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The Perplexing Power Of John Wimber's Power Encounters

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Introduction: John Wimber

'I'm just a fat man trying to get to heaven,' said John Wimber, pastor of Vineyard Christian Fellowship in Anaheim, California.¹ With such a simple laid-back statement of genial humility, the Californian preacher and the recently formed denomination, 'Association of Vineyard Churches,' continued to attract tens of thousands of new converts into the decade of the nineties. Vibrant religious experience and practice of the supernatural within the context of Evangelical—charismatic Christianity formed the basis of the movement's theological expectation. Wimber attributed the rapid growth of his movement to power encounters of dynamic quality. Healing became a sign of divine sanction and anointing placed upon this Pentecostal—charismatic movement:

Today we see hundreds of people healed every week in Vineyard Christian Fellowship services. Many more are healed as we pray for them in hospitals, on the streets and in the homes. The blind see; the lame walk; the deaf hear. Cancer is disappearing.²

This paper will detail essential features in the ministry and content of John Wimber's preaching and teaching ministry. The emphasis will concentrate on the power encounter dynamics of Wimber's message. After a quick background study of Wimber, his message, and method, the focus of the paper will target key theological elements in his teaching: expectation of the miraculous, demonic influences, 'power healing,' and 'power evangelism.' For the purposes of this paper, illuminating the pragmatic and experiential nature of Wimber's ministry, rather than the conceptual features, will be the primary objective. One additional goal will be to provide an impressionistic glimpse into the disequilibrium which groups like Wimber and the Vineyard Ministries International beget. With this in mind, no ultimate judgment will be made concerning seemingly contradictory perspectives of Wimber, nor will criticism of Wimber be emphasized. The reader should make his or her own judgments.

At the time of this study the Vineyard churches represented one of the most significant contemporary North American contributions to the worldwide Pentecostal—charismatic community. Wimber, the most

visible Vineyard pastor effectively communicated the Pentecostal dynamic of healing and charismatic expectation to the Evangelical and mainline church community, primarily in the United States of America.

Wimber: The Early Years

‘What’s a Bible?’ ‘What’s a Christian?’³ These were questions John Wimber asked before converting to Christianity in 1962. These questions also reflected his ignorance of the basics of Christian culture and influence in the West. In a moment of reflection he portrayed the intriguing pilgrimage which brought him to his current spiritual understanding and experience:

I knew little about God when I converted to Christianity in 1962. A fourth-generation unbeliever, I had received no Christian training as a child. As an adult I had neither belonged to nor regularly attended a church. At twenty-nine years of age, I was a jazz musician with a soaring career and a divine marriage. The reason for my conversion to Christianity was simple: my life was in shambles and I was told a personal relationship with Jesus Christ offered hope from despair. Certainly my conversion was not the result of sincere intellectual inquiry into the mysteries of God.⁴

Few who knew him imagined that this ex-jazz musician would be sending shock waves across the world as the premier advocate of power ministry—expectation and experience of the supernatural and the charismatic—as the biblical norm for the church.

After several years of leading bible studies and bringing hundreds of people to a personal faith in Christ, like his own, Wimber was finally recorded [ordained] by the California Yearly Meeting of Friends. He spent a brief stint as pastor of the fast growing evangelical Yorba Linda Friends Church which ended in 1974. Frustrated with the administrative and mechanical responsibilities which caused him to become distant to his own congregation, he accepted an invitation to change professions.⁵ This opportunity came from C. Peter Wagner, dean of Fuller Theological Seminary’s School of World Mission. Wagner offered Wimber a staff position with Fuller Evangelistic Association with special portfolio to develop the Department of Church Growth. Wimber took the position and over the next four years taught more than forty thousand pastors techniques of church growth and evangelism.⁶

Once a cessationist of the Benjamin B. Warfield variety, maintaining that the charismatic gifts had ceased early in the history of the Christian church, C. Peter Wagner made a radical shift as his studies forced him to consider the experiences of non-Western Christians attending Fuller Seminary.⁷ His research finally convinced him that the supernatural and charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit were indeed still in operation among the most rapidly growing segments of Christianity, especially in the Third World. Wagner’s book, *Look Out! The Pentecostals are Coming*, had a profound impact on Wimber. Wimber also previously rejected the appro-

priateness of the supernatural, and even viewed charismatic gifts such as glossolalia and gifts of healing, as possible demonic or psychotic manifestations. The intellectual climate at Fuller Theological Seminary, the influence of Fuller Professor George Eldon Ladd's 'Kingdom of God' theology, C. Peter Wager's friendship, and Wimber's own research and reflection played a major rôle in forming the theological basis for Wimber's teaching on power encounter.⁸ In addition to this, the presence of credible Pentecostal and charismatic scholars at Fuller, such as Russell P. Spittler, opened his eyes to a reasonable and academic presentation of a Pentecostal theology.⁹ This period of meditation and reflection changed Wimber, and it was soon to have an impact on the seminary campus and his own congregation.

