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## The Purpose of Signs and Wonders in the New Testament

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### INTRODUCTION

**U**ntil three decades or so ago, most Christians in the West who emphasized the importance of healing and miracles developed their understanding of the Bible out of the grid of classic Pentecostalism. Spirit-baptism normally follows conversion; God's will is that we be healed; God's power in healing (and in other displays) can be called forth by faith; a want of healing typically signals a want of faith.

Over against this understanding of Scripture, two groups of evangelicals staunchly insisted that the age of miracles (including "tongues") is forever past. The stricter dispensationalists ruled miracles out of court on the ground that God's current administration of His sovereign reign has left such phenomena behind in an earlier era. Many other evangelicals, not least those in the Reformed tradition, though unpersuaded by dispensationalism, nevertheless came to the same conclusion. They did so by agreeing with Warfield, who argued that signs and wonders are tightly tied in the Bible to the purpose of attesting those of God's servants who exercised peculiar

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ministries in the sweep of redemptive history. Since all the public redemptive acts are behind us (except for the second advent), we should beware of counterfeit claims to miracles in our day.<sup>1</sup>

Many evangelicals who could not accept the arguments of cessationism were nevertheless able to keep Pentecostals at arm's length because they were convinced that the undergirding "second blessing" theology was exegetically wrong and pastorally divisive. Worse, the pastoral practice that allowed suffering people to writhe in self-inflicted guilt because they did not have the faith to be healed was unconscionable.

Enter John Wimber and the Vineyard movement.<sup>2</sup> Wimber disavows "second blessing" theology and insists that not everyone will be healed. The basic structure of his theology reflects an eschatological vision that most evangelicals happily espouse. The kingdom of God has dawned and is at war with the kingdom of Satan. Although the final victory awaits the consummation, the decisive victory was achieved by Christ Himself. The demonstration of the kingdom's coming lies in the clash between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan, and this clash includes displays of signs and wonders. Although signs and wonders in the New Testament frequently attest who Jesus is or who the apostles are, they cannot be limited to a role of *mere* attestation: they are displays of kingdom power.

Since the kingdom has dawned and is operating, Wimber argues, we should expect signs and wonders as surely as we expect conversions. In Wimber's predominant usage, signs and wonders include exorcism, healing the sick, and words of knowledge. They not only serve to confirm the Christian's faith, but they are *necessary* manifestations of the kingdom's presence and advance. That does not mean that Wimber thinks a miracle should take place every time someone is converted, or in every instance where there is evangelism, but that in the sweep of our evangelism signs and wonders *must* find a place or the gospel we present is defective, robbed of its power. Signs and wonders have an apologetic function in evangelism.<sup>3</sup>

There is a growing literature criticizing and defending the Vineyard movement, much of it fairly partisan. In addition, there are numerous treatments of the nature of prophecy and revelation, obvi-

ously relevant to the topic at hand. My purpose, however, is much more constrained. Against the backdrop of the present controversy, I shall survey the purpose of signs and wonders in the New Testament, with some necessary references to the Old Testament. The brevity of the chapter ensures that this will be nothing more than a hasty glance over the whole. Although a thick volume might easily be devoted to the subject, the virtue in the present procedure is the same as that achieved by examining the Rockies from a high altitude airplane: you find it somewhat easier to maintain a sense of proportion than when you spend a lot of time on the ground hunting for particular kinds of rock. However sketchy the survey, I shall end with some theological and pastoral observations.

#### A SURVEY OF THE BIBLICAL MATERIAL

To organize and limit this section, I have shaped the material into an apostolic number of points.

1. At the purely linguistic level, "signs and wonders" is not a particularly apt way to designate the Vineyard movement. Most of the events that the Bible designates as "signs and wonders" are miraculous, redemptive-historical acts of God. In the Old Testament, the events surrounding the Exodus take pride of place (Exodus 7:3; cf. 3:20; 8:23; 10:1, 2; 11:9, 10; 15:11; Numbers 14:22; Deuteronomy 4:34; 6:22; 7:19; 26:8; 29:3; Joshua 3:5; 24:17). Later generations of Israelites could testify, "[God] sent his signs and wonders into your midst, O Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants" (Psalm 135:9; cf. Nehemiah 9:10; Psalm 105:27; Jeremiah 32:21). Stephen, steeped in the Scriptures, refers to the Exodus events the same way: "[God] led them out of Egypt and did wonders and miraculous signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the desert" (Acts 7:36).

No other event in the Old Testament attracts this array of witnesses speaking of signs and/or wonders. One theme comes close, namely, threatened judgment on the people of Israel. After God describes the wretched curses that will befall His people if they do not obey, He adds this summary: "They [the curses] will be a sign and a wonder to you and your descendants forever" (Deuteronomy 28:46). In the context of the Pentateuch, that is a way of saying that the

“signs and wonders” that effected Israel’s deliverance were simultaneously terrible judgments on Egypt—and those same judgments would be turned against the covenant community if they did not obey. Jeremiah 32:20 picks up the same usage; Daniel 4:2-3; 6:27 extends the threat to eschatological dimensions (the latter in connection with the rescue of Daniel from the lions’ den).<sup>4</sup>

With this controlling Old Testament background, the New Testament application of the expression “signs and wonders” to Jesus’ ministry, especially at Pentecost (Acts 2:19 [referring to Joel 2:30], 22), suggests that at least some Christians saw the coming of Jesus as a major redemptive-historical appointment, on a par with the Exodus (and, I would argue on other grounds, its “fulfillment”), combining in the one event great salvation and great judgment.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, many miracles in the Bible are not specifically referred to as “signs and wonders.” I shall say more about some of them below. But at the purely *linguistic* level, “signs and wonders” cannot easily be made to align with the kinds of phenomena that interest Wimber.

2. When “signs and wonders” refers to God’s major redemptive-historical appointments, what function do such references have in the texts where they are found? One of their major purposes is to call the people of God back to those foundation events, to encourage them to remember God’s saving acts in history, to discern their significance, and to pass on that information to the next generation.

In the future, when your son asks you, “What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the Lord our God has commanded you?” tell him: “We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Before our eyes the Lord sent miraculous signs and wonders—great and terrible—upon Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household. But he brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land that he promised on oath to our forefathers. The Lord commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the Lord our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today.” (Deuteronomy 6:20-24)

Unbelief in Israel is nothing other than the reprehensible forgetting of all the wonders God performed at the Exodus (Psalms 78:11-12; 106:7); by contrast, the psalmists extol God by calling to mind the redemptive deeds of the Lord (e.g., Psalms 77:11, 15; 105:5).

