

Detoured by the Supernatural (2)

For more than a century the “signs and wonders” movement has existed, detouring thousands of genuine believers in Christ from the mark of God’s New Testament economy. This deviation and deception have carried off many believers as spoil, replacing their pure hunger for Christ with an insatiable lust for supernatural thrills, sensations, power, and miracles. Like the sea level, this movement rises and falls but never goes away. At high tide its swells whip unsuspecting and undiscerning Christians into a frenzied pursuit of the supernatural. At its lows, it washes up thousands of believers—demoralized, confused, and disillusioned by false promises and failed experience.

This article is the second part of a discussion of this movement, based on *The Reality of the Supernatural World* (hereafter *Supernatural*) written by a recent prominent leader of the movement, Todd Bentley. This article will examine the critical reason that the movement continually repeats its sad history. Like undulating swells in the ocean, the “signs and wonders” movement is destined for troughs even before it reaches another crest. Excerpts from *Supernatural* will illustrate the movement’s most debilitating flaw—it is in the wrong *realm*.

Second, there is a simple yet profound explanation why this movement stubbornly survives so many devastating failures and disappointments. Using *Supernatural*, this article will offer an explanation for the tenacious persistence of the movement.

A Movement in the Wrong Realm

Like the book’s title, the emphasis of the “signs and wonders” movement has always been to experience and live in a certain realm—a supernatural one. *Supernatural* devotes much attention to an explanation of the second and third heavens and traveling there:

As I passed through the second heaven, I heard the sound of shattering glass. Floating before me, opposing me, was a Tibetan Buddhist monk with his legs crossed...Fear washed over me and the monk’s presence kept me from getting into the third heaven. (107)

Supernatural explains that “the devil and his demons...

will do everything they can to keep you from living in the supernatural realm of God” (107). According to *Supernatural*, God’s goal is not only for a believer to be miraculously transported to the third heaven but also for the experiences described in the book to become a part of a believer’s normal life.

These quotations reveal a fundamental flaw in the “signs and wonders” movement. Christians are called to live in another realm, but they are not called to the one often promoted in this movement. Throughout *Supernatural*, believers are exhorted, cajoled, and admonished to enter into a new realm by miraculously traveling upward to take tours and speak with those who are there. *Supernatural* says, “Heaven and hell will become more real to you” as you learn about “the different realms or places that exist there” (108).

There is a stark difference between the understanding and aspirations of someone under *Supernatural*’s influence and someone who lives under God’s New Testament economy. When a believer embraces *Supernatural*’s teaching, his bent, his seeking is directed toward visible encounters with angels and physical sensations. Christians are encouraged, in a literal sense, to “touch what’s in Heaven” (111). As a believer is carried away, he should expect to see in the third heaven “different geographical locations and climates” and “many other cities and regions” as well as the “capital city” (112-113). He is instructed to think of activities, such as “horseback riding, hiking in the mountains, or a vacation to Hawaii,” and then he is promised that he will likely “enjoy some of these same activities in Heaven” (113). As he experiences this realm, he can expect to enjoy the

sweetest perfumes coming from the fairest flowers, filled with the fairest forms. For, floating around me were beautiful beings whom I felt by instinct were angels and archangels, seraph and seraphim, cherub and cherubim, together with the perfect blood-washed saints. (114)

All of this occurs for Bentley in a place where “the whole sky at times seemed to be full of white-winged, happy, worshipping, joyous beings” (114).

In contrast, a believer who has seen what the New

Testament reveals concerning God's purpose and plan will awaken each day predisposed in an entirely different direction. He will long to touch the Lord in his spirit, instead of waiting to be teleported to the third heaven, because he has found the key to living in the divine and mystical realm revealed in the Scriptures—"the Spirit Himself witnesses with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom. 8:16). He does not need a supernatural or extraordinary out-of-body experience to live a normal Christian life. He has seen that he has been born of God in his spirit (John 3:3, 5-6), that he has been made a partaker of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4), and that day by day the indwelling Christ wants to spread from his spirit to "make His home" in his heart (Eph. 3:17). As this happens, his mind is renewed, and his soul is transformed (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18). He becomes saturated and permeated with the life-giving Spirit to the point that his entire tripartite being is sanctified and preserved until the coming of Christ (1 Cor. 15:45; 1 Thes. 5:23).

