and I see in the natural," Johnson says. (Kris Vallotton, cofounder of BSSM, has worked alongside Johnson for 38 years.)

Johnson, Vallotton, and others believe that God is still speaking, and that it is possible for believers to hear and convey the *rhema*, or "fresh word" of God, to others—a hallmark of charismatic teaching. However, such utterances do not assume the authority of Scripture, Johnson says. "In the Old Testament, the prophet was judged. In the New Testament, the prophetic word was judged." There is a need to discern elements of ego, doubt, confusion, and personal projection that hinder the Word of God.

In Johnson's view, the risks incurred by Bethel's culture of openness to fresh words are like occupational hazards: unavoidable but justifiable. "I don't know how to learn except to experiment," he says. "My job is to create a safe environment [in which] to learn things." In an interview with *Charisma*, Vallotton echoed the sentiment: "We celebrate creativity, revelation, invention, and innovation above comfort, safety, and security."

Bethel's "high stakes" ministry approach is apparent everywhere, from the people entering the sanctuary in motorized wheelchairs with hopes of healing, to the warnings at services for anyone who thinks they were healed to continue taking prescribed medications until doctors verify whether their conditions have been lifted. (Farrelly later

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tells me the medical community “is also a source of God’s healing grace and is not inferior to a supernatural miracle.”) The Alabaster Prayer House—open 24/7—is monitored by a campus security team who watches for dangerous or illicit behavior. Inside, a large yellow button summons security, while a large red button connects you to the Redding police. I wonder whether the red one has ever been pushed.

WHEN IT COMES to the risks inherent to Bethel culture, words of knowledge are relatively low-risk: they are generally affirming and positive, so while they might not be directly from the Lord, they probably won’t hurt you.

The healing room—entered by people on crutches and in wheelchairs—is another story.

I arrive there on Saturday morning and fill out a form, checking the appropriate boxes: “Are you a Christian?” (yes) and “Have you been baptized in the Holy Spirit?” (no). In the space where I state what I’d like to have healed, I report a cratered molar with a pain level of “1” that hurts only when I drink a hot or cold liquid.

After sitting through a class and waiting in the sanctuary, I enter the healing room and am directed toward four Bethel students. I give my form to one of the women and explain my dental issue.

“I’ve heard of people getting new teeth that are made of gold,” a member of the healing team says. The two men and two women ask for permission to place hands on me, and when I grant it, they begin to pray.

After a few minutes, one of the women asks me whether there’s been any change in my tooth. I feel the molar with my tongue and report that it’s still cratered. They ask about the pain, and when I tell them that I don’t feel any without a hot or cold liquid, one of them asks if they can get me a glass of water. She brings it to me, and I drink. “Is there any pain?” she asks. The water is room temperature. “No,” I say, hesitating.

“No pain?” she says, smiling. “Did you just say no pain?” As she repeats the question, she grows louder and more celebratory; I feel a prick of embarrassment on my scalp. “Yes, it is unusual,” I say. The dark-haired man on my healing team turns to the woman. “Was it cold water?” he asks. She replies that it was not.

“I notice on your form that you have not been baptized in the Holy Spirit,” she turns to tell me, and I confirm that I have not been. “Would it be okay if we prayed for you to receive that?” I tell the team that I would not feel comfortable praying to receive that. Then the woman asks if it would be okay if they prayed for me to receive the Holy Spirit in a measure I would be comfortable with. I tell them that this would be fine. Their hands are warm on my shoulders and back, and I join them in prayer.

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ON SUNDAY EVENING, my final night, I sit in the sanctuary while Bethel's congregation sings and prays. Giant mechanical booms hoist video cameras back and forth. Their movements above mimic the raised arms of the worshipers below.

A woman onstage delivers a prophetic word about a crop of conversions in the film industry, then Johnson takes the stage. My mind wanders as he preaches. I think back to my interview with Sarah Sumner.

"I can't ultimately stand on the side of the critics," she says. The culture of generosity here—the "culture of honor" that makes Bethel's risk-taking feasible—is too important a corrective to pharisaical tendencies within parts of evangelicalism for her to dismiss Bethel out of hand, she says.

I try to parse my own feelings about Bethel and am unsuccessful. I have seen an earnest enthusiasm for Scripture and a bracing zeal among people here that puts my own devotion to shame. But when I think of the excesses—McCurdy tells me he once stopped a BSSM student in a hardware store who was trying to prophesy to another customer through their dog—it gives me pause.

"They're seeing miracles because they're obediently praying for miracles," a friend will later tell me back in Toronto. I want this to be true. At the end of the day, I want Bethel to be an affront to Enlightenment modernity, a place where clouds of gold dust fall on worshipers filled with the Holy Spirit as people are healed—a place where intimidating men dance with abandon in the presence of their God.

But when I think of the dancing, I think also of the people waiting for their turn in the healing room. Many of them were not able to raise a banner or move their legs, even after receiving prayer.

Bethel, in my mind, does not cleanly resolve. It is too big and complicated a place for me to collapse into a single theme. I have not seen miracles here, but I do not disbelieve in miracles as such. Without a single satisfactory interpretation, I resign myself to letting Bethel remain a parallax phenomenon: it changes depending on your point of view.

"We're going to do a fire tunnel tonight," Johnson announces at the end of the service. Staff and students line up in rows in front of the stage and form a tunnel of raised hands; they pray for each person who walks through. Alyssa and I join the line of people entering the tunnel.

Now I feel a warmth in my chest. "Lord, bless his hands as he makes music!" a woman says as I pass. People around me are praying in tongues. Some are laughing. Some are making waving motions, as though pushing the wind of the Spirit into people.

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I suppress an urge to laugh. When I exit the tunnel, the warmth remains. It is still there when I leave the building, when I enter my car, and when I drive out of the parking lot for the last time.

When I am halfway to Sacramento in the middle of the night, I realize that I am excited to get home, because I can't wait to go to church.¹

¹ Jones, M. W., & Galli, M. (2016). "Kingdom Come in California?" *Christianity Today*, 60(4), 31–37.