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Does the Bible Teach that Only Christians of the Apostolic Age Would Possess Miraculous Powers?

(A Conference Paper.)

The question is frequently asked, Are there Scripture-passages by means of which we can prove that the extraordinary gifts possessed by Christians in apostolic times, like those of healing, prophesying, etc., were intended for, and given to, the Church of early New Testament times only? The reply has to be, There are no such Scripture-passages. Our Lord at various times conferred upon His disciples the power to do miraculous works. The best-known occasion is one of the meetings which He held with His disciples prior to His ascension. According to Mark He said at that time: "And these signs shall follow them that believe. In My name shall they cast out devils, they shall speak with new tongues, they shall take up serpents, and if they drink anything deadly, it shall not hurt them, they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover," Mark 16, 17, 18. Jesus, it will be observed, is not merely speaking of the Eleven, but of believers in general. He does not say, These signs will follow you, but, These signs will follow "them that believe." It will be noticed, too, that Jesus does not add a limitation. He does not say, For a short time these signs will follow, etc. His promise is very broad. The unprejudiced reader will think that the faculty to perform these signs was given to the believers of all times. As long as there will be believers, this promise will stand. Incidentally it might be remarked that the five miracles which Jesus mentions here, namely, the casting out of devils, the speaking with new tongues, the taking up of serpents, the drinking of deadly things without hurt, and the healing of the sick, can well be looked upon as representing miracles in general and that it is not doing violence to the words of Jesus if we understand Him here simply as endowing His followers with miraculous powers.

It is true, Scripture-proof has been submitted for the position that these extraordinary so-called charismatic gifts can no longer occur. 1 Cor. 12, 11 is quoted, where Paul, speaking of the spiritual endowments of the church in Corinth, says: "But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as He will." The point of the argument is that the Spirit divides as He will; He is not bound, or compelled, to equip people with these miraculous faculties in our day and age. Certainly, that is true; but it does not show that the Spirit would not grant miraculous endowments beyond the limits of the Apostolic Age. 1 Cor. 13, 13 is adduced: "And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three." The stress is laid on "abideth." People who use this passage in the argument we are considering say that Paul declares faith, hope, and love are abiding, that is, remaining, virtues, while the miraculous gifts

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cease. Again quite true, but the argumentation is deficient because it does not prove just what is to be proved, namely, that these miraculous gifts did not last longer than about the first century. Paul evidently is contrasting the present world with the future one of glory. The miraculous gifts have their sphere here. They cease at the grave. In yonder world they are not found. But faith, hope, charity, are abiding virtues, forming a golden diadem whose luster will not be dimmed during the vast cycles of eternity.

Deut. 13, 1—3 is at times thought to furnish an argument showing that Christians nowadays cannot possess charismatic gifts. Moses says there: "If there arise among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams and giveth thee a sign or a wonder and the sign or the wonder come to pass whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them, thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the Lord, your God, proveth you to know whether ye love the Lord, your God, with all your heart and with all your soul." Now, evidently, there is no argument for the position in question contained here. The Lord warns against false prophets who work miracles. It is an important warning. But there is in it not a scintilla of proof showing that only the Christians of the first century were supernaturally endowed.

We turn to Acts 2, 16. 17 as another passage cited in this connection. Peter says there: "But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel, And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of My Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams," etc. The argument based on this runs thus: Joel had prophesied a miraculous outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Now, Peter says that this prophecy was fulfilled on the first day of Pentecost, hence it would be wrong to think that the Spirit would be poured out miraculously at a later time. That is an argument which falls to pieces the minute you look at it a little more closely. It would mean that only those present in Jerusalem at the first Christian Pentecost received that great endowment, the extraordinary communication of the Spirit; and this, again, would imply that the Christians in Corinth who had special endowments were not living in the era spoken of by Joel, hence that their gifts were not of the Holy Spirit, but that their charismatic faculties were a deception. It would imply that Paul was not equipped with the power of the Spirit, in spite of his specific declaration that he had performed miracles in his congregations. No, the exegesis underlying this argument is entirely faulty. True it is that the prophecy of Joel was fulfilled on the first Christian Pentecost Day, but not exclusively on that day. That great day marked the beginning of the era of the Spirit, as has

well been said. The dam was opened, and the refreshing waters began to flow in a wide and ever-spreading stream to cover the world, and the blessed floods have not yet receded.

The argument which is usually advanced is that these gifts were needed in the early Church to establish Christianity and that, since this has been accomplished, God withholds these special endowments. I might present it in the words of Gregory the Great, quoted by Nebe, *Evangelische Perikopen*, II, p. 437: "These things were necessary in the beginning of the Church, for in order that faith might grow, it had to be nourished by miracles; for we, too, when we plant shrubs, pour water on them till we see that they have gotten a strong hold on the ground; and when once they are firmly rooted, we stop the watering. For this reason Paul says: 'Tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not,' 1 Cor. 14, 22." We see a twofold argument here. The one is taken from human reason. The gifts were intended merely for the first age of the Church because at that time they were needed. The necessity no longer exists, hence this endowment is no longer granted. Strictly speaking, we ought not to call it an argument which proves that the extraordinary gifts were meant for the early Church only. It does not furnish any such proof. It merely *explains* the absence of these gifts in our days and hence has an apologetic value. Moreover, it does not rest on revelation, on a word of God, but, as has been stated before, simply on our own reason and constitutes merely a plausible conjecture on our part, which I, for my part, am very willing to accept for what it is worth.

