

THE MIRACLE CHASERS

Inside the Movement Reshaping Christianity



Rich Abbott

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DEDICATION

*To those who struggle, who are concerned,
and who are too young in the faith to know
what is true.*

You are not alone.

Acknowledgements

To Melody, my wife and editorial partner, whose red pen, honest instincts, and willingness to ask the hard questions have made every page better. This book would not exist without her.

To the teachers at Full Gospel Bible Institute and Briercreech Bible College who modeled the pursuit of truth and taught me that hermeneutics is not a cage but a compass.

To everyone who sat across from me over the years — in churches, in living rooms, in difficult conversations — and asked questions they were afraid to ask out loud. This book is the long answer.

Introduction

I Was One of Them

I already wrote this book. At least I thought I did.

I started writing it in the fall of 1993 while attending Briercrest Bible College in Saskatchewan, still close enough to four years inside the movement to feel the heat of it. I compiled it more solidly by 1995. Then I kept editing.

When Melody and I married she took a red pen to it — grammar, clarity, structure — and handed it back. I rewrote. She edited again. This went on for years. She will tell you my grammar was bad. She is not wrong.

We finally published it in 2013. A few copies sold. Most people who heard about it reacted before they read it. I can't entirely blame them. I was angry, and it showed.

Here is what thirty three years of writing, editing, and living taught me that four years inside the movement could not: being right about some things does not mean you are right about everything. I left the movement convinced that tongues had ceased with the closing of the biblical canon. I held that position for years. Then I kept reading, kept thinking, kept watching — and concluded that

the cessationist argument has its own problems. The gift may still be real. What passes for it in most churches today is another question entirely.

That is a harder thing to say than what I wrote in 1995. It is also more honest.

I am not writing this book to win an argument. I have a theology degree — and there is an old joke among those who went further that BA stands for Begin Again.

I have met plenty of Masters degree or Doctorate holders who simply learned to regurgitate their professors with more sophistication. What actually teaches you is time. Experience. Observation. Being wrong and admitting it. Being right and staying humble enough to keep asking questions.

I am in my mid-sixties now. The movement I spent four years inside has not shrunk — it has exploded. Bethel Church in Redding, California. The International House of Prayer. The New Apostolic Reformation. The Asbury Revival. Names and places that mean nothing to many churchgoers, yet they are reshaping Christianity in ways that will outlast all of us. The curious evangelical sitting in a traditional church, watching friends and family get swept up in something they don't quite understand, deserves an honest guide — not a prosecution, not a celebration, but a fair-minded look at what is actually happening and what the Bible actually says.

That is what I have tried to write this time.

I have been inside this movement. I have studied against it. I have softened some conclusions and held others firm. I have watched it up close for thirty three years. I still do not have tidy answers to every question. But I have things to say, and time is not unlimited.

So here we go. Again.

—*Rich Abbott*
Manitoba, Canada

Chapter One

Something Is Happening

She had been in the same Baptist church for thirty years. She knew the hymns by heart, served on the hospitality committee, and had never once questioned whether God was at work in her congregation. Then her daughter came home from a weekend retreat glowing in a way her mother had never seen before, speaking of an encounter with the Holy Spirit that left her weeping on a gymnasium floor for reasons she could not fully explain.

Her daughter was not troubled by the experience. She was transformed by it. She signed up for a ministry school six states away. She started talking about healing, about prophecy, about the presence of God moving in ways that no church bulletin could schedule. Her mother listened, said little, and quietly began to wonder whether she had

missed something in thirty years of faithful Sundays.

That mother is not one person. She is thousands of people sitting in pews from Saskatchewan to South Carolina, watching someone they love get swept into something they cannot name and do not fully understand. They are not hostile. They are not dismissive. They are simply trying to figure out what is happening — and whether it is from God.

This book is for her. And for the daughter too, if she is willing to read it.

Something is happening in Christianity. Not quietly, not in corners, and not in ways that can be easily ignored. The movement centered on miraculous signs, direct encounters with God, supernatural healing, and the ongoing gifts of the Holy Spirit has become one of the most significant forces reshaping the Christian landscape in the world today. It is not new — its roots stretch back more than a century — but its current form is

more visible, more culturally embedded, and more theologically influential than at any previous point in modern history.

For millions of Christians in traditional evangelical, Reformed, Baptist, Anglican, and mainline Protestant churches, this movement feels like something happening at a distance. They hear the music coming from the newer church down the highway. They notice the friend who changed churches and seems different since. They see the conference posters, the worship albums, the online streaming services with hundreds of thousands of followers. They watch the social media clips of people falling to the floor, of claimed healings announced from stages, of prophetic words delivered with extraordinary confidence. They watch and they wonder.

They wonder, quite reasonably, what exactly they are looking at.

In February 2023, something happened in a small Kentucky town that made it

impossible for anyone paying attention to Christianity to ignore this movement any longer.

Asbury University is a small Christian liberal arts school in Wilmore, Kentucky — a town so small it has two traffic lights. On February 8, a routine Wednesday chapel service ended and a handful of students simply did not leave. They stayed to worship. An hour passed. Then another. Word spread across campus and students began returning. By the next morning, Hughes Auditorium was full and the singing had not stopped.

It did not stop for sixteen days.

What became known as the Asbury Revival drew visitors from more than 260 colleges and universities. On some days an estimated fifteen thousand people crowded into a town whose permanent population is a few thousand souls. Lines of cars backed up for miles. People flew in from other countries. By the time the gathering concluded,

somewhere between fifty thousand and seventy thousand visitors had made the pilgrimage to Wilmore. The hashtag #asburyrevival reached sixty-three million views on TikTok. The Washington Post, the BBC, and major television networks covered it. Asbury University's enrollment rose twenty-five percent the following year — its largest incoming class in a quarter century.

What made the Asbury Revival significant was not just its size. It was its character. There were no celebrity speakers booked, no production team, no advance publicity. Students described an atmosphere of unusual quiet, deep confession of sin, and sustained worship that felt qualitatively different from anything organized or manufactured. Critics asked whether it would produce lasting fruit. Defenders said something genuine had occurred. Both sides agreed it was unusual.

Asbury is not a charismatic school. It is Wesleyan-Methodist in tradition —

theologically careful, historically grounded. That made the revival harder to categorize and easier for a broader range of Christians to take seriously. Even those most skeptical of signs-and-wonders Christianity had to sit with the images coming out of Wilmore and ask an honest question: what was that?

While Asbury caught the world's attention for sixteen days, another institution has been quietly reshaping global Christianity for decades from an unlikely location.

Bethel Church sits on a hill above Redding, California — a mid-sized city in the northern Sacramento Valley more known for its heat than its spiritual significance. Founded in 1952 as a small Assemblies of God congregation, Bethel broke from its denominational roots in 2006 and has since grown into something with no precise parallel in modern Christian history.

Today Bethel is a congregation of over eleven thousand members with a sixty-million-

dollar annual operating budget. Its worship music collective, Bethel Music, reaches more than two million monthly listeners and has placed albums at the top of the iTunes Christian charts above artists like Hillsong. Its online streaming platform reaches over four hundred thousand international users. Its weekly podcast draws twenty million downloads a year. Its leaders speak at conferences on every continent.

But the most remarkable element of the Bethel phenomenon is its school. The Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry — BSSM — was founded in 1998 with thirty-seven students. Today it enrolls more than two thousand students annually from sixty-four countries. The school trains what it calls revivalists: men and women equipped to heal the sick, deliver prophetic words, cast out demons, and carry what Bethel calls a revival culture into every sphere of society. Students have come from England, Nigeria, South Korea, Brazil, Australia, and dozens of other

nations, spending one to three years in Redding before returning home changed — and spreading Bethel's theological DNA to churches around the world.

The school has been called, not entirely without affection, Christian Hogwarts. Students practice what Bethel calls treasure hunts — going into shopping malls and public spaces looking for strangers who match descriptions they believe God has given them, then offering prayer and prophetic words. Healing rooms operate on campus where people come seeking miraculous cures. The theological framework undergirding all of it is a conviction that the age of miracles has not ended, that heaven can literally invade earth, and that Spirit-filled believers carry the authority to demonstrate that invasion through signs and wonders.

Bethel's influence extends well beyond its campus. Its mayor, Jack Munns, is connected to the church. Bethel has donated millions to the city's police force, taken over

management of the civic auditorium, helped secure an international flight route, and launched a campus expansion that will triple its capacity. Some residents celebrate this as transformation. Others — including a local watchdog group that hands out stickers reading Don't Drink the Kool-Aid — find it troubling. Either way, the reach of one church into every layer of a city's life is difficult to dismiss as a fringe phenomenon.

Bethel is not alone. It is one visible peak of a much larger mountain range.

The International House of Prayer, founded by Mike Bickle in Kansas City in 1999, operates around-the-clock worship and intercession and has trained thousands of young people in what it calls a forerunner calling — preparing the way for what IHOP believes will be the greatest spiritual awakening in human history preceding the return of Christ. IHOP has faced significant controversy in recent years, including serious allegations against its founder that led to

Bickle's removal from leadership in 2023. The allegations have raised difficult questions about accountability in movements built around prophetic leadership. But IHOP's influence on an entire generation of young, passionate Christians who gave years of their lives to night-and-day worship cannot be measured simply by its founder's failures.

Then there is the New Apostolic Reformation — the NAR. Less a formal organization than a theological framework, the NAR holds that God is restoring the offices of apostle and prophet to the church in preparation for a final great harvest. Its adherents believe that Spirit-appointed apostles and prophets hold governing authority in the body of Christ and that the church is called to take dominion over what they call the seven mountains of culture: government, media, business, education, arts, family, and religion. The NAR's influence is woven through dozens of networks, conferences, and ministries across North

America and the Global South. Its theology has shaped political movements, informed worship culture, and quietly become the operating system of thousands of churches whose congregations have never heard the term New Apostolic Reformation and would not recognize themselves in it.

Sean Feucht — a former Bethel worship leader and one-time congressional candidate — has held outdoor worship events across America since 2020, drawing tens of thousands to parks, city squares, and capitol buildings in what he frames as spiritual warfare over the soul of the nation. His events look like revival. They sound like revival. Whether they constitute revival in any theologically meaningful sense is a question this book will return to.

Zooming out from individual organizations, the scale of what we are discussing becomes genuinely staggering. The Pew Research Center has estimated that there are somewhere between five hundred million

and six hundred million Pentecostal and charismatic Christians in the world today. That is roughly a quarter of the global Christian population, making this movement the fastest-growing expression of Christianity on earth by a considerable margin. In sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia, it is not the exception but the norm. In many parts of the Global South, to be Christian is effectively to be charismatic.

In North America the picture is more complex. Traditional denominations have been declining for decades. Meanwhile, independent charismatic and Pentecostal congregations have been among the most resilient and in many cases the most rapidly growing. The worship music that fills most evangelical churches on any given Sunday — including many that would firmly resist the charismatic label — was written and produced by Bethel, Hillsong, Elevation, and other ministries embedded in the signs-and-wonders world. The theological influence travels

further than the theology. Millions of Christians sing Bethel songs every week without knowing who wrote them or what the writers believe.

I have been watching this movement for most of my adult life. Not from a distance, and not merely as a scholar. I spent four years inside a Pentecostal community in the early years of my faith — years that shaped me, confused me, and ultimately drove me back to the Scriptures with a determination to understand what I had experienced. I left. I wrote about it. I thought I had settled the question.

I had not. thirty three years of continued reading, watching, and honest reckoning have taught me that the questions this movement raises are not as simple as I once believed, and that dismissing it wholesale does a disservice both to the sincere faith of the people within it and to the genuine complexity of what Scripture actually teaches about the Holy Spirit and his gifts. That is not a charismatic

conclusion. But it is a more honest one than I was capable of reaching in 1993.

The movement has also grown enormously more complex since then. The Pentecostalism I encountered in the early nineties was theologically straightforward by comparison to the layered, globally networked, culturally sophisticated landscape that exists today. Bethel did not exist in its current form. The NAR was not yet named. IHOP had not been founded. Asbury's revival was thirty years in the past. The questions ordinary Christians are asking today — about their daughter who just enrolled in a ministry school, about the worship music their church started using, about the pastor who began talking about apostles and prophets — deserve answers that are both biblically grounded and honest about the full complexity of what we are dealing with.

This book is an attempt to provide those answers. Not to prosecute the movement, and not to celebrate it. To understand it — fairly,

carefully, and with enough honesty to say both what it gets right and where it goes wrong.

That is a harder task than writing a polemic. It requires taking seriously the genuine hunger for God that drives millions of people into these churches, these schools, and these experiences. It requires asking whether that hunger is being fed something real, something counterfeit, or — as I now believe in many cases — something that is a mixture of both in proportions that vary from church to church, leader to leader, and moment to moment.

It requires, above all, going back to the Scriptures with fresh eyes and the courage to let them say what they actually say rather than what we have already decided we want them to say.

Before we can examine what the movement teaches and whether it holds up, we need to understand why it draws people in with such extraordinary power. What is it that

a tired evangelical in a traditional church finds in a signs-and-wonders community that she could not find where she was? What is the Miracle Chasers movement actually offering — and why is the offer so difficult to refuse?

That is the question of Chapter Two.

Chapter Two

The Seeking Heart

Before we can ask whether the Miracle Chasers movement is right or wrong, we need to ask a more honest question: why does it work?

Because it does work. Not in every case, and not without cost, and not always in ways that hold up under scrutiny. But millions of sincere, intelligent, spiritually earnest people have walked through the doors of signs-and-wonders churches and found something there that changed the direction of their lives. To dismiss that as mass delusion, emotional manipulation, or theological error — without first trying to understand it — is neither fair nor useful. It is also, frankly, the kind of response that guarantees nobody inside the movement will listen to anything else you have to say.

The seeking heart is real. The hunger that drives people toward these communities is legitimate. Understanding what that hunger is and where it comes from is the first step toward understanding anything else in this book.

There is a question that haunts a significant portion of the Christian church in the Western world, and most congregations are not equipped to answer it. The question is simply this: is that all there is?

The person asking it is not a skeptic. They are not a doubter in the usual sense. They believe the gospel. They read their Bible. They attend Sunday services faithfully and sit through sermons that are doctrinally sound and personally forgettable. They sing the same songs in the same order each week. They shake the same hands in the lobby. They go home largely unchanged, return the following Sunday, and repeat the cycle for years. Decades. A lifetime.

They are not necessarily unhappy. But somewhere beneath the routine a quiet question persists. The God described in the pages of Scripture — the God who parted seas and spoke from burning bushes, who raised the dead and healed the blind, who descended on Pentecost like fire and wind — that God seems to operate at a considerable distance from the Tuesday afternoon they are actually living. The sermons explain what God did. The worship songs describe who God is. But the felt presence of God — the sense that he is actually here, actually moving, actually doing something — seems reserved for the pages of a book rather than the hours of an ordinary week.

That gap — between the God described in Scripture and the God experienced in daily life — is the open door through which the Miracle Chasers movement walks. And it walks through with an answer so simple and so appealing that it is almost irresistible: the gap is not supposed to be there. God is just as

present, just as active, just as willing to heal and speak and intervene today as he was in the pages of Acts. The reason you have not experienced him that way is not his distance. It is yours. Come to where the Spirit is moving. Come and see.

To understand the appeal of these communities, it helps to look honestly at what they offer that many traditional churches do not.

The first and perhaps most powerful thing is expectation. When you walk into a Bethel-influenced church or a signs-and-wonders community, something is different in the room before a word is spoken. The expectation that God is about to do something — heal someone, speak through someone, move in ways that defy ordinary explanation — is palpable. It is built into the culture, the music, the body language of the people around you. Whether or not anything miraculous actually happens, the atmosphere of expectation itself is intoxicating to someone

who has spent years in a church where the most expected thing is that the service will end by noon.

The second thing is belonging. These communities are extraordinarily good at making new people feel immediately and genuinely welcomed. The warmth is not incidental — it is intentional and often intensive. In charismatic and Pentecostal circles this pattern is so consistent and so documented that researchers have a term for its most concentrated form: love bombing. A new member is surrounded with attention, affirmation, and inclusion so complete and so rapid that the emotional effect can be overwhelming — particularly for someone who arrives already wounded, already lonely, already hungry for a community that sees them.

The third thing is experience. The Western evangelical tradition has, for good reasons rooted in its history, placed a high premium on correct doctrine and a

corresponding suspicion of experience as a guide to truth. That suspicion is not wrong — experience is an unreliable guide and has led many people badly astray. But the correction can become its own problem. A Christianity that is entirely in the head, that processes the gospel as a set of propositions to be correctly understood rather than a living relationship to be genuinely encountered, leaves a hunger in the human heart that orthodoxy alone cannot feed. The Miracle Chasers movement feeds that hunger directly and unapologetically. It offers tears, physical sensation, the overwhelming sense of being in the presence of something far larger than yourself. It offers, in short, an experience of God rather than merely an education about him.

Whether those experiences are always what they appear to be is a question this book will return to at length. But the hunger they feed is real, and it would be both arrogant and dishonest to pretend otherwise.

There is one more thing these communities offer that deserves careful attention, because it is perhaps the most significant factor in understanding how people enter them — and why they stay even when doubts begin to surface.

They offer acceptance at the moment of greatest need.