The believer who lives under this Scripture-imparted vision of God's New Testament economy truly lives in another realm—a realm of the pneumatic Christ living in his spirit and spreading outward into his whole being. Ultimately, such a believer is not infatuated with escaping to a third-heaven sphere; rather, he lives in God's kingdom, bringing it to the earth by daily, even moment by moment, enjoying the Christ whom the Father has revealed within him (Gal. 1:15-16).

Hebrews 4:16 is a precious verse related to God's New Testament economy, which tells us to come forward with boldness to the throne of grace. *Supernatural* says, "Most of us are OK with that verse until someone actually sees the throne or has an encounter and describes what it looks like" (111). Thus, *Supernatural* mutates the meaning of this verse, using it as a biblical charge to be teleported in an out-of-body experience to see God's throne and talk with those who are there. According to the book, you will be "walking around heaven," and "though your body may be back on earth, it's 'Hi, Enoch. Hey, Moses. What's up, Peter?'" (137).

But believers who have been blessed to see God's intention and way do not long to chitchat with Peter; they want communion with God in their spirit. When they read Hebrews 4:16, they do not wait for teleportation to see the throne of God with lightning and angels. Instead, they turn to the Lord who indwells them and touch the Christ enthroned within. As they pray, they find "timely help" for their present needs while on earth. In other words, as they come to the wonderful indwelling Christ (Col. 1:27), they are supplied by Him with all that He is and all that He has accomplished. It is a realm in the most vivid, antithetical contrast to what *Supernatural* promotes.

Those under the vision of God's economy understand the profound significance of Hebrews 4:16—that the veil between us and God has been done away with and that God is utterly available to us, even while we are in our present situations on earth. It is not that God wants to carry us away from our troubles by space travel, as if suctioned by a "huge vacuum cleaner" (118). Rather, as we come to Him, He dispenses all that He is to us to be our daily salvation and moment-by-moment supply.

Supernatural says, "If your spiritual eyes were suddenly opened now you'd see angels and probably demons" (117). However, a believer who perceives God's economy knows that the eyes of our heart need to be enlightened (Eph. 1:18) to see the riches of the glory of the wonderful person of Christ "in the full knowledge of Him" (v. 17), not angels and demons. *Supernatural* tells us that "the most important thing is the experience itself" (138), but the Bible tells us that the most important thing is Christ in us (2 Cor. 13:5)! This movement is in the wrong realm. In fact, if it were in the right realm, it would not be a movement of man at all. When we enjoy Christ, we enter God's move, not a movement of man.

Bentley suggests that Christians should seek experiences patterned after his own:

In my visits, I felt as though a huge vacuum cleaner just sucked me up through the roof—yep, a roof! I first saw blue sky, then a black sky with stars and planets, flashing lights and a g-force atmosphere, vibrations, and tremendous speed. (118)

At this point, Bentley tells us, "I've actually tasted fruit from the Tree of Life" (121), implying that the tree of life is material. In contrast, someone living under the biblical view of God's New Testament economy knows that the tree of life is Christ Himself! As a fruitful tree, Christ is available for our daily enjoyment and as our nourishing life supply. When such a believer thinks of the tree of life, he thinks of Christ in His availability to humanity, whom he can daily eat and whose words are spirit and life, not mere physical fruit (John 6:57, 63). Such a believer can likewise proclaim that he has tasted the Lord (Psa. 34:8) but not in an outward, physical sense. Instead, he partakes of Christ and knows Him in an inward way, in his regenerated spirit, and as life. Having seen the divine and mystical realm of God's New Testament economy, he seeks to live an ordinary life in the extraordinary but normal realm of living and walking by the Spirit (Gal. 5:25).

The fatal flaw of the "signs and wonders" movement is a misplaced emphasis on and infatuation with the wrong realm—one of outward fanciful visions and physical sensations. *Supernatural* misuses Paul's unique

experience (2 Cor. 12:1-2, 4) to justify the book's admonition for all believers to seek this realm as the normal Christian life.