At Fuller, both Wagner and Wimber were instrumental in developing the controversial course MC 510, entitled 'The Miraculous and Church Growth.' The success of the course gained international attention, as did the controversy surrounding the practical application of the charismatic within the context of the classroom. At Fuller, one of the largest seminaries in the United States, the course was the most popular. More than eight hundred students attended between 1982-1985, breaking all enrolment records.¹⁰ The 'laboratory sessions held at the close of each lecture drew overflow crowds of non-students who came to witness God's power.'¹¹ Eventually, the class was discontinued and later modified in order to avoid controversy and obvious excesses.

Wimber's new church originated from a home Bible study group which Wimber had taught. On Mother's Day 1978 the first 'official' meeting took place in a park with one hundred and fifty in attendance. By 1983 the church relocated to Anaheim and rented part of a Pacific Stereo warehouse—sixty-five thousand square feet of space. Wimber's church also became connected to an already existing charismatic group called Vineyard Christian Fellowship. Both groups had ties to Chuck Smith's Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, California. The first Vineyard started in 1974 in the home of a musician named Chuck Girard.¹² Vineyard churches claimed to experience supernatural manifestations of God's power and presence. This included daily healings and occasional raisings of the dead. Theologically and practically, power healing and power evangelism have continued to function as central features in the worship of Vineyard congregations.¹³ Currently, the Vineyard has more than three hundred and fifty churches with about one thousand adherents, and it is rapidly growing in the United States and overseas.¹⁴

Wimber: Expectation of Manifestation

Wimber has advocated the immanence of God in most of his writings. To Wimber God was an active, intimate, and powerful force who broke into this world in authoritative proofs of divine power. In *Power Healing* Wimber described the practice of laying his hands on a person during prayer for healing. Healing was the most visible and reported aspect of

Wimber's teaching, but it was also the most controversial. Wimber exhibited the greatest degree of expectation and involvement with the supernatural in this realm:

My hands usually tingle and are warm, and I feel something like electricity come out of them when I speak a word of command. I have come to associate feelings like tingling and heat with an anointing of the Holy Spirit on me for healing. Other examples of sensations associated with an anointing for healing include pain or heat in my body in an area that corresponds to where the person I am praying for hurts. When I pray for the person my pain disappears.¹⁵

According to Wimber, one had to experience intimacy of relationship with God if one was to 'hear his voice, know his will, and understand his heart.'¹⁶ Relationship with God was fundamental to all other relationships. The power of relationship became evident throughout the teaching, music, and life of Vineyard congregations. Wimber composed numerous songs and hymns. Many of these reflected the intensity of relationship within Vineyard congregations. Relationship was also one of the most helpful tools of evangelism:

When we experience the intimacy of the Father and the Son, it will affect our relationship with brothers and sisters in such a way that many pagans will believe that Jesus was sent by the father to redeem the world. Christian unity, rooted in an intimate relationship with our heavenly father, is the most powerful testimony of Christ's lordship in the world today.¹⁷

The importance of expectation in the ministry of Wimber should not be underestimated. Wimber argued that one of the reasons why churches did not experience signs and wonders was simply because these churches did not expect to see the miraculous.¹⁸ Indeed, much of the historic church, Wimber argued, abandoned practical expectation of the sort of signs and wonders attributed to Christians during early church history, signs and wonders, which by the way, Wimber's Vineyards also claimed. One theological assumption commonly believed was that signs and wonders ceased with the reception of the canon of scripture and the conclusion of the age of the apostles.¹⁹ This belief became known as the cessationist dogma. To many, Wimber and those associated with his Pentecostal—charismatic movement have broken the influence of this cessationist teaching by their preaching, teaching, and miracle working. Numerous apparent examples of the supernatural operated in Wimber's meetings, confounding arguments for cessation.

The expectation of signs and wonders accompanying the preaching ministry of Wimber existed throughout the documents of Wimber's movement. The Vineyard, much more than other Pentecostal—charismatic movements in history, attempted to identify with the mainstream of orthodox Christianity. The voice of the early church fathers gained Wimber's ear, and he responded to their song. Whitefield, Wesley,

Luther, and St. Francis of Assisi also secured positive attention.

