

# Signs that Make you... Wonder?

**AWAKENING THE SPIRIT-LIFE**

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## AWAKENING THE SPIRIT-LIFE

It seems that history does have a knack of repeating itself. The two areas that were most abused in the early church are the same areas often subject to abuse today: the power of God and the second coming of Christ. Peter sought to clarify the apostolic truth, saying, **“we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ”** (2 Peter 1:16). In this article we look at God’s power, specifically signs and wonders. In a separate article we tackle the return of Christ\*.

Our purpose is two-fold in this article. Firstly, we hope to stir a fresh openness to and hunger for the power of God. The answer to abuse is not non-use but proper use. May our earnest prayer mirror the early church’s intercession: **“Now Lord...grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus”** (Acts 4:29, 30).

Secondly, we offer a suggested approach to judging (testing) what is **“of God”** as we are instructed to do (John 7:24; 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22; 1 John 4:1-3). This approach reflects the writers attempt to Biblically process several experiences that have occurred to him and those close to him. This is certainly not the only approach to accomplish this task and I welcome constructive counsel to help us further along in our pursuit of His Presence and in my desire to be more effective in the work of God. May this stir thought and provoke much needed discussion around this subject.

### **Silly me!**

In appealing to the delinquent church in Corinth, Paul reminded them of their introduction to the Gospel: **“I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God”** (1 Corinthians 2:3-5).

I would prefer Paul to have said, “that your faith should be in the *Word of God*,” rather than **“that your faith should be in the power of God”**. For me, that would sound a little more sound...a little more safe. Being very analytical, cognitive and cerebral...I prefer when I can work things out, when I can put things into neat theological boxes that my mind can get around. And I’m not alone in this “mad sanity”.

\*See our study course entitled, “Living at the Edge of Time”.

For us raised in our rational world, we all like things boxed, formulated, packaged, measured and defined by our computer generated grids, patterns and spread-sheets. We want to know how everything works, where everything fits, what outputs we can expect based on the inputs we make, what returns are guaranteed before we invest. While postmodernism is slowly altering this world view, it is still the framework for viewing our world that under-girds the educational system that conditions our thinking.

In our world, we are encouraged to be very cerebral...cognitive...analytical...to be more left-brained in our orientation. We now know that the left side of our brain is responsible for our analytical, systematic brain functions; the right side of our brain for our intuitive, perceptive brain functions. Studies conclusively show that some people tend to be more left-brained while others tend to be more right-brained, and our modernistic world-view has tended to prize left-brain orientation (academic) and marginalized those who are more right-brained (artistic)\*.

Western-world Christianity has also tended to favour those who are more left-brained; ordered and structure in thought. Those who tend to be more right-brained; spontaneous and intuitive, often feel frustrated by our theological straight-jackets. Is it any wonder why so many right-brained people have struggled under our dry, dogmatic churches and sought experiential based faith in the occult and the New Age?

For the record, we need to use both sides of our brain and it is within the power of each individual to develop a healthy balance between our left- and right-brain functions. However, this has to be a deliberate process and our upbringing, exposure to influential others and life experiences contribute a lot to the imbalance most of us tend to have in this regard. Going to an all boys school that prized left-brained pupils, my right-brained functions were seriously deprived. Studying at university after school continued to develop the analytical, cognitive functions of my brain; poetry, music and the arts were for those who I considered lesser men! Silly me!

After a dramatic encounter with the Lord during first year university, I repented of my ungodly ways and sought Him with all my heart. My hunger for the Word was insatiable and I spent hours a week reading and studying the Bible. Being so left-brained, the outcome was less than attractive: I found myself quickly becoming a little Pharisee! Paul warned: **“knowledge puffs up”** (1 Corinthians 8:1), and I was sadly missing the point. My accumulation of knowledge – my *perceived* Biblical intelligence – was packaged into theological grids and boxes where everything fit so neatly, and into formulas and principles in which I could explain the way God worked. Then like a good Pharisee, in my “know-it-all” attitude, I judged and condemned others.

\*Of course, in an ironic twist – or is it, revenge of the right-brain – the small group of artistic superstars who break-through into the public arena as actors or musicians become the icons of our society.

But not only was I looking and sounding like a Pharisee, I was becoming an unhappy, frustrated one! My faith experience became increasingly inconsistent with what I was reading in Holy Scripture...and with my salvation encounter for that matter. The entire Bible was rich in spiritual experience as God conceived and intervened in human experience...in awful contrast, my experience was increasingly dry, dull and intellectual. I was bemused...how did I, in my passion, become a Pharisee? The Bible makes it very clear how Jesus felt about them!

In my second year of university I had to take an elective arts credit as part of my Bachelor of Commerce degree. I decided to take Religious Studies, a year long study of the main religions and cults of the world which included one short section ditching the Christian faith. It was during this time that I threw myself into Christian apologetics and engaged in rigorous debate over the validity of the Christian faith. I had an answer or three for every question or apparent contradiction.

Then in our final exam paper, my lecturer – a New Ager – required us to write an essay, choosing one from the three topics he proposed. I chose the dangerous one, an essay on how fundamentalism had scarred humanity. I offered a brief but valid critique of the Crusades and Spanish Inquisition and then wrote about “Christianity according to Jesus”. I expected to fail but top scored with distinction instead. My broom-flying lecturer wrote: “Excellent. I could not fault your argument”. But rather than tasting sweet success, I felt the cold emptiness of an argument won but a battle lost. I would like to comfort myself in the knowledge that perhaps I sowed a few seeds that God, in His greatness, will germinate but I still feel grieved at my pharisaic arrogance. To compound the shallow victory I felt, I was adding confusion to my frustration.

