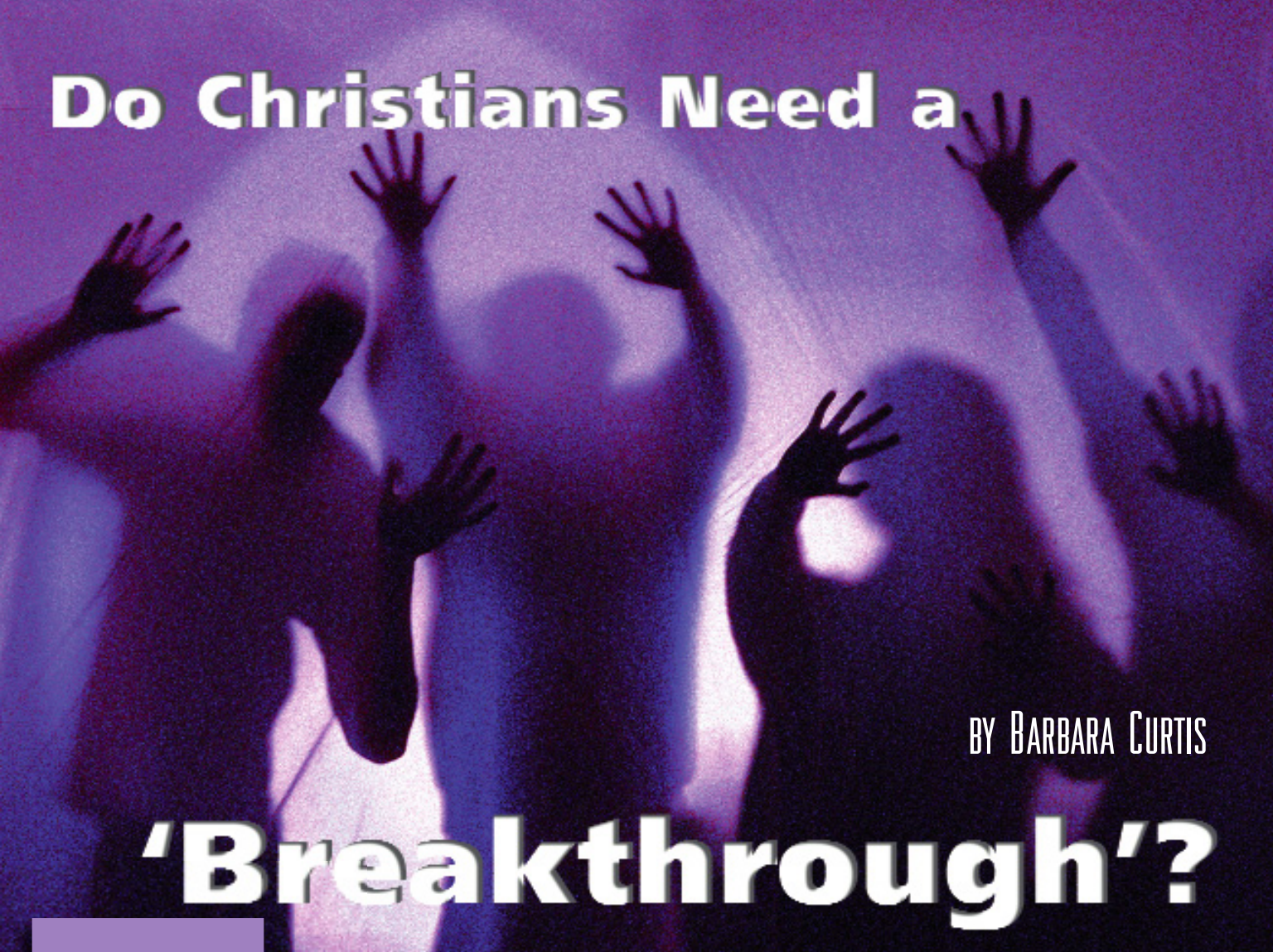


# Do Christians Need a



BY BARBARA CURTIS

## 'Breakthrough'?

**T**ime to rise up!  
Time to come into  
the Promised Land!  
Leave your fears be-  
hind! Time to cross  
the Jordan!"

Pastor H's voice crashed over the pews and billowed back through the rafters, like the challenging Pacific breakers that strengthen the fittest but leave the weak a bedraggled, breathless mass on the shore.

My husband, Tripp, and I grabbed each others' hands and re-enacted Joshua 1-4 with our own crossing over, demonstrating the power of our faith in God—unlike Moses, whom Pastor H had contemptuously reminded us did not have what it took and hence lost his chance to enter the Promised Land.

