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A Visit to the Vineyard Church, Anaheim, Calif.

(September 5, 2003 - David Cloud, Fundamental Baptist Information Service, P.O. Box 610368, Port Huron, MI 48061, 866-295-4143, fbns@wayoflife.org) -

The Vineyard Fellowship, which numbers more than 500 churches worldwide, prospered under the leadership of the late John Wimber (1934-1997). In 1977, Wimber started a church in Anaheim, California, which eventually grew to 6,000 members and became the mother church of the Vineyard Association. These churches have exercised an influence far beyond their numbers. They have promoted a radical ecumenism and a charismatic-style experience orientation among evangelicals who do not claim to be charismatics. A large part of this experience derives from the use of powerful rock music to help create a sensual worship experience. The Vineyard music has gone around the world and is very influential in the contemporary praise and worship movement. Recently, for example, I obtained a Vineyard tape that was produced in India and was sold in a bookstore in Kathmandu, Nepal.

John Wimber opened the floodgates to many errors by downplaying the importance of biblical discernment. He warned against being “too rigid” and “too heavily oriented to the written Word” (Counterfeit Revival, p. 109). He warned against “worshipping the book” and mocked those who judge everything strictly by the Bible, saying they have “God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Book” (Ibid.). One would say something like that only if he were attempting to promote things which were not in accordance with the Word of God. The Psalmist said the written Word “is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path” (Ps. 119:105). It is impossible to be too strongly oriented toward the Bible!

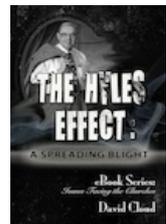
In his healing seminar, Wimber made the following statement, “It’s evil when you hide behind doctrinal beliefs that curtail and control the work of the Spirit. ... The Church today is committing evil in the name of sound doctrine. And they are quenching the work of the Holy Spirit” (Wimber, Healing Seminar Series, cited from Testing the Fruit of the Vineyard by John Goodwin).

In 1994 Phillip Johnson visited the Anaheim Vineyard, the church pastored by Wimber, and he and the rest of the congregation were told by one of the Vineyard pastors: “In a moment I’m going to call down the Holy Spirit. Things like you’ve never seen will begin to happen. ... Don’t be alarmed by anything you see ... And above all, don’t try to rationally evaluate the things you will see. ... Subjecting the revival to doctrinal tests is the surest way to put out the fire” (Phillip R. Johnson, “My Visit to the Anaheim Vineyard,” 1995, www.gty.org:80/~phil/articles/laught.htm). At the same meeting a woman church staff member led in public prayer with these frightful words: “We refuse to critique with our minds the work that You want to do in our hearts. We refuse to subject Your work to our little doctrinal tests.”

Such a mindset leaves one open to spiritual delusion. If the Holy Spirit operates contrary to the Word of God, there is absolutely no way to discern between the true Spirit and false spirits. This subtle undermining of biblical authority is one reason why strange and unscriptural things such as spiritual drunkenness and prophets who learn how to prophesy by making mistakes have been accepted in the Vineyard

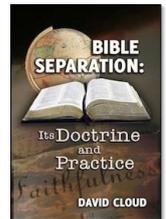
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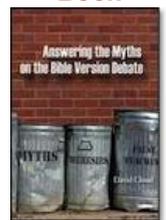
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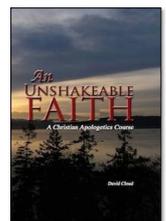
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movement.

On August 31, 2003, I attended the Sunday morning service of the Anaheim Vineyard in order to report on what I saw and heard. The dress was casual in the extreme. The people dressed as they would for a sporting event. Shorts were the rule.

The service was divided into four segments: praise and worship, prophecy, sermon, and “personal ministry.”

The praise and worship segment was led by a large rock style band consisting of a drummer, three or four guitars, a piano, a keyboardist (who also played saxophone and a wind midi), and several singers. A large percentage of the people participated enthusiastically in the worship service, many lifting up their hands, some kneeling, most swaying to the music, some dancing.

The Vineyard music is very influential and is crossing most denominational lines. One of its themes is ecumenical unity. Vineyard worship leader David Ruis’ song “Break Dividing Walls” is an example. It says, “We will break dividing walls; we will be one. We will break dividing walls between the Baptist and the Methodist, between the Episcopalian and the Presbyterian, between the Pentecostal and the Charismatic; the walls are coming down between all denominations.”