Although I had several answers to every question that challenged the Christian faith, I was becoming increasingly dissatisfied with this Christian walk that I could so triumphantly defend. Even my answers began to become empty clichés void of the glorious mystery of the Almighty. But once again, my Father in heaven came to my deliverance. In a moment of bright simplicity, God’s Presence flushed out the muddy waters of rationalisation from my fatigued mind. I realised: “If I ever did completely figure God out, He would only be the size of my tiny little brain... then ‘he’ would no longer be the God of the Bible...and certainly no longer worth following”. If God was only as big as my ability to comprehend Him, we would all be in serious trouble!

This does not mean that we cannot understand His ways. Some misquote Isaiah 55:8, 9 and, in resignation and despair, moan: God’s **“ways are higher than our ways, and His thoughts are so much higher than our thoughts”**...sigh...! This is not what is meant by this passage at all. Through the prophet Isaiah, God is the one moaning...He laments that this ought not to be so! He expresses His grief, in essence, saying: “Why are My ways and thoughts so beyond you when I have done everything to reveal Myself to you?”

Paul then quotes the recurrence of this theme in Isaiah when he quotes Isaiah 64:4, “**Eye has not seen, nor ear heard...**” and then triumphantly concludes: “**BUT God has revealed them to us through His Spirit...we have the mind of Christ**” (1 Corinthians 2:9, 10, 16). Wonderful! God longs to be found just as a father who plays hide-and-seek with his three year old daughter longs to be found by her. The great joy in playing hide-and-seek as a father is to see the delight on my child’s face when she discovers me – even though I hang my leg out from under the curtain to ensure she cannot miss me! God wants us to know His ways and think His thoughts. But this requires that I repent of my intellectual pride, surrender my ways to Him and re-learn to think the way He thinks.

Both Peter and John used an interesting play on the word “**knowledge**” in their epistles as they combated the growing heresy of Gnosticism towards the latter part of the first century. On the one hand, they used the Greek word *gnosis* to refer to mental enlightenment that only flatters the intellect and tickles the ego but has no power to change...the ideology behind the Gnostic heresy. On the other hand, they used the Greek word *epignosis* to refer to *experiential, revelation knowledge that results in life transformation*. Jesus Himself said: “**Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God**” (Matthew 4:4). Jesus spoke of a transformed life that flows out of intimacy with the Father as we tune our ear to the words He breathes.

Permit me an important qualifying thought here. It is important to state categorically that I am not proposing that we kiss our brains good-bye. The Bible does not say, “be transformed by the *removal* of your mind”. We are not given permission to be stupid I’m afraid. Romans 12:2 reads: “**be transformed by the renewing of your mind**”. We are transformed through the renewing of our minds as we learn to think like Him. And mind renewal consists of, first, repenting of our man-made restricted thinking and then second, embracing *epignosis*...revelation knowledge from God.

This is a key point of departure between Biblical faith and the New Age philosophy. In the New Age movement, the mind is the enemy and one is taught to disengage the mind in order to experience “reality”. The Bible teaches us something very different. The mind is not the enemy...our man-made thinking and value systems are. The Bible teaches us to engage God with our whole being and the mind is a vital part of this engagement process. We are to fill our minds with the glory of God so that His truth washes our brain clean from stinking thinking and corrupt attitudes. Oh yes, we need a thorough “brain-washing”! Only as we “**behold...the glory of the Lord**” are we transformed “**from glory to glory**” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

## **Rivers and flows...**

Two concepts helped to renew my mind. The first was to understand that *God's ways are characterized more by rivers and flows than by grids and boxes*. Let me explain.

The Bible has two under-girding themes. On the one hand, *God's character is consistent, unchanging and...predictable!* Jesus *"is the same yesterday, today and forever"* (Hebrews 13:8). God is pretty emphatic about this: *"For I am the Lord, I do not change"* (Malachi 3:6). For this reason, God describes His character with metaphors like a *"Rock"* that express His consistency and predictability (Psalm 144:1). You may never have heard God's character described as predictable before but this is why we can trust Him! He is completely reliable, absolutely trustworthy and totally dependable. Who He is today is who He will be tomorrow...which is why we can sleep tonight!

On the other hand, *God's works are spontaneous, creative and...well, unpredictable!* The metaphors God chooses to predominantly reveal His ways are all fluid, organic, living pictures: water (John 7:37-39), rivers (Ezekiel 47:1-12), breath (Ezekiel 37:1-10), wind (John 3:8), oil (Psalm 133:1-3), fire (Acts 2:3), light (John 1:4), bread (John 6:35) and even a vine and branches, where the obvious implication is that the Holy Spirit is the life-giving sap that flows from the Vine to the branches (John 15:1-8).

While God's character is consistent, unchanging and predictable; His works are creative, spontaneous and unpredictable. And here is a vital truth: *one of God's unchanging characteristics is His creativity!* God is Creator and His very nature is to be creative. For example, He did not create one person that looks the same. Incredible! We all have two eyes, two ears, one nose and one mouth. Yet not one is exactly the same! Amazing! God is gloriously creative. You cannot put God in a box in the same way you cannot put a wind in a box. If we are going to understand God's ways and cooperate with Him we have to understand His spontaneity, His creativity...we have to understand that God's ways are characterized more by rivers and flows than by grids and boxes.

