

Culture of Honor: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment. By Danny Silk, Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, 2009. 213 pp. \$12.99

In *Culture of Honor: Sustaining a Supernatural Environment*, Danny Silk sets out to explain the beliefs and practices needed to create a “culture of honor” in the local church. This paradigm-shifting environment—practiced and promoted by Bethel Church where Silk serves as a senior leader—is created as a church learns to discern and receive people in their God-given identities and roles (26). It is based on Bethel’s principle of honor, which says, “Accurately acknowledging who people are will position us to give them what they deserve and to receive the gift of who they are in our lives” (25). A popular and pithy quote by Bill Johnson of Bethel Church says it best: “A culture of honor is celebrating who a person is without stumbling over who they’re not.”

In *this* culture of honor, however, the church recognizes not only teachers, pastors, and evangelists, but also modern-day apostles and prophets to provide the foundation for leadership in the local church. When a church embraces all five of these roles, a “funnel” is created that brings the “focus and priorities of Heaven to earth” (26-27). Silk explains that this culture has enabled Bethel Church to establish relationships and roles that “attract and sustain the outpouring of God’s presence and power in [their] midst” (27).

Identifying Challenges and Limiting Scope

The challenge of reviewing this book is that it is worthy of both commendation and criticism. For example, while Silk’s *principle* of honor is surely a biblical and necessary component of a healthy gospel culture in the local church, the *expression* of that principle through the recognition of modern-day apostles and prophets is not. In other words, the problem is not with the principle of honor (cf. 1 Pet. 2:17; Rom. 12:10; 13:7), or with “honor” as a core

value of a church, but with its implementation. The problem is expanding the principle of honor to include recognition of, and submission to, modern-day apostles and prophets.

Therefore, this review will deal with specifically with Silk's proposal for apostles and prophets as the foundation of the local church, found in chapters two and eight. Chapters 3-7 are largely helpful and applicable to all churches and do not require the recognition of apostles and prophets, which places them beyond the scope of the current review.

Laying a New Foundation

In chapter two, Silk lays out his case for churches to be governed by the fivefold ministry, with apostles and prophets at the helm. This new "wineskin" of leadership, Silk writes, is "one of the primary factors that has kept Bethel hosting the presence [of God]...Without a complete, mature expression of *these* graces that equip the saints, the people of God *cannot be adequately prepared* to contain what God is pouring out and release it to the world around them" (47, emphasis added). This effectively sets churches with modern-day apostles and prophets above and apart from those churches led by elders and deacons since the first century.

For these churches that have embraced elder-deacon models of church government, they are charged with "divorcing the supernatural from ministry":

The problem is that these are earthly-focused models of leadership. Without the flow of grace from the apostles and prophets, who are not only focused on seeing what is going on in Heaven but also on releasing that reality here on earth, these models inevitably lead us to focus on what we know God has done in the past and miss out on what He is doing now (57).

He even suggests that, according to James 3:15, these "earthly-focused" models of leadership are according to man's wisdom and are, therefore, potentially unspiritual and demonic (60). And yet,

the models of church government with elders and deacons, which Silk pejoratively labels as “earthly,” are what God himself has ordained for his church.

First Apostles, Second Prophets, Third Teachers...

The primary Scriptural support Silk gives for this governmental shift is 1 Corinthians 12:28. He claims that Paul lays out an “order of priority” (56) in this particular verse for all churches to follow. “When Paul makes apostles first, prophets second, and teachers third he is describing a flow. The flow streams through the teacher, is released in miracles and healing, and continues through helps and administrations and tongues” (57).

However, this verse alone cannot bear the weight Silk places on it for several reasons. First, apostles and prophets are mentioned here not only because of their importance but because of their appointment in time. The numbered list indicates *chronological appointment* for the establishment of the church. D. A. Carson notes: “In *historical* order, God first appointed apostles, then (New Testament) prophets at Pentecost...and then teachers” (*Showing the Spirit*, 90-91, emphasis added). Second, even if Paul means first in greatness or authority, that still in no way implies that the office of apostle is somehow transferable to believers in the church today, especially when Scripture makes it clear that apostles were eyewitnesses of the resurrected Jesus (Acts 1:21; cf. 1 John 1:1-4; 1 Cor. 9:1) and received their commissioning directly from him (John 20:21; Acts 9). Third, this cannot be where Paul lays out his ideal and comprehensive model of church government because elders and deacons are not even mentioned. In order to understand what the Spirit says to the church about its governance the whole of Scripture must be considered, not just a few isolated passages.

