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SIGNS AND WONDERS TODAY: SOME THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

Stanley K. Fowler

1. Introduction

The contemporary "signs and wonders movement" confronts us with a host of questions: Are all the spiritual gifts mentioned in the New Testament available today? Is their absence in many churches due to a lack of faith in God's power and desire to do miracles? Should we expect miracles to regularly accompany our preaching of the gospel? Is evangelism without miraculous displays of power relatively ineffective? Should we be fervently praying for displays of divine power through miracles? Can we believe the reports which we hear about signs and wonders? Can those who have divergent opinions (and experiences) about these things function harmoniously in the same church or denomination? To what extent should a church or a denomination define a position on these issues?

These questions and many others like them must be addressed by contemporary Evangelicals. Until fairly recently, such questions were usually associated with classical Pentecostalism or neo-Pentecostalism (charismatic renewal), and they were dismissed by the rest of us through our refutation of the "second blessing" theology of Pentecostalism.¹ But then came John Wimber and the Vineyard Movement, arguing for a regular connection between evangelism and miracles apart from the traditional Pentecostal doctrinal system. It is not difficult to understand the attraction which many Evangelicals feel to this movement. Wimber's theology is basically mainstream evangelical; his concern to bring sinners to salvation ought to be attractive to all Evangelicals; and all of this is associated with a worship renewal movement which has had many positive effects in many kinds of churches. How, then, shall we respond?

In the modest study which follows, I will seek to summarize the foundational perspective of John Wimber and the cessationist critique of Wimber by John MacArthur. Wimber's view is taken from his foundational work, *Power Evangelism* (1986). He has elaborated on this in *Power Healing* (1987) and *Power Points* (1991), but the essential perspective is fully present in his first book. MacArthur's critique is found in his *Charismatic Chaos* (1992), which updates *The Charismatics* (1978) and includes a chapter on Wimber's so-called "Third-Wave" theology. Wimber and MacArthur stand at opposite ends of the spectrum, the one asserting that miraculous gifts must regularly accompany gospel proclamation and the other asserting that such gifts ceased with the apostolic age.

After summarizing these opposite poles of the spectrum, I will look briefly at the key biblical texts used by both authors and state a biblical-theological perspective which seems to make sense of all the data. In my opinion, this perspective comes out somewhere between Wimber and MacArthur.

2. Wimber's Power Evangelism

The fundamental tenets of a power evangelism perspective can be summarized as follows:

1. Miraculous signs accompanied the preaching of the gospel by Jesus and his disciples throughout the New Testament. No one can dispute the presence of such a pattern. Jesus is said to be authenticated by the signs and wonders which he performed during his ministry (Acts 2:22), and the Gospels display his miraculous power over nature, demons, disease, and even death. The Book of Acts indicates that miraculous signs occurred through the agency of the apostles in general (Acts 2:43; 5:12), Peter (Acts 3:1-9; 5:1-11; 9:32-43), Paul (Acts 13:4-12; 14:3; 16:18; 19:11-12; etc.), Stephen (Acts 6:8), Philip (Acts 8:5-13), and the relatively obscure Ananias (Acts 9:17-19).

2. Disciples of Jesus are expected to duplicate all the works of Jesus. The key text is John 14:12,² which gives us Jesus' promise that those who believe in him will do the same works which he did, and indeed will do "greater things than these." The power of the Holy Spirit who enabled Jesus to do miracles (Matt 12:28) is bestowed on those who believe in Jesus (Acts 1:8), thus empowering us who believe to do the same things.³

3. Miraculous signs ought to accompany the preaching of the gospel throughout this age. In fact, Wimber declared that in the familiar Great Commission text (Matt 28:18-20), "Jesus commissions us to be sources of power encounters."⁴ Doing miraculous signs is said to be included in this text, because Jesus prefaces the commission with the assertion that "all authority" in the universe had been given to him, implying that his disciples go forth in his name with access to all his power.⁵

4. Evangelism without signs of divine power is incomplete and relatively ineffective. Wimber contrasts what he calls "programmatic evangelism" (proclamation alone) and "power evangelism" (proclamation plus signs of divine power).⁶ The power in the second type is experienced in both outward signs and wonders and in the evangelists' dependence on "the immediate illumination of the Holy Spirit to give pertinent information for each encounter."⁷ Powerful signs done in connection with proclamation lead to more genuine disciples, as opposed to the mere "decisions" which tend to result from simple proclamation.⁸

5. Miraculous signs normally occur only in the ministries of those who are expecting them. The relative absence of miracles in the church in the western world is due to a naturalistic-scientific worldview, which is a barrier

to what God wants to do through the church.⁹ Sometimes Jesus did not do miracles in a certain place, because of the prevailing unbelief there, which is to say that God does not provide miracles promiscuously. Whether we admit it or not, we modern, western Christians tend to be adversely affected by our scientifically-oriented culture, and we are tempted to explain away miracles. It is no surprise, then, that God does not waste miracles on us.