The 'power encounter' became a major theme in Wimber's theology. According to Wimber, the dynamic of this encounter or clash between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan formed the basis for the expression of the power of God. Wimber claimed that battles raged in the spirit world between forces of God and forces of Satan. The Christian was the instrument by which the evil forces could be defeated. Wimber and those who identified with him were weapons in this heavenly battle. God utilized them to destroy the strongholds of the enemy. It was little wonder that Wimber gained criticism for dualistic tendencies. Yet, this concept of power encounter became the central feature of all other theological views in the Wimber theology. The influence of Ladd was quite evident in Wimber's development of power encounter theology.²⁰

Wimber: The Demonic Influence

Major criticism has been levelled against Wimber because of his view of the demonic. Wimber believed that demons could influence people today, however, he carried this view to what some consider an extremist position. According to Wimber, the influence of demons affected humans in three categories: temptation, oppression, and demonization. Temptation influenced people in the following manner:

The world, the flesh, and the devil work in concert to tempt us. They have a diabolical interrelationship that seeks to trap men and women in sin and death. When we yield to the temptations of the flesh and the world, we become vulnerable to further demonic temptation.²¹

Wimber considered opposition a more destructive feature of the demonic. To Wimber, opposition attacked individuals in a more direct way, even touching their physical health. Wimber stated, 'Opposition usually comes in the form of attacks like making someone sick, causing an accident, making a scene, and so on.'²²

Demonization was significantly different from these first two categories. Demonization occurred as 'Satan and demons attacked men and women by getting a grip on people's personalities or physical lives.'²³ Wimber explained that the term demonization came from the Greek word *daimonizesthai*, which meant 'to have a demon.' According to Wimber, 'possession' was a foreign concept to the Bible. It would be more accurate to speak of degrees of demonization, or levels of having a demon. Wimber clarified this position by indicating that categories of influence ranged from mild to severe demonization:

The term 'demonized' refers to people who are in varying degrees of levels of demonic bondage. In all instances of bondage people are subject to periodic attacks by one or more demons that may affect them physically, mentally, and spiritually. In literature on demonization, terms used to describe more mild forms of demonization include influence, oppression,

obsession, and subjection. More severe forms of demonization are described as demonic attack, assault, and possession.²⁴

This classification would in itself not be unusual in Evangelical Christianity, except for Wimber's strong emphasis that Christians could also be demonized. The possibility of Christians being demonized was one factor which caused negative reaction to Wimber, yet his argument from experience was difficult to contradict. Wimber made his views quite clear in *Power Healing* when he said, 'I believe believers and non-believers alike can be demonized.'²⁵ One feature in his healing seminars continued to be sessions where ministry to deliver Christians from evil powers and demonic control took prominence. In the ministry of Wimber the expectation of confronting the demonic was quite real.

Wimber did qualify what some have taken further out of context. He pointed out that those who 'walk in faith and live righteously' were ensured 'absolute protection from demonization.'²⁶ Wimber's style was to temper radical theological positions with reasonable explanation. He did so effectively. Exorcism, according to Wimber, was but one facet of the overall mandate to bring healing as a sign of the kingdom and presence of God.

The longest chapter in *Power Healing* was the chapter entitled 'Healing the Demonized.' Wimber used Scripture to back his position, but his strongest argument came from his own experience and that of others with the demonic. It is difficult to argue with a man or woman who says, 'I saw the demon in her eyes.' These practical non-biblical suggestions and experiences were most revealing of his ministry. Wimber did not suggest that demons were behind every problem a person might experience. But he did indicate there were major differences between mild and severe demonization. After he exhibited intensely logical argumentation to defend his position that demonization existed, he took a step back and pointed out that severe demonization was actually a rare occurrence. 'Mild demonic influence was much more common.'²⁷

The practical advice and acknowledged sensitivity to the Spirit by Wimber was worthy of notice. He presented his own experiences as the model of success for others seeking success in spiritual ministry. Demonization could be the result of many things. According to Wimber, seventy percent. of all children of alcoholics become alcoholics themselves. He then said, 'I believe in many instances demonic influences contribute to their problem.'²⁸ Accordingly, Wimber believed Christians could fall under the influences of demons, often without their own knowledge. In Vineyard congregations men and women gifted in discernment were necessary in order to discern the presence of the demonic. In this vein, Wimber made some eye-opening statements:

Christians can be demonized if inherited demons [demons passed from parents to children] or demons that they pick up through other means are not cast out of their lives.²⁹

The Perplexing Power Of John Wimber's Power Encounters

Demons may also gain access to men and women through sins done against them . . . For example, people who have been sinned against sexually usually have serious demonic problems . . . Many times I have discerned the cause of people's physical and emotional illness are spirits that have come to them from their parents. Curses spoken by relatives, teachers, and friends may be avenues for demonic influence, as can all sorts of witchcraft practised by others against unsuspecting people. Trauma such as rape, abandonment by parents, and serious accidents also create fear and terror that are avenues for demons.³⁰

Again, Wimber dashed the apparent extreme positions he had advocated with a more rational and realistic tone. 'Frequently,' he says, 'Christians misdiagnose psychological disorders as severe demonization. I never call anything a demon until I actually talked to it.'³¹ Wimber cited that in his view of his own experience he came to the conclusion that most who claimed to be demonized were not in actuality.³² When Wimber confronted demons, he spoke to them in the name and in the authority of Jesus. Then the demons were cast out of the person, although sometimes extended periods of aggressive prayer and dialogue with the demons occurred.