The research on entry into high-control religious groups — and some, though not all, communities in the Miracle Chasers world qualify as high-control — consistently shows that people rarely enter through the door of intellectual curiosity. They enter through the door of pain. A marriage ends. A diagnosis arrives. A friendship shatters. A church community that was supposed to be family turns cold or cruel or simply indifferent. A person finds themselves suddenly without the support structures they had built their life around, spiritually disoriented and emotionally raw, and in that moment a community appears that is warm and welcoming and absolutely

certain that God has a word for them, a plan for them, a healing for them.

That is not a minor comfort. That is the difference between drowning and being pulled to shore.

I know this from the inside. I am not speaking theoretically.

Before I encountered the Pentecostal community that would occupy four years of my life, I had spent time in a controlling religious group that I had trusted completely. When I discovered that what I had been taught was built on a foundation of falsehood, the disillusionment was not merely intellectual. It was total. Everything I had believed, every relationship I had formed within that community, every framework I had used to make sense of my faith — all of it was suddenly in question. When I tried to leave quietly I was not wished well. I was shunned. I had my membership effectively forced from me. I was excluded from people I had

considered family. I left carrying a confusion about doctrine that I did not have the tools to resolve, and a wound that went far deeper than theology.

Into that open wound came a community that offered exactly what I needed most. Acceptance without interrogation. Friendship without condition. Prayer that felt like someone actually believed God was listening. Fellowship in the most literal sense — people who sat with me, sang with me, laid hands on me and asked God to heal what was broken. After what I had experienced, the warmth of that welcome was not something I was capable of being cautious about. It felt like grace. In some ways, it was grace. The people who welcomed me were, for the most part, genuine in their care. Their theology was mistaken in ways I would only come to understand later. Their love was real.

This is the complexity that polemics against the Miracle Chasers movement almost always miss. The entry experience is

frequently genuine. The community is frequently loving. The hunger being fed is frequently legitimate. What is being fed to that hunger — the doctrines being absorbed in the atmosphere of belonging, the experiences being interpreted through a particular theological filter, the authority being granted to leaders who may not deserve it — those are the questions that take longer to see clearly. By the time you can see them clearly, you are already embedded.

It is worth pausing here to say something plainly about the people who are drawn into these communities, because the stereotype is both common and wrong.

The Miracle Chasers are not, as a rule, weak-minded, gullible, or poorly educated. They are not people who have failed to think carefully about their faith. Researchers who have studied entry into charismatic and high-control religious movements consistently find that the people most susceptible to their

appeal are often among the most spiritually serious — people who want more from their faith, not less. People who find the comfortable, low-demand Christianity of the suburban megachurch insufficient. People who have read enough of the New Testament to suspect that what they see in their church on Sunday morning bears little resemblance to what they read in the book of Acts.

They are also, very often, people who have been hurt. Not always dramatically, not always by anything that would make headlines — but hurt in the quiet ways that religious communities can inflict damage without ever intending to. The pastor who was too busy. The small group that did not show up. The prayer request that went unanswered. The grief that was met with a Bible verse and a casserole rather than with genuine presence. These are not catastrophic failures, but they accumulate. And a person carrying that accumulated disappointment who walks into a community where the worship is electric and a

stranger lays a hand on their shoulder and says God told me you needed to hear this — that person is not being foolish. They are being human.

Understanding that is not the same as endorsing everything that follows from it. But it is the necessary foundation for any honest evaluation of what this movement is and why it matters.

Underneath all of it — the hunger, the belonging, the experience, the door of pain — there is a theological question that the Miracle Chasers movement is asking that deserves a real answer rather than a dismissal.

The question is this: does God still act? Does he still heal, still speak, still intervene in the physical world in ways that cannot be explained by the ordinary operations of cause and effect? Is the Christianity of the New Testament — with its healings and prophecies and dramatic encounters with the living God — something that happened in a unique

founding era and then stopped? Or is it the normative pattern of Christian life in every generation, accessible to every believer who has the faith and the expectation to receive it?

That is not a trivial question. It is one of the most important questions in the contemporary church, and the traditional evangelical answer — a version of cessationism that says the miraculous gifts ended with the apostolic age — has not always been argued carefully enough to be convincing, especially to a generation that finds the argument suspiciously convenient. If God stopped doing miracles precisely when the canon was closed and we were left with only a book and our reason, one might be forgiven for wondering whether the argument was constructed to justify an experience of God that was already impoverished, rather than to faithfully interpret the Scripture.

That was, in fact, my own eventual conclusion about cessationism — and I say this as someone who held that position for years

after leaving the Pentecostal movement. The case that the miraculous gifts ceased when the perfect canon of Scripture was completed rests on an interpretation of 1 Corinthians 13:10 — when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away — that is exegetically very difficult to sustain. The word translated perfect almost certainly refers to the return of Christ and the fullness of the kingdom, not the completion of the New Testament. The argument was always more convenient than convincing.

But concluding that the gifts did not cease is not the same as concluding that everything practiced under the banner of the gifts is therefore legitimate. That is the leap the Miracle Chasers movement tends to make, and it is a leap this book intends to examine carefully.

The hungry heart asking whether God still acts is asking a good question. It deserves a better answer than cessationism offers. It

also deserves a more honest answer than the signs-and-wonders world typically provides.

That honest answer begins with going back to what the Scripture actually says — not with the filter of either tradition already in place, but with genuine openness to what the text teaches and genuine willingness to follow it wherever it leads.

Before we go there, however, we need to know who we are actually talking about. The Miracle Chasers world is not monolithic. It is a landscape of streams and tributaries, of organizations and networks and movements within movements, each with its own emphases and its own dangers. Chapter Three is a map of that territory — a guide for the curious evangelical who wants to understand what they are actually looking at when they look at the world reshaping Christianity around them.

Chapter Three

A Map of the Territory

One of the reasons the Miracle Chasers world is so difficult for outsiders to evaluate is that it is not one thing. It is a landscape — a range of overlapping movements, networks, churches, and organizations that share broad family resemblances without sharing identical theology, structure, or practice. To say someone attends a signs-and-wonders church tells you something, but not enough. It is a bit like saying someone is Protestant. The word covers territory that stretches from a quiet Anglican morning prayer service to a tent revival in rural Alabama, and most of what matters lies in the specific details rather than the general category.

The curious evangelical trying to understand what their friend or family member has gotten into — or the ordinary churchgoer trying to make sense of what they

keep seeing online and on Christian television — deserves a clear map. This chapter provides one. It is not exhaustive. The landscape is too large and too fluid for any single chapter to cover completely. But it identifies the major streams, names the key players, and explains what each one believes and practices with enough clarity to orient anyone who arrives at this territory without a guide.

The map has five major regions: the Classical Pentecostal tradition, the Charismatic Renewal, Bethel and the signs-and-wonders megachurch world, the New Apostolic Reformation, and Hillsong and the global worship culture movement. Each has its own character, its own strengths, and its own problems. They overlap at the edges and influence one another constantly. Understanding them separately is the first step to understanding them together.

The oldest stream in this landscape is Classical Pentecostalism, and it is worth beginning here because everything else is, in

some sense, a response to it or a development from it.

Classical Pentecostalism traces its modern origins to the Azusa Street Revival of 1906 in Los Angeles, where a Black Holiness preacher named William J. Seymour led meetings that drew crowds of all races at a time when that alone was extraordinary. The central conviction that emerged from Azusa Street — and that has defined Pentecostalism ever since — is that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is a distinct experience subsequent to salvation, and that speaking in tongues is the initial physical evidence that this baptism has occurred.

That conviction became the theological foundation of denominations that now include the Assemblies of God, the Church of God in Christ, the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, and dozens of others. These are not fringe organizations. The Assemblies of God alone claims more than sixty-seven million adherents worldwide, making it one of the largest

Protestant denominations on earth. Classical Pentecostalism is the mother tradition of virtually everything else on this map.

For most of its history, Classical Pentecostalism was a working-class, often minority, movement — theologically conservative, socially marginal, and largely ignored by the broader Christian world. That began to change dramatically in the 1960s with what became known as the Charismatic Renewal.

In 1960, an Episcopal priest named Dennis Bennett announced to his California congregation that he had spoken in tongues. The reaction was immediate and divisive — he resigned under pressure — but the story made national news and sparked a conversation that had not previously been possible in mainstream Protestant and Catholic circles. For the first time, the experience of speaking in tongues was being claimed not by working-class Pentecostals on the margins of

respectable Christianity but by Episcopal priests, Presbyterian ministers, and eventually Catholic priests and laypeople in parishes across North America and Europe.

This movement became known as the Charismatic Renewal. Its distinctive mark was that it did not ask its participants to leave their existing denominations. You could be a Catholic charismatic, a Lutheran charismatic, a Baptist charismatic. The gifts of the Spirit — tongues, prophecy, healing, words of knowledge — were now available inside the established church, not only in Pentecostal congregations on the other side of town. By the 1970s the Charismatic Renewal had touched virtually every major Christian denomination in the Western world and had begun spreading rapidly into the Global South.

The Charismatic Renewal is the reason that signs-and-wonders Christianity is no longer a Pentecostal phenomenon. It crossed every denominational line and deposited its theology and practice across the entire

landscape of Western Christianity. The evangelical in a Baptist church who believes God still heals today, who raises their hands during worship, who has attended a prayer meeting where someone spoke in tongues — they are the grandchildren of the Charismatic Renewal whether they know it or not.

By the 1990s a new stream was emerging that went considerably further than the Charismatic Renewal in both its theology and its practice. Its roots lay partly in what researchers call the Third Wave of the Holy Spirit — a term coined by missiologist C. Peter Wagner to describe a fresh surge of signs-and-wonders Christianity that was distinct from both Classical Pentecostalism and the Charismatic Renewal. The Third Wave produced the Toronto Blessing of 1994, the Brownsville Revival of 1995, and eventually the network of churches and ministries centered on Bethel Church in Redding, California.

Bethel, as described in Chapter One, is the most influential single congregation in this stream today. But it represents a broader world of signs-and-wonders megachurches and ministry schools that share its basic theological framework. That framework holds several convictions that distinguish it from both Classical Pentecostalism and the older Charismatic Renewal.

The first is a theology of dominion — the belief that Spirit-filled believers are called not merely to preach the gospel but to literally bring the kingdom of heaven to earth, transforming communities, cities, and eventually nations through the power of the Spirit. This is not merely metaphorical. Bethel's stated mission is to see heaven established on earth. Its ministry school trains students to heal the sick in shopping malls, to prophesy over strangers, and to take what it calls kingdom culture into every sphere of society.

The second is a very high view of personal prophetic revelation. In this world, God speaks regularly and specifically to individual believers — giving them words for strangers, revealing hidden information, directing the course of their lives and ministries through dreams, visions, and direct impressions from the Holy Spirit. This is not merely the general guidance described in traditional evangelical spirituality. It is precise, frequent, and treated as carrying significant authority.

The third is an approach to healing that goes well beyond the cautious prayers of most evangelical churches. Healing is not merely asked for — it is commanded. Death itself is considered subject to reversal through sufficient faith. In December 2019 Bethel launched a global prayer campaign seeking the resurrection of a two-year-old child, Olive Heiligenthal, after she was pronounced dead. Hundreds of thousands of people around the world joined the campaign on social media.

The child was not raised. The campaign drew both enormous sympathy for the grieving family and significant criticism from those who argued that such expectations set vulnerable people up for devastating disillusionment.

Bethel's influence has spread primarily through its music and its school. Bethel Music songs are sung in churches of virtually every theological stripe — including many that would firmly reject Bethel's theology if they encountered it directly. This is one of the most significant and least-noticed features of the current landscape: the theology travels in the music. A congregation that sings Bethel worship songs week after week is absorbing, at the level of affection and imagination rather than conscious reasoning, a particular vision of God, of the Christian life, and of what to expect from the Holy Spirit. That absorption happens whether or not the pastor has ever heard of Bill Johnson.

Overlapping with the Bethel world — and in some cases deeply intertwined with it

— is a movement that deserves its own careful treatment because it is both more theologically radical and more politically significant than most Christians realize.

The New Apostolic Reformation, or NAR, is not a denomination and has no formal membership rolls. It is better understood as a theological framework and a network of relationships centered on two convictions: first, that God is restoring the offices of apostle and prophet to the church in these last days; and second, that these restored apostles and prophets are called to lead the church in taking dominion over what the movement calls the seven mountains of culture — government, media, business, education, arts and entertainment, religion, and family.

The term New Apostolic Reformation was coined by C. Peter Wagner, a former missionary and church growth researcher who became convinced in the 1990s that God was doing something unprecedented in the earth. Wagner claimed the NAR represented the

most significant shift in Christianity since the Protestant Reformation of 1517. He may not have been wrong about its significance, even if serious questions remain about its theology.

In the NAR model, authority flows from the top down through apostles and prophets rather than through the democratic structures of traditional church governance. Apostles are considered the highest office in the church, functioning as governing authorities whose directives carry divine weight. Prophets receive and communicate fresh revelation from God that guides the church's mission. The combination produces communities in which the word of a recognized apostle or prophet carries extraordinary authority — authority that is difficult to question without being seen as questioning God himself.

The Seven Mountain Mandate — the NAR's vision for cultural dominion — has spread far beyond the formal networks of the movement. A 2024 poll by Denison University found that forty-one percent of American

Christians expressed belief in the Seven Mountain Mandate, including many who had never heard the term and had no idea of its origins. The idea that Christians are called to take dominion over the key spheres of society has quietly become mainstream evangelical thinking in ways that would have seemed extraordinary even twenty years ago.

The NAR's entanglement with American politics has been significant and at times troubling. NAR leaders were prominent in the prayer events surrounding Donald Trump's 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns, framing his political success in explicitly prophetic and spiritual warfare terms. Paula White-Cain, one of Trump's most prominent spiritual advisors, operates within NAR networks. House Speaker Mike Johnson has been connected to NAR-aligned figures and theology. The line between spiritual authority and political influence is, in parts of this world, essentially invisible.

It is important to note here what the NAR is and is not. It is not a monolithic conspiracy, and most of the Christians influenced by its ideas have no awareness of its history or its most radical claims. Many pastors who believe in modern apostles and prophets and preach the importance of taking mountains of culture for God would be surprised and perhaps offended to be told they are part of the New Apostolic Reformation. The ideas have spread far ahead of the name. That is precisely what makes them worth understanding.

No account of the current landscape would be complete without addressing the movement that has done more than any other to shape the sound and feel of contemporary evangelical worship worldwide — and whose spectacular collapse has raised questions that the broader Miracle Chasers world has not yet fully answered.

Hillsong Church was founded in suburban Sydney, Australia in 1983 by Brian

Houston and his wife Bobbie. For decades it grew steadily into one of the most influential Christian organizations on earth — not through theological sophistication or apostolic networks, but through music. Hillsong's worship bands produced songs that became the common language of evangelical worship globally. What a Beautiful Name, Oceans, Shout to the Lord, Mighty to Save — these songs have been sung by more Christians in more languages in more countries than almost any worship music in history.

At its peak Hillsong claimed over thirty campuses worldwide and attendance figures of approximately one hundred and fifty thousand people weekly. Its New York City campus drew lines around the block. Justin Bieber, Kevin Durant, and other celebrities attended. The church became a cultural phenomenon that transcended its Australian origins and its Pentecostal roots, attracting a generation of young Christians for whom the aesthetic of Hillsong — the production values, the lighting,

the coffee shop in the foyer, the tattooed young pastor in skinny jeans — felt like a version of Christianity that made sense in the world they actually inhabited.

Then, between 2021 and 2023, Hillsong collapsed with a speed and thoroughness that shocked even its critics. The celebrity pastor of Hillsong New York City, Carl Lentz, was fired for an extramarital affair. Brian Houston was investigated for covering up his father's sexual abuse of a minor — a charge of which he was ultimately acquitted — and stepped down as global senior pastor after an internal investigation found he had breached the church's moral code through inappropriate behavior with women. Financial scandals followed: a forensic audit commissioned after a member of the Australian parliament made public accusations of misuse of funds revealed luxury travel expenses, financial irregularities, and governance failures that made international news. Over half of Hillsong's American campuses disaffiliated. Revenue fell

by nearly twenty percent. The Sydney sanctuary, once packed to capacity, began showing up in photographs and videos noticeably half-empty.

Hillsong's collapse is not simply the story of one organization's failure. It is a case study in the structural vulnerabilities of a particular model of church — built around celebrity leadership, aesthetic appeal, and a culture of unquestioning loyalty — that the Miracle Chasers world has produced in abundance and has not yet developed adequate accountability structures to govern. The lessons of Hillsong will appear again in later chapters when we examine what the movement gets dangerously wrong.

But the music remains. Despite everything, Bethel songs and Hillsong songs and Elevation songs and Hillsong United songs continue to fill evangelical sanctuaries across the globe. The theology travels in the worship, and the worship outlasts the scandals. That is

one of the most important things to understand about this world.

Beyond these five major streams lies something even harder to map: the vast network of independent churches, house churches, apostolic networks, prayer movements, healing ministries, prophetic conferences, and online communities that constitute the majority of the Miracle Chasers world by sheer number of participants.

