

# The Quarterly Journal



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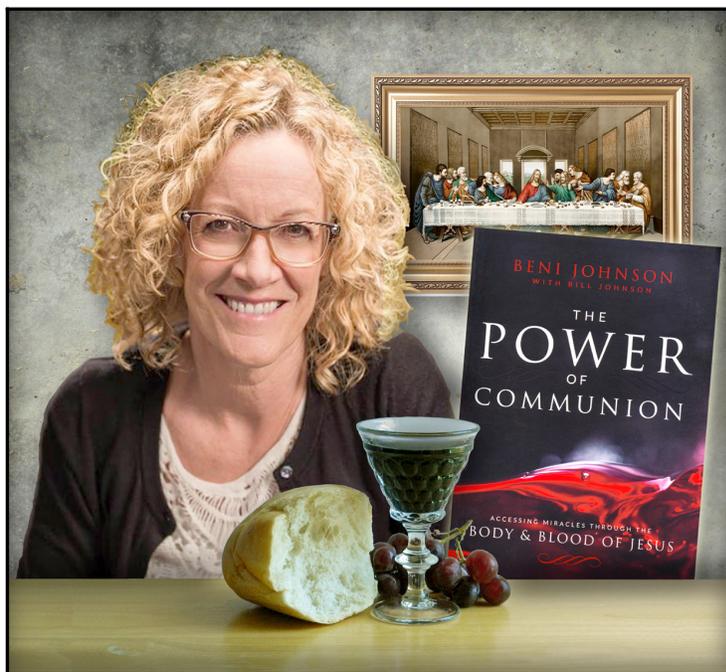
EDITOR: KEITH A. MORSE

## A Communion Table for One Beni Johnson's Strange Ideas About The Lord's Supper

by M. Kurt Goedelman

When most Christians think of Communion, they think of just that: *communion* — fellowship with other believers reflecting upon the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ; upon His death and resurrection. But not so, says Senior Pastor Beni Johnson in her new book, *The Power of Communion*. No longer are we to consider it just a time of personal reflection and remembrance of the cost of our salvation wrought by Jesus. Communion, Johnson argues, gives us access to miracles, prophetic acts, breaking demonic strongholds, and even releases heaven on earth. Moreover, while it can remain a community event, it shouldn't. It is an act of worship that should be done personally and privately — even multiple times a day, Johnson says.

Johnson's book is marketed with great fanfare and promises. The back cover claims that the reader will:



“Discover practical keys for ... HEALING: release the healing testimony of Jesus' blood and body over your sickness. DELIVERANCE: announce the eternal victory of Jesus over torment, addiction and bondage. WARFARE: shift spiritual atmospheres over you, your family and even world events. PRESENCE: experience new dimensions of God's glory as you apply Jesus' victory over your life.”<sup>1</sup>

### WHO IS BENI JOHNSON?

Perhaps Beni Johnson is a name unfamiliar to many. She is a key player in an apostolic network that is gaining in popularity and influence. According to Johnson's own website:

(continues on page 15)

### Inside this Issue:

CHRISTIAN ZIONISM 101 .....	PAGE 2
MACDONALD FIRED BY CHURCH HE FOUNDED .....	PAGE 3
SOCIAL JUSTICE — A MISSION DRIFT .....	PAGE 4

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# Editorials

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## CHRISTIAN ZIONISM 101

Ever since the Jewish expulsion from Jerusalem by Emperor Hadrian (A.D. 135), the thought of return was never far from the Jewish mind.

Jewish return to the land of Israel started in earnest among the Jewish people in the late 1800s. However, it was not just a Jewish idea. From the time of the Puritans in the 1600s, Christians were beginning to champion the idea and began pushing Israel's agenda for Jewish return to their ancient land. The Puritans' agenda for Jewish return to the land of Israel is well-documented in Iain H. Murray's book, *The Puritan Hope*. Murray lays out the biblical principles behind the Puritan hope.

Zion was a word referring to the City of David and the Temple Mount. At times, the Bible loosely refers to Jerusalem as Zion. Today the Western hill of Jerusalem is called Mount Zion.

The word Zionism began to be used in the early 1800s and as far as we know the term Christian Zionism was coined by Theodore Herzl in 1897 at the first Zionist Congress. The term was used for Christians who supported the Jews' return to Israel.

Israel's Museum of the Holocaust (called Yad Vashem) has among its features "The Avenue of Righteous Gentiles." This is an outdoor tree lined section dedicated to non-Jews — many of them Christians — who put their lives on the line assisting Jews during the Holocaust.

These were strong supporters for the return. Corrie Ten Boom is one such Christian remembered there.

Sir Henry Finch (1558-1625) immersed himself deeply in the Hebrew language. In England he wrote volumes on what he called the "Great Restoration." He was a non-Jewish Zionist and a passionate spokesman for Jewish return to Israel.

In the late 1700s, the Rev. George Bush pastored a Presbyterian Church in Vermont. Bush had mastered Hebrew and was an advocate for Jewish return to Israel. His research and writings on the book of Ezekiel mightily advanced the Zionist agenda. His book *The Valley of Vision* sold the unheard of number of a million copies.

And we must not forget James Finn. According to one source: "James Finn served as Her Majesty's Consul for Jerusalem and Palestine from 1846 to 1863. A pioneer for the resettlement of the Jews in Eretz Israel, he was a devoted friend of the Jews and often protected them from the Ottoman authorities. At the same time he was a devoted Christian and engaged in missionary activities — a fact which led many Jews to complain that he was trying to convert them" (*Famous Travelers to the Holy Land* compiled by Linda Osband, pg. 42).

In 1878, William E. Blackstone's book, *Jesus is Coming*, called for Jewish restoration to the land of Israel. Blackstone pointed out the miracle of Israel's survival.

(continues on page 23)

### PERSONAL FREEDOM OUTREACH

P.O. Box 26062 • Saint Louis, Missouri 63136-0062 • (314) 921-9800

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## MORMONS ALLOW BAPTISMS FOR CHILDREN OF LGBT PARENTS

In November 2015, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints instituted a rule that prevented children of parents who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender from being blessed as infants and later baptized. In April, however, the Mormon church made a “surprise announcement” that it was repealing that policy and would now allow the blessing of infants and the baptism of children of LGBT parents.

The announcement came in a news release during the church’s 189th Annual General Conference held in April and which stated, “These changes do not represent a shift in church doctrine related to marriage or the commandments of God in regard to chastity and morality.” According to the *Deseret News*, church president Russell M. Nelson “said in early 2016 that the November 2015 policies were the result of revelation.” But now, according to the newspaper, Nelson claims “that a flurry of policy changes over the past year were [also] inspired by revelation.” Nelson became the church’s 17th president in January 2018.

The *Deseret News* further reported that “same-gender marriage by a church member still is considered a serious transgression,” but that “it no longer will be treated as apostasy for purposes of church discipline.”

—MKG

## CHAN SAYS HE’S NOT MOSES

Francis Chan, the nationally recognized author and speaker who has attracted criticism for a variety of questionable teachings and associations, is now rebuking “Christians who rely on his teachings for divine insight.” According to *Charisma*, Chan told conference goers at an Orlando gathering, “I’m not your Moses.”

The magazine stated that Chan said “he is used to being treated like Moses,” but apparently a divine revelation has changed that. At the conference, Chan said, “And the Lord revealed something to me tonight, just a couple hours ago. He said, ‘Francis, you’re not supposed to be Moses. You’re not supposed to go up on that mountaintop and have everyone go, ‘What’d He say?’”” *Charisma* reported in its April edition.

Over the past several years, Chan has aligned himself with those within the New Apostolic Reformation, including modern-day prophet Mike Bickel, and has authored *Crazy Love*, which underscores the Social Gospel message.

—MKG

## MACDONALD FIRED BY CHURCH HE FOUNDED

Less than a month after stepping aside from his leadership role at Harvest Bible Chapel, embattled pastor James MacDonald was fired from the Chicago area church he started more than three decades ago. In January, MacDonald had announced that he was taking an “indefinite sabbatical,” following ongoing reports of sinful conduct that were made public.

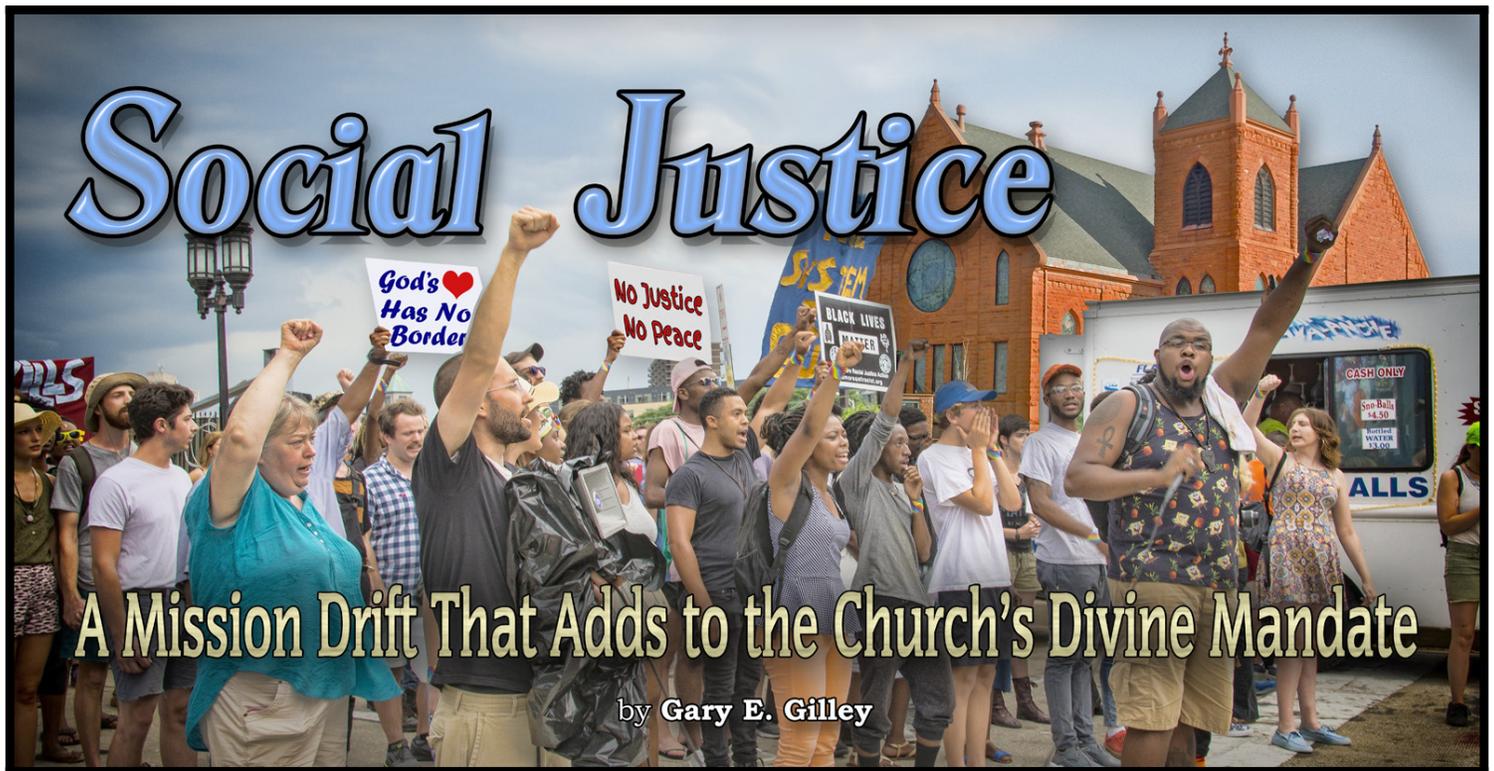
On Feb. 12, the church published a statement on its website from its elder board which said that after “a lengthy season of review, reflection, and prayerful discussion, the Elders of Harvest Bible Chapel had determined that Pastor MacDonald should be removed from his role of Senior Pastor.” The termination was effective immediately.

Journalist Julie Roys, one of MacDonald’s critics, wrote in a blog on her website, “According to a statement posted to Harvest’s website, the decision [to fire MacDonald] was ‘accelerated’ after Chicago radio and TV personality, Mancow Muller, aired vulgar and defamatory comments by MacDonald on his radio show.” According to the *Chicago Tribune*, “Muller joined Harvest and once was friends with MacDonald, but their relationship had soured in recent years.”

More recently, Roys posted on her website that upon MacDonald’s termination she was “cautiously optimistic,” but now believes that “whatever beauty exists at Harvest continues to be obscured by ungodliness” and that “the elder board continues to be controlled by former executive committee members — the same people responsible for Harvest’s ‘ungodly’ and potentially fraudulent spending.”

In late March, the *Chicago Sun Times* reported that, “Donations to Harvest Bible Chapel are down by as much as 40 percent” since MacDonald’s firing and stated the church had to “cut weekly operational spending by about \$100,000, or nearly 25 percent.”

—MKG



# Social Justice

## A Mission Drift That Adds to the Church's Divine Mandate

by Gary E. Gilley

Of the many hot-button issues in both society and the church, nothing has sparked more debate than social justice. The unrest and controversy are particularly evident in three areas. First, there are the interrelation concerns, expressed most clearly in the #MeToo movement, which is an effort directed at the alleviation of sexual harassment and assault, primarily targeting women. Next are the debates involving human sexuality, especially LGBTQ issues. Finally, matters of race and ethnicity have surged afresh in recent years. As these concerns filter down to the church, to a certain extent the response of God's people should be clear.

