

John Wimber, (1934 – 1997)

**Modern-Day Apostle
Or
Contemporary Heretic?**

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Introduction

John Wimber (1934 – 1998) (sic), was a man of tremendous controversy. His life and ministry impacted the body of Christ in multiple ways. He was the founding pastor of the Vineyard Christian Fellowship of Anaheim, CA and president of the Vineyard Ministries International. He was the founder of the Vineyard movement as well as the “signs and wonders” ministry that has had a profound affect on tens of thousands of charismatics and noncharismatics alike. Eventually his church grew to over 5,000. He was also responsible for the start of an aggressive church-planting effort that now includes more than 500 churches associated with the Vineyard Association of churches. The AVC put on conferences worldwide

He was a church growth consultant and adjunct professor at Fuller Theological Seminary. He lectured with C. Peter Wagner in the School of World Mission’s Doctor of Ministry program on signs and wonders and church growth. His classes were the most popular and controversial in the seminary’s history¹. Because of his influence and legacy, he was a very controversial Christian leader. Many of his followers believed him to be a modern-day apostle (despite his protestations), while his critics saw him as a heretic whose theology was flawed.

Through this paper I will show that John Wimber was anointed with the spiritual gift of apostleship and was thus called to address a very specific need within the church. As a leader who operated with this gift, he was accountable to God alone in his efforts. Because Wimber’s role was to blaze a trail by traveling down unexplored paths, he was

¹ Wagner, C. Peter. “Wimber, John” in *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, Rev and Exp ed.

plagued with many challenges, including resistance and “learning curve” issues; these were at the core of the controversy surrounding his ministry. Consequently, his critics failed to recognize and appreciate that he was called by God to break new ground.

Wimber’s Role

In reading Wimber’s original work as well as biographies by his close associates, it is apparent that he had a very clear picture of God’s plan to use him to impact the world. Through the strength of his personality and the ministry he fathered, he found a way to bridge the gap between the charismatic Pentecostals and the more conservative traditional churches; by encouraging the free movement of members across denominational lines. Gerald Coates states, “John seemed totally unimpressed with whether you were Anglican or New Church, Pentecostal or Baptist. Each person was treated as an individual, as a human being.”²

Wimber’s Call

Wimber was a man who was sure of his place in God’s plans. Wimber’s wife, Carol, wrote of him³:

What may have appeared to certain people (who didn’t understand him), to be a driving ambition, was nothing more than a sense of responsibility before God. He felt that God had given him something for the whole church and he did not want to waste any time, but to fulfill that mission. That is what drove him; it was his sense of responsibility. He had a message that he needed to tell people.

² Pytches, D. (Ed.). *John Wimber: His Influence and Legacy*. Guildford, Surrey, England; Eagle, 1998.
Gerald Coates, *The Ecumenist*, 158.

³ Pytches, D. (Ed.). *John Wimber: His Influence And Legacy*. Guildford, Surrey, England; Eagle, 1998.
Carol Wimber, *A Wife’s Tribute*, 298-9.

Wimber's call was to teach Christians to be lead by the Holy Spirit in their lives and ministries instead of by human rationalism. He believed that in order for this to be accomplished, Christians needed to develop a greater level of intimacy in their relationships with God. This call also included empowering the laity to do the ministry of God. Carol Wimber also recalls⁴:

Another high place he tore down (he ended it in our circle at least), was the monopoly of the ministry of the Holy Spirit by the pastor, priest or leader or the 'star' up on the stage. 'Every body gets to play.'" He used to say.

The Gift of Apostleship

The gift of apostleship differs from the office of apostle, which the Twelve and Paul held. There is debate going on over whether or not the office still exists today. However, for the purposes of this paper will not engage that debate. Rather, this paper will focus only on the spiritual gift of apostleship.

J. Robert Clinton⁵ describes this gift as:

... A special leadership capacity to move with authority from God to create new ministry structures (church and parachurch) to meet needs and to develop and appoint leadership in these structures.