3. MacArthur's Cessationism

John MacArthur is a highly influential spokesman for strict cessationism, which asserts that biblical miracles were designed for purposes which were fully accomplished, and therefore, we should not expect the same kind of miraculous signs today. The essential components of his view may be summarized as follows.

1. Biblical miracles were not evenly distributed over all of biblical history, but rather occurred in clusters which served to introduce new eras of revelation.¹⁰ There are three major eras of miracles: the ministry of Moses, introducing the Law; the ministry of Elijah and Elisha, introducing the prophets; and the ministry of Jesus and his apostles, introducing the gospel of the new covenant. Miracles do not occur in a straight line throughout redemptive history, and signs and wonders were never the everyday experience of God's people. If they were, they would lose their ability to serve as special signs. Even within the ministry of the apostles, miracles play a decreasing role. Early in their ministry miracles of healing seem to be highly significant and widespread, but later on the same apostles sometimes leave their friends and associates sick (2 Tim 4:20). If miracles were not an everyday occurrence in the biblical era, then they will certainly not be that today.

2. Biblical miracles served to authenticate the messengers of special revelation, *i.e.*, the prophets and apostles.¹¹ The agents of signs and wonders were not believers in general, but those who received new revelation from God, and the signs gave outward evidence that supernatural power was at work in them. Paul refers to signs and wonders as "signs of an apostle" (2 Cor 12:12). If such miracles occurred through all disciples, then they could hardly serve as a distinguishing mark of apostles. Heb 2:3-4 also indicates that miracles served the purpose of confirming the word of the Lord as it came through "those who heard him" (*i.e.*, the apostles), and this distribution of miracles is described in the *past tense*.¹²

3. Biblical miracles called attention to new revelation. They had no inherent power to command assent to the revelation, but they did get the attention of the observers.¹³

4. Special revelation ceased with the apostles of Christ and the writing of the New Testament, and therefore miracles ceased also, since they had achieved their purpose.¹⁴ This does *not* mean that God never acts in miraculous ways, *e.g.*, healing in response to prayer, but it does mean that

God does not enable anyone to *declare* miracles in the same way that Christ and his apostles did. MacArthur defines a miracle as “an extraordinary event wrought by God through human agency, an event that cannot be explained by natural forces.”¹⁵ A miracle is “designed to authenticate the human instrument God has chosen to declare a specific revelation to those who witness the miracle.”¹⁶ In other words, God still acts in supernatural ways, but not with a human agency component equivalent to the experience of the apostles.

5. Cessationism does not imply that God *cannot* bestow miraculous powers today, but rather that God has revealed a theology of miracles which indicates that he *will not* do so. God’s nature and power do not change, but the ways in which he works do change. The common criticism of cessationists, that they are functional sceptics or unbelievers under the sway of naturalism, is inaccurate and slanderous.¹⁷

4. Some Crucial Biblical Texts

It is impossible in this brief study to develop a complete biblical theology of miracles, but at this point I wish to look at some of the New Testament texts which are crucial to one side or the other in this debate and to ask whether these texts point in any direction with clarity.

John 14:11-12

Jesus calls his disciples to believe in him because of the works (τὰ ἔργα) which he had done, and promises that believers will do the same works. Τὰ ἔργα seem to be broader than “miracles” (NIV), but due to their evidential value, the term probably includes miracles. But does this mean that *all* believers in *all* eras will do miraculous works? This hardly seems possible on the analogy of faith, since Paul explicitly declares that gifts of miracles belong only to *some* members of the body of Christ (1 Cor 12). One must remember, also, that it is the apostles to whom Jesus is speaking directly here, and it is not always clear in this discourse whether Jesus’ words are strictly apostolic in application or designed for all Christians. Jesus clearly says that among those who believe in him, some will do miracles like his, but to say any more than that is impossible.¹⁸

