

Power Encounter

Toward an SIM Position

The intent of this article is to spell out SIM's position on spiritual warfare, power encounter and the issue of the miraculous in their ministry. SIM will not withhold the request that God would stretch out His hand "to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders" in Jesus' name.

By Howard Brant

Like many other mission societies, the Society for International Ministries (SIM) has been raised up by God as a religious mission order to plant the church of Jesus Christ throughout the world. By the very nature of our ministry, we are called upon to enter enemy territory and engage in spiritual warfare. In this war zone we often find ourselves challenged by the spiritual forces of darkness. How we deal with spiritual power encounter is of vital importance to us individually and corporately. C.S. Lewis, author of *Screwtape Letters*, commented that there are two common mistakes that one can make in dealing with the enemy. The first is in giving him too much emphasis; the other is in not giving him enough.

The dilemma which faces the evangelical world in general and conservative evangelical missions like SIM in particular is precisely that of which C. S. Lewis warned. For on the one side, if we ignore our enemy, we cannot wage war effectively. But on the other, if we become unduly preoccupied with these issues, we will find ourselves detracted from our ultimate purpose or embroiled in paralyzing controversies.

The related subject of the miraculous in Christian ministry is currently receiving unusual attention. Contemporary Bible colleges and seminaries are rapidly adding courses on spiritual warfare, power encounter, and sign and wonders to their curriculums. Current Christian books and magazines of both popular and scholarly variety are flooded with discussion on this topic. Popular lecturers crisscross the continents to expound the issue. A new denomination, Vineyard Christian

Fellowship, focusing on signs and wonders, is growing rapidly. Indeed, a movement identified as "The Third Wave" calls upon the evangelical world to accept that signs, wonders, and miracles, as seen in the miracles of Jesus and the apostles, are to be expected in today's church.

It is the intent of this paper to spell out SIM's position in these areas. To this end, we have studied the Scriptures and sought input from a study group composed of SIM missionaries and SIM-related national church leaders. Our findings were carefully scrutinized by a group of SIM theologians as well as by several prominent pastor-teachers who are deeply involved with SIM. This paper was then approved by SIM's International Council and noted by the Board of Governors. What is represented in this paper is an attempt to clarify SIM's position on this important topic.

PART 1: SPIRITUAL WARFARE

In SIM, we do recognize the reality of the spirit world. One phrase in our doctrinal statement states that we believe in "the personality of Satan, who is called the devil." No one can be a member of SIM without accepting that reality. Furthermore, SIM missionaries and related national church leaders are not strangers to spiritual encounters with the demonic world. National church leaders report incidents of spiritual attacks on national Christian workers. Our missionaries relate case studies in which they have seen those once bound by Satan delivered from demonization through the powerful name of Jesus.

Dealing with the Demonic

From our collective experience and study of Scripture, several important principles emerge:

* The ability to expel demons is not related to any spiritual gift, but has to do with the believer's position in Christ and His authority over the principalities and powers (Ephesians 1:19-21; 2:4-6). We deny anyone's claim of being especially gifted as an exorcist.

* We do not actively seek out opportunities to exorcise demons, but when confronted in ministry, we should not hesitate to respond (Acts 16:16-18).

* Because Jesus "disarmed the powers and authorities" at the cross, and because we are granted a position over them in Christ, we believe that ultimately they must obey direct commands given in the powerful name of Jesus (Colossians 2:15, Acts 16:18).

* We recognize that there may be incidents when an individual may have to deal with such encounters alone. We strongly advise, however, that this should be a group ministry (Matthew 17:21).

* Sometimes the demonized have more than one evil spirit troubling them. For this reason, it may be helpful to discern the name of the dominant spirit and deal with it first (Luke 8:30).

* Great care must be given to those who have been delivered. They must be urged to confess Christ as their personal Savior. They should be taught how to pray in the name and authority of Jesus. They should be surrounded by loving Christians who are aware of their spiritual authority (Luke 11:24-26).

* Those involved in this ministry

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should do so realizing that all ministry is through the grace of God. They should examine their own hearts to see if there is unconfessed sin, any desire for self-exaltation, or any gap in their spiritual armor through which they can be attacked (Ephesians 6:10-19). They must beware lest they be lifted up with pride and thus fall into the temptation of the devil himself (1 Timothy 3:6; 1 Corinthians 12:7).

