

Parsing Out Charismatic Signs And Wonders As An Orthodox Christian

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From This



To This

My Christian experience before Orthodoxy was among the Charismatic and Pentecostal Protestants. Recently several people from this same Charismatic Protestant background have begun coming to me in order to inquire into the Holy Orthodox Church. Consequently, I have been given cause to think about what exactly was wrong, or potentially wrong (or perhaps “dangerous” is a better word) with the apparent miracles, or manifestations I experienced in those days.

Perhaps those who have never been among Charismatic and Pentecostal Christians will not understand the importance signs and miracles play among these groups, and perhaps they will think that such claims to experiencing signs or miracles are always false, delusional or that they are strictly from the devil. However, from my own experience, I can testify that this is not the case. Yes, there are among the Charismatics and Pentecostals many charlatans and I often encountered people who claimed experiences that seemed to me to be exaggerations, imaginations or even manifestations of mental illness, and certainly, the devil has his share in much of this craziness.

However, I personally experienced or saw many real physical healings, clairvoyant insights, and even prophetic words—including the predicting of an earthquake (which, I admit, in Southern California, is statistically about as impressive as predicting a tornado in Kansas). Nevertheless, all of this did happen. Now how much of this was of God or of the devil or manifesting group think or derived from psychological power or personal insightfulness or even will power, I do not know. But I do know that in my Charismatic worldview, such signs were what led me to the door of the Orthodox Church. Such signs led me to the Orthodox Church knowing beyond a doubt that it is the True Church and that in submission to the Church I would find salvation in Christ. Based on my own experience, I must say that whatever mix of demons, angels, and human psychology was going on, God in His great love was definitely in the middle of it all guiding us, in as much as we would let Him, from darkness into Light.

God used signs and wonders to lead us, but for the most part, I have not tried to parse it all out. I have not tried to figure out what exactly was of God or of the devil or of some merely human origin. But recently into my life have come some wonderful Protestant (mostly of Mennonite background) men and woman who are very zealous for Charismatic manifestations and at the same time hungry for Orthodox spirituality. They are saying the Jesus Prayer and experiencing the Grace of God like they have never before experienced it, and they are searching for someone to tell them what all this means. (By the way, I did not teach them the Jesus Prayer. They encountered the Philokalia on their own and began saying the Jesus prayer. Now they are knocking at the door of the Church looking for help.) What am I to say to them about all of their experiences of dreams and clairvoyant impressions and miracle healings? Should I tell them that none of that is real or all of it is “of the devil”? I can’t do that. I can’t do that mainly because I do not believe that. At the same time, I know that much of what they believe and experience is mixed with serious error and is deceptive and misleading.

Orthodox Christians also experience miracles, dreams and clairvoyant impressions, but the Church has taught us not to put very much stock, or invest much meaning into such experiences when or if they happen. And especially, the church teaches us not to become passionate about such experiences. Here, I mean passionate in both the popular meaning of “to be enthusiastic and motivated about something” and the technical Orthodox spiritual meaning of “to allow disordered thoughts and feelings to be stirred up because of or concerning something.” The excitement and passion that are aroused by the experience of supernatural phenomenon, these, it seems to me, are the most dangerous aspects of the matter. St. Paul warns us that the devil often appears as an angel of light, and it would be very foolish (and manifest a great deal of pride), were I to assume that I have the spiritual insight and maturity to discern the difference. Therefore, no matter what kind of clairvoyant insight or miraculous experience I encounter, it is best that I not get too excited about it. If it edifies, good; but even then, the fruit of some trees takes years to mature. The genuine fruit of any word or action may not be known for a generation or even until the Age To Come.

Excitement derived from the experience of supernatural phenomenon (genuine or not, divine or demonic) is dangerous because it is so easy for us to interpret it as evidence or confirmation that what we think, believe, have done or have experienced. We may wrongly conclude that what we think or have done is vouchsafed by God Himself. Or as one of my inquiring Charismatic friends said, “to mistake excitement for the Presence of God.”

And then there is the matter of pride. It is very difficult, almost impossible, to experience (or believe you are experiencing) clairvoyant impressions, dreams and other miraculous manifestations that seem to be “of God,” and seem to help and encourage people and to create a lot of excitement for God, and not to interpret the fact that such things are happening to and through you as a sign that you yourself, what you believe, what you think and how you perceive things is correct, that somehow God is confirming you.

This is why in the Orthodox tradition, neophytes or beginners (and I consider myself a beginner), are taught not to read significance into a thought or experience that seems to be clairvoyant or otherwise miraculous. In fact, we are taught to dismiss it. We are taught that if God really has something to say or do, He will do or say it without drawing attention to me, He will do it through the channels of the Church that are already established. And if I happen to say something that turns out to be clairvoyant or say a prayer and God heals someone, then I should perceive that as a matter of someone else’s faith, as almost an accident, as having nothing to do with me. When you read the lives of holy elders who have manifested multiple and

profound miracles, it is clear that they themselves do not read much significance into the miracles—except as a call to deeper repentance.

