

SIGNS AND WONDERS.

There is a rising tide of interest in the phenomena of "signs and wonders" in the church today. With the resurgence of the occult and its powers in our society, there is indeed a crying need for the exhibition of the power of God through His people.

We must, however, be careful to discern the Biblical context for signs and wonders, and to see that these supernatural demonstrations of the power of God are only released when certain conditions are fulfilled.. They are not at our command. They are the sovereign prerogative of the Holy Spirit. Nor are they to be sought in and for themselves. Indeed, there is mortal danger in pursuing these things apart from the other and more important things of which signs and wonders are the marks of Divine confirmation. The danger is that in seeking signs and wonders in isolation, we may expose ourselves to the deception of the enemy. *"The coming of the lawless one by the activity of Satan will be with all power and with pretended signs and wonders and with all wicked deception."* (2 Thess.2:9-10.) *" False Christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect."* (Matthew 24:24.) See also Revelation 13:13-14.

We are also in peril of deceiving ourselves if we imagine that signs and wonders will, of themselves, always result in people being convicted and converted. The miracles of Jesus did not convince the Jewish leaders of the truth of His claims. Indeed so hardened were their hearts, that when they were witnesses of the healing of the man with the withered hand, they immediately held consultations about destroying Jesus. (Mark 3: 1-6.)

The testimony of Jesus Himself confirms that He was not placing confidence in His miracles as such to convince men. In John 2: 23-24 it tells of many who, *"believed in His name when they saw His signs which He did."* But, here is something of great significance, *"Jesus did not trust Himself to them, because He knew all men and needed no one to bear witness of man, for He Himself knew what was in Man."*

In the story of Dives and Lazarus, the rich man in torment pleads with Abraham to send someone from the dead to his five brothers and says, *"No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent."* The reply is, *"If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead."* (Luke 16:30-31)

Again in John 6:26 we find Jesus remonstrating with the people who had followed Him after the feeding of the five thousand, *"Truly, truly I say to you, you seek me not because you saw the signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves."* In other words, they had not perceived the true spiritual significance of the signs, but were only concerned with the physical satisfaction they had obtained through them.

There are many today who seek the same soulish excitement from signs and wonders, and who will rush from one place to another, and from one advertised miracle worker to another in order to satisfy wholly carnal desires.

By the end of John 6. those same seekers-after-miracles have drifted away, and Jesus, turning to His own chosen men asks them if they too will go away. Peter's answer is supremely illuminating. *"Lord to whom shall we go ? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy one of God."* It was not, you see, the signs and wonders which held these men, but rather the words of eternal life. Nor must we forget the reply of Jesus to some of the Scribes and Pharisees who said to Him, *"Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you."* Jesus replied, *"An evil and adulterous generation seek a sign."*

With these cautions in mind we can go on to the positive aspects of the subject and declare with the utmost conviction that **signs and wonders are an integral part of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.** The whole of Jesus' ministry recorded in the Gospels, the account of the early church in Acts, and the subsequent history of the church bear eloquent testimony that the Gospel is to be made known both in word and deed, and that those who hear the Gospel should also see marvellous things. The Gospel was never, never meant to be *"In word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit."* (1 Thess. 1:5.) We could multiply Scriptures which fully confirm this, but our purpose here is more to examine the conditions for the release of true Divine signs and wonders.

From the New Testament it is abundantly plain that **signs and wonders which are from God are the accompaniments of the preaching of the word of God. The word is the prior thing.** The signs and wonders **follow.** The preaching of the word is attested, confirmed, endorsed and underwritten by the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the miraculous. So, the priority must be given to the declaration of the word, the truth of God. We must seriously question the kind of publicity which advertises "Healing and Miracles" and draws attention to the names of men. There is no evidence that the Apostles followed such a policy, nor that they gave the kind of need-centred messages so popular today. Their number-one-objective was to declare the good news of Jesus, to preach the word of God, and they knew that, as they were faithful in this, God, in His sovereignty, would act by the Holy Spirit to attest His truth. They expected and looked for that, believed it would happen, and it did!

Look at some Scriptures:

Mark 16:20. *"They went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it."* First, the word proclaimed; then the signs granted by the Lord. They preached and the Lord worked.

Acts 4:29-30. *"And now Lord look upon their threats and grant Thy servants to speak Thy word with all boldness, while THOU stretchest forth THY hand to heal and signs and wonders are performed through the name of Thy Holy Servant Jesus."* Note again the human responsibility to declare the word with boldness and the Divine affirmation which they sought. Mark also that the signs and wonders are seen, not as coming from man, but the Lord.

