

## **John Wimber changes his mind**

[Phillip Jensen](#) | 24 April, 1990

Just prior to the Spiritual Warfare Conference in March, John Wimber met with three of Sydney's leading evangelicals. The discussions, which lasted just under three hours, were requested by some Sydney people who had reservations about the Signs and Wonders ministry. Present at the meeting with John Wimber were Jack Deere and Paul Cain from the Vineyard Ministries, Dan Armstrong from Kairos, and John Woodhouse, David Cook and Phillip Jensen from Sydney. Although the meeting was conducted privately at John Wimber's hotel it was agreed from the outset that what was said privately would be published openly later. Careful notes were made of the discussion.

We began the meeting by asking John Wimber if his public preaching and private views were the same. We explained that it was rumoured that there were differences.

Hurt by this accusation, John very generously and openly declared his views with the kind of humility, compassion and laid-back friendliness for which he is well known. Six areas of discussion ensued:

- the use of money
- the healing miracles
- power evangelism
- the sufficiency of the Scriptures
- the concern for truth
- the divisiveness of the Signs and Wonders ministry.

### **1. The use of money**

We were assured by John that profits from the Australian conferences would not go to him personally, nor to his American organization, but were invested in the continued growth of the Vineyard International Ministry. We were promised that a full account of the books would be sent to us by Kairos Ministries, the local group responsible for financial arrangements.

### **2. The healing ministry**

John seems persuaded that great miracles of healing are taking place by God's work in the world today. He rejects the idea that he is a healer; it is God who heals. He quickly and freely gives countless anecdotes of healing, and promises that documentation of the Vineyard's Ministry of healing will be forthcoming.

He admitted that not all diseases are equally responsive to healing. Blindness, for example, has a success rate of 3-8%, depending upon the cause of the blindness—blindness from disease having more healings than blindness from accidents or birth.

Three issues need to be dealt within assessing these claimed healings:

1. the facts—whether genuine miraculous intervention by God is actually taking place
2. the theological significance of whatever miracles take place

3. how we handle the issue pastorally.

1. The first issue was tackled by raising the possible healing of children with Down syndrome. This genetic disease cannot be caused or healed by psychosomatic 'mind-over-body' factors. It is an ideal test case disease, being relatively easy to diagnose genetically both before and after the 'healing'.

John Wimber claimed to have prayed over more than 200 children with Down syndrome. To his genuine disappointment, only one of the 200 have shown any sign of healing. This one child still has many of the symptoms of his problem (i.e. visual features), but has been able to reach "the lower end of the normal range" in educational attainments. John was careful to emphasize that it was the lower end, but within the normal range.

The healing rate, then, for Down syndrome is 0.5%, and the healing that did take place was only partial (unlike Jesus' healings). Why this disease is so resistant, John has no idea. On further consultation with doctors working in this area, we have been assured that for a Down syndrome child to be in the lower end of the normal range of academic achievement is not unusual or remarkable, let alone miraculous. From a medical viewpoint, John Wimber's 0.5% success rate with Down syndrome is less than is achieved through the efforts of health professionals.

The implication this has for other 'healings' of backaches and headaches seemed to escape John Wimber completely. We know that many illnesses are psychological or psychosomatic. We know of the placebo effect where a patient takes what he believes is a cure for his problem (but which is actually a sugar pill), and improves. The evidence so far suggests that John Wimber heals in the 'sugar pill area'. The area where the New Testament speaks of healing and where he talks of healing seem to be wholly resistant to his ministry. That is, to put it bluntly, it is to be seriously doubted that any miraculous healings are taking place at all. (The failure so far to provide Christian doctors with cases to verify from the Sydney conference only contributes to the growing doubt over any genuine miracles. See Philip Selden's account on page 19.)

2. The second issue is the theological significance of healing. Given the very low percentage of healings, we asked John Wimber if he considered that his healings were like Jesus' or the Apostles'. He quickly and rightly saw that they were quite radically different. We asked about the claims of his books and his previous teaching that the powerlessness of evangelicals lay in their failure to pray for and claim the Signs and Wonders of the Kingdom, seen in Jesus and the Apostles. He replied that thanks to the advice of Jack Deere, he had come to understand that the current miracles fit into the New Testament not at the point of Jesus and the Apostles and the coming of the Kingdom, but in [1 Corinthians 12-14](#) and the gifts of healing.

This change of mind seriously compromises the stance of the previous Signs and Wonders conferences, Vineyard Ministries and John Wimber's books. He was asked if he would be explaining this change of mind to the Sydney conference, but he declined. (As it turned out, both views were expressed during the course of the week.)

3. The third issue of healing is the pastoral consequences of the claims for miracles. John Wimber is very open about not being healed himself. He also said that he does not promise healing for everyone or blame lack of faith as the sole reason for lack of healing.

However, when asked if he would be open with enquirers and tell them of the small probability of healing, he declined. He wants to encourage people to put their faith in God and call upon

him for healing. He wants people to know that God can heal and wants to heal, and therefore to ask expectantly. He paralleled this to salvation/forgiveness. He said that we do not say to people that they only have a chance of being saved. We say that God can save and wants to save, and so we encourage people to put their faith in God and call for forgiveness. Such a confusion of categories is appalling.