A similar strand can be found in the New Testament. In the fourth gospel, Jesus’ miracles are often referred to as “signs.” The climax of the gospel is reached when, after the resurrection, the evangelist tells us: “Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:30-31). In other words, John’s readers are called to reflect on the signs that he reports, to think through the *significance* of those redemptive events, especially Jesus’ resurrection, and thereby believe. The mandate to believe here rests on John’s reports of God’s past redemptive-historical signs, not on testimonies of present ongoing ones.

3. The significance of signs deserves a little more elaboration. The New Testament writers treat Jesus’ miracles in a rich diversity of ways and see in them a plethora of purposes and achievements. In John, many if not all of the “signs” (which in John always refer to what we would label the miraculous) are not mere displays of power but are symbol-laden events rich in meaning for those with eyes to see. John teases out some of those lessons by linking some signs with discourses that unpack them, or with surrounding events that elucidate their meaning. The feeding of the five thousand precipitates the “bread of life” discourse. Part of the significance of that sign, therefore, is that Jesus not only provides bread but is Himself the “bread of life,” apart from which men and women remain in death (John 6). The raising of Lazarus is placed in conjunction with one of the great “I am” claims of Jesus: “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11). More examples could be adduced. The point is that one of the purposes of Jesus’ “signs” stretches far beyond display of raw power and personal attestation: they frequently serve as acted parables, pregnant acts of power, suggestive signs.

4. For the sake of completeness, it should be mentioned that not all biblical “signs” or even “wonders” are miraculous.<sup>6</sup> Several prophets performed ordinary but symbol-laden actions that were called “signs” (e.g., Ezekiel 12:1-11; 24:15-27), or in one case “a sign and wonder” (Isaiah 20:3, KJV; NIV, “a sign and portent”). Isaiah designates himself and the children the Lord has given him as “signs and symbols [“signs and . . . wonders,” KJV] in Israel from the Lord Almighty” (Isaiah 8:18, NIV).<sup>7</sup> There is no similar use of “signs” in the New Testament (though the “signs of the times” in Matthew 16:3 are probably not restrictively miraculous).

On the other hand, there is a conceptual parallel in the New Testament that is worth pondering. The *charismata* include not only such “miraculous” gifts as healing and prophecy, but also such “nonmiraculous” gifts as helping and administration—and even marriage and celibacy (1 Corinthians 7:7). Of course, this observation does not itself address substantive issues in the modern so-called charismatic movement; it does remind us, however, that if we adopt *biblical* terminology, it is exceedingly difficult to think of any Christian as “noncharismatic” if all of us have received *charismata* (“grace-gifts”) from God.

5. Not all signs and wonders (I now use the expression as a general category, roughly on a par with “miracles,” not merely at the linguistic level) receive positive reviews in Scripture. There are at least four differentiable dangers:

a. Signs and wonders can be performed quite outside the heritage of the God of the Bible. The Egyptian magicians could match Moses miracle for miracle for quite a while (Exodus 7:8–8:18). Paul predicts, “The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing” (2 Thessalonians 2:9-10). The second beast in Revelation 13 “performed great and miraculous signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to earth in full view of men” (v. 13).

Perhaps in some cases these are nothing more than disgusting tricks, like the nasty little sleights of hand practiced by many who lead seances. But there can be little doubt that the Bible pre-

sents many of these signs and wonders as genuinely miraculous, in the sense that what takes place is entirely at odds with the the normal ordering of things. In the worst case they are demonic. In one of the most perceptive analyses of Wimber, Alan Cole, who has served Christ in several different cultures, writes:

None of these signs are new to me (healings, visions, tongues, exorcisms). But the trouble is that I have seen *every one of them* (yes, tongues too) in non-Christian religions, and outwardly, there was no difference in the signs, except that one was done in the name of Jesus and the other was not. Of course, if the person was also responding to the Gospel, there was a real and lasting change in life. That is why I cannot get excited about healings in themselves, and why I can reverently understand how Jesus used them sparingly, and retreated when the crowds became too great.<sup>8</sup>

More than fifteen thousand people a year claim healing at Lourdes. Testimonies of healing are reported in every issue of the *Christian Science Sentinel*. Pakistani Muslims claim that one of their revered saints, Baba Farid, has healed people with incurable diseases and traveled great distances in an instant. Thousands of Hindus claim healing each year at the temple dedicated to Venkateswara in Tirupathi. Some Buddhist sects provide yet another set of reports of healing.

None of this demands that we conclude that genuine miracles have ceased or that all miracles ostensibly performed in a Christian context are necessarily counterfeit or even demonic. It is simply to insist that because both in Scripture and in Christian experience miracles can occur both in the context of biblical religion and outside it, it is unwise to make too much hang on them, especially if the gospel is left behind. More strongly put, it is always perilous to equate the supernatural with the divine.

There remain three further dangers that are perhaps more relevant to contemporary Western Christianity.

b. Signs and wonders performed within the believing community can have deceptive force. That was true in ancient Israel.

If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, "Let us follow other gods" (gods you have not known) "and let us worship them," you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. The Lord your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul. It is the Lord your God you must follow, and him you must revere. Keep his commands and obey him; serve him and hold fast to him. That prophet or dreamer must be put to death, because he preached rebellion against the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery; he has tried to turn you from the way the Lord your God commanded you to follow. (Deuteronomy 13:1-5)

Observe that the text does not question the reality of those signs and wonders. Nor does it assign them to the work of the devil. At one level, God Himself is behind them: "The Lord your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul"! More than likely these false prophets sometimes announced the false god they championed as Yahweh, the Lord—as Hananiah does in Jeremiah 28. Not every bit of idolatry introduces a god with another name; indeed, a false prophet within the believing community is pernicious precisely because, like Hananiah, he or she appeals to Yahweh's name and says that Yahweh has spoken even when Yahweh has not spoken.

The test that Moses introduces in Deuteronomy 13 is illuminating. It turns not on the reality of the miracle or the accuracy of the false prophet's prediction, but on whether the prophet has the effect of drawing people away from the God who performed some redemptive-historical act. In Moses' day, that was the Exodus; in ours, it is the cross and resurrection. If the people of Israel are being drawn to a god they have not known as the God who brought them out of Egypt and redeemed them from the land of slavery, the prophet is false.