Scripture condemns all forms of immorality, sexual misconduct, and abuse. The church has not been spared the accusations of sexual misconduct, with several high-profile leaders having been exposed for the misuse of their positions of power and abuse of women. Concerning the LGBTQ agenda, the Word speaks with equal clarity.<sup>1</sup> However, this has presented a considerable dilemma for the "attractational church," which is trying to create a setting in which the unbeliever is comfortable and happy

to join. Those following this model of "doing" church are struggling with how to attract unbelievers while condemning LGBTQ morality, which has become increasingly acceptable within our culture.

Finally, contrary to some Christians in the past, there are few today who would question the evil of racism. All human beings are created in the image of God and stand on equal footing before Him, and should before us as well. But in our present time and environment, the matters surrounding race and ethnicity are not all that simple. Misunderstandings, accusations, division, and anger abound, and the church has not been spared. It is primarily disputes regarding race that have gained the most attention of late.

The issues involved in the recent social justice controversies are not new; they have ancient roots. Known in previous times as the Social Gospel, it was at the heart of the rise of liberalism in the 1700s and 1800s; it was central to the Fundamentalist/Modernist divide in America in the 1880-1930s; it was key to the separation between the Evangelicals and Fundamentalists in the 1950s and beyond; it was at the core of discussion

during the Civil Rights movement; and it is front and center today.

The so-called Social Gospel discussions of the past are like those of today, even though the terminology has changed. The current term, "social justice," has fewer pejorative overtones than "Social Gospel." The latter implies that the Gospel itself has been altered, something roundly condemned in Galatians 1:6-9. This is what happened with the original Social Gospel movement perpetrated by liberal theology and Higher Criticism during the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries. Richard Niebuhr's summary of that movement could hardly be improved upon: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross."

True conservative Evangelicals would never subscribe to such a description of their core beliefs. The divide, however, within evangelicalism in the earlier Social Gospel movement was over what role social justice plays in Christianity. Those who saw social concerns as secondary to evangelism and discipleship chose not to focus on them. These Christians, later

known as “Fundamentalists,” did not totally disengage from culture, something they are often falsely accused of doing,<sup>2</sup> but saw their primary calling as proclaiming the Gospel rather than changing society through direct political and social activity. If the world is to be improved, they reasoned, it will be improved primarily through the penetration of the Gospel. Those who disagreed, known as “neo-Evangelicals” at first, and now merely as “Evangelicals,” saw the social agenda equally, or at least nearly, as important as proclaiming the Gospel, and in fact, many have made it part of the Gospel itself. Over the last 70 years or so, the tension over these Social Gospel issues has waxed and waned, but has never gone away. More recently the heat has been turned up, especially over the three issues mentioned earlier in this article.

### THE SJ&G STATEMENT

Bringing things to a head was the release of “The Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel” in September 2018. Also known as “The Dallas Statement,” writer Christine Yount Jones reports, “The statement emanates from 14 male pastors who met at a coffee shop in Dallas, Texas, ‘having all expressed our growing concern with much that was taking place within evangelical circles under the banner of “Social Justice.””<sup>3</sup> *Christianity Today* offered this commentary on the Statement:

“The statement comes at a time when a series of blog posts and sermons attacking social justice from [John] MacArthur, a popular California pastor and author, have sparked controversy in the evangelical community. The harsh reaction to MacArthur’s ideas was shaped by the events of the past four years, says Washington, DC, pastor and Gospel Coalition council member Thabiti Anyabwile. ‘They land in the midst of an evangelical movement that is already fraying and fracturing under the weight of the last five years, if I’m dating this back to the Mike Brown shooting and the fallout,’ said Anyabwile. ‘Evangelicalism as a movement splin-

tered instantly as to how they understood that issue and different quarters circled one another in suspicion and sometimes outright attack.”<sup>4</sup>

It is apparent that with the publication of “The Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel,” the debate on social justice has been given new energy. The statement itself contains 14 short sections dealing with everything from Scripture to the image of God to the Gospel and related social issues such as complementarianism, sexuality, and racism. It is only slightly over six pages long but is accompanied by a series of articles that unpack its meaning. Authors of these articles include Tom Ascol (the editor of the statement and pastor of Grace Baptist Church in Cape Coral, Fla.), Phil Johnson, James White, and John MacArthur. In addition, transcripts from four sermons by MacArthur are attached and, no doubt, more articles are forthcoming.

The Statement expresses concern that the evangelical church is borrowing from the culture’s values in such a way that Scripture is being undermined in the areas of race and ethnicity, manhood and womanhood, and human sexuality. Going further, it challenges the present social justice movement because it is confusing both the message of the Gospel and the mission of the church, saying “the obligation to live justly in the world, though legitimate and important in their own right, are not definitional components of the gospel.”<sup>5</sup> And it denies “that political or social activism should be viewed as integral components of the gospel or primary to the mission of the church.”<sup>6</sup>

It rejects “any teaching that encourages racial groups to view themselves as privileged oppressors or entitled victims of oppression. While we are to weep with those who weep, we deny that a person’s feelings of offense or oppression necessarily prove that someone else is guilty of sinful behaviors, oppression, or prejudice.”<sup>7</sup> The authors are deeply concerned that the social justice movement is perpetuating the idea of victimization, especially of blacks.

The framers of the statement deny that only those in positions of power are capable of racism, and they deny that the contemporary evangelical movement has any deliberate agenda to elevate one ethnic group and subjugate another. They further state, “And we emphatically deny that lectures on social issues (or activism aimed at reshaping the wider culture) are as vital to the life and health of the church as the preaching of the gospel and the exposition of Scripture. Historically, such things tend to become distractions that inevitably lead to departures from the gospel.”<sup>8</sup>

### OPPOSITION

As might be expected, in the present explosive evangelical environment, a statement that addresses primarily racial issues and which is as bold, “in-your-face,” dogmatic and authored by 14 white men, would face considerable push-back. And the response to the SJ&G Statement does not disappoint. It has the potential to draw a line between former friends, including frequent speakers at Together for the Gospel conferences and within The Gospel Coalition. One observer quickly listed a number of prominent Evangelicals who will be marginalized including Russell Moore, Thabiti Anyabwile, and Timothy Keller.

Some critics, such as Dennis Edwards, have come out firing. Edwards opens his commentary with angry words which expressed deep animosity, but says nothing about the issues involved:

“We’re witnessing the death rattle of white Protestant fundamentalism in America. And as it dies, the empire has been striking back. Some aging white men fear the loss of their power, prestige, and heretofore unquestioned authority to tell others what to believe. Consequently, we receive from them edicts, often in the form of theological statements, designed to build a fence around their traditions, constructing walls of separation from others — even those who also take the Bible seriously.”<sup>9</sup>

Equally caustic on the other side are these comments by the editors of *Pulpit & Pen*:

“The statement has been a long time coming, as *Pulpit & Pen* has repeatedly warned for years that a rift was developing among Calvinistic evangelicals. Under the leadership of progressive leftists, Russell Moore and Tim Keller, sides have been chosen in what is promising to become what amounts to a spiritual civil war between the two factions. On one side are theological heavyweights who have pined for the applause and appreciation of a lost and fallen world, who are cloaked in a coat of political correctness, and who in the name of ‘Gospel’ have made progressive talking-points into their own political but pseudo-theological agenda. Make no mistake about it, this side has the bulk of the power and prestige. Advocates for the Social Gospel include DA Carson, Mark Dever, Albert Mohler, Russell Moore, Tim Keller, David Platt, Matt Chandler, Beth Moore, JD Greear, and Ligon Duncan. In other words, a number of the leaders of that faction have been speakers at John MacArthur’s Shepherd’s Conference over the years and are his longtime friends.”<sup>10</sup>

Early responses, such as the ones above, hardly look like the SJ&G Statement will be opening up productive dialogue resulting in “iron-sharpening-iron” discussions. As is all too common today, gracious theological debate turns into a bloodbath of slander and accusations with little progress being made. The key ingredients of such statements, and of those who disagree, are too often left unaddressed as supporters and detractors go on the attack. Before we analyze these ingredients, a few more reasonable opponents should be mentioned.

Eric Mason has recently written a volume he titled *Woke Church*.<sup>11</sup> He defines “Woke” as “no longer being naïve nor in mental slavery. ... [It is] a term for being socially aware of issues

that have systemic impact.”<sup>12</sup> In a foreword to the book, John M. Perkins says that justice issues are not separate from the Gospel<sup>13</sup> and Mason believes that the evangelical church is asleep to the racial tension and injustice, and needs to be “woke.”<sup>14</sup> To do so the evangelical church must:

- Become aware of the issues.
- Acknowledge the injustices of the past, for the past binds the present.
- Become accountable for the injustices of the present such as the high concentration of black men in prison and the school-to-prison pipeline system.
- Be active, defining it as: “white Christians must reach across the color line and begin building respect and trust for minorities. Minorities must respond with open arms and hearts to these efforts.”<sup>15</sup>

Russell Moore, the president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, claims to be disheartened to see the church repeat the same mistakes as in the past and compares what is happening now (in reference to the SJ&G Statement) to rhetoric during times of slavery. He apparently would side with Mason on including social justice as part of the Gospel.<sup>16</sup>

Timothy Keller, who says that he would agree with much of the Statement line-by-line but, due to “speech act theory,” believes we must look beyond the words to the motivation behind them. What do the authors of this document really mean? Apparently, they are attempting to ignore racial issues and injustice and continue white supremacy within the church, according to Keller.<sup>17</sup>

Albert Mohler says he will not sign it because it “has been interpreted by some as denying this reality [of racism] and its continued reality.”<sup>18</sup> This is a step up from Keller, but seems to accept speech act theory and allows the interpretation of others to determine his own views and response.

Eric Waldon, a black pastor from Ohio who ministers to inner city people, agrees with much of the SJ&G Statement, but does not think it goes far enough. When feelings of guilt and

injustice are expressed by the black community, dismissing them is not helpful and he believes the Statement has the feel of dismissal. He thinks the principles of 1 Corinthians 8 should apply to the social justice divide. If our brother is stumbling over something we do, we need to take some responsibility. We may not be personally at fault, but we can listen, love, and care even if we do not fully agree. He recognizes that the black consciousness movement is growing not only in society but within the church, and it deeply concerns him.

## ANALYSIS

As might be imagined, in addition to the comments above, there have been many responses, from robust support to strong disagreement and everything between. Those who crafted and signed the SJ&G Statement are concerned that the Gospel is being compromised by adding to it a social element foreign to the New Testament. And if the Gospel is modified or expanded to include social concerns then the mission of the church will also be revised to include the betterment of society, as well as the proclamation of salvation and making disciples of God’s people. Two foundational doctrines are therefore at stake.

First and most important is the Gospel itself. Is the Gospel the good news of Christ living, dying, and resurrecting in the place of sinners — bringing reconciliation between God and man, or is it something else? This message is articulated throughout the New Testament and in texts such as 1 Corinthians 15:1-4; Ephesians 2:1-10; Romans 5:1-21; 2 Corinthians 5:21; and 1 Peter 2:24.

If solving existing social problems, throughout all cultures due to the corruption of sin, is added to this Gospel message, then the Gospel has been expanded to include something never found in the New Testament. Pain and suffering should not be minimized, but they must not be included in the Gospel message itself, for to do so results in redefining the Gospel in ways not supported by Scripture.

The Lord could not be clearer than when the Holy Spirit, through Paul, warned us that to define the Gospel in any other way than God defined it would result in distorting the Gospel itself, which Paul soundly condemned (Galatians 1:6-9). Any Christian, no matter how sincere and well-meaning, will want to take this warning very seriously. It is frightening to know that a declaration of "anathema" by the Lord is promised for distorting the Gospel. It is the message of the biblical Gospel that the crafters and signatories of the SJ&G Statement are most eager to protect. It reads:

"We deny that anything else, whether works to be performed or opinions to be held, can be added to the gospel without perverting it into another gospel. This also means that implications and applications of the gospel, such as the obligation to live justly in the world, though legitimate and important in their own right, are not definitional components of the gospel."<sup>19</sup>

The supporters of the Statement are not opposed to justice, relief for the poor, or fair and gracious treatment of minorities and the helpless, but they are opposed to including such actions into the definition of the Gospel.

In an explanatory article accompanying the SJ&G Statement, Darrell Harrison, reminds his readers that one of the key spokesmen for the earlier Social Gospel movement, Walter Rauschenbusch, wrote:

"The kingdom of God is not a matter of getting individuals to heaven, but of transforming the life on earth into the harmony of heaven. ... the essential purpose of Christianity was to transform human society into the kingdom of God by regenerating all human relations and reconstituting them in accordance with the will of God."<sup>20</sup>

It is this kind of thinking that concerns framers of the SJ&G Statement, for they see the evangelical community headed down the same pathway that ultimately led to theological liberalism 150 years ago. Mac-

Arthur is transparent in a related sermon:

"Social justice is nowhere included in any passage in the New Testament about the gospel. So on its face it's not included as a part of the spiritual gospel. ... That is not to say that we're not to love people and live justly, and care for them, and minister to the people who have been treated unfairly and unkindly and mercilessly; we are as Christians [to do so]. ... That is a result of the salvation. ... Social justice is not a part of the gospel. I'll go one step further: It is a serious hindrance to the gospel."<sup>21</sup>

If the Gospel is expanded to include a social dimension, either in fact or in practice, then the mission of the church is changed from evangelism and discipleship to include the betterment and improvement of society and cultural conditions on planet earth. While no signatory of the SJ&G Statement denies that enhancing life on earth is a good thing, they do deny that it is the mission of the church. Harrison bluntly suggests "that social justice activists would do well to remind themselves that Jesus is a Savior, not a divine Social Worker."<sup>22</sup> Phil Johnson, in another accompanying article, writes:

"Blending the gospel with social activism has been tried many times. (Google 'Walter Rauschenbusch' or 'social gospel.')