* If such incidents are recounted publicly, great care must be taken to give all the credit and glory to Christ, at whose name the demonic world trembles (Acts 14:15; 15:12).

Influence, Control and Possession

Within this consensus there are areas where we have honest questions among ourselves. For instance, not all of us are agreed as to the degree to which evil spirits can affect believers, particularly those in a back-slidden condition who knowingly, or unknowingly, dabble in the occult.

We all agree wholeheartedly that every believer receives the Holy Spirit at conversion and is indwelt by Him (Romans 8:9). But we also note that Paul and John encouraged church leaders to “test the spirits and see if they be from God” (1 Corinthians 12:3; 1 John 4:1). Is it possible that some believers, while claiming that they had spiritual gifts from God, were unwittingly manifesting the influence or control of evil spirits?

One of our number related that when he applied such a test to a person claiming spiritual utterance an evil spirit manifested itself and was cast out in the name of Jesus. Do we then question the salvation of the person so afflicted?

Several members of our study group have witnessed incidents in which evil spirits spoke through professing believers and openly confessed that these backsliders belong to Jesus, and that the spirits had come back to trouble them because they had become involved again with worshipping Satan. When such persons repented and confessed their sin, they were immediately released.

From a practical point of view, if one is confronted by such a situation it must be dealt with even if all the theological implications are not understood. But in

theological terms it is difficult to determine the exact degree to which an evil spirit can influence, control, or possess a believer. On this continuum, some would draw the line between influence and control. Others would draw it between control and possession.

Note the three words which we have used: possess, influence, control. We resolutely deny that Satan or any evil spirit can possess a believer in the sense of ownership. Believers belong to God. Jesus knows His own (John 10:14). No one can take them out of His hand (John 10:28, 29). But no one would doubt that Satan and his demons do have power to influence believers, at least to the degree of serious temptation (Acts 5:3ff). Where believers are not walking in fellowship with the Lord, where they are not filled with all the fullness of God, where they have given place to the devil, we know that the demonic can gain a strategic foothold (Ephesians 4:27). Whether this can include outright control is an area of question.

As in other issues where controversy could threaten our unity, those who entertain such questions must agree not to make them a point of division.

One further word of clarification: When we speak of someone being demonized, we are speaking of an evil spirit taking control of someone in such a way that the evil spirit speaks through or otherwise affects the faculties or person of that individual.

We know of those who see demonic manifestation in all sorts of sins and shortcomings of the flesh. But we see no Biblical precedent for casting out demons of anger, lust, hatred of one's mother-in-law, etc. We know of deep crippling damage which has been done to Christians who have been dealt with in this way. We believe that the Biblical method for dealing with such sins is to repent and confess them to God. Any other teaching relieves sinners of their personal responsibility to confess their own sins to God (1 John 1:9).

Spiritual Warfare at a Deep Level

Even though many within SIM have had experiences and theological insights of the type discussed, this was not an area of major emphasis or concern. In fact, dealing with the demonized is not where most of us feel the heat of spiritual battle.

For in dealing with the demonized, we are usually dealing with isolated incidents. Dramatic as exorcism may be, our missionaries and church leaders are involved essentially in turning the hearts of whole ethnic groups from “darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God.” (cf. Acts 26:16-18) Indeed, exorcism as described above may be seen only as one visible expression of the much larger cosmic battle.

Far more serious are the pervasive powers of darkness which have blinded whole people groups to the light of God. We are concerned about those “powers and authorities,” about those world forces of darkness, those spiritual forces of wickedness which stand opposed to the advance of the gospel and the spreading of God's kingdom on earth (Ephesians 6:12).

We want our missionaries, our related churches, and all Christians everywhere, to recognize that there are dark spiritual forces which have enormous power over entire clans, villages, towns, ethnic groups, and even over nations (Daniel 10:11-13). It is as we learn to take up the weapons of our warfare and attack these strongholds of wickedness that God's Spirit will be released to turn men and women to himself, bring salvation to the lost, and revive His church.