Clinton also makes the following observations about this gift:

The capacity to establish new ministry structures requires a special kind of authority from God. A person who has this kind of special authority is usually recognized by a local church and released to this new pioneering work. The gift can be operated within one's own culture or in a cross-cultural setting. Traditionally, the apostolic gift has been associated with missionary work because the pioneering aspect was easy to see. However, all who go as missionaries certainly don't have this gift.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ J. Robert Clinton. *Unlocking Your Giftedness*. Altadena, CA: Barnabas Publishing, 1998.

Wimber's Gift of Apostleship

If the ability to create new ministries is the benchmark by which the gift of apostleship is recognized, then John Wimber would most certainly fit that criteria: He was the founder of a new movement – a style of church which emphasized ministry and worship that brings the believers into a close and intimate relationship with God. He empowered lay believers to minister by being led by the Holy Spirit, instead of through their own will or programs. He founded his own church, the Anaheim Vineyard, as well as planted churches and adopted others – to a total of more than 500.⁶ He started the Vineyard Association of Churches.

In addition, he also founded the Vineyard style of worship music. The style was intended to offer a steady flow of unhindered time of worship and intimacy into the depths of God's presence. He also developed a 'Vineyard model' for worship: Stage 1: A call to worship (time of invitation), Stage 2: Engagement (electrifying dynamic of connection to God and to each other), Stage 3: Exaltation (expressions of praise start to flow from the hearts), Stage 4: Adoration (expressions become more tender); Stage 5: Intimacy (God's intimate presence amongst us).⁷ Eventually he also founded the Vineyard Music Group, a non-profit, church-based ministry that produces and sells music created by Vineyard musicians. Therefore, even his style of music had become a "movement."

⁶ Wagner, C.P. "Wimber, John" in *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, Rev and Exp ed., 1200.

⁷ Pytches, D. (Ed.). *John Wimber: His Influence And Legacy*. Guildford, Surrey, England; Eagle, 1998.
Matt Redman, *Worshipper and Musician*, 65-6.

Wimber's Response To "Apostle"

Many people considered John Wimber to be an apostle. However, he apparently disagreed. From all accounts, Wimber was a very humble man and very well aware of his own weaknesses. It seems as though his chief concern was that if he chose to accept such a title, he would then be expected to live up to it.⁸ Yet, while he denied the title, he certainly behaved as someone who possessed this powerful gift.

Apostleship – Answering to God Alone

Scriptures report numerous accounts where God makes it clear to his messenger that he expects that person, and that person alone, to accomplish a task. If John Wimber did indeed operate from the gift of apostleship, then God would have expected him to answer to God alone regarding his ministries. Consequently, Wimber's critics questioning his teaching are in a sense questioning God himself as well as God's authority.

Yet, as Paul states in Gal 1:1, 10, 12, he is accountable to God alone for his works. Therefore, it does not matter whether others agree with what he is doing or not – he must follow God's lead. In Exodus 4 God makes it clear to Moses that he has called Moses to do the task and to speak from God. Jonah was originally told what to do (1:1-2) and even when he ran from God, he was still brought back to do God's will (3:1-3).

When a leader has been called by God to do something, he or she will likely face opposition. However, God also reminds us how he expects us to respond to his authority, choices, and ways of doing things. "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are

⁸ Pitches, D. (Ed.). *John Wimber: His Influence And Legacy*. Guildford, Surrey, England; Eagle, 1998.

Jack Deere, *The Prophet*, 105.

your ways my ways’, declares the Lord. ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your thoughts’ (Isaiah 55:8-9). When Job challenged God’s ways, God replied, “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding, who sets its measurements? Since you know, or who stretched the line on it?” (Job 38:4-5). Therefore, those leaders with the gift of apostleship will forge ahead in spite of criticism. – This is precisely what John Wimber did.

The Controversy

As mentioned earlier, John Wimber was a very controversial leader. As with any divisive issue, there are two sides to the story. The following are summaries of some of the key arguments behind the controversy as well as Wimber’s response to his critics.