During the prophecy segment, a few people, both men and women, gave personal prophecies or led out in a song. One prophecy boldly proclaimed, “The time will come when the taverns and the malls will be places of worship.” This is a prophecy that has often been made by those who believe that the coming of Christ will be preceded by a great spiritual revival characterized by the redeeming of large segments of society accompanied by signs and wonders. Many of the prophets who have been associated with the Vineyard, such as Paul Cain and Mike Bickle, have made such prophecies.

The message was on contemplative prayer and it was deeply influenced by Roman Catholic spirituality. The speaker, who is a pastor emeritus in a Vineyard church, described four types of prayer: crisis prayer, evangelical prayer, “Come, Holy Spirit” prayer (calling upon the Holy Spirit to demonstrate “kingdom power”), and contemplative prayer. He described the latter as “gazing at length on something” and as “coming into the presence of God and resting in the presence of God.” He described contemplative prayer as lying back and floating “in the river of God’s peace.” The speaker described sitting on a couch “in the manifest presence of Jesus.” He quoted St. John of the Cross, “It is in silence that we hear him.”

The Vineyard speaker recommended the writings of the late Thomas Merton (a Catholic priest who converted from the Anglican Church), who wrote a book on contemplative prayer and whose voice is influential in the “centering prayer” movement. Merton spent the last 27 years of his life in a Trappist monastery devoted to Mary (Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky) and promoted the integration of pagan practices such as Zen Buddhism and Christianity. The titles of some of his books were “Zen and the Birds of the Appetite,” “The Way of Chuang Tzu,” and “Mystics and the Zen Masters.” For three years, Merton lived as a complete hermit.

The Vineyard speaker described personal revelations that he has allegedly received from God. He claimed that on one occasion Jesus said to him, “Come away, my beloved,” and he obeyed by staying in a monastery for some days. He mentioned at least two occasions in which he has spent time in monasteries. The speaker claimed that there are five benefits from contemplative prayer: (1) An abiding sense of peace, (2) prophetic revelation, (3) love that is felt, (4) personal transformation, and (5) power ministry.

He used several Catholic “saints” as examples of the benefit of contemplative prayer, and there was no warning whatsoever about their false gospel, their blasphemous prayers to Mary, or any other error. In fact, he recommended that his listeners “read the lives of the saints.” He mentioned St. Catherine of Siena and said that Christ appeared to her and placed a ring on her finger signifying her marriage to Him. He claimed that Catherine experienced the benefit of contemplative prayer by being able to exercise supernatural healings. He mentioned “St. Anthony,” one of the fathers of the deeply unscriptural Catholic monasticism. Anthony spent 20 years in isolation, and after that, according to the Vineyard pastor, the “saint’s” ministry was

characterized by “signs and wonders.”

The growing emphasis on Catholic spirituality in evangelical and charismatic circles is very dangerous, but it is the outgrowth of the ecumenical philosophy which has torn down the walls of separation between many Protestants and the Roman Catholic Church. When Ronald Atwood left the Episcopal church and was ordained a Catholic priest in the St. Francis de Sales Cathedral in Oakland, California, in December 1984, he cited Thomas Merton as one of his influences. Atwood testified that the practice of Catholic-style contemplative prayer “led him to seek spiritual direction from a Catholic priest” (The Christian News, Jan. 7, 1985).

After the sermon, the Vineyard speaker gave an invitation for the people to come forward to receive personal ministry by the workers. He first led the congregation in repeating silently to themselves, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” He said, “Receive his presence that is coming upon you.” He said, “Holy Spirit, I pray for your merciful presence to rest on each of us.” The people were urged to pray, “Lord Jesus, have mercy on me a sinner,” but the gospel was never given. There was no explanation of why sinners can receive mercy or what sin is or what it means to receive mercy. Nothing was clarified; all was vague religiosity. A Roman Catholic would have interpreted the invitation within the context of his sacramental gospel and would doubtless have “received Jesus” again just as he has been taught to do repeatedly but without coming to the once-for-all experience of the new birth.

Many people went forward, but I did not observe the traditional charismatic phenomena such as spirit slaying and shaking. Those were typical at the Anaheim Vineyard in the 1990s, but it appears that such things are no longer the norm for regular Sunday services. There weren’t any signs and wonders that day.

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