It has always turned out to be a shortcut to Socinianism, carnal humanism, or some more sinister form of spiritual barrenness. The social message inevitably overwhelms and *replaces* the gospel message, no matter how well-intentioned proponents of the method may have been at the start. ... *Nothing* borrowed from worldly discourse should ever become a major theme in the message we proclaim to the world — not philosophy, politics, pop culture, or anything similar."<sup>23</sup>

Even a superficial glance at the New Testament reveals a people highly motivated to spread the good news of redemption, minister within the body of Christ, and glorify God with their

lives and in their worship. But one will search in vain to find either teachings or activities related to alleviating injustice in the world. While there is much evidence of the church taking care of its own, there is no encouragement to change society by means of politics, social programs, or challenging governmental leaders.

Loving one's neighbor, in any number of ways, is mandated and the natural outcome of a people called to be salt and light in the world. As Christians, we are to have a positive effect on the world around us because of Christ who is in us. But attempting to change the world, a world corrupted by sin and ruled by the devil, through social programs is not our calling. This is why blending the Great Commission with any form of the Social Gospel has always gone astray.

## RACISM AND VICTIMIZATION

But as important as the Gospel and social justice in general is, the debate and division over the SJ&G Statement swirl around discussions of racism. The framers do not deny racism exists, but they are concerned that some minorities are claiming racism is exclusively a sin of white men against primarily black people. When racism is understood in this narrow way it fosters and perpetuates a victimization mentality. Josh Buice, in his article linked to the Statement, writes, "It must not be understated that one of the central problems with the social justice agenda is its fascination with victimology."<sup>24</sup> The most controversial assertion in the document seems to be the section on race and ethnicity:

"We reject any teaching that encourages racial groups to view themselves as privileged oppressors or entitled victims of oppression. While we are to weep with those who weep, we deny that a person's feelings of offense or oppression necessarily prove that someone else is guilty of sinful behaviors, oppression, or prejudice."<sup>25</sup>

It is these words which receive the most attention from Albert Mohler.

Mohler lines up pretty well with most of the Statement, agreeing that there is indeed a detrimental victimization mentality in our society and that much of the social justice agenda is drawn from Marxism. Still, he refuses to sign the document because he believes racism is still an “urgent issue.” He says:

“I can’t associate with any assertion that we do not have a massive problem — in the society and in the church — with claims of racial superiority ... and with the fact that remnants and ongoing manifestations of those claims of white racial superiority continue.”<sup>26</sup>

And while Mohler’s point is well taken, it does not seem to be substantially different from what the SJ&G Statement is saying. Yes, racism exists and yes, white supremacy is real and, yes, there are real victims in this world. Where the two entities differ is that the framers of the Statement are claiming that racism is not exclusively a white issue; the vast majority of true Evangelicals have no desire, or agenda, to support or live out racism, and that a victim mentality, if embraced, will lead to more harm for everyone rather than to solutions. While some might argue that the wording could have been better, or a different approach would have produced happier results, the points being made in the SJ&G Statement seem neither sinister nor out of line with Scripture or reality. At least that would be the interpretation coming from the perspective of the authors of this Statement. How might it be viewed from a different perspective?

### THE WOKE CHURCH

From the perspective of many black Evangelicals, the SJ&G Statement is saying something else. One such leader, who definitely sees things differently, is Eric Mason who was referenced above as the author of *Woke Church*. Mason wants a pursuit of “honest reconciliation that faces the issues of our broken past.”<sup>27</sup> To begin this process, we must “revisit our history and proclaim the gospel to each season and seek reconciliation,

restoration, and restitution, as it is appropriate. This is the gospel mandate,”<sup>28</sup> he claims.

While Mason attempts to distinguish the Gospel from the effects of the Gospel, nevertheless he has broadened the definition of the Gospel to include a social component when he writes that the goal of his book is to “shine a spotlight on one of the aspects of the gospel that has been neglected and dismissed.”<sup>29</sup>

He says that today, “We are at the cusp of another church movement that will determine the trajectory of the church in America for some time to come.”<sup>30</sup> By this, Mason is referring to the rise of black consciousness and “Black Nationalism,” which seek the restoration of black dignity and respect.<sup>31</sup> The past binds the present to such an extent, Mason believes, that moving forward seems unlikely unless “we can wake up from our slumber.”<sup>32</sup> Mason accuses America of telling African-Americans to forget about the past, but he is convinced that we haven’t yet even talked about it.<sup>33</sup>

Because so much injustice is in the system, the Woke Church must stem the tide of injustice in three categories: intervening, preventative, and systemic.<sup>34</sup> With this in mind, his church has launched numerous social betterment programs, which apparently are to lay the pattern for the Woke Church.<sup>35</sup> He borrows from the playbook of the liberal branch of Christianity and from pioneer psychologist Abraham Maslow’s now debunked theory of “hierarchy of needs” and claims, “You can’t help a person who has experienced injustice and a lack of the basic needs of life without first intervening for their current needs.”<sup>36</sup>

With this as a foundation Mason spends his last two chapters offering concrete suggestions for a Woke Church in action. These suggestions are primarily social programs. While grieving the increasing racial injustice in our country, he says, “What needs to happen in the body if we are going to work together cross-ethnically is that white Christians must reach across the color line and begin building respect and trust for minorities.

Minorities must respond with open arms and hearts to these efforts.”<sup>37</sup> Mason claims, “We would be light years ahead if minorities weren’t the only ones talking about racism.”<sup>38</sup> This is perhaps the thesis of his book.

*Woke Church* gives the perspective of one evangelical black pastor on the racial divide and tension facing both our culture and our churches in America. His perspective most certainly is representative of many others, yet the book leaves a lot to be desired. First, it is not a view drawn from the Bible. Second, *Woke Church* is filled with generalized, exaggerated statements and misrepresentations. Third, documentation, scholarship, and fair analysis are lacking throughout. Fourth, virtually no discussion takes place about how to deal with crime, reform of the community, and the breakdown of the family. Fifth, gearing the local church up for social programs to deal with the issues is not the biblical model. Sixth, the author ignored the many good actions that have been taken or are in process, within both black and white evangelism.

### A WAY FORWARD

Some of the problems Mason identifies are real and pressing. Whites and blacks, even within the church, are often insensitive to the others’ respective hurts and backgrounds. True, honest, loving, non-defensive dialogue and attempts to understand one another need to happen regularly. The past must not be allowed to determine the present, but neither should it be dismissed. Our love and forgiveness for one another should be real and evident. Perhaps if the church of God, regardless of color or race, would take these steps, progress could occur, and the world would know we are Christ’s disciples by our love for one another.

We must not minimize the serious theological divide concerning social justice and the Gospel. These differences concern the message and the mission of the church. Does the New Testament teach that the Gospel message is about the cross-work of Christ whereby people who are alienated from a Holy God due to their sins can

be redeemed and reconciled to Him, or does it also include a social dimension whereby people are liberated from the effects of sin in a fallen society and on this planet now? The answer to this question will inform the answer to a second question: What is the mission of the church? In other words, has the church been mandated to take the biblical Gospel of spiritual redemption to lost people and when they receive that Gospel, disciple them in order that they might live for the glory of God? Or has the church also been commissioned to solve the world's problems and injustices brought about by the corruption of sin?

The present debate hinges on the answers to these two questions. The New Testament is abundantly clear that the church has a unique message and mission. It is to spread the Gospel and disciple believers. Believers in turn are to be the salt and light to the world which in many instances will bring about social changes in society, but that is not the Christian's direct calling. Yes, the church should preach, and stand against sin, all sins, including societal evils such as racism, injustice, greed, slander, and hatred. We should be concerned for this planet for, after all, we are citizens not just of heaven, but of this earth as well. But one will search in vain to find in the New Testament examples of, or instructions to, the church attempting to change culture through political involvement, poverty reduction, rebellion against government, or social programs and the like.

Those who argue otherwise do so without the support of Scripture. Let us stand against sin; let us show compassion for the needy; let us take the opportunities the Lord gives us to demonstrate the love of Christ; let us condemn social injustice; and let us actively take our place in society. But let us not dilute the unique message of the cross, or the unique ministry of discipleship, by adding social justice issues to Christ's Gospel or mandate.

As we attempt to further evaluate the social justice movement, especially in light of the current debates within evangelicalism spawned by the publi-

cation of the SJ&G Statement, it is helpful to trace its roots. The emphasis on social justice that is now all but omnipresent within Christianity did not appear out of thin air; there are predecessors and forerunners who have paved the way for comingling of the biblical Gospel with a social agenda producing a hybrid gospel and mission for the church. An earlier article in *The Quarterly Journal* traced the development of the 19th-century Social Gospel movement that led to theological liberalism.<sup>39</sup> In that article, it was documented that German rationalism, higher criticism, Enlightenment, and Romanticist thought were interlaced and embraced first by European and later by American Protestantism. When the dust had settled, the authority of Scripture had been undermined, all cardinal doctrines had been diluted, and the Gospel itself had been lost in most formerly evangelical churches, denominations, seminaries, and organizations.

In the wake of these theological compromises emerged a "liberal" church that no longer held to the traditional faith of the Scriptures. In its place was a religion wrapped around improving life on the planet by attempting to reduce poverty, aiding the weak and marginalized, and seeking social justice for all people. It was not that the conservative church had not been concerned about these things and had not done much to enhance lives all over the globe through benevolent acts. But the Protestant church to that point had not confused its message or its mission. Its message was one of reconciliation to God through the preaching of the Gospel and the discipling of those who had been redeemed by faith in Jesus Christ. Its mission was to focus attention and resources on doing the one thing that the church can do, as no other organization can: taking the biblical Gospel of reconciliation to the world.

However, the Social Gospel first elevated social needs to equality with the biblical Gospel and ultimately replaced it with the social agenda altogether. This has been the pattern throughout church history when social interests begin to eclipse the

message of redemption. It is the concern of many today that that pattern is being repeated within conservative evangelicalism and is the motivation for the SJ&G Statement.

## MODERN FOUNDATIONS

With the historical backdrop given above, we are now ready to look more closely at the social justice/gospel movement of today. We will start by examining a few of the crafters and architects of the movement from the 20th century, who have constructed the platform from which the most recent thought has sprung. We will only have space to inspect four such foundational movements and/or individuals, beginning with the most disturbing and moving forward.

*Liberation theology* is a way of understanding Scripture and the Christian life grounded in a Latin American social context. It discards capitalism, rejects the reliability of Scripture, and when interpreting Scripture uses a hermeneutic of the kingdom of God as its controlling thought. Liberation Theology is dedicated to cultural salvation, or the transformation of society, rather than spiritual salvation. Utopia on earth is the goal and it is achieved often through revolution and violence.

Liberation theologians believe Christianity and Marxism have a common goal — the kingdom of God (although Scripture and Marxism define the kingdom of God very differently) — which is why many rightly view it as a Marxist form of Christianity. The argument of Emilio A. Núñez C., in his book *Liberation Theology*,<sup>40</sup> is that Liberation Theology is a new way of doing theology. Its point of departure and hermeneutical norm is not the written revelation of God, but the social context of Latin America and the revolutionary praxis striving to create there a "new man" and a "new society" within a socialist system as a supposed manifestation of the kingdom of God.

The recognized father of Liberation Theology is Gustavo Gutiérrez who wrote his groundbreaking book, *A Theology of Liberation*, in 1971 (revised

in 1988).<sup>41</sup> Some of Gutiérrez's key ideas are:

- Liberation Theology is not a call for social and economic development (which is rejected), but a call for revolution,<sup>42</sup> a permanent cultural revolution<sup>43</sup> that may include violence.<sup>44</sup>

- It is a rejection of capitalism and promotion of socialism.<sup>45</sup> There must be liberation from capitalistic countries, especially the United States, and overthrow of private ownership of property.<sup>46</sup>

- The meaning of salvation has been expanded. It includes liberation from social oppression, liberation from personal servitude, and liberation from sin.<sup>47</sup> Salvation is more than forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God; it is transformation and fulfillment of the present life,<sup>48</sup> and deliverance of society.<sup>49</sup> "The Church ... has two missions: evangelization and the inspiration of the temporal sphere."<sup>50</sup> "[T]o participate in the process of liberation is already, in a certain sense, a salvific work,"<sup>51</sup> it is a building of a new society.<sup>52</sup>

- Liberation Theology, while not swallowing Marxism whole, nevertheless incorporates much of Marxism's philosophy,<sup>53</sup> especially the idea of a classless society and a denunciation of private ownership of property.