Charismatic Gifts

There is much debate in the Christian community over cessationism – whether or not certain charismatic spiritual gifts have ceased to function. “The Scofield Reference Bible is often seen as a primary source for the cessationist position”⁹ This view holds that the spiritual gifts ceased to function in the church with the death of the Twelve and Paul. In contrast, the Charismatic movement holds the position that these gifts never died out and have been functioning from the first century through today. They use church history to prove their point.¹⁰ Since John Wimber’s call and ministry was rooted in the charismatic movement, that in itself was the root of most of the controversy.

⁹ Shepherd, D.H. *A Critical Analysis Of “Power Evangelism” As an Evangelistic Methodology Of The Signs And Wonders Movement*. Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary. Dissertation Abstract: UMI Dissertation Services, 1991.p. 62.

¹⁰ Ibid. p.72.

Proper Exegetical Study of Scriptures

Most of his critics based their objections on what they perceived to be inaccurate exegetical interpretations of the Scriptures. A common argument of Wimber's ministry was the theology that since Jesus used "signs and wonders" to introduce the gospel, then so should we.¹¹ There are volumes of works dedicated to prove the inerrancy of this interpretation. For example, Sarles claims that it is wrong because today's Christians are not Jesus and do not have his power.¹²

However, Wimber held to the teachings of Ephesians 4:11-12: "And he gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints (laity) for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ."

Yet, despite this controversy, the "signs and wonders" movement continued to spread. Shepherd reports: "Power evangelism has affected established denominations." He goes on to report that "Vinson Synan calculated that the emerging Third Wave churches would be average Baptist, Methodist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Lutheran congregations which would be open to experiencing manifestations of healing, tongues, prophecy, and other gifts of the Spirit."¹³

¹¹ John Wimber and Kevin Springer. *Power Evangelism*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1992, 78.

¹² Sarles, Ken L. (1988, Ja-Mr). *An Appraisal of The Signs and Wonders Movement*. Bibliotheca, v.145, (Ja-Mr 1988), p.57.

¹³ Shepherd, D.H. *A Critical Analysis Of "Power Evangelism" As an Evangelistic Methodology of The Signs And Wonders Movement*. Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary. Dissertation Abstract: UMI Dissertation Services, 1991, 31-32.

World View

The “signs and wonders” movement defends itself by holding that most scholarly criticism fails in its ability to grasp the workings of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, its critics cannot understand what the Scriptures actually say about it. Wimber gives this understanding of the Western worldview as an explanation: There are at least four characteristics that inhibit our ability to practice power evangelism (being led by the Spirit instead of programming or rationalism): 1) Secularism – The assumption of secular minds is that we live in a material universe closed off from divine intervention, in which truth is arrived at only through empirical means and rational thought. 2) Self-reliance: Human’s desire to control everything – people, things, events, and even future events. This in turn produces a sense of autonomy where people believe they had little need for help from anything outside themselves. 3) Materialism – it assumes that nothing exists except matter and its movement and modifications. – That is only what can be seen, tested and proved is real. 4) Rationalism – Seeking a rational explanation for all experience, making human reasoning the main guiding force for all things in life. – Rationalism accepts reason as the only, and the highest authority in life.¹⁴

For most Westerners, the underlying premise is: If it doesn’t fit into my paradigm, it can’t be from God. One of the critics of Wimber’s works states,

“The Third Wave’s arguments on cessation and spiritual gifts are much more persuasive. Here power evangelism can offer solid biblically based theological approaches. The problem is that the constant references to personal miraculous experiences dilute the credibility of the writers. Doubtless, the perspective of this movement on the nature of spiritual gifts is one of its foundational theological

¹⁴ John Wimber. *Power Evangelism*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1992, 139-40.

pillars and could be studied with great benefit by other evangelicals, if some of the more bizarre experiential aspects were eliminated.”¹⁵

In other words, it’s as if they are saying, “if you take out your personal experience, I might be able to believe you.” Yet, according to the proponents of the “signs and wonders” movement, one must first start with the experience in order to understand the Scriptural foundation.¹⁶ What this shows is that it is very difficult for Westerners to let go of their worldview long enough to understand another view.