The contemporary application is pretty clear. The question is not first of all whether the miracles reported by the Vineyard movement are real (though that is an important question), nor even whether people are drawn to renewed love for "Jesus." There are, af-

ter all, many Jesuses around: the Mormon Jesus, the Jehovah's Witness Jesus, the Muslim Jesus, the classic liberal Jesus, and so forth. The question, rather, is whether the movement draws men and women to renewed love for the Jesus of God's great, redemptive-historical act, the Jesus of the cross and resurrection. That is an issue of extraordinary importance; I shall return to it again. For the moment it is only necessary to remind ourselves that Jesus could warn against the efforts of false Christs and false prophets who by performing signs and wonders would "deceive the elect—if that were possible" (Mark 13:22). The language suggests they are extraordinarily deceptive and come within a whisker of this end. That means it will take more than usual discernment to see what is askew; and our generation of believers is not noteworthy for discernment.

c. The third danger connected with signs and wonders in the Scripture, a danger not always distinguishable from the second, is the corruption of motives that is so often connected with pursuit of them. The four gospels preserve many instances where people demanded a sign from Jesus and He roundly denounced them for it, sometimes dismissing them as "a wicked and adulterous generation" (Matthew 12:38-45.; cf. 16:1-4; Mark 8:11-12; Luke 11:16, 29). One can understand why: the frequent demands for signs was in danger of reducing Jesus to the level of a clever magician, able to perform tricks on demand. The result would be a domesticated Jesus; Jesus would have to "buy" faith and allegiance by a constant flow of miracles done on demand. Such a demand is wicked and adulterous: it makes human beings the center of the universe and reduces God to the level of someone who exists to serve us. He may capture human allegiance if He performs adequately, but at no point is He the unqualified Sovereign to whom we must give an account, and who alone can save us. In the worst case, a Simon Magus insists that he himself must have the wonderful power to confer the Spirit and His gifts (Acts 8), as if the Spirit is so easily tamed or is so easily purchased.

In two reports (Matthew 12:39-40; Luke 11:29-32) Jesus says the only sign that will be given those who demand signs is the sign of the prophet Jonah, which turns out, in the context, to be a portent of His own resurrection. In other words, Jesus wants faith to be firmly based on His own death and resurrection.

It is important not to infer too much from this evidence. As we shall see, signs can have a legitimate subsidiary role in establishing faith. But the uncritical quest for signs is easily corrupted by impure motives. And in any case there is ample evidence that Jesus Himself drives those who hunger for signs back to His resurrection.

d. The final danger connected with signs is hypocrisy. Of course hypocrisy finds a home in many forms of religious observance; I here mention its home in signs and wonders simply because that is the topic of this essay. Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (Matthew 7:21-23). Their exorcisms, prophecies, and miracles are all performed in Jesus' name. Jesus Himself does not bother to question their reality. It is quite possible that those who ask these questions of Jesus on the last day honestly think they *ought* to be admitted to the kingdom (just as the "goats" are surprised by their fate in Matthew 25:41-45). But they are turned away, unrecognized by Jesus, because however "powerful" they may be in the realm of the miraculous, they do not display the marks of obedience: they do not do what Jesus says, they do not produce good fruit (cf. 7:20).

Once again, the wrong inference must not be drawn. The point is not that signs and wonders are inevitably bad but that they are never of first importance. One thinks of the flow of the argument in 1 Corinthians 12-14: various *charismata* may be distributed to members of Christ's Body, the church, but the "most excellent way [not "gift"!]" required of all believers is the way of love. Similarly here: the critical test for who is and who is not a genuine follower of Jesus is obedience, not displays of power. And some displays of power, even some done in Jesus' name, are proof of nothing at all.

6. Even within the ministry of Jesus, healings and exorcisms are clearly placed in a subsidiary role to Jesus' teaching and preaching.<sup>9</sup> When Jesus' intention is stated or His initiative described, almost always His teaching and preaching are in view, not His healings (e.g. Mark 1:14-15, 21, 35-39; 2:2, 13; 3:14, 22-23; 4:1; 6:1-2, 34; 7:14;

8:31, 34; 9:30-31; 10:1; 12:1, 35). By contrast, apart from one or two summary statements (e.g., Matthew 4:23), when Jesus heals individuals or casts out demons from them, either the initiative is with the sufferer (e.g., Matthew 8:3-4; 9:20-22, 27-31; 17:14-18; Mark 1:23-26; Luke 7:1-10; John 4:46-54—including the initiative of the sufferer's friends, Matthew 9:27-31; 12:22; Mark 1:30-31, 32-34; 6:55-56), or Jesus may take some initiative with an individual after His purpose for being there is established on some other basis. For instance, in the case of the crippled woman of Luke 13:10-13, "Jesus was *teaching* in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there. . . . *When Jesus saw her, he called her forward*" (cf. also Matthew 12:9-13; John 5).

Not for a moment is this to suggest that Jesus did not see His healings and exorcisms as part of His messianic work: we shall return to this theme again (see Matthew 8:16-17; 11:5-6). It is simply to point out that there is no record of Jesus going somewhere in order to hold a healing meeting, or of Jesus issuing a general invitation to be healed, or of Jesus offering generalized prayers for healing. Where Jesus does undertake to heal an individual, the procedure is never prefaced by some generalizing announcement (there is no "I have a word from the Lord: there is someone here with back pain, and God wants to heal you"), and the result is never ambiguous.

7. On the other hand, signs and wonders do have an attesting function in Jesus' ministry. At one level, that is not unlike the attesting function of signs and wonders in the life of, say, Joshua (3:7; 4:14). But in most cases there are additional overtones connected with Jesus' role as the promised Messiah.

For instance, when John the Baptist sends envoys to question Jesus' credentials, Jesus responds with a summary of His ministry: "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me" (Matthew 11:4-6). The important point to observe is that Jesus frames this summary as a fulfillment of messianic prophecy (Isaiah 35:5-6; 61:1-2): His miracles attest that He is the one who would bring in the new order promised in the Scriptures. What Jesus pur-

posely leaves out of each of the passages He here quotes from Isaiah is the note of judgment, "the day of vengeance of our God" (Isaiah 61:2); He does not include the words "he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you" (Isaiah 35:4) in his allusion. Probably that was what was troubling the Baptist: John had preached that the One whose sandals he was unworthy to loosen would not only baptize His people in the Holy Spirit but would thoroughly clear His threshing floor and burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire (Matthew 3:11-12). Jesus is saying, in effect, that the dawning of the kingdom in His own ministry is introducing the long-awaited blessings of the messianic age, even though the judgments are delayed. Meanwhile, John, having started well, is encouraged not to draw back now: "Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me" (Matthew 11:6).

Again, on the day of Pentecost, Peter describes Jesus in these terms: "Jesus of Nazareth was a man *accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs*, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know" (Acts 2:22, italics added).

Still, even in these and other passages, at least two things must be borne in mind. The person being accredited is Jesus, God's own Son, the unique Redeemer. In this case, at least, it is improper to think of the potential of signs and wonders to command faith without also thinking of where the faith is to be placed. Of course, that means we shall need to explore just how far some similar role is assigned to signs and wonders performed by others, but that is a subject to be treated further on.

Second, although Acts 2:22 insists Jesus was accredited by God to Peter's hearers by miracles, wonders, and signs, the fact of the matter is that those hearers did not become believers until Pentecost and the gift of the Spirit. In other words, Peter appeals to the signs and wonders to establish the unique redemptive-historical gift from heaven bound up in the Person and work of Jesus Messiah; all his preaching turns on this point. Even so, the miracles themselves did not command faith, not even in the ministry of Jesus.