- It makes use of a kingdom of God hermeneutic.<sup>54</sup> That is, the mission of the church is developing the kingdom of God by making the world a better place,<sup>55</sup> a utopia of sorts which will be the work of man, not God,<sup>56</sup> and elimination of poverty.<sup>57</sup> Apparently, as mankind moves toward these achievements it will enable the Lord to return.<sup>58</sup>

- Understanding the meaning of poverty is at the heart of Liberation Theology.<sup>59</sup> It can mean either spiritual poverty (a good thing) or physical poverty, which is seen as sin and evil and out of the will of God.<sup>60</sup>

In the writings of Gutiérrez, we pick up some of the threads being laced together by Evangelicals in the 21st century, especially the expanded two-pronged Gospel message of spiritual

redemption and societal salvation, and the kingdom of God hermeneutic. It is by tracing the modern social justice movement back to Liberation Theology that Al Mohler can say that much of it is Marxist in nature.<sup>61</sup>

*Ronald Sider* has long been a bridge between Liberation Theology and evangelicalism. While not endorsing the darker sides of Liberation Theology, such as bloody revolutions and the overthrowing of governments, he has accepted the socialistic features of the movement and has attempted to integrate them into the evangelical church in the West. His *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, published in 1988 and revised in 2015, has sold a half-million copies and widely influenced many.

Sider's solution to world poverty follows the socialistic talking points of remission of debt and redistribution of wealth.<sup>62</sup> Sider understands preaching the Gospel and providing physical relief as equally important and believes Christians should give approximately as much to support evangelism as for social justice activities.<sup>63</sup> What Sider advocated in the 1980s has now become commonplace. That is, many believe the Gospel has both spiritual and social dimensions which are equally important.

*The Lausanne Movement* was formed in 1974 by Billy Graham and John R.W. Stott to address the issue of world evangelism. The First International Congress on World Evangelism met in Lausanne Switzerland, with a second gathering in Manila in 1989 and a third one in Cape Town in 2010. Lausanne promotes its slogan as "the whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world."<sup>64</sup>

While this makes for a snappy vision statement, almost every word is fraught with potential danger. Given the high emphasis on ecumenical unity at all the congresses, it appears that the "whole church" includes virtually all branches and traditions within Christendom, including Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy as well as mainline denominations. The "whole gospel" will be defined by what is meant by the "whole world." According to the Lausanne website, among

other things, it calls for "a commitment to be shaped into a community of mutual concern and responsibility for the well-being of the whole world and particularly for the most vulnerable."<sup>65</sup> The "whole gospel" ostensibly means that the good news of Jesus Christ not only makes sinners right with God, but also addresses social injustices. Lausanne's influence has gone a long way toward modifying the Gospel message and the church's mission as it has combined social action with Gospel proclamation as part of the message and mission of the church.

*Carl F.H. Henry* was the respected theologian of the movement. As neo-evangelicalism was formed in the 1940s and 1950s, there were many important individuals leading the neo-evangelical contention, such as Billy Graham, John Stott, and Harold Ockenga. But it was Henry who was the most prominent. He wrote many excellent books and articles and defended the authority of Scripture passionately. But for our purposes, his little book, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, plays an out-of-proportion role in the social justice debate. Evangelicals, following the lead of Henry, "insisted that the Church was mandated not only to preach the gospel but also to redeem the social order."<sup>66</sup>

Fundamentalists, he lamented, sometimes separated entirely from the social/political arena to focus on preaching the Gospel. However, more commonly, while not believing the church as the church should be involved in trying to reform the world, it tried "to be compassionate toward those in need, and the individual believer was encouraged to be involved in community needs and reform."<sup>67</sup>

Nevertheless, this did not go far enough for Henry. Of a positive nature, Henry never advocated for the church to major on social reform apart from the preaching of the Gospel of redemption. He went so far as to write that to do so is nothing more than "a bubble and froth cure."<sup>68</sup> However, he envisioned the evangelical church taking leadership in social

renewal, insisting it have a voice in the rectifying of societal evils.<sup>69</sup> That Western society had already dismissed biblical thinking by 1947, when the book was published, did not seem to deter Henry. He believed an organized effort of proclaiming the Gospel of redemption accompanied by social programs would change society.

After 70 years of efforts by Evangelicals to implement Henry's ideas, cultural conditions have improved little. Where Henry stumbled was in misunderstanding that in Scripture Jesus and the apostles preached a Gospel of redemption to individuals, they did not add a social program to their message. Historically, if and when enough individuals in a given community were regenerated and changed by the power of the Gospel and the Holy Spirit, the culture which engulfed that community was also bettered. It was the power of the Gospel that dealt with social sins, not the Gospel plus an organized effort to bring about social justice.

## RECENT PROMOTERS

Those endorsing and propagating the social justice agenda today are legion and varied. It would be hard to throw a rock at most large Christian gatherings and not hit someone who fails to distinguish the Gospel of Scripture from the gospel of social improvement and justice. While most would not want to trace their views back to some of the foundation layers outlined above, especially Liberation Theology, there is an undeniable similarity in many of the views. Some, of course, press for social justice and all that accompanies it more extremely than others who advocate a milder brand. We will begin with the more extreme within the general category of Evangelicals and work our way to the more moderate.

*Shane Claiborne* is not your typical Evangelical, to be sure, but he is seen and followed by some who would place him there. He is a prominent speaker, activist, and best-selling author. Claiborne worked with Mother Teresa in Calcutta and founded The Simple Way in Philadelphia. According to the "Bio" page on his website,

"He heads up Red Letter Christians, a movement of folks who are committed to living 'as if Jesus meant the things he said.'"<sup>70</sup>

As can be inferred by his involvement with Red Letter Christians, Claiborne has little respect for Scripture except for the words of Jesus. He believes that if we simply focused on Jesus' words and actions, we could revolutionize the world, as he argues in this popular book, *The Irresistible Revolution*. Claiborne believes that Christians can change the social/economic world, thereby "creating another world"<sup>71</sup> by bringing in the kingdom of God through social justice activities. As a matter of fact, he writes, "This thing Jesus called the kingdom of God is emerging across the globe in the most unexpected places ... Little people with big dreams are reimagining the world."<sup>72</sup> In the process, wealth will be redistributed, poverty will end, and world peace will be realized.<sup>73</sup>

Claiborne describes truly converted Christians as those who have converted homes — fueled by renewable energy — and laundry machines powered by stationary bicycles and toilets flushed with dirty sink water.<sup>74</sup> Having written a whole book pushing for social action, Claiborne toward the end addresses the question of the Gospel:

"So what's more important: to love God or our neighbor, feeding bellies or saving souls? Neither. It is impossible to separate them. ... And the whole gospel is about loving God and loving people."<sup>75</sup>

Claiborne and what he calls The Simple Way, demonstrates what happens when someone twists the teachings of Christ as found in Scripture and launches out independently. He is not wrong to emphasize loving people; he is wrong to see the Social Gospel and the Gospel of redemption as being of equal importance and to believe that by loving people we will usher in the kingdom of God. He wants to accomplish through human efforts what only Christ can and will accomplish at His return.

*N.T. Wright* is considered by many to be a leading evangelical theologian,

even though he was a bishop in the Church of England (hardly known for its orthodoxy) and a leading proponent of the New Perspective on Paul (which mutilates the teachings of Paul, as well as the Gospel).<sup>76</sup> In his book *Simply Good News*, Wright lays out his case for understanding both the biblical Gospel and the Social Gospel and how they relate.

First, Wright repeatedly, and correctly, states that the Gospel is not good advice; it is a good news message about an event that has changed everything. But Wright's understanding about this event (which rightly includes the cross and the resurrection) is not what many would assume. He agrees the message that Jesus died for our sins and took our punishment so that we could be saved and go to heaven is true, but it is a distorted message, which the Western Church got wrong.<sup>77</sup> How so? First, getting people to heaven and keeping them out of hell was never God's plan. God's plan was about His kingdom in which heaven comes to earth.<sup>78</sup>

The Gospel is God reclaiming the earth so that "*the world would be healed, transformed, rescued, and renewed.*"<sup>79</sup> And Wright also says, "What was holding back the kingdom was the dark power, the force of evil itself. On the cross, that force, that power was defeated."<sup>80</sup> At the cross, Wright claims, Christ's kingdom was re-established on earth and our task now is to help bring the kingdom to its ultimate glory.<sup>81</sup> The Gospel is basically the kingdom of God.<sup>82</sup> He states:

"The good news is that *the living God is indeed establishing his kingdom on earth as in heaven, through the finished work of Jesus, and is inviting people of all sorts to share not only in the benefits of this kingdom but also in the work through which it will come to its ultimate completion.*"<sup>83</sup>

And Wright further states, "*It is time for God to become king — here and now,*"<sup>84</sup> and it is time for us to "become transformed people who are then transforming the world."<sup>85</sup>

In *Surprised by Hope*, which perhaps is the fullest expression of Wright's

thinking, he continues the same theme by claiming that the efforts Christians now make to solve social and ecological issues will be continued into the new universe. Wright does not deny the work of God; nevertheless, he views Christians as agents of planetary transformation as we together with God advance the kingdom.<sup>86</sup> Believers are to be God's rescue stewards over creation, accomplishing something which will become due in the new world.<sup>87</sup> Specifically, what does this kingdom work look like? It is working with God for social justice.<sup>88</sup> This includes debt remission for poor countries, which Wright sees as the most pressing concern of our time. A close second is ecological responsibility. Next is beauty, or revitalizing aesthetic awareness and creativity.<sup>89</sup>

Wright does not leave out evangelism, but he sees the biblical Gospel of reconciliation with God as "lopsided" and even deceptive.<sup>90</sup> To Wright, the Gospel is two-pronged. The first prong is spiritual and concerns itself with reconciliation with the Lord which takes place through faith plus baptism.<sup>91</sup> The second prong is social redemption. Basing his view almost exclusively on Romans 8:18-25 and Revelation 21-22, he sees redemption as a liberation of the cosmos from whatever has enslaved it.<sup>92</sup> Combining the two prongs gives us the "full-orbed mission of the church,"<sup>93</sup> or the "full biblical gospel."<sup>94</sup> Wright sees evidence of Christians already accomplishing the second-prong of the Gospel in the fall of Soviet Communism and apartheid,<sup>95</sup> never mind that the Christians' role in either of these two events was minor at best, and the outcome of their collapse has been deeply flawed.

He never seems to pause long enough to look at the broad picture painted within the New Testament of Christ's commission to the church. Where in Scripture is Wright's great emphasis on the church fighting social injustices, remissions of national debts, battling ecological concerns, and developing the arts? As citizens of this planet, we should be concerned for many of these things. But,

as Christians, our mission is clearly different. It is to make disciples and train people to live for the glory of God, as outlined in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20). Wright's two-pronged Gospel is not found in the pages of Scripture.

*Timothy Keller* is a well-known pastor (recently retired), theologian, and apologist. A co-founder of the Gospel Coalition with D.A. Carson, Keller has published several books, many of which have value and substance. His doctrinal positions would be more biblical than any of those mentioned above, but within conservative evangelical circles he is a major leader in the social justice movement. The vision statement at his church, Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, provides a clear declaration combining both the spiritual and social gospels:

"The Redeemer family of churches and ministries exist to help build a great city for all people through a movement of the gospel that brings personal conversion, community formation, social justice, and cultural renewal to New York City and, through it, the world."<sup>96</sup>

In *Generous Justice, How God's Grace Makes Us Just*, Keller makes a case for social justice as it relates to the corporate church and to individual Christians. Keller proclaims that he is writing this book for four kinds of people: young believers who respond with joy to the call to care for the needy, those who approach the subject of "doing justice" with suspicion, younger evangelicals who have "expanded their mission" to include social justice along with evangelism, and those who believe that the idea that the Bible is devoted to justice is absurd.<sup>97</sup>

Keller thinks all four types of his audience "fail at some level to see that the Biblical gospel of Jesus necessarily and powerfully leads to a passion for justice in the world."<sup>98</sup> *Generous Justice* is written to correct the views of these four groups and to present a case for the author's understandings of the subject.<sup>99</sup> Keller writes with balance and graciousness and surely convinces

many readers that it is God's idea to prioritize concerns for justice, the poor, and the needy. Therefore it should be His children's idea as well.

However, the issues are far more complicated than that. Engaging with Keller's argument, which offers the best balance of those mentioned in this article, will help us examine the role of social justice in the life of the church and the individual Christian. First, how involved should the local church, versus the individual Christian, be in social issues? Keller seems to vacillate on this one. At times he is clear that the church should focus on what it has been called to do and which only it can do — evangelize and disciple.<sup>100</sup> The church as the church should not be directly involved in justice issues. Rather it would be better to start parachurch organizations to handle such matters. But at other times he promotes the involvement of the church in social agendas, of which Redeemer Presbyterian Church is a clear example. This leaves the reader confused at best.

An important question exists: if we are drawing our marching orders from the Bible as we should, is the emphasis in Scripture on social justice throughout the world, among all peoples, or only among believers? Keller admits that the Old Testament laws on social justice (as he looks primarily to the Old Testament for his support throughout the book) focused on justice and care among the community of Israel, who were called to be the followers of God, and not the broader world.<sup>101</sup> Yet most of the book deals with the injustices found throughout the planet and how the church and Christians should actively be involved in rectifying these problems. This is an important disconnect. If the Old Testament is primarily interested in Israel's welfare, upon what biblical base is the New Testament church and/or the individual believer to make social justice throughout the world at large a mandate on par with evangelism and discipleship? Keller offers at least three:

- All humans are made in the image of God.

• The Lord is the owner of everything and our resources do not belong to us but to the Lord and to the community.

• Sharing with the poor is the proof of our understanding of God's grace.<sup>102</sup>

While these motivations seem solid, where in Scripture are believers taught to devote primary time, resources, and efforts to the poor and marginalized of the unbelieving world? While believers in both Testaments are to do good to all people, it is the community of believers to which these efforts are consistently directed. There is scant evidence within the Bible that believers are to attempt to change society, solve social ills, or orchestrate political movements, something Keller admits.