The other argument of Gregory is taken from 1 Cor. 14, 22: "Tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not." What Gregory wishes to deduce from this evidently is: Miracles are to help in converting unbelievers. In the first century the Church was surrounded by unbelievers on all sides, and therefore God gave the Christians the power to perform miracles. Now there are not many unbelievers any more, speaking by comparison, hence God has withdrawn this power. In arguing thus, he, of course, gets more out of the words of Paul than they contain. What Paul wishes to inculcate is the proper evaluation of the spiritual gifts. Speaking with tongues—such is the meaning of the apostle—impresses the outsider, the unbeliever, it does not edify the Church; hence strive after something else, something higher, namely, prophesying. That is a gift which really benefits the Church. It is clear that this passage, too, does not limit the charismatic gifts to the Apostolic Age.

As far as I know, there is no argument from Scripture by which we could show that the charismatic gifts of the Spirit were intended only for the early Christians. Now, does that not put us into a rather deplorable situation? We are plagued by various very active sects which maintain that they possess the extraordinary spiritual gifts

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which the early Church possessed. They stress possession of these gifts as evidence of the superior character of their religion, and over against them we have to admit that we cannot show from Scripture that such charismatic endowments are impossible in our day. It would be a beautiful cutting of the Gordian knot with the sword of Alexander, I grant, if we had Scripture-passages showing unmistakably that such gifts are a thing of the past. But in the Church here on earth knots are not cut in that way. We see it in the present financial situation in our Synod. How fine if we could stamp our feet and instantly produce the millions of dollars we need! In the divine revelation as given in our Bible there are many matters on which we, according to our reason, think we ought to have more light. God has not given it to us. How fine if we had that light! How easily could we not then refute heretics! we say. But God has not given us the light our reason clamors for. We find that there are passages which errorists quote to bolster up their wrong teaching. Perhaps the wicked thought has come to us, Too bad that such and such a passage is found in Holy Writ. Well, that is God's way of dealing with us. He has not taken away all Gordian knots, and He has not given us a sword to cut these knots in short fashion. In all humility, with fear and trembling, we have to proceed on our way. And as we despair of our own strength and wisdom, a Mightier One than we are will find us and lead us upward, and when He surrounds us with His heavenly light, then our difficulties take on a brighter hue, obscure texts become illumined, and we see blessings in the very things we deplored. — This is a digression which had no other purpose than to emphasize that certain things which we, according to our own little human wisdom, might wish to find in the Bible are not contained there.

Let us not say: The Bible teaches that the charismatic gifts were confined to the early Church. In my conviction we cannot prove that the Bible carries such teaching. No, it is in an altogether different way that we have to approach the problem which is here facing us. I think that Luther in this case, as usual, takes the right position. He writes in the *Kirchenpostille* with reference to Mark 16, 19 (XI, 988 f.): "Hier haben die Rotten auch zu gruebeln von den Zeichen mit unnuetzen Fragen, ob sie aufgehoert haben und warum sie nicht noch durch uns geschehen. Es ist aber hiervon auch genug zu wissen, dass solche Zeichen gegeben sind zum Zeugnis und oeffentlicher Beweisung dieser Predigt des Evangeliums, wie sie denn sonderlich im Anfang desselben stark haben gehen muessen, bis das Evangelium in die Welt ausgebreitet worden, da sie nicht mehr so gemein sind; wie auch nicht not ist, nun diese Predigt schon durch alle Lande und Sprachen gangen. Wiewohl es wahr ist, dass allezeit dieselbe Kraft und Wirkung Christi in der Christenheit bleiben, dass, wo es