Rivers and flows refer to God's spontaneous and creative ways; grids and boxes refer to our mechanical and formulated approach to trying to understand Him that quickly foments religion and produces little Pharisees like me. Incidentally, *"religion"* is a neutral word and is actually used in a positive sense by James (James 1:27). The word refers, *"to one's system of beliefs."* *The problem occurs when we begin to put our faith in the "system" rather than in Him whom we believe!* We then live by a "system" rather than by relationship and it is here where religion gets nasty. The mystery and romance of God is reduced to grids and boxes...and we wonder why the wonder and awe of living for Him is replaced by drudgery and religious effort.

Resisting my human bent to try to squeeze God into the little box of my mind, I had to accept that God had given me – and every person – a gift through which we can grasp and grow in understanding His creative spontaneity. God created us with an...*imagination*. I am ashamed to admit that it took me so long to accept that it was in fact a gift from God.

Somehow I had managed to use my imagination so well for evil that I battled to accept that it was indeed a God-given gift, let alone to actively begin to use it for Him.

Not only does God give us a collection of stories that make up His Word, filled with metaphors that reveal His character and His ways, He then also created us with our own inbuilt data projectors – our imaginations – into which He reveals these metaphors. As we meditate on His Word and allow His metaphors to engage our intellect **and** imagination (our mind), the Spirit transforms us with the experiential, revelation knowledge of God.

And this is where I so often found myself missing the point. My analytical brain would attempt to quickly dissect the Biblical passage into pieces and points, clinically extracting any lesson or formula possible from it. The result? I was left with a rule book of do's and don'ts...void of the mysterious life and romance intended by Author of the Story of God.

By God's all-sufficient grace, I started to use my imagination to re-play the many Biblical metaphors in the big screen of my mind. My prayer life was enlarged as I pictured the River of God flowing from the Throne through my heart and onto the nations (Revelation 22:1-5; Ezekiel 47:1-12 and John 7:37-39). My worship life was transformed as I joined the heavenly host in celebrating the exalted, Lord of glory (Revelation 4:2-11; 5:1-14). And my meditation on Scripture became alive as I pictured myself in each story I read. I muted my natural tendency to get down to the bottom line of every account and instead allowed myself to enjoy the poetry of each passage, to share in the grief of the afflicted, to rejoice in the victory of the valiant and, in essence...enter the Story of God.

Two blessings occurred...which I had certainly not planned. Unbeknownst to me, this discipline served to help me flex the dormant muscles of my right brain, enabling me to better tune into the voice of God and the things of the Spirit. And I became increasingly comfortable with the many Biblical paradoxes present in Scripture, things like childlikeness vs. maturity, fruit vs. gifts, truth vs. mercy, family vs. nations, life vs. death and resurrection vs. self-denial (to name but a few). The ever-present doubts I used to nurture (despite my perceived Biblical intelligence), dissipated in the quiet assurance of His Presence. I was like the baby, gently rocked to sleep in fulfilment of the prophet's promise: **“He will quiet you with His love”** (Zephaniah 3:17).

### **Senses and perceptions...**

The second concept that helped to renew my mind was to understand that *my true identity is characterized more by my “inward man” than by my “outward man”*. Paul makes a distinction between the **“inward man”** and the **“outward man,”** teaching us that the **“inward man”** is what is **“not seen”** but **“eternal”** and the **“outward man”** is what is **“seen”** yet **“temporary”** (2 Corinthians 4:16-18). And just for the record, he stresses that the **“outward man”** is **“perishing”** – no matter what extreme makeover attempts to advertise!

Paul, like Peter, then refers to the “**outward man**” – our body – as this “**earthly house**”...a “**tent**” (2 Corinthians 5:1; 2 Peter 1:4). Of course, he also refers to it as the “**temple of the Holy Spirit**” (1 Corinthians 6:19); our attitude towards our body should be two-fold:

- (1) *We must not trivialize it.* We are to be good stewards of the house...the tent...the temple that God has given us.
- (2) *We must not idolize it.* We must realize that it is in our house...our tent...our temple...where the real treasure is...the real me...the new creation miracle which becomes the focal point of Paul’s thoughts in the next chapter (2 Corinthians 5:16, 17). When you look at me, you are looking at Craig’s earth-suit – precious and God-made – but not to be confused with the real, inner me.

This is where we come to a foundational thought. *As the redeemed, we are not human beings having a few spiritual experiences; we are, in fact, spirit beings having a human experience.* After explaining that he was “**crucified with Christ,**” Paul then said: “**the life I now live in the flesh [in this body] I [the real, inner me] live by faith in the Son of God**” (Galatians 2:20; also see Romans 1:9; Romans 8:16; 1 Corinthians 14:15). I had to redefine myself. I was not a human being seeking a spiritual fix every now and then; I am a spirit being learning to bring the Kingdom of God to this earthly realm as an “**ambassador for Christ**” (2 Corinthians 5:20). Wow!

God created us with five natural senses. Why? For one, because He loves us and made the earth for our enjoyment – a novel thought for some, I know. Secondly, I believe, to point to the reality of our spiritual senses. Just as God created us with five natural senses to experience this natural world, He created us with spiritual senses to experience the supernatural realm of the Spirit. In fact, all of our five natural senses are used as metaphors to express our enjoyment and experience of God: taste (Psalm 34:8), sight (Ephesians 1:17), hearing (Revelations 2:7), smell (2 Corinthians 2:14) and touch (Luke 8:43-48).

