

A Short History of the Association of Vineyard Churches

Introduction

I grew up rooted in historical evangelicalism. My mother was converted to Christ at a Young Life parent's meeting and led me to Christ when I was a boy. I went on to attend Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois, and after graduation worked for Youth for Christ. My future in the evangelical stream would have seemed secure except for one unnerving moment at Wheaton's Science Station in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Two friends laid their hands on me and prayed that I would be "baptized" with the Holy Spirit. Within minutes I had an encounter with the Holy Spirit so powerful I was nearly shaken off my bunk. Some weeks later, back at the college, I lay in my bed looking up at the Edmund Chapel steeple and began to pray in tongues.

My new experience of the Spirit was not embraced within my evangelicalism so I prayed in tongues in private. I also prayed for someone to mentor me in the works of the Spirit into which I so longed to look. Little did I know that all over the world there were people just like me looking for the same things.

It was during my Gordon-Conwell years that my dilemma came to a head. I was still an evangelical theologically but my hunger for life in the Spirit had led my wife and I to an Assembly of God church. When I explored ordination with that denomination I was rejected because I was unwilling to adhere to their "initial evidence" doctrine of baptism in the Spirit as evidenced by speaking in tongues. Not dismayed we tried to pastor within the Evangelical Free Church, but they wouldn't have me because I spoke in tongues. I was between a rock and a hard place until one day in 1982, shortly before graduation, I was invited to hear a man named John Wimber teach on healing.

I went to the meeting reluctantly but was pleasantly surprised to hear a standard lecture on the kingdom of God ala the required readings of George Ladd for my Life of Jesus course (*New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Eerdmans, 1974). The music was contemporary and directed to God. I liked the beat. Oh, did I mention that no one was wearing a tie? It was when Wimber had a "word," however, about a woman with a deaf ear that I sat up and took notice. Sure enough there was a woman there with one ear deaf since birth. John and others laid hands on her and prayed with their eyes open, explaining that they were looking for signs of the Spirit's activity. Then, suddenly, the lady could hear out of that ear. This, I thought, is what I had been looking for since my days at Wheaton.

I give this autobiographical statement simply because I can. The Vineyard is so new that those of us who are in it have lived it. Many of us are evangelicals who have had encounters with the Holy Spirit along our journey and at some point met John Wimber. It was John who gave us language for what we were experiencing and dared to invite the Spirit into the framework of our evangelicalism.

Church Growth expert, Peter Wagner, dubbed what began to happen to evangelicals in the 1980s as the "third wave" of the Holy Spirit (*The Third Wave of the Holy Spirit*, Ann Arbor, Michigan, Servant Publications, 1988). Wagner saw the birth of the Pentecostals at the turn of the century as the first wave. The second wave swept the world in at least three different forms, primarily in the '60s and early '70s. First there were the Neo-Pentecostals comprised primarily of those out of historic denominations such as the Episcopalians and Presbyterians. Next there was a strong Catholic "charismatic" movement that impacted Catholicism worldwide. Finally, there was a massive evangelistic net that swept in thousands

upon thousands of young rock ‘n rollers known as the Jesus People. The third wave is represented by the events that follow in the next few pages.

It was the second wave that John Wimber had come to reject. He was converted to Christ out of the music industry and quickly demonstrated an uncanny ability to lead people to Christ through what he called “intuition.” It never occurred to him that these intuitions might be gifts of the Holy Spirit because the Quaker church he attended taught that these gifts were no longer in operation in the present age.

His ability to evangelize and grow churches eventually led Peter Wagner to invite Wimber to be the first employee of the new Fuller Seminary Institute of Church Growth in Pasadena, California. During the years 1974-77, Wimber worked with over twenty denominations in every state in union. He saw the church, warts and all. As he traveled, he began to dream of a church that he would like to go to. Despite his dreams, his spiritual life began to dry up. It culminated one night in a hotel in Detroit, Michigan, when God woke him up saying, “John, I’ve seen your ministry (clearly implying that He wasn’t too impressed), but now I’m going to show you mine.” John wept into the morning saying to God, “This is what I’ve always wanted.”

