

SPIRITUAL DEVIATIONS

Seeking God in Signs and Wonders

Quite a stir (some call it a revival) has recently garnered considerable attention, predominantly in Pentecostal and charismatic circles. Unusual manifestations of “spiritual phenomena,” described in the book *The Father’s Blessing* by John Arnott, were first publicized in 1994 by Arnott’s congregation in Toronto, Canada, and more recently by others in Brownsville and Pensacola, Florida, and other parts of the world. Many Christian leaders believe that these manifestations, often collectively referred to as “the Toronto blessing,” could be God’s answer to His people’s desperate prayer for revival. Yet, because of the strange, often bizarre phenomena witnessed in these meetings, both opponents and proponents of this movement have found themselves wrestling with identifying and confirming its true source. Proponents, some initially skeptical, have gradually become convinced that these phenomena are of the Holy Spirit. Certain opponents are equally sure that the manifestations are demonic. Still other critics contend that these must be the work of the flesh. Many onlookers simply refuse to take sides for fear of blaspheming the Holy Spirit. The most likely source of these particular signs and wonders, however, is probably none of the above.

I wish to address two serious concerns about this “signs and wonders” movement. First, the movement’s actual origin: I will propose what I believe to be a more accurate, yet heretofore unconsidered source of these “signs and wonders.” Second, its legitimacy: I intend to show how “the Toronto blessing” really is no blessing at all by pointing out this movement’s fundamental, fatal flaw—a subtle, yet radical deviation from Christ as the sum of all spiritual blessings.

Let me state from the outset that I do believe that God can and does perform miracles. Some, due to the difficulty in distinguishing the false from the genuine, fall into the extreme position of denying any present-day supernatural activity of God. We should certainly avoid such a snare. Others, however, blindly ascribe any and all supernatural phenomena to God—a naiveté we should likewise shun. The Bible, nevertheless, assures us that “signs and wonders” will follow the apostles (Mark 16:17, 20; Rom. 15:19) as well as Antichrist and false prophets (Matt. 24:24; Rev. 13:2-5, 12-14). God, in His wisdom, thus requires that His believers exercise discernment in order to receive what is from God and reject what is not. In just such an exercise, I will examine “the Toronto blessing” and its accompanying

signs and wonders, drawing from John Arnott’s *The Father’s Blessing* (hereafter referred to as *Blessing*).

Blessing describes the movement’s beginnings and relates numerous “signs and wonders,” detailing and defending the Toronto church’s “manifestations” of spiritual “phenomena.” *Blessing* states that “no new doctrines are being taught. There is nothing new here. The Holy Spirit is simply coming in ways that glorify Jesus” (37). Excerpted in the following paragraphs are but a few of the phenomena recorded in *Blessing* purported to “glorify Jesus.”

In setting the scene for its readers, *Blessing* compares the congregation’s meetings to “walking into a heavenly insane asylum” (75), where the Spirit engages in surprise attacks “like the shark in *Jaws*” (74). Here events are “not necessarily decent and in order” (67), but “chaotic and messy” (85). Attendants act “silly” (90); they laugh, groan, cry, and shout during the preaching (42, 72). They describe a “surge of joy” flowing up from the belly into the mouth (68), a tremendous release of joy and uncontrolled laughter (46, 75). *Blessing* boasts of having “the best party in the whole universe” (43), where attendants exhibit drunken behavior (38). During the course of these meetings, worshippers lie “on the floor as if dead for hours” (72), frequently needing to be carried out (59). As a result, the church has started a program to drive home inebriated worshippers who, after thus glorifying Jesus, are no longer able to drive their cars (146).

According to *Blessing*, “People are seeing all kinds of glorious things, and their physical bodies are responding” (143). How? They jerk, flop, and roll on the floor (18, 76), tumbling around in circles (78). They jump and shake (37), arms twitching and flailing (155). They walk around on their tip-toes (149). They slump over other worshippers and distract them (151). Even more incredibly, Jesus is glorified by men whose bodies are “on fire,” who feel hailstorms in their faces while lying on the floor, with a woman at their feet and a man at their head (80). Sparks even seemingly shoot from their fingers with shouts of “Oo, ow!” (154). One particular blessing involves explosions which literally knock people off their feet (71). Various types of physical healing are also reported.