Most of the people in this world do not attend a Bethel-affiliated church or a Hillsong campus or an IHOP prayer center. They attend smaller, locally rooted congregations that have been influenced by one or more of these streams without being formally connected to any of them. Their pastor attended a conference where a Bethel leader spoke. Their worship team learned songs from Elevation and Jesus Culture. Their small group leader received prayer ministry at a regional prophetic gathering. Theological DNA has been transmitted through relationships,

conferences, music, books, podcasts, and YouTube channels in ways that make formal organizational mapping largely impossible.

This is the world that the curious evangelical's daughter or son has entered. It may not have a name they recognize. It may not appear on any organizational chart. But it is shaped by the same convictions, the same experiences, and the same expectations that characterize the named movements described in this chapter.

Understanding the map does not tell you everything. But it tells you enough to ask the right questions — about what this world is promising, whether those promises are grounded in Scripture, and what happens to the people when the promises do not come true in the way they were offered.

Those questions begin in the next chapter, where we turn to the most fundamental claim the Miracle Chasers world makes: that God still performs miracles today,

that healing is available to those who seek it with sufficient faith, and that the age of signs and wonders is not past but present.

It is time to examine what the movement is actually promising — and to ask, as honestly as we can, whether it delivers.

Chapter Four

The Promises Being Made

Every movement makes promises. What distinguishes the Miracle Chasers world from most of the rest of contemporary Christianity is the nature, the scope, and the confidence of the promises it makes. They are not modest promises. They are not heavily qualified promises. They are promises stated with the certainty of people who believe they are delivering a message that has been authorized by heaven itself, and they touch virtually every dimension of human longing — physical, relational, financial, spiritual, and eternal.

This chapter is an inventory. It does not yet evaluate the promises. That work begins in Part Two. Here the task is simply to listen carefully to what is actually being offered — to hear the promises as someone walking through the door of one of these communities for the first time would hear them, without the

filter of either prior commitment or prior skepticism. That is harder than it sounds. Both committed insiders and committed critics tend to hear these promises through filters thick enough to obscure what is actually being said.

I was offered all of these promises at one point in my life, in a season when I was in no condition to evaluate them carefully. I remember how they sounded. They sounded like the answer to everything.

Here is what was on offer.

The first and most fundamental promise is healing. Not the tentative, carefully hedged prayer for healing that most evangelical Christians are familiar with — not the 'if it be your will' prayer that acknowledges God's sovereignty over the outcome — but healing as a covenant right, available to every believer who approaches God with sufficient faith and correct understanding of the Scriptures.

The theological foundation for this promise is drawn primarily from Isaiah 53:5 —

'by his wounds we are healed' — and from Matthew 8:17, where Matthew applies that Isaiah passage to Jesus's healing ministry. The argument runs as follows: since physical healing was included in the atonement, it is available to every believer in precisely the same way that forgiveness of sins is available. To pray 'if it be your will' for healing is no different from praying 'if it be your will' for forgiveness — it represents a failure of faith, a misunderstanding of what Christ purchased on the cross.

In its more restrained forms this theology produces communities that pray for the sick with genuine expectation, that believe God heals today, and that celebrate reported healings as evidence of God's ongoing activity. This is not inherently problematic. The New Testament is full of healing, and any theology that has no room for God's direct intervention in the physical world has drifted far from the text.

In its more extreme forms this theology produces something considerably more troubling. Kenneth Copeland, one of the most prominent figures in the Word of Faith stream of this world, has an estimated net worth reported at hundreds of millions of dollars, travels by private jet, and teaches that believers who understand their covenant rights can command healing with the same authority with which they would command a demon to leave. Benny Hinn built a global television ministry on healing crusades where people in wheelchairs were brought to the stage and prayed over with theatrical intensity, and where the claimed healings were treated as incontrovertible evidence of divine power. Both men represent the outer edge of healing theology, but they did not create it in isolation. They built on a theological tradition that runs through the movement in diluted but recognizable form even in its most mainstream expressions.

The promise of healing carries a consequence that is rarely stated explicitly in the initial offering but becomes apparent over time: if God has promised healing to those with sufficient faith, and healing does not come, the explanation most readily available is a deficiency in the patient's faith. The person who prays for healing and remains ill has not failed to receive God's provision — they have failed to access it correctly. This is one of the cruelest features of extreme healing theology, and it is discussed at length in Chapter Five.

The second promise is tongues — not merely the historical phenomenon described in the book of Acts, but tongues as a personal prayer language available to every Spirit-filled believer, a direct line of communication between the human spirit and God that bypasses the limitations of the rational mind.

In the Classical Pentecostal tradition, speaking in tongues is understood as the initial physical evidence of Spirit baptism — the sign that the second definitive work of

grace has occurred. Without tongues, the baptism has not been received. In the broader charismatic and signs-and-wonders world the requirement has softened — some will receive tongues and some will not — but the gift is consistently presented as highly desirable, spiritually significant, and available to those who seek it earnestly.

What is actually being promised is something quite specific: an ability to pray in a language the speaker does not consciously understand, which is nonetheless a genuine language of prayer addressed to God. The apostle Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 14:2 — 'For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to people but to God. Indeed, no one understands them; they utter mysteries by the Spirit' — is taken as the primary biblical warrant for this private prayer language. The experience, it is claimed, edifies the spirit even when the mind is unfruitful, provides a channel of intercession that goes beyond what words can express, and deepens intimacy with

God in ways that ordinary prayer in one's native language cannot achieve.

I was taught to speak in tongues in the community I joined after leaving the controlling religious group that had so wounded me. The process was not particularly mysterious. I was prayed over, encouraged to open my mouth and begin speaking syllables, and assured that the Spirit would take over and complete what faith had begun. Something happened. Whether it was the Spirit or the psychology of a desperate man doing what he was told in a room full of people praying for him is a question I spent years trying to answer honestly. I have not concluded the gift is impossible. But, I have concluded that one should not seek it. It is because what I experienced I believe did not match what the New Testament describes, and I will say more about that in Chapter Six.

The third promise is prophecy — the claim that God speaks specifically, personally, and regularly to and through individual

believers in ways that carry genuine divine authority.

Prophecy in the Miracle Chasers world takes many forms. At the personal level it manifests as words of knowledge — specific information about a stranger's circumstances, health, history, or spiritual condition, received and delivered as a communication from God. At the corporate level it manifests as prophetic declarations over churches, cities, nations, and leaders — statements about what God is about to do, what he is calling his people toward, what spiritual forces are at work in particular regions or seasons.

The promise implicit in this practice is extraordinary: that the living God is sufficiently interested in the details of your individual life to communicate them to strangers in shopping malls, that he is continuously directing the course of his church through human vessels who receive and transmit his current instructions, and that access to this prophetic guidance is available

to every believer who develops sensitivity to the Spirit's voice.

The appeal of this promise is not difficult to understand. To live in a world where God is not silent but actively communicating, where his will for your life is discoverable through prayer and prophetic community, where a word delivered by a stranger at a conference might redirect the course of your entire future — this is a radically different and more immediately engaging version of the Christian life than the version offered by most traditional churches, where God's guidance is sought primarily through Scripture, prayer, and the slow counsel of trusted community.

The problems with this version of prophecy are substantial and will be examined in Chapter Seven. For now it is worth noting one pattern that recurs with striking consistency across the modern prophetic movement: specific predictions made with great confidence and attributed directly to God that simply do not come to pass. Leaders

have prophesied the outcomes of elections, the timing of revivals, the healing of named individuals, the fall of governments, and the course of world events — declarations delivered not as prayerful hopes but as thus-saith-the-Lord certainties. When those declarations prove wrong the response is rarely the one Deuteronomy 18 would require. Videos disappear. Explanations multiply. The prophet moves on to the next word. Kris Vallotton of Bethel Church was a notable exception — publicly admitting a significant prophetic failure, calling it a major mistake, and asking forgiveness from those who had trusted his word. That kind of accountability is admirable. That it was notable enough to be widely reported is itself a comment on how rare it was.

The fourth promise is direct revelation — a category broader than formal prophecy that encompasses the entire claim that God communicates personally and specifically with individual believers through dreams, visions,

inner impressions, audible voices, and supernatural signs in the physical world.

This promise is woven into the fabric of virtually everything in the Miracle Chasers world. Bethel students go on treasure hunts in public spaces because they believe God has given them specific descriptive details about people they are about to encounter. NAR apostles receive revelations about territorial spirits, end-time strategies, and the spiritual condition of nations. Ordinary believers in signs-and-wonders churches are taught to cultivate sensitivity to the Spirit's voice and to expect that God will guide them, warn them, encourage them, and direct them through direct supernatural communication on a regular, perhaps daily, basis.

The theological grounding is real — the New Testament is full of visions, dreams, and direct divine communication, and there is no compelling exegetical reason to believe that God has entirely ceased to speak to his people in these ways. The pastoral and practical

problems arise not from the premise that God can speak but from the culture that develops around the premise. When direct revelation becomes the primary mode of guidance, when the inner impression carries more immediate weight than the Scripture it may or may not be consistent with, when the community expects to hear God's voice constantly and treats silence as a spiritual deficiency — the conditions for significant error and significant harm have been established.

The fifth promise is victory in spiritual warfare — the claim that believers carry authority over demonic forces, that they can bind and loose spiritual powers, that territorial spirits can be identified and displaced through prayer and spiritual combat, and that the physical and social conditions of communities and nations can be transformed through strategic intercession and prophetic declaration.

The language of spiritual warfare is everywhere in this world. Churches wage war

against spirits of poverty, addiction, sexual immorality, and political corruption over their cities. Apostles map the demonic strongholds of regions and deploy intercessory networks to break them. Believers are taught to take authority over circumstances in Jesus's name — to speak to the storm, to command the mountain, to rebuke the spirit behind the illness, the financial crisis, the broken marriage.

There is a genuine biblical framework for spiritual warfare — Paul's language in Ephesians 6 about the armor of God and wrestling against powers and principalities is not metaphorical decoration. The question is not whether spiritual warfare is real but whether the elaborate tactical systems developed in parts of this world bear any resemblance to what Scripture actually teaches, and whether the authority being claimed by believers over demonic forces is the authority the New Testament actually

grants. Those questions belong to Chapter Nine.

Behind all five of these specific promises lies a single overarching offer that is perhaps the most powerful of all: the promise of more.

More of God. More of his presence. More of his power. More of his activity in your daily life. More experience of the supernatural. More certainty that you are living inside a story that is going somewhere, that the God of the Bible is not a historical figure but a present reality, that heaven is not merely a future destination but a dimension that can break into the present moment and change everything.

This is the promise that draws people who are not particularly interested in healing theology or prophetic culture or spiritual warfare as such — people who simply feel that what they have experienced of God so far is insufficient, that there must be more, that the Christianity they have known has been too

small, too tame, too distant from the dramatic reality described in the pages of the New Testament. The Miracle Chasers world looks at that hunger and says yes. You are right. There is more. And we know how to access it.

That yes is the most powerful word in the entire movement. Everything else is built on it. The question that the rest of this book pursues is a simple one: is the yes true?

Answering it requires going to the one source that has the authority to settle the question — not the experiences of those who report healings, not the testimony of those who speak in tongues, not the declarations of apostles and prophets, but the Scripture itself, read carefully, honestly, and in its full context. That is where Part Two begins.

Chapter Five

The Miracle Question

There is a woman somewhere reading this book — or there should be, because she is the reader I have most in mind for this chapter — who prayed for healing and did not receive it. She was told her faith was sufficient. She was prayed over by people she trusted, people who believed with great confidence that God was going to heal her. She confessed healing. She refused to speak negatively about her condition because she had been taught that words of doubt would undermine what God was trying to do. And then the diagnosis came back unchanged, or the condition worsened, or the person she loved most in the world died anyway, in spite of every prayer and every confession and every desperate act of believing faith.

What happened to her afterward is the part the movement rarely discusses in its

testimonials. She was told, gently or not so gently, that the problem lay with her. Her faith had been insufficient. She had harbored secret doubt. She had not persisted long enough. God had wanted to heal her but she had not held on to her miracle. She walked away from that community not only unhealed but carrying a burden that the theology had placed directly on her shoulders: the conclusion that her own failure of faith was the reason God had not acted.

That is the cruelest feature of extreme healing theology, and it is the place where the examination of the miracle question must begin — not because the miraculous is impossible, but because the way the promise of healing is packaged and delivered in much of the Miracle Chasers world causes specific and documented harm to real people. Before we can ask whether miracles happen, we need to ask what we are doing to people when we tell them they will happen, and what we do with them when they do not.

The question of whether God still performs miracles today is not a simple one, and anyone who tells you it is — on either side — is not dealing honestly with the evidence. The cessationist position, which holds that the miraculous gifts ceased with the death of the apostles, has been stated with great confidence for decades by serious theologians. It has also been argued for with considerably less rigor by people whose real motivation seems to be the avoidance of anything that might disturb the settled order of their theological world.

On the other side, the claim that miracles are commonplace, that healing is a covenant right available to every believer with sufficient faith, that death itself can be reversed through prayer — that position has also been stated with great confidence, and has also frequently been promoted by people whose real motivation seems to be financial, emotional, or organizational rather than purely theological.

The honest position sits somewhere between those poles, and getting there requires looking carefully at three distinct things: what the Scripture actually teaches about healing and the miraculous gifts, what the evidence from around the world actually shows, and what the specific claims of the Miracle Chasers world hold up to when examined carefully. This chapter addresses the first two. The third runs through the rest of Part Two.

The New Testament presents healing as a central feature of Jesus's ministry. The Gospels record dozens of specific healings — blindness, paralysis, leprosy, fever, hemorrhage, deafness, demonic oppression, and death itself. These are not presented as metaphors or as spiritual illustrations. They are presented as real physical events witnessed by real people in real places. Matthew's Gospel frames Jesus's healing ministry as the fulfillment of Isaiah 53:5, connecting the physical healings of Christ's

earthly ministry to his redemptive work. Jesus himself sends his disciples out with explicit instructions to heal the sick, and the book of Acts records the apostles doing precisely that.

James 5:14-16 instructs believers explicitly: 'Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up.' This is not a marginal text. It is a clear apostolic instruction that prayer for the sick is part of normal Christian community life, with an explicit expectation that God will act in response.

Paul lists gifts of healing among the spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12, alongside other gifts that the broader church has generally continued to acknowledge as operative today — teaching, giving, service, administration. The same chapter that lists healing also lists prophecy and tongues, and Paul does not introduce any distinction

between gifts that will cease and gifts that will continue. The cessationist case requires reading that distinction into the text from outside rather than finding it within it.

On the basis of the New Testament alone, then, there is a strong case that prayer for the sick with genuine expectation of God's intervention is not a relic of the apostolic age but a normative feature of Christian community in every generation. The question is not whether God can heal or whether Christians should pray for healing. The question is what healing theology should look like, what expectations are warranted, and what we do with the inevitable reality that not everyone who is prayed for is healed.

In 2011 New Testament scholar Craig Keener of Asbury Theological Seminary published a two-volume, eleven-hundred-page study titled *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*. It is the most comprehensive academic treatment of the subject in the modern era. Keener's argument

begins with David Hume, the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher whose argument against miracles — that uniform human experience makes miracles impossible — has been the intellectual backbone of skepticism about supernatural events ever since. Keener's response is simple and devastating: human experience is not uniform. Hundreds of millions of people around the world report experiences of miraculous healing, and dismissing all of them without examination is not rigorous skepticism — it is a prior philosophical commitment masquerading as evidence.

Keener's two volumes catalog healing accounts from across the globe — accounts that include multiple witnesses, medical documentation before and after, and in many cases the testimony of physicians who had no explanation for what they observed. The accounts cluster particularly in the Global South, where Christianity is growing most rapidly and where the expectation of God's

direct intervention is most culturally natural. Keener is careful not to claim certainty about every account he cites. He acknowledges the challenges of verification, the possibility of misdiagnosis, the role of psychosomatic factors in some recoveries. But his overall conclusion is careful and measured: the evidence for events that are best explained as supernatural is substantial enough that dismissing it entirely requires more faith in philosophical naturalism than the evidence actually warrants.

Keener's work is not affiliated with the Miracle Chasers world. He is a careful scholar operating within the mainstream of academic theology, and his conclusions are significantly more restrained than anything you would hear at a Bethel healing conference or a Benny Hinn crusade. But his work establishes something important for the purposes of this chapter: the question of whether God heals today is a genuine open question deserving serious examination, and the evidence is not

as one-sided as either extreme position would suggest.

The problem with the healing theology of much of the Miracle Chasers world is not that it believes in miracles. The problem is what it does with the theology of miracles, and specifically what it does with the people for whom the miracle does not come.

Bethel Church in Redding operates healing rooms where people come seeking miraculous cures. Thousands of healing testimonies are collected and celebrated. The culture of expectation is intense and sincere. When Shasta Scout, the local investigative journalism outlet in Redding, asked Bethel to provide documentation of a single medically verified miracle, the church was unable to do so. That does not prove that nothing genuine has occurred in those healing rooms. But it reveals a gap between the scale of the claims and the willingness to submit those claims to any form of external verification — a gap that ought to give any honest reader pause.

