

Signs and Wonders

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Of recent years a number of sincere and earnest Christians have been much taken up with certain remarkable doings and manifestations, which, they claim are a revival of those spiritual gifts of a divine and miraculous kind which were comparatively common in the Apostolic age. In 1 Corinthians 12: 7-10, we get a list of those gifts, but the claims as to a modern revival are centred mainly in two only, the "gift" of healing and the "gift" of tongues.

Where these "gifts" are exercised a stir is created, and this is particularly so in regard to the former. Huge crowds assemble for healing campaigns and this is not surprising; nor is it surprising that many zealous believers are attracted to it all. Feeling keenly the low spiritual state of the mass of believers, to say nothing of the condition of the immense number of people who are Christian in name only, they naturally long for something that will act as a spiritual tonic, something so supernatural and divine that the incredulous may be convinced and Christianity itself freshly vindicated in the eyes of a sceptical world.

In these modern signs and wonders they think they have found the very thing that their souls desire. But have they? — that is the question.

We are not among those who assert that such gifts as those mentioned in Corinthians are quite impossible in our days, for who are we to place limits on the power of God or to take it upon ourselves to say what He will or will not do? We are responsible however to discern the true character of all that presents itself to us as being of God. We may face undoubted facts judging of them in the light of the Word, which if really understood will put us on our guard, save us from being deceived and lead us only to accredit what is unmistakably of Himself. May we point out a few things that Scripture indicates?

In the first place have you noticed what is said as to the wonderful display of miraculous powers which characterized our Lord Himself. Said Peter, "Jesus of Nazareth, a Man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs" (Acts 2: 22). Men despised Jesus of Nazareth but God approved Him; and the miracles which marked the whole course of His public ministry were God's attestation to His worthiness and to His claims, the seal of God's approval placed upon Him. This verse is like a key, unlocking for us the real force and meaning of all miraculous signs and gifts.

The only miracles we read of in Genesis are those connected directly with God Himself or His Angel. Not until we come to Exodus and Moses do we find miracles performed by a man. Why was this? Because not until this point in the history of the world did God intervene through a man to unfold and establish His Word.

Now however He sends Moses to boldly confront earth's mightiest monarch, to rally and lead out of bondage His oppressed and disheartened people, and to be for them the mediator of the old covenant, the covenant of law. Moses was consequently accredited by a wonderful display of miraculous gifts.

Again did God intervene through men in matters of great importance when He raised up Elijah and Elisha. Both were amply accredited by miraculous gifts. Indeed their times and the time of Moses were the two epochs of Old Testament history when the miraculous was strongly in evidence.

After a long period of silence John the Baptist, one of the very greatest of the prophets, appeared;

yet, "John did no miracle" (John 10: 41). Why? Because, great man though he was, he was only the humble fore-runner of the infinitely Greater, the Lord Himself. Then it was that the miraculous blazed forth as never before, as God signified His approval of Jesus. Yet in spite of it He was rejected.

His rejection however was followed by His resurrection, His ascension to heaven and the consequent descent of the Holy Spirit, which resulted in the formation of the church. It now became necessary for God to show that He had moved beyond the weak and beggarly elements of Judaism, that His presence was no longer to be found in Jerusalem's temple, nor indeed in any temple made with hands, but in the church which had become His house. Hence the era of miracles extended onwards from the time of our Lord through the apostolic age. The apostolic witness to the resurrection and glory of Christ was in this way fully approved of God amongst the people.

The object of these miraculous manifestations then, whether healings or tongues or anything else, was not that believers might enjoy them as their own special privilege their preserve, so to speak — but that they might be a testimony to the world, authenticating whatever is God's testimony at any given time as being truly and unmistakably of Himself. Understanding this, we shall not be surprised to notice that the healings recorded in the Acts of the Apostles were all of people not known as believers when they were healed. We are not forgetting the cases of Dorcas and Eutychus and Paul with the venomous viper, in so saying. The last was a case of miraculous preservation of the apostolic messenger; the two former were cases of the raising of the dead which is something reserved for believers. No unconverted person has been brought back to life in this world during this gospel age, else indeed they would be having a second chance after death. Let believers in a second chance note this!