John's gospel puts some of these tensions in proportion. In one and the same book, several perspectives on signs and wonders are brought together. On the one hand, Jesus' signs display His glory, at least to His disciples (John 2:11). On the other hand, Jesus' ini-

tial response to a man who cries for help is the firm reproach "Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders . . . you will never believe" (4:48). The religious leaders are convinced that Jesus is actually performing miracles whose reality they cannot deny, but that does not foster faith: rather, it fuels their rejection and anger and nurtures their plot to corrupt justice and have Him executed (e.g., 11:47-57). Precisely because they will not believe Jesus' words and do not perceive that He does what His Father does, Jesus begs them at the very least to reconsider His miracles: "Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may learn and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father" (10:37-38). Here, too, the appeal is to learn from the signs and wonders Jesus performs exactly who Jesus Himself is. From the way Jesus phrases Himself, we conclude that He sees such faith as of inferior quality, but certainly better than unbelief. And in any case His appeal is futile: His hearers do not believe. Elsewhere, some do believe because they see Jesus' works (e.g., 11:45), though not all faith triggered by Jesus' signs proves valid: some of it is spurious (2:23-25; cf. 8:30-31). The narrative of the last of the twelve to believe in Jesus' resurrection is revealing. Thomas comes to believe in Jesus' resurrection precisely because Jesus graciously proffers the hard evidence of the miraculous that satisfies His doubting apostle. But the same relatively negative valuation is given: better than the kind of faith that insists on seeing Jesus' signs first hand is the faith that rests on the reports of the unique signs of Jesus (20:29-31).

8. I turn now to the postresurrection period. Once again it proves helpful to begin at the purely linguistic level. It is rather startling to observe that "signs and wonders" (or some minor variation) as a *linguistic category* is almost exclusively restricted to the apostles. I have argued that "signs and wonders" are heavily tied in the Old Testament to the major events surrounding the redemptive-historical event of the Exodus, and that the category is quickly applied to Jesus in the New Testament. After reporting that Peter on the day of Pentecost proclaims that God has once again performed "wonders" and "signs" through His Son Jesus (Acts 2:19, 22), Luke immediately summarizes the results of that first Christian sermon:

“Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs *were done by the apostles*” (Acts 2:43, italics added). The same point is repeated in Acts 5:12. Signs and wonders are attributed to Paul and Barnabas in Acts 14:3; 15:12. Considering Luke’s consistent usage, the “signs and wonders” for which the church prays in Acts 4:29-30 are most plausibly understood to be miracles that the apostles would perform. In Acts, the only other individuals who are said to perform “signs and wonders” are Stephen (Acts 6:8) and Philip (8:13), who at least are closely associated with the apostles. Paul himself refers to the “signs and miracles” or “[marks of] an apostle” that he performed (Romans 15:19; 2 Corinthians 12:11-12). Although some take Hebrews 2:3-4 another way, the most natural reading is that the “signs, wonders and various miracles” by which God testified to the gospel were performed by those who first heard the word (i.e., the apostles) and who then passed the message on.

Once again it is vital not to draw the wrong conclusion from this evidence. It cannot be made to support the conclusion that miraculous signs and wonders have ceased altogether. But a substantial linkage can be made between “signs and wonders,” taken as a linguistic entity, and the two major events of redemptive history, namely, the Exodus and the coming of Jesus Messiah. In this light the activity of the apostles is part and parcel of the Christ-revelation.

Something of this vision is retained in the prologue to the epistle to the Hebrews. In the past, the writer tells us, God spoke to the fathers “*through the prophets* at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us *by his Son*” (1:1-2, italics added). This Son-revelation is thus a step beyond the older revelation. The writings of the first witnesses, the writings of the apostles and apostolic men, are thus not seen as further revelations beyond the Son-revelation but as inscripturating the Son-revelation, rounding it out as it were. This Son-revelation is climactic: it has taken place in the “last days.” Thus the apostles and other New Testament writers must be viewed as something more than proto-Christians, models of what all other Christians should enjoy and experience: in some respects they are *uniquely* tied to the climactic, once-for-all Christ-revelation. At certain levels, of course, they function as models for Christians in every generation. What is remarkable, however, is that the “signs and wonders” terminology is force-

fully linked to the central redemptive-historical focus and embraces not only Jesus and His death and resurrection but the first articulation of that truth in the apostolic circle that was peculiarly accredited to that ministry.

Lest I be misunderstood, I must repeat: this does not mean Warfield was entirely right in arguing that the age of miracles ended with the apostles. We have still not considered such miracles as, say, the gifts of healing mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12. But at the purely linguistic level, “signs and wonders” in both the Old and New Testaments seems to enjoy primarily a narrow focus and is therefore a misleading label to apply to the Vineyard movement and its phenomena. The problem is more than one of labeling: by using the expression so freely, the Vineyard movement frequently applies to itself Scriptures and principles that a more sober reading refuses to warrant.

9. If, then, against New Testament usage, we apply the expression “signs and wonders” to all Christian expressions of the more spectacular *charismata*, or of miracles generally, can we discern other functions of signs and wonders in the New Testament? There are, I think, primarily two kinds of passages to consider.<sup>10</sup>

a. First, there are the passages where Jesus authorizes either the twelve (Matthew 10:8; Luke 9:1-2) or the seventy-two (Luke 10:9) to heal the sick (or, in the former passages, to heal the sick, raise the dead, and cast out demons). On the one hand, it will not do to limit the applicability of the command to the twelve, since the seventy-two receive a similar commission. On the other hand, it will not do to cite Matthew 28:20, “teaching them to obey *everything* I have commanded you,” as if that authorizes the automatic applicability of those passages to all believers: after all, the same commissions to the twelve and the seventy-two also included prohibitions against going to the Gentiles or the Samaritans, and commands to take no bag for the journey, and so forth. The historical particularities of these trainee missions must be thought through; their theological significance must be quietly and thoroughly studied before glib proof texts are cited.