After all, the standard Old Testament texts normally cited to support the social justice movement reference Israel, not the world. And the usual New Testament passages used, such as Matthew 25:31-46, even when ripped out of context as Keller does, speaks of aiding the brothers and sisters, not the unbeliever. For these reasons, Keller champions the story of the Good Samaritan as the most important text to inform us of our social duties.<sup>103</sup>

It should be mentioned that building an argument on a descriptive narrative, rather than drawing from direct biblical prescription and instruction, is an all too common hermeneutical mistake and ready-made for misunderstanding the teaching of Scripture. Keller claimed that based on this story we should "go out into the world looking to help absolutely anyone in need."<sup>104</sup>

However, contrary to what Keller implies, the Good Samaritan did no such thing. He was not seeking someone to aid, but rather happened upon a wounded man and with compassion helped him. The Bible does not instruct us to make it our mission to search the world over looking for people to aid physically and socially. It does tell us to go throughout the world making disciples (Matthew 28:19) and it does teach us to help

those in need who come across our pathway. The teaching of the New Testament is that the church is to focus on the mission the Lord has given us — to make disciples.

At points, Keller admits all this, but he cannot resist returning to the idea that it is the church and the people of God who are responsible for solving social problems in the world at large. When an author draws from philosophers and social scientists, he is on shaky ground at best. When he quotes, without caveat, the father of Liberation Theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez,<sup>105</sup> he demonstrates a lack of discernment.

Keller is on better ground when he confirms, with D.A. Carson, that we cannot redeem culture, but we can improve it.<sup>106</sup> We can do so, he teaches, by helping a neighborhood to become self-sufficient through relocation (moving into disadvantaged neighborhoods), redistribution (training local leadership), and racial reconciliation (multiethnic and interracial leadership).<sup>107</sup> Yet buried in endnotes Keller admits how complicated and even destructive some of these steps are.<sup>108</sup>

When Keller turns to Scripture he does not do much better. He believes the idea that the church needs to stick with preaching the Gospel and building disciples while neglecting social justice is naïve and wrong.<sup>109</sup> Using Acts 6; 2 Corinthians 8:13-14; and Galatians 2:10, as well as 1 Timothy 5:1-10 and Acts 4:34, he tries to make a biblical case. Yet he ignores the fact that every one of these texts deals directly with how the church should minister within the church, not society, something he has admitted several times throughout the book<sup>110</sup> and in a number of footnotes.

Where he missteps is in his thinking that the Gospel is two-pronged. That is, the Gospel, in Keller's thinking (drawing much from Peter Wagner's concept of the "whole gospel"), is not only about reconciliation with God, but also about solving social issues.<sup>111</sup> He does not see the biblical Gospel as identical to social justice, but believes they are in an asymmetrical, inseparable relationship. Keller thinks that

they are connected in two ways. First, the Gospel produces a concern for the poor and, secondly, deeds of justice gain credibility for the preaching of the Gospel.<sup>112</sup>

He writes that, "Someone must resist and change the legal, political, and social systems,"<sup>113</sup> and that someone must be the church:

"You or your church should begin by discovering the needs in your locale. Are there disadvantaged children (abused and neglected, physically or mentally disabled, failing in school) who could use help?"<sup>114</sup>

In this writer's opinion, this would be a good definition of a "mission drift" in which the church adds to its divine mandate of making disciples the direct solving of social problems of our culture.

Make no mistake: The people of God should be concerned about injustice and social issues that plague our world at large, and they should be model citizens who do good to those around them. That is not in question and is not the issue. On the table is whether it is God's plan for His people to actively be focusing their attention, efforts, and resources into changing the legal, political, and social systems found within secular culture. Those who believe it is, including all those mentioned above, are adding the Cultural Mandate (Genesis 1:26-28) to the Great Commission as the purpose of the church.

This is Keller's argument, but he does not make his case biblically. His cutting and pasting of Scripture, mostly out of context, might give the appearance that he has proved his thesis, but the vast teaching of Scripture stands against his view. Keller makes a good point when he affirms that individual Christians working within parachurch or secular organizations might devote time to social issues while leaving the church to do what only the church can do. However, Keller is not consistent throughout his book and confuses the message and the mission of the church.

Keller represents well the confusion which has infiltrated the church in the

21st century. The arguments supporting and adding the social justice agenda to the mandate of the church sound good and resonate with the culture, especially with younger people, but they do not agree with the teaching of Scripture which presents a far narrower agenda of proclaiming the Gospel of redemption and the call to make followers of Christ. Believers are to be salt and light in the world and thereby have an effect on society. But the social justice movement is a well-meaning distraction from our biblical mandate.

### Endnotes:

1. See further, Gary E. Gilley, "Homosexuality - The Pressing Issue Facing the Church," *The Quarterly Journal*, October-December 2016, pp. 1, 12-20.
2. See the excellent work by Jim Owen, *The Hidden History of the Historic Fundamentalists 1933-1948*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2004. This well-documented book corrects the propaganda directed toward Fundamentalists accusing them of being uninterested about this world and the happenings within it.
3. Christine Yount Jones, "The 'Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel' Stirs Up Controversy and Conversation," from the Church Leaders website, posted Sept. 10, 2018. Document accessed at: <https://churchleaders.com/news/333017-the-statement-on-social-justice-and-the-gospel-stirs-up-controversy-and-conversation.html>.
4. "John MacArthur's 'Statement on Social Justice' Is Aggravating Evangelicals," from the Christianity Today website, posted Sept 12, 2018. Document accessed at: [www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/sep-tember-web-only/john-macarthur-statement-social-justice-gospel-thabiti.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/sep-tember-web-only/john-macarthur-statement-social-justice-gospel-thabiti.html).
5. The Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel, Section VI, Gospel.
6. *Ibid.*, Section VIII, The Church.
7. *Ibid.*, Section XII, Race/Ethnicity.
8. *Ibid.*, Section XIV, Racism.
9. Dennis R. Edwards, "Reflections After the Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel: What's This Really All About?," from the Missio Alliance website, posted Sept. 13, 2018. Document accessed at: [www.missioalliance.org/reflections-after-the-statement-on-social-justice-and-the-gospel-whats-this-really-all-about/](http://www.missioalliance.org/reflections-after-the-statement-on-social-justice-and-the-gospel-whats-this-really-all-about/).
10. "A Line in the Sand: The Dallas Statement on Social Justice," from the Pulpit & Pen website, posted Sept. 4, 2018. Document accessed at: <https://pulpitandpen.org/2018/09/04/a-line-in-the-sand-the-dallas-statement-on-social-justice/>.
11. Eric Mason, *Woke Church*. Chicago:

- Moody Publishers, 2018.
12. *Ibid.*, pg. 25.
13. *Ibid.*, pg. 14.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 22-25.
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31. *Ibid.*, pg. 90.
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## A COMMUNION TABLE FOR ONE

(continued from page 1)

"Beni and Bill Johnson are the Senior Pastors of Bethel Church. Together they serve a growing number of churches that have partnered for revival. This apostolic network has crossed denominational lines in building relationships that enable church leaders to walk in both purity and power. Beni has a call to intercession that is an integral part of the Bethel Church mission."<sup>2</sup>

And her church's website says:

"Beni is a pastor, author and speaker. She has a call to joyful intercession that's an integral part of Bethel Church. Her insight into strategies for prayer and her involvement in prayer networks bring breakthrough with global impact. Beni is passionate about health and wholeness — in body, soul and spirit."<sup>3</sup>

Bethel Church, in Redding, Calif., was founded in 1952. In its early years it was affiliated with the Assemblies of God denomination. For a number of years Bethel was pastored by Bill's father, Earl. In 1996, however, the Johnsons came to Redding to take over the pastoral reins from Earl. It is reported that when the couple arrived, nearly half of the congrega-

tion departed — about 1,000 people — while another 1,000 remained.<sup>4</sup> Today the church boasts a weekly attendance of more than 8,500.

Ten years after Bill and Beni took over, the church voted unanimously to withdraw its affiliation from the Assemblies of God and to become a non-denominational church. More recently, Bethel Church finds itself associated with the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) movement. The NAR is a coterie of self-proclaimed apostles and prophets who have gained prominence and influence among charismatic, Pentecostal, mainline, and evangelical churches.<sup>5</sup>

The NAR advocates are notably conspicuous in promoting eccentric doctrines and practices which help define the movement. The Johnsons fit well into this model. The Johnsons — and by extension, Bethel Church — are known for their unusual doctrine and practice. *Christianity Today* magazine reports that the church claims to experience Shekinah glory clouds, angel feathers, and gold dust at its services.<sup>6</sup> Mrs. Johnson, it appears, was raised on such hyper-charismatic manifestations and experiences. She writes that as a child:

"I remember one time, the pastor invited people to come to the front to encounter more of the Lord. I immediately went right down and

sat at the end of the first pew. People began to come up, and right away they started to manifest physically. They were crying and rolling around on the ground, encountering the Holy Spirit in new ways. This was many years before the renewal in the '90s, where this kind of activity became a bit more normal."<sup>7</sup>

And now it appears that Johnson is trying to make even the bizarre and grotesque "a bit more normal." *CT* goes on to reveal that, "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."<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the "grave sucking" exploit is a bit too much, even for the NAR advocates. When *Charisma* writer Michael Brown recently interviewed Johnson's husband, one of the concerns which Brown questioned Bill about was the criticism being leveled at Bethel because of the "grave sucking."<sup>9</sup> Bill denied that they participate in the practice. He claimed that he and/or the Bethel staff do not practice "grave sucking."

However, one can easily find online a copy of his wife's Facebook entry with a photograph of her lying atop the grave of C.S. Lewis with the

caption, “Senior Pastor Beni Johnson ‘grabbing some’ at the grave of C.S. Lewis.” One who responded to the post tells Mrs. Johnson, “Yes ... grab some for me.” So what Bill is now saying about visiting graves doesn’t at all look like the photograph that his wife posted on Facebook.

### COMMUNION FOR ONE

As noted at the beginning of this article, Johnson is not saying that Communion should no longer be a communal event among the members of a church body, but that it should not be strictly a congregational event. Her desire is that Communion should become a personal and private act of worship. She tells her readers:

“Too often Communion can get locked into the routine of church culture. There are great, logistical reasons for churches to have Communion once per month. But that doesn’t mean we have to limit ourselves to that! Like every other aspect of our walk with God, if we are only experiencing Communion within the four walls of the church, we are missing out on a gift from Jesus.”<sup>10</sup>

And:

“But I want to encourage you to release the power of Communion from the four walls of the church and into your family, your business, your community, etc. There is no area of your life that Communion with God cannot improve.”<sup>11</sup>

In fact, in her 172-page book, only six pages cover corporate Communion.<sup>12</sup> Johnson lifts Communion from the church and moves it to prayer closets, mountain tops, hospital rooms, and even holistic health clinics. She wants Communion to not just be an infrequent church event, but calls attention to the fact that she often partakes daily — sometimes as often as three times a day.<sup>13</sup>

Most Protestants and Catholics would maintain that Communion is to be observed within the context of the local church. Communion is an ordinance that was given to the church and not individuals. Baptist

theologian Ray Van Neste writes:

“To describe the Lord’s Supper as a church ordinance is to assert that this rite was given to the church to practice and not simply to individual Christians. This is the understanding of the great majority of Christians across the history of the church. The Supper assumes a gathered community each time it is mentioned in the NT (e.g., Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 11:17-34). ... Furthermore, Paul’s admonitions in 1 Corinthians 11 discuss the Lord’s Supper as something which occurs ‘when you come together as a church’ and ‘when you come together’ (vv. 18, 20). From these observations it seems that the NT assumes the Lord’s Supper is a church event.”<sup>14</sup>

Thus, Van Neste and others would contend that Johnson has neither biblical instruction nor precedent to present her case for private Communion. Simply stated, Scripture is silent in the matter of an individual Christian partaking the Lord’s Supper apart from an assembled body of believers. As noted above, the scriptural accounts of the Lord’s Supper all take place within the context of a local church setting. Author and pastor Bobby Jamieson writes:

“But I want to argue that the Lord’s Supper actually plays a crucial role in putting the church together. Celebrating the Lord’s Supper together is an essential step in making a church a church. In a very significant sense, the Lord’s Supper is the moment when a group of Christians become one body. The Lord’s Supper makes many one. ... In the Lord’s Supper, we renew our commitment to Christ and his people. But, distinct from baptism, the Lord’s Supper is something we all do together. The Lord’s Supper marks off an entire group of Christians as one body, drawing a line between them and the world around them. And by drawing a line between the church and the world, baptism and the Lord’s Supper draw a line around the church.”<sup>15</sup>

Now having said that, it must be admitted that Scripture makes no direct prohibition of an individual partaking of Communion apart from a local assembly of believers — either alone, as a couple, or in a small group. As such, there are those who would advocate that under certain circumstances it is permissible to observe Communion in those settings. Along this line, Alfred P. Gibbs, argues:

“There are some who would have us believe that the Lord’s supper is *exclusively* a ‘church act.’ They affirm that unless there is a regularly constituted and ‘recognized’ church, with its complement of proper gift in the way of evangelists, pastors and teachers, the Lord’s supper cannot be observed! To this we reply that the New Testament, our sole authority on all such matters, says nothing of the kind! It is to be feared that those who teach this are more concerned about a *mode of procedure* than the value and the purpose of the simple memorial.”<sup>16</sup>

Yet there is little doubt that Gibbs disagrees with what Johnson proposes. Gibbs’ point is that a strict local church setting for Communion would disallow soldiers on a battlefield, missionaries on the mission field, believers at a Bible camp or conference, or even the aged or infirm who are unable to attend worship services from ever partaking of the elements.

