

Studies in renewal

Study 4:

Signs and wonders in the New Testament

By Dr Ulf Metzner, Indooroopilly Qld (1987)

The most frequently used words for 'signs' and 'wonders' in the New Testament are *semeia*, *dunameis* and *terata*. Generally speaking, the usage of these terms falls into the following categories:

a. **Jesus' opponents desire to see a sign which would give certain proof that he really was the Messiah.**

Jesus rejects the desire for such signs as being typical of 'an evil and adulterous generation' (Matt 12:39; 16:4).

(Note: The disciples' wish to have a sign in Matthew 24:3 does not fall into this category, since they do not desire proof of his lordship, but rather a hint of when the end is at hand.)

For study:

Read Matthew 12:38–42; 16:1–4 and Luke 23:8.

1. What significance does a sign have for people such as those mentioned in the above passages?
2. How does Jesus react to such requests for signs?

b. **Jesus himself gives signs to 'manifest his glory', even as God himself has done** (Luke 2:12). Sometimes such signs lead to faith, more often they do not. The evangelist John says that he has reported some of the signs which the resurrected Lord gave '... that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ' (John 20:30).

While signs may lead to faith, the fact is that all too often even 'mighty works' could not break through the barrier of unbelief. Jesus himself certainly would have preferred that people believed without any manifestations of his glory and power.

For study:

3. Read John 2:11
Why does Jesus perform miracles?
4. Do signs and wonders lead to faith?
In discussing this question, refer to John 2:11; John 12:37; 20:30, 31; Matthew 13:58.
What would Jesus have preferred according to John 20:29 and 4:48?

- c. **The followers of Jesus regarded the 'mighty works and wonders and signs which God did' through Jesus as God's way of showing that Jesus is Lord.** Empowered by the Spirit of Jesus, the disciples also did 'many wonders and signs'. In this way Jesus 'confirmed the message' his disciples preached.

For study:

5. Read Acts 2:22.
How did Jesus' followers regard the mighty works and wonders and signs which God performed through Jesus?
6. Acts 2:43; 4:30 and 2 Corinthians 12:12 tell us that the disciples did many signs and wonders. What does Mark 16:20 tell us about the reasons why Jesus empowered the disciples to perform such signs?

- d. **This does not mean there was no ambiguity surrounding the signs and wonders.** The Pharisees saw the wonders Jesus did and were convinced he drove out demons 'by Be-el-zebul, the prince of demons'. While Jesus insisted that he 'cast out demons by the Spirit of God' and that this was a sign that the Kingdom of God had come, the apostle Paul warned the early Christians not to be deceived, because signs and wonders and a display of power can be 'the activity of Satan' himself (2 Thess 2:9–12).

(Note that the three words used here to describe the work of Satan are *semeia*, *dunamis* and *terata*!)

For study:

7. Discuss the following passages, paying particular attention to the 'negative slant' which is placed on signs and wonders: Matthew 12:22–28; 2 Thessalonians 2:9–12; Revelation 13:11–14.

CONCLUSION

There can be no doubt, biblically speaking, that signs and wonders may be manifestations of God's glory and power. This must be true of our time as it was true of biblical times. Wherever the Spirit of God empowers us with the authority to perform such signs and wonders, let us exercise the gift humbly, to God's glory, for the building up of his Body (Eph 4:12–16), and for the common good of his people (1 Cor 12:7).

However, today as then, there can be no proof that such signs and wonders are manifestations of God's Spirit. Satan is no less at work today than he was in the time of early Christianity. It complicates matters somewhat when we, in attempting to evaluate the situation, add those passages of Scripture that speak of signs and wonders in the context of the last times. 2 Thessalonians 2:9–12, in ascribing signs and wonders to Satan, classifies these as being 'pretended' manifestations which are all part of Satan's 'wicked deception'. Revelation 13:11–14 also speaks of 'great signs' being produced by the 'great beast', which results in confusing and deceiving those who witness such signs.

There seems to be no evidence from Scripture, however, that certain movements in our time stressing such signs and wonders ought therefore to be classified as being part of Satan's great and wicked deception. Nor does there appear to be solid evidence supporting the idea that signs and wonders were typically the work of the Holy Spirit in the first century, then ceased with the apostles, only to be revived as part of Satan's wicked deception in the last times. The opposite seems more likely, namely, that signs and wonders did not cease with apostolic times but were present, to a greater or lesser degree, in many phases of the church's history.

Whenever we are confronted by a situation in which we do not know whether the spirit of Satan or the Spirit of God is at work, we are called on 'to test the spirits to see whether they are of God' (1 John 4:1; 1 Cor 14:29). In 1 Corinthians 12:10 Paul lists this ability to 'distinguish between the spirits' as one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The apostolic advice with respect to distinguishing between the spirits is 'By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God' (1 John 4:2, 3). And furthermore, 'Whoever knows God listens to us, and he who is not of God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error (v 6).

From this we conclude that two criteria are essential in determining whether something is the work of the Holy Spirit or not. The first is that only he can truly confess the lordship of Christ who has indeed the Spirit of God. And the second is obedience to the apostolic word. Both these criteria include conforming with the principle of love (1 Cor 13) and the instruction that all things should build up the body of Christ (1 Cor 8:1; 10:23).

In addition, we may know those who exercise the gift of signs and wonders by their fruits (Matt 7:16) – the fruits that are in harmony with the Spirit of Christ (Gal 5:22). If indeed Satan's wicked deception results in confusion and ambiguity even with respect to such fruit, then we may do no more than follow our Lord's advice (Matt 13:24–30, particularly verse 30): 'Let both grow until the harvest; and at the harvest I will tell...'

For study:

8. It is often hard to decide what is of the Spirit of God and what is not. What do you think: Does God equip us so that we can solve the problem of the source of a spirit? Which two criteria are given to us, enabling us to discern the spirits? In discussing these questions, read 1 John 4:1–6; 1 Corinthians 12:3; 14:29; 12:10.
9. Discuss the relevance of Matthew 13:24–30 in the context of discerning the spirits.

REMEMBER

- Signs and wonders are never an infallible proof of our faith. They may be manifestations of God's glory and power, but they can also be part of Satan's wicked deception.