While all these things had been happening, John had also begun to review his position on the gifts of the Holy Spirit. His contacts with visiting missionaries at Fuller had filled his mind with amazing stories of church growth accompanied by miracles such as healing and the casting out of demons. Wimber was aided by Peter Wagner who was also going through a similar “paradigm shift” in his worldview. They both began to realize that their anti-supernatural stance had been based more in their modernistic worldview than the study of Scripture. It was at this point that Wimber began to read the kingdom theology of George Ladd, which gave him the exegetical foundation for the ongoing ministry of the Spirit in the church. John and his wife, Carol, had also been attending one of the churches affiliated with the Calvary Chapel movement where the teaching of pastor Chuck Smith on the ministry of the Spirit was practical and timely.

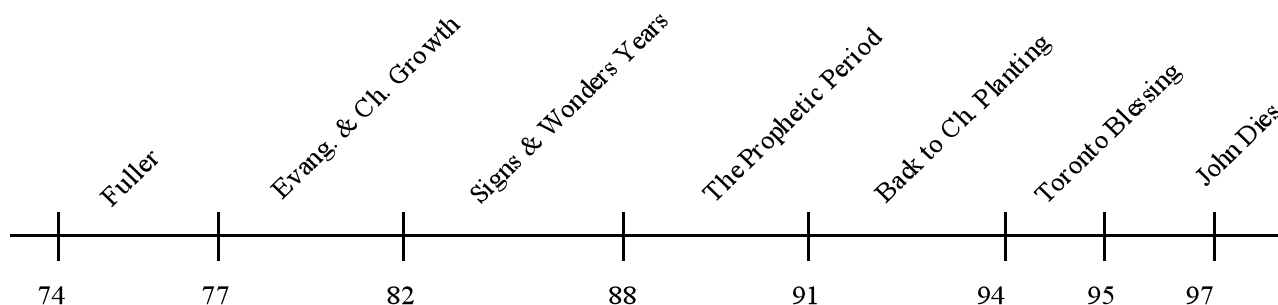
Joining himself to a group of Quakers that had been meeting on Sunday nights at their house, Wimber began services for a new church on Mother’s Day, 1977. They affiliated with Calvary Chapel as Wimber now began to explore the possibilities of seeing the same kind of church growth accompanied by miracles as had been attested to by the missionaries at Fuller. Shortly after starting the church, they began to study spiritual gifts on Wednesday nights and on Sundays Wimber began to teach on the subject of healing from the Gospel of Luke. After teaching on healing for nine months and seeing no one healed, they were ready to quit. God gave Wimber an ultimatum, either teach on healing or leave the ministry. Wimber chose to stay and teach and before the tenth month they saw their first person healed. From that point the healings began to trickle, then pour in.

While all this had been happening, one could not say that their church was “charismatic.” There were no outbreaks of tongues or other overt manifestations of the Spirit—that is until May of 1980. Wimber asked a young man converted during the Jesus People movement named Lonnie Frisbee to give his testimony. After finishing, Frisbee invited all the people 25 years old and younger to come forward. He then invited the Holy Spirit to bring God’s power. What happened is now legendary in Vineyard folklore. The young people were filled with the Spirit, began to fall over, speak in tongues and shake. Witnesses said it looked like a battlefield.

Those young people, many of them junior high and high school age, were so lit on fire for God that they began to see their friends healed and brought to Christ from all over town, baptizing them in swimming pools and Jacuzzis. Within months, Wimber’s church had catapulted into growth, launching what he would later come to call “power evangelism” i.e., conversions precipitated by healings and miracles.