Without embarking on a full-scale exegesis of the passages, I would be inclined to say at least these things. First, there is an im-



portant sense in which the first disciples' ministry, even before the cross, was an extension of Jesus' ministry and a prefiguring of the in-breaking kingdom. This, too, was part of the Son-revelation. Second, although the application of the text to all Christians is fraught with difficulties (unless we want to apply *everything* in these chapters to all Christians and are prepared to deny that there was *nothing* special reserved for the first followers of Jesus), there is nothing to suggest that it would be impossible for *any* other believers, after the resurrection, to be gifted in similar ways. Third, it is imprudent to miss, in one of the three passages, the remarkable conclusion to the mission. When the disciples return with joy exclaiming, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name" (Luke 10:17), Jesus not only reminds them of what authority has been confided to them (vv.18-19) but warns, "However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (v. 20). In other words, far more important, and far more justly a cause of joy than any miracle I might perform, is God's elective knowledge of me as one of His own people. And that, surely, is the rightful heritage of all the people of God.

b. Second, there are passages that speak of gifts of healing (such as the crucial discussion of *charismata* in 1 Corinthians 12-14) or that casually assume that more miracles were taking place among first-century believers than those performed by the apostolic band and a few others (e.g., Galatians 3:5; James 5:13-16). These, I think, serve as the death-knell to the strong form of the Warfield thesis. There is no sufficient evidence for supposing that all genuine miracles came to an end at the close of the apostolic age. Doubtless Wimber and others have been helpful in reminding some Christians of that fact.

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that all of these passages that assume the presence of miraculous gifts outside apostolic ranks focus, without exception, not on the justification of miracles but on their purpose or limitation or control in some way. For example, 1 Corinthians 12 insists that not all Christians have the same gifts, that believers with gifts not greatly respected should be greatly honored in the church, that the gifts should edify the church, and much more along the same lines.<sup>11</sup> Galatians 3:5 drives its readers back to the apostolic gospel; James 5:13-16 focuses on

personal holiness. In all of these passages, the driving concern lies deeper than the presence or absence of miracles (though their presence is assumed); in no passage are readers berated because they have been insufficiently concerned with gifts of healing and exorcisms.

10. When we examine the notion of power in Paul, we find it centrally tied to neither evangelism nor healing, but to perseverance, faith, hope, love, spiritual stamina, endurance under trial, and growing conformity to Jesus Christ. That is easily confirmed not only by word studies of "power" and related terms but by careful and meditative study of Romans 8:31-39; 1 Corinthians 1-4; 2 Corinthians 10-13; Ephesians 3:14-21; and many other passages. A thorough study of Paul's prayers similarly discloses where the heart of his concern for his readers is.

11. Another way to approach this question is to study all that the New Testament has to say about the Holy Spirit. It is surely correct to say that under the New Covenant there is a tremendous emphasis on the gift of the Spirit, poured out on all children of the covenant without exception, in fulfillment of Old Testament promises. In one sense, this is the age of the Spirit; if someone does not have the Spirit of God, he or she does not belong to God.

But having said that, the biblical material rapidly becomes so rich (and sometimes disputed) that it becomes difficult to say much more without embarking on a much longer chapter than this one. Two comments must suffice.

First, the tendency in some literature (both scholarly and popular) is to fence off the Spirit from some phenomena. Some Christians have argued, for instance, that the only unique ministry of the Spirit under the New Covenant is His work in unifying believers into one body. A few minutes with a concordance should disabuse students of that conviction. At a more academic level, many scholars have argued that in Luke-Acts the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of prophecy, whereas Luke thinks of healings and exorcisms and the like as the fruit of *dynamis* ("power"), not the Spirit. This thesis has recently been ably rebutted by Turner.<sup>12</sup>

Second, the burden of the associations with the Spirit in Paul is not on miracles but on sanctification, ethics, revelation, transformation of character, the mediation of all that God provides for His people under the New Covenant. Although the theme deserves extensive exploration, it cannot be probed here.

12. Finally, the purpose of signs and wonders in the New Testament could be usefully explored by examining minutely many important passages and classifying the results. For example, one might argue that signs and wonders, in the larger sense, demonstrate Jesus' mercy and compassion in Matthew 9:35-36; 14:14; 20:34; Mark 1:41; they serve to establish the preeminence of faith, both inside and outside Israel (Luke 7:1-10); and so on. But most of those purposes could easily be made to slip under the points already made.

Two passages, however, deserve a little extended comment:

a. *Matthew 11:2-15*. We have already thought through vv. 4-6, where Jesus answers the Baptist's doubts by referring to his own ministry in terms of two passages from Isaiah. Jesus then turns to the crowds and speaks to them about John. As John bore witness to Jesus, so Jesus now bears witness to John—though as we shall see, it is witness of a special type.

In brief, Jesus asks a number of rhetorical questions regarding the expectations of the crowds when they went to see John in the desert. The final question leads Jesus to affirm that John the Baptist was a prophet (11:7-9)—indeed, “more than a prophet.” How so? The Baptist is more than a prophet, Jesus insists, because John not only spoke the Word of God, but was someone of whom the Word of God spoke. Jesus cites Malachi 3:1: John is the one of whom the prophet Malachi said, “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you” (Matthew 11:10).<sup>13</sup> That is what makes John the Baptist more than a prophet. In fact, Jesus does not hesitate to offer this staggering evaluation of John: “Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (11:11).

The second part of the verse shows that Jesus means John is the greatest born of woman *up to that time*. From the time of the

kingdom onward, John is outstripped in greatness by the least in the kingdom. Still, the first part of the verse must have raised a few eyebrows in the first century. It means that in the evaluation of Jesus John the Baptist is greater than Moses, greater than King David, greater than Isaiah or Jeremiah, greater than Solomon. Why?

Bearing in mind the quotation from Malachi, the only possible answer is that John the Baptist is the greatest because to him was given the task and privilege of pointing Jesus out more clearly than all before him. True, on Jesus' reading of the Old Testament, Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Solomon had all pointed to Jesus in one fashion or another, but John pointed out just who Jesus was in time, on the plane of history, before his peers. That is what made him the greatest person born of woman to that point in history. The brief assessment reported by the fourth evangelist is pertinent: “Then Jesus went back across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing in the early days. Here he stayed and many people came to him. They said, ‘*Though John never performed a miraculous sign* [italics mine], all that John said about this man was true.’ And in that place many believed in Jesus” (John 10:40-42). This means, of course, that although it is true to speak of Jesus' witness to John, it is a peculiar witness indeed: He is in fact using John to point afresh to Himself. The Baptist's entire greatness turned on the clarity of his witness (owing to his position in redemptive-history) to Jesus.

And then Jesus adds that “he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Matthew 11:11). For the comparison to be meaningful, the categories of “greatness” must be the same as those that applied to John the Baptist. The least in the kingdom are greater than John because even the least in the kingdom can point Jesus out more clearly and with greater depth than could the Baptist. All of us live this side of the cross and resurrection; none of us is slow to affirm that Jesus is simultaneously the conquering king and the suffering servant, the Davidic king and the priest in the order of Melchizedek, the sovereign Lord and the bleeding sacrifice, the crucified Messiah and the resurrected Savior.