The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews actually defines spiritual maturity in these terms: where we have our “**senses** [Greek word meaning, “to perceive”] **exercised to discern good and evil**” (Hebrews 5:14). As we learn to experience the fullness of life in the Spirit through our spiritual senses, we develop our abilities to perceive and discern the ways and will of God.

The first time I tried to read through the Gospel of John I got rear-ended in Chapter 5 by this statement from Jesus: “**I only do what I see the Father do**” (John 5:19). Do you see my problem? Had Jesus said, “I only do what I hear the Father say,” I would have been happy to put this statement into my little box entitled “prayer” and read on. But Jesus said: “**I only do what I see the Father do”.** Of course, Jesus heard what the Father said, but He also saw what the Father did...His spiritual senses were well exercised to perceive and discern the will of His Father.

Think of a person whose natural senses are inactive or dysfunctional. He would be blind, unable to see; he would be deaf, unable to hear...he would be unable to smell, taste or feel. Can you imagine how dull, how small and how narrow his perception of life would be? In an equally real sense, I realised that my spiritual senses were shrivelled, dull and dormant. Unable to *spiritually* see, hear, smell, taste or feel...my spiritual perception was limited...dysfunctional. I needed desperately to awaken from my slumber. I needed to wake up and sell my coffin!

### **On course...for a collision!**

It was then that I stumbled, or should I say, slammed into 1 Corinthians 2:5. Recall Paul's reminiscing words: **"I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God"** (1 Corinthians 2:3-5).

He did not say, "that your faith should be in the Word of God," but rather said: **"that your faith should be in the power of God"**. Now, of course, the power of God is intimately linked to the Truth and the Spirit of God. But I had to admit that my faith was plugged into the Word of God void of the **"demonstration of the Spirit and of power"**. Thus, it was high on doctrine and low on experience. Both are essential for a balanced, holistic faith. If we have the Truth without the Spirit, we dry up! If we have the Spirit without the Truth, we blow up! But with the Truth and the Spirit, we grow up!

Then I read an article that stunned me. The article, from a well-known and respected author, compared those in the Western-world who felt called into the five-fold ministry with those in third world countries who likewise felt called into the five-fold ministry. The survey revealed that nearly 80% of those from Western-world countries, influenced by modernism, felt called by God through a passage of Scripture that moved their heart. This was certainly my case, as I felt called by the Lord when Colossians 1:28, 29 and Matthew 28:18-20 were impressed on my heart. The survey continued to reveal that nearly 80% of those from third world countries, free from the influence of modernism, felt called by God after experiencing visions and dreams, many claiming to have experienced a vision of the resurrected Christ!

Now neither side of the equation is more right than the other. Both are genuine as God graciously speaks to us in the "language" we best understand. I do not doubt for a second that the Lord has called me as a five-fold gift ministry. The Scriptures illuminated to me are sufficient for me; I do not need to now doubt my call, nor do I now need to see a vision or have dream to authenticate this calling. But hey...I would love to be more open to see visions and have dreams inspired by the Holy Spirit! And I would love to help others to likewise have the benefit of being open to both the illumination of the Word and the revelation of the Spirit... the full power of God!

Learning to understand God's ways as rivers and flows – regularly and ruthlessly kicking the end out of the boxes I seem bent on making – and seeking to awaken my spiritual senses have brought me great joy as I have increasingly experienced the full power of God...both the Truth and the Spirit of God. And...I'm grateful to testify...my right-brain functions are no longer anaemic and dysfunctional!

Without doubt this journey into a greater appreciation of the supernatural realm aided my openness to judge the manifestations of the Spirit I was then graciously allowed to experience. There are certainly two ditches many fall into when it comes to supposed manifestations of the Spirit. On the one hand, are those who – unlike me – tend to be ***gullible***. Lacking any discernment, they assume everything must be of God because some celebrity Christian said so. We do live in a world where we are so open-minded that sometimes I wonder if our brains have fallen out!

On the other hand, are those – like me – who tend to be ***sceptical***. So much of what is termed discernment is really just suspicion. And as someone who has landed in this ditch more than not, I am just being honest. There is of course, a better way. We must avoid being either gullible or sceptical as we seek to follow the instructions of Scripture. Jesus taught us to **“judge with righteous judgment”** (John 7:24). John urged us to **“test the spirits”** (1 John 4:1). Paul beseeched us: **“do not quench the Spirit”** but **“test all things; hold fast what is good”** (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21).

Moving through the scepticism, my first experience of a manifestation of the Spirit was termed “being slain in the Spirit”. Personally, I prefer the phrase, “going under the power of the Spirit” – but when I first saw people crashing to the floor when the “pastor” laid hands on them, no title would have helped soften the unease I felt. I certainly was not convinced of the authenticity of what I witnessed and it seemed to be “used” primarily as a measure of the “pastors” perceived anointing. Gratefully I continued to pursue the Lord wholeheartedly not allowing my scepticism to derail me.

One evening I attended a combined meeting of four home groups where a guest speaker was teaching. To be honest the message was not memorable and there was nothing special about the meeting in anyway. However, when the speaker closed off by asking if he could pray for anyone present who needed a touch from God, I ran to the front. There were just two or three others who had responded and I simply closed my eyes with heartfelt expectation.