Biblically, spiritual warfare includes both resisting the devil as well as standing firm in our faith (1 Peter 5:8,9). Often our struggle is not so much a deliberate focusing on evil powers in conscious resistance as in living a life of disciplined responsiveness to the Lord, who has power over them. In Ephesians chapter 6, the Christian's resistance to evil powers is effected by the disciplines of truth, a life of righteousness, readiness to witness, faith, and giving attention to the Word and intercessory prayer.

We are called to take up the weapons of our warfare, which are really God's weapons of warfare (cf. 2 Corinthians 10:4 and Ephesians 6:11). We should be greatly encouraged as we see that these weapons are the same ones with which our blessed Lord did battle while upon the earth. (Note Isaiah 11:5; 39:2; 52:7; 59:17.) It should encourage us to know that He used these weapons when sharing our humanity so that “... he might destroy him who holds the power

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of death” (Hebrews 2:14).

At the cross, Jesus “disarmed the powers and authorities” (Colossians 2:15). We are challenged to get into the battle, to take up God’s full armor against a naked and defenseless foe, and wield the offensive weapons of praise, the sword of the Spirit, and intercessory prayer. Through faith, mighty faith, and by prevailing prayer, we shall be numbered among the overcomers (Ephesians 6:16, 1 John 2:13,14).

PART II: SIGNS, WONDERS AND MIRACLES

“Powers encounter” is a general term which includes “spiritual warfare” as well as “signs, wonders, and miracles.” Spiritual warfare refers to the confrontation which takes place between a believer, as God’s agent on earth, and the forces of demonic darkness. In signs, wonders, and miracles (works of power), the focus is not so much on direct confrontation with the demonic as on supernatural displays of God’s power over the natural elements of our fallen world. In either case, God’s power is visibly displayed.

The Purpose of Signs and Wonders

God’s purpose in signs, wonders, and miracles (the miraculous) appear to be many:

* In the days of Moses, God displayed His power in signs and wonders in order to convince Pharaoh of His sovereign reality as well as to draw attention to Moses as His servant (Acts 7:26).

* In the days of Elijah, God demonstrated himself by fire to show himself as superior over all the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18).

* God used Naaman’s healing through the word of Elijah to prove that no god in all the world is equal to the God of Israel (2 Kings 5:15).

* In the days of Daniel, God spared the three Hebrew children to cause Nebuchadnezzar to recognize His sovereign power (Daniel 4:2). Daniel was

spared from the lions that Darius might know that the Lord reigns in heaven (Daniel 6:27).

* On the day of Pentecost, Peter reminded the multitude that the ministry and message of Jesus was attested to by signs, wonders, and miracles (Acts 2:22). In the same discourse, he stated that many signs and wonders were performed by the apostles immediately after the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:22,43).

* In the early church, the people prayed: “Sovereign Lord... enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and

wonders in their ministry among the Gentiles. It would seem that they used this argument to prove that the Gentiles were just as much a part of the church as were the Jews. (See Acts 15:12)

* Similarly, when Paul’s authority as a true apostle was challenged, he went to great lengths to explain how he had preached the gospel freely, suffered for the gospel intensely, and had performed signs and wonders among them, as any true apostle would have done (2 Corinthians chapters 11 and 12, especially 12:12).

* From 1 Corinthians 12:9 and Galatians 3:5 it would appear that miracles were not uncommon in the early

church; and not necessarily at the hands of the apostles only, but rather as part of the spiritual gifts which God gave sovereignly to believers.

* Finally, God will use signs and wonders in the future. Joel prophesied about “wonders in the heavens and on the earth” (Joel 2:30; cf. Acts 2). Many of these are yet to be fulfilled. Further, we are warned that when the “lawless one will be revealed,” he will come displaying counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders (2 Thessalonians 2:9).

It would appear that God uses the miraculous in many ways. Sign and wonders validate His message and His messengers. They can create a sense of awe in believers and foster faith in unbelievers. They can also be used to chasten those who attempt to obstruct His purposes. They come at particular times and seasons when God, for whatever reasons, chooses to make himself manifest.

Some have attempted to give precise definitions to the use of signs and wonders and then go about showing why God must or cannot do such things today. But any attempt to confine or limit their use would require a full understanding of all that God is doing. In this regard, Paul exclaimed: “Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?” (Romans 11:33, 34).

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wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus” (Acts 4:24-30).