Since this watershed period essentially launched the Vineyard movement, we need to pause for a moment and give an overall framework for the periods of our history. Most of these periods center around John Wimber’s quest to find the radical middle between his historic, doctrinal evangelicalism and his desire to have Pentecostal power (see Bill Jackson, *The Quest for the Radical Middle*, Cape Town, South Africa, Vineyard International Press, 1999). In retrospect, he had two primary callings, to found a church planting movement called *The Association of Vineyard Churches* and to address a deficient pneumatology in the evangelical church. He accomplished the later through seminars, courses, conferences and writings as church leaders hungered throughout the world for an experience of the Spirit within an evangelical framework.

The Wimber/Vineyard history can be broken down into the following periods:



We have already examined the Fuller years and the early years of John’s church where he was testing the waters of evangelism and church growth as led by the Holy Spirit. The real beginning of the Association of Vineyard churches begins with that Sunday night experience of the Spirit in 1980 and Wimber’s separation from Calvary Chapel in 1982 to align with a fledgling church planting movement called the Vineyard. We now turn to a brief overview of these events.

The Signs and Wonders Years

After the Spirit was poured out on John’s church, Peter Wagner sat up and took notice. Wimber was invited to teach a course at the Fuller School of World Mission called MC 510 (MC stands for “mission class”) *Signs, Wonders and Church Growth*. The class not only included lecture but a “clinic” time where the Spirit was invited into the room to perform healings and miracles. From the outset, these and other manifestations of the Spirit were prevalent after each class. With Wimber’s evangelical notoriety as a church growth expert, the word quickly went out. *Christian Life Magazine* devoted a whole issue to the class and within months MC 510 was catapulted into worldwide visibility. Wimber would teach the class numerous times, eventually opening it up to the public in conference form. Kevin Spinger expanded the course syllabus into the book *Power Evangelism* (San Francisco, CA, Harper & Row, 1986), later followed by *Power Healing* (San Francisco, CA, Harper & Row, 1987), the course syllabus for MC 511.

When Wimber began to heal the sick and pursue the Holy Spirit’s ministry in the main church meetings, conflict began with the Calvary Chapel network of churches led by Chuck Smith. Calvary history had been

replete with Spirit activity but it had eventually been relegated to the “back room” where it was less visible. The tension mounted to the point where it was suggested in a meeting with Calvary leaders that Wimber’s church stop using the Calvary name and affiliate with a young pastor in West Los Angeles named Kenn Gulliksen who had started a church named the Vineyard. Within a short time, Gulliksen’s church had spun off sister churches, all with the Vineyard name. Wimber changed the name of his church to the Vineyard in the spring of 1982. Gulliksen then turned over the churches under his care to Wimber, thus beginning Wimber’s leadership over the Vineyard.

With Wimber’s catalytic prowess at the helm and the Holy Spirit’s wind in the sails, the Vineyard sailed out of safe harbor and out into rapid and stormy seas. By 1986, with the visibility of the MC 510 class and Wimber’s aggressive conferencing, people and churches right and left wanted to affiliate with the Vineyard. They, like I, had come aboard to recover the life of the Spirit in the church within the moorings of historic evangelicalism. By the end of 1986 there were 136 Vineyard churches with twice as many churches projected for the following year.

With growth, however, came severe attack. Fuller put a moratorium on the Signs and Wonders courses claiming that the “clinics” belonged in the realm of the church, not the confines of an academic institution. Other criticisms came from books and denominational periodicals originating during this period and extending on into the late 1990s. Men such as former Dallas Seminary professor, Jack Deere, and Wayne Grudem, chair of systematic theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, took up their pens in defense of Wimber’s theology and the Vineyard. By the grace of God, the movement was able to negotiate tricky waters and stay the course toward growth.

The Prophetic Years

All this took its toll on Wimber, however. He suffered from angina, was overweight, overworked, and by 1988 he felt like he was going to collapse. A remarkable turn in the story appears right at this point. A prophetic minister named Paul Cain began to prophecy with great power to Wimber and the Vineyard and the movement went into a period of renewal. These years also saw a relationship develop with Mike Bickle, a young pastor of an independent church in Missouri called Kansas City Fellowship. Bickle had gathered a number of prophetic figures to his ministry, most notably Bob Jones. Men like Cain and Jones began to regularly minister within the Vineyard with great affect.