Acts 14:3. *"They remained for a long time speaking boldly for the Lord, who*

bore witness to the word of His grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands." Here again is the same sequence. First the word, then the power of the Lord granted in His sovereign good pleasure to confirm it. There was none of our modern drawing attention to men as miracle workers. Rather attention was directed only to the Lord, and the glory was His alone.

Hebrews 2:3-4 *"How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard Him, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to His own will."* Once more we see that the miraculous is the sole prerogative of God. It is His to give or to withhold as He wills, and the signs and wonders are released upon and through those declaring the message of salvation.

Acts 5:30-32. *"The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted Him at His right hand as Leader and Saviour to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things and so is the Holy Spirit who God has given to those who obey Him."* These verses, while not speaking directly of signs and wonders do disclose some of the key things in the declaration of the word to which the Holy Spirit bears witness. The other passages we have looked at reveal that one aspect of this witness of the Holy Spirit is the release of the miraculous.

To What Will the Holy Spirit Bear Witness ?

What are the things proclaimed to which the Holy Spirit will bear witness?

a) **The death of Jesus on the Cross.** *"Jesus Christ and Him crucified"* was the central theme of Paul's preaching in Corinth, and it was such a message that was accompanied by the *"demonstration of the Spirit and power."* (see 1 Corinthians 2:1-5.)

b) **The resurrection of Jesus.** *"The God of our fathers raised Jesus."* This too was right at the heart of apostolic preaching. The power at work in those who believe was recognised as the same power which raised Jesus from the dead.

c) **The exaltation of the Lord Jesus to the right hand of the Father.** The early Christians were totally assured of this because they had received "the promise of the Father", the outpoured Holy Spirit. To them this was the incontrovertible evidence that Jesus had indeed been exalted to the Throne in heaven.

All of these were God's acts. The Father sent the Son to give His life a ransom for many. God gave Him up for us all.(Romans 8:32.) God raised Jesus from the dead. Again and again that note sounds throughout the New Testament. It was God also who highly exalted Him. This was the word of God which the apostles preached. It concerned first and foremost what God had done in Christ. It was centred in what God had done and not primarily on

the need of man. From these acts of God there flowed glorious consequences for those who believed the witness concerning them. They were granted repentance and the forgiveness of sins, thus dealing with the root causes of a man's subsidiary needs.

It is to the preaching and exposition of these things that the Holy Spirit will continue to bear witness: **The Cross of Jesus** in all its New Testament dimensions and significance as a substitutionary death, a sacrifice once and for all, acceptable to God, a bearing of the wrath of God against sin, a vindication of the righteousness of God, and a death blow to both the power and guilt of sin.

The resurrection of the Lord Jesus from the dead, His physical rising from the grave in a glorious transformed body, Jesus Himself, this same Jesus who had been crucified; all the spiritual significance of resurrection life imparted to believers.

The exaltation of Jesus and all that means in relation to victory over all the powers of darkness; Jesus exalted to the supreme place of power and authority, with all things under His feet. Jesus is Lord!

Repentance and the forgiveness of sins as the gifts of God's grace. The Holy Spirit will assuredly testify to the declaration of this full-orbed New Testament Gospel, and where signs and wonders occur in such a context, we need not fear that they are the deceptive counterfeits of a very cunning and powerful enemy, but we will know God is confirming His word. But where the order is reversed, and the emphasis is on the signs more than the word, let the Christian beware, and where the focus is on man rather than on the Lord, let him be doubly careful.

Through Whom Will God Work ?

We have looked briefly and concentratedly at the kind of proclamation to which we may expect the Holy Spirit to bear witness with signs and wonders. **What of the calibre of the men through whom He will work?** We cannot ignore that signs and wonders were wrought *"through the apostles."* (Acts 2:43.), that they were done *"among the people by the hands of the apostles."* (Acts 5:12.) Stephen, we read, *"Full of grace and power did great wonders and signs among the people."* (Acts 6:8.) The people in Samaria heard Philip *"and saw the signs which he did."* (Acts 8:6.) *"God did extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul."* (Acts 9:11.) It must be worth noting the qualities of these men, for the release of signs and wonders through them had some relationship to the kind of men they were.

Here are some of the qualities that fitted them to be entrusted as the vehicles of such power ministry:

1) **They were Spirit filled men.** Without exception they were men who had known the overwhelming experience of being baptised in the Holy Spirit, and they were living in His fullness.

2) They were humble men, wholly intent on the glory of God. They were not seeking a name or glory for themselves. *"Why do you stare at us, as though by our power or piety we had made him walk?"* So said Peter after the amazing healing of the lame man. Their heart intention was that the name of Jesus be glorified. They did not seek publicity. They did not advertise their healing ministry. Philip did not hesitate, when the Lord commanded him, to lay down a powerful ministry of evangelism and signs and wonders in Samaria to go to the desert road to share the word of the Gospel with one seeker. Paul's very first preaching concerned Jesus, *"That He is the Son of God."*(Acts 9:20) He was ever more eager to proclaim that than to exercise a ministry of signs and wonders. These signs were there, but never as the primary focus of his work.