Ephesians 2:17-22 is also considered in support of the fivefold model. According to Silk, this passage is not talking about the universal church, but that new apostles and prophets should

be the foundation of *each local church today* (59). Yet, reading this passage in its larger context prevents the reader from thinking that every church on every street corner must be built on *its own* foundation of apostles and prophets (cf. Eph. 2:17-3:6, esp. 3:5)! The church throughout the ages has consistently understood “God’s household” in this passage as the church *universal* which *has been built* on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ as the cornerstone of that first-century foundation. In other words, the church today has the same apostles and prophets as it did in the first century, just as we still have the same Christ.

To say that apostles and prophets are around today is the equivalent of rejecting the original foundation and building a new and improved one on top of it. And if new apostles and prophets can be built on top of the foundation that has already been laid, does that mean each local church needs a new Cornerstone as well?

The Biblical Model of Church Government: Elders and Deacons

Silk claims the Scriptural basis for the recovery of these apostolic and prophetic “anointings” is based on 1 Corinthians 12:28 and Ephesians 2:20. Strangely, no references are made to the book of Acts and the missionary journeys of Paul, the pastoral epistles, and the first epistle of Peter—all of which specifically deal with the appointment and qualifications of *elders* (i.e., pastor, overseer, shepherd) and *deacons* (1 Tim. 3; Tit. 1:5-9). One would expect these important New Testament books to feature prominently in discussions of church government. And yet, quite conveniently, they have been left out of this book, leaving 1 Corinthians 12:28 to stand on its own and be taken out of its original context.

Commissioned by the risen Lord Jesus, the apostles appointed elders who functioned as overseers and shepherds (Acts 14:23; 20:17-38; 1 Pet. 5:2). James instructs the elders to pray for the sick, not local apostles and miracle workers (Jas. 5:14). Paul says it is the elders who are to

be “considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17). In a position paper rejecting modern-day apostles and prophets, the General Presbytery of Assemblies of God (a charismatic denomination) rightly concludes that the New Testament makes no provision for the appointment of apostles or prophets “as part of a church leadership hierarchy for succeeding generations.”

Support for the church being built on the first-century apostles and prophets and led by elders and deacons can even be seen all the way back to the first century. In his late first-century letter to the Corinthians, Clement of Rome (30-100 AD) writes:

Having therefore received their orders, and being fully assured by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and established in the word of God, with full assurance of the Holy Ghost, [the apostles] went forth proclaiming that the kingdom of God was at hand. And thus preaching through countries and cities, **they appointed the first-fruits [of their labors],** having first proved them by the Spirit, **to be bishops [i.e., elders] and deacons of those who should afterwards believe.** (chapter 42, emphasis added).

Silk admits, “I’m still not sure how [1 Corinthians 12:28] got passed over for so many years in our approach to governing God’s church” (199). He even asks the question: “How did pastoral environment become the supreme level in the church? ‘Pastor’ is not even in the list. It’s not even a close fourth” (200). But the simple and biblical answer to that question would be to *look at what the rest of the New Testament says*—specifically the book of Acts, the pastoral epistles of 1-2 Timothy and Titus, and 1 Peter.

The Fivefold Anointings

After providing his scriptural basis, Silk begins to explore his proposed fivefold ministry in detail.

Apostles and Prophets

In order to explain how the fivefold ministry should operate in a church, Silk gives a fanciful description of what might happen if people with these anointings arrived at the scene of a car accident (56-58). What is especially frustrating is Silk's description of prophets and apostles in this fictitious scenario:

The **prophet** knew this [car accident] was going to happen because he had a dream about it the previous night. Because everyone in the dream had survived the accident, he *rebukes a spirit of death* and declares with great faith and unction that all shall live and none shall die. He also proclaims that there are *angles surrounding the scene of the accident* and prays that the eyes of all the people's hearts will be opened to *see in the Spirit*. Then he walks around and starts to *call the destiny out in various people*. He *releases a spirit of revelation* within the group. And finally, and quite naturally, he begins to ask around to find out who is in charge at the scene. When he discovers the one in charge, he discerns whether this is God's chosen leader or not. Or if he finds that no one is in charge, *he will appoint a leader* [i.e., an Apostle].