Benny Hinn has built a global ministry on healing crusades that draw hundreds of thousands of people, including a February 2024 event in Nairobi, Kenya attended by an estimated half a million people including the Kenyan president. Multiple investigative reports — by the Los Angeles Times, NBC's Dateline, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and Australia's 60 Minutes — have examined his claimed healings and found them consistently unable to withstand scrutiny. People who claimed healing at his events were later found to be no better or in some cases worse. People abandoned medical treatment on the basis of healing declarations that proved unfounded. The theatrical atmosphere of his crusades — the dramatic music, the physical contact, the crowd expectation, the emotional intensity — creates conditions in which the appearance of healing can be produced and experienced without any actual physical change occurring, and in which the social pressure to testify to healing can

override honest reporting of continued symptoms.

The word of faith stream of the movement — associated with figures like Kenneth Copeland, whose estimated net worth runs into the hundreds of millions of dollars, and whose theology teaches that believers can command healing with the authority of spoken faith — produces perhaps the most damaging version of this dynamic. When healing is not merely hoped for and prayed for but declared and commanded as a covenant right, the failure of healing becomes evidence of a covenant failure on the believer's part. The theology has no exit. If you are not healed, you have not believed correctly. The sick person becomes responsible for their own sickness, the bereaved parent responsible for their child's death, the cancer patient responsible for their tumor. This is not Christianity. It is spiritual cruelty dressed in the language of faith.

What should an honest theology of healing look like? It begins with taking seriously both the New Testament's expectation that God heals and the New Testament's equally clear record that not everyone is healed in this life. Paul prays three times for the removal of his thorn in the flesh and the answer is no — not because his faith is insufficient but because God has a different purpose for him in his weakness. Epaphroditus nearly dies. Timothy has a stomach condition Paul can only address with practical advice. The apostles who healed others were not themselves immune to illness and physical suffering.

The pattern of the New Testament is not that faith guarantees healing. It is that God heals sovereignly, sometimes dramatically and immediately, sometimes progressively, sometimes through the ordinary means of medicine and care, and sometimes not at all in this life — with the final healing of all things reserved for the resurrection. The prayer

offered in faith in James 5 is a real prayer with a genuine expectation of God's response, but it is offered by a community of elders who are not commanding healing as a covenant right — they are asking God to act, and they are trusting his sovereign answer.

A Christianity that has no room for miraculous healing has drifted from the New Testament. A Christianity that treats miraculous healing as a guaranteed entitlement of sufficient faith has done something far worse — it has turned the sovereign mercy of God into a transaction, and it has laid the weight of every unanswered prayer on the shoulders of the person who could least afford to carry it.

The miracle question deserves a better answer than either cessationism or word-of-faith theology provides. That answer is available in the Scripture, if we are willing to read it honestly and follow where it leads — even when it leads somewhere less tidy than we would prefer.

The next question in this examination is the one that has generated more heat and more confusion than perhaps any other in the history of the movement. It is time to ask, as honestly as we can, what tongues actually is — what Paul was describing, what the book of Acts records, and whether what happens in the majority of signs-and-wonders churches today bears any meaningful relationship to either.

Chapter Six

The Tongues Question

No subject in the entire Miracle Chasers conversation generates more heat or more confusion than speaking in tongues. It has divided denominations, ended friendships, sent people running from churches in embarrassment, and drawn others in with the force of revelation. It is the gift most associated with the movement, the experience most insisted upon in Classical Pentecostalism, the practice most often cited by critics as evidence that something has gone wrong, and the phenomenon most personal to those who claim to have received it.

It is also, when you sit down with the actual text of the New Testament and read carefully, considerably more complicated than either side of the argument usually acknowledges.

I once spoke in tongues. I no longer do. That is not the end of the story — it is the beginning of it. The reasons I stopped have less to do with theology and more to do with honesty: what I experienced did not match what I read in the New Testament, and I could not reconcile the two in good conscience. But I want to be careful here, because that personal conclusion does not settle the theological question. What settles the theological question is the text, read carefully and without the filter of either a prior commitment to validate the practice or a prior commitment to discredit it.

So let us read it carefully.

There are two distinct phenomena in the New Testament that go by the same name, and the failure to distinguish between them is the source of most of the confusion in this debate.

The first is what scholars call xenolalia or xenoglossia — from the Greek *xenos*, meaning foreign, and *glossa*, meaning tongue or language. This is the supernatural ability to

speaking an actual human language previously unknown to the speaker. It is what happened on the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter two, and it is described with unmistakable clarity. When the Spirit came upon the disciples, crowds of Jewish pilgrims gathered from across the known world heard them speaking in their own native languages. Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt — each heard the mighty works of God declared in the language of their birth. This was not mysterious or ambiguous. It was a reversal of Babel, a sign to unbelieving Israel, and a declaration that the gospel was for every nation. The miracle at Pentecost was not a miracle of hearing — the Greek grammar of Acts 2:6 makes clear that the disciples were speaking actual known languages, not uttering ecstatic sounds that each hearer somehow processed in their own tongue.

The second phenomenon is what scholars call glossolalia — from glossa and lalia, meaning speech. This is the ecstatic, unintelligible utterance that Paul addresses at length in 1 Corinthians 12 through 14. When Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:2 that the one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to people but to God, and that no one understands him, he is describing something categorically different from what happened at Pentecost. The crowd at Pentecost understood perfectly. The Corinthian assembly did not understand at all, which is precisely why Paul insists on the presence of an interpreter and gives extended instructions about the orderly use of the gift.

These are not the same phenomenon. Reading them as identical is the foundational error of Classical Pentecostalism's doctrine of tongues, and it has compounded every subsequent confusion. Pentecostalism read the Acts accounts as establishing a normative pattern — receive the Spirit, speak in tongues — and then mapped that pattern onto the

Corinthian practice, treating them as the same gift operating in the same way for the same purpose. But Acts tongues are recognizable human languages. Corinthian tongues require an interpreter precisely because they are not recognizable to the hearers. The purposes are different, the audiences are different, and the theological freight they carry is different.

The cessationist response to all of this has been to argue that both phenomena ceased with the close of the apostolic age, and the primary proof text for that argument is 1 Corinthians 13:10 — 'when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.' On the cessationist reading, the perfect refers to the completed New Testament canon, and the passing away of tongues and prophecy occurred when the last book of Scripture was written.

I held this position for years after leaving the Pentecostal community. I found it in books I trusted, argued for by scholars I respected, and it seemed to resolve the

problem neatly. Leave the movement, conclude the gifts have ceased, move on.

The problem is that the exegesis does not hold up, and it has been acknowledged by cessationist scholars themselves. Tom Schreiner, himself a committed cessationist, has written plainly that the arguments for cessationism from 1 Corinthians 13 are not exegetically convincing. New Testament scholar Anthony Thistleton, also a cessationist, stated that few if any serious cessationist arguments depend on a specific reading of 1 Corinthians 13:8 through 11, and that the passage should not be used as a polemic for either side. The most straightforward reading of the Greek — that when the perfect comes, we will see face to face and know fully even as we are fully known — points unmistakably to the return of Christ and the fullness of the kingdom, not to the completion of the New Testament canon.

Consider why. If the perfect refers to the completed canon, then Paul's knowledge

became complete when the last book was written. But Paul confesses in verse twelve that he currently knows only in part, and that he will one day know fully even as he has been fully known. That fullness of knowing has not arrived for any of us. None of us, holding our completed Bible, know fully as God knows us. The canon view requires us to conclude that the arrival of the New Testament produced a completeness of knowledge that Paul himself never possessed, which is self-evidently impossible. The face to face language of verse twelve — drawn from the same tradition as Moses seeing God face to face, as Jacob's wrestling match where he saw God and lived, as the great expectation of the prophets — does not describe an encounter with a text. It describes an encounter with a person, at the end of the age when all things are made new.

So the cessationist argument from 1 Corinthians 13 fails. That does not make cessationism false — serious cessationists have other arguments, rooted in the unique

function of apostolic signs and the structure of redemptive history, that deserve more careful engagement than this chapter can provide. But it does mean that the most commonly deployed argument against tongues and prophecy is not as solid as it has often been presented, and it means that the question of whether these gifts have ceased must be answered on other grounds.

My own conclusion, reached slowly and with considerable reluctance, is that the gifts have not ceased. The New Testament provides no clear evidence that God intended to withdraw the gifts he gave to the church, and the worldwide testimony of Christians across many cultures and centuries includes too many credible accounts of tongues, healing, and prophecy to be dismissed without examination. The gifts may well still be real. What I am far less confident about is whether what passes for tongues in most of the Miracle Chasers world today is the gift the New Testament describes.

Here is the honest problem. When William Samarin, a linguist from the University of Toronto, conducted a thorough five-year study of modern Pentecostal glossolalia in the early 1970s — recording samples from meetings in Italy, the Netherlands, Jamaica, Canada, and the United States — his conclusion was careful and measured. Glossolalic speech, he found, resembles human language in some respects: it uses accent, rhythm, intonation, and pauses to break the speech into what sound like distinct units. But it bears no systematic resemblance to any natural language, living or dead. It is, in his precise definition, meaningless but phonologically structured human utterance, believed by the speaker to be a real language. That assessment was published in 1972 and has not been seriously challenged since.

If the tongues at Pentecost were actual human languages, and if Samarin's assessment of modern glossolalia is accurate,

then modern glossolalia is not what happened at Pentecost. That does not automatically make it false or spiritually worthless — Paul's Corinthian letters address a form of tongues that was also apparently not immediately intelligible to hearers, and he does not condemn it but regulates it. But it does mean that the classical Pentecostal insistence that modern tongues is the same experience as Pentecost, and therefore evidence of Spirit baptism, rests on a comparison that the texts and the linguistics both struggle to support.

There is an additional problem that is more personal than academic. The way tongues is typically introduced in Pentecostal and charismatic communities — including the way it was introduced to me — involves a process of coaching, encouragement, and social expectation that can produce the experience without any supernatural cause whatsoever. You are prayed over, often by multiple people simultaneously, some speaking in their own syllables, others praying aloud in

English, hands pressed against your shoulders and head. You are told to open your mouth and begin — to trust God, to let go, to make any sound and allow the Spirit to take it from there. Some have been told to start with simple sounds, even sounds as uninhibited as an animal noise, on the assurance that God will meet them wherever they begin. You are surrounded by people expectantly interceding, creating an atmosphere of intense spiritual pressure in which remaining silent begins to feel like resistance to God himself. You are assured that the Spirit will take what you offer and complete it. Under those conditions a person in genuine spiritual need, desperate for the promised experience, will very often begin to produce syllables. Whether what follows is the Holy Spirit taking over or the human psyche doing what it has been conditioned and pressured to do is a question the atmosphere of the room makes virtually impossible to answer honestly.

I am not saying nothing supernatural can occur in such a setting. I am saying that the setting makes verification impossible and that the results are almost entirely indistinguishable from what social psychology would predict without any supernatural component at all. That ought to give serious pause to anyone committed to intellectual honesty about spiritual experience.

What then should we conclude? Several things that are worth holding together carefully rather than collapsing into a simple verdict.

First, the cessationist argument from 1 Corinthians 13 fails exegetically. The perfect is the return of Christ, not the completion of the canon. The gifts have not been proven to have ceased on that basis, and dismissing tongues and prophecy by citing that passage with confidence is not as solid a move as it has long appeared.

Second, the Pentecostal doctrine that modern glossolalia is the same phenomenon as Acts tongues, and therefore evidence of Spirit baptism, rests on a confusion of two distinct New Testament phenomena. The xenolalia of Pentecost and the glossolalia of Corinth are not the same gift operating in the same way. Mapping them onto each other has generated a century of theological confusion.

Third, what passes for tongues in most contemporary Miracle Chasers communities — coached, syllable-by-syllable, produced under social pressure and expectation, bearing no resemblance to any known human language — does not match what the New Testament describes in either Acts or Corinthians with any precision.

Fourth, none of this proves that the genuine gift of tongues is impossible or that every claimed experience of tongues is false. It means the bar for genuine discernment is higher than most communities in the movement are willing to apply, and that the

insistence on tongues as a marker of spiritual maturity or Spirit baptism has no solid New Testament foundation.

Paul himself ends his extended discussion of tongues in 1 Corinthians 14 with two sentences that the movement would do well to sit with. He says: eagerly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything must be done in a fitting and orderly way. The first sentence holds open the possibility of tongues as a genuine gift. The second sentence places that gift under the authority of discernment, order, and the edification of the community — not the subjective experience of the individual speaker, not the atmosphere of the room, and not the social pressure of a community convinced that you need this experience to be spiritually complete.

That standard has rarely been applied consistently in the century and more since Azusa Street. The examination of why — and

what the consequences have been — continues
in the chapters that follow.

Chapter Seven

The Prophecy Question

She had been told by a prophet she trusted that God was calling her to leave her job, move to a different city, and join a ministry school. The word had come during a conference, delivered with great specificity and obvious sincerity by a man with a significant following and a reputation for accuracy. The details were precise enough to feel unmistakably divine — her profession was named, her hesitation was named, and a scriptural reference was attached that seemed to confirm everything. She went home, prayed about it, felt a peace she interpreted as confirmation, and within three months had resigned her position, packed her apartment, and relocated.

The ministry school was not what had been promised. The community was not what she had hoped. Eighteen months later she

returned home without the spiritual formation she had expected, without the career she had left, and with a debt she had not anticipated. When she raised questions about the prophetic word that had sent her there, she was told that she must have misheard, or that she had not followed through with sufficient faith, or that God's timing was different from what anyone had understood. The prophet moved on to his next conference. Nobody was held accountable. Nobody even seemed to think accountability was the appropriate response.

Her story is not unique. It is not even unusual. Across the Miracle Chasers world, major life decisions — marriages, divorces, career changes, financial investments, relocations, church commitments — are regularly made on the basis of prophetic words delivered by men and women who claim to be speaking directly for God. When those words prove wrong, the architecture of the prophetic culture ensures that the weight of the failure lands almost always on the

recipient rather than the deliverer. The prophet was hearing correctly. You failed to receive correctly. This is a pastoral crisis hiding inside a theological controversy, and it deserves an honest examination.

The Old Testament standard for prophecy is not complicated. Deuteronomy 18 states it plainly. If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord and the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him.

The standard is binary and absolute. The prophet either speaks for God, in which case the prophecy comes to pass, or the prophet does not speak for God, in which case the prophet has spoken presumptuously. There is no third category for prophets who were learning, or prophets who heard correctly but the recipient failed to act in faith, or prophets whose words were conditional in ways that explain the failure. The text offers none of

those escapes. A false prophecy identifies a false prophet. Period.

The movement's standard response to this passage is that it belongs to the Old Testament economy, where prophets spoke with plenary divine authority, and that New Testament prophecy operates differently — as a fallible, community gift that must be weighed and tested rather than received as infallible divine speech. That response has genuine merit. Paul does instruct the Corinthian church that two or three prophets should speak and the others should weigh what is said. The weighing implies the possibility of error. New Testament prophecy is not identical in function or authority to Old Testament prophecy, where the prophet was the direct mouthpiece of God with no mediating human element.

But here is the problem. The movement cannot have it both ways. If New Testament prophecy is fallible and subject to communal testing, then it cannot be delivered with the

authority of thus saith the Lord. It cannot be used to direct major life decisions. It cannot carry the weight of divine command. A fallible word is a human word that may contain something from God — it is an impression, a prayer, a sense of leading — and it must be held loosely and tested carefully before anyone acts on it. The moment a prophetic word is delivered with the authority of a direct divine communication, the Old Testament standard is being implicitly claimed, and the Old Testament accountability must follow.

The Miracle Chasers world wants the authority without the accountability. It wants words delivered with divine weight but evaluated with human grace. That combination is not available in the Scripture, and the gap between what is claimed and what is practiced is precisely where the harm lives.

Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 14 are specific, practical, and almost entirely ignored in the contemporary prophetic culture. He says two or three prophets should

speak — not dozens. He says the others should weigh what is said — not receive it with open arms and grateful tears. He says if a revelation comes to another sitting there, the first prophet should be silent — the gift is under the control of the one who exercises it, not a force that overrides human agency. He says you can all prophesy one by one so that all may learn and all be encouraged — the gift is for the community's edification, not for the display of the prophet's gifting or status. And he ends with the sentence that governs everything: but everything must be done in a fitting and orderly way.

The prophetic culture of most of the Miracle Chasers world does not resemble Paul's instructions. Individual prophets speak at length to individuals with specificity that goes well beyond anything Paul describes. Prophetic words are recorded and preserved as divine documents to guide future decisions. Prophets are elevated to positions of spiritual authority that make their words functionally

immune to questioning. The community does not weigh the prophecy — they receive it, celebrate it, and build their lives around it. The testing that Paul requires has been replaced by an atmosphere of expectant reception that treats any questioning of a prophetic word as evidence of spiritual immaturity or insufficient faith.

The consequences of this culture are serious enough to warrant naming directly.

The most immediate consequence is the harm done to individuals who act on false prophetic words. Major life decisions made on prophetic authority — and then reversed by reality — produce genuine suffering. Financial loss, career disruption, relationship damage, geographic dislocation, spiritual disillusionment. The suffering is real. And because the prophetic culture assigns the weight of failure to the recipient's faith rather than the prophet's accuracy, the person who suffers the consequences also carries the shame of having failed to receive what God

was offering. That double burden is extraordinarily cruel, and it is built into the theology.