As the speaker touched me I flew back several metres, crashing into the steel-framed chairs, for what seemed, to on lookers, a very painful fall. However I felt nothing and was oblivious to what had happened; I was out for several hours. During this time I experienced a tremendous sense of “electricity” – warm “pins-and-needles” – throughout my body. It felt as if someone had thrown a heavy, warm blanket over me giving me the distinct impression that I was pinned or glued to the floor. I'm sure I could have “snapped out of it” at any time but I willingly and gratefully responded to the amazing, refreshing Presence of the Lord. At some point, I felt a deep chuckle begin to bubble out from my core; not quite a heavy laugh but a deeply satisfied sense of joy.

Then I heard it...the firm but gentle voice of the Lord saying: “Your hands...your feet...your mouth...are Mine...your hands...your feet...your mouth...are Mine,” over and over again. I felt this incredible sense of God’s demand on my life...and I vowed, in that holy moment, to follow Him with everything I was and everything I had.

How did I Biblically process this unplanned, life-altering experience? Many Biblical examples of people falling down to the ground before God clearly implies that they willing fell before Him, rather than “falling under the power” (Joshua 5:14; Revelation 4:9, 10; 5:8). When the glory filled Solomon’s Temple, the priests “**could not continue ministering**” (1 Kings 8:10, 11; 2 Chronicles 5:13, 14). Although it does not say, “They fell down under the power of the Spirit,” they were clearly incapacitated “**for the glory of the Lord filled the house**”. It seems they may have been more inebriated than floored but they could just have easily “fallen under the power”. However, the best example, is when Jesus told the arresting officers in the Garden of Gethsemane, “**I am He**”...and they “**drew back and fell to the ground**” (John 18:6)!

Although “falling under the power” has sadly become one of the most abused “religious responses” today, few would deny that when God’s Presence overwhelms an individual, the physical strength of the person may be likewise overwhelmed and he may “**fall to the ground**”. But what about other manifestations...things like holy laughter, spiritual drunkenness, the appearance of physical oil, gold dust and feathers?

Working through some of my own scepticism I realised that I was asking two main questions often used by people in judging various “manifestations.” At first glance, the questions look valid but I have come to consider them insufficient and inadequate in discerning whether something is “**of God**”.

## **Question 1..**

The first question I realised I was asking was: “Where is this manifestation recorded in the Bible... What chapter and verse?” For a long time I was stuck right there. In my love and fervour for the Word of God, I concluded, “Surely everything that God does today must be recorded in the Bible?” However, in God’s mercy and longsuffering with me, I felt Him challenge my thinking: “What chapter and verse in the Bible tells us to find a chapter and verse for everything?”

***The Bible does not record everything God did in the past as the sum total of what God will ever do.*** God’s Word is not a prescriptive straight-jacket that requires Him to only work in “certain” defined ways into the future. The Bible – God’s breathed, inspired Word (2 Timothy 3:16, 17) – is the Story of God revealing Himself to mankind and teaches us, as mentioned earlier, two major themes: (1) The character of God is consistent, unchanging and predictable and (2) The work of God is creative, spontaneous and unpredictable. And as noted earlier, ***one of God’s unchangeable characteristics is His creativity.*** In other words, God is predictable in His unpredictability!

Think about it, God seldom did a miracle the same way. Consider Jesus' creative and different healings of the blind. On one occasion He simply touched the blind man and healed him (Matthew 9:27-31). On a second occasion; He spat on the ground, made a paste, smeared the mud on the blind man's eyes and told him to wash in the pool of Siloam before being healed (John 9:1-7). Then on a third occasion, He spat directly into the blind man's eye (Mark 8:22-26). Jesus seemed to thoroughly enjoy being creative and unpredictable!

He also seemed determined to avoid allowing His followers to think that there was some special formula involved. If He had left it at the "spit-and-paste" incident, there was a good chance the disciples may have figured: "So that's the trick...let me make some mud!" The problem with formulae is this: we start to put our faith in the formula rather than in God Himself!

Not only did God seldom do a miracle the same way, He often rebuked His people for assuming that He would work the same way twice. When the Israelites begged for water, God instructed Moses to *strike* "**the rock in Horeb...and water will come out of it**" (Exodus 17:1-6). When a similar need arose later, God instructed Moses to now *speak* to the rock "**and it will yield its water**". Moses probably figured that it would look a little silly to have a chat with a rock, and decided to strike the rock again. Hey, it worked last time. Who can blame Moses for being pragmatic and sticking to what worked? However, God was not impressed: "**Because you did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them**" (Numbers 20:1-13).

One of the outstanding distinctions between David, a man after God's heart, and Saul, a man with a wayward heart (1 Samuel 15:10-23), was that David understood God's creative ways. Where Saul assumed...and guessed...and took liberties, David learnt to *inquire of the Lord*. A great example of this is when David and his army squared off against the Philistines, not once but twice within a short period of time, in the Valley of Rephaim (2 Samuel 5:17-25). On both occasions David enjoyed victory because on both occasions he "**inquired of the Lord,**" receiving different instructions for each incident. Had David assumed the strategy that secured victory on the first instance was the strategy he should use on the second occasion; his army would have been routed!