The **apostle** prays for the injured. He *invites the supernatural healing touch of God into the scene*. He begins to tell testimonies of when he has been on the scene of car accidents and witnessed the power of God manifest itself in those situations. *The faith level of the people begins to rise*. He then asks if anyone can feel heat in his or her hands. He puts those who raise their hands to work praying for others to be healed. He demonstrates to all who are near that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. *He then opens a school* for those who arrive at car accident scenes and sends them all over the world *to do signs and wonders* (56-58, emphasis added).

Aside from several allusions to rare and unique events from Israel's history under the old covenant, much of what Silk imagines in this scenario does not describe the apostles and prophets of the early church. Calling out destiny, releasing spirits of revelation, feeling heat in one's hands, and opening a school to *train people* how to do signs and wonders—in exchange for tuition, of course (cf. Acts 8:9-24)—are activities that Danny Silk and Bethel consider to be the role of prophets and apostles in a culture of honor, rather than what Scripture has to say about these two offices.

Teachers

Some of the most egregious claims in the book come in Silk's explanation of the office of teacher. Based on Paul's alleged "order of priority" in 1 Corinthians 12, Silk argues that the teacher is the "third level of anointing." He believes that teacher "*is a C in a grade scale, and it is what keeps the Church only average in its effects and influence*" (67, emphasis added). On this understanding, churches led by pastors must be "failing," since pastors are not even mentioned in Paul's list here!

Silk goes on to make an even more astonishing and troubling claim:

Most teachers are fixated on the *written* Word of God. They believe that the Word of God is the source of life and truth on the earth. Their value for the Word is much higher than their need for the supernatural. *These are the lawyers, scribes, and pharisees of our day*" (68, emphasis added).

Here, Silk criticizes teachers for believing God's Word is the source of life and truth—the very things Jesus himself believed (John 17:17; 6:63; cf. Ps 119:25; 2 Tim 3:16). He then pits the Word against the Spirit's supernatural work, assuming that those who preach and teach the Bible do not rely on the Holy Spirit to work through it. The truth, however, is that the Scriptures are valued and preached precisely because of our need for the supernatural work of God! The Spirit of God works through the inspired Word of God.

So, what role, if any, should a teacher have in an apostolic church operating with a culture of honor? Silk answers: "*Teachers must take the passion and the revelation of the apostles and prophets and show us how it becomes truth that we apply to our lives*" (69, emphasis added). Later on, he writes that teachers must "give people a scriptural context to understand the apostles and prophets and *their* core values" (202, emphasis added). In other words, teachers are to teach the private, special revelation given to the apostles and prophets (revelation not available to ordinary believers) and *then* use Scripture to validate what these first-

tiered leaders are seeing in the heavenly realm. Silk goes on to say “the days of teaching our limited experiences are over. We now must learn to teach how and what Heaven is doing” (70). This seems to suggest that our “limited experiences” are what we only know from God’s inspired Word, which apparently is not good enough anymore. Forget Paul’s words that Scripture is sufficient to make the man of God “complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). In order to know what heaven is *really* doing, teachers are to teach what the prophets and apostles are seeing and hearing in the heavenly realm, which only they (conveniently) have access to.

Pastors

Since Silk is operating solely on the basis of the partial list of gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:28—which doesn’t include the office of shepherd/elder—he does not devote much time to the role of a pastor in the culture of honor. He considers the God-ordained office of pastor as “another role that has helped complete the disorder in church government” (70). In order for pastors to be effective, they must connect people to the supernatural environment created by the apostles and prophets (72). In other words, pastors only “work” when under the oversight of modern-day apostles and prophets. If pastors are not connected to these offices, “then their leadership will only lead people back to a self-focus and the pastor will have to give them a natural alternative to a supernatural life” (71).