The second consequence is the use of prophetic words as instruments of control. This is not merely a risk — it is a documented pattern. When leaders are believed to have direct access to divine communication, and when that communication carries the authority to direct the lives of those in their community, the conditions for coercion and abuse are established whether or not abuse was intended. People who question a prophetic word are questioning God. People who resist the direction of an anointed prophet are resisting the Spirit. The social and spiritual cost of disagreement becomes prohibitive, and the community becomes closed to correction from outside.

Mike Bickle, the founder of the International House of Prayer in Kansas City, was one of the most influential prophetic voices in the Miracle Chasers world for

decades. In 2023 multiple women came forward with allegations of sexual abuse spanning many years. An independent investigation commissioned by IHOPKC found that he had engaged in inappropriate behavior with multiple individuals. Subsequent investigation found evidence of abuse in seventeen cases, including allegations involving minors. What made the Bickle case especially relevant to the prophetic question is what the reports describe: in multiple instances, Bickle allegedly used prophetic words — words delivered as communications from God — to groom and isolate victims, to justify inappropriate contact, and to suppress objection. One survivor reported being directed to pray a psalm of repentance by a man who told her his actions were guided by a higher power. Prophetic authority was deployed as an instrument of sexual predation.

Bickle's case is extreme. But the mechanism it illustrates — prophetic authority used to override the judgment, conscience,

and resistance of those under its influence — is not extreme. It is structural. Any system that grants a leader unaccountable access to divine speech and places that speech above the testing of the community has created the conditions for this kind of abuse, whether or not the leader intends to exploit those conditions. The abuse of prophetic authority is not a corruption of the system. In too many cases it is the system's logical endpoint.

What then should honest prophecy look like? The New Testament does not abolish the gift. Paul urges the Corinthians to eagerly desire prophecy, and he describes its proper function as strengthening, encouraging, and comforting. That is a gift worth having and worth cultivating. But the parameters Paul draws around it are not optional refinements for mature communities — they are the guardrails that prevent the gift from becoming a weapon.

Honest prophecy is held loosely by the one who delivers it. It is offered as an

impression, a sense of leading, something that might be from God — not as a thus saith the Lord that cannot be questioned. It is submitted to the community for weighing, which means the community is genuinely empowered to say that does not ring true, and that response is received without defensiveness or spiritual counter-accusation. It is never used to direct major irreversible decisions. It is never delivered privately to individuals by leaders in positions of authority over them without witnesses present. It is never treated as a substitute for the plain teaching of Scripture or the ordinary counsel of trusted community.

And when it proves wrong — as human impressions inevitably sometimes will — the one who delivered it says so honestly, without elaborate explanation, without blame-shifting to the recipient's faith, and without continuing to operate as a prophetic voice as though nothing has happened.

That standard sounds demanding. It is. The gifts of the Spirit are not toys. They are

not personal spiritual experiences to be celebrated and curated. They are given for the building up of the body of Christ, under the authority of the Scripture and the community, and they are to be exercised with the humility that befits people who know they see only in part.

Yes, it fits perfectly here — and it makes the chapter significantly stronger. What you are describing is a rare and honest confession that most critics of the prophetic movement never make: you were not just a passive recipient of questionable prophecy, you participated in delivering it. That admission disarms the defensive reader completely. You are not throwing stones from a safe distance. You were inside the room, doing what everyone else was doing, and you can describe it from the inside.

The second part — that you do believe you have genuine prophetic and teaching gifts, expressed through preaching — is theologically important. It shows your conclusion is not that prophecy is impossible

or that you have no gifting. It is that what gets called prophecy in most of these settings bears little resemblance to the genuine gift. That is a different and more credible conclusion than simple rejection.

I received prophetic words during the years I spent in the Pentecostal community. Some of them were warm and encouraging — the kind of thing that could be offered by any attentive pastor who had spent time with a person in need. Some were specific enough to feel supernatural. None of them proved accurate in the specific ways they were delivered. Looking back, I cannot say with certainty whether any of them contained something genuine from God. What I can say is that the atmosphere in which they were delivered — the expectation of divine speech, the authority of the speaker, the emotional intensity of the setting — made honest evaluation impossible at the time. I received what I was offered because I needed to be received, not because I had carefully weighed what was being said.

What I have rarely said publicly is that I also delivered prophetic words during that season. Encouraged by the community, emboldened by its culture, I began to operate as one with prophetic gifting. The method was not difficult to learn. I would observe the person, listen carefully to what they shared, take note of my

surroundings, and when boldness came I would offer something — usually framed in King James cadences and thus saith the Lord language, usually drawing encouragement from a Scripture passage that seemed to fit the moment. Feel-good words, sincerely offered and sincerely received. Looking back with honesty, I was doing what the culture trained me to do, and calling it the voice of God.

I do not say this to condemn everyone who operates similarly. Some of what I offered may have contained genuine pastoral insight. But there is a vast distance between a pastor who knows someone well, reads the room carefully, and offers timely encouragement rooted in Scripture — and a prophet who speaks with the authority of divine revelation. I had no business claiming the latter. Neither, I suspect, do most of the people who claim it today.

I will say this plainly: I do believe I carry genuine gifts of prophecy and teaching. But those gifts find their expression through careful preparation, honest engagement with the text, and effective preaching — not through impressions delivered in emotionally charged settings to strangers who have no means of evaluating what they are being offered. The gift, where it is real, works

through the Scripture and through the community's life together. It does not require the theatre.

That is not a recipe for the edification of the body. It is a recipe for the exploitation of the vulnerable. And the Scripture calls for something better.

The next chapter turns to the broader question of experience itself — the signs, the wonders, the physical manifestations, the unusual phenomena that have characterized the movement from its beginnings and that continue to draw seekers and alarm critics in equal measure. It is time to ask honestly what we make of being slain in the Spirit, of holy laughter, of gold dust falling from the air, and of the entire experiential vocabulary that the movement has developed to describe encounters with the divine.

Chapter Eight

The Experience Question

On January 20, 1994, a small Vineyard church near Toronto's Pearson International Airport held what was intended to be a routine series of meetings. Within days, something had happened that would ripple through the global church for the next three decades. People were falling to the floor. People were laughing uncontrollably — some for hours, some reportedly for days. Some were making animal noises, roaring like lions, barking, clucking. Some could not stand. Some wept without ceasing. Pastors flew in from around the world to witness and to receive what became known simply as the Toronto Blessing, and they carried it home to their congregations like a flame passed from candle to candle.

The Toronto Blessing was the modern movement's most concentrated eruption of

what it calls manifestations — unusual physical and emotional phenomena attributed to the direct action of the Holy Spirit. But the phenomena were not new in 1994, and they have not stopped since. Being slain in the Spirit — falling backward, sometimes unconscious, under the weight of God's presence — has been part of Pentecostal culture since Azusa Street. Holy laughter traces further back still, appearing in John Wesley's Methodist meetings in the eighteenth century and in the American frontier revivals of the early nineteenth. What made Toronto distinctive was the concentration and the global spread, and the addition of phenomena that previous generations had not normalized, including the animal sounds and what came to be called drunk in the Spirit — staggering, slurring, incapacitated behavior that Rodney Howard-Browne, the South African evangelist who pioneered the laughing revival, cheerfully described as his role as a Holy Ghost bartender serving the new wine of joy.

The experience question is not simple, and anyone who treats it as simple — either enthusiastically attributing everything to God or dismissively attributing everything to manipulation or psychology — is not engaging honestly with the evidence. Something happens in these meetings. The question is what.

Before asking what these experiences are, it is worth asking what they are not — specifically, what the New Testament does not contain.

The disciples at Pentecost did not fall over laughing. They were not slain in the Spirit. They did not make animal noises. They spoke in actual human languages that actual human beings understood, they proclaimed the gospel, and three thousand people were converted. The biblical account of Pentecost is extraordinarily undramatic by the standards of the contemporary Miracle Chasers meeting. The crowd's reaction was not awe at physical phenomena — it was bewilderment at the

languages, and some mocking suggestion that the disciples were drunk. Peter's response was to preach. The entire episode is centered on intelligible proclamation of the gospel, not on unusual physical experience.

The biblical accounts of people falling in the presence of God are real but consistently different in character from what the contemporary movement describes. In the Old Testament, falling before the Lord is almost always prostration — falling on one's face in reverence before divine holiness, the response of Isaiah in the temple and of Ezekiel before the divine glory. In the New Testament, people fall at Jesus's feet or at the feet of an angel — again in reverence, not in an involuntary physical collapse. The soldiers who came to arrest Jesus fell backward when he identified himself — not as an experience of blessing but as evidence of divine power confronting hostile force. John falls as if dead in Revelation chapter one, overwhelmed by the glorified Christ. None of these accounts resemble the

contemporary slain in the Spirit experience, where a worship leader touches a forehead and a person tumbles backward onto a waiting catcher.

There is no biblical precedent for holy laughter as a normative spiritual experience. Laughter appears rarely in Scripture, and several New Testament references warn against it rather than commend it. James 4:9 calls believers to change their laughter to mourning in a season of repentance. The joy of the Spirit that Paul describes as a fruit in Galatians 5 is not a physical state of incapacitation but a deep orientation of the soul that coexists with suffering, with difficulty, and with the full range of ordinary human experience. The fruit of the Spirit includes self-control — the very thing that holy laughter, by definition, overrides.

Grave soaking — the practice, associated with some Bethel students, of lying on the graves of deceased revivalists in the belief that spiritual anointing can be absorbed from the

burial site — has no biblical warrant whatsoever. Bethel's senior leadership has denied officially teaching the practice, and one long-serving Bethel pastor has written that the most extreme versions of it arose from student enthusiasm rather than deliberate instruction. That may be true. But the theological soil that produces grave soaking — the belief that spiritual power is a transferable substance that can be imparted from person to person and apparently from corpse to corpse — is Bethel's own. When Bill Johnson writes in *The Physics of Heaven* about unclaimed anointings and revelations lying in the places where previous revivalists walked and died, and when students read those words with the hunger of people who have been told that spiritual power is the primary currency of the Christian life, grave soaking is the predictable destination. The leaders may not have intended it. They created the conditions for it.

The honest examination of these experiences requires holding two things

simultaneously that the movement and its critics both tend to flatten into one.

The first is that unusual experiences in religious settings are real, documented, and not automatically supernatural. The psychology of crowd experience, suggestion, expectation, social pressure, and altered states of consciousness is well established and powerful. People in highly charged emotional environments with strong expectation of unusual experiences will very often have unusual experiences. The body responds to psychological states in dramatic ways — falling, trembling, laughing, weeping, and apparent incapacitation are all within the ordinary range of human psychophysiology under the right conditions. The fact that an experience is real and powerful does not make it supernatural. A Daily Telegraph journalist who traveled to Toronto to write a skeptical report was touched by John Arnott and fell to the floor laughing. He later told a Christian newspaper that the experience had made no

difference to his unbelief. The same physical experience, the same apparent manifestation — but no spiritual transformation. That is worth sitting with carefully.

The second thing to hold simultaneously is that unusual experiences in religious settings are not automatically fake. The history of genuine revival — the Welsh revival of 1904, the early Methodist awakening, the first Great Awakening under Jonathan Edwards — includes physical phenomena. People wept. People cried out. People fell to the ground under a conviction of sin so intense that their bodies could not sustain them upright. Edwards himself, one of the most careful theological minds in American history, wrote thoughtfully about how to distinguish genuine from counterfeit religious experience. His conclusion was not that physical phenomena were evidence of the Spirit's presence or absence but that the fruit in people's lives over time was the only reliable test. Did people love God more? Did they love

their neighbors more? Did they repent of sin and walk in holiness? Were their lives genuinely transformed?

That Edwardsian standard is the one the movement consistently avoids applying. The question is never what happens to people's lives over time after the experience. The question is always how intense the experience was in the moment. The spotlight never leaves the stage.

The specific phenomena of the Toronto Blessing deserve a few words of direct assessment, because they have been carried forward into the contemporary movement and continue to appear in signs-and-wonders communities today.

Holy laughter in its mild form — a spontaneous, joy-filled response to a sense of God's love and goodness — is not difficult to understand and is not inherently alarming. Human beings laugh in response to joy, and there is no reason to conclude that a genuine

encounter with the living God could not produce laughter. The problem is not the laughter itself but the culture built around it. When laughter becomes a sign of spiritual status, when the inability to stop laughing for three days is celebrated as evidence of divine favor, when the experience is sought for its own sake and used as a measure of the Spirit's presence, the thing has become its own end rather than a response to God. Experience that points to God is one thing. Experience that points to itself is another entirely.

The animal manifestations — roaring, barking, clucking, making sounds described as whatever God leads you to make — have no biblical parallel and no theological rationale that holds up to examination. The attempt to connect them to the lion of Judah, or to the Spirit's movement as wind and fire, is exegetical desperation rather than genuine interpretation. Notably, researchers who have examined these phenomena have pointed out that very similar manifestations — roaring,

shaking, laughing, falling — appear in Hindu kundalini yoga traditions, where they are associated with a specific kind of spiritual awakening produced by the transmission of a guru's spiritual energy to a disciple. That parallel does not prove the Toronto phenomena were demonic. It does prove they were not uniquely Christian, and it raises questions that the movement has never adequately answered.

Being slain in the Spirit, in its contemporary form, is the experience most consistently manufactured by human means. The mechanics are usually visible to any observer paying attention: the subject is prayed over by a leader with established authority, the subject's expectation is high, catchers stand behind them, and a touch or a word produces the fall. Studies of the phenomenon have noted that the rate of falling is significantly correlated with the authority and reputation of the person praying, and with the subject's prior expectation. People rarely

fall when the touch is unexpected. People almost always fall when the atmosphere, the authority figure, and the expectation are all aligned.

I know this not only from research but from observation that I cannot forget. During a five-week mission trip to northern Saskatchewan, working among Indigenous communities, one of the men in my group went down during a prayer time. Afterward I asked him what had happened. He said, without particular distress, that the pastor had pushed him over. I did not entirely believe him, so I began watching more carefully. Sure enough — a heavyset man moving slowly forward while praying, leaning into people, the weight of his momentum doing the physical work. Anyone in his path toppled. I observed the same pattern from other leaders in other settings afterward. The experience was real. The falling was real. The sensation of being overwhelmed was real. The supernatural cause was not.

That pattern is precisely what social psychology would predict. It says nothing definitive about whether the Spirit was also present in some of those moments. But it suggests that the human mechanism is doing the primary work in many cases, and that claiming the phenomenon as unambiguous

evidence of divine visitation is an overreach that does not survive honest observation.

What should an honest Christian make of all this?

The wisest framework remains Jonathan Edwards's: test the fruit, not the feeling. An experience that produces deeper love for God, genuine repentance from sin, greater love for neighbors, and sustained transformation of character is worth taking seriously, whatever physical form it took. An experience that produces spiritual elitism, theological instability, an appetite for more experiences, and an inability to function in ordinary Christian life without the next infusion of manifestation is producing bad fruit, whatever it felt like in the moment.

Applying that test honestly to the Toronto Blessing and its legacy is not straightforward. Many people report genuine transformation from that era. Many others report disillusionment, spiritual exhaustion,

and the particular kind of disappointment that follows when the emotional high inevitably subsides and ordinary faith feels insufficient by comparison. The post-Toronto landscape is full of people who spent years chasing the next manifestation and eventually stopped going to church altogether, unable to sustain the intensity the culture required.

The contemporary movement has not resolved this problem. If anything it has intensified it. The culture of signs and wonders creates an appetite for experience that ordinary discipleship cannot satisfy and was never designed to satisfy. The Christian life described in the New Testament is not primarily an experience. It is a relationship, a vocation, a daily dying and rising with Christ, a slow conformity to his image through the ordinary means of Scripture, prayer, community, and suffering. The gifts of the Spirit exist to serve that life, not to replace it.

That is not a popular thing to say in a world where the next conference promises

another outpouring, and where the most followed voices in the movement are those who can deliver the most dramatic moments on the most polished stages. But it is what the Scripture teaches, and it is what three decades of watching the fruit of this culture has confirmed.

The next chapter turns to the question of power itself — why the pursuit of spiritual power is so appealing, and why it has proven so consistently and so specifically dangerous when it becomes the organizing principle of Christian community.

Chapter Nine

The Power Question

There is something in the human soul that wants power. Not the crude political kind, not necessarily — though the Miracle Chasers world has proven surprisingly comfortable with that kind as well — but the deeper kind. The desire to matter. To have access to something others do not have. To be in the room where God is moving most intensely. To carry an anointing that other people can feel. To speak and have what you speak come to pass. To lay hands on someone and see them healed. To be, in short, significant in the economy of God.

That desire is not entirely corrupt. It is, at its root, the desire to be used by God — to have one's life mean something beyond the ordinary, to participate in the divine work rather than merely observe it. The disciples had it. They argued about who would be

greatest in the kingdom. James and John asked, through their mother, for the seats at Jesus's right and left hand. Peter walked on water when invited and then sank when he looked at the waves rather than the one who had called him. The hunger for significance in God's story is not a sin. It is a human longing that can be directed toward genuine service or twisted toward something considerably more dangerous.

The Miracle Chasers world has, in significant portions of its landscape, twisted it toward something more dangerous. The pursuit of spiritual power has become the organizing principle of communities that were ostensibly organized around the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the consequences have been serious enough to warrant a full chapter of examination.