What was fascinating about Wimber's books, and much of the literature dealing with the Signs and Wonders Movement, was the wealth of information, accounts, and testimonies of supernatural events, especially works of deliverance in the lives of people. In one case, a twenty-nine year old former pastor under psychiatric care came for help. The man had serious emotional and spiritual problems, and according to Wimber's diagnosis, they 'were the result of serious demonic influences.' The man told Wimber of a lifelong obsession to 'look at pornographic pictures and make obscene phone calls.' The man had already left two pastorates because members in his church caught him at a compromising moment. His problem according to Wimber was not psychological, it was demonic:

At our first meeting a demon manifested itself through Bill, which was the first time something like this had happened to him. Bill's voice and personality changed, his face became contorted, and the spirit challenged my authority to be there. Until this time Bill had ruled out the possibility that he might be under the influence of demons, because he had been taught and believed that demons could not influence Christians today. I said, 'Identify yourselves.' They said they made Bill use pornography and practice masturbation; they caused his rage and self-hatred. I said, 'In the name of Jesus, leave Bill right now' (see Luke 10:17). At first the demons resisted my commands . . . so I prayed further and again told them to leave. Bill told me that for the first time in years he felt free from the compulsions to sin sexually.³³

Wimber recorded that he followed-up on Bill, and although still meeting with the psychologist, the demons had left the man's life.³⁴ Examples of this kind of power encounter with the forces of Satan were standard

literature in material associated with Wimber and the Vineyard, however expectation of confrontation with Satan was not unique to Wimber. It existed as a central feature in Pentecostal evangelism since the genesis of the movement at the turn of this century, especially in Pentecostal missions in the Third World. Wimber was not the creator of power encounter in the twentieth century.

Both of Wimber's books, *Power Healing* and *Power Evangelism*, referred to the historical development of scepticism. Of interest was Wimber's view of the Enlightenment. Wimber saw the intellectual products of the Enlightenment, secularism, rationalism, materialism, and mechanism as non-biblical negative factors infiltrating the Western Church. The Enlightenment caused a rejection of the belief in and expectation of the supernatural. Accordingly, modern society developed, entangled within an anti-supernaturalistic straight-jacket worldview.³⁵ During the Enlightenment, people moved away from acceptance of the worldview of the bible, into an alien worldview that destroyed natural expectation in the miraculous. Wimber's objective was to take the church back to that prior perspective of expectation. He argued for a simple commitment to the biblical worldview of signs and wonders and a rejection of scepticism. The gap between actual belief of modern society and the teaching of scripture produced further condemnation.³⁶ To Wimber, the Enlightenment was the enemy of faith and an enemy of the miraculous:

For the purpose of defining the term 'power encounter,' though, the Enlightenment's most significant influence among Christians is to bend their thinking away from the supernatural and toward rationalism and materialism.³⁷

The historical-critical method of interpreting the Scripture gained the blistering criticism of Wimber. He made the accusation that even conservative Evangelical biblical scholars have yielded to the Enlightenment methodology. Evangelicals professed orthodox theology, yet lived heretical experience. Wimber credited the success of his movement and other similar movements with the collapse of the Enlightenment in modern thought. With the increase in 'non-rational private religious experiences,' a hunger erupted for 'personal religious experience, good and bad.' Wimber's power encounter theology 'offered a viable option in an age of supernatural expectation and experimentation.'³⁸

Lay involvement in ministry, especially the healing ministry within Vineyard congregations, played a prominent part in the charismatic activity of the church. When Wimber went to England to preach and teach, he took along hundreds of fellow lay ministers from his congregation. These men and women ministered in gifts of discernment, healing, and use of other spiritual gifts. At the end of the sessions the lay ministers worked in teams to pray for healing all over the auditorium.³⁹ Wimber developed a model for divine healing, much of it contained in *Power Healing*. The pragmatic aspects of equipping lay Christians for healing were presented

with great force by Wimber. Those being trained went through a logical systematic step-by-step procedure. 'To learn how to pray for the sick is by watching another do it.'⁴⁰

Wimber set a priority on training others to participate in his brand of power ministry. This intense desire to create and multiply his ministry caused some difficulties, especially when some misinterpreted the extreme things he said. The texts *Power Evangelism* and *Power Healing* offered practical methodology on how one could engage in the power ministry.