* Stephen the deacon and Philip the evangelist both performed signs and wonders (Acts 6:8; 8:6). We learn from the latter account that, whatever the purpose of signs may be, it certainly is not something to be purchased with money for personal gain. Peter sternly rebuked Simon the sorcerer, who sought such power with money and warned him, “You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God” (Acts 8:21).

* Signs of power were present as Paul, Barnabas and Silas went their missionary journeys. They were used to silence the opposition of Elymas the sorcerer and so amazed Sergius Paulus that he believed, “for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord” (Acts 13:12). Later when Paul and Barnabas addressed the Jerusalem Council, they told how God had used signs and

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Perhaps the most we should say is that God performs the miraculous when it suits His purposes and when He chooses to reveal His own glory. We do need to make the point, however, that the miraculous is not always overt. There are periods in sacred history when the waters of the miraculous go underground only to spring up again at some other time and in another place as God sovereignly directs the flow of His eternal plans. (cf. 1 Samuel 3:1)

The Spiritual and Natural Worlds

If we believe that Christians are positioned in Christ with authority over the demonic world, what about authority to heal, work miracles, and demonstrate God's power through signs and wonders in the natural or fallen world about us?

The point of departure for some modern practitioners is not through "gift" theology, or through "healing in the atonement" theology, or in the popular "prosperity" theology. Rather, it is through "kingdom of God" theology and more particularly through the issue of "spiritual authority."

With regard to God's kingdom, some assume that because Jesus came to set up the kingdom of God, and since we believers are part of that kingdom, we already have all the rights and privileges of that kingdom. This has led to confusion over what some theologians refer to as "already" in God's kingdom and what is "not yet."

We need to recognize that our world is still under the Adamic curse. Though Christ came to inaugurate His kingdom, that kingdom is yet to be fully implemented. Jesus acknowledged this when He taught us to pray, "your kingdom come."

The apostle Paul teaches that all fallen creation is presently "groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (Romans 8:22). Though our world is subjected to frustration, it is subjected in hope (Romans 8:20). We eagerly await the day when all sorrow, suffering, pain, and death will be done away as God establishes His eternal kingdom. But it is not until the new Jerusalem comes down out of heaven that the loud voice from the throne cries, "There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

The claim of this new movement is that today's disciples have the same authority to heal, cast out demons, and work other miracles as did the earth disciples in the days of Jesus. They argue that as Jesus gave authority to the first disciples to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the leper, and cast out demons in His pre-resurrection commission, (cf. Matthew 10:8) that same authority is to be passed on to all believers as part of their birthright today. They point out that the same disciples who received authority in Matthew chapter 10 were later instructed to teach their disciples all that the Lord had commanded them. (cf. Matthew 10:8 and Matthew 28:19-20) Thus, we, who are Christ's disciples today should expect the miraculous in our ministries.

This teaching, however, needs to be balanced by the fact that those pre-resurrection commands to the early disciples are specific as to their time and situation. In Matthew chapter 10, those early disciples were also instructed not to take money with them, to take no change of clothes, to stay in one place only and not to move from house to house. Moreover, they were commanded not to go to the nations (*ethos*) but only to the "lost sheep of Israel" (Matthew 10:5). No honest interpretation of these passages could assume that all these commands would apply to the missionaries (apostles are "sent ones") of our day.

Suffering in our Fallen World

Another error we need to avoid is believing that all pain, sorrow and calamity can be directly attributed to the evil one. The division between the demonic and the fallen aspects of our world is not always clear. We know, for instance, that sickness is part of our fallen world. Some sicknesses, as in the case of Job, can be inflicted by Satan. Even there, permission had to be obtained from God himself. It certainly does not follow that all sickness is demonically induced. Paul encouraged Timothy to take medicinal wine for his stomach's sake. He did not prescribe exorcism. The man born blind in John chapter 9 was afflicted, "that the work of God might be displayed in his life." At the burning bush God said to Moses, "Who makes (man) deaf or dumb? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I the Lord?" (Exodus 4:11).