Notice further that in the Epistles various cases of sickness or infirmity amongst believers are mentioned: — amongst the Corinthians — the very people with whom the gifts of healing were found (1 Cor. 11: 30); with Paul himself (2 Cor. 12: 7-9; Gal. 4: 13), with Epaphroditus (Phil. 2: 25-30); with Timothy (1 Tim. 5: 23); with Trophimus (2 Tim. 4: 20); amongst the scattered Jewish believers generally (James 5: 14-16); with Gaius (3 John 2); yet only in James is there any word as to a way of healing, namely *prayer* and *confession*. If sick we are to pray for one another with confession, and if the elders of the church can pray in *faith* for the sufferer, having anointed him with oil, he *shall* be healed. It is the faith of those who pray that is in question not the faith of the sick person.

It is an evident fact that by the close of the apostolic age these miraculous gifts mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12 had ceased. The Apostle Paul indicated that they would in 1 Corinthians 13: 8, just as the miracles of the days of Moses and Elijah had passed away. What happened when the apostles were gone? Just what happened when Moses was gone and when Elijah and Elisha were gone — *rapid declension*. If bestowed to accredit a people and a message as being indubitably of God, what is likely to happen when both people and message begin to be corrupted? Obviously, the withdrawal of the authentication. From a worldly church and a defective or corrupted gospel, no longer "approved of God," the signs and wonders were withdrawn.

At this point we make an assertion: — In spite of faithfulness here and there, and possibly "a little strength" (Rev. 3: 8) in certain directions, that which can be called "the church" was never more worldly than it is today; the gospel was never more flagrantly and publicly corrupted.

We now ask a question: This being so is it likely that God would select this moment for a revival on any substantial scale of such gifts as marked the church at the beginning when it was in the days of its first love? The answer is very obvious: — It is in the highest degree improbable.

Notice another Scriptural fact bearing upon this matter. Whilst there is no prediction of a restoration

of signs and wonders from God at the end of this age, there is a prediction that there will be a working of Satan to that very end. Read 2 Thessalonians 2: 8-12, and see.

This passage evidently refers to what will transpire *after* the Lord has come for His saints, and the restraining influence exerted by the Holy Spirit, who indwells them, is removed from the earth. Still it is frequently the case that before any system or power of evil reaches its climax and full expression there are sundry preliminary manifestations of its working. We believe that it is exactly something of that kind which is taking place before our eyes today. About a century ago in connection with a movement known as "Irvingism" there began to be signs and wonders in the form of what purported to be speaking in unknown tongues and "inspired" prophecies. One of the chief actors however afterwards confessed that the power under which he spoke was *not of God*. From the days of Irvingism until now there has been a succession of similar things, until today we have a regular epidemic of them, particularly in the way of healings, connected with teachings fairly sound in some cases, and in others with teachings utterly unsound — such as Christian Science. We have no hesitation in saying that as it was a century ago so it is today: the great mass of these wonders are *not of God*.

We have one more remark to make, and it is this: — the great mass of these "signs and wonders" *are not genuine*. Time and again the supposed results of these great healing campaigns have been subjected to a calm investigation months afterwards, when all the furore and excitement have died down. Invariably the final residuum of real healings has been painfully small — if any existed at all.

We fully believe that occasionally it pleases God to intervene on behalf of the sick in ways that are supernatural, on the lines indicated in James 5: 14-16. We believe that there have been cases even in our days of wretched victims of demoniacal power out in the heathen world being delivered by the faith and prayer and fasting of devoted servants of God. These things have come to pass as the fruit of dealings with God in secret just as they did, only far more commonly, in apostolic days. But we also fully believe that false cults can present us with lists of equally well attested wonders, especially in the form of healings — take for example the Romish cures at Lourdes, and the cures of Christian Science and of Spiritism — which are not of God at all.

Amongst the miraculous gifts at Corinth was one called, "discerning of spirits" (1 Cor. 12: 10). Had that gift been revived we should not see so many carried away by these modern crazes. A word for us to-day is, "Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children but in understanding be men" (1 Cor. 14: 20).