Mark 16:15-20

The long ending of Mark may not be original, but since it may be, it needs to be considered. This is the Lord’s commission to the apostles (v. 14) to evangelize the entire world, along with a promise that various miraculous signs will occur among those who believe their message. The basic intent of the signs is to “confirm the word” (v.20), to authenticate the gospel as it is proclaimed. This commission/promise is given directly to the apostles, but

this is not equivalent to saying that *only* apostles would ever experience miraculous confirmation as they preach the gospel. If the essential purpose of the signs is to confirm the message, then it may well be that various preachers of *the message* will experience such confirmation. In that case, the special connection between miracles and the apostles would be due to their special connection to the gospel as its foundational witnesses.

2 Corinthians 12:11-12

In this text Paul defends his apostleship by referring to the miracles which God had wrought through him in Corinth. Such events are evidences of apostleship, from which MacArthur and other cessationists infer that *only* apostles did such miracles. The argument is plain enough: if others did such miracles, then how could miracles prove apostleship? However, it needs to be asked whether these signs are *sufficient* or merely *necessary*? It is hard to see how they could be strictly sufficient, since it is clear that some who were not apostles nevertheless were agents of miracles (Stephen, Philip, Ananias, and apparently some at Corinth). Perhaps, then, miracles were necessary as opposed to sufficient. This would be analogous to his invoking the fact that he had seen the Lord in defense of his apostleship (1 Cor 9:1). Such a direct encounter with Christ would be necessary for an apostle of Christ, but certainly not sufficient. I conclude, then, that this text does not allow us to say that miracles were always directly connected to apostles of Christ.

Hebrews 2:1-4

Here the author refers to the confirmation of the gospel as proclaimed by both Christ and his apostles, and notes that this confirmation took the form of "signs, wonders and various miracles." MacArthur and other cessationists build on the fact that this refers explicitly to the apostles, and it does so in the past tense. But surely the cessationist inference is hasty, for how does the assertion that something happened to certain persons in the past prove that the same thing will not happen to other persons in the future? When referring to Christ and the apostles, what tense other than the past could have been used?

1 Corinthians 13:8-12

This text is a favorite proof-text of both sides in this debate. Cessationists fasten on the declaration that "tongues will cease" and in various ways argue that the cessation has already occurred. Non-cessationists fasten on the apparent reference to the second coming of Christ and the *eschaton*, and thus argue that tongues and other sign gifts will continue until the second coming. I would suggest that the passage is inconclusive on this point, for the

following reasons.

Some cessationists argue that the state of completed knowledge (τὸ τέλειον) here is the completed canon of Scripture, thus indicating that sign gifts will disappear by the time that canonical revelation is complete, *i.e.*, by the end of the apostolic age.¹⁹ But it is very difficult to correlate this view with the language of this text, which talks about “face to face” knowledge and knowledge which is as full as God’s present knowledge of us.²⁰ Therefore, many cessationists, including MacArthur, have accepted the view that τὸ τέλειον denotes the conditions of the eternal state after the second coming of Christ.²¹ MacArthur and others base their cessationist claim on the verb παύσονται (“cease”), specifically on the fact that the middle voice of the verb implies “cease on its own” rather than “be terminated by the return of the Lord,” and/or on the idea that the meaning of the verb implies permanent cessation.²² The most charitable thing that can be said about this is that it derives more from the Greek language than it has to offer. The same verb in the same voice is used in Luke 8:24 to describe the cessation of the storm at the word of the Lord. Unless that was the last storm ever on the Sea of Galilee, that incident surely proves that the verb does not mean “cease on its own” or “cease permanently.”

On the surface, then, this text would seem to indicate that sign gifts will continue until the second coming of Christ, but this is also a hasty inference. It is not uncommon for Paul to speak as if the *parousia* would occur in his lifetime, because such was a real possibility, but without thereby asserting that such would actually be the case. When Paul says, “we who are still alive and are left” (1 Thess 4:17), he is not saying that he will certainly live until the *parousia*, any more than his statement that, “God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise *us* also” (1 Cor 6:14) proves that he would die before that time. He simply writes of the second advent as a genuine possibility for his generation, and the same thing may be at work in 1 Cor 13. For all we know from that text, tongues may die before the second advent just as Paul does—all that is clear is that sign gifts will not be needed after the Lord returns.