The person unfamiliar with Wimber's concepts of power ministry, and unaware of the dynamics of the modern Pentecostal movement, might be shocked by such a discussion thus far. However, to some, Wimber played a middle rôle, between extremes in both directions. Some might argue that Wimber's churches overemphasized the charismatic. On the contrary, balance was a desired goal of Wimber's ministry.⁴¹ Wimber did not wish to stress sectarian differences in his ministry, and he strove to establish ecumenical relationships with tolerance for other perspectives. This was perhaps one reason why he has developed positive contact with traditional Protestants as well as cultivated ties to Roman Catholics in a friendly way that most traditional Pentecostals would not tolerate.⁴²

Wimber: Power Healing

Wimber viewed his emphasis on signs and wonders as a continuation of the healing ministry of historical individuals such as St. Cuthbert of Lindisfarne, St. Francis of Assisi, John Welch of post-Reformation Scotland, and twentieth century notables such as Kathryn Kuhlman, Oral Roberts, Archbishops Milingo in Zambia, and the Korean, Paul Yonggi Cho.⁴³ He made the argument for healing today from history and scripture, but perhaps the most forceful argument that he made came from his own experience. He argued that when a healing occurred, the miraculous proved God's involvement. In fact, he connected healing to the Reformation doctrine that a reformed church was one always reforming. Thus, it would only be proper to accept the practice of divine healing in the contemporary church scene as a process of reform.⁴⁴

For Wimber, the 'anointing of the Spirit' was fundamental to a successful healing ministry. The pragmatic aspect of power healing came through as Wimber maintained that the key to the growth of Vineyard churches was their learning 'to know when God's unction or anointing had come for a task like healing in a particular situation.'⁴⁵ Not only has Wimber observed that the Spirit's anointing was crucial for the ministry of healing, but the author of *Signs and Wonders: The Wimber Phenomenon*, John Gunstone, evaluated the Vineyard Christian Fellowship as one of the rare groups in history, anointed by God to contribute to the church of the modern world. This anointing consisted of 'special charisms of prophecy, teaching, encouragement, and such like, to guide the rest of us along the road he wants us to travel.'⁴⁶

Healing to Wimber contained much more than spiritual or physical

elements. Healing consisted of a wide range of effects, such as forgiveness from sin, restoration from sickness, elimination of the oppression of poverty and unjust social structures, deliverance from the demonic, and raising of the dead. Healing was something which was available to the Christian now and encompassed both the physical and the spiritual. Healing to Wimber was a concrete experience from God. To Wimber, although healing took place, the fact that the kingdom of God had not yet destroyed the kingdom of Satan interfered with the present actuality of the fullness of the kingdom.⁴⁷ Wimber stated that some people did not gain their healing because 'we do not seek God as wholeheartedly as we should . . . In other words, God was able to do greater miracles than we have yet seen, if only we would persist in seeking him.'⁴⁸

Wimber's view of the clash between the kingdoms had an effect on his understanding of the reason for most illnesses. According to Wimber, physical illness came from spiritual, emotional, or even demonic forces.⁴⁹ Since he rejected a purely physical understanding of illness, he devoted significant attention to what he termed 'inner healing'. Inner healing was necessary for three categories. First, those born into difficult situations, born into a sinful world, needed this inner healing. Secondly, those who have been 'injured by others, parents, family members, friends, acquaintances, even strangers' needed to experience inner healing. Thirdly, when individuals committed personal sin, they needed inner healing from the effects of their transgression.⁵⁰ For Wimber, inner healing was an important part of his healing ministry.

Some might wonder how Wimber, by no means a stereotypical Pentecostal, came to be involved in the healing movement. When he first felt that God was directing him to teach and preach on healing, Wimber confessed that he did not believe in healing and was opposed to the idea, especially since he associated healing with quacks and rip-off artists.⁵¹ Yet, after further study he obeyed what he felt was God's direction and soon came to view healing as biblical. At first, he failed to see any real successes as he prayed for the sick in his own congregation. He reached the point where he expressed to God, 'I will not teach healing any more.' At that point, Wimber pointed out that God spoke to him 'clearly,' 'Either preach my word or get out.'⁵² From that crisis Wimber began to experience healings in his congregation and ministry. In view of his controversial teaching, Wimber's apparent objectivity and transparency still burst forth with comments like, 'I don't fully understand how healing works, I don't know why this happens.'⁵³

Perhaps, one of the most distinctive aspects of the Wimber episode was the training of significant numbers of people to release the healing power of God themselves. According to Wimber, big names such as Billy Graham, Oral Roberts, Kathryn Kuhlman, and others were not the wave of the future.⁵⁴ The future was to be strongly connected to the ministry and charismatic contribution of the ordinary Christian in ordinary congregations. This mobilization of the ordinary came to be known as the 'Third

Wave,' and it was a revolutionary movement away from the standard clergy domination of church life:

The Third Wave has many results similar to classical Pentecostalism and the charismatic renewal: evangelism, church planting, and the renewal of existing congregations are the most obvious. But I believe there is one result that may separate the Third Wave from the first two waves. If I am one of the leaders of the Third Wave, and if the ministry of the Vineyard is characteristic of where the Third Wave is going, then it is an equipping wave. By 'equipping' I mean it is a wave in which *all* Christians are encouraged to pray for the sick and experience *all* the gifts. This is why I conduct training seminars, not healing campaigns; my goal is to release the healing ministry throughout the entire body, not keep it confined to only a few faithful healers.⁵⁵

Wimber acknowledged that there was much he still did not understand about healing. However, his eyes caused him to believe in it as a fundamental part of his ministry.⁵⁶ His theology might not necessarily be totally consistent according to the rigid demands of Enlightenment rational expectations, but he would claim that this was not the issue. The issue was whether or not his methodology worked. With this in mind, it was no wonder that he devoted most of his energy to proclaiming the 'how to' rather than the 'what is.'⁵⁷ Wimber might be best known as the pragmatic evangelist of healing methodology.