Communion has been a major issue of contention among Christians. The observance that should draw us together in unity has divided us. Throughout the history of the Church there have been fierce debates and battles over the Lord’s Supper. People have fought to the death over the Communion table and its meaning.

Foremost in these debates has been the interpretation of Jesus’ words, “This is My body ... This is My blood.” Are we to understand Christ’s words literally? Or figuratively? Roman Catholics choose the former,<sup>17</sup> while many Protestant denominations choose the latter;<sup>18</sup> with other Protestants — such as Lutheran<sup>19</sup> and Reformed<sup>20</sup> believers — finding themselves somewhere in between.

Then, other minor debates over Communion have arisen, such as the frequency of the observance, if we use leavened or unleavened bread, wine or grape juice, and whether it should be an “open” or “closed” service.<sup>21</sup> Maybe if saying that the Lord’s Supper can be a personal and private act of worship is all Johnson had to say about Communion we could consign it to the category of another of those minor debates on the subject. But Johnson has much more to say about it, making claims and presenting to her readers ideas that lack any biblical support or precept.

### BENI’S FURTHER TAKE ON COMMUNION

By her own admission, Johnson’s directives in *The Power of Communion* are a work in progress. She writes:

“I have always taken Communion whenever I have felt prompted by the Holy Spirit. As an intercessor, I have included Communion as a part of my prayer time. It has always been wonderful and powerful. ... I’ve started to take Communion as a tool in my intercessory toolbox, as a purposeful and proactive part of my relationship with the Lord. I usually take it every day, sometimes multiple times a day, and this new intentionality has shifted my expectation and understanding of the power behind that little wafer and small cup of juice.”<sup>22</sup>

“In fact,” Johnson claims, “it was really only a few years ago, when my husband became so ill that his life appeared to be in jeopardy, that I began to understand Communion in a whole new way.”<sup>23</sup> And that, “it wasn’t until Bill got sick several years ago, that I grabbed on to Communion in a more intentional way. Something shifted for me.”<sup>24</sup>

And there is much more to Johnson’s perception as to the dynamics of Communion. For her, Communion is superior to a simple act of reverence and remembrance and one which moves her into the supernatural and subjective:

“When I take Communion, I take it as a prophetic act, applying it to

any situation that is weighing on my heart. A prophetic act is a Holy Spirit-inspired physical action that disrupts the atmosphere. Sometimes, I’ll feel as though God wants me to do something tangible to activate something that I’m praying into. During those moments, I simply ask the Holy Spirit, ‘What should I do about this?’ Then, I’ll feel prompted to — for example — take my shofar into the prayer house that we have at Bethel or go to a specific place to take Communion. In completing the prophetic act, we are releasing something into the atmosphere that helps the answer to our prayer to break through.”<sup>25</sup>

So for Johnson, the prophetic is a key element in Communion. She says, “Often, when I take Communion, I prophesy to myself. There is something powerful in the spirit realm about the declaration of truth, so I talk to myself out loud.”<sup>26</sup>

As an example of a prophetic, “Holy Spirit-inspired physical action that disrupts the atmosphere,” Johnson relates an experience she was part of on Mt. Shasta, a mountain near her home. Mt. Shasta, she claims, “is considered to be a place of power and worship for many satanic or occult belief systems.”<sup>27</sup> She describes the adventure:

“I felt that we were to go up the mountain and take Communion, pray, and blow the shofar. I had around 150 people as a team that day, so it was a power-charged group, and they were ready to see God. We spent some time walking around the meadow praying, and then we gathered around the spring and took Communion together. Then I had a friend blow her shofar. After the third blow on the shofar, we all shouted out praise to God.”<sup>28</sup>

Those actions that day, Johnson would have us believe, disrupted the occult activity on Mt. Shasta. Elsewhere, she tells a similar story of Henry Gruver, who made a trip to “Wales to pray and release the Kingdom.”<sup>29</sup> Gruver visited a place known as The Devil’s Pulpit. There he “began praising God and rejoicing” and he

claims that he “took dominion over the devil there, with the intention of taking back that area.”<sup>30</sup> Johnson then provides more details of Gruver’s experience:

“Henry felt like the Lord told him to start making declarations over the land. ‘When we are remitting sins, and claiming back the land, God wants His Word spoken over that land.’ The devil had used this ground for long enough. It was time to reclaim the entire mountaintop for Kingdom purposes. As he walked throughout the amphitheater, he declared the sovereignty of the Lord over that land and began remitting the sins of all who had come there for satanic purposes.”<sup>31</sup>

Other than a subjective feeling, Johnson never explains the biblical criteria for “claiming back the land” and “remitting the sins of all who had come there for satanic purposes.” However, she does want her readers to know that several years later, Gruver was “introduced to a satanist high priest”<sup>32</sup> who told Gruver that, “You took out all our high places, all over this country. Every year we were losing high places and we didn’t know who was doing it.”<sup>33</sup>

Communion, according to Johnson, breaks geographical strongholds and devastates occult activity. “There is power in the victorious blood of Jesus. That power was not just for the salvation of our souls at Calvary; that power is for right now,”<sup>34</sup> Johnson writes.

### FROM INTERCESSION TO MIRACLES

Johnson moves beyond her claim that Communion is a tool for intercession by saying that the act is a means of divine healing and health. It is a major theme throughout the book. However, she tells her readers that, “I never mean to imply that Communion is some sort of golden ticket”<sup>35</sup> and “Communion is not a magic pill, and God is not a vending machine.”<sup>36</sup> Yet those statements get quickly lost in a myriad of alleged signs and wonders and boastings such as the “promise” of Matthew 17:20 (faith the

size of a mustard seed will move a mountain) “is embedded in the body and blood of Christ.”<sup>37</sup> The book is peppered with testimonies of healings and supernatural experiences by those who are accessing miracles through the body and blood of Jesus. Johnson gives new meaning to the old hymn, “There Is Power in the Blood.” She writes:

“Why is Communion so powerful? We’ve heard of wonderful testimonies surrounding Communion — people being healed, couples who were dealing with infertility taking Communion every day and getting pregnant, and of people falling out in the middle of taking Communion. They had an encounter with the Lord that was so powerful while they participated in the sacrament that their bodies could no longer stand up. That’s more than just a wafer and some grape juice. That’s the power of the Living God.”<sup>38</sup>

Healing and health is a staple in Word-Faith teaching and Johnson is unwavering in her advocacy of the teaching:

“Jesus died for our sins and for our sicknesses — anything that threatens to steal, kill, or destroy our life in Him is not of Him. When He went to the cross, He carried with Him every dark thing of the enemy and was the eternal sacrifice on our behalf.”<sup>39</sup>

She also tells her readers:

“Because of all that Christ did on the cross, we now have access to the same health and wholeness that is found in Him. Our God is the healer. It’s not something that He chooses to do or not do; it is who He is. When you take Communion, align yourself up with this reality. Plead the blood of Jesus over your soul, your spirit, and your body. And receive His transformative, healing presence into every area of your life.”<sup>40</sup>

However, Johnson augments the health doctrine of her Word-Faith peers by maintaining that the partaking of Communion is a conduit for healing. She wrote of a time when her

husband, Bill, was dealing with a growth in his small intestine:

“We would take the elements, give thanks, and proclaim all that Jesus did on the cross. We would remind ourselves and the enemy that divine health is our birthright. We would declare, ‘This is Your body, broken for us. This is Your blood that was poured out for us. You died for our sins as well as our sicknesses. We align ourselves — spirit, soul, and body — with all that You did.’”<sup>41</sup>

And Bill agrees. In the closing chapter in the book, Bill writes that Communion is “the tool” that God provides “to bring divine health.”<sup>42</sup> And he further states:

“When we say that ‘by His stripes we are healed,’ we’re talking about the beating that He endured. We’re talking about the moment when Jesus made a payment for our health and our healing. This part of His suffering was not to make it possible for us to go to Heaven. This one, in many ways, is for Heaven to come to earth in us. His blood paid the price to get you to Heaven. But His stripes were actually a payment for our pain, suffering and sicknesses here on earth.”<sup>43</sup>

And to this Bill alleges that partaking of Communion brings not just mundane healing but much more:

“I believe that the Lord is going to release unusual miracles of healing in the taking of the bread. He is going to release unusual miracles of deliverance to people and family members, who are maybe a thousand miles away or more by our taking the juice (representing the blood) and pleading the blood of Jesus over their lives.”<sup>44</sup>

Isaiah 53 (especially verses 4-5) is the standard fare for those in the Word-Faith camp to advocate their teaching of healing in the atonement. And both Johnson and her husband cite these passages.<sup>45</sup>

So are the Johnsons and their Word-Faith compatriots correct? Do the

Scriptures, verses such as those in Isaiah 53, really affirm that there is healing in the atonement? The short answer is, “Yes, indeed.” For a true biblical understanding, however, that short answer must be expounded upon. Pastor and author Curtis Crenshaw, comments:

“Is there healing in the atonement? Absolutely. Where else would it be? All sickness is a result of sin, and sin is what the Lord came to bear. All benefits without exception come from His death and resurrection. The curse on the earth and the universe will be lifted as a result of the atonement (Rom. 8:18-23; Col. 1:19, 20). Just as the curse on the earth is a result of sin, so sickness is a result of sin.”<sup>46</sup>

Yet Crenshaw is quick to point out an important distinction that is missed by the Johnsons and other Word-Faith teachers:

“Did the Lord bear our sicknesses in the atonement? Yes and no. It depends on what is meant by this, and it is a crucial point. No, Christ did not literally bear our diseases. Yes, He did bear the *cause* of our illnesses, which is sin.”<sup>47</sup>

Crenshaw further explains:

“The Word of Faith leaders, however, make a fruit of His death, healing diseases, the essence of the atonement. They miss the whole point of sin, judgment, and Jesus’ death, for God has not charged us with diseases but with sin, with disobedience to His moral laws. Diseases are the *result* of sin, not the sin itself, and Jesus bore our sin, not the result.”<sup>48</sup>

To this, Richard Mayhue, former dean of The Master’s Seminary (1990-2014), agrees and further observes:

“In reality, Christ paid the penalty for sin but He did not remove sin from the life of the believer. Christ cared for the *cause* of sickness: *sin*, which is the cause of sickness in its moral sense. But He did not remove sickness from the life experience of believers because He

did not free them from besetting sin."<sup>49</sup>

Mayhue also demonstrates a major inconsistency of the Word-Faith adherents who argue for present-day healing in the atonement:

"To suggest that there is now no sickness because Christ cared for physical affliction at Calvary is like suggesting that there is now no sin because Christ bore our sins at Calvary."<sup>50</sup>

In summarizing his position, Mayhue writes:

"Recall the question which we asked at the beginning: 'Is there healing in the atonement?' My answer is 'Yes!' but with this explanation: There is healing 'through' the atonement or 'as a result of' the atonement, but it is never promised to believers for the present. When sin is ultimately removed, physical healing for believers will be in full — but only in the future, when our bodies have been redeemed by the power of God (Romans 8:23; Revelation 21:4)."<sup>51</sup>

### NOT ALWAYS DIVINE HEALING

Even for the Johnsons themselves, the belief that Communion is "the tool" that God provides "to bring divine health" is not a steadfast rule and they have had to seek conventional medical treatments. As noted earlier, Bill suffered with a growth in his small intestine. Beni describes the episode:

"In 2015, Bill started getting sick. For months, he had trouble eating and keeping food down. He would have a bad spell, and then his symptoms would seem to disappear for a little while. But then he'd get sick again. He tried changing his diet and getting medical advice, but it wasn't getting better. Finally, in the spring of 2016, while he was teaching in Europe, he became very ill. After speaking one evening, he went back to his hotel room and threw up 20 times. He was able to fly home and, once he got back, we

knew we needed some serious help."<sup>52</sup>

That "serious help" came by way of not divine or supernatural healing through Communion, but rather through a "specialist in San Francisco"<sup>53</sup> and the possible need for doctors "to perform a very serious, life-altering procedure."<sup>54</sup> Because of Bill's condition, Beni "began to take Communion for him."<sup>55</sup> In the end, it is proffered that the miracle wrought by the taking of proxy Communion was that the intestinal growth shifted slightly allowing the surgeons "to perform a procedure that was much less invasive with a quicker healing time."<sup>56</sup>

And further in the volume there is another report as Johnson writes of her own serious medical issues. In 2018, her annual breast thermography led to a sonogram, which led to a needle biopsy. Johnson says, "Those three days of waiting for the results to come in were torturous."<sup>57</sup> Johnson further describes the event:

"Deep inside, I felt like I knew what the doctor was going to tell me, but I began to pray and believe that whatever had grown inside of me would disappear. Three days later, the doctor called me into his office and told me that there was cancer in my right breast."<sup>58</sup>

A second opinion was obtained from a "top surgeon" in her city that confirmed the initial diagnosis. And then came more bad news:

"In addition to the scanning for cancer, I also had my DNA tested. There was a history of breast cancer in my family, so I wanted to see if I had a genetic predisposition for the disease. The test showed an anomaly on one of my genes, basically letting me know that there was a chance that this could reoccur. After the first doctor's diagnosis, I had already discussed having surgery to remove the two tumors. But, when I got the results of the DNA back, I decided to have both breasts removed. Even though it was a more invasive surgery, I knew

that having a double mastectomy would help me to maintain my peace in the days to come."<sup>59</sup>