Then there is also the matter of what my Charismatic Protestant friends call covering, or what we in the Church would simple refer to as humility. In the Church there are two streams of authority that we are called to submit to and that both vouchsafe and create humility. The first is the hierarchy and liturgical structure of the Church. One does not speak in the Church without the blessing of the bishop. One enters into and humbly receives the Tradition and teaching of the Church. If one is called and gifted to speak to or in the Church, one must wait until the bishop recognizes such a calling and blesses what you have to say. In this formal structure of the Church, everyone may have and express their opinion, but only the bishop (or those he blesses or delegates) may speak with authority. In such a structure, one must trust in God. One must trust that both the context and the authority to speak (or act) will be granted from outside. Just as St. Paul submitted to the bishops/elders both at Jerusalem and Antioch, being sent out with the laying on of hands, so we too in the Orthodox Church must do nothing without the blessing of the bishop.

However, there is also another stream of authority in the Church, that functions within the visible structure of bishops and liturgics. This is what we in the Orthodox Church often refer to as the Charismatic giftedness of spiritual fatherhood (but not “charismatic” in the contemporary Protestant and Roman Catholic sense). Typically, and again I must stress that this takes place within the structure of the bishops and liturgical life of the Church, a spiritual father or mother is an older, more experienced Orthodox Christian to whom one submits for spiritual guidance. In its classic form, spiritual fatherhood takes place in a monastic context. A monastic novice is assigned an elder in the community to whom he or she must confess all of his or her thoughts on a daily basis. The elder then helps the novice discern the thoughts, assigns penances (or spiritual exercises to heal the soul and produce virtue—the fruit of the Spirit), and gives obediences, or assignments for work around the monastery. This exercise of submitting every thought to one’s elder frees you to humbly just be. You simply trust God to guide you through your elder and (learn to) assume that you know nothing on your own.

This ideal form of spiritual fatherhood, however, is seldom realized these days. There are just not that many true spiritual fathers. And, I hasten to add, there are not that many men and women who would truly submit to them if they did exist. (Warning! The thought that may have just occurred to you that *you* would submit to a true spiritual father if you had one, that thought is almost certainly from the evil one.) If we cannot even submit to the wisdom of our stumbling, bumbling parish priest, then

we are deluding ourselves if we think we could submit to a God-bearing Elder. As Jesus said, he who is faithful in little will be found faithful in much.

But even though the ideal form of spiritual fatherhood seldom fully manifests itself these days, nonetheless, every Orthodox Christian should have a spiritual father or mother. This is essential because we cannot see most of our own sin and none of our delusion. We need someone outside us, someone whose authority we respect, someone whom we have given permission to speak truth, even painful truth, into our lives. As the ancient saying goes, “he who discerns his own way, has a fool as a guide.” We need a spiritual guide who is not necessarily excited by what excites us nor disturbed by what disturbs us. We need someone outside us who can say, “Yes, that one thing is important—forget the rest.” or “Have you considered this possibility?” or sometimes, “I think you’re missing the point.”

Of course one must be careful. All men and women, even spiritual fathers, are broken in various ways. There is no magic relationship; there is no perfect fit. You have to work within the limits of what (and who) you have, what you feel safe disclosing, and above all use common sense. But if God can speak through a donkey, God can speak to us through weak spiritual fathers and mothers. You see, it is very easy to see the weaknesses and failings of others, so even a spiritually blind priest like me can most of the time see where others need to repent and grow. Finding someone who can accurately point out your errors and wanderings astray is not nearly as difficult as humbling yourself to listen to them with an attitude of obedience. That’s the real work.

Perhaps it seems that I have wandered away from my topic of parsing out Protestant Charismatic experiences of clairvoyance and miracle healings, but I have not. OK, maybe I have a little, but all of what I have said about the hierarchical and liturgical structure of the Church and the practice of spiritual fatherhood really does apply to my topic. It applies because outside of the Church, outside of the context that God created for such manifestations to take place, it really is impossible to parse out these things. Even within the Church, discerning such things often requires more than a lifetime. So outside the Church, I don’t think we can know at all how much of a miracle healing or an apparently prophetic word is or is not from God. And unfortunately, outside the Church, there is very little to stop the collateral damage done through pride, false confirmation, and misinterpreted excitement that often accompanies such experiences.

In the troparion (hymn) for Christ’s Nativity, we sing “Through a star, God taught those who worshiped the stars to adore You, the Sun of righteousness.” Certainly in my life, God used signs and wonders to teach me to adore the Significant One, the

Wonderful One. And just as the Magi from the East never looked at the stars in the same way again, I too don't look at signs and wonders the same. They still happen. Miraculous words, events and healings happen all of the time in the Orthodox Church—just as the stars continued to shine in the sky for the Magi—but their significance is not the same.

Miraculous signs are more than miraculous, they are first and foremost signs. A sign points to something. And that something to which the sign points, that is the important thing. To be excited about the miracle and to miss the sign is, perhaps, the greatest demonic delusion of all. Perhaps that is what St. Paul was referring to when he spoke of “lying wonders.” Millions of people saw the sign of the Star, but very few saw the significance, only three saw the significance and got up and went to where the Star led. May God help us all, Orthodox, or otherwise, to have the wisdom, courage, and steady-mindedness not to be caught up in the miraculous, but to see and follow the sign to the Cave, the Stable, the Manger, the place of humility, where we too will find Jesus.

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