Less electrifying but equally “spiritual,” according to *Blessing*,

are the worshippers who glorify God as they roar like lions (169), crow like roosters (181), paw the ground, snort (178), bark like dogs, and cackle like chickens (Dager 10). Other attendants reported smelling “a beautiful perfume all around the conference hall” (155). A female attendant saw visions and dreams of Jesus curling His finger around her hair (26). Another said in her vision that Jesus asked her for the first dance (165). Such “signs and wonders,” according to *Blessing*, are the Holy Spirit’s new ways that glorify Jesus.

These phenomena, outlandish as they may seem, should not be summarily dismissed as mere contrived performances. Perhaps many genuinely experience these emotions and see the visions reported in *Blessing*. The question here is not their authenticity, but their origin. I do not deny the miracles, but I question their source. I do not believe that they are directly satanic; neither do I find them to be consistent with the scripturally defined fruit of the Holy Spirit. Nor should these supernaturally powerful manifestations be simply relegated to the natural realm of the flesh. Then what remains? I suggest that we can look to other domains of similar phenomena for an explanation of what is actually behind this “blessing.” For example, false, manmade religions such as Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam have cultivated techniques and practices intended to circumvent the body’s limitations in order to tap into a latent power of the soul. Many of the resulting miracles are genuine, but certainly not divine. Similarly, in more recent years psychologists have devised techniques such as hypnosis to explore and unleash the dormant power of the soul. Such forays into the depths of the fallen human psyche in fact afford God’s enemy an enthralling array of opportunities to counterfeit God’s divine power with this preternaturally potent soul, created, after all, in His own image. Watchman Nee realized this danger and sounded a clear warning in *The Latent Power of the Soul*:

We (Christianity) are different from them because all our miracles are done by God through the Holy Spirit. However, Satan is utilizing soulish power to express his supernatural abilities and make man as God....We cannot say that the works of wonders that others perform are all counterfeits; I admit that many of them are real. However, these phenomena all come from the latent power of the soul after Adam’s fall. We Christians must be very careful in this last age. We must not purposely or unconsciously stir up the latent power of the soul. (475, 476)

Watchman Nee refers here to the release of the dormant psychic power of man’s fallen soul as “the latent power of the soul.” Before Adam’s debilitating fall, his soul undoubtedly possessed powers which we would now consider supernatural. For example, Genesis 1 and 2 imply that he possessed a prodigious intelligence which enabled him to name and remember each of the myriad animals in creation, as well as the remarkable capacity to cultivate and keep the

entire garden of Eden (2:15), an area large enough to span a river basin encompassing four rivers. One can only imagine the extent of his abilities before sin entered, transmuting his body into fallen flesh and thereby drastically limiting and subduing his soul’s power.

Though writing over sixty years ago, Watchman Nee unmasked soulish counterfeits that are strikingly similar to those described in *Blessing*:

[Satan] wants to confuse the works of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit works within man through his spirit. But Satan produces many phenomena in man that are similar to the results of the Spirit’s working, such as giving man false repentance, false salvation, false regeneration, false revival, false happiness, and other experiences that are not from the Holy Spirit. (482)

Similar counterfeit experiences are documented in *Blessing* as well as in other sources. *Blessing* boasts that unbelievers in these meetings are “blessed” with the same psychosomatic experiences as the believers—including the phenomena of involuntarily falling down and “tumbling around in circles”—even though they have yet to be converted (78, 152).

Amazingly enough, Watchman Nee also addresses this phenomenon of “holy laughter” in the above mentioned book.

Many people want to have the feeling of joy. There is one thing which is very popular in Western countries now. It is called the “holy laugh.” ...Those who laugh this way do not know why they laugh; they seem to have caught some kind of disease which keeps them laughing uncontrollably, as if they have gone insane....Everyone began to laugh at each other. The more it went on, the harder they laughed. Eventually, everyone laughed so hard that they could not stop. What is this? Is this the infilling of the Holy Spirit? Is this the work of the Holy Spirit? This is only one of the many works of the soul! (505)

The environment and conditions in the so-called revival meetings described in *Blessing* closely correspond to those often present when the soul’s latent power is released. For example, *Blessing* describes many of the attendants as discouraged and desperate, coming with predetermined expectations and in search of soulish sensations and freedom from oppression. These attendants often stand for hours or do “carpet time” (lie on the floor for long periods of time) as a ministry team “marinates” and “soaks” them in prayer (85, 167). Again, years ago Watchman Nee warned of such marathon “marinating” prayer sessions.

