

Counterfeit Kingdom



*The Dangers of
New Revelation,
New Prophets,
and New Age Practices
in the Church*

HOLLY PIVEC *and* R. DOUGLAS GEIVETT



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To the handsome stranger I met at Starbucks. (See chapter 2.)

—Holly

To my father, Howard, and my mother, Dixie

—Doug

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Authors' Note

In this book we share memories of our personal past experiences. We have retold events to the best of our memories and after carefully reviewing our own recorded observations. We also share stories of individuals who have been damaged by the New Apostolic Reformation movement, as those stories have been shared with us. Where possible, we obtained permission to share those stories; otherwise, we removed personally identifying details to protect individual privacy. We also changed the names of some individuals. There were other stories we very much wished to include but did not because the parents who shared them with us were nervous about possible repercussions if their adult children—who have become followers of the “apostles” and “prophets” and have broken off communication with them—were to learn that they spoke with us. These parents feared that their already fractured relationships would be broken beyond repair. Their fear sends a strong signal about the destructive effect of the movement we write about.

This book focuses especially on the *practices* of the New Apostolic Reformation movement—the concrete ways it is showing up in churches, ministries, and music. We have written other academic books that take a deeper dive into the theology, and they are heavily documented. They are *A New Apostolic Reformation? A Biblical Response to a Worldwide Movement*, and the condensed version of that book, *God's Super-Apostles: Encountering the Worldwide Prophets and Apostles Movement* (both published by

Lexham Press). While writing *Counterfeit Kingdom*, we completed another academic manuscript focusing on the theology of Bethel Church in Redding, California. Forthcoming with Cascade/Wipf & Stock, it is titled *Reckless Christianity: The Destructive New Teachings and Practices of Bill Johnson, Bethel Church, and the Global Movement of Apostles and Prophets*. If you have questions that are not answered by this book, we refer you to these other books and to Holly's blog at www.HollyPivec.com.

We also wish to note that when we refer to teachings of NAR leaders in this book, we do not mean to imply that every apostle, prophet, or teacher in this movement holds to all of the same beliefs or agrees on every point of theology and practice. But the practices and teachings we highlight here are those promoted by influential leaders in this movement and, for that reason, have gained entrance into a growing number of churches. We've welcomed every opportunity for direct dialogue with leaders of the movement.

*I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out
for those who cause divisions and create
obstacles contrary to the doctrine that
you have been taught; avoid them.*

—Romans 16:17

CHAPTER 1



Wake Up, Olive

It's a church that quite frankly messes with you: your theology, your way of doing church and your view of your walk with Jesus.

—Premier Christianity article
about Bethel Church¹

With more than 780,000 Instagram followers, Bethel Church in Redding, California, is one of the best-known churches in America and around the world. A major reason for this is their music. Bethel Music (with a staggering 1.7 million Instagram followers) has produced many of the most popular songs sung in churches and streamed online, including “No Longer Slaves,” “You Make Me Brave,” and “Reckless Love.” The pastors, including Bill Johnson and Kris Vallotton, have written numerous bestselling books, like *When Heaven Invades Earth* and *Supernatural Ways of Royalty*.

Obviously, many Christians know *of* Bethel Church. But do they *really* know what goes on there, and do they know what the church’s leaders actually teach?

Sure, they might know that the church is charismatic. But while that type of theology is not every Christian's cup of tea, there are plenty of faithful charismatic Christians. So maybe Bethel's beliefs aren't too far out there. Or are they?

Let us give you some revealing snapshots of Bethel behind the scenes, and you can judge for yourself.

Wake Up, Olive

The story is heartbreaking. Readers will no doubt empathize with those who walked through this tragedy, especially if they've ever been through something similar. But what Bethel did afterward shocked and disturbed Christians around the world, including many Pentecostal and charismatic Christians who expect God to perform miracles of healing sick people, but did not approve of Bethel's actions.

On December 14, 2019, two-year-old Olive Heiligenthal was sleeping in her bed and suddenly stopped breathing. When this was discovered, her family called 911, and paramedics rushed her to the hospital. But it was too late. Little Olive had died.

A senseless tragedy. Every parent's deepest fear. The hollow ache of helplessness with a funeral sure to follow.

But maybe not, this time around.

Most grieving parents would have planned a funeral. But not Olive's parents. Her mother, Kalley—a worship leader at Bethel—and her father, Andrew, refused to accept her death. Based on their peculiar understanding of the Bible—taught to them by Bethel Church leaders—they appeared 100 percent convinced that God would raise Olive from the dead. So they kept her body at the local morgue—just for a bit—while they waited for her to come back to life.

Through social media, Bethel leaders urged Christians around the world to join the parents in “declaring” a resurrection because they believed their spoken words, as children of God, had the power to bring Olive back. The hashtag #wakeupolive went viral. Tens of thousands across the globe joined the chorus of “declarations” posted to Facebook and Instagram.

“Praying, and declaring resurrection Life for Olive . . . Little Olive, arise, in Jesus’s name!”

“Father, in Jesus’s name we decree and declare Spirit of life come back into Olive!”

“Awake little Olive, we release resurrection power into your body in the name of Jesus.”²

Even well-known worship leaders from other churches, including Hillsong’s Taya Gaukrodger and Brooke Ligertwood, joined the Instagram chorus. American singer and songwriter Kari Jobe made what must have been a startling announcement to her one million followers: “We’re still standing in faith for Olive to wake up.”³

The story was picked up by national news. The *Washington Post*, the *Daily Mail*, *USA Today*, *Slate*, and *BuzzFeed* were among the many high-profile media outlets that covered it. *BuzzFeed* used words like *heartbreaking* and *horrifying* in this description of the church’s attempts to raise Olive.