3) They were men of utter submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Their message was, "Jesus is Lord." And they were living testimony to the message. They were His willing bond slaves. It was through such wholly obedient men that God was pleased to grant that signs and wonders be done in the name of His Holy Servant Jesus.

4) They were men bound together by the Spirit in one Church, the living body of Christ. None worked in lonely isolation, but always in relationship. The picture of the early church community is one of vibrant togetherness. Peter and John were together when the lame man at the beautiful gate of the temple was healed. Paul always worked in team with others. The signs and wonders flowed from men living in true and loving relationships in the undivided Church.

5) They were men of holy character. Their lives were exemplary. Paul could say to the believers in Thessalonica, *"You are witnesses and God also how holy, righteous and blameless was our behaviour to you believers."* (1 Thess. 2:10.) Peter could make an urgent plea for holiness because he himself walked in holiness. (See 1 Peter 1:15-16.) Stephen was *"full of grace and power"*, and he had the glory and beauty of the Lord even on his face. (Acts 6:8.) Holiness is in fact the sum of all the other qualities we have noted and their holiness sprang from their intense love relationship with their Lord.

We are now in a position to draw together what we have been saying and to highlight some of the critical issues for the church today in relation to signs and wonders.

The New Testament knows nothing of a Gospel devoid of the confirmatory evidence of signs and wonders. The miraculous is everywhere in the scriptural accounts of the ministry of Jesus, of the apostles and of the early church. It is equally clear, however, that the signs and wonders were not the focus of the life of the early believers. They did not measure success in terms of the frequency or magnitude of the signs following the word, but rather in the victories of the good news in bringing repentance and faith to those who had previously been in darkness. Lives changed into the likeness of Christ was the supreme aim of their mission. *"My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you."*

(Galatians 4:19.) Such was the burning desire in the heart of Paul. The apostles *"devoted themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word."*, while the people *"devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."* They discovered that, as they walked in these ways, God sovereignly stood with them and of His grace and by His power He granted signs and wonders to affirm His own witness to the truth.

The Dangers of Seeking Signs and Wonders

There is a danger today that we may pursue signs and wonders apart from their New Testament context. In modern parlance we may be tempted to a signs and wonders "trip", giving these phenomena a priority and attention which the Scripture does not accord them. Such a course is fraught with the hazards of deception and confusion. There is reason to fear that some are already ensnared in this trap. We see men glorified as healers and miracle workers and publicly advertised as such. This inevitably puts tremendous pressure on these men to perform each time they appear. Seekers after phenomena eagerly rush to wherever such are reported to be occurring, and some seem to revel in repeated highly charged emotional experiences which produce little of long-term observable changes in character. Such scenarios provide fruitful ground both for self-deception and Satanic deception, and are far removed from the New Testament pattern of the priority of the word, and the gracious release of signs and wonders by the sovereign will of God.

Why The Lack of True Signs and Wonders ?

If we lament the lack of genuine signs and wonders among us today, the first place to look is at **the word being preached**. Is it the New Testament Gospel in its fullness? Is it the Gospel expounded in Paul's letter to the Romans or the Galatians, or is it a watered-down and sugar-coated man-centred substitute eliminating the terrible facts of man's sin and lostness, the need for radical repentance, the power of the atoning blood of Christ, and the absolute necessity of a Holy Spirit birth from above ?

The second place to look is at **the quality of our lives**. Are we the kind of people to whom the Lord will entrust the working of signs and wonders? How do our lives compare with those of Peter, Stephen, Philip, Paul? Do we know the fullness of the Spirit? Are we truly humbled under the mighty hand of God, neither seeking or receiving glory for ourselves? Are we sold out to Jesus Christ as Lord? Are we united in bonds of love and loyalty with brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ? Are we, like Paul, holy in all our conduct?

Thirdly, **we need to look at the level of our faith and expectancy**. Does it match that of those who prayed in that urgent time of calling on the Lord in Acts ch. 4:24-30? Are we looking and believing for the Lord to stretch out His hand and heal?

Fourthly, we need to see **the crippling effects of division within the Church**. The New Testament signs and wonders took place in an undivided Church, which knew nothing of institutionalism or denominationalism.

Perhaps this is the greatest barrier to the true power of God being released in our day.

In the New Testament church they had no need for teaching seminars on signs and wonders. There were no techniques to be learnt. Rather, a sincere and pure devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ, the unity of the Spirit and a fearless commitment to declare the whole counsel of God provided the environment in which God was pleased to add His witness by granting the release of these miracles. As it was then, so it may be today.

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