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Signs, Wonders, and Unusual Manifestations

An unusual phenomenon that began occurring years ago in the church is no laughing matter to some, in spite of its nature: believers of all ages and social backgrounds began experiencing prolonged outbursts of laughter. This spirit of hilarity seemed to be contagious, spreading through large groups. Some reported that this laughter stimulated their faith, drawing them closer to the Lord. Others, however, skeptically regarded this phenomenon as Satan's deception.

People would often ask me about the source of this laughter—could it possibly come from the Holy Spirit? I would tell them this was indeed possible. (I had to believe that, because laughter is how I came to Christ. Or should I say, laughter is how Christ came to me.)

A Joyful Supernatural Conversion

In the summer of 1941, I was stationed with a medical unit of the British army in a hotel on the North Bay of Scarborough in Yorkshire, England. The hotel had been gutted of its furniture, so we slept on straw mattresses on the floor. A nominal Anglican at the time, I was reading my Bible through from beginning to end, but not for devotional purposes. Rather, I regarded the Bible as a work of philosophy. As a professional philosopher, I deemed the work important to read as my academic duty. By this point, I had reached the book of Job.

In Scarborough, I interacted on several occasions with Pentecostal Christians, who were the first people to confront me with the necessity of receiving Christ as my personal Lord and Savior. Presented by the Pentecostals with the claims of Christ, I decided one night to pray until something happened. I did not know what to expect, but starting at eleven o'clock, I struggled for one hour to form a coherent prayer. Around midnight, I was distinctly aware of a divine presence with me and found myself repeating the words

Jacob articulated to the Man with whom he wrestled at Peniel: “I will not let You go unless You bless me!” (Genesis 32:26).

With increasing emphasis, I repeated, “I will not let You go, I will not let You go,” until I added, “Make me love You more and more...more and more and more....”

An invisible power came over me, and I found myself lying face-up on the floor with my arms in the air, repeating, “More and more and more....” Moments later, my words turned to deep sobs that rose up in my stomach and then shook my body before escaping through my lips. Half an hour later, an indescribable and involuntary change occurred: my sobbing turned to laughter. Like the sobs, the laughter proceeded from my stomach. Gentle at first, it gradually grew louder, reverberating off the walls of the room.

The soldier who shared my room woke up to find me on my back, laughing uproariously with my arms in the air. He cast me several helpless glances and said, “I don’t know what to do with you. I suppose it’s no good pouring water over you.” Within me, an inaudible response arose: “Even water would not put this out!” Not wanting to disturb my fellow soldier, I crawled to my mattress, pulled a blanket over my head, and laughed myself to sleep. I knew that the Holy Spirit was within me.

When I awoke the next morning, I was a totally different person. No longer did vile language flow from my mouth. Prayer was effortless; it came as naturally to me as breathing. I could do nothing—not even drink a glass of water—without thanking God. At six o’clock that evening, I headed to the pub for my customary drink; however, it seemed as if my legs locked at the door, and I could not enter. I stopped trying to move my legs when I realized the pub’s fare no longer tempted me.

I returned to my billet and opened my Bible, which had become a new book overnight. It seemed as if God and I were the only two people in the universe. God spoke directly to me through the Bible text. I opened to Psalm 126:1–2, which reads, “When the LORD brought back the captivity of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter.” That’s exactly what happened to me, I thought. It wasn’t I who was laughing. My mouth was being filled with laughter from some other source! Upon further reflection, I realized that this strange, supernatural laughter expressed the same joy and excitement of God’s people when He delivered them from captivity.

In Job, I came across another relevant passage: “Behold, God will not cast away the blameless....He will yet fill your mouth with laughing, and your lips with rejoicing” (Job

8:20–21). This laughter does not result from a person’s own will; it comes from God Himself as a response to the assurance of His acceptance.