All around us men and women, prepped by an hour-long hammer-

ing on their inadequacies, joined us in acting out their own desire to receive God's promises by claiming victory over their weakness of character and lack of faith. Even as Tripp and I had rushed to "cross over the Jordan," many were trembling and groaning as they faced the fears that held them back. Many were stumbling up to the altar for a laying-on of hands by Pastor H or one of the elders.

As usual, my husband and I left completely pumped and full of purpose for the week ahead. As first-generation Christians who'd stumbled into this cutting-edge church a year after discovering that Jesus Christ was the son of God and surrendering our lives to his care, we were excited by what we found there each week. In contrast to the quiet, comfortable worship of our first church, here under the

charismatic (sometimes almost fire-breathing) Pastor H we experienced "breakthrough after breakthrough," each week bringing us closer to a spiritual peak higher than the week before.

Church was definitely *The Happening Place*—and we entered the doors each Sunday geared up for the same intense sensational experience that had once kept us hooked on rock concerts.

Only now our excitement and emotion were bringing us closer to God!

The most obscure Old Testament symbol—like the grain on the threshing room floor in 2 Samuel—could become a banner under which we were called to "mobilize against the Enemy." Speaking in tongues, being slain in the spirit, spiritual warfare, special anointings with oil and weekly altar calls

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made it seem as though we were pilgrims progressing on a *Mission Impossible*-style spiritual journey.

And if the carrot wasn't enough, the whip would keep even the most stubborn member moving with warnings from the pulpit that "God is moving swiftly and we have to run to keep up."

We didn't last long at that church. Less than a year into it, I remember sitting down behind Mrs. H—who did her best to turn up the heat of the altar calls, then coolly sat and observed the resulting weeping and wailing—and leaning over the pew to ask, "I don't understand. Why do the same people crawl to the altar week after week seeking some kind of breakthrough? How many breakthroughs do you need?"

"You don't understand," she answered.

But it wasn't long before I did begin to understand that in this very strange, yet all-too-common, religious situation God had provided me a textbook lesson in all that he really isn't looking for in his believers.

### Hyper-aggressive Christianity

Flash forward fifteen years. As an older and hopefully wiser believer, I'm grateful for this earlier experience with a church built on a faulty premise—that in order to realize our potential as Christians we must charge forth like superheroes to seize God's promises by force, as though they were being held in Satan's lockbox.

In this scheme of things, even prayer becomes a testing ground. Rather than a quiet time of communication with God involving

Adoration

Contrition

Thanksgiving

Supplication...

prayer becomes more a storming of the barricades to appropriate what is rightfully ours. Take this blurb from a book called *Breakthrough Prayer*:

*"Many people are missing the great things God wants to do in their lives because they don't know how to receive answers to their prayers. This revolutionary book is not a step-by-step guide on how to pray but an inspiring vision that moves people to greater hope as they see the tremendous potential of prayer...."*

*What are the prayers that really have power with God?"*

**What are the prayers that really have power with God? Are you kidding me?** As though God were some sort of cosmic vending machine into which we must put the exact change in order to make him produce the results we desire. Or the kind where you must insert the dollar bill according to a diagram—when you put it in the wrong way, it spits back out at you.

This is not the God we worship and serve!

And yet, many modern evangelists present a worldview in which it is up to us to "take authority" against the evil principalities which prevent us from tapping into God's abundance, as Kenneth Copeland explains:

*"What we saw in 2005 were the very first manifestations of some major, major changes in the world. I'm not talking about just the blessing of God. I am talking about breakthrough that has to do with God's properties—breakthrough of the reservoirs of God's goods that have been dammed up by Satan. Release of the things he has stolen through his schemes and threats—things he conned people into*

FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A FORMER NEW AGER, I CAN SEE THE APPEAL OF THE "BREAKTHROUGH" MINISTRIES: WE HAVE TROUBLE MAKING ENDS MEET, A WAYWARD CHILD, A MEDICAL PROBLEM. WE WANT RELIEF. WE WANT IT NOW. THERE MUST BE SOMETHING WE CAN DO.

*yielding to him by giving up their authority. The cracks are already in the dams that are holding back God's goods, God's money, God's properties. Those who listen can become wealthy beyond their wildest imagination."*

Whether it's a hellfire-and-brimstone pastor exhorting his church to "cross over the Jordan" of their psychological limitations or a prosperity preacher urging Christians to overcome their checkbook balance—or even a simple book like *Prayer of Jabez* which advances astonishing claims for an obscure Old Testament prayer, this brand of evangelism has one thing in common—merchandising.