Some in the movement were skeptical, however, and wanted to proceed with caution. The messages of Bickle and the prophetic ministers were based in the idea that various gifts of the Spirit had been lost over the course of the ages and were in the process of being restored. The high degree of revelation being received by the prophets was seen as an indication that the prophetic ministry was exceeding that of the New Testament (the “greater works” prediction of Jesus made in John 14.12). After the prophetic had been restored to the church, next would come the apostolic ministry, which would precede the Second Coming of Christ.

Wimber bit hard on the prophetic bait, his own son being delivered from drug addiction through a word from Bob Jones. When Wimber’s meetings in London in 1990 failed to bring the type of revival expected from a prophecy by Paul Cain, Wimber felt embarrassed and began to distance himself from Bickle and the restorationist thesis. Bickle himself had been embroiled in defending accusations against false prophecy and aggrandizement and had come under the Vineyard banner becoming Metro Vineyard in Kansas City. He was later acquitted from most charges and admirably accepted responsibility for the others. When it

was all said and done, Wimber led the Vineyard back to its missional, church planting roots and Metro Vineyard eventually relinquished the Vineyard name and became Metro Christian Fellowship.

Back to Church Planting

The pastors' conference in Denver in the summer of 1991 moved us away from the revivalism of the prophetic and back to our genetic code in evangelism and church planting. Structures were set in place to proactively plant churches with proper training and oversight. The denominational exception was that the Vineyard was not intending to start its own seminaries and Bible colleges, choosing rather to use traditional evangelical systems of education. The specifics of church planting and leadership were imbedded into formalized internships in larger Vineyard churches.

The Denver conference also introduced an expansion into world missions. The Vineyard had always been involved overseas, but usually in the role of renewal. Many of the church leaders in countries inviting the Vineyard to do meetings had asked that there be no church planting efforts in those countries. During the years 1992-1994, the moratorium was lifted as Wimber felt God leading the Vineyard to expand their churches extensively around the globe. As of this writing we have almost a thousand churches in over 50 countries, seven of those having been released as their own as self-governing associations of Vineyard churches.

The Toronto Blessing

For one young man, the new Vineyard emphasis was not enough. Randy Clark, pastor of the Vineyard on the south side of St. Louis, Missouri, wanted more of God's power in his life. Prophecies given to him throughout his life pointed to more that God wanted to do with him. In a desperate spiritual condition, Randy attended meetings in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in the summer of 1993 led by visiting South African evangelist Rodney Howard-Browne. During ministry after the preaching Randy went up for prayer again and again. Each time he fell to the floor, overcome by the Spirit of God. He went back to St. Louis a new man. Manifestations of God's Presence began to break out his church immediately. People began to fall, shake, laugh and receive healing from physical illness.

When asked to share what God had been doing at a regional Vineyard pastors' conference, the same phenomena was spread to the other pastors. Word of what had happened at this conference reached the ears of John and Carol Arnott, Vineyard pastors of a small church near the airport in Toronto, Canada. Sensing that this was what he was praying for, Arnott asked Randy Clark to come up for a handful of meetings at his church in January of 1994. Little did they know that the St. Louis pastor would not leave Toronto until March 26th. Amazing things began to happen at the Toronto Airport Vineyard from the outset of Clark's preaching. Similar phenomena as described occurred in each instance with the added benefit that people began receive salvation in Christ. The demonized were freed. Joy emanated from people's faces and the word spread around the country. Suddenly people began showing up from the States. Before long, planeloads began coming from Britain, then places in Asia, then from all over the world. Eventually every continent except Antarctica was represented. The most significant thing was that people who traveled to the Toronto meetings took the power of the Spirit home with them, almost as if they had taken a fiery brigand with them in their suitcase. Similar things began to break out wherever they went. Before long there were other centers of renewal such as in Pensacola, Florida, Pasadena, California, Kelowna, Canada and London, England. The so-called "Toronto Blessing" had begun.

