

“Prophecy, Visions, Dreams, Holy Spirit”
(Acts 2:1-21)
Pastor Espinosa

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen. John Wimber the late founder of The Vineyard Christian Fellowship (a Charismatic Denomination within Christendom) commenced his search for what he considered authentic Christianity by visiting many Christian congregations while looking for congregations that were living out the miraculous manifestations of the book of Acts. He would attend the services of many congregations and when he did not see the miraculous he would ask the pastor afterwards, “Where’s the stuff?” referring to the works of miracles in the midst of the congregation’s ministry. His presupposition was that a Christian ministry that was truly filled with the Holy Spirit should also demonstrate the miracles of the Spirit that are recorded in the book of Acts. If these were missing, then there was something lacking in that congregation that confessed Jesus. His ministry took off and the Vineyard is a major non-denominational charismatic fellowship in the United States. They are Christian in that they are Trinitarian, teach the condemnation of sin and the saving atonement of Jesus, but we differ of course on our approach to the ministry of the Holy Spirit (which disagreement leads to other important differences regarding for example the Sacraments).

Besides studying the teaching of the Vineyard in depth and personally seeing and hearing John Wimber speak to this issue, and while personally visiting the Vineyard in my research, I have a little insight on the matter and do not speak from only second-hand sources.

The issue is important, because there is a general tendency as we deal with the constant barrage of accusation from our enemy the devil, and from our own fragile consciences. It is easy for even the mature Christian to feel inadequate – esp. the one who is properly and constantly confessing his or her sin; and living in true humility – but along the way we can make the matter worse. Our sin tempts us to yearn for sensational manifestations. We hear about particular interpretations about Acts for example and we start to believe that we should expect more from our faith. If God is all-powerful and we are in fellowship with God, why don’t we experience more of that power? If we are not careful, such questions have the potential of making us great skeptics and in fact tempt us to step away from the foundation of our faith that is Christ alone.

Such skepticism unfortunately loses the meaning of what the Scriptures are actually saying and oftentimes makes reading Acts – for example the first part of Acts 2 that we consider today on this great feast of Pentecost – a reading that is framed in wrong motives and wrong expectations. That is to say, we must be careful to understand a fundamental problem of the sinful nature that is still in us. By nature we yearn for what is more impressive. By nature we

are the watchmen of glory. By nature we want to see what the world considers great and manifest signs and wonders...after all, that is how God works right?

Don't let what I'm saying seem only as a theological consideration that no one cares about anymore. You would be amazed at the practical nature of what I am now speaking of. If you are a Christian why is it that you struggle in your marriage? If you were more Spirit-filled wouldn't God deliver you from these? Isn't marriage His institution and are you not His child, so why isn't it easier? If you were truly Spirit-filled would you struggle so much as a Christian parent? If you were truly Spirit-filled would you struggle so much as a Christian child? If you were truly Spirit-filled wouldn't your prayer life be better? Wouldn't your witness be better? Wouldn't your experience of the fruits of the Spirit be more manifest? So when we begin to make these assumptions and hold to these unfortunate expectations and then THEY DON'T OCCUR, watch out. Then our consciences are wrung out to dry. Then we move into despair which is Satan's breeding ground to squash faith. Then we start to think, "What's the use?" "What's the point?" "I can't do this!" Blah Blah Blah. Be careful Christian. The devil is a deceiver. He is a liar. And He wants to pull the wool over your eyes.

Do the Scriptures reveal the miraculous? Absolutely, but we quickly forget that the miraculous in the Bible is never presented as common-place. The epochs or dispensations of miracles were in connection to very special circumstances. Israel would be delivered from slavery in Egypt, this was not an everyday situation nor was Moses an everyday guy. Elijah and Elisha were raised up to confront Baal. Not an everyday crisis, and these were not everyday prophets. Daniel had to maintain faithfulness in the face of the idolatry and exile in Babylon. Special time. Jesus would demonstrate signs pointing to the fact that He was truly the Son of God. Special time, the only Messiah. And the apostles, they were tasked with breaking down the barriers between Jew and Gentile...a monumental task, a monumental season. Miracles in Scripture are not everyday occurrences, but can be charted to demonstrate God's special purposes at unique junctures in history. What is not being communicated is that every believer in every time should seek miracles. This does not mean that God cannot work miracles in 2016. The Lord can surely do whatever He wants, but we cannot forget that the Lord Himself has said there is more to the story.

The rest of the story is that He is a God who hides Himself. He is a God who has taught us that those who demand signs will not get them. He is the Lord who has revealed to us that even if some see a dead man rise from the dead, they STILL won't believe. He is the Lord who just as He emptied Himself in becoming incarnate, still works powerfully through what is lowly, humble, and unimpressive. He appeared as a helpless baby, He died a humiliating death on the cross when the mockers could see no "power" (even though power was radiating unseen). He comes to us in simple and plain Sacraments with no sensation, no glitter, not glitz, and most surprisingly He works in and through His very humble people...working effectively through Christians who struggle in their marriages, struggle in their parenting, struggle at their jobs,

struggle with their faith...who just struggle. Don't look now, you are starting to look a lot like Jesus. Many will say, yes, but He did miracles, yes, but why? So as to make us yearn for miracles? No, but to speak to His identity. It was never to wow people, it was never to put on a show, it was never just to make life easier for the sake of making life easier...the signs were purposeful...they were signs that said, "Trust in THIS ONE!"