Consider too the deliberate lessons Jesus taught His disciples in sending them on apostolic mission. When He sent out the seventy, He explained, "**I send you out as lambs among wolves**" and then He instructed, "**Carry neither money bag, knapsack, nor sandals**" (Luke 10:3, 4). Jesus sent them empty-handed, vulnerable and barefoot into enemy territory to teach them dependency on Him alone. Later though...Jesus gave them very different instructions. First, He reminded them of the early lesson, asking: "**When I sent you without money bag, knapsack, and sandals, did you lack anything?**" When they replied, "**Nothing,**" Jesus then said: "**But now, he who has a money bag, let him take it, and likewise a knapsack; and he who has no sword, let him sell his garment and buy one**" (Luke 22:35, 36). He was teaching them the importance of seeking the Lord's will in every instance, avoiding the error of presumption.

Without question, one of God's unchanging characteristics is His creativity.

Furthermore, the Bible does not give us an exhaustive list of things God will do. When Paul lists the “**manifestations of the Spirit**” (1 Corinthians 12:7-11), he uses ***broad*** categories ***that give God space to do more creative works that are not recorded in Scripture***. Luke, for example, tells us that Paul did “**unusual miracles**” (Acts 19:11, 12), describing only one such miracle without giving us an exhaustive list of them. He also records an unusual miracle in Peter's ministry (Acts 5:15), something that was completely creative...never before experienced.

Some ask, “Doesn't Mark 16:15-20 imply that specific signs would follow those who believe?” While the NKJV does seem to specify “**these signs**” and then goes on to stress: “**the accompanying signs**,” the Greek words used do not have this same stress. For example, the NLT reads: “**the Lord worked with them, confirming what they said by many miraculous signs**”. And just to prove that Jesus was not making an exclusive or exhaustive list here, He does not mention, for example, prophecy or word of knowledge which are clearly referred to in the church age.

So what about laughter, spiritual drunkenness, oil, gold dust, the appearance of feathers? If asked, “Do you believe God could make gold dust appear?” most believers would say, “I guess so...God is able to do anything. But ***why*** would He do this?” The question is “Why?” While asking “Why?” in itself is a good question, the scepticism in my heart led me to the second insufficient and inadequate question I was asking, phrased this way:

## **Question 2...**

“Should a sign and wonder not lead to a direct and clear healing or deliverance? Surely, if God touches a life, a sign and wonder should lead to salvation, healing or deliverance?” Right?

No. Many Biblical signs and wonders did not lead to a direct healing, deliverance or salvation. Forget the ream of Old Testament examples, John records that Jesus' very first miracle was turning water into wine (John 2:1-11). No one got saved, healed or delivered...some just got a little happy! John explains: “**This beginning of signs Jesus did...and manifested His glory**” (John 2:11). What about feeding the 5,000 (Mark 6:30-44), walking on the water (Mark 6:45-52) or money in the fish's mouth (Matthew 17:24-27) to name a few other examples?

## **A Biblical Approach...**

So then how do we Biblically judge (discern/test) these manifestations? This is what I have found helpful:

***(1) Expectantly yet discerningly ask whether God is using one of the Biblical metaphors to reveal Himself.***

As mentioned earlier, God uses metaphors (pictures) to speak to us and reveal His ways. It is my opinion that He then manifests His glory ***through physical expressions of these metaphors***. He may choose to manifest His glory by causing one of the Biblical metaphors to “materialize” in this natural realm. Before we “judge” Jesus’ miracle in Cana with this approach, it is important to do so with an attitude of eager “expectation”.

In Paul’s ministry in the city of Berea, we uncover a gem; a crucial attitude to embrace if we are going to learn to be truly discerning. While Paul usually received a mixed and often volatile reception from city to city, he was in for a pleasant surprise in Berea. Luke tells us that the Bereans ***“were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica”***. The word translated ***“fair-minded”*** is not “simple-minded,” rather it actually refers literally to a “noble” attitude. What noble trait did they exhibit? They were neither gullible nor sceptical, rather they ***“received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so”*** (Acts 17:11).

Rather than assuming that what Paul taught was not “of God” and then setting to prove their point from Scripture; they ***“received the word with all readiness”*** – eager expectation – searching the Scriptures to find out whether these things ***were*** “of God”. Notice firstly that they searched the Scriptures for themselves avoiding the ditch of the gullible. But secondly, and equally importantly, they searched ***“to find out whether these things were so”***. Rather than arrogantly assuming they “knew-it-all,” the Bereans searched the Scriptures with an eager expectation to confirm, not disprove, the truth Paul was sharing. Hence, they avoided the ditch of the sceptical. They knew God’s Word would stand up to any test but that if their goal was to disprove rather than affirm, their scepticism would block their ability to receive what God may be doing.

How then could we judge Jesus’ sign and wonder at Cana (John 2:1-11) and thereby use this approach on other manifestations?

Biblically wine was used as a metaphor to express God's new blessing and the fulfilment of His promises; specifically, it was used to point to the establishment of the New Covenant (Joel 2:24; Amos 9:13). Jesus could have begun His ministry by teaching them again about His intention to usher in a New Covenant and could have used "wine" as a metaphor. Instead, He manifested His glory by actually, physically turning water into "**wine**". The presence of actual wine appearing was a *sign* of Jesus' intention to usher in His New Covenant and reveal His glory that left the people in awe and *wonder*.