Many people seem to think that the cessation-of-gifts debate is all about the reading of 1 Cor 13,²³ but this seems to be a false assumption. The issue will have to be decided on broader grounds.

Revelation 11:3-6

It may be perilous to introduce a difficult passage from the Apocalypse into this discussion, but I do so because it is mentioned by MacArthur, and it has implications which cessationists need to deal with. MacArthur interprets this reference to two witnesses as a prediction of eschatological revelation and accompanying miraculous signs which occur during the final tribulation at the end of this age.²⁴ It does seem to be eschatological in its reference, and whether it is a prediction of individuals or groups, it certainly predicts that

they will be agents of signs and wonders on a large scale. Now if this will indeed happen at the end of the age, how can it be argued that miraculous gifts have ceased permanently with the completion of the Bible, as MacArthur argues? Will the Bible be expanded at the end of the age? Or is this evidence that while the frequency of miracles is not what it was in the apostolic age, we cannot rule out their occurrence at God's pleasure? It looks as if the latter is true. At the very least, I do not see how MacArthur can continue to use his argument that the completion of the Bible as such proves the cessation of signs and wonders.²⁵

5. Some Conclusions

This study leads to the conclusion that a biblical perspective on signs and wonders lies at neither end of the spectrum of evangelical views. Scripture does not allow us to say an unqualified Amen to either Wimber or MacArthur. I would suggest the following outline as part of a biblical perspective.

1. Miracles are sometimes used by God to confirm the gospel as it is proclaimed, but these signs have no inherent power to convert sinners to faith. This ought to be evident from the effects of Jesus' ministry, in which the powers of the age to come were regularly displayed in connection with a perfect life and an infallible proclamation of the truth, and still his own people rejected him.

Therefore, "power evangelism" is not superior to "proclamation evangelism." Whether God chooses to employ miraculous signs or not, conversion depends ultimately on an efficacious work of grace, without which no one comes to faith.

2. God is free and sovereign in the distribution of miracles. The case for cessationism is not compelling, so we must not deny the possibility that God may enable some of his people to declare miracles today. But it is equally false to assert that miracles ought to be the everyday experience of the typical Christian. This was not true in biblical history, and it is not true today. Since the apostles were special witnesses to the gospel, we ought not expect our ministry to be confirmed in quite the same way, but neither can we rule out the possibility of miraculous confirmation.

3. The fact that apostolic teaching is now written down in permanent form in the canonical New Testament does not deny the propriety or usefulness of confirming signs for the benefit of unbelievers. It is no easier to believe the written gospel than it is to believe the preached gospel.

4. If miraculous signs do occur today, one would expect them to follow the biblical pattern of confirming the gospel at significant stages of world evangelism. For example, such signs might occur when the gospel enters a new people group or in a situation in which demonic power is very visible. But one would not expect daily miracles to keep Christians healthy, and such claims deserve to be questioned. When Timothy had stomach ailments, Paul told him to drink some wine with his water—he did not counsel him to find

someone with a gift of healing or even to pray for his own healing! The absence of exhortations in the New Testament epistles to seek miracles is quite striking and not without significance.

5. If the miraculous gifts described in the New Testament really do occur today, then one would expect modern manifestations to genuinely duplicate the scriptural examples, but it is not at all clear that this is happening. For example, the apostles displayed the ability to simply *declare* a miracle, and it was done (Acts 3—the lame man; Acts 9—Dorcas raised to life; Acts 13—Elymas declared blind). But when I read the accounts of healings in the Vineyard movement, the claims are much more modest, often involving partial or protracted healings, if there is healing at all.²⁶ It is right to pray for healing in any case, but effectively praying for healing is not the same as the miraculous ability to declare an instantaneous healing. Admitting the possibility that God may duplicate some of the apostolic experiences is not the same as saying that the modern experiences are genuine duplicates.

6. Wimber and others have rightly reminded us that God sometimes works in extraordinary ways to confirm his Word, and we should be open to and grateful for such divine interventions. But it is not clear that the modern “signs and wonders” really duplicate the apostolic signs, and there is no basis for turning the experience of miraculous signs into a movement that seeks or demands them.