Suffering is a fact of our fallen world. God's incredible wisdom is displayed when He uses suffering as a tool to refine character, teach us truths about himself, and, as in the case of Paul, make us weak so that His grace and power may be all the more evident in us. We must not forget that it pleased God to bruise His own Son on the cross: "It was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer" (Isaiah 53:10). From His suffering comes our salvation. Our theology is often colored with the desire to escape the disciplines of the cross and reach too quickly for the crown. Paul, however, reminds us that we shall rule with him, if we suffer with Him (2 Timothy 2:12). Any theology which fails to recognize God's purpose in suffering is sub-biblical.

Spiritual Dimension in Various World Views

Much of the current literature on this topic points out that our Western world-view tends to be highly rationalistic and secularistic. Conversely, in our non-Western world people are much more aware of the spiritual dimensions of life and are more open to accepting supernatural phenomena. This is certainly true, but as we consider this we need to beware lest we fall into the trap of becoming animists ourselves, that is of adopting practices and beliefs of the animistic world-view which sees everything as related to the spirit world.

Animists try to manipulate their world through placation of the evil spirits. Western rationalism tries to control its world through the application of certain laws of science. Both systems overlap in their attempts to control their world. Animistic spiritualism and Western secular rationalism both need to come under the judgment of Scripture.

If we are not careful, we can become like the animists who see spirits behind everything. Like: the copy machine doesn't work; so you need to cast out the demon. The car won't start; and there's another demon. You run the red light because the devil made you do it. And worse, you are ticketed by a policeman – a messenger of Satan to buffet you! This kind of thinking gives altogether too much emphasis to the demonic. It causes one to treat every natural phenomenon as if it were of diabolic origin.

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We Christians, and missionaries in particular, will pave the way for syncretism if we teach that we can manipulate God's Spirit to do our bidding (Prior 1987:38-40). All we would be doing would be substituting the manipulation of evil spirits for manipulation of the Holy Spirit. God forbid! The harmful effects of such doctrine could be enormous, especially in animistic societies.

A Key Theological Distinction

Our position is that believers do, indeed, have authority over demonic principalities and powers because of their position in Christ (Ephesians chapters 1 and 2).

But it needs to be debated whether and to what extent that same authority extends into our natural world into areas such as healing and performing miracles in the same ways as the pre-resurrection disciples to whom Jesus gave such authority!

One thing is sure: all authority in heaven and earth now belongs to Jesus (Matthew 28:19). We move at his command. We do not command Him. Jesus taught us to pray, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). Too many people today want to change that prayer to read, "My will be done in heaven as I want it on earth." We must never become confused over who is master. God will not be manipulated into doing our will. Even the Lord Jesus, prayed "Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39).

How is it then, that a believer may have authority to expel evil spirits, but may not have the same authority to heal and perform other miracles? The distinction is that in Christ we have been granted a position above the principalities and powers (Ephesians chapters 1 and 2). We have authority over them and command them in the name of Jesus. But we are not placed in a position of authority over God to command *Him*. The prophet Isaiah declared:

This is what the Lord says – the Holy One of Israel, and its maker: Concerning things to come, do you question me about my children, or give me orders about the work of my hands? (Isaiah 45:11).

The obvious answer is, "You'd better not, for *He* is God."

When we desire to see God intervene

miraculously in the affairs of men or nature, we come to our sovereign Lord and present our requests, not our commands, before Him. We are not demanding our *rights*, but rather exerting the *privilege* which He has given us to come before Him confidently in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16).

PART III: THREE TIMELY PRINCIPLES

Seventy years ago, SIM founder and first General Director, Rowland

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Bingham, took issue with the teaching of his day that divine healing was in the atonement and therefore "every true Christian had a right to take healing in the same way as they accepted salvation." According to this teaching, if true Christians were sick, they were living "below their privilege." Thus healing was taught as the right of the believer.

In his book, *The Bible and The Body*, Bingham argued that though the motive of wanting to see healing for a suffering world was commendable, this doctrine simply was not supported in Scripture nor in true experience of ministry. Indeed, Bingham argue, that such teaching was really a deterrent to the gospel because it held out false hope. He cited numerous incidents where such teaching left behind a wake of disillusioned people whose faith was crushed when God chose not to provide the miraculous.

This does not in any way imply that Bingham, or SIM, deny God's power or willingness to heal and perform miracles. Bingham's point was that God can

and does heal, but on the basis of His sovereignty, not on the basis of our authority.