### All About You?

No matter how anyone feels about *The Purpose-Driven Life* and its endless spin-offs, Rick Warren deserves credit for a brilliant opening sentence. Had he never written another word, he would have done us a great service by capturing in four words the true secret of successful Christian living:

*It's not about you.*

By contrast, the breakthrough theologies begin from the premise that it is indeed all about you. There is something wrong with you. You are not experiencing God's abundance the way that you should. You are not wise enough, spiritual enough, healthy enough, influential enough, rich enough. You, you, you, you, you!

*Breakthrough Gurus*—as surely as the car, fast food and diet industries—have a product to promote: Books, tapes, a ministry or even just an ego.

And their techniques are as transparent as a TV commercial, resting on two things:

1) Our discontent

2) Their promise

Of all the greetings Joel Osteen,

PHOTO BY R. KNAUER

who's been described as "the Prosperity Gospel's Coverboy," could have chosen for his website, here is his direct appeal:

*Once you understand the unique, exciting purpose for which God created you, you are not only going to feel fulfilled, but this world is going to be a brighter place because you are here!*

According to Osteen, it is after all, all about you! Your fulfillment. Your significance.

In a more obvious way, but still very much in the manner of the *Prayer of Jabez*, Osteen plays on our confusion about the goal of the Christian life.

You become convinced there is more to life than you are experiencing. There must be something you can do to realize your poten-

now on, what happened was up to God.

That was in 1987. Since then, we've walked through the birth of a child with handicaps, business failures, financial setbacks and a child turning his back on his faith. Life hasn't always been the way I might have wanted.

And yet I wouldn't have it any other way.

Because one thing I am sure of—God knows more than I. He knows what I need. And what I need may be very different from what I want.

From the perspective of a former New Ager, I can see the appeal of the "breakthrough" ministries: We have trouble making ends meet, a wayward child, a medical problem. We want relief. We want it now. There


Expanding our sphere of influence?

Or is it about glorifying God? And if it is about glorifying God, then how? Do we glorify him by becoming spiritual warriors demanding the things of the world?

God is not looking for spiritual superheroes. The significance of our lives is not based on anything we do, but on what Christ did for us.

God's purpose for our lives is not that we be rich or famous or powerful, but that we become each day more conformed to the image of Christ.

How does he make us like Jesus Christ? Isn't it through the discomfort and the pain of adverse circumstances which cause us to



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ALL AROUND US MEN AND WOMEN, PREPPED BY AN HOUR-LONG HAMMERING ON THEIR INADEQUACIES, JOINED US IN ACTING OUT THEIR OWN DESIRE TO RECEIVE GOD'S PROMISES BY CLAIMING VICTORY OVER THEIR WEAKNESS OF CHARACTER AND LACK OF FAITH.

tial. Buy this book! Listen to this man! Pray this way! Make it happen!

### **What Does it Mean to Be a Christian?**

I remember when my husband and I became Christians. We'd been New Age seekers for seven years, using prosperity thinking and affirmation to build a successful business, buy a home and build a family. But when we learned that Jesus was not just one of many great spiritual teachers—that he was the son of God and the only true way to have a relationship with God—we surrendered our lives to him immediately.

As weeks went by and the significance of our commitment settled in, I recall a distinct moment when I realized that in surrendering my life to Christ, I had to lay down the spiritual tools we'd used to build worldly success for ourselves. From

must be something we can do.

Or maybe we are just vaguely dissatisfied. Our lives lack significance. God must have more. Is this really what it's all about?

Along comes someone with the answers—someone who lives in a million dollar home, has a gorgeous wife, drives a Mercedes. Someone who's made a significant name for himself. Someone many have placed on a pedestal.

But one thing I've learned as a Christian is that God's ways are not the world's ways. What looks like success in the world's eyes does not spell success in God's. And in the words of the wisest man of all...King Solomon:

*The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler of fools* (Ecclesiastes 9:17).

And so, a few quiet questions:

What is the Christian life all about? Is it about attaining personal fulfillment? Enjoying abundance?

rely on the Holy Spirit, events which cause us to be more dependent on our Heavenly Father?

Martin Luther put it this way: "For whoever believes, everything is beneficial and nothing is harmful. For those who do not believe, everything is harmful and nothing beneficial."

The Christian life isn't about learning to harness spiritual forces to control our circumstances, but learning to find God in each moment. It's not about breakthroughs. And it's not about serving ourselves, but it's about serving others...and through others, God.

Let's face it—if these *Breakthrough Gurus* were right, we really wouldn't need God at all. □

*Barbara Curtis writes for many publications but finds her Plain Truth assignments especially challenging and enjoyable. You can read her blog at [www.mommylife.net](http://www.mommylife.net).*