Let us use this approach to judge the following:

***What about the appearance of physical oil today?***

Biblically oil was used as a metaphor to refer to the Presence and power of God, specifically a sign of the Holy Spirit's activity (Exodus 30:22-33; Psalm 133:1-3; Isaiah 10:27). Is the presence of fragrant oil appearing today not a *sign* of God's Presence and an affirmation of the activity of the Spirit? I *wonder*?

***What about the appearance of gold dust\*?***

Biblically gold was used as a metaphor to refer to the sublime glory of God; from the Ark of the Covenant, Table of Showbread, Golden Lamp stand and Altar of Incense in the Old Testament (Exodus 25:10-40; 30:1-10) to the New Jerusalem in the New Testament (Revelation 21:9-21). Is the presence of gold dust not a *sign* of God's manifest and increasing glory filling the earth? I *wonder*?

\*We are aware that a number of people are attributing the appearance of gold dust to the occult or Catholicism. Admitting that these manifestations are now happening without question, they claim that the source of them is demonic. They point out that gold is associated with many ancient pagan religions, such as the Egyptians and Incas, and that it has a special place in many cults today. Furthermore, the appearance of gold has been reported along with manifestations of the "stigmata" in Catholicism.

The issue for us is simple. Who created gold, God the Creator of heaven and earth or the devil? The devil has no creative genius within him; he can only copy and corrupt. He can only copy and pervert what God does and what God creates. Why should we give him the credit?

***What about laughter?***

We know that Biblically laughter is either an overflow of one's heart completely satisfied in God or even an indication of judgment and victory over one's enemy (Psalm 126:2; Nehemiah 8:10; Psalm 2:4). Is the sound of laughter from God's people not a *sign* of our true delight in Him and even perhaps a sign of His accomplished (and soon to be consummated) victory? I *wonder*?

***What about spiritual drunkenness?***

We know that Biblically spiritual drunkenness occurred when God's people became overwhelmed by His Presence (1 Kings 8:10, 11; Acts 2:1-15; Ephesians 5:18). Is the incapacitated appearance of God's people not a *sign* of the drenching of the Holy Spirit? I *wonder*?

### ***What about the appearance of feathers\*?***

We know that Biblically a dove is a picture of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:16) and that God uses the metaphor of a bird's wings and feathers to express His comfort of us (Psalm 68:13; 91:4). Is the presence of feathers not a **sign** of His care? I **wonder**?

\*My wife and I have personally experienced all the manifestations described here except that of the appearance of feathers. I have heard of the sudden appearance of feathers from a reliable source and have included it as a part of this article in an attempt to show how I have, with difficulty – my brain is frustratingly and persistently sceptical – renewed my mind to the reality that God is well able to use the metaphor of wings and feathers to comfort His Beloved. It still amazes me how narrow my thinking is, despite the graciousness of God to me. My prayer is that I learn to become increasingly open to the things of the Spirit as I learn to be more discerning. Pray for me!

To recap, the first suggestion I made, as we seek to Biblically judge (discern/test) these manifestations, was to expectantly yet discerningly ask whether God is using one of the Biblical metaphors to reveal Himself. Then to ask Him for grace and wisdom to cooperate appropriately to His revelation is vital. God does not just do things to put on a show. I think we should ask, “Father, how can I learn and respond to what You are so graciously doing?” Moving onto the second suggestion...

### ***(2) Expectantly and discerningly look at the fruit.***

Jesus said: “**Therefore by their fruits you will know them**” (Matthew 7:20). We should ask (1) are believer's hearts being freshly set on fire resulting in empowered service? And (2) are lost people encountering Him? While I do think that signs and wonders are predominantly for the lost, I certainly agree that we who “believe” need them too. I for one need them...I realise how easy it is for me to become so dull to the things of the Spirit and thus need to be reawakened!

As we look at the fruit (deliberately aiming to avoid the flaky abuse and hype that human beings seem bent on), asking whether our hearts are being drawn to Him for empowered service and whether we are using this empowering to serve the lost, we will be kept from turning what God graciously does into another self-absorbed “bless-me” extravaganza. The world does not need God's people to be further wrapped up in themselves! Jesus called us to be the lights of the world, not the decorations of self-impressed religion. Lord deliver us!

We can then pray with the early church: “**Now Lord...grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus**” (Acts 4:29, 30). Amen!

Jesus taught us to look at the fruit. One problem with fruit watching is that it usually takes time to judge its growth or lack thereof. We should be quick to pray and slow to judge, allowing God's love to cover and protect. We should always heed this sound advice...from a Pharisee no less, which in itself is a sign and a wonder: **“And now I say to you,...if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it – lest you even be found to fight against God”** (Acts 5:38, 39).

## **Final thoughts from Matthew, Chapter 12...**

In order to be as thorough as possible in this article, we feel it is important to make two comments on the happenings of Matthew, Chapter 12.

After Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath, **“the Pharisees”** sick and tired of Jesus **“went out and plotted against Him, how they might destroy Him”** (Matthew 12:14). They were no longer curious about this carpenter from Nazareth; from now on they were seeking to pounce on any opportunity to take Him out. And it was not too long before such an opportunity presented itself.

When Jesus healed and delivered a **“demon-possessed, blind and mute”** man, the crowds **“were amazed”** and wondered, **“Could this be the Son of David?”** The Pharisees discredited Jesus and the miracle, claiming that He was operating under Satan's power (Matthew 12:22-24). Jesus pointed out the absolute absurdity of their charge saying, **“If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself”** and then revealed that this manifestation was in fact, the penetration of Satan's kingdom by the Kingdom of God: **“if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the Kingdom of God has come upon you”** (Matthew 12:28).