The problem begins with a theological assumption so embedded in the culture that most participants cannot see it clearly: the assumption that spiritual power is the primary

evidence of God's presence and the primary measure of a ministry's validity.

In this framework, the most anointed leader is the most powerful leader. The most Spirit-filled church is the one where the most dramatic things happen. The most faithful believer is the one who operates most consistently in signs and wonders. Power is the currency, and everyone is measuring everyone else's account balance. The conference speaker who can consistently produce healing, prophecy, and manifestations draws the largest following. The church with the most dramatic testimonies attracts the most students. The ministry school that produces the most revivalists receives the most financial support. The entire ecosystem is organized around the demonstration of power, and the people at the top are the people who appear to have the most of it.

This is not a minor theological distortion. It is a fundamental inversion of the New Testament's account of what spiritual maturity

looks like. The apostle Paul, writing to Corinth — the most supernaturally active church in the New Testament record — does not congratulate them on their power. He rebukes them. Their gifts have produced pride, division, immorality, and the abuse of the Lord's Supper. The most gifted church in the New Testament is also the most troubled, and Paul's corrective is not to help them access more power. It is to redirect their entire framework toward love, servanthood, and the building up of the whole body. His criterion for mature Christianity is not the quantity or quality of manifestations. It is the fruit of the Spirit — love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. None of those are spectacular. None of them draw a conference crowd. All of them transform a life.

The structural problem created by the pursuit of power is that it produces communities uniquely vulnerable to a specific kind of leader: the person whose personality

naturally generates the experience of power in others.

Chuck DeGroat, a therapist and seminary professor who has written extensively on narcissism in church leadership, observes that ministry is a magnet for narcissistic personality because it offers a platform, divine authority, and a community primed to receive both. The charismatic leader who appears anointed, who carries the room with them, who produces the feelings and phenomena that the community has been taught to interpret as the Spirit's presence — that leader is rewarded by the community's devotion, financial support, and institutional protection regardless of the character that lies beneath the platform. In normal organizational life, a leader's effectiveness is measured partly by outcomes that can be verified independently. In the Miracle Chasers world, effectiveness is measured by the subjective experience of the people in the room, and the leader controls the room.

The result is a pattern that has repeated itself with tragic consistency across the movement's history. A leader emerges with genuine gifting and genuine charisma. The community forms around the leader's anointing. Accountability structures are either never built or are gradually dismantled as the leader's status rises above the reach of ordinary oversight. The community becomes, in its emotional and spiritual life, dependent on the leader's power. Questioning the leader begins to feel like questioning God. And then, eventually, the thing breaks — in financial scandal, sexual misconduct, spiritual abuse, or simply the slow discovery that the leader's private character bore no relationship to the public persona.

The list of prominent Miracle Chasers leaders whose ministries have ended this way is long enough to constitute a pattern rather than an exception. Todd Bentley, whose Lakeland Revival of 2008 drew global attention and hundreds of thousands of

visitors, was subsequently found to have been engaged in an extramarital affair during the revival itself, resigned from ministry, and has since attempted multiple restorations that have not held. Mike Bickle of IHOP, as documented in Chapter Seven, used prophetic authority to groom and abuse multiple women over decades. The Hillsong collapse described in Chapter Three is another iteration. Each case is different in its specifics. Each case is identical in its structure: power without accountability, platform without character formation, authority without submission.

Jesus addressed the power question with a directness that the movement has not yet fully absorbed. In Matthew 7, immediately after warning his disciples about false prophets, he describes a terrifying scenario: on the day of judgment, many will say to him, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles? And he will tell them

plainly, I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers.

The people in this passage were not pretenders. They believed they were serving God. They had prophecies and miracles and deliverances to point to. They had, in the language of the Miracle Chasers world, an anointing. And Jesus says he never knew them. The criterion for belonging to his kingdom is not the demonstration of spiritual power. It is knowing him and being known by him — which, in John's Gospel, is the language of intimate relationship, obedience, and love. The Sermon on the Mount that precedes this warning is a description of what life in the kingdom actually looks like: poverty of spirit, mourning, meekness, hunger for righteousness, mercy, purity of heart, peacemaking, willingness to suffer. None of those are power. All of them are the opposite of power.

This is the passage the movement most needs to sit with. Not as an accusation against

any individual, but as a corrective to a framework that has elevated the demonstration of spiritual power to the place where the New Testament places love, character, and the slow conformity of a life to the image of Christ.

The question of spiritual warfare, which belongs to this chapter, is another place where the pursuit of power has produced distortion.

Paul's teaching on spiritual warfare in Ephesians 6 is real and serious. The armor of God is not a metaphor for good intentions. There are genuine spiritual powers at work in the world, and the Christian life involves genuine conflict. The New Testament does not present a tame, materialistic universe where nothing happens beyond what can be measured and observed. Spiritual warfare is real.

What the NAR and the broader signs-and-wonders world have done with Paul's teaching is something considerably more

elaborate. Territorial spirits govern cities and regions. Apostolic prayer teams can identify and displace these spirits through strategic intercession. Spiritual mapping — the practice of researching and identifying the specific demonic powers controlling a geographic area — is a legitimate spiritual discipline that precedes effective ministry. Curses can be spoken over enemies. Decrees made by apostles and prophets carry binding authority in the spiritual realm. The Christian is not primarily a servant of God and neighbor but a spiritual warrior engaged in cosmic combat, and the level of victory achieved is proportional to the authority and anointing of the warriors involved.

None of that extended framework has a clear basis in the New Testament. Paul's armor of God passage is about the interior life of the believer — truth, righteousness, faith, salvation, the Word of God, prayer — not about external spiritual combat operations managed by apostolic authority. The New

Testament's account of spiritual warfare is remarkably simple compared to what the movement has constructed: resist the devil and he will flee, put on the armor, pray without ceasing, stand firm. The elaborate tactical systems of territorial spirits and strategic intercession are additions to the text, not derivations from it, and they serve the same function in the movement as everything else: they require the authority and expertise of specially anointed leaders, and they create communities of people whose spiritual lives are organized around the management and deployment of power.

What should power look like in the Christian community?

The New Testament answer is consistent and uncomfortable. Power in the kingdom of God works upside down. The greatest is the servant of all. The leader is the one who washes feet. The authority that matters is not the authority to command spiritual forces but the authority that comes from a life genuinely

conformed to Christ — the authority of demonstrated character, sacrificial love, and decades of faithful obscurity. Jesus did not build his ministry on a platform. He built it in the dust of Galilee's roads, at dinner tables with sinners, in private prayer before dawn, and at the end, on a cross.

The Miracle Chasers world has produced remarkable generosity, genuine compassion, and communities of real warmth and belonging. It has also produced a culture of celebrity, a tolerance for abusive leadership that would not be acceptable in any other context, and a definition of spiritual maturity that has more in common with the Corinthians' problem than with Paul's solution.

The corrective is not to abandon the gifts of the Spirit or to retreat into a Christianity so cautious that it has no room for the God who parted seas and raised the dead. The corrective is to subordinate every gift, every experience, every claim to anointing and authority, to the one criterion that the New

Testament consistently applies: does this produce genuine love for God and for people, sustained over time, demonstrated in the ordinary texture of a life? Power that produces that fruit is worth having. Power that produces celebrity, dependence, and the silencing of accountability is worth examining very carefully indeed — regardless of what it looks like on the stage.

The next chapter shifts from examining the movement's claims to asking what the Scripture consistently and clearly teaches about the Holy Spirit — the part that tends to get crowded out when the conversation is dominated by the spectacular. It is time to ask what the Spirit nobody fights about actually looks like.

Chapter Ten

The Holy Spirit Nobody Fights About

There is a version of the Holy Spirit that almost no one in the Christian church disputes. Not the cessationist, not the continuationist, not the Baptist, not the Pentecostal, not the Reformed theologian, not the Bethel student. This version of the Spirit does not generate conferences or controversies. He does not produce the disagreements that have divided denominations and ended friendships. He is not what people mean when they argue about tongues, or prophecy, or being slain in the Spirit, or the gifts. He is the Spirit who has been at work in ordinary believers in ordinary circumstances for two thousand years, and he is the one that both the Miracle Chasers world and its critics tend to obscure when they are busy arguing about everything else.

It is time to give him some attention.

This chapter is not a retreat from the honest examination of the previous chapters. It is a completion of it. Having looked carefully at what the movement claims and where those claims hold up or fall apart, we owe the reader — and ourselves — a clear account of what the Scripture actually and consistently teaches about the Spirit. Not what one tradition emphasizes, not what any particular camp has made its distinctives, but what the whole New Testament says when you read it without either the charismatic filter or the cessationist filter already in place.

What you find is a Spirit who is considerably more active than most traditional evangelical churches acknowledge, and considerably more interested in character than most of the Miracle Chasers world implies.

The Holy Spirit's first and most consistent work in the New Testament is conviction. Jesus, in his farewell discourse in John's Gospel, describes the Spirit he is about

to send: when he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment. Conviction is the Spirit's opening move in every human life that encounters God. Before there is transformation, before there is gifting, before there is any of the subsequent work that the New Testament describes, there is the arresting sense that something is wrong — that the self as it stands is not right before God, that righteousness is real and matters, that judgment is coming and must be reckoned with. This is not comfortable. It is not the feel-good encounter that the Miracle Chasers world tends to offer at its outreach events. It is the Spirit doing the most fundamental work he does: making a person genuinely aware of their condition before God.

The second consistent work is regeneration — the new birth that Jesus describes to Nicodemus in John chapter three. No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. What is

born of the Spirit is spirit. The Spirit is the agent of the new birth, the one who takes a person who was dead in trespasses and sins and brings them to life. This is not an experience to be sought, worked up, or produced by the right atmosphere. It is the sovereign act of God in the human soul, as invisible and as uncontrollable as the wind that Jesus uses as its metaphor. You cannot manufacture it. You can only receive it.

The third work is indwelling. Paul's most radical statement about the Spirit is not about tongues or prophecy or healing — it is this: do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? Every believer, from the moment of genuine faith, is the dwelling place of the third person of the Trinity. This truth is so astonishing that it tends to be handled politely rather than really believed. If it were fully believed, it would transform the way ordinary Christians understand their ordinary days. The Spirit is not a force to be accessed

through the right spiritual technology. He is present. Already. In you. Now.

The fourth work is sealing. Paul writes in Ephesians that believers were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing their inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession. The Spirit is God's mark of ownership and his down payment on the fullness of what is coming. Not a temporary infusion of spiritual energy but a permanent, irreversible commitment. The Spirit's presence in the life of the believer is the guarantee that what God has begun he will complete.

The fifth work is illumination. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians that no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God, and that the person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. The Spirit is the one who opens the Scripture to the

believer's understanding. He is the internal teacher that Jesus promised, the one who will guide you into all truth. This is not a promise of continuous direct revelation about the believer's personal circumstances. It is a promise that the Word of God, which the Spirit inspired, will be made alive and comprehensible to the Spirit-indwelt reader in a way that goes beyond mere intellectual analysis.

And then there is sanctification — and this is where the Spirit's most consistent, most consequential, and most thoroughly undramatic work takes place.

Paul's letter to the Galatians addresses a church that has been seduced away from the gospel by a religious system that promises spiritual advancement through religious performance. His corrective is to point them back to the Spirit who is already at work in them, producing something that no religious system can manufacture. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,

goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Notice what Paul does not say. He does not say the fruit of the Spirit is tongues, or healing, or prophecy, or extraordinary experiences, or spiritual power. He says the fruit — the singular, unified outcome of the Spirit's presence in a human life — is a character transformation that produces love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Nine qualities. Not one of them is spectacular. Not one of them draws a conference audience. Every one of them is urgently needed and embarrassingly rare.

The fruit of the Spirit is also exactly what the Miracle Chasers world's most prominent failures have conspicuously lacked. The leaders who abused prophetic authority lacked gentleness. The communities that silenced questioning lacked kindness. The celebrities who resisted accountability lacked faithfulness and self-control. The people who

used financial pressure to extract giving from those who could not afford it lacked goodness. The atmosphere of spiritual elitism lacked peace. What the Spirit is most consistently producing in the lives of genuinely Spirit-filled people is precisely what the movement's most visible failures have most consistently been unable to demonstrate. That contrast is not coincidental. It is diagnostic.

Paul goes further still in Romans 8, one of the richest pneumatological passages in the New Testament. The Spirit of God, he writes, who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you. The same Spirit who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you. The Spirit helps us in our weakness. When we do not know what we ought to pray for, the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. Not those who are anointed. Not those who operate in the gifts. Not those who have the most dramatic

testimonies. Those who are led by the Spirit — day by day, moment by moment, in weakness and confusion and ordinary life — are the children of God.

John's Gospel adds another dimension that the Miracle Chasers world has both claimed and misunderstood. Jesus says in John 14 that the Spirit of truth will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. He says in John 16 that the Spirit will guide you into all truth. These promises have been used in the movement to justify the ongoing reception of fresh revelation — new prophetic words, new divine communications, the continuous stream of thus saith the Lord that characterizes the prophetic culture. But reading these passages in context, they are promises about the Spirit's work in relation to Jesus and his words, not a promise of continuous new revelation beyond the apostolic witness. The Spirit teaches, reminds, and guides into the truth that has already been revealed in Christ and recorded

in Scripture. He illuminates what is there. He does not perpetually add to it.

This does not settle every question about the continuation of the gifts. It does clarify what the Spirit's primary teaching role is and what it is not. The Spirit is the one who makes the Scripture alive to the reader. He is the one who brings a verse to mind in a moment of temptation or sorrow with exactly the force needed. He is the one who, in prayer, takes the groan of a person who does not know how to ask and translates it into intercession. Those are not boring experiences. They are the most consistently life-giving experiences in the Christian life, and they require no conference, no apostle, no special atmosphere, and no stage.

The Spirit's work is also fundamentally communal in the New Testament, which is something that both the hyperindividualism of the Miracle Chasers culture and the private quietism of some traditional evangelical culture tend to miss.

The gifts of 1 Corinthians 12 are given not for the enhancement of the individual believer but for the common good. The body metaphor that Paul uses in that chapter is not about the dramatic gifts — it is about the irreplaceable necessity of every member, including the ones that seem least significant. The eye cannot say to the hand, I do not need you. The parts of the body that seem weaker are indispensable. The Spirit's distribution of gifts to the body of Christ is an act of deliberate, comprehensive design, not a bestowing of spiritual prizes on the most deserving or most seeking. Every genuine believer has received something from the Spirit for the body. The question the New Testament asks is not whether you have the most spectacular gifts. It is whether you are using what you have been given for the good of the whole.

The Spirit also produces unity, which is another quality conspicuously absent from large portions of the Miracle Chasers

landscape. Paul writes in Ephesians that there is one body and one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. The Spirit's presence in a community should produce a unity that transcends theological disagreement, cultural difference, and the ordinary friction of human community. What the movement has too often produced instead is fragmentation — a constant cycling of people through communities that cannot sustain them because the demand for ever-more-intense experience erodes ordinary loyalty and ordinary perseverance.

None of this is the Spirit of a God who is absent, silent, or unconcerned with the daily life of his people. The Spirit of the New Testament is intensely, intimately, constantly present. He convicts, regenerates, indwells, seals, illuminates, sanctifies, intercedes, gifts, unifies, and leads. He is active in prayer, active in Scripture reading, active in genuine community, active in suffering, active in

ordinary acts of service and love. He does not require special settings, special leaders, or special spiritual technology to be encountered. He is already present in every genuine believer, already working toward the conformity of that life to the image of Christ, already groaning in intercession for what we cannot articulate ourselves.

The Spirit nobody fights about is the Spirit who is most consistently and most powerfully present in the Christian life. He is worth knowing, worth attending to, and worth allowing to do his work — without the overlay of human expectation, the pressure of community atmosphere, or the performance demands of a culture organized around the spectacular.

He is enough. He has always been enough. And he will be enough until the day when the partial gives way to the perfect and we see, at last, face to face.

The next chapter steps back from the biblical examination to ask what the movement is doing right — because that question matters as much as every question this part of the book has been asking, and honest evaluation requires the courage to acknowledge both.

Chapter Eleven

The Good, the Concerning, and the Dangerous

Any honest evaluation of the Miracle Chasers world requires the courage to go in both directions. The preceding chapters have examined the movement's claims with considerable scrutiny and found many of them wanting. That scrutiny was necessary and the conclusions were earned. But scrutiny without acknowledgment of genuine good is not honest evaluation. It is a prosecution dressed as a book review, and the reader deserves better than that.

This chapter attempts something harder than either celebration or condemnation. It attempts a fair accounting — naming what the movement consistently gets right, identifying where it goes wrong in ways that are correctable, and marking clearly the territory where it crosses lines that should concern

every thoughtful Christian regardless of their position on the gifts. A fair accounting serves everyone. It serves the curious evangelical who wants to understand what their loved ones have found in these communities. It serves the charismatic who is genuinely seeking and who deserves honest engagement rather than dismissal. And it serves the reader who has watched this movement for years and is still trying to figure out what to make of it.

The Miracle Chasers world gets several things genuinely, substantially right, and those things deserve full acknowledgment before anything else is said.