In the wake of Wimber's ministry, hundreds of testimonies were generated. Psychiatrist and author John White interviewed numerous individuals from the Vineyard. His conclusion was that significant changes in the spiritual and medical situation of people occurred, 'plenty to convince a skeptic,' he said.⁵⁸ He talked with seven former homosexuals who attributed a 'complete change in sexual orientation because of the healing prayers of the Vineyard.'⁵⁹ Roman Catholic journalist and broadcaster Peter Jennings claimed that he was miraculously healed of sarcoidosis, a rare disease with no known cure, at the ACTS 86 festival of faith at Britain's National Exhibition Centre.⁶⁰ Examples of this nature, of individuals claiming to have been healed, run into the hundreds.

Perhaps the most controversial treatment of Wimber and his supposed healings has come from the English social anthropologist, Dr. David C. Lewis.⁶¹ In *Healing: Fiction, Fantasy or Fact* Lewis examined critically the claims of healing which were alleged to have occurred at the Harrogate Conference in the fall of 1986. Of the two thousand four hundred and seventy people registered, more than one thousand eight hundred and ninety returned a questionnaire used to quantify experiences, participant backgrounds, and other related phenomena. After additional extensive personal interviews Lewis developed a computerized analytical model of the data. This data was further subjected to the scrutiny of Lewis and other professionals for more than a year.⁶¹

Lewis's conclusions supported the claims of healing on the physical, emotional, and spiritual planes. Although there were only sixty-eight

reported cases of total physical healing, Lewis pointed out that marked improvement in the physical status of the person prayed for occurred in fifty-eight percent of those who reported on the questionnaires.⁶²

Inner healing and/or deliverance from emotional and spiritual problems had significantly higher results. Lewis recorded that seven hundred and forty eight people at Harrogate received prayer for spiritual or emotional healing, some for more than one problem. Almost eighty percent of those prayed for reported experiencing some form of healing.⁶³ This category of healing included improvement in some of the following areas of need: resentments, tension, sense of rejection, relating to God as Father, habit of picking skin spots, lack of confidence, attitudes to mother-in-law, giving up smoking, attitudes towards women, healing of effects of sexual abuse as a child, memory of attempted incest, thoughts of murdering husband, fears, 'pendulum swings' in life, and numerous other areas of spiritual or emotional problems.⁶⁴

Lewis also looked at related phenomena, such as the experience of many who felt a 'word of knowledge' spoken during the meetings applied to them. Five hundred and four people had this experience.⁶⁵ Others experienced physical manifestations such as falling down, tingling hands, weeping, hot areas on the body, behaviour resembling 'drunkenness,' screaming, laughing, and shouting.⁶⁶

Of the total who turned in questionnaires, eight percent were not from Great Britain. More than fifty different denominations were noted with Anglicans having the most attenders—thirty-five percent, followed by Baptists—eleven percent, Roman Catholics—three percent, Methodists—four percent, and Pentecostals—ten percent. Surprisingly, the social group which consisted of professionals, (lawyers, doctors, and clergy), represented the highest percentage in attendance. The next highest group included business managers and teachers.⁶⁷

What was unique about Wimber's healing reputation was that he claimed to have failed to see a healing on numerous occasions. He claimed that he had 'gone for days praying for literally hundreds of people,' and he saw, to the best of his knowledge, 'every one of them get well.'⁶⁸ And yet, at other times he acknowledged, 'no one I pray for gets well.'⁶⁹ One of his most celebrated cases of failure was with the Anglican minister, David Watson. Watson had a positive relationship with Wimber, and considered Wimber an important figure in the renewal of the Anglican confession in Great Britain. David Watson was one of the most important figures in the Anglican renewal movement. On numerous occasions Wimber fasted and prayed for his friend, but finally Wimber succumbed to the reality of his friend's medical situation. During one of their last times together Wimber spoke with Watson:

'David,' I said, 'you're a dying man, and you're denying it.'

'I know,' he said.

'Unless God sovereignly intervenes, you will die,' I said.

'Go home and get your affairs in order. Your faith in Christ has been a constant source of encouragement to me.'