Then Jesus taught about the “unpardonable sin” saying, **“every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men”** (Matthew 12:31). Two points are worth making here. Firstly, if someone feels troubled that they may have committed the “unpardonable sin,” the fact that they are concerned about grieving the Spirit is certainly proof that they have not. Someone who had grieved the Spirit in this way would not care two-hoots that they had done so. And this leads to the second point and our first qualifying comment.

We have personally heard people teach that we dare not question the authenticity of a manifestation or else we could be guilty of the Pharisees' sin described in this passage. The implication is that we must not judge the manifestations of the Spirit but rather accept everything without question. We trust that this article goes along way to explaining the Bible's exhortation to **“test the spirits”** (1 John 4:1), even offering a suggestion to how we may go about doing so.

The Pharisees' sin here was not that they were sincerely attempting to discern whether Jesus was **"of God,"** nor were their accusations simply an act of ignorance. No. They consciously and decisively denounced Jesus, intentionally rejected the Spirit's conviction in their hearts and sought opportunity, in fact, to murder Jesus. Their sin was deliberate, conscious and intentional. If we, in our sincere desire to be discerning, battle to accept that a specific manifestation may truly be of the Spirit, we are not guilty of the "unpardonable sin". We would encourage you in this case to continue to seek the Lord with an open heart and resolve not to judge others who may be convinced that the specific manifestation is **"of God"** (Romans 14:5, 13). The "unpardonable sin" is when a person, deliberately rejecting God, becomes apostate; searing their conscience, thus insulting the Holy Spirit (see 1 Timothy 4:1, 2; Hebrews 6:3-6; 10:29).

Blind to the truth and filled with evil, the Pharisees did not even bat an eye-lid but immediately demanded: **"Teacher, we want to see a sign from You"** (Matthew 12:38). Mark reveals that their agenda was to **"test Him"** (Mark 8:11) and goes onto to reveal Jesus' deep sorrow for them: **"He sighed deeply in His spirit"** (v. 12).

Jesus answered them saying, **"An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign..."** (Matthew 12:39). This leads to a second important comment. Some feel, based on this passage, that we should not ask for or seek after signs: "If God wants to do something then fine, but we should not be actively seeking after signs and wonders". While certainly we are not advocating any obsession with signs and wonders – we agree, we are to seek Him first and foremost – we are, in fact, encouraged to pray for signs and wonders (Acts 4:29, 30) with an earnest expectation that the Lord Himself seeks to manifest His glory through them (Mark 16:17-20). Again, we are not suggesting that we pray, "Please Lord make physical oil appear" – how God chooses to manifest His glory, we concur, is His domain: **"as He wills"** (1 Corinthians 12:11) – but we are to nurture a holy expectation in the knowledge of the Lord's desire to bear **"witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit"** (Hebrews 2:4).

The context of Jesus' judgment on these apostate Pharisees must be kept in mind. They had witnessed many signs and wonders already. Yet they had purposed to destroy Jesus and were now looking to test and trap Him. Jesus thus pronounced a judgment on them and those who, like them, rejected Him and His offer of salvation. Of course, we know Jesus did many more signs and wonders after this incident but He knew that the Pharisees would be blind to them. Furthermore, Jesus did not have to prove Himself on demand to these unbelieving, conniving murders; it was, in fact, they who had to prove themselves to Him! In stark contrast: to the weak, the sick, the bound, the needy and the lost, Jesus took great pleasure revealing His salvation, His healing, His deliverance, His provision and His glory through signs and wonders.

In our journey to know our generous and merciful God and to understand the supernatural realm of the Spirit\*, we have seen many flaky expressions and outright abuses...and have been guilty of our fair share too. We have many times been put off by others and grieved by our own mistakes...and were thus tempted to re-box everything and keep things “neat and tidy”. But we are determined to pursue the Lord wholeheartedly in holiness, resolute in our desire to **“not quench the Spirit”** (1 Thessalonians 5:19) and to **“earnestly desire the best [most appropriate] gifts”** (1 Corinthians 12:31; 14:1). To this end, we realise that we will have to guide God’s people through their sincere but sometimes misguided attempts to experience Him and also to govern situations where people attempt to abuse the gifts of God to draw attention to themselves and manipulate others with shows of “perceived spirituality”. Our goal is, as always, that He be glorified and **“that no flesh should glory in His presence”** (1 Corinthians 1:29).

Even in this, we remind ourselves that the Lord is well able to defend His own Name and He is, always...always, more patient and merciful than we are!

\*A final qualifying comment is important here. The word “supernatural” should not be seen as synonymous with the word “spectacular”. Indeed many supernatural manifestations of the Spirit, mentioned in this article, are wonderfully spectacular. However, the supernatural activity of the Spirit does not need to be spectacular to be powerful and life-enriching. A kind embrace, an encouraging word and a simple prayer can all have lasting, eternal impact. And our faith walk is filled with *seasons of routine* as well as *moments of inspiration*. We ought not to wish the routine away; for, in fact, it is how we walk faithfully and expectantly through our seasons of routine that prepares us for God-ordained moments of inspiration! We should always remember that Jesus walked on the water once; the other ninety-nine times He took a boat!





**This article is part of a series entitled:  
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## **CrossWave**



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