For Johnson, the miracle (or healing) produced by the partaking of Communion was the "peace in deciding to have a double mastectomy."<sup>60</sup> And there are more disconnects and cracks in other of Johnson's claims. *The Christian Post* reported that in April 2017, 10 months before her cancer diagnosis:

"Beni's daughter-in-law, Jenn Johnson, urged members to pray for a 'cancer free zone' at Bethel during a worship service while singing 'By the Blood.' During that service, Beni Johnson revealed she had a heavenly encounter with Jesus in the spirit and gained access to healing power over cancer. ... She then encouraged the crowd to grab the healing power for cancer out of Heaven."<sup>61</sup>

Other "miracle" healings reported by Johnson often appear not to be miracles at all. For example, she tells of a woman who had the Epstein-Barr virus. Citing the woman's doctor, Johnson writes, "she began taking Communion three times a day, discerning the Lord's body, broken for her healing. A year later, she was in perfect health, with no trace of the virus in her blood."<sup>62</sup> As in the case of their own personal health issues, and many of the other testimonials, the "miracles" (and healings) came about through conventional means and/or a gradual self-healing process. Doctors, medicine, and self-healing properties of the human body are all means in which God works in our lives. However, these are more correctly identified as God's *providence*, not as the *miraculous*. Pastor Clint Archer defines the distinction that is missed by Johnson and others of the "signs and wonders" movement:

"The compartment in God's toolbox that supplies Him with His most used instrument is that of providence. Whereas a miracle is an example of God's involvement in His creation by *breaking* the laws of nature, providence refers to God's operation *within* those laws to accomplish His will."<sup>63</sup>

## MORE PROBLEMATIC CONCERNS

There are other ideas and concepts which Johnson expresses that would cause the discerning reader concern. For example, she writes that, "I think we can learn from the way the Catholic Church honors Communion, teaching the children what it means and making a special event of their first occasion."<sup>64</sup> It is difficult to understand why Johnson makes such a statement. The extent to which the Catholic Church "honors Communion" is because of its doctrine of transubstantiation. Catholics believe the bread and wine actually become the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches:

"By the consecration the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ is brought about. Under the consecrated species of bread and wine Christ himself, living and glorious, is present in a true, real, and substantial manner: his Body and his Blood, with his soul and his divinity."<sup>65</sup>

Catholics believe that partaking of the elements is a means of grace and hold the bread and wine in the highest honor, even to the place of worshiping them with supreme adoration — especially the host. In Catholicism, unless one believes in transubstantiation, they may not receive Communion. James McCarthy, who has written extensively on the errors of Catholicism, states:

"No one, however, may partake of the Eucharist who does not believe in the *real presence* of Christ, that is to say, 'a *substantial* presence by which Christ, God and man, makes himself wholly and entirely present' in the consecrated bread and wine. To guard against sacrilege, as the priest distributes holy communion to each person, he holds the consecrated wafer in front of the communicant, saying, 'The body of Christ.' Before the person can receive the host, he or she must respond, 'Amen,' meaning, 'Yes, it is true!'"<sup>66</sup>

The doctrine of transubstantiation was formalized in A.D. 1215 and has no biblical foundation. So, what did Jesus mean when He said, "This is My body ... This is My blood"? As one encyclopedic volume notes:

"There can be no doubt that Jesus meant, and his disciples understood, his words symbolically and not literally. The literal, physical body of Jesus was there in the room, serving them. The symbolism was clear: the body and blood of Jesus would be given in sacrificial death. The focus was on the cross, not on the elements themselves."<sup>67</sup>

Added to this, apologist Ron Rhodes addressing the doctrine of transubstantiation, writes:

"There are a number of serious problems with this view. First, note that Jesus was present with the disciples when He said that the bread and wine were His body and blood (Luke 22:17-19). Obviously He intended that His words be taken figuratively. Jesus often spoke in metaphors and figures of speech. He called Himself the *gate* (John 10:9) and the *true vine* (John 15:1). These are not literal. In the same way, when Jesus said the *bread* was His body, He was speaking metaphorically. Beyond this, one must keep in mind the scriptural teaching that drinking blood is forbidden (Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 3:17; Acts 15:29). However the verse is understood, it should not be taken to mean that the elements actually become the flesh and blood of the Lord."<sup>68</sup>

One of the basic rules of hermeneutics (Bible interpretation) is the literal principle — the text means what it says. But as we apply the literal principle we also remember that the Bible — like any other literary work — contains figures of speech, including allegory, simile, metaphor, hyperbole, and so forth. How do we know the difference? When a literal interpretation — like eating flesh and drinking blood — is immoral and contrary to the command of Scripture, one can safely say it is a metaphor.

Beyond soliciting respect for the honor Catholics give to Communion, Johnson relates an incident that not only shows a blatant disrespect for the Communion elements but also extends an unbiblical view of forgiveness. Johnson describes the event:

"In 2015, students who had gone through our Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry traveled on a ministry trip to Turkey for the 100-year anniversary of the Armenian Holocaust. ... Together, they traveled to the location of some of the conflicts, and *they poured the Communion elements onto the ground*, praying for the trauma of the genocide to leave the land. *The Armenian students forgave the Turks* and prayed for the salvation to come to all of Turkey."<sup>69</sup>

About a page later, she further explains:

"When those Turkish and Armenian students stood together and poured out Communion into the war-ravaged soil, they were inviting the reality of the resurrected Christ, the One who is victorious over sin and darkness, into the history of that land. When we are lined up with the reality of Christ — in spirit, soul, and body — we release that reality into the world."<sup>70</sup>

While Roman Catholics take their reverence of the elements to an unbiblical level — even to the point of worship — there can also be an opposite extreme. It can be argued that the actions of these Bethel students, by pouring onto the ground the Communion elements, fit this latter category. Despite Johnson's claim that Communion is not a "magic pill" or "golden ticket," she apparently sees it as exactly that — a mystical and enchanted device to deliver both land and people from horrors such as genocide.

Johnson's contention that these students were able to forgive the Turks lacks biblical merit. Biblical forgiveness is a transaction. As an example, 1 John 1:9 states, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all

unrighteousness." The operative word there is "if." "If" we confess our sins, then forgiveness is extended. That same concept is expressed in 2 Chronicles 7:14; Psalm 32:5; 86:5; Proverbs 28:13; Matthew 18:15-17; and Luke 17:3.

The action of these students does not adequately deal with sin. Confession and repentance necessitate a change of mind concerning the sin (or sins) one has committed, and with that a sincere desire to forsake the sin. These must be the actions by the one who has sinned, addressing the one who was sinned against. No matter how good it makes them feel, or how noble it appears to others, the Bethel group cannot extend forgiveness to those who have brought about the horrors of war and genocide.

A further issue of concern is Johnson's misunderstanding or ignorance of the occult. She writes:

"The power of Communion — sometimes overlooked by Christians — has not been missed by the occult. One of our dear friends and former leaders at Bethel, Sue Manwaring, grew up with an understanding of the power of Communion. But it was taught to her by her family members who were involved in extreme witchcraft. She explained that as a part of the satanic rituals, they would mimic Christian rituals. So, they took Communion, but instead of the blood and body of Christ, it involved horrific abuse. ... 'Whilst the Church does Communion thanking Jesus for the cross, we did Communion to the devil,' Sue explained."<sup>71</sup>

In her comments, Johnson sets forth a common misconception — that witchcraft and satanism are the same. They are not. If you want to annoy a witch, say they worship the devil. As Steve Russo explains:

"But keep in mind that Wicca and Satanism is not the same thing. Most witches would say that they don't even believe in the devil or accept the concept of 'absolute evil.' They believe that to give evil a name is to give it power. Because Wiccans say they don't

believe in the devil, they get offended if anyone compares Wicca to Satanism (worshipping the devil)."<sup>72</sup>

As Marcia Montenegro points out, "Wiccans do not generally believe in Satan, and Wiccans and Satanists dislike and often resent each other."<sup>73</sup> All of this is readily expressed by witches themselves. An online Q&A page composed by a Wiccan group states:

"Q. Do Witches worship the devil? A. No. Satan, or the Devil, has absolutely no place in Wicca or Witchcraft. The worship of Satan is the practice of profaning Christian symbolism and is thus a Christian heresy, rather than a Pagan religion. The Goddess and God of the Witches are in no way connected to Satanic practices. Satan, or the Devil, is a Christian creation and they are more than welcome to keep him."<sup>74</sup>

Finally, there is Johnson's own personal pursuit for wellness that not only blends her concept of Communion with conventional medical treatment, but adds homeopathic remedies. Johnson described her battle with breast cancer:

"I experienced another beautiful kiss through God sending me a wonderful, new friend who also happened to be a health coach. She had also overcome stage four cancer through holistic means. ... On her advice, we both ended up going to an amazing holistic clinic in Spain, The Hilu Institute, run by Dr. Raymond Hilu. ... Some mornings, especially when we were in Spain, I would join with my health coach and we would take Communion together. It was a wonderful time for both of us, committing our lives and care to Him. I truly believe that this daily alignment was a large part of my healing process."<sup>75</sup>

Last summer, Johnson posted on her Facebook page:

"Many know that I've been going through being healed of cancer, tumors removed, and now I'm onto Marbella Spain for holistic treatments. It's my life right now.

I'm in good hands and I'm loving Jesus all the way. Dr. Hilu's Clinic is wonderful. Many of the treatments are not allowed in the US. Which is really sad. Money and politics. Praying things will change."<sup>76</sup>

What Johnson is here opening her readers to is a movement that is heavily undergirded with New Age influence and Eastern mysticism. Elliot Miller warns that "holistic thought and practice are so often interlaced with occultism that, in its search for alternative approaches to healing, an entire generation is in danger of being baptized in psychic power."<sup>77</sup>

In their book, *New Age Medicine*, authors Paul and Teri Reisser and John Weldon provide a thorough examination of holistic health and many of its therapies. In outlining the issue, they explain:

"During the past few years a movement has been growing which argues that the health care system has lost touch with the human soul and spirit. This movement seeks to restore that broken relationship in the everyday practice of medicine. Its leaders call not just for an overhaul of the way medicine is practiced, but for nothing less than a radical revision of the underlying thinking about health and disease. This revision, it is said, necessarily includes reuniting modern medicine with its mystical traditions, as well as opening it to paranormal phenomena. ... They are convinced that the time has come for a 'New Age' in medicine, for what they call *holistic health*."<sup>78</sup>

It is strange that one who claims a ministry "where healing and miracles are normal,"<sup>79</sup> finds herself under the care of conventional medical treatment and then shows a lack of spiritual discernment by pursuing "New Age" holistic therapy.

## THE PERSON OF COMMUNION

It's not about the power of Communion, but rather about the person of Communion. While Johnson may

attempt to sanction all that she offers in her book by way of testimonies and experience, so many of her observations are without merit and unbiblical. For the Christian, however, there is one who received by revelation from the Lord the specifics and purposes of the Lord's Supper. We should listen to him instead. The Apostle Paul, in his discourse to the believers at Corinth,<sup>80</sup> instructs that Communion is all about the Lord, not about miracles, healings, breaking strongholds, or the ability to move mountains. While Johnson tells her readers that Communion is 'the most powerful weapon,'<sup>81</sup> the inspired Scriptures never identifies it as such and it is absent from Paul's description of the "full armor of God" described in Ephesians 6:13-17.

As one Christian encyclopedia reminds us:

"The Lord's Supper, though of great importance to Paul, is not all-important. There are no magical qualities to it. It has no more power to communicate life and maintain it than did the spiritual food and drink provided Israel in the wilderness (1 Cor 10:1-13). ... The importance of the Supper exists solely in the Person it points to, and whose redemptive acts it proclaims."<sup>82</sup>

Communion is merely a reminder to keep Calvary afresh in our minds and hearts by recalling the cost of our salvation at the expense of a willing Savior, and of His promise to return. We would do well to avoid the hype and embellishments afforded it by Beni Johnson.

