A Dominion Experiment:

The Shepherding/Discipleship Movement

A Personal Account and Analysis

by Robin Arnaud©

I was very new to the Charismatic experience and just 12 years old when this movement began, right in my own hometown. Originally billed as "a return" to city-churches, it was supposed to eliminate barriers and unify the church in every city. It was to be a grand, courageous exercise in mutual submission that would dissolve all remaining walls between Christians (denominational, political, theological, financial, social). And such a unified church would be so powerful that **dominion** would quickly follow.

"There were not separate churches divided by denominations in the first century," the founders of this movement explained. "Churches were city-churches, single entities in every city, which is why the gospel spread so quickly despite persecution." The authors of this great experiment (Bob Mumford, Derek Prince, and Don Basham) began it soon after they had established very popular teaching ministries in Fort Lauderdale Florida and founded *New Wine* magazine — now defunct, but then hugely popular. *New Wine* was one of the earliest Charismatic "teaching" magazines produced by the Charismatic movement. I grabbed every copy I could get my hands on, and literally sat at Bob Mumford's feet on those overcrowded Monday night teaching meetings — first held at Memorial Baptist Church and then moved to the Governor's Club Hotel in downtown Fort Lauderdale to accommodate huge crowds of itchy-eared Charismatics. All us preteens and teenagers sat up

front on the floor to let the grownups have the chairs. Besides, the closer to the front we could get the better we liked it!

"**Kingdom dominion**" was the object of this movement from the very beginning. The object was to unify the church, thus making her far more powerful and influencial. "That we may be one... perfected in unity and in glory so that the world may believe that God sent Jesus," was the appeal, based on a misapplication of John 17:21-23.

Early on, this movement wedded itself to "**Kingdom Now"** theology, which most of the more orthodox churches (even Pentecostal ones) had rejected as heretical and dangerous. But "Shepherding" offered a way to make "Kingdom Now" actually work. It was to be the first practical application of the concept, putting the ideals into practice through mutual "shepherding." It was supposed be the means to "establish the unified Kingdom of God on earth," hastening the return of Christ. This was my first exposure to any Post-millennial eschatology. I was bewildered by it at first, then completely taken in by its appeal to here-and-now dominion. And I felt lucky to be "on the ground floor, right at the beginning" of the establishment of God's kingdom on earth in the first city in it was to be achieved in our century. The appeal of this idea was irresistible. We expected to become powerful and influential. We expected to win the entire Broward County metro area to Christ in just a few short years because of "the uninhibited flow of the Spirit" through a "unified" Spirit-filled church. Dominion of the whole world would follow within a generation or two, spreading from right here in my own hometown. Here's how that unity was to be achieved:

Not really by His Spirit, but by might and by power.

The might and power of manipulation. The equivalent, I believe, of witchcraft. Manipulation of others *is* witchcraft. A "pyramid" of headship was laid out like an organizational chart with Christ at the top, followed by three "apostles" (guess who? If you guessed Bob

Mumford, Derek Prince, and Don Basham, you win!), and from there to their disciples, who would, in turn, train other disciples once they were fully trained. *Every individual in the whole city would be personally discipled*, by a "shepherd" who had himself been personally discipled, etc. Right on up to the "top" — so that everyone would ultimately become a disciple of Christ. Every person was assigned to a "shepherd" who had been trained in discipleship by the three "Apostles of the Church in Fort Lauderdale."

But what kind of authority does a "shepherd" have? As we look casually at examples of discipleship in the bible, we get a picture of total obedience. But it was not slavery! Any disciple in every biblical model was free to leave his teacher at any time. The biblical model of discipleship did not blur the lines between spiritual authority and domestic authority. Biblically, the individual retained his own responsibility and authority for his own vocation, family, children, place of residence, etc. But this Shepherding movement blurred those lines. In fact it virtually eliminated them. There were stories of abuse so hideous that they had to be quelled by stern orders from above.

There were no clear lines drawn to define the scope and limit of a "shepherd's" authority over those he was "discipling." The authority of a spiritual discipler is ***spiritual***, not domestic nor political. It is limited to training in the word of God. Except in the godly application of Scripture to all of life, a discipler has no authority to control every aspect of a believer's personal life. But in this movement, such limits were never defined. The proper application and limits of church discipline were neither studied nor explained.

My own "shepherd," Andy Z., had a group of men living in his home who kept 10 percent of the money they earned for themselves and turned ninety percent over to Andy. I would have been one of them, but I wasn't old enough to move out of my parents' house yet. My older brother, however, was old enough. Already troubled

by the abuse we endured at home, my brother moved out of the house at the first opportunity that presented itself — which happened to be Andy's newly-forming commune. I was very happy that my troubled older brother had finally "come to Christ" and that he was being "really discipled." He'd be okay after all, I thought.

But since his exposure to this cultish abuse of the bible and manipulation by so-called ministers of the gospel, my brother has abandoned every form of discipline including *self*-discipline. He knows a lot of theology and can quote a lot of Scripture. But he remains at enmity with God. The abuse my brother suffered at the hands of this "shepherd" and the men who formed this little commune was worse than the abuse he had fled from at home. The damage was so profound and long-lasting that my brother remains unable to maintain relationships and function normally as an adult in a free society.