That is what establishes the Christian's greatness: to us has been given the indescribably great privilege of bearing witness to Jesus' Person and work. It does not depend on performing miracles, as

John the Baptist's greatness did not depend on performing miracles (John 10:40-42): it depends on the privilege of knowing God in Christ Jesus, this side of the cross and resurrection, this side of the dawning of the promised kingdom.<sup>14</sup>

Anticharismatics must not milk this exegesis for more than it is worth. There is no warrant for concluding that the children of the kingdom *must not* perform signs and wonders (in the generic sense) in their witness to who Jesus is, on the ground that John the Baptist *did not*. What is entirely clear, however, is that greatness in Jesus' mind is not tied in any way to the performance of miracles. The greatest person born of woman until the dawning of the kingdom performed no miracles but pointed Jesus out more immediately than all before him. The least in the kingdom is still greater than he, for the obvious analogous reason: he or she can point Him out with even greater clarity because of the fuller revelation we have in the New Testament. That is tremendously humbling; it is staggeringly Christ-centered; it establishes that proclamation of the truth about Jesus (i.e., the gospel) is fundamental to our significance.

b. *John 14:12*. What about "greater things"? In the farewell discourse Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do *even greater things than these* [italics added], because I am going to the Father" (John 14:12). The passage has become a more or less standard proof text not only in many traditionally charismatic circles but also for many in the Vineyard.

Before summarizing what the text means, it is worth mentioning what it *can't* mean. First, it cannot simply mean *more* works: the church will do more things than Jesus did. There are perfectly good ways to say that sort of thing in Greek, and John did not choose any of them. Second, it cannot mean *more spectacular* works or the like—though some such meaning seems to be assumed by many Vineyard people. We must remember that Jesus walked on water, raised the dead (in Lazarus's case, after he had been dead four days), fed five thousand from a lunch, and turned water into wine. I know of no one in the Vineyard, or anywhere else, for that matter, who claims, with any sort of public attestation at all, that he is performing *more spectacular* miracles than these. I know no person who is matching them; I know no group that is collectively match-

ing them. In fact, it is difficult to imagine what kinds of miracles could possibly be classed as more spectacular than these.

Interpretative clues to the meaning of the passage are provided by the context. First, the verse before verse 12 must not be ignored: "Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles [lit., "works," which in John include miracles] themselves" (14:11).<sup>15</sup> In this context, the "greater things" (v. 12) that believers will perform surely derive their relative greatness from the fact that they are performed after the cross and resurrection for which Jesus is at this point preparing His followers. Both Jesus' words and His deeds were somewhat veiled during the days of His flesh, as the previous verses make clear. Even His closest disciples misunderstood much of what He was saying and doing. But in the wake of Jesus' glorification and the descent of the Spirit (themes that dominate chaps. 14-17), the words and deeds of Jesus' followers, empowered by the Spirit of truth, the *Paraclete*, will take on a clarity, and thus a "greatness," that *necessarily* eluded some of Jesus' words and deeds in the period before the cross. The words and signs of Jesus *could not* be as effective before the cross as they become after, when they are reported, in the wake of Jesus' exaltation and His gift of the Spirit. In the same way, Jesus' followers perform "greater things" (the expression is ambiguous enough to include more than miracles), precisely because they belong to the period of greater clarity, of less ambiguous witness to Jesus. In short, the argument is not unlike what we discover in Matthew 11.

Second, this interpretation is confirmed by the causal clause at the end of the verse. When Jesus says His followers will do greater things than what He is doing "because I am going to the Father," He cannot possibly be understood to mean that they will somehow have greater scope for their wonderful efforts because He will have faded from the scene and abandoned the stage to them. Rather, their works are classed as greater precisely *because* Jesus is going to the Father—a category in the fourth gospel that embraces His death, resurrection, and exaltation. They *belong* to that postexaltation period.

Third, there is an important parallel in 5:20: "For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, to your amazement he

will show him even *greater things than these*" (exactly the same Greek expression as here). The context of 5:20 shows that the "greater things" the Father will show the Son, and that the Son will manifest to His followers, are displays of resurrection and judgment (5:17, 24-26). And this life-giving power of the Son turns on His death, resurrection, and exaltation—what John calls His "glorification."

In short, the greater things that believers do include all their words and works empowered by the Spirit and performed this side of the Son's exaltation. They are greater precisely because they bear witness most tellingly to who Jesus is (note the witness theme throughout this gospel, not least in these chapters, e.g., 15:26-27). Doubtless they may include miracles, but there is not a scrap of evidence to restrict those "greater things" to miracles, and certainly not to miracles that are judged more spectacular than those of the Lord Jesus.

#### SOME THEOLOGICAL AND PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

*Assessing the Vineyard movement.* The subject of this chapter deserves more detailed work than these few pages can provide. Still, I dare to hope that for some it will provide something of a foil both to the works of strict cessationists and to the writings of Wimber and others who tend to focus on relatively few themes and passages, richly sweetened by many personal and moving anecdotes. To strengthen this hope, I offer the following reflections:

1. Few movements in the history of the church have been entirely good or entirely bad. To expect all the leaders of the Vineyard movement to be only heroes or villains is naive. The evidence of other, somewhat similar movements in the history of the church tends in the same direction. In the sixth century, St. Gregory describes a preacher from Bourges who drew large numbers through his healing ministry. Before him, Montanus gathered large numbers through his emphasis on the Spirit; a century and a half after St. Gregory, Aldebert, an itinerant preacher described by St. Boniface, claimed to effect many cures, and certainly gathered many people. In the days of Whitefield and Wesley, the French Prophets believed

they were led by the Spirit in ways not experienced by most Christians. Many others have claimed that the kingdom has come in its fullness in the locus of their ministries. The results have almost always been mixed. In some cases the theology was decidedly aberrant (e.g., Montanus); in other cases, nothing essential was denied, but the balance of Scripture was decidedly skewed. Sometimes some part of the church experienced a measure of genuine renewal; in other cases, the renewal so quickly led into forms of sheer subjectivism that the movement, at first popular, became isolated, self-righteous, totally dependent on authoritarian gurus. But the point to be observed is that few movements in the history of the church have been entirely unequivocal in their effects, and so we need to be cautious, humble, even-handed, and patient in our attempts to be discerning. This is all the more urgent if we are in danger of becoming a merely reactionary movement—a movement constantly reacting *against* whatever is going on—and likely to fall under the same limitations that befall most movements, becoming decidedly mixed in our self-identity and effect.

2. Although some people in the Vineyard movement justify their emphasis on healing by saying that at least the movement prays for the sick, whereas mainstream evangelicalism fails to do so, that has not by and large been my experience. Doubtless there are some evangelicals who never ask for healing, and, if they pray for the sick at all, pray exclusively for perseverance and stamina and the like. But far more, at least in North America, focus a large percentage of their public praying on the sick. I have been to countless prayer meetings where 70 or 80 per cent of the prayers have canvassed the illnesses of sundry friends and relatives, in each case petitioning the Almighty for healing.