With regard to the question of the place of the miraculous in our ministry, SIM bases its position on three timely principles of Scripture: the sovereignty of God; the primacy of the gospel; and the unity of the body.

The Sovereignty of God

The principle of God's sovereignty is absolutely fundamental to our understanding of all signs and wonders and distributions of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, Paul listed nine spiritual gifts, including "gifts of healing" and "working of miraculous powers," i.e., miracles, and then concluded by saying,

All these are the work of one and the same spirit, and he gives them to each man, just as he determines (1 Corinthians 12:11).

In Hebrews 2:1-4, the writer speaks about our "great salvation" and then proceeds to explain how this salvation came down to us:

This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

In our discussion of signs and wonders we must avoid extreme positions on both sides. On the one side there are those who deny God performs signs and wonders today. Conversely, some give them such emphasis that they are in danger of neglecting other important aspects of Scripture.

We do well here to recall that heresy is not so much the acceptance of error as it is the taking of a doctrinal truth to an extreme position. With regard to the topic at hand, it is a dangerous thing to tell God what He *must* do. By the same token, it is undoubtedly equally as dangerous to predetermine what He *cannot* do.

SIM has chosen a position "between the shoals of denying the possibility of miracles in our day, and the rocks of presumption that demand miracles according to our need and schedule." (Smedes 1987:17) We acknowledge that God can and will do whatever pleases Him in any given situation.

SIM's stand is like the three Hebrew children who told Nebuchadnezzar:

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by the Lord Jesus himself.

It is argument and rebuttal like this which have caused some to take strong issue with the assumption that all such demonstrations were limited to the authentication of Scripture. In fact, some current writers declare that there is nothing in Scripture that indicates that signs and wonders were meant to stop after the early days of Christianity. They contend that theories about the termination of certain spiritual gifts all come from human interpreters under the influence of Western world views and not from God's Word.

Others make the same point by suggesting that theories of cessation are theological judgments rather than historic observations.

The historical evidence would seem to indicate that signs, wonders, and miracles of all kinds did not end with the death of the apostles or with inscripturation. Some writers press this point by quoting extensively from Irenaeus who, about 180 A.D. wrote:

In Christ's name the Christians are driving out devils...Others have foreknowledge of things to come; they see visions, and utter prophetic expressions. Others still heal the sick by laying their hands upon them, and they are made whole. Yea, moreover, as I have said, the dead even have been raised up, and remain among us for many years. (Against Heresies by Irenaeus as quoted in Williams 1989:134)

It is well known that Tertullian, Cyprian and Origen, all of whom lived in the third century, after the canonization of Scripture, testify to the miraculous in the early church. Origen (200-258 AD) wrote that he personally witnessed "many delivered from serious ailments, and from mental distraction and madness, and countless other diseases, which neither man nor demons had cured." (Quoted in Smedes 1987:36)

Some of the greatest revivals of history have had displays of signs and wonders very similar to those being claimed today, especially the revivals of Wesley, Whitefield, the Great Awakening of the 18th century and the Welsh revival. (Cf. John White, *When the Spirit Comes with Power*, especially chapters 2-6.)

SIM founder and the first General Director, Rowland Bingham, had much to say about the role of signs, wonders,

and miracles in his book, *The Bible and the Body*. He wrote:

...miracles of healing, however much they may have decreased after the Apostolic age, never entirely ceased, and that in the records of the Church, and the memoirs of her saints, accounts of supernatural healing are by no means uncommon. (Bingham 1921:13)

Bingham also readily affirmed that signs are present in our world today:

In most of the foreign fields there have been such displays of His power for a sign. Missionaries could duplicate almost every scene in the Acts of the Apostles during the past hundred years of their activities. Where, for the glory of the Christ, for the establishment of his Word, for the furtherance of the Gospel, signs are necessary or expedient, there He gives the signs, according to His own will. (Bingham 1921:66)

Note that Bingham saw no cessation of signs when God saw it would be useful for His purposes. The bottom line with Bingham, and with SIM today is the sovereignty of God.

We would like to make it clear that although there may be some who feel that such signs have no place in our present day, SIM has never taken any official position that signs, wonders, miracles, or any specific gifts have ceased. Today, seven decades after Bingham took this stand, we affirm his words as our position:

Where, for the glory of the Christ, for the establishment of His Word, for the furtherance of the Gospel, signs are necessary or expedient, there He gives the signs, according to His own will.