The first is expectation. The movement has recovered something that much of traditional Western Christianity quietly abandoned: the expectation that God is actually present and actually active in the lives of ordinary believers. The God of the movement shows up. He speaks. He moves. He heals. He transforms. That expectation — even when it has been theologically distorted in the

ways this book has described — produces communities that pray with genuine urgency, that seek God with genuine hunger, and that expect the Christian life to be something more than an intellectual exercise or a social contract. A Christianity that has lost that expectation has lost something real, and it would be dishonest to pretend otherwise simply because the Miracle Chasers world has sometimes handled the expectation badly.

The second thing the movement gets right is welcome. These communities are, in the main, extraordinarily good at receiving people. The warmth is real. The belonging is real. For people who arrive broken, confused, excluded, or simply lonely, the experience of walking into a charismatic community and being surrounded by people who appear genuinely glad you are there is not a small thing. The traditional church has been slow to learn this and in many cases has still not learned it. People do not stay where they do not feel wanted, and the movement's culture

of welcome has kept people in Christian community who would otherwise have drifted away entirely. Whatever critique must be made of the theological use to which that welcome is sometimes put, the welcome itself is a genuine act of Christian hospitality that reflects something true about the kingdom of God.

The third thing the movement gets right is engagement with the Global South. Classical Pentecostalism and the charismatic movement have been the primary vehicles for the explosive growth of Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia over the past century. In contexts where poverty is severe, where medical care is scarce, where suffering is immediate and physical, and where the cosmology of the local culture has always included spiritual powers and divine intervention as normal features of reality rather than embarrassing superstitions, a Christianity that takes the supernatural seriously and that prays for healing with

genuine expectation is not a theological distortion — it is a contextually appropriate response to people's actual lives. The majority world church, which is increasingly Pentecostal and charismatic, is not a confused backwater. It is the growing edge of global Christianity, and the movement has been its primary ambassador.

The fourth thing the movement gets right is worship. Whatever theological questions surround Bethel and Hillsong and Elevation, the worship music these communities have produced has reconnected millions of Western Christians to an emotionally authentic engagement with God that formal liturgy and traditional hymnody had, for many people, ceased to provide. The criticism that contemporary charismatic worship is theologically thin is sometimes valid. The observation that it has moved people to genuine praise, genuine surrender, and genuine encounter with God is also valid. Both things can be true simultaneously, and

intellectual honesty requires acknowledging both.

The fifth thing the movement gets right is mission. Signs-and-wonders communities are, in general, strongly outward-facing. They believe the gospel is for everyone and they act on that belief with remarkable energy. Street evangelism, healing rooms open to the public, treasure hunts in shopping malls, missionary schools sending graduates to unreached people groups — the movement's orientation toward the world outside the church building reflects a genuine and admirable reading of the Great Commission. The traditional evangelical church has sometimes retreated into a comfortable self-referential culture that looks inward more than outward. The Miracle Chasers world has not made that mistake, even when it has made others.

There are also things in the movement that are genuinely concerning — not dangerous in themselves but problematic in ways that produce real harm and that deserve

honest naming even among those who are otherwise sympathetic to the movement's better instincts.

The most pervasive concern is the culture of experience dependency. The movement has created communities in which ordinary Christian life — daily Scripture reading, prayer without dramatic accompaniment, faithful service in unglamorous contexts, the slow growth of character over decades — feels insufficient by comparison to the intensity of what is experienced at the conference, at the healing service, at the revival meeting. When people require a continuous infusion of supernatural experience to sustain their faith, they have not been built into mature disciples. They have been trained to be consumers of spiritual experiences, and when the experiences become less frequent or less intense, the faith itself is at risk. This is not a theoretical problem. It is documented in the lives of thousands of people who spent years in these

communities and left not because they rejected God but because they could no longer sustain the pace and intensity the culture demanded.

The second concern is the treatment of doubt and questioning. In communities organized around the certainty of divine speech and the authority of anointed leaders, intellectual questioning tends to be treated as a spiritual problem rather than a healthy human instinct. The person who asks hard questions is not seen as seeking truth — they are seen as lacking faith, resisting the Spirit, or being influenced by a spirit of religion that opposes genuine moves of God. This culture of anti-intellectualism is not universal in the movement, and some communities handle it better than others. But it is common enough to constitute a systemic problem, and it produces people who have learned to suppress their most honest questions in order to remain in good standing with their community. That suppression is spiritually and psychologically

costly, and communities that exact it are not operating in the freedom that the Spirit produces.

The third concern is financial. The theology of generosity in parts of the movement — particularly in the word of faith stream — has been used to extract significant financial sacrifice from people who could not afford it, on the promise of divine return. Seed faith giving, tithe-based blessing theology, the suggestion that financial generosity to a ministry is an act of faith that will unlock God's favor — these teachings have enriched leaders while impoverishing followers in ways that deserve clear and direct condemnation. The broader movement is not uniformly guilty of this, and many charismatic communities have genuine and accountable financial practices. But the pattern is common enough and the harm documented enough that any fair assessment must name it plainly.

The fourth concern is the movement's entanglement with political power, particularly

in the NAR stream. The theology of the Seven Mountain Mandate has provided a framework in which the pursuit of political influence is reframed as spiritual obedience, and in which the authority of apostles and prophets is deployed in the service of partisan political goals. Christians are called to engage the world, including its political dimensions, and that engagement can be done faithfully. But when prophets are speaking in the name of God about the outcomes of elections, when apostles are claiming divine commission to reshape governments, and when the movement's most prominent voices are functioning as religious validators for particular political agendas, the line between prophetic witness and partisan manipulation has been crossed. The witness of the church is compromised when it is identified too closely with any political program, and the movement's current entanglements carry real cost for its long-term credibility and effectiveness.

And then there is the territory that should genuinely alarm every thoughtful Christian, regardless of where they stand on the questions of gifts and continuationism.

The claim of direct ongoing revelation that carries binding authority is the most dangerous single feature of the movement's landscape. When a leader's word is treated as the word of God — not subject to testing, not open to questioning, not answerable to the plain teaching of Scripture — the conditions for spiritual abuse, theological error, and the systematic exploitation of vulnerable people have been fully established. This is not a risk that might materialize in the wrong circumstances. It is a documented pattern that has materialized repeatedly across the movement's history, in communities of every size and in leaders of every apparent gifting.

The prosperity gospel, in its most explicit forms, is a false gospel. Not a distortion that can be corrected at the margins but a fundamental substitution of a different

message for the one Jesus proclaimed. It replaces the call to take up your cross and follow with the promise that following produces health and wealth. It replaces the Beatitudes — blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek — with the declaration that poverty and suffering are evidence of insufficient faith. It is not merely theologically incorrect. It is spiritually cruel to everyone who believes it and does not receive the promised prosperity, and it is particularly cruel to the majority world Christians for whom material poverty is not a temporary inconvenience but the permanent context of their lives. A theology that tells a subsistence farmer in Nigeria that her poverty is the result of her failure of faith is not a modification of the gospel. It is its opposite.

The use of spiritual authority to silence accountability and protect abusive leaders is not a feature of the movement that can be addressed by better pastoral training. It is a

structural problem that arises directly from the theological claim that certain leaders have special divine authority that transcends the ordinary accountability structures of Christian community. As long as the movement grants that claim, the protection of abusers behind the shield of anointing will continue. The solution is not better leaders. The solution is the elimination of the theological category that places any leader beyond question.

This is a sobering inventory. It is meant to be. A movement that has done genuine good and genuine harm simultaneously deserves to be assessed with the same honesty that should characterize all of Christian life — not the partisan honesty that celebrates what we already love and condemns what we already distrust, but the costly honesty that follows the evidence wherever it leads and says what it finds.

The next chapter turns to the names and places that have been most prominent in the current landscape — Bethel, the NAR, and the

power brokers who are shaping the movement today. It is time to look at them specifically, fairly, and without flinching.

Chapter Twelve

Bethel, NAR, and the New Power Brokers

The Miracle Chasers world is not an abstraction. It is made up of specific institutions, specific leaders, and specific theological systems that have specific consequences in the lives of real people. This chapter looks at the organizations and individuals currently doing the most to shape the movement's direction — not to assign blame or score points, but because any fair guide to this landscape must be willing to name names and describe what those names actually stand for.

The curious evangelical who wants to understand what their daughter has gotten into deserves to know whether the ministry school she has joined is connected to Bethel, to the NAR, to IHOP's network, or to something else entirely. The answers matter.

The theology differs. The accountability structures differ. The risks differ. A map that refuses to mark the specific territories is not a guide — it is an evasion.

Bethel Church in Redding, California remains the most globally influential single congregation in the signs-and-wonders world. As described in earlier chapters, its music, its school, its conferences, and its leadership network have shaped the theology and worship culture of tens of thousands of churches worldwide, including many that would not identify themselves as part of the Bethel ecosystem and whose congregants have never heard Bill Johnson's name.

Bill Johnson is a careful and often gracious communicator who has genuine pastoral gifts and who leads a community that by most accounts is warm and sincere in its faith. He is also the co-author, with Lance Wallnau, of *Invading Babylon: The 7 Mountain Mandate*, which frames the Christian's calling as the spiritual reclamation of every sphere of

society from demonic control. He has consistently affirmed the apostolic and prophetic offices as governing authorities in the contemporary church. He has taught that it is always God's will to heal, a position that this book has examined at length and found wanting. And his wife, the late Beni Johnson, was photographed lying on graves in what became one of the more bizarre controversies in the movement's recent history.

Bethel's official position on grave soaking is denial — the leadership has stated that neither the church nor its school teaches or encourages the practice. That denial is worth taking at face value. But the theological soil from which the practice grew — the belief that spiritual power is a transferable substance that can be passed from revivalist to student through touch, proximity, or focused spiritual intention — is Bethel's own. Johnson's writing about unclaimed anointings and spiritual inheritances available for recovery created the conditions for grave soaking

without requiring him to have planned it. When you teach that spiritual power is locatable, transferable, and available for those with sufficient faith and boldness to claim it, students will find the logical conclusion of that teaching on their own.

Bethel's School of Supernatural Ministry deserves particular attention because it is the movement's most significant training institution for the next generation of leaders. More than two thousand students annually, from over sixty countries, spend one to three years in Redding being formed in a theological framework centered on signs and wonders, apostolic authority, and the expectation of continuous supernatural encounter. Those graduates return to their home countries carrying Bethel's theological DNA into churches, ministries, and communities that may have no formal connection to Bethel whatsoever. The school's influence is therefore considerably larger than its enrollment figures suggest. It is a theological multiplier with

global reach, and the theology it is multiplying deserves the kind of careful examination this book has attempted.

The New Apostolic Reformation is a harder entity to assess because it is deliberately diffuse. It has no membership rolls, no formal denominational structure, and no central governing body. Its apostles and prophets operate through voluntary networks of relationship rather than institutional hierarchy, which makes the movement simultaneously easier to join and harder to hold accountable. A leader can claim NAR alignment when it serves them and deny it when it does not, and the structure of the movement provides no mechanism to adjudicate the claim either way.

What the NAR does have is a coherent and identifiable theological framework, and that framework has spread far beyond any formal network. The restoration of the offices of apostle and prophet as governing authorities in the contemporary church. The

Seven Mountain Mandate as the organizing vision for Christian engagement with culture. Dominion theology as the eschatological framework — the church's calling is not to wait for Christ's return but to prepare the earth for it by establishing Christian dominion over every sphere of society. Spiritual warfare as the primary mode of engagement with the political and cultural world. These ideas now circulate through large portions of charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity without being labelled NAR, often without the recipients knowing where they originated.

A 2024 scholarly poll found that forty-one percent of American Christians express agreement with the Seven Mountain Mandate, the majority of whom have no idea the concept has a name or a history. The idea has outrun its origin. That is both a measure of the NAR's success and an index of the challenge facing any Christian who wants to evaluate it honestly — you may already hold significant

portions of its theology without having consciously chosen to.

Lance Wallnau is the NAR's most visible contemporary practitioner of the political dimension of Seven Mountain theology. His Courage Tour of 2024, which brought explicitly spiritual warfare framing to electoral mobilization across American swing states, represents the current edge of the movement's political engagement. Wallnau has described political opponents in terms of demonic spiritual forces, framed specific electoral outcomes as the subject of prophetic divine speech, and positioned himself as an apostolic voice with divine authority to direct the church's political activity. His events draw thousands of participants who receive political instruction under the canopy of prophetic ministry, a combination that makes independent evaluation of either element extremely difficult for participants inside the meeting.

This book is not in the business of partisan political commentary and will not become so here. What can be said without reference to partisan politics is this: when the authority of divine speech is deployed to direct electoral behavior, the capacity of participants to evaluate that behavior independently has been severely compromised. The person who believes God has spoken about who should govern their country is not in a position to weigh that belief against ordinary political evidence, because ordinary political evidence has been placed in a different and lower category than divine communication. That is not a statement about which political outcomes are desirable. It is a statement about epistemology — about how people know things and how the claim to prophetic authority distorts the process of knowing.

The International House of Prayer's situation deserves an update beyond what was described in Chapter Three. The removal of Mike Bickle in late 2023 following documented

allegations of sexual abuse spanning decades has forced IHOP into a period of institutional reckoning that was still ongoing at the time of this writing. The organization renamed itself as International House of Prayer — Kansas City, distinguishing itself from the founder, and has commissioned multiple independent investigations whose findings have been significant and troubling.

What the IHOP situation illustrates most clearly for the purposes of this chapter is the structural vulnerability that was described in Chapter Nine: a movement organized around the anointing and prophetic authority of a specific leader is uniquely unable to hold that leader accountable. The people most positioned to raise concerns are the people most invested in the leader's authority, because their own standing in the community is partly derived from proximity to that authority. Questioning the prophet is not merely socially costly — it is theologically dangerous in a framework where the prophet

speaks for God. By the time IHOP's institutional leadership was able to act, the harm had been accumulating for decades.

IHOP's genuine strengths — the seriousness of its prayer culture, the formation of young people in sustained worship and intercession, its global reach — do not disappear because of its founder's failures. But those strengths will only be preserved if the organization is willing to undertake the kind of structural reform that addresses the theological conditions that enabled the abuse, not merely the personnel change that removed the abuser. Whether IHOP is capable of that reform remains to be seen.

Elevation Church, led by Steven Furtick in Charlotte, North Carolina, represents a slightly different stream within the broader landscape — one that blends charismatic theology with the megachurch model in ways that have made it one of the fastest-growing church networks in North America. Elevation Worship has produced songs sung in churches

across the denominational spectrum, and Furtick himself has a significant following among younger Christians. His theology is less explicitly NAR-adjacent than Bethel's, and his public persona is more concerned with personal transformation than with apostolic authority or Seven Mountain dominion.

What Elevation shares with the broader Miracle Chasers world is the celebrity pastor model and its attendant vulnerabilities. A community organized around the gifting and personality of a single highly visible leader, operating with limited transparency about governance and finances, is a community that has built its structural weaknesses into its foundations. Elevation has faced criticism over financial transparency and the concentration of authority in Furtick's leadership. Whether those criticisms are fair in their specifics is less important than the structural principle they illustrate: celebrity Christianity, regardless of its theological content, tends to produce the same accountability failures

because it concentrates too much power in too few hands with too little oversight.

What should the curious evangelical make of all this? Several things worth holding clearly.

First, not every charismatic or Pentecostal church is part of the NAR or connected to Bethel or shaped by the specific theological frameworks this chapter has described. The landscape is large and varied. A signs-and-wonders community in rural Manitoba has a different character from a Bethel-affiliated church in California, which has a different character from a Classical Pentecostal congregation with sixty years of history in its neighborhood. Generalizing across the whole landscape does injustice to the diversity within it.

Second, the music a church sings does not tell you everything about what the church believes. Bethel songs and Elevation songs are being sung in theologically conservative

congregations that have no awareness of the theological frameworks their worship teams have imported. This is worth knowing if you are evaluating a church, but it is not grounds for alarm about every church that plays contemporary worship music.

Third, the power brokers described in this chapter are not representative of every leader in the movement. There are charismatic pastors who exercise their gifts with genuine humility, who maintain real accountability structures, who do not claim apostolic authority over their congregations, and who are producing genuine fruit in the lives of people in their care. They tend not to be the ones filling conference stages or building global ministry empires, which is itself part of the point. But they exist, and dismissing the movement wholesale does injustice to them.

Fourth, the theological problems described in this chapter are serious enough to warrant careful navigation. The combination of claimed divine authority,

limited accountability, political entanglement, and the specific theological errors this book has identified creates conditions for significant harm to sincere believers. That harm is not hypothetical. It has been documented, named, and is ongoing. The person who wants to engage with the Miracle Chasers world — or who loves someone who has — deserves to know what they are engaging with.

The next chapter asks what that knowledge should mean practically — for the evangelical in the pew, for the family with a loved one inside the movement, and for the movement itself.

Chapter Thirteen

When Someone You Love Is a Miracle Chaser

This chapter is for the person who picked up this book not because they needed a theological education but because someone they love has changed and they do not know what to do about it.