This week, an Instagram plea from a mom who is a prominent figure in an influential yet controversial Christian church has gone viral. Her request is both heartbreaking and horrifying: She is asking her church and believers across social media to pray for her child, who died suddenly

over the weekend, to be raised from the dead. . . .
Thousands of people are rallying around the
idea that the power of prayer, and spreading it
through social media, can literally “breathe life”
back into a child.⁴

Riveted by these reports, people around the world watched the
story unfold.

One day passed.

No resurrection.

Two days.

Nothing.

Three days. Surely this would be the day. After all, Jesus was
raised three days after His death. So Bethel’s followers reasoned.

Still nothing.

But the story was not yet over. They persisted. “Day 4 is a
really good day for resurrection,” Kalley wrote on Instagram.⁵
Later that night, the couple stood on the church’s stage, singing at
the top of their lungs: “Olive, come out of that grave, come out of
that grave in Jesus’s name!”⁶ The congregation joined with them,
dancing, raising their arms in the air above their heads, and com-
manding Olive to come back to life.

The next day, Kalley repeated the same words, “Day 5 is a
really good day for resurrection.”⁷

Finally, after six days, the church suddenly gave up. *USA Today* declared: “Olive Hasn’t Been Raised: After Praying for a
Miracle, Girl’s Family Now Plans Memorial.” Many other news
organizations ran similar headlines.

The conclusion to the dramatic events of the previous week
was anticlimactic. Bethel leaders sent out a press release announc-
ing that the family had begun planning a memorial service. Their
attempts to raise her had been loud and took place very much in

the public eye. In contrast, the service was planned quietly and held behind the scenes. Almost as if they were hoping to draw as little attention as possible to the funeral—and their failure to raise Olive.

What Bethel saw as bold Christian faith, other Christians viewed as foolishness. The declarations, feverish dancing, and denial had come to an end. Olive's parents were left with nothing but a hole in their hearts and promises from a church that didn't pan out.

What would become of Olive's parents? concerned onlookers wondered aloud. Would their faith survive? What about the church's followers throughout the world who truly believed Olive would be raised? Would they be so disillusioned that they'd give up on church—or even worse, on God?

Many worried that Bethel's "crazy" antics would taint the way non-churched people think about all Christians and damage their witness to a watching world. Sadly, they were right. One popular atheist blogger, who has more than half a million Facebook followers, saw an opportunity to take a jab at *all* religious beliefs, not just Bethel's. Hemant Mehta—who goes by the pen name "The Friendly Atheist"—wrote:

My heart goes out to the family. I don't know what they're going through. But the church needs to rethink its own theology because it's downright cruel to tell people their dead loved ones might come back *if only they pray hard enough*. It takes religion to add a second layer of misery on top of already unthinkable grief.⁸

No doubt many of the Friendly Atheist's followers felt confirmed in their belief that Christians are unreasoning buffoons.

Another blogger suggested that Bethel exploited the case of little Olive by releasing a Bethel Music song titled “Come Out of That Grave (Resurrection Power).” The album debuted within six months of her death.⁹

Of course, some still defend Bethel for trying to raise Olive. Maybe the church’s beliefs are bizarre—they say—but the people meant well, and that’s what matters. But regardless of their good intentions, there’s no denying the devastating consequences of their actions and their message.

Grave Sucking

It’s not just activities taking place at the church that have raised eyebrows. So have the “field trips.”

What would possess a bunch of college-age students to hang around a graveyard? The desire for miraculous powers.

Some were sprawled on their backs on the tops of grave markers. Others lay face down on the grass before the headstones. One was curled up in a fetal position in front of a tombstone, as though nourishing herself on the corpse’s still-living spiritual power. Bethelites call this power the “anointing.”

Turns out the students were from the Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry (BSSM), and they were taking part in a practice called “grave sucking” or “grave soaking.” They would visit the gravesites of well-known “miracle-workers”—such as the British faith healer Smith Wigglesworth and the American “healing” evangelist Kathryn Kuhlman—and try to “suck” (or “soak”) up the dead miracle workers’ powers. What reason did they give for their ghoulish goings-on? They pointed to a little-known Bible verse, 2 Kings 13:21. It’s the story of when a dead man’s body came into contact with Elisha’s bones and the man came to life.

Is there a new reformation happening in the church?

It depends on who you ask.

The New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) is a popular and fast-growing new movement of Christians who emphasize signs and wonders, and teach that God is giving new revelation through new apostles and prophets. But is this biblical Christianity?

In *Test the Spirits*, apologists and NAR experts Holly Pivec and Douglas Geivett show how the NAR's key tenets distort the gospel, twist the Scriptures, are influenced by New Age practices, and lead faithful Christians to shipwreck their faith. They also offer practical suggestions for readers who are already influenced by the NAR, who are curious about it, or who have friends or family members who have been swept up by the movement.

What used to be on the fringes of the church is now mainstream, and many are being influenced by it unaware. This book is a wake-up call.

HOLLY PIVEC is a blogger, author, and speaker, as well as a pastor's wife and homeschooling mom. She has a master's degree in apologetics from Biola University, where she also served as university editor for nearly a decade. She has co-authored two books about the New Apostolic Reformation: *A New Apostolic Reformation?* and *God's Super-Apostles*. She operates a popular blog which has followers from around the world, and has spoken and written for several audiences and outlets.

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