The Primacy of the Gospel

Faulty theology is to be avoided, but equally dangerous is a faulty emphasis. Many proponents give such emphasis to signs and wonders that they overlook the real purpose to which Christ's followers are called. (Recall C.S. Lewis's concern, lest we give the enemy too much emphasis.)

As we compare the Gospel record we see that there is only one comment regarding the place of signs and wonders in evangelism. That is the disputed passage in Mark 16:17 where we read, "And these signs will accompany those who believe...." Though the textural debate is beyond the scope of this study, we make the point that whether or not this passage was opened by Mark, and not added later as some

If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, Oh king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Oh king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up (Daniel 3:17,18).

Some argue that signs and wonders and miracles were authenticating signs and limited to those through whom God was granting "normative revelation," i.e., the Scriptures. They say, such signs and wonders terminated with the inscripturation of God's special revelation in the New Testament.

Some who take this position hold that the "signs and wonders" were certain enablements given to certain believers for the purpose of authenticating or confirming God's word when it was proclaimed in the early church before the Scriptures were penned. They believe that these sign gifts were temporary. Once the Word of God was in Scriptures, the sign gifts were no longer needed and they ceased.

This position, however, has come under increasing attack from both exegetical and historical perspective. For instance, some take 1 Corinthians 13:8-10 to show that gifts such as prophecy, tongues, and knowledge would "cease" and "pass away" "when perfection comes." They argue that "perfection" must refer to the completion of revelation and thus think they have proof that certain gifts have ceased.

The problem, however, is that equally competent Bible scholars have argued that "perfection" does not refer to inscripturation at all, but rather to the second coming of Christ. If that position is correct, it would argue strongly that such gifts are indeed valid throughout the whole church age and prove exactly the opposite of this negating position.

Others point to Hebrews 2:4 to make the case that it was only at the first, i.e., at the beginning of the church age, that God used signs, wonders, miracles (work of power) and distributions of His Holy Spirit to confirm the word.

The problem here also is an exegetical one, for there is no certain proof that the word "first" applies to the signs and wonders. Many would interpret it as applying only to the fact that our great salvation was "first announced"

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suggest, the thrust of the text is not signs and wonders are necessary to bring people to faith, but that the life and ministry of the new community of believers will be confirmed (“demonstrated to be standing”) by supernatural signs.

This phenomenon is not uncommon in the mission fields of the world today. Many times, when the gospel comes into a stronghold of Satan, those who first accept it are held suspect by the unbelieving majority. Sometimes God allows the miraculous to take place so the rest of the community can see that the new teaching about Christ is indeed something of divine origin. As time passes, the life and testimony of the believers becomes its own authentication. SIM can point to numerous places where large numbers of people have believed after they have had time to watch the first converts and see the power of God in their transformed lives. The gospel’s greatest attestation is a transformed life.

While it is true that some have ignored the possibility of the miraculous, others argue that evangelism should be preceded and undergirded by supernatural demonstrations of God’s presence, so that resistance to the gospel is overcome by the demonstration of God’s power.

Though no one should deny that God is able to bring spectacular displays of His power to bear at the time of preaching the gospel, we should not fall into the trap of thinking that displays of power will automatically accompany the gospel. They may or they may not. If we follow our first principle that signs are given sovereignly, it must follow our first principle that signs are given sovereignly, it must follow that God alone decides if and when signs are useful to encourage faith.

Signs, wonders and miracles can be used as a temporary means to enhance faith. But that which is lasting and builds faith is the preaching of God’s Holy Word. “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the world of Christ” (Romans 10:17). It would be a huge mistake to assume that God must work miracles to cause receptivity and foster faith. On one occasion Jesus said, “They will not be convinced even if someone rises

from the dead” (Luke 16:31). On another occasion He said it was a “wicked and adulterous generation” that was always looking for a miraculous sign (Matthew 16:4). Paul said, “Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:22-24).