The distinction of the Vineyard movement does not lie in its prayers for the sick but in its insistence that signs and wonders *must* be part of normal Christianity. That means frequent claims of healing must be present, or the movement loses its *raison d'être*. In my observation, that has badly skewed the objectivity of the reporting. Remarkable healings may take place both within and outside the Vineyard (and other related) movements. I suspect they take place more frequently in mainstream evangelicalism than some think,

and considerably less frequently within the Vineyard than some think.

Meanwhile, by making not only prayers for the sick but an expectation that a certain percentage of them must be cured miraculously a central plank in the movement's *raison d'être*, the Vineyard has (doubtless unwittingly) spawned something of a reaction in some branches of mainline evangelicalism. For example, some Christians have become more timid in their prayers for the sick, simply because they do not want to be identified with the Vineyard.

In all such tussles, the most important thing we can do to breed maturity is to turn again and again to the Scriptures, and try to take the measure of our ministry from this lodestar.

3. The Vineyard is to be commended for disavowing a systematic two-tier form of Christianity, based on a second-blessing theology in which only some Christians enjoy some sort of inside track with the Spirit (however expressed). In practice, however, the Vineyard displays more of the inner ring syndrome than its formal theology justifies. Endless testimonies are of the "before-I-entered-the-Vineyard-and-after-I-entered-the-Vineyard" variety. There are no prizes for guessing which side is more spiritual, powerful, effective, godly, and so forth.

This goes beyond the normal Christian testimony about the changes that take place when the individual meets Christ. So many of these testimonies deal with self-perceived improvements effected by connection with the Vineyard. The result is a practical two-tier system of spirituality after all.

I have no doubt that many thousands of people have been genuinely helped by the movement. They may have been oppressed by the feeling of desperate unreality that afflicts so many mainstream evangelical churches. They may have been drawn to the excellent times of corporate praise that characterize some Vineyard churches.

Yet the fact remains that the Vineyard not only fosters an inner ring syndrome that caters (however unwittingly) to spiritual arrogance and tends toward divisiveness, but it does so on the basis of a certain perception of the nature of spirituality. There are, of course, many different visions of that in which spirituality consists.

Some speak of the spirituality of sacrament, others of the spirituality of nature, still others of the spirituality of worship. Central to the Reformed tradition is the spirituality of Word—a vision that desperately needs recapturing and rearticulating in our day, as it is so frequently misconceived as nothing more than rational exegesis. So far as I can see, the vision of spirituality in the Vineyard movement might be dubbed a spirituality of power, whether in ostensible miracle or in frequent and private divine disclosure. To assess this vision fairly would take us too far afield, but the least that must be said is that this focus on power caters to the infatuation with triumphalism so disturbingly endemic to modern Western culture. There is so little perception that God's power is perfected in weakness, that we triumph as we endure—and frequently that we conquer as we suffer. There is so little call to self-denial, to the way of the cross.

4. More generally, on the basis of the biblical evidence the Vineyard movement seems to have focused on the relatively peripheral (namely, the kinds of phenomena found in 1 Corinthians 12-14 and some other passages), called them "signs and wonders," and elevated them to a place of central importance. Because signs and wonders (at least in the generic sense) are part of the biblical heritage, there is no wisdom in despising them and some danger in doing so. But to elevate them to what is central is to lose the central, or at least to send it into eclipse.

Undoubtedly one of the models of freeing people in the New Testament is healing. But the modern propensity to speak of virtually every act of transformation as a "healing" tends to squeeze out other models—freeing people from the slavery of sin, forgiving debts, bringing them into new birth and life, and much more. Above all, these models are all tied in the New Testament to the cross. It is virtually impossible to imagine a Vineyard preacher saying, with Paul, "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). Indeed, in scores of their public meetings, where checks have been made as to the place given the cross in hymns, songs, prayers, and preaching, this element, so foundational to New Testament Christianity, scarcely registers on the scale of what is important—even though no one would overtly disown its importance.

That is extremely troubling. It may be that the movement will restore some of the biblical balance. That is eminently to be longed for.

5. There can be little doubt that the Vineyard leaders believe they are bringing genuine integration back into Christian life. The West is so rationalistic, so enslaved by the prevailing scientism, that it leaves no place for the power of God. We have tended to restrict God to the other-worldly and leave normal life to the domain of science, to the power of natural processes with their tight circles of cause and effect. This bias needs to be broken down, and the Vineyard movement at its best helps to accomplish this task.

Nevertheless, the way it does so may actually serve the opposition. In any deeply biblical view of God's work, the rain falls at God's command, however much His commands may be thought sufficiently regular that the science of meteorology is possible. Not a sparrow falls from the heavens without His sanction. The stars "come out" at night at His command; through His Son, God upholds all things by His powerful word (Hebrews 1:3). When God performs what we call a miracle, it is not as if He is doing something for a change. Rather, He is doing something extraordinary.

But this means that if the power of God is praised primarily in what is perceived to be extraordinary, there is a strong tendency to view God as *not* operating in the "ordinary." If God heals by a miracle, *He* heals; if He heals through "natural" processes, then maybe it is not God who is doing it. This leads to enormous pressure to dramatize the mundane, to claim miraculous intervention when no one else can detect a miracle—even where other Christians, more subdued, do detect the power of God. In short, this vision of reality is in constant danger of reverting to the God-of-the-gaps theory; it is in constant danger of reinforcing secularism.<sup>16</sup>

Not long ago, a couple committed to the Vineyard movement were visited by a chap who complained, over dinner, that he was suffering from fairly constant headaches. As the couple tell the story, the woman felt impelled (a word from the Lord?) to ask if their visitor had had his eyes tested. He confessed that he hadn't. That week he followed their advice, discovered he needed spectacles, and his headaches disappeared. In mainstream evangelicalism, this de-

velopment would be construed, at the lowest level, as "common sense"; the more reflective would say that this community wisdom is also under the sovereign sway of God, and thank Him for it, remembering that He gives gifts of wisdom (including "common" sense!) to His people. But because of their Vineyard connection, the couple in question felt compelled to analyze what happened as divine intervention, the immediate impress of the Spirit on a human mind, a prophecy, and display it as evidence, even justification, for their theological outlook. But this represents not only the triumph of triteness, it reflects a profoundly secular worldview broken up by moments of divine intervention. That is sad; it may also be dangerous.

6. Although Wimber and others acknowledge the existence of the biblical passages that warn against false signs and wonders, and sometimes erect some useful tests to distinguish between the true and the false, they have not adequately probed the different *kinds* of falseness. The choice, as we have seen, is not always between the divine and the demonic. There can be genuine signs and wonders pursued by thoroughly corrupt motives; there can be signs and wonders designed to test our faithfulness. Above all, biblical warnings against the *deceptiveness* of some signs and wonders must be taken more seriously.