Over a century ago, the great English preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon was apparently on a few occasions the agent of what would now be called a “word of knowledge.” He was on those occasions able to declare that someone in a very specific condition was in his congregation, and God used that in the conversion of that person. But Spurgeon did not turn those experiences into a paradigm or a movement. All of us are tempted to extrapolate from our powerful experiences of God’s grace and power, and thus assume that he wants to do in general what he has done in us. But God is free and sovereign, and he shows himself in many ways. We can be open to his free intervention in miraculous ways, but we have no right to demand it or to program it.

¹The “second blessing” concept of the Christian life has its roots in the theology of John Wesley, who taught that there is a definite “second” work of the Spirit available to all Christians which leads to entire sanctification. This was systematized in the Holiness Movement and identified with the biblical concept of “baptism of the Holy Spirit.” Pentecostalism retained the terminology but altered the focus from holiness to power, and also changed the evidence from godly living to speaking in tongues. Although some charismatics reject the *absolute* necessity of tongues as the initial evidence, it still remains for them the normal sign of Spirit-baptism and a vital component of the Christian life. For a concise but excellent survey of the

background of Pentecostalism, see Frederick Dale Bruner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1970), p.35-55.

²Indeed, John 14:12 provides the title (“The Works of Jesus”) for a crucial chapter in John Wimber, *Power Evangelism* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), p.91-106.

³*Ibid.*, p.11,31.

⁴*Ibid.*, p.30.

⁵*Ibid.*, p.31.

⁶*Ibid.*, p.45-48.

⁷*Ibid.*, p.46.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Ibid.*, p.66-90. Wimber admits that miraculous answers to prayer sometimes occur in the lives of those not expecting them, but he denies that this will regularly happen (p.89-90).

¹⁰John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), p.112-114.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p.115.

¹²*Ibid.*, p.118-119.

¹³*Ibid.*, p.116.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p.117.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p.106.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷I was once at a meeting in which a well known charismatic Baptist theologian declared that cessationism is “simply unbelief.” Such an attitude toward sincere biblical interpreters does not advance our corporate attempt to know the truth about difficult issues.

¹⁸Jesus’ assertion that his disciples will do “greater” works than his is provocative and has been interpreted in many different ways. It would be interesting to pursue this question here, but it would be tangential to the purpose of this study. Whatever may be the sense of “greater” here, it remains true that Jesus *at least* said that his disciples would do *the same works* that he did.

¹⁹For example, Robert Gromacki, *The Modern Tongues Movement* (Grand Rapids: Baker House, 1967), p.126-127, and Merrill F. Unger, *New Testament Teaching on Tongues* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1971), p.98-101.

²⁰As D. A. Carson forcefully puts it: “To argue that the spiritual experience and maturity of the early church before the canon’s completion are to the experience of maturity of the postcanonical church just what the experience of an infant’s talk and understanding is to that of an adult is historical nonsense” [*Showing the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), p.71].

²¹For example, MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos*, p.231, and S. D. Toussaint, “First Corinthians Thirteen and the Tongues Question,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 120 (1963), 311-316. Toussaint’s article seems to have influenced several

cessationist authors, according to my survey of the literature. This exegetical shift occurred between the first and second editions of Charles R. Smith, *Tongues in Biblical Perspective* (Winona Lake: BMH Books, 1st ed., 1972, 2nd ed., 1975), one of the most cogently-argued cessationist books.

²²MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos*, p.230-231.

²³For example, Wimber, *Power Evangelism*, p.132-133. Wimber responds to cessationist theology simply by dealing with 1 Cor 13, and that in a somewhat uninformed way. He gives no evidence of understanding the cessationist case which is built on a broadly-based biblical theology of miracles.

²⁴MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos*, p.62.

²⁵In fact, MacArthur is forced to adopt an argument along dispensational lines which asserts that the present cessation of special revelation is actually temporary. His words are: "And so through the Scriptures God has given us a body of teaching that is final and complete. Our Christian faith rests on historical, objective revelation. That rules out all inspired prophecies, seers, and other forms of new revelation until God speaks again at the return of Christ (cf. Acts 2:16-21; Rev 11:1-13)" (p.62). If prophecies of this sort are to be reintroduced at the end of the age, it is hard to see how the Scriptures are actually "final and complete."

²⁶For example, Wimber indicates that at the beginning of his commitment to a healing ministry, he prayed for healings for ten months without a single case of healing (*Power Evangelism*, p.42-43). While his success rate has increased, he makes no claim to be able to guarantee healing in any case. So in the end, while there may well be healings which God does in response to Wimber's prayers, this is not a reproduction of apostolic ministry.

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