God’s Laughter

In the book of Psalms, I made another discovery: God Himself laughs. His laughter is not, however, a reaction to something comical, but rather an expression of triumph over His enemies. When a wicked man plots against a righteous man, “The LORD laughs at him, for He sees that his day is coming” (Psalm 37:13).

When earthly rulers scorn God’s government, “He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; the LORD shall hold them in derision” (Psalm 2:4). Regarding the evils of unregenerate men, the psalmist writes, “But You, O LORD, shall laugh at them; You shall have all the nations in derision” (Psalm 59:8). The righteous can join in God’s jubilation: “The righteous also shall see and fear, and shall laugh at him [the wicked, evil man]” (Psalm 52:6).

In addition to explaining the source of my laughter, the Bible shed light on the identity of the Person from whom I was requesting blessing: Jesus of Nazareth, the same Man Jacob encountered at Peniel. Jacob met Him before His incarnation; I met Him after His resurrection. Both man and God, this Person could have been none other than Jesus of Nazareth.

About ten days after my first encounter with the Lord, I was lying on my mattress in the barrack when I started speaking an unfamiliar language that sounded like Chinese. I recalled what I had heard in church about speaking with other tongues. At first, I spoke with timidity. As I relaxed, the words came freely, with forcefulness. They did not originate in my mind or mouth, but in my stomach, like the sobs and laughter.

The next evening, I spoke again in an unknown language—this time, it was different from the previous instance. The words possessed a marked, poetic rhythm. After a brief silence, I spoke again—in English. The words did not originate in my mind, however, and their rhythm seemed to mirror that of the previously uttered speech. I concluded that what I was speaking in English was an interpretive rendering of what I had spoken in an unknown tongue.

Unconventional, but Not Unbiblical

While my laughter was an unconventional spiritual experience, it was no less authen-

tic. In Matthew 12:33, Jesus explained the test for spiritual experience: “A tree is known by its fruit.” What was the fruit of my strange experience? A life converted from sin to righteousness, from agnostic dabbling in the occult to an unshakable faith in Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture; a life that has brought forth fruit in God’s kingdom. Since this experience, I have had several additional instances of supernatural laughter. I have even seen God touch other believers in a similar way. Supernatural laughter cleanses and exhilarates, and it has even prompted miracles of physical healing and deliverance from emotional burdens such as depression.

A second example from my experiences with unusual manifestations occurred while I was a pastor in London. One evening, I was praying with some people from our fellowship on the top floor of a four-story building when the building suddenly shuddered and shook for thirty minutes—it shook with the power of God. At this time, a lame man was miraculously healed and threw away his crutches. It was at this very time that they began to praise God and the building started to shake.

A similar sign in the early church was recorded by Luke in Acts 4:31:

When they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.

The Biblical Record

The simple fact that something is unconventional or unusual should not provoke automatic wariness, for it may indeed be from God. In the Old Testament, God’s prophets did some unusual things. Isaiah had to walk barefoot and naked for three years. (See Isaiah 20:1–4.) Ezekiel was required to lie on his left side for three hundred and ninety days and on his right side for forty days; he had to prepare his food on a fire of cow dung. (See Ezekiel 4:4–15.)

In the gospels, Jesus Himself healed people in unconventional ways. He healed a deaf mute by spitting and touching the man’s tongue. (See Mark 7:32–35.) He healed a blind man by making clay from His own spittle and smearing it on his eyes. (See John 9:6–7.) In the book of Acts, many features and events of the early church are unconventional

compared to the church today.

Events from History

Unusual manifestations have long characterized the ministries of well-known spiritual leaders, including John Wesley, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and Charles Finney. Their ministries differed from the current trend in unusual manifestations, however.

First, the principal activity of these men was preaching God's Word. It was not unusual for Finney to preach a two-hour message; today, most sermons are significantly abridged to suit the short attention span of listeners.

Second, these men made a fervent call to repentance. A penitent spirit preceded the change; the same should occur today, but people clamor for "a refreshing" without realizing the prerequisite of repentance, which Peter articulated in Acts 3:19: "Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord."