But don't forget the rest of the story: He was humble, He was unimpressive to the world in many ways, He caused offense, He cried, He sweated, He bled...He showed weakness...and gave skeptics many opportunities to mock Him...this is the rest of the story that is frequently forgotten, so we must be careful as to how we approach the book of Acts.

The "last days" in Acts are all of the days from Christ's first coming to Christ's second coming. The last days were occurring when there was a great eclipse of the sun when Jesus was dying on the cross...a great sign of the times; the last days were occurring during the great earthquake when our Lord breathed His last having covered our sins with His blood; the last days were occurring when many rose from their graves at His death and when three days later, He rose! The last days occurred when His predictive prophecy about the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 came to fruition and mixed the smoke with the fire which indeed must have made the moon look as blood when night came. But the greatest sign of these last days we live in also includes what is happening now and what is yet to happen (namely the second coming when Jesus will judge all), but also – and again – what is happening now.

What is the greatest sign mentioned here in Acts 2 which quotes the prophet Joel? The answer is "prophecy." When many hear this word they assume future prediction, but that is not the fundamental thing that is here being discussed. This prophecy is the confessing, speaking, sharing, preaching, proclaiming of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. This prophecy is saving prophecy. This prophecy is faith-giving. This prophecy unites sinners to Jesus. This prophecy is when the Word of God goes from the hearts and minds of believers, onto their lips, and the life-changing Word gets out...and crosses the airwaves, into the ears, the hearts, and the minds of those who receive it. This prophecy is the greatest sign of the end-times.

The Holy Spirit came at Pentecost in a powerful way so that we would know today that He has been given to us in the Church in an exceptional way indeed. He was given to form us, the Body of Christ, the very Church of God. He is the Breath of God, the *ruach* of the Old Testament, the *pneuma* of the New Testament. He is the One whom the Lord Jesus breathed upon the disciples (John 20), He is the One whom the Lord compared to as the wind in John 3. And He was the One given to you in your baptism into Christ! And so it does not surprise us that His outpouring upon Christ's Church sounded like a mighty wind, this sound testified to the Spirit's power, but power for what? Power to brag? Power to boast? Power to say look at me I'm special? No this is all flesh and sin, but power that brings Jesus Christ, so the rest of the signs...the tongues of fire, when faith is alive in the heart, then the lips must speak, the Gospel

must be proclaimed and confessed. And not just through pastors. One of our young confirmands from our last confirmation class was speaking to a friend at school who challenged him about the Christian faith, and this young man still in middle school went on to share the Gospel with his friend.

This is what Joel was talking about: “your sons and daughters shall prophecy...your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants...” (Acts 2:17-18). St. Luke and St. Joel were communicating that ALL believers, young and old, male and female, Jew and Gentile would have the gift of prophecy just like you Christian, because the Holy Spirit would be given to them, and because the Holy Spirit would be given to you. This is the gift of Pentecost which endures to this day: the gift of the Holy Spirit not for you to be healed every time you get an illness, but for you to know the life of Christ and as a result to be the Lord’s mouthpiece, to be His disciple, His ambassador to share the saving Gospel with others...like grandchildren, children, co-workers, and neighbors. Not only has the Lord gifted you with the Holy Spirit to have saving faith in Jesus, but to actually share that gift: that is, to prophecy; to let the Gospel flow from your heart through your lips that more and more would be saved. This is the Pentecost miracle! When the Spirit enabled the disciples to proclaim the Word of the Lord in a wide range of real foreign languages that they had never learned. It was yet another way of saying that the Gospel is for all people! Its results are still occurring in these last days; the last days we share with our first-century brothers and sisters in Christ.

This is how Luther put the gift we have:

“What are all other gifts compared to this gift, that the Spirit of God himself, the eternal God, comes down into our hearts, yea, into our bodies and dwells in us, rules, guides, leads us! Thus now, as concerning this passage of the prophet, prophesying, visions, dreams are *all one thing*, namely the knowledge of God through Christ, which the Holy Spirit kindles and makes to burn through the Word of the gospel.” (Lanski quotes Luther, Acts of the Apostles, 74-75)

The Wind-Holy Spirit came to you in your baptism Christian, His purifying power united you to Jesus so that your sins are no longer seen by God, and your tongue has been loosed so that in faith you may prophecy. Even in the midst of so many struggles, your tongue is loosed to speak, to open your lips, to tell of the Lord Jesus who forgives the sins of all, who has opened the Kingdom of God so that “everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” (Acts 2:21)