To this day, if you look carefully, you might still find some of the Lord's sheep limping back to their old feeding grounds in Fort Lauderdale Florida, gingerly peeking all around them before taking a step, and asking one another: "Is it safe? Can we come out now?"

You will also find the church in Fort Lauderdale more sharply divided now than in most other communities, and only a few dying remnants of the old "glory days" of the great experiment. *New Wine* magazine is nowhere to be found. Memorial Baptist church has closed it's doors, and the once-grand Governor's Club hotel no longer hosts crowds of itchy-eared Charismatics. Charismatics in Fort Lauderdale, as a matter of fact, are scattered into several "independent" churches. Many have found themselves mending in the spiritual care of orthodox churches, thank God. But many have ended up like my brother: Severely damaged by the failure of the church to define the Kingdom of God for what it is — the ***spiritual*** reign of Christ *in* His people. It is not a carnal, physical imposition of righteousness *from without*. The Kingdom of God is within us. It is not imposed from outside. It is not physical nor temporal nor political. Kingdom life is not lived through the

obedience of the people to earthly shepherds, but through the obedience of the One (Romans 5:19) who has qualified us for citizenship in His kingdom.
May God grant that the Church will never forget the tragic lessons of ill-considered but well-intentioned attempts to "bring in" the Kingdom of God, to unify and perfect it so as to hasten Christ's return. But *only the Holy Spirit can create and perfect such unity* and power in the Church. **The nature of the Kingdom is *spiritual!*** Human attempts to make it "real" by imposing man-made inventions have always resulted in abuse and tragedy. This Shepherding/Discipleship experiment is just one recent example of it.

But there are others, emerging and growing even now. Again the lines that Scripture draws between the earthly and the spiritual — between the temporal and the eternal — are being blurred by the same seductive appeal of "Kingdom Now" dominion teaching. Certain aberrant forms of theonomy are just more of this same dominion theology that birthed the destructive Shepherding / Discipleship movement in a different wrapper. Such forms seek to "bring in" the Kingdom, to "make it real in the here and now" and to hasten the return of Christ by ushering in a physical, *earthly, temporal, political* expression of the Kingdom of God.

***Reformed* theonomy**, by its very definition, does not teach any such concept. Biblical Christian theonomic communities have thrived here and there since the first century (see Acts 4:32-37). But in such communities the bounds and limits of spiritual and domestic authority are clearly defined; not blended and blurred as they were in Christian Growth Ministries' unbiblical dominion experiment.

While the Shepherding movement sought to "bring in the kingdom" through the imposition of another's will upon individuals under the guise of submission to "shepherds," theonomy seeks to apply the Law of God to Christian society. The distinctions between God's *moral* law, His *decreative* law, and even the *civil* laws of

ancient Israel are blurred or eliminated in the Shepherding movement, while Reformed theonomists maintain those distinctives when applying God's law to Christian society.

For example: The primary function of the civil government, according to Scripture, is *the administration of justice* (see Romans 13), by promoting an atmosphere conducive to the safety and liberty of individuals and their commerce. This administration of justice enforced by the sword is *not* the function of the Church! The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but spiritual. A church can discipline it's members for violations of God's moral law, by admonition, by witholding the Lord's Supper for a season, or in extreme cases by excommunication. But the church has no duty and no authority to impose fines, imprisonment, or physical punishment upon anyone. Again, our weapons are *spiritual*. Our kingdom is *not of this world.* But while we are *in* the world, we are to be salt and light, influencing our civil government as much as we possibly can, that *its* administration of justice might be righteous and fair. We do so by promoting Christian morals in the society in which we live.

Looking back through history since the first century AD, one can see very clearly that any attempt to "bring in the Kingdom" which fails to honor those distinctions has resulted in untold suffering imposed on whole nations until they collapsed from within because "the kingdom" was imposed from without. From Charlamagne's reign over "the Holy Roman Empire" to the smaller, lesser-known but just as destructive Shepherding/Discipleship movement, history is replete with examples of this folly. Every attempt at it in history has failed. And yet the idea continually resurfaces and finds adherents. But it is based on a false premise.

It appeals so seductively to by our own inner groanings and eagerness for the revealing of the children of God! Paul describes it:

> "For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was

> subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will also be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our body (Rom 8:19-23, NASB)."

We don't want to wait for God to accomplish this in His own time and in His own way. We can hardly resist the temptation to hurry this up, to relieve our groanings and longings for the liberation of all creation from the curse of sin. If we are not careful, we will lose hope in God's providence (Romans 8:28-30) and take matters into our own hands. Yet any visible outward glory we can create can't compare with the glory that God is preparing. And besides, hope that is seen is not hope at all, but unseen hope produces perseverance (Rom 8:24-25).

It's easy to see why dominion theology is so appealing. It's easy to see why so many people, inwardly groaning for the revelation of the children of God, lose patience (Rom 8:25) and assign themselves the task of "bringing in the Kingdom." But any attempt to do so that is unbiblical is not only harmful, but doomed to failure. Whatever new forms this error takes, they must be avoided! And Christians must be warned to stay clear of this seductive error.

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