In chapter four he picks up his discussion of pastors and writes the following about the “Earth to Heaven” model of leadership, which is the biblical elder/deacon model:

The devil is working to destroy us, and the “earth to Heaven” model [i.e., churches *without* modern-day apostles] will usually help him accomplish his goal in the church...[W]e are confined to earthly limitations when our senior leaders are teachers, pastors, administrators, and evangelists who have not been hooked up to the flow of anointing and revelation in an apostolic government (113).

This makes churches *without* apostles and prophets appear to be used by the devil to destroy the true church. However, churches led by elders and deacons *are* “hooked up” to a “flow of anointing and revelation” because *the apostles of the church in first century are still the apostles of the church today*. As the church holds fast to the apostolic tradition in holy Scripture, we remain connected to Christ, his chosen apostles, and the gospel they proclaim (2 Thess. 2:15; cf. 2 Thess. 3:6).

“Treasure Hunters:” The New Evangelists

In the eighth and final chapter Silk describes what evangelism looks like in a church implementing Bethel’s culture of honor (203-204). Silk *assumes* that “workers of miracles” from 1 Corinthians 12:28 is actually describing the role of an evangelist, although he fails to provide any Scriptural support for such a claim. These evangelists, now known as ‘treasure hunters,’ have replaced biblical evangelism with a new practice called ‘treasure hunting.’ These treasure hunters get a “treasure list from Heaven” that includes (often vague) details like places, colors, names, gender, body parts, etc. Once they’ve received their list, they go out into the community to find people that correspond to items on their ‘treasure list’ and simply ask to pray for them. Rather than making the proclamation of the gospel their primary goal, “the priority is for believers to be conduits on the Earth for Heaven to happen” (204).

The problem with this novel form of evangelism is not *primarily* the questionable practice of searching for “treasure”—which is nowhere commanded of or practiced by believers in Scripture. Rather, the spiritually perilous problem is the lack of obedience to Scripture and the downplaying of gospel proclamation. While there are a few somewhat similar and unique instances of this practice in Scripture—and while God may (at various times, in various ways) provide supernatural insight into the lives of others—there is no biblical basis for substituting the

preaching of Christ crucified, resurrected, reigning, and returning with attempts to practice and perform signs and wonders.

But with this retrieval of the prophetic and apostolic offices comes an assumed redefinition of what pastors, teachers, and evangelists do, a redefinition of their priorities, and ultimately a redefinition of the gospel.

New Foundation, New Priorities

Just as new wine requires new wineskins, Silk suggests that a new foundation for the church requires new priorities. Before explaining what these are, he summarizes the priorities of the current pastoral model of government. Here he makes the shocking claim that the problem with the current and “earthly” form of church government is that its priorities are people, doctrine, and salvation (197). He criticizes churches following the pastoral model for considering salvation “the final priority,” stating that, “Getting people saved is generally the only supernatural activity in the pastoral environment” (199). What is staggering is that this is said as if the salvation of sinners as the primary goal of the church was a bad thing! If that wasn’t shocking enough, he continues:

[T]o even admit that the salvation message isn’t paramount can seem like heresy. But until we are willing to reorder our thinking, to be renewed in our minds, then yesterday will determine our tomorrow. We must have permission to challenge the sacred cows of our day, just as Jesus did. (199)

Unfortunately, *Silk’s suggestion that the salvation message isn’t paramount for the church is indeed outright heresy*. To suggest that what the true apostles considered of “first importance” is actually *not* of first importance is to be at odds with the Lord Jesus Christ himself (1 Cor. 15:1-3). According to Silk, being “renewed in our minds” (a biblical phrase used to make his argument sound biblical) means believing that the gospel is *not* paramount to the church! And

while Jesus did challenge the sacred cows of his day, these sacred cows were the man-made traditions that the Pharisees created that superseded the written law of God.

In the new, better, and “heavenly” government with apostles and prophets, Silk explains: There is a new core value for the activity of the spirit world, for the saints having their eyes and ears opened by the prophet, for hearing the heartbeat of Heaven and becoming aware of the activity of the third Heaven, which supersedes the devil’s strategies. Signs, wonders, and miracles bring people into God encounters that radically change the way life is lived here on earth (202).