Like a politician, John Wimber is not promising unequivocally that each person will be healed. But it would seem that his mixture of generalization and over-confidence results in all but the wary being misled.

### **3. Power evangelism**

One of the most contentious parts of John Wimber's speaking and writing has been his distinction between evangelism and power evangelism, with the resulting distinction between Christian conversion (inferior and superior).

When this matter was raised, John Wimber expressed dissatisfaction with his teaching both in Canberra (where he spoke of 'natural' and 'supernatural' evangelism) and in his book. He explained that his book was not written by him, but came from tapes and notes of his seminars. He had not read the manuscript in detail or critically before its publication.

When asked to publicly repudiate this false distinction (between natural and supernatural evangelism), to withdraw his erroneous book and to desist from talking of power evangelism, he equivocated. The book is wrong and "needs re-writing" and he was "wrong" in his address at Canberra, but somehow this is not to be taken as a serious problem.

He agreed that the book on power evangelism was imbalanced, lacking as it does any real exposition of the gospel or evangelism. However, this was due to the manner of its composition and plain oversight.

### **4. Sufficiency of Scriptures**

This topic was more difficult to discuss because of the need for precise terminology to avoid misunderstandings.

John Wimber was keen to stand in the Evangelical tradition, upholding the inspiration and authority of the infallible and inerrant Scripture which is sufficient for all matters of the Christian life. However, this was because he had not understood the implications of his 'words of knowledge', which go well beyond Scripture and play an essential part in his Christian living. John's adviser, Jack Deere, assured him and us that he did not believe in the sufficiency of Scripture.

Thus, the ministry of gifts is used to add significantly to the Scripture as the authoritative voice of God for Christian living.

### **5. Truth**

No-one claiming to be a Christian can be unconcerned about truth. All of us must vote for it, along with motherhood, prayer, the Lord's supper and apple pie.

John Wimber's teaching on 'The Third Wave of the Holy Spirit' proposes that the Pentecostal movement at the turn of the century and the Charismatic movement of the 1960s were truly movements of the Holy Spirit. However, John Wimber thinks that some of the central teachings

of these two movements (concerning baptism in the Spirit and the place of tongues) were wrong. So the movements which taught error were inspired by the Spirit of truth!

This kind of confusion of truth and error is reflected in his books when opponents of evangelical faith are portrayed as having conversions or being great saints and advocates of signs and wonders. This is particularly so with his ready acceptance of Roman Catholics.

When the matter was raised with John, he refused to countenance criticism of charismatics. He accepted that healing in the name of Mary was wrong. He pleaded ignorance of some of his Roman Catholic examples in his books. He didn't know much about them; in fact he did not even know who they were or that he had cited them.

## **6. Unity**

The discussion of truth led naturally to the issue of unity. John Wimber sees the 'third wave' as a unifying force for Christians. Those outside it see it as divisive. Each can blame the other for the divisions.

It was suggested that the 'third wave' was not so much uniting Christians as re-aligning them on the basis of common experience instead of truth. This was denied by John; he wanted to say that truth was important.

When challenged about our unity in the cross, he again denied that he had been distracted from the cross, or that he allowed the signs and wonders ministry to be less than cross-centred. The Vineyard songbook was cited, where 52 out of 53 songs fail to mention the cross! John agreed that this was awful. He has tried to correct this, but his writers have very little or no theological training. (Those present at the evangelistic rally held on the Thursday night of the conference may have noticed the striking absence of the cross or repentance in the preaching.)

Discussion ranged widely and freely over these topics for almost three hours. The meeting concluded with an invitation to cancel the Spiritual Warfare Conference and to go home to America.

Summarizing such a meeting is very difficult. On all appearances, John was trying to answer the questions of his critics honestly and openly to satisfy us and to gain our fellowship, goodwill and acceptance. The concluding invitation to cancel the conference was an obvious disappointment to him. He did not seem to expect our continued dissatisfaction with his answers.

However, his lack of theological understanding and education makes him a most dangerous friend. He is like the 'loaded dog' of Henry Lawson's story. It is his friends who are most likely to be damaged by his errors.

None of us has to be right 100% of the time in order to teach. But the teacher is judged with greater strictness for the damage that he can do. We teachers must be clear on the basics, ready to admit error, quick to correct and withdraw misleading ideas, and willing to take responsibility for our faults. We must work hard to be accurate and to be accurately understood.

From the outset of our discussions, John said that God had told him not to read anything critical of his ministry because it would discourage and embitter him. He has followed this advice, and relies on his friends and co-workers to screen all critical material.

John Wimber has changed his mind on cardinal points of his teachings, yet he will not come clean publicly and denounce his former ideas. Rather, he continues to express himself in a

confusing mixture of old errors, and new and contradictory insights. The truth that he does teach only further confuses Christian people into following his thoughtless theology.

In encouraging people to get in touch with the 'supernatural', he misrepresents the effects. In seeking unity, he welcomes and promotes the enemies of the gospel. In emphasizing extra-biblical phenomena, he undermines the centrality of the cross, the power of the word of God, the sufficiency of Scripture, and the unity of our common commitment to the truth of the gospel.

He maybe compassionate, loving, genuine and sincere, but so was the loaded dog!