### Endnotes:

1. Beni Johnson, *The Power of Communion*. Shippensburg, Penna.: Destiny Image Publishers, 2019, back cover, ellipsis and upper case in original.
2. "About" page on BeniJ.org — Website of Beni Johnson. Document accessed at: <http://benij.org/about.php>.
3. "Leadership" page on Bethel Church's website. Document accessed at: [www.bethel.com/leadership/bill-johnson/](http://www.bethel.com/leadership/bill-johnson/).
4. Kris Vallotton, *School of the Prophets*, DVD Series. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Chosen Books, 2015, Session 1, "Discovering Your Divine Call," timemark: 17:15.
5. For a fuller critique of the New

- Apostolic Reformation and Bethel Church, see Gary E. Gilley, "Peter Wagner and the Modern-Day Apostles," *The Quarterly Journal*, January-March 2018, pp. 1, 12-21 and M. Kurt Goedelman, "School Time with Kris Vallotton," *The Quarterly Journal*, January-March 2019, pp. 1, 11-20.
6. Martin Wendell Jones, "Kingdom Come in California?," *Christianity Today*, May 2016, pg. 33.
7. *The Power of Communion*, op. cit., pg. 10.
8. "Kingdom Come in California?," op. cit., pg. 33.
9. "Dr. Brown Interviews Pastor Bill Johnson," *The Line of Fire with Dr. Michael Brown*, YouTube video, posted Oct. 12, 2016, timemark: 15:05. Video accessed at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=AflhswGOjZg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AflhswGOjZg).
10. *The Power of Communion*, op. cit., pg. 110.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 127-128.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 140-145.
13. See, for example, *ibid.*, pg. 19.
14. Ray Van Neste, "The Lord's Supper in the Context of the Local Church," in Thomas R. Schreiner and Matthew R. Crawford, *The Lord's Supper*. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2010, pg. 369.
15. Bobby Jamieson, "How the Lord's Supper Makes a Local Church," from the 9Marks website. Document accessed at: [www.9marks.org/article/how-the-lords-supper-makes-a-local-church/](http://www.9marks.org/article/how-the-lords-supper-makes-a-local-church/).
16. Alfred. P. Gibbs, *The Lord's Supper*. Kansas City, Kan.: Walterick Publishers, 1963, pg. 134, italics in original.
17. Romans Catholics (as well as Episcopalians and Greek Orthodox) hold to *transubstantiation*, which is the belief that the bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Jesus Christ.
18. Most Baptists and other fundamental churches hold to a *memorial view*, which is the belief that the bread and wine (or juice) only symbolize or illustrate the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.
19. Most Lutherans hold to *consubstantiation*, which is the belief that while Jesus Christ is literally and physically present in the bread and wine, the elements still remain bread and wine.
20. Some Reformed churches hold to *impanation*, which is the belief that the elements are still bread and wine, but Jesus Christ is present in the elements in a spiritual way.
21. Closed Communion restricts the serving of the elements to only members in good standing of the hosting church; open Communion allows anyone identifying themselves as a believer to partake.
22. *The Power of Communion*, op. cit., pg. 12.
23. *Ibid.*, pg. 11.
24. *Ibid.*, pg. 12.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.
26. *Ibid.*, pg. 19.
27. *Ibid.*, pg. 20.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

29. *Ibid.*, pg. 41.
30. *Ibid.*, pg. 42.
31. *Ibid.*, pg. 43.
32. *Ibid.*, pg. 44.
33. *Ibid.*, pg. 45.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.
35. *Ibid.*, pg. 62.
36. *Ibid.*, pg. 145. Bill Johnson writes, "Communion is not a magic formula," (pg. 165).
37. *Ibid.*, pg. 98.
38. *Ibid.*, pg. 27.
39. *Ibid.*, pg. 52.
40. *Ibid.*, pg. 68.
41. *Ibid.*, pg. 50.
42. *Ibid.*, pg. 154. Beni also designates Communion as a "tool" on pp. 11, 12.
43. *Ibid.*, pg. 156, italics in original.
44. *Ibid.*, pg. 165.
45. *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53, 154-158.
46. Curtis I. Crenshaw, *Man as God: The Word of Faith Movement*. Memphis: Footstool Publications, 1994, pg. 129.
47. *Ibid.*, italic in original.
48. *Ibid.*, pg. 133, italic in original.
49. Richard Mayhue, *The Healing Promise*. Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 1994, pg. 121, italics in original.
50. *Ibid.*, pg. 123.
51. *Ibid.*, pg. 125.
52. *The Power of Communion*, op. cit., pg. 49.
53. *Ibid.*, pg. 50.
54. *Ibid.*, pg. 51.
55. *Ibid.*
56. *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.
57. *Ibid.*, pg. 72.
58. *Ibid.*
59. *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.
60. *Ibid.*, pg. 76.
61. Leonardo Blair, "Bethel Church Pastor 'Shocked' by Cancer, Remains Strong in Faith: 'Loving Jesus All the Way,'" *The Christian Post*, Aug. 17, 2018. Document accessed at: [www.christianpost.com/news/bethel-church-pastor-shocked-by-cancer-remains-strong-in-faith-loving-jesus-all-the-way.html](http://www.christianpost.com/news/bethel-church-pastor-shocked-by-cancer-remains-strong-in-faith-loving-jesus-all-the-way.html).
62. *The Power of Communion*, op. cit., pg. 61.
63. Clint Archer in Mike Abendroth, Clint Archer, and Byron Yawn, *Things That Go Bump in the Church*. Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 2014, pg. 102, italics in original.
64. *The Power of Communion*, op. cit., pg. 132.
65. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. New York: Image Book, Doubleday, 1995, entry 1413, pg. 395.
66. James G. McCarthy, *The Gospel According to Rome*. Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 1995, pg. 131, italics in original.
67. Christopher Wright in Alister E. McGrath (General Editor) and James I. Packer (Associate Editor), *Zondervan Handbook of Christian Beliefs*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: The Zondervan Corporation, 2005, pg. 245.

68. Ron Rhodes, *What Did Jesus Mean?* Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 1999, pg. 108, italics in original.  
69. *The Power of Communion*, op. cit., pg. 111, emphasis added.  
70. *Ibid.*, pg. 113.  
71. *Ibid.*, pg. 133.  
72. Steve Russo, *What's the Deal With Wicca?* Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2005, pg. 20.  
73. Marcia Montenegro, *Spellbound*. Colorado Springs, Colo.: Cook Communications Ministries, 2006, pg. 127.  
74. "Witchcraft, Wicca and Paganism Frequently Asked Questions" on The Celtic

Connection website. Document accessed at: <https://wicca.com/celtic/wicca/faq.htm>.  
75. *The Power of Communion*, op. cit., pp. 83-84.  
76. A screenshot of Johnson's Facebook post is shown in "Bethel Faith Healer, Beni Johnson, Seeks Medical Treatment for Cancer," on the Pulpit & Pen website. Article published Aug. 13, 2018, and accessed at: <https://pulpitandpen.org/2018/08/13/bethel-faith-healer-beni-johnson-seeks-medical-treatment-for-cancer/>.  
77. Elliot Miller, *A Crash Course on the New Age Movement*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1989, pg. 92.

78. Paul C. Reisser, Teri K. Reisser, and John Weldon, *New Age Medicine*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1987, pp. 10, 11, italics in original.  
79. "Leadership" page on Bethel Church's website, op. cit.  
80. See 1 Corinthians 11:17-34.  
81. *The Power of Communion*, op. cit., pg. 20.  
82. G.F. Hawthorne in Merrill C. Tenney (General Editor), *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1975, Vol. 3, pp. 985, 986.



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## EDITORIALS

(continued from page 2)

Hundreds of thousands of copies of the book were sold. Blackstone drew up a petition for a Jewish State and had over 400 Jewish and Christian leaders sign on.

William H. Hechler was a contemporary of Blackstone. Hechler was chaplain to the British embassy in Vienna and called for Jewish restoration to Israel. He became a devoted friend to Theodore Herzl and issued pamphlets endorsing a Jewish State.

John Nelson Darby, who lived in the 1800s and fathered the Plymouth Brethren movement, was a strong advocate of Christian Zionism and dedicated himself to promoting the Jews' return to the Holy Land.

Horatio Spafford is best known for his hymn, "It Is Well With My Soul." Spafford was a friend of D.L. Moody. After great personal tragedy (including the death of his son, loss of much of his business in the great Chicago fire of 1871, and the drowning deaths of his four daughters while crossing the Atlantic), Spafford and his wife, Anna, moved to Israel in 1881 and founded what is known as The American Colony. He had a passion for dispersed Jews and wrote on the return of the Jews to their homeland. His beliefs regarding the restoration of Jews to the Holy Land influenced politicians and writers worldwide. *Our Jerusalem* is Bertha Spafford Vester's account of her family's years in Jerusalem.

Israel had nothing even close to an army for 1800 years. That changed dramatically during Britain's successful war against the Turks (1914-1918). Irishman John Henry Patterson, a devout Christian and Bible scholar, led the Zion Mule Corp, a Jewish fighting force. Patterson became a strong advocate of the restoration of the Jewish people to Israel. Patterson's army was small compared with the "army" of Christian Zionists that fill the pages of history.

Daniel Poling, the influential editor of the *Christian Herald* magazine, declared himself a Christian Zionist in 1947, a year before the State of Israel was born. A tidal wave of support was beginning to form.

While not agreeing with everything that Michael Evans teaches, some credit is due him for his two-volume set of books titled *The History of Christian Zionism*. There we meet multitudes of Christian Zionists of all theological stripes. Evans established the Friends of Zion Museum on Yosef Rivlin Street in Jerusalem.

There is no doubt that Israel is presently gathered in unbelief. Even ultra-orthodoxy is a very small percentage of a largely secular Israeli society. The Israeli government must deal with the Russian mafia, drug trafficking, theft, murders, and all sorts of evils. A few of their high-ranking politicians have done jail time. A daily reading of Israel's newspapers shows the country to be just like any other. Tel Aviv boasts of being the most gay friendly city in the Middle East (see *Frommer's Israel*, sixth edition, pg. 67). The annual gay pride parade in Tel Aviv draws thousands of supporters.

So what is the factor that unites Christian Zionists past and present? What is it that Christian Zionists share that gives them the unshakable conviction that Israel still has a glorious and blessed future? What is the cohesive factor that drives Christian Zionism?

That factor is their hermeneutic. Their hermeneutic convinces them of the truth of Christian Zionism. They share a hermeneutic that says passages such as Isaiah 2:1-5; Isaiah 11:1-10; and Ezekiel 47:9-12 are literal. These Scriptures are not to be twisted and spiritualized because they are to be taken literally. Agree or disagree, the issue is hermeneutics plain and simple.

If all the prophecies concerning the first coming of Christ were literal and literally fulfilled, why would promises of His Second Coming be any different? That was the question and reasoning of so many Christian Zionists.

This editorial has only been a very brief overview of a very large subject. My prayer is that it will be a challenge to the reader to seek more of the details. Christian Zionism is a rich subject that needs to be pursued and enjoyed.

—GRF



# Books in Review

## WHY DOES GOD ALLOW EVIL?

by Clay Jones

Harvest House Publishers, 272 pages, \$15.99

Why there is evil and suffering in this world is a question that both believers and non-believers wrestle with. And books which respond to that question from a Christian perspective often quickly come and go. One of the more recent efforts to tackle the subject is Clay Jones' book *Why Does God Allow Evil?*

Jones is a professor of Christian apologetics at Biola University in California and has written articles for the Christian Research Institute. He writes in the book's Preface that the volume "is written primarily to explain to reflective Christians some of the most difficult theological concepts regarding evil and to encourage them in God's grand plan for their eternities" (pg. 11). He says the book is an effort that took 23 years to complete.

Jones covers a lot of ground, including answering where did evil originate, why did Adam sin, and why the effects of that sin are passed on to us. And that's just the first chapter! In the next two chapters, he explores the depth of human depravity in detail. In chapters 4 and 5, Jones turns his attention to hell and eternal punishment, explaining the destiny of the unevangelized and whether eternal punishment is fair. In the next three chapters he considers free will, before addressing what he calls misconceptions about heaven and eternity in chapters 9 and 10. In the final chapter, he explains how our present sufferings help prepare us "to be fit inheritors of the kingdom of God." In an appendix, he presents a brief treatment of Satan's rebellion and God's response.

In discussing why we suffer for Adam's sin, specifically in presenting his answer that we all have a realistic or seminal union with Adam, he observes, "It takes time to wrap one's mind around this concept, but it is worth spending the time doing so" (pg. 38). That could be said about many of the arguments and answers he offers. For example, he explains and contrasts the concepts of divine determinism vs. compatibilism in one of his chapters on free will (pp. 126-130). There is much to be mined from this book for those willing to give careful and thoughtful

consideration to what Jones has to say. Understanding evil and why we suffer is foundational to a Christian worldview.

Throughout the book, Jones responds to skeptics and critics of the Bible who use evil and suffering in an attempt to deny God's existence or undermine Scripture (such as Bart Ehrman, Sam Harris, and Anthony Flew), as well as some who offer a wrong view of suffering and evil (such as Harold Kushner).

Nearly one fifth of the book is made up of endnotes (and if you consider that this section is set in a much smaller font size, that percentage is greatly increased). In that the book is meticulously endnoted, it is important to know that those endnotes are not just addresses of the sources and resources that Jones cites, but in many cases contain additional valuable insight and commentary.

With all that is outstanding about this book, it must be noted that there are some things which prevent it from being a "10." For example, while Jones draws from a number of sound and biblical sources, the volume is spotted with unqualified (and favorable) citations from questionable sources. These would include repeated quotations from both Dallas Willard (pp. 103, 104, 172, 192, 205) and John Hick (pp. 27, 35, 36, 112, 164). Willard is a modern-day mystic and guru of the spiritual formation movement, and Hick espoused an unbiblical Christology. Other citations from problematic sources include open theist and inclusivist John Sanders (pg. 139); new perspective on Paul (covenantal nomism) advocates N.T. Wright (pp. 159-160) and James D.G. Dunn (pp. 32, 224); and medieval mystic Thomas à Kempis (pg. 198). He also cites Gregory Boyd (pg. 26), but does state that Boyd is an open theist and distances himself from that belief.

Another issue is that Jones gives a passing endorsement to visions as a means of evangelism (pg. 84), maintaining that "God can reach people and share the gospel with them through dreams or visions" (pg. 89). It is interesting that later on in one of his chapters on free will, Jones speaks to the uncertainty of dreams (pg. 135).

Nevertheless, if one is aware of those concerns and sidesteps them, then there is a whole lot that Jones has to offer in way of biblically and logically helping the believer work through the "problem" of why a good God allows evil and suffering, and in understanding the depths of human sinfulness.

—MKG

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