Our prayers should only be offered to the Father in heaven and should ascend to the heavenly Father. We should not care for our good feeling or bad feeling or any

feeling at all. God only wants us to offer our prayers to heaven by faith. If we just pray to the God in the room, I am afraid that we will have many strange feelings, miraculous experiences, and strange visions from the God. All of these will be given to us by Satan....It is also very dangerous if you direct your prayer *toward* the person for whom you are praying. (486)

Elsewhere Nee identifies what is actually happening in meetings like those of “the Toronto Blessing.”

What they are doing is nothing but bringing men’s disordered minds, wavering emotions, and feeble wills to an empty state and, at the same time, subduing the outward flesh. In this way, it becomes possible to release the latent power of the soul....People today are simply developing the inner latent power. (474)

Why “the Toronto Blessing” Really Is No Blessing at All

I would now like to turn to an even more serious, fundamental flaw of this movement, that of substantially “removing from Him” (Gal. 1:6). Ephesians 1:3 definitively proclaims to the Christian that every spiritual blessing is found exclusively in Christ. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with *every* spiritual blessing in the heavenlies *in Christ*” (emphasis added). Christ is the sum and locus of all spiritual blessing; hence, to gain Christ is to gain the Father’s blessing. If one seeks spiritual blessing apart from Christ, he misses both. But if one seeks Christ instead of blessing, he gains both; for the One subsumes the other. Christ Himself is the totality of the Father’s blessing. “He who has the Son has the life” (1 John 5:12).

Blessing pays lip service to this central truth. Yet most of the participants’ own words, spoken out of the abundance of the heart, disclose their actual desire and focus. While Jesus Himself is at times glorified with the lips, the heart is seeking an *it*, not *Him*. The following litany of “it”s and impersonal, even inanimate objectives, underscores this subtle deviation from the seeking of Christ Himself. (All emphases are mine.)

Eleanor saw *it*, she felt *it*, she experienced *it*. (18)

Just let *it* happen. (127)

How would you like to take part in the best *thing* that has ever been offered to the human race? *It* is a kingdom of love. (25)

God...works through *noise* and *laughter*. (136)

The God of glory gave me *laughter* as I have never laughed before in my entire life....You save the best for last. (43-44)

Everybody except one person immediately received *the gift of laughter*. (70)

It’s a cup of joy. (50)

I want *joy!*...Well...*jump* then. Get *free*. (122)

I want *intimacy*. (132)

Let *your emotions* be expressed. Be real! (110)

Oh, what I *feel* is so wonderful...Oh, *it’s* so wonderful...I would be aware of my own unfulfilled desire for *refreshing*. (88)

These excerpts should provide ample evidence that “the Toronto blessing” is actually no spiritual blessing at all but is instead a subtle deviation from Christ, the focus of God’s blessing and eternal economy. Here, *Christ* has been replaced with *it*. Paul tells the similarly “bewitched” Galatians that Christ has rescued “us out of the present evil age” (Gal. 3:1; 1:4). To a great extent the present evil age in Paul’s day was the Judaistic religious world. Judaism in and of itself was not evil, as much of it was in fact from God. But it became evil when it competed with Christ (Gal. 1:6). Likewise, phenomena such as laughter, visions, and dreams are obviously not evil in and of themselves, but here they have become the object of curious seeking, the unique and overriding expectation of the participants. Eventually laughter, so-called visions, exciting prophecies, and the like will all grow stale and fall away. A. B. Simpson, one of the pioneers of American Pentecostalism at the turn of the century, realizing this truth, eventually relinquished such pursuits for a life of gaining Christ (Gal. 2:17-20). He summed up his sentiment (and mine) in one of his hymns:

Once it was the blessing,
Now it is the Lord;
Once it was the feeling,
Now it is His Word;
Once His gift I wanted,
Now, the Giver own;
Once I sought for healing,
Now Himself alone.

All in all forever,
Only Christ I’ll sing;
Everything is in Christ,
and Christ is ev’rything. (*Hymns* 468)

The Father’s greatest blessing to His believers is Christ. He is our unique sign and wonder, and Him solely should we pursue and experience.

by Gary Evans

Works Cited

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