Yes, Paul was carried away to both Paradise and the third heaven and saw things that he was not permitted to speak. There was no one more qualified than Paul to promote this type of experience. Yet Paul waited fourteen years to tell anyone about it. And when he was given an opportunity to encourage the churches to pursue what he experienced, he never did. Instead, he used the entirety of his fourteen Epistles to unveil God's eternal purpose and God's plan to carry it out. When he unveiled the normal Christian life and the normal church life, Paul did not include his unique experience of being carried away. Rather, he emphasized such matters as experiencing Christ as life and being renewed, transformed, and built up as Christ's Body to be the fullness of Christ on earth. Paul stressed our need to pursue Christ, gain Christ, and magnify Christ so that He would increasingly be expressed on earth until His return. Paul mentioned his unique experience of being carried away in order to vindicate his apostleship only when he came under slanderous attack by opposers. In the "signs and wonders" movement, however, infatuation with the supernatural takes precedence over everything else.

How the Movement Survives

Given its consistent history of ups and downs, of ecstasy followed by abysmal disappointment, one wonders how the movement continues to find new adherents. One simple reason comes to the forefront: After regeneration, real seekers of Christ instinctively long to know Him more and to live an overcoming life. Not understanding what is revealed in the New Testament and often frustrated by unscriptural, lifeless traditions, many believers seek an answer in the supernatural to the shortcomings in their Christian walk and church life. The "signs and wonders" movement confidently announces the supernatural realm as the solution, and it promises to meet the inward lack that so many Christians know they have.

For example, *Supernatural* tells us that if we follow its directions, we should "get ready to walk in a deeper reality of life as a supernatural being residing in a natural body" (108). Who would not want a deeper reality of life? If we have experiences like those described in *Supernatural*, it promises to "leave a divine mark" on us forever (111). Who would not want this? Furthermore, we are promised that "we will grow in deeper intimacy with the Father" (134). All God's children would like this.

Many believers also know both intuitively and by the Lord's commission that they need to care more for the lost.

Supernatural promises that if we experience its realm, "our passion for evangelism and God's kingdom would grow dramatically" (134). The supernatural realm is also promoted as being new and exciting (135). Everyone likes excitement. We are promised that as we walk the streets of gold, talk to the saints, and see the throne, it will be "life-changing" (138). Everyone wants a life-changing experience. Sharing these out-of-body experiences also is presented as a means to keep us "fresh in the anointing" and our "faith high" (147). We all want the anointing and strong faith. Finally, since all believers would like to have more power in their Christian life, *Supernatural* declares, "This is the manifestation we all desire—the power of God...healing, miracles, and signs and wonders. God's grace and power are available for you to bring about miracles wherever you go" (179-180).

The promises of the "signs and wonders" movement strike a chord with many seeking believers. The tragedy lies in its inability to deliver, because what it promises is not according to God's economy and plan. Supernatural experiences alone can never serve as the basis for fulfilling God's eternal purpose. Certainly many believers in this movement know that supernatural manifestations are not a prerequisite for genuine experiences of Christ, but since many are dear Christians who truly want to know the Lord more and to lead overcoming lives, there is ample opportunity for exploiting this desire. Consequently, every decade or two there seems to be a new manifestation of the movement with new leaders. Sadly, there is always a new generation of Christ-seekers who become caught up in the excited atmosphere. Through someone else's honest testimony or through their own conscience, these seekers eventually acknowledge that they are not walking in truth (3 John 4) and that they have been misled. Sadly, some are so disappointed and damaged that they never recover their appetite for a walk with Christ.

There is a central lane to the Christian experience and to the church life revealed in the New Testament. The entire New Testament has a central thought, a major emphasis that permeates the Gospels, Acts, the Epistles, and Revelation. It is described by Paul as the economy of God—His household plan to fulfill His eternal purpose. It involves the person and work of Christ in His incarnated status as the Word to accomplish our judicial redemption and in His resurrected status as the life-giving Spirit to apply His organic salvation, to build up the Body of Christ to be His bride, and to consummate this masterpiece as the New Jerusalem. We may confidently give ourselves to follow the Lord in this God-ordained way.

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