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## Water into Wine: A Sign for the Modern Ministry

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# Water into Wine: A Sign for the Modern Ministry

"This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee and manifested forth His glory, and His disciples believed on Him." (John 1:12)

By ARTHUR M. VINCENT

**G**OD in man made manifest," we sing (*The Lutheran Hymnal*, 134). Nathaniel, just before Cana, said it too, "Rabbi, Thou art the Son of God; Thou art the King of Israel." (John 1:49)

A king begins His public ministry. He performs His first miracle; He gives His first "