'But you have to acknowledge that you are dying.'⁷⁰

Watson died in February 1984. Wimber maintained a positive relationship with his widow. In fact, Anne Watson, mother of two, gave her account of the death of her husband and expressed the belief that God had comforted her and helped her through her grief.⁷¹

Wimber: Power Evangelism

Wimber's concept of power evangelism took a crucial place in his overall ministry and teaching. Wimber stated in *Power Evangelism* that contemporary evangelism lost its power and authority because it ceased to be closely tied with the demonstration of the power of God. Wimber maintained that the presentation of the Word of God must be validated by the demonstration of the power of God in order to be truly biblical. In other words, the signs and wonders ministry of Christ and the disciples should be the model for the modern church.⁷² Wimber did not intend totally to eliminate the rational from this process. 'By power evangelism', he claimed, 'I mean a presentation of the gospel that is rational but also transcends the rational.'⁷³ For Wimber, and also according to his own spiritual experience, 'the best explanation of the message of Christ was to be found in the demonstration or validation of God's power over the kingdom of Satan.'⁷⁴ Often the validation of the proclamation occurred in Wimber's ministry with power demonstrations through healing the sick and the casting out of demons.⁷⁵

Wimber caused a negative reaction among some non-charismatic Christians with his assertion that non-Pentecostal evangelism was functionally inferior and bound by the rationalistic anti-supernaturalistic cultural bias of the worldview of the West.⁷⁶ According to Wimber, evangelism must be combined with the exercise of the powers of the kingdom of God. He believed that the miraculous intervention of God must be the norm for true biblical evangelism. Wimber did not neglect to identify his own experience with the rapid growth of the Pentecostals.⁷⁷ He argued that worldwide Pentecostal missionary successes were connected with the association of the spirit's supernatural activity with evangelism. This is where power evangelism came from. The proclamation of the gospel was to be preceded and undergirded by 'supernatural demonstrations of God's presence.'⁷⁸ Other evidences of God's involvement included direct communication with the Holy Spirit, miraculous healings, the casting-out of demons, and other supernatural events.⁷⁹ After all, Wimber would no doubt argue, this was exactly the pattern Jesus followed.

The apparent power present in many Wimber meetings caused certain physical phenomena similar to those which were present at Harrogate. Within Wimber's Vineyard congregation in Anaheim, one of the early church services experienced the following phenomenon:

One fellow, Tim started bouncing. His arms flung out as he fell over taking a mike stand down with him. He was tangled up in the cord, with the mike next to his mouth. He began speaking in tongues . . . At one point it looked like a battlefield scene, bodies everywhere, people weeping, wailing, speaking in tongues . . .⁸⁰

It was indeed interesting to observe that many of these physical responses to a perceived presence of God, find direct historical similarity with antecedent historical movements. The revival campaigns during the activity of Edwards, Wesley, Whitefield, Finney, and Moody also saw similar reactions.⁸¹ Wimber not only went back to history to cite precedents, but he also spent no small effort in going back to the bible for proof-texts.⁸² Nigel Wright, Editor of *Renewal*, an Anglican charismatic magazine, attended one of Wimber's meetings. As one of the most respected leaders of the Anglican charismatic movement, he earned a reputation for fair-mindedness and level-headed perception:

In the various meetings led by John the distinctive feature is the manifestation of overwhelming spiritual power in a way quite remarkable to those who encounter it. Signs and wonders meetings have certainly not been short on wonders. Possibly there have been more wonders than there have been signs! Shaking, convulsive behaviour, spiritual 'drunkenness,' falling in the Spirit, trances, ecstasies, tears, laughter, shouts, screams, all are in evidence. Never have I personally encountered such amazing and (from the human point of view) apparently inexplicable events. Spiritual power was here in evidence and not just in talk.⁸³

In the context of power evangelism, personalized prophecy has grown to some importance with Wimber. Carol Wimber reported that her husband often received words of knowledge, where the Holy Spirit gave him special information about a person or persons in the congregation. Often Wimber claimed to see a light shine down on individuals, and it was these people who she claimed experienced power for healing and renewal.⁸⁴ At times Wimber manifested the ability to speak words of command, on some occasions speaking directly to the evil spirits, commanding them to leave in Jesus' name.⁸⁵ There were several other 'words' which Wimber spoke, some were directed at the illness itself with authority to heal. Others were more prophetic in content.⁸⁶

Wimber: Making People Uncomfortable

Wimber caused Christian people to reflect on their own experience and belief. If the Christian God has truly penetrated the barrier of the Enlightenment, then those who claim to be followers of the Christian God, must of necessity re-evaluate their own experiences and expectations, especially if they have grown accustomed to the rationalistic and sceptical outlook on life. This was especially so for fundamentalists and evangelicals who prided themselves on experiencing God through the preaching of the Word, yet neglected the clear evidence of the supernatural within the

text of scripture as potential valid experience. Wimber told them that their experience was incomplete without tangible demonstrations of God's power defeating the kingdom of Satan. Wimber's proclamation threatened the foundation of their theological presuppositions.