not waere, auch wohl noch solche Wunder geschehen koennen. Wie denn auch oft geschehen ist und noch geschieht, dass in Christi Namen der Teufel ausgetrieben, item, durch Anrufung desselben Namens und Gebet die Kranken gesund werden und vielen in grossen, beide leiblichen und geistlichen, Noeten geholfen wird; so wird auch jetzt noch das Evangelium mit neuen Sprachen verkuendigt, da es zuvor unbekannt gewesen. Denn solche Zeichen sind der ganzen Christenheit gegeben, wie er hier sagt 'denen, die da glauben,' ob man gleich nicht allezeit bei einzelnen Personen solche Gaben sieht, wie sie auch die Apostel nicht alle gleich getan haben." Again he writes (XI, 956): "Etliche fahren hie zu und legen diese Zeichen geistlich aus, damit sie der Heiligen Ehre erhalten. . . . Aber solche Auslegung leiden diese Worte nicht; denn damit macht man uns die Schrift wanken und unbestaendig. Etliche fahren zu und sagen, dass, wie wohl diese Zeichen nicht jedermann hat und tut, so sind sie doch der ganzen Gemeinde, dem ganzen Haufen der Christenheit gegeben, dass der die Teufel austreibe, der andere die Kranken gesund mache und sofort an. Darum sagen sie, dass solche Zeichen seien eine Offenbarung des Geistes, dass, wo die Zeichen sind, sei auch die christliche Kirche, und wiederum. Aber diese Worte wollen nicht gehen auf die Gemeinde, sondern auf einen jeglichen insonderheit, dass die Meinung sei: Wenn ein Christenmensch ist, der den Glauben hat, der soll Gewalt haben, diese nachfolgenden Zeichen zu tun, und sollen ihm folgen, wie Christus im Johannes, Kap. 14, 12, sagt: 'Wahrlich, wahrlich, ich sage euch: Wer an mich glaubet, der wird die Werke auch tun, die ich tue, und wird groessere denn diese tun'; denn ein Christenmensch hat gleiche Gewalt mit Christo, ist eine Gemeinde und sitzt mit ihm in gesamten Lehen. . . . Darum wo ein Christenmensch ist, da ist noch die Gewalt, solche Zeichen zu tun, wenn es vonnoeten ist. Es soll sich aber niemand unterstehen, die zu ueben, wenn es nicht vonnoeten ist oder die Not erfordert; denn die Juenger haben sie auch nicht allewege geuebt, sondern allein das Wort Gottes zu bezeugen und durch die Wunderzeichen dasselbe zu bestaetigen; wie denn in dem Text allhier steht: 'Sie aber gingen aus und predigten an allen Oertern, und der Herr wirkte mit ihnen und bekraeftigte das Wort durch mitfolgende Zeichen.' Sintemal aber das Evangelium nun ausgebreitet und aller Welt kund geworden ist, ist es nicht vonnoeten, Zeichen zu tun wie zu der Apostel Zeiten. Wenn es aber die Not erfordern wuerde und sie das Evangelium aengsten und dringen wollten, so muessten wir wahrlich daran und muessten auch Zeichen tun, ehe wir das Evangelium uns liessen schmaehen und unterdruecken. Aber ich hoffe, es werde nicht vonnoeten sein und werde dahin nicht gereichen. Als, dass ich mit neuen Zungen sollte allhier reden: ist es doch nicht vonnoeten, sintemal ihr mich alle wohl vernehmen und verstehen koennt. Wenn mich Gott aber hinschickte, da sie mich nicht vernahmen, da

koennte er mir wohl ihre Zunge oder Sprache verleihen, dadurch ich verstanden wuerde." Luther, as the above shows, holds that the doing of miracles in our days is not *a priori* excluded. If it should become necessary, he holds they would be done, and, in a measure, they are being done every day, namely, when Christians pray and God grants their petitions.

To be brief, I think these canons might guide us:—

1. Charismatic powers were conferred for the upbuilding and edifying of the Church. If any one uses miraculous powers from personal aggrandizement, they are not from God, but from the devil. Cf. Acts 8, 18 ff.

2. The charismatic gifts accompanied the pure Gospel. If any one uses extraordinary powers to defend and spread false teaching, they are not from God. Cf. Deut. 13, 1—3; 2 Thess. 2, 9 ff.

3. There must exist a real need for miracles if they are to be performed. It would be tempting God if any one undertook to do them without such necessity. Cf. Matt. 4, 7.

4. Signs "shall follow them that believe," Matt. 16, 7. When they are genuine, they merely *accompany* the pure Gospel. Putting them in the foreground, making them the chief factor in one's ministry, is proof that the the respective "prophet" is an errorist.

Holding these principles, we shall be able to overcome errorists who set up the claim that they can perform miracles and disturb the Church with their false doctrines.

W. ARNDT.

Paulus in Athen.

Act. 17, 16—34.

1.

Vielleicht darf ich die nachfolgende Behandlung dieser interessanten und wichtigen Episode im Leben und Wirken des Apostels Paulus mit einer persönlichen Erinnerung beginnen. Vor einer Reihe von Jahren traf ich auf einer Reise einen amerikanischen Universitätsprofessor, der auf naturwissenschaftlichem und mathematischem Gebiete arbeitete. Wir führten eine längere Unterhaltung; jeder redete über sein eigenes Gebiet, und zum Schluß tauschten wir unsere Karten aus. Nach einiger Zeit schrieb dieser Gelehrte an mich und ersuchte mich, etwas für ihn nachzuschlagen in den Berichten der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften in Berlin. Wir hatten nämlich gerade auch von diesen wertvollen Veröffentlichungen geredet, und ich hatte bemerkt, daß sie sich vollständig fanden in der Bibliothek der St. Louiser Akademie der Wissenschaften, an deren Gründung und Förderung seinerzeit der bekannte Gelehrte Prof. Dr. G. Seyffarth, damals Lehrer an unserm St. Louiser Seminar, beteiligt war. Ich erfüllte gern seinen Wunsch, und beim Suchen des betreffenden Artikels