In the Christian church, supernatural activity should be regarded with neither blind faith nor cynical skepticism. We are instructed to "test all things; hold fast what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21). We must apply Scripture to test any sign, as Hebrews 5:14 indicates: "But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil" (NIV). Discernment and a diet of solid spiritual food will enable us to assess the authenticity of signs we encounter.

Five Movements That Went Astray

Some movements start with a genuine prompting of the Holy Spirit, but they veer off track, straying from the truths of Scripture and ignoring God's guidance. I would like to review five examples. Within the overarching charismatic movement are five specific movements with which I have had a personal association that raise questions about their legitimacy and authenticity.

The Latter Rain

In the Canadian province of Saskatchewan shortly after World War II, an outpouring of the Holy Spirit came to be called the "Latter Rain." Many people emigrated from the United States to Saskatchewan, and the lasting effect of this movement was a restoration of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. About one decade later, from 1957 to 1962, I was a mis-

sionary with the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, and I inquired why the members of the Pentecostal Assemblies seldom—if ever—exercised spiritual gifts. They told me that “Latter Rain” had the spiritual gifts; in other words, because Latter Rain possessed the gifts and went astray, they did not want the gifts because they feared they might do the same. This notion is unfounded and the people showed signs of being deceived. In addition, the leaders became proud and self-assertive, falling into immorality.

The Manifest Sons of God

Another example is the Manifest Sons of God, a persuasive group of men who strongly believed the Scripture that all creation is waiting for the manifestation of the sons of God. (See Romans 8:19 KJV.) Their ministry was powerful, particularly in casting out demons. But they would engage in prolonged conversations with these demons, seeking revelation from them. Seeking revelation from demons is unscriptural, as was their theological conviction that some members of their group had already received their resurrection bodies. (See 2 Timothy 2:18.)

The Children of God

Next were the “Children of God,” who changed their name to “The Family.” Their female leader was powerful and captivating, but she manipulated the minds of young people, undermining relationships with their parents and families.

William Branham

William Branham had a remarkable ministry with incredible scope. He was a gentle, humble man with a legendary ministry of the word of knowledge. Once, at a meeting in Phoenix, Arizona, he chose a woman in the audience from his position on the platform and told her, “Now, you’re not here for yourself. You’re here for your grandson.” Next, he said her name and street address in New York City—it was all accurate.

On several occasions, after exercising his gift, Branham collapsed and was carried offstage. Ern Baxter, the Bible teacher at Branham’s evangelistic meetings and a colleague of mine, once told me in private that “Branham had two spirits; one was the Spirit of God, one was not.” After Branham died in an automobile accident, his followers embalmed his body and kept it unburied until Easter Sunday, many months later, when they thought he would be resurrected. He was not.

Discipleship, or the Shepherding Movement

Lastly, “Discipleship” or the “Shepherding Movement” began with the genuine, supernatural intervention of God. During a convention, three fellow preachers—Bob Mumford, Charles Simpson, and Don Basham—and I discovered that the man who was leading the convention was a practicing homosexual. We met to pray about how to address the situation, and by the time our prayer was finished, we knew that God had joined the four of us together. Subsequently, we made a commitment to cover one another in prayer, to submit our personal lives to one another’s scrutiny, and to confer together before making any major personal decisions.

Later, however, selfish ambition took control and inexperienced men were being put in positions of authority. In addition, our minds were not renewed, nor were we unified in purpose or aligned with God’s purpose.

There are some common threads running through all five of these movements. One is pride, which I consider the most dangerous sin. Proverbs 16:18 wisely warns, “*Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.*” The second common thread is a mixture of spirits—truth and error, the Holy Spirit and other spirits. These other spirits enter during a person’s decline from earthly to soulish to demonic (see James 3:15), concepts we will discuss at length in later chapters.