Since both of the main pastors initially involved with the Toronto Blessing were from the Vineyard, John Wimber set out to try to pastor the renewal from a distance. Exotic manifestations were capturing the attention of many, things such as excessive (at least to some) laughter and sounds coming from people being ministered to that sounded like animal noises. Before long John Wimber was inundated with requests to put a stop to these things lest the ground gained against the Vineyard critics be lost.

Wimber, ever cautious to shut things down prematurely, wrote corrective articles in his in-house publication called *Vineyard Reflections*. These things were not enough to keep Bible Answer Man, Hank Hanegraaff, from using his radio program and writings to lambaste the Vineyard for what was going on. Vineyard parishioners around the country were shaken to hear the Vineyard being called “a great end-times delusion from Satan.” Fearing that Toronto was moving away from the Vineyard genetic code, an emergency board meeting was called where Toronto leaders were invited to interact with Vineyard leaders from around the U.S.A. Upon conclusion, the board published a report offering parameters to govern the renewal.

By 1995, the Toronto Blessing was getting a lot of visibility. Newscaster, Peter Jennings, did a television special called *In the Name of God*, which featured the Vineyard. Phil Donahue had Toronto leaders on his talk show and investigative reporters from *A Current Affair* were preparing to air their own perspective on what was transpiring. Even these things were not enough to raise Wimber’s ire. It was when John Arnott released a book called *The Father’s Blessing* that Wimber stepped in. The book featured a chapter attempting to give biblical interpretations to some of the more exotic phenomena of the Holy Spirit. Since Wimber’s name was on the back endorsing the book, even though Wimber had not seen this particular chapter, it appeared that Wimber was approving hermeneutical methodology outside of the historical and grammatical exegetical methods endorsed within evangelicalism. It was at this point that Wimber drew the line. An emergency meeting was called in Toronto.

The Toronto leaders assumed Wimber was coming to work through their differences to find middle ground. They were completely taken by surprise when Wimber gave them an ultimatum. Within hours the Toronto leaders affirmed their solidarity with the way they were pastoring the renewal and removed themselves from the Vineyard. For some the separation was a great relief, for others a tragedy. In either case, both the Vineyard and Toronto have moved on, the Vineyard getting “back on track” one more time and Toronto forming its own network of churches. As has historically been true, church rifts have resulted in church growth. God is sovereign.

The Post Wimber Era

John Wimber, after suffering for years with angina, cancer and a stroke, tragically went to be with the Lord on November 17, 1997, after a hallway fall had led to a massive brain hemorrhage. The Vineyard had continued to grow throughout John’s journey toward God but many now wondered what would happen to the movement. Would it fracture into old-line Vineyard churches, “seeker” churches and churches pursuing the renewal? Leadership would be the key.

Acting AVC USA Director, Todd Hunter, one of Wimber’s earliest disciples, was set in place as National Director in the spring of 1998 after unanimous approval of the board. All board members voluntarily turned in their resignations to give Hunter the freedom to choose his team. Most of those men have since been retained, having clearly demonstrated faithfulness commensurate with the gifts and callings on their lives.

Hunter addressed the “church he would build” at our national pastors’ conference in Anaheim, California, in the summer of 1999. He told us that he intended to lead us beyond the battles won in the 1980s for intimate worship and the Holy Spirit’s Presence welcomed in evangelical settings. All over the world people were singing Vineyard songs and laying hands on the sick for healing; Baptists, Lutherans, Presbyterians co-laboring side-by-side with charismatics and Pentecostals, singing the same songs and yearning for the same demonstrations of God’s power. He challenged the movement now to redefine itself not in ecclesiastical terms, as we had done in the past i.e., the best of evangelicalism and the best of Pentecostalism but in biblical terms. The Vineyard’s challenge was to now look forward and define itself as existing for God and the fulfillment of the Great Commission of Jesus (Mt. 24.14).