Your daughter came home from a weekend retreat glowing in a way you have not seen before, talking about an encounter with the Holy Spirit, about healing, about prophecy, about a calling she had received from God to leave her career and join a ministry school. Your husband started attending a new church that meets in a warehouse, and now he speaks in tongues at home, has given several thousand dollars to a prophet he follows online, and refers to his pastor as an apostle. Your best friend of twenty years has become someone you barely

recognize — certain about things she was not certain about before, certain in ways that leave no room for your questions, certain in ways that have quietly but unmistakably moved her farther from you. Your adult son has enrolled in a Bethel-affiliated school across the country and has told you that God called him there, and that your concerns are evidence of spiritual unbelief.

You love these people. You are concerned about them. You do not know how to talk to them without making things worse. And you are wondering whether you are the problem, whether your concern is just your own discomfort with something you do not understand, whether you should simply trust them and pray.

This chapter will not tell you what to do. It will tell you what I have observed, what the research shows, and what the Scripture offers as a framework for navigating a relationship with someone whose faith has taken a

direction you find alarming. What you do with that is between you and God.

The first and most important thing to understand is why your loved one is there.

Chapter Two of this book described the hunger that drives people into the Miracle Chasers world — the genuine longing for more of God, the experience of being welcomed at a moment of need, the community that forms around shared expectation of divine encounter. That hunger is real and it is legitimate. Your loved one did not join this movement because they are naive or weak or spiritually deficient. They joined it because something in them was hungry and something in that community fed it. Understanding that — genuinely, not as a concession on your way to the argument you have already prepared — is the foundation of any relationship that has a chance of surviving this season.

What they found there — the belonging, the warmth, the expectation, the sense that

God is present and active — may be things they did not find where they were before. That is worth sitting with honestly. Sometimes the person who has gone into the Miracle Chasers world is running toward something they needed. Sometimes they are also running away from something — a church that felt cold, a faith that felt routine, a season of pain that nobody in their previous community knew how to address. Knowing which of those is true, or whether it is both, will shape how you engage.

The second thing to understand is what not to do, because the instinctive responses almost always make things worse.

Do not lead with your research. You may have read this book or others like it. You may have watched the documentaries, read the critical articles, assembled a case. The moment you present that case — have you read about what Bethel actually teaches, do you know what the NAR is, I found a video of your prophet saying something alarming — the

conversation is over before it has started. In a community that has trained its members to interpret outside criticism as spiritual attack, your research will not be received as loving concern. It will be received as confirmation that you are operating under a spirit of religion or unbelief, and your loved one will retreat further into the community that understands them and away from you.

Do not issue ultimatums unless the situation has become genuinely dangerous — and by genuinely dangerous, I mean physical safety, financial ruin, or complete severance from all relationships outside the community. Ultimatums given before that point tend to accelerate exactly what you are trying to prevent. The person hears the ultimatum as you forcing a choice between God and you, and in that framing, God will win. You will have handed the community a narrative that confirms everything it has been teaching about the cost of following Jesus and the opposition of unbelieving family.

Do not mock what they have experienced. The experiences they are describing — the sense of God's presence, the warmth of the community, the feeling of being known and welcomed — are real experiences, whatever their theological interpretation. Dismissing those experiences as delusion or manipulation is dismissing something your loved one has found genuinely life-giving, and it will close the door on your influence faster than almost anything else you could do.

Do not disappear from the relationship out of discomfort or principled disapproval. Sustained, unconditional relationship is the single most protective factor for someone inside a high-control or high-demand community. The community thrives when outside relationships weaken. Your continued presence — warm, engaged, non-coercive — is the most important thing you can maintain.

What you can do is considerably more subtle and considerably more effective over time.

Ask questions rather than making statements. Not interrogative questions designed to expose inconsistency, but genuine questions that invite your loved one to articulate what they believe and why. What drew you to this community? What has changed for you since you started going there? What does your pastor teach about this? What do you think Scripture means in that passage? Questions do two things simultaneously. They keep the conversation open, because people do not feel attacked by someone who is curious about their experience. And they activate the person's own critical thinking, because articulating what you believe under gentle questioning is how most people begin to notice what they actually think.

Stay in the relationship on ordinary terms. Dinners, phone calls, shared activities that have nothing to do with the church or the movement. The goal is to remain a significant relationship in your loved one's life — someone whose presence and opinion carries

weight — so that when doubts begin to surface, as they almost always eventually do, you are still close enough to be part of what comes next.

Express love and concern without theological debate. I love you and I am concerned about some of what I am hearing is a complete sentence. You do not need to back it up with arguments about cessationism or NAR theology. The concern, expressed clearly and without agenda, plants a seed that can grow slowly. The debate, even if you win it, plants nothing except resentment.

Know your non-negotiables and hold them quietly. If there are things you will not participate in — attending a service where practices make you uncomfortable, giving money to a ministry you distrust, validating a prophecy you find concerning — it is appropriate to decline those specific things calmly and without extended explanation. You do not have to go to everything. You do not have to endorse everything. You can maintain

your own integrity without turning every encounter into a confrontation.

Pray. Not as a last resort after everything else has failed, but as a first and sustained response. Not prayer as a strategy for getting your loved one to change, but prayer as the honest conversation with God about your own fear, your own limitations, your own need for wisdom in a situation that is beyond your control. The outcome of your loved one's spiritual journey is ultimately not in your hands and never was. Your faithfulness in loving them and staying present is what you are actually responsible for.

There are situations that require more than patience and relationship maintenance, and it is important to name them honestly.

If your loved one is in a community that has cut them off from all outside relationships — where leadership controls their finances, their living arrangements, their daily schedule, where they are not permitted to speak to

family members who raise questions, where leaving the community is framed as leaving God — you are not dealing with an overly enthusiastic church. You are dealing with a high-control group that has the structural features of a cult, and the situation requires more urgent and more direct intervention. Resources exist for families in this situation — cult recovery specialists, exit counselors, organizations that support families of people in high-control religious groups — and they are worth consulting.

If your loved one is making financial decisions that are putting them in genuine danger — giving away savings, taking on debt at the direction of a leader, sending money to an online prophet they have never met in person — that situation also warrants direct engagement. A calm, specific, non-accusatory conversation about the specific financial behavior — not about the theology, not about the leader, just about this specific financial decision and its consequences — is

appropriate. If the person is not a minor, your ultimate leverage is limited, but the conversation is still worth having.

If the community is teaching things that are directly harmful to your loved one's physical health — discouraging medical treatment, insisting that seeking a doctor is evidence of unbelief, claiming that sickness is the result of sin or insufficient faith — that is a situation where the concern needs to be stated directly and clearly. The theology of healing as a covenant right, which this book examined in Chapter Five, has killed people who delayed necessary medical treatment on the basis of faith. That is not an alarmist statement. It is a documented reality.

Something worth knowing about the long arc of these situations: most people who enter the Miracle Chasers world do eventually leave. The intensity of the experience, the demands of the culture, the disappointment of promises that do not materialize, the exhaustion of sustained performance — all of

these erode commitment over time in the majority of cases. The research on people who leave high-demand religious communities consistently shows that relationships outside the community are the primary bridge back. The parent who stayed present, the friend who kept calling, the sibling who never made it a contest between them and the church — those are the people who are still there when the doubts surface and the exit becomes possible.

You may be in a long season of watching and waiting and praying and maintaining a relationship that feels one-sided and unrewarding. That is a real cost and it deserves to be acknowledged honestly. You did not sign up for this. You are doing it because you love someone, and love sometimes looks like a very long and unglamorous faithfulness to a person who is not currently able to receive it fully.

That faithfulness is not nothing. In the economy of God, it is everything.

The final chapter of this book turns to the place where everything in this examination ultimately lands — a conclusion that tries to say honestly what thirty three years of watching, questioning, and reckoning have produced. Not tidy answers. But something true.

Chapter Fourteen

Still Seeking, Still Thinking

I began writing the original version of this book in 1993. I was still close enough to four years inside a Pentecostal community to feel the heat of it. I was angry, and I was right about some things, and I was wrong about others, and I could not yet tell the difference with any reliability. It took another thirty three years.

This is that book. Not the one I wrote in 1993. Not the one I published in 2013. This one, written in my mid-sixties, from a small town in rural Manitoba, by a man who has been a pastor and a student and a writer and a fool and a seeker and a skeptic and — through all of it — a follower of Jesus Christ who has never found a convincing reason to stop.

I said at the beginning that I was not writing to win an argument. I meant it. The

argument I was trying to win in 1993 felt urgent and important. From here it looks like what it was — a wounded man swinging at the people who had wounded him, with theological language providing a respectable cover for what was fundamentally a personal grievance. The theology was not entirely wrong. The spirit in which it was deployed was.

This book has been written in a different spirit, or at least I have tried to write it that way. Whether I have succeeded is for the reader to judge, not me.

Let me say plainly where I have landed on the questions this book has examined, because a conclusion that declines to conclude is not a conclusion but a performance of open-mindedness.

On healing: God heals. He healed in the pages of the New Testament and there is no compelling reason from the text to conclude that he has stopped. Prayer for the sick with genuine faith and genuine expectation is a

normative feature of Christian community, not a relic of the apostolic age. The word-of-faith theology that treats healing as a covenant right and blames the sick for their own suffering is cruel and unbiblical and should be named as such. These two conclusions are not in tension. They exist simultaneously and must be held simultaneously.

On tongues: The gift of tongues described in Acts is xenolalia — actual human languages spoken supernaturally. The practice described in 1 Corinthians is a different phenomenon, subject to strict communal regulation, never to be used as a mark of spiritual status or evidence of Spirit baptism. The cessationist argument from 1 Corinthians 13 fails exegetically. The Pentecostal argument that modern glossolalia is the same phenomenon as Pentecost also fails. What passes for tongues in most contemporary settings — coached, socially produced, linguistically unverifiable — does not match what either Testament describes. I do not

conclude from this that the genuine gift is impossible.

On prophecy: God speaks. He spoke throughout the Scriptures and Jesus promised his Spirit would guide his people into truth. New Testament prophecy is a fallible, community-tested gift for strengthening, encouraging, and comforting the body — not a mechanism for delivering binding divine directives to individuals about the major decisions of their lives. Any leader who delivers prophetic words with the authority of divine command and without the humility of communal accountability is not practicing what the New Testament describes. They are practicing something else and calling it by the same name.

On the experiences: Some of them are genuine encounters with God. Some of them are the ordinary products of human psychology in charged emotional settings. Some of them are manufactured. Distinguishing between these requires the

application of Jonathan Edwards's test — the fruit over time, in the ordinary texture of a life — and that test is rarely applied in a culture organized around the intensity of the moment rather than the faithfulness of the decade.

On the movement as a whole: It contains genuine good and genuine harm in proportions that vary enormously from community to community and leader to leader. It has recovered something the traditional church needed to recover — the expectation that God is present and active — and it has done damage that the traditional church rarely acknowledges because the traditional church is not the one paying the cost. Both things are true. Holding them both is harder than choosing one, but it is the only honest option available.

There are things I still do not know, and I want to name them honestly because dishonest certainty has done enough damage in this conversation already.

I do not know with certainty where the line is between a genuine supernatural experience and a psychologically produced one. I have had experiences in prayer that I cannot fully account for by ordinary means. I have also had experiences in highly charged religious settings that I later concluded were largely the product of atmosphere and expectation. The line between them is not always visible from the inside, and anyone who claims otherwise is not being honest about the limits of introspection.

I do not know whether the gifts of the Spirit operate today in exactly the same way they operated in the first century, or in a different form, or not at all, or in a form so different from what either side of the debate is describing that the debate itself is partly a category error. The Scripture does not resolve every question I have about this, and I have made my peace with that.

I do not know what to make of the many sincere, intelligent, spiritually serious people I

have known who operate in these gifts and whose lives show the fruit of genuine encounter with God. I cannot dismiss them as deluded and I cannot endorse everything they practice. Both responses feel inadequate. I live in the inadequacy.

What I do know, after all of it, is simpler and perhaps more important than any of the contested questions.

I know that Jesus Christ is Lord. I know that he rose from the dead. I know that the Spirit he sent is present in the life of every genuine believer, working toward the conformity of that life to the image of Christ through means that are usually quiet, usually slow, and usually nothing like what anyone would design if they were trying to make the thing impressive. I know that the Scripture is the primary vehicle through which God has chosen to communicate his character and his will to his people, and that it is sufficient for that purpose without needing to be supplemented by continuous fresh revelation. I

know that love is the greatest gift and the only criterion that will matter at the end, and that by that criterion every community in this book — including the traditional evangelical churches that have served as the implied contrast throughout — has a great deal to answer for.

I know that the people in the Miracle Chasers world are, in the overwhelming majority, sincere believers who are genuinely hungry for God and who have found in their communities something that feeds that hunger. I disagree with significant portions of what they have been taught. I do not doubt that many of them love Jesus more genuinely than I do.

I know that thirty three years of continued questioning has not diminished my faith but has clarified it. The faith I held in 1993 was thinner and more brittle than I knew — it needed to be right about everything because it could not survive being wrong about anything. The faith I hold now has been

tested by enough failures, enough honest admissions of error, enough encounters with questions I cannot answer, to have become something I trust rather than something I merely assert. That is not a faith without questions. It is a faith that has learned to carry questions without being undone by them.

I want to say something to two groups of readers before I close.

To the person who came to this book from inside the Miracle Chasers world, or who loves someone who is: I hope you found here something that took you seriously. Not agreed with you about everything — it would have been dishonest to pretend I do. But took the genuine hunger seriously. Took the genuine experience of God's presence seriously. Took the question of whether God still speaks and heals and moves with the same seriousness that the New Testament deserves. If this book has felt like a prosecution rather than a fair inquiry, I have failed at what I set out to do,

and I am sorry for that. If it has raised questions worth sitting with, I am glad.

To the traditional evangelical who came to this book looking for confirmation that the Miracle Chasers world is simply wrong: I hope you found more than that. The traditional church has its own failures of expectation, its own comfort with a Christianity so tame that it requires nothing from God and produces nothing that ordinary human effort could not produce unaided. The hunger that drives people into the signs-and-wonders world is a legitimate hunger, and before dismissing it, the traditional church owes itself an honest accounting of why it is not being fed where it is. That accounting is uncomfortable. It is also necessary.

The movement described in this book will not stop when this book is published. It will continue growing, continue shaping the global church, continue producing genuine fruit and genuine harm in the complicated proportions that human movements always

produce. New leaders will emerge. New controversies will arise. New communities will form around the promise of more, and new people will enter those communities carrying the same hunger that has always drawn people there.

They deserve honest guides. They deserve communities that take the Scripture seriously and the Spirit seriously simultaneously — that expect God to be present without manufacturing his presence, that pray for healing without blaming the sick, that welcome the gifts without mistaking the gifts for the Giver, that hold authority accountable because they understand that authority was never meant to be self-serving.

Those communities exist. They are not usually the ones filling conference stages or producing the music that fills everyone else's sanctuaries. They are doing their work quietly, faithfully, in places most people have never heard of — which has always been how the kingdom of God advances, despite every

century's attempts to make it more spectacular.

The questions in this book are not finished. They will not be finished until the partial gives way to the perfect and the seeking gives way to the seeing. Until then, the honest response to a world as complicated and as grace-filled as the one this movement inhabits is the same response that has always served the follower of Christ best.

Keep reading. Keep praying. Keep asking honest questions. Keep loving the people around you, including the ones who frighten you and the ones who have disappointed you and the ones who are wrong about things that matter. Keep showing up to the ordinary life of Christian community, with all its failures and all its grace.

And hold loosely the things that are not yet clear, trusting the one who promised that what is hidden will be revealed, and that those who seek will find.

So here we go. Still.

— *Rich Abbott*
Manitoba, Canada
2026

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About the Author

Rich Abbott is a former pastor with a Bachelor of Arts in theology and more than three decades of experience at the intersection of faith, Scripture, and honest inquiry. He has been a student of the church's history and controversies for most of his adult life, including four years spent inside a Pentecostal community that became the crucible for much of what he has written since.

Rich writes from Manitoba, Canada, where he lives with his wife Melody, his most trusted editorial partner and the person most likely to tell him when he has gotten something wrong. His writing spans Christian non-fiction, and wealth psychology all of it shaped by the conviction that honest questions serve people better than comfortable answers.

His other Christian titles are available at books.richabbott.com.

Also by Rich Abbott

The Prosperous Steward

What does the Bible actually say about money, wealth, and the responsibilities of those who have been entrusted with both? The Prosperous Steward examines the biblical framework for financial faithfulness — not the prosperity gospel's promise of abundance as a reward for faith, but the deeper and more demanding call to steward well what God has placed in your hands. For readers who want a Christian approach to money that takes Scripture seriously without being naive about the complexity of the financial world.

Created in His Image

What does it mean to be made in the image of God — and what difference should it make to the way you live, work, create, and relate to others? Created in His Image explores the theological depth of the Imago Dei and its practical implications for identity,

purpose, and the Christian life. A book for readers who want to go deeper than surface-level self-help and discover what Scripture says about who they actually are.

A Note to the Reader

If this book raised questions worth sitting with, the best thing you can do with it is pass it to someone else who needs to sit with them too. A review — even a short one — helps other readers find the book and decide whether it is worth their time. Honest reviews, whether you agreed with everything or not, are genuinely valuable.

If you found the book helpful and want to stay connected with Rich Abbott's writing, visit books.richabbott.com where new titles are added regularly.

Questions, responses, and honest disagreements are welcome. The conversation this book started does not have to end here.