That he constantly faced an audience who could not understand his ministry vision, was a frequent challenge to Wimber. Not the least of which was to get people who so heavily relied on their own Western worldview to understand.

“...in front of a group of academics who were frantically writing notes on how they could heal, he said, ‘You don’t get it do you?’ Looking down he saw some kids and called them out to him. There he saw some kids and called them out to him. There was a crippled man there also and he said to the kids, “you pray for him!” They said: ‘Pray for him? What do we say?’ John told them: ‘Just ask Jesus to do what you think needs to be done.’ So the little boys said, ‘Jesus, heal this man’s legs’, or something like that, and the man was healed right there! God taught, with that single event, something that would have taken years for the academics to understand with all their wisdom and scholarship. The ministry of the Holy Spirit is for anyone, any Christian who is willing to take the risk and put their hand to whatever they sense Jesus is doing.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Shepherd, D.H. *A Critical Analysis Of “Power Evangelism” As An Evangelistic Methodology Of The Signs And Wonders Movement*. Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary. Dissertation Abstract: UMI Dissertation Services, 1991, 95.

¹⁶ Goldingay, J. Goldingay, J. (Ed.). *Signs, Wonders And Healing*. Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1989, 182.

¹⁷ Pytches, D. (Ed.). *John Wimber: His Influence And Legacy*. Guildford, Surrey, England; Eagle, 1998. Carol Wimber, *A Wife’s Tribute*, 301.

“In Ephesians [4:] 11-12 we read, ‘He gave some as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, for the equipping {*not for the stars on stage but ...*}[sic] the believers.’ The equipping of the saints means the equipping of believers. John’s delight was to see us all doing what God had called us to do. We all had a part to play in the ministry of the Holy Spirit – a ministry that for years, it seemed, had been reserved for the special Holy Men. (C. Wimber 302)

Conclusion

On a personal note, in reading about John Wimber’s legacy, I was struck at just how much influence his ministry and works have had on my present church (Vineyard affiliated), my life and my ministry.

I can honestly say that my first church, whose emphasis was on solid teaching of the word, gave me an excellent foundation as a new believer. – They were gifted at teaching individuals to make sure that everything they do and accept is grounded in the Scriptures. I was taught, without even understanding it, that “those people” are false teachers who are totally operating out of “their own flesh.” Consequently, I became very judgmental and fearful of Charismatic Christians and churches.

However, after four years, the lack of intimacy with my congregation and a perception that I was not needed or welcome because I did not “fit their mold” made me so uncomfortable, that I found myself not wanting to go to church. I knew that would eventually drive a wedge between God and me. So I left that church four years ago, and wound up where I am now. I can truly say that I have grown in my ability to have intimacy with God and the Body of Christ. I am also finding it much easier to see how the Spirit of God moves in this present world. This has certainly enhanced my own spiritual growth as well as my ministry. Yet, I still often find myself asking of anything presented to me, “Yes, but is it biblical?”

I mentioned on my first day in class that I am here at Fuller, and in this class, to let God show me what he is doing in our day, because he wants me to communicate this to average people. Increasingly, what I am seeing is that the different denominations, churches, and individuals within the Body of Christ are all gifted in different ways, but weak in others. Consequently, we (including the Vineyard Movement) are all “different members of the body.” “For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly...” (Rom 12:4-6). Unlike in decades past, people, churches and denominations are increasingly crossing diving walls to learn from each other. As each of the different members of the Body of Christ are getting stronger and maturing, they are learning to help each other instead of fight against each other.

So, the question remains: “Was John Wimber a modern-day apostle, or a contemporary heretic? Reviewing his legacy brings me to two scriptural references: When John the Baptist questioned Jesus’ authenticity, he replied: “Go and report to John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the gospel preached to them.” (Luke 7:22) Also, Jesus’ words, “So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit...So then, you will know them by their fruits” (Matt 7:17,20). John Wimber had a powerful affect on the Body of Christ – bringing greater intimacy, lead multitudes to Christ, healed many, planted many churches, brought unity among denominations, equipped the saints, and left a fruitful worship music ministry.

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