Among the tests to be applied (certainly not an exhaustive list) are these:

- (a) Do these displays of power give glory to God or to people (cf. John 7:18; 8:50; 17:4)? This test should not be applied only to the formulas used but to the reality of what actually happens in the meetings. It is a particularly difficult test to apply fairly in North America, where a cultural bias toward rugged individualism tends to exalt leaders to a dangerous degree.
- (b) Do those involved display the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-25)? Do they walk in the way of love (1 Corinthians 13)? The genuine power of God ultimately transforms us into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

- (c) Do those involved in these displays of power cheerfully submit to the lordship of Christ (James 2:14-19; 1 John 2:3-5; 5:3)? This, too, is not a question of profession but of performance, not simply a question of orthodoxy but of obedience (Matthew 7:21-23).
- (d) Do these displays of power edify others and foster the unity of the church (1 Corinthians 12-14)? This test must not be applied simplistically: divisions sometimes occur for valid reasons. Still, the drift of a movement in this regard is important, since the New Testament holds the unity of the church in high regard. The projection of an image of spiritual superiority, of an inner ring, is potentially destructive of both love and sound doctrine.

Other tests could be added. Are the leaders genuinely accountable? Do they prove self-correcting as they grow in maturity, or are they largely impervious to advice (except, perhaps, from a coterie of camp followers)? But perhaps it will be sufficient to add one more:

- (e) Do these displays of power drive people to the Jesus of the gospel, to Jesus crucified, risen, exalted? Or is the Jesus who is praised another Jesus, one largely detached from the gospel? Do people in the movement expect men and women to be transformed by the message of the cross or by powerful signs? Meditate long on 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5. How do the public meetings of the movement display the commitments of the leaders in this regard?

7. Finally, it is vital to recognize that the long-term blessing or corrosive influence wielded by any Christian movement turns in no small degree on its ability or inability to integrate its dominant features with other streams of Christian thought. In other words, it must strive for biblical balance and proportion, or it will degenerate into yet another eccentricity, possibly even a heterodoxy. When Jesus castigates some Pharisees in His day, He does not belittle their scrupulous commitment to apply the tithing laws even to the herbs

grown in the garden; rather, He tears a strip off them for scrupulously observing the tithing laws while ignoring the far weightier matters of justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Matthew 23:23-24).

Consider the Corinthians. They were so obsessed with the blessings and gifts they had received in Christ that they overlooked the blunt fact that Christianity has a “not yet” as well as an “already.” They left nothing for the new heaven and the new earth; they thought they had it all already (see especially 1 Corinthians 4:8-13).<sup>17</sup> The result was that they had few categories for future hope, laid no emphasis on death to self-interest and self-fulfillment (it is impossible to imagine a Corinthian delighting in Mark 8:34-38), and could not defend themselves against the *deceptive* sins of their culture. It was not that they went around overtly *denying* the complementary truths of the faith; rather, they ignored them so successfully that those truths played no governing part in their values and conduct. To what extent are similar things true of the Vineyard movement?

Even though this problem is largely one of balance and proportion, it is not incidental. We may gratefully concur with the Vineyard movement that genuine signs and wonders (in the generic sense) *sometimes* in the New Testament become occasional causes of belief, and that they may do so today as well. But on the evidence of Scripture, it is doubtful this theme is anywhere near as central as some think. Occasional causes of faith include any number of personal experiences: personal tragedies, a kind deed performed by a friend, a good argument, a deep friendship, a sudden bereavement, some Christian music, an exorcism. But biblical evangelism is not substandard when any one of these phenomena is lacking—and it is not substandard when no genuine sign or wonder is performed. Serious imbalance in this area is in danger of distorting the gospel itself.

We may probe further into this problem of proportion and ask if the emphasis on signs and wonders in the Vineyard makes it difficult to articulate and teach a theology of suffering, a theology of faithfulness, a theology of perseverance, a theology of the Word of God, a theology of the cross, a theology of the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit—all of which are far more central to biblical thought, and far more important to Christian maturity, than the power of signs and wonders to serve as an occasional cause of faith.

NOTES

1. B. B. Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles* (London: Banner of Truth, 1972 [orig. 1918]).
2. It must be said that many charismatic groups today espouse a structure of thought not very different from that of Wimber, if perhaps less articulate or less published. For example, many of the house churches in Britain, with no connection with Wimber, applaud much of his theology. In this essay it is convenient to use the Vineyard movement as a foil because of its high visibility and numerous publications.
3. The two most important books articulating this theological structure are John Wimber and Kevin Springer, *Power Evangelism* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986); idem., *Power Healing* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987). Wimber's views have changed slightly over the years, but I think he would own the summary I have just presented.
4. On other, minor uses of the expression in the Old Testament, see the discussion below.
5. I am indebted to an unpublished paper by John Woodhouse, "Signs and Wonders and Evangelical Ministry," produced for EFAC (The Evangelical Movement in the Anglican Communion), for first prompting me to reflect on this concatenation.
6. Definition of "miracle" is surprisingly difficult. In a theistic universe, everything that takes place is in some sense God's deed. But we may think of God normally doing things in regular ways, entirely in accordance with the nature of the universe He has Himself created, thus making modern science possible; and we may think of God occasionally doing something in an extraordinary way, out of step with the nature of the universe that He has Himself established. We should not think of a miracle as something that occurs when God intervenes to do something for a change (it being tacitly understood that ordinarily He does little); rather we should think of a miracle as what takes place when God does something highly unusual.
7. In the singular and without any connection with "wonder," "sign" in the Old Testament covers a considerably wider range of phenomena. But the full classification of uses need not be presented here.
8. *The Southern Cross* (April 1987), p. 13 (italics his).
9. I here summarize some of the argument presented more fully in my book *How Long, O Lord?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), pp. 125-26.
10. I do not here examine demonization and exorcism, as that would push the chapter's limits out of bounds.
11. I have discussed these matters at length in *Showing the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).
12. Max Turner, "The Spirit and the Power of Jesus' Miracles in the Lucan Conception," *NovT* 33 (1991), pp. 124-52.
13. The interpretation of this verse is disputed. In my view it means that if the "messenger" is John the Baptist, the "me" is Jesus, identified in Malachi as Yahweh, yet at the same time the "messenger of the covenant."
14. It is probably worth adding that the passage does not establish ranking within the kingdom, as if it were saying that the best witness to Jesus is the greatest person.
15. See the comments above on this verse's only close parallel, namely, 10:38.
16. Cf. the thoughtful essay by Paul G. Hiebert, "Healing and the Kingdom," in James R. Cozzins and Paul G. Hiebert, eds., *Wonders and the Word* (Winnipeg: Kindred, 1989), pp. 109-52.
17. Cf. A. C. Thiselton, "Realized Eschatology at Corinth," *New Testament Studies* 24 (1978), pp. 510-26.