Of course, churches embracing Bethel’s culture of honor would deny that they are rejecting the gospel; after all, they believe that the “gospel of the kingdom,” with its emphasis on miracles and wealth, is a *fuller* gospel. The response to such a critical evaluation of Silk’s ecclesiology will inevitably be to point to the “fruit” of such a culture, and the “signs and wonders” being experienced. But changing the church’s priorities to signs and wonders, and what the apostles see in the “third heaven,” is not only an unbiblical move, but a dangerous one. Any church that redefines, diminishes, or rejects the proclamation, defense, and spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ is on dangerous grounds, regardless of how many alleged “signs and wonders” are being performed (cf. Matt. 7:21-23). If the fruit of a church includes a disparaging or rejection of Scripture and what Scripture considers of first importance then it is not true biblical, God-glorifying, Christ-exalting fruit. As Martin Luther put it, “Where Christ is not preached, there is no Holy Ghost.”

Spitting out the Apostolic Bones

One feature of this book mentioned at the outset that is particularly frustrating is that chapters 3-7 do not strictly relate to churches implementing Bethel's apostolic culture of honor. Aside from a chapter on developing a wealth mindset (ch. 5) much in these chapters is good and helpful. Chapters three and four talk about our identity in Christ and not as sinners under the law, while chapters six and seven encourage churches to be safe places filled with grace and honor where conflict can be dealt with in a healthy way. To these chapters I give a hearty "Amen!"

And yet, all this helpful and biblical content is sandwiched between the chapters discussing the fivefold ministry. This implies that the concepts of showing honor and extending grace to others are only found in churches who have positioned themselves under an apostolic and prophetic ministry. So, while Silk is careful at the outset to avoid suggesting that Bethel's culture of honor is the only "environment" that "works," the rest of the book leaves the reader with the opposite impression—namely, that other environments *without* apostles and prophets are devoid of grace, honor, love, and ultimately God's presence. But modern-day apostles and prophets are not required for a church to cultivate a culture of honor where conflict and confrontation are handled in a healthy, gracious way.

Conclusion

Any book about the church that begins with the author challenging "what many understand to be true" and messing with "long-standing paradigms" should be a warning to the reader to proceed with caution, especially when the paradigms being challenged are, in fact, biblical. According to Silk, the culture of honor is a "contest to those long held approaches and core values one can easily find in the historic and contemporary Christian culture" and is "reforming and confronting what we've come to know about church leadership, authority, and church discipline for literally centuries" (23). That is fine and often needed when the approaches

and values found in the church are unbiblical and in direct opposition to God's Word. However, the paradigm Silk winds up rejecting—churches led by elders and deacons—is neither unbiblical nor ineffective. Silk sets up several straw-man arguments, presenting all churches led by elders as legalistic, divisive, ineffective, devoid of honor, grace, and the supernatural (i.e., the Spirit). Once he has caricatured and painted all pastoral environments with the same large brush, he is able to present the apostolic culture of honor as the true form of church government that brings heaven to earth, unleashes the supernatural, and helps believers grow as God intends.

Despite its helpful emphasis on grace and honor, the culture of honor proposed in this book is founded upon several glaring misinterpretations of Scripture. To reject the God-ordained offices of elder and deacon, and replace them with modern-day apostles and prophets, is to be at odds with God's own word. To consider pastor-teachers as ineffective, harmful, and useful insofar as they submit to modern-day apostles and prophets is to misunderstand their role, importance, and permanence in the church. To replace evangelism with "treasure hunting," and to shift the goal of evangelism away from preaching the gospel to simply creating "God encounters" is to be disobedient to our risen Lord and the task he has given his church.

The principle of honor, as defined by Silk, is an excellent principle to live by and promote in the local church. We should always strive to acknowledge the gifts and callings of other believers. We should seek to create an environment where the inherent dignity of every person is recognized and celebrated. Our churches must be safe places where conflict can be dealt with and believers can discover who they are and why they exist. We must cultivate an "environment of grace," where confrontation is aimed at restoration. But we do not need to adopt an unbiblical form of government to do so.

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