For classical Pentecostals, especially in North America, Wimber also posed a challenge. Although technically Wimber was connected to the larger world-wide Pentecostal-charismatic movement, traditional Pentecostals found it difficult to adjust to the style of the newcomer from California. Perhaps, most difficult was accepting Wimber's significant numerical success, especially when a few of the contemporary traditional Pentecostal denominations have recently slowed in growth in North America. Agreement on teaching and practice was similar between Wimber and the traditional Pentecostals, but Wimber departed in two major areas from the classical Pentecostal theology. First, his view of the charismatic differed in the exercise of the charismatic gifts of the Spirit. For example, he did not place heavy emphasis on glossolalia and would accept either glossolalic or prophetic utterance as an evidence of the filling of the Spirit.⁸⁷ Classical Pentecostals remained rigid in their position that glossolalia was the initial evidence of the baptism in the Spirit. Wimber's acceptance of the possibility of demonization or practical possession of the Christian was another point of disagreement.⁸⁸

An additional apparent difference with Pentecostals was in the area of lay ministry. Pentecostal denominations in North America have gradually shifted toward more clergy domination, whereas Wimber placed heavy emphasis on lay ministry and discipleship.⁸⁹

Several complaints came against Wimber. Some were reasonable; some were not. His concept of healing, especially his methodology caused a stir. In the Acts 1986 Conference, he asked every woman with a 'lump on her breast to stand in the auditorium.'⁹⁰ He desired to pray for them, but some complained that there was a lack of pastoral sensitivity to personal privacy in his method. The question of when not to heal, or whether or not God desired people to experience 'perpetual enjoyment of physical health,' was one problem brought out in Fuller Seminary's response to the MC 510 course before it was dropped.⁹¹ The course continued later with certain limitations. Indeed, Wimber left himself open to criticism by his contradictory statements. For example, he stated, 'There are many reasons people are not healed when prayed for. Most of the reasons involve some form of sin or unbelief,' but also stated, 'I never blame the sick person for lack of faith if healing does not occur.'⁹² Some complained that too much attention surrounded the healing of the body, but not enough to the spiritual regeneration of those who were not vibrant Christians.⁹³

Has Wimber ignored the sovereignty of God in the realm of healing? If Christians were called to heal, logically they must also be called to raise the dead. Where are the bodies and empty graves? These represent just a few concerns expressed concerning the healing ministry of Wimber.

However, the accounts of satisfied customers apparently outweighed the critics, and Wimber will continue his expanding ministry into 1992.

Hard-line Evangelicals have been most critical of Wimber. They argue that Wimber succumbed to anti-intellectualism and displaced preaching the gospel from its central rôle in worship. Evangelicals claimed that the excitement of the circus meetings subverted the entire cognitive-oriented message of the Christian religion.⁹⁴ Wimber's reliance on his own experience was another major concern. Wimber often brought his experience to the bible, and interpreted the text through the lens of his experience. With this in mind, critics claimed that Wimber fell into an 'existentialist blind spot' when it came to understanding the bible.⁹⁵ Others registered complaints of heresy, dualism, magic, and credulity. Some criticisms were lame at best.⁹⁶ Wimber's success naturally drew many of these complaints, some motivated by sincere theological and practical concerns and some by jealousy. Some individuals eventually rejected Wimber because they were tied to rigid theological positions, unwilling or unable to reflect with an open mind.

Wimber: Concluding Remarks

John Wimber was a man on a pilgrimage. This pilgrimage took him across diverse terrain and gave him numerous experiences. He participated in a religious enthusiasm which more traditional, sceptical, and staid Christians and churches would find shocking and offensive. Could it be that Wimber's serious desire and expectation to experience the Holy Spirit played a rôle in the events of his life? Was expectation the crucial factor in the pilgrimage of experience he has taken?

Wimber practised invoking the Holy Spirit in his meetings. Often, when he requested the Spirit's presence, a hush would settle over the auditorium. The hush would trumpet the arousal of expectation alive with silence.⁹⁷

When Wimber prayed for those who desired to be healed and helped, he placed his hands on the person and loudly prayed that the Holy Spirit would come and minister in power.⁹⁸ If Wimber were to speak to a person who was spiritually hungry for an experience of the grace, power, and presence of the Holy Spirit, he might repeat his actual words recorded in *Power Encounters*:

Your power encounter is only as far away as this prayer, 'Holy Spirit, I open my heart, my innermost being to you. I turn from my sin and self-sufficiency and ask that you fill me with your love, power, and gifts. Come Holy Spirit.'⁹⁹

Wimber firmly placed the challenge at the doormat of Christians in the twentieth century. Should the supernatural accompany the church in this century? Is the church sufficiently the Church without the supernatural power and manifestations evident which Jesus and the disciples experienced? To what degree are healing and the charismatic appropriate for the

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Christian church today? It would be easy to write him off as just another extremist, but those who have come to know Wimber's ministry would not all be quick to forget their experience with the supernatural. We should not be quick to ignore his movement's challenge in view of the steady proliferation of Pentecostal and charismatic theology around the globe.

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