We need to concentrate on and emphasize what God has given us to do. It is given to us to preach the gospel. That must be done whether or not there are signs and wonders. If God sovereignly chooses to perform signs and wonders, that is wonderful and we will thank Him. If He chooses not to perform signs, we will also thank Him, for the gospel itself is the power of God through faith unto salvation. Whichever way He chooses, we will concentrate on what he has told us to do: preach the gospel, disciple believers, and teach His Word.

If evangelists go into a town or village thinking, “If only a miracle would occur here, the whole town would come to Christ,” their emphasis is on the miraculous. Rather, they should go saying, “Christ has commanded us to preach the gospel. We will do that with all the energy and enabling which He gives us. And if He should grant some miracles of power, all the better. We will thank Him for that.”

The Unity of the Body

What then shall SIM Do? Should we encourage the use of signs and wonders in ministry? Should we forbid it? We can gain some perspective from Paul’s instruction to the Corinthian church in the use of spiritual gifts, for there were people who considered themselves “spiritual” and yet were abusing the gifts. (cf. Hemphill 1988:43ff)

Paul avoided what may have seemed the easy road: outlawing the use of specific gifts in the church altogether. Under the guidance of the Spirit he chose the delicate balance of not quenching the Spirit by forbidding the use of genuine gifts, and by giving clear teaching that would correct errors and direct the proper use of gifts in the

church. Here is what he laid down for the Corinthians in his First Epistle to them:

1. Recognize that God gives all His gifts sovereignly (12:11,18).
2. Gifts in public must be for the edification of all (14:3-5).
3. All should be done in peace and without confusion; properly and in an orderly manner (14:33,40).
4. Those who are acting outside Scriptural guidelines should be ignored (14:37,38).
5. All gifts, miracles, or signs should be open to the examination of others (14:29-32).
6. Genuine gifts and ministry should not be forbidden (14:39).
7. Everything should be done undergirded with selfless *agape* love which never fails (chapter 13).

It is of interest that Paul made a distinction between what was done privately and what was done in public or in the church. As a Mission we have no desire to make rules which preclude the possibility that God may indeed work in miraculous ways. Rather, we must make sure that what happens within our Mission family or in the church body at a public level conforms to our common understanding of that which pleases God.

As SIM missionaries we are all volunteers who have set aside our particular doctrinal distinctive to work in an interdenominational mission. We have rallied around the common goal of preaching the gospel and planting the church throughout the world. The diverse nature of our organization means that its members must agree to allow one another liberty in expression and experience.

By the same token, being a member of such a mission means agreeing to work within a broad consensus. If a person’s conviction or over-emphasis threatens to break our consensus, the mission’s unity is threatened. We must never allow that to happen.

SUMMARY

*We encourage our missionaries and all true saints of God to put on the

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armor of God and to take up the weapons of spiritual warfare and get into the battle for the souls of lost men and women.

* We believe that God is sovereign over all. When it serves His purposes and brings glory to His name, He has performed and can perform signs, wonders, and miracles according to His will. We do not believe, however, that we as believers and His servants have the right or the authority to demand such miracles.

* We believe that God has clearly commanded us to preach the gospel, disciple the nations, and teach His Word. We will continue to make this our emphasis. If God in His sovereignty allows the miraculous to take place, we will praise Him. If not, we will still praise Him, for the gospel itself is the power of God unto salvation.

* We believe that God has called us to disciple believers into churches equipped to fulfill Christ's Commission. As an interdenominational mission, we cannot allow any one to over-emphasize secondary or tertiary distinctives of doctrine or practice in such a way as to threaten our unity or bring division to our Mission. We do welcome, however, all who can work within our consensus.

* In short, we accept the miraculous in ministry where:

1. It is in harmony with the Word of God.
2. It brings glory to the Lord Jesus and not to an individual.
3. It calls attention to the gospel and not to a person.
4. It does not impinge on the sovereignty of God.
5. It is subject to the judgment of others.
6. It does not pursue or over-emphasize in a manner which could threaten the unity of our Mission.

In Conclusion

We believe with all our hearts in a God who is powerful and willing to show himself mighty in His good time. We will preach the gospel with fervor for it is the "power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" (Romans 1:16). We will pray, as did the early church, that He would enable His servants to speak the Word "with great boldness." Nor will we fear to include the request that God would stretch out His hand "to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders" through the name of His holy servant Jesus (Acts 4:29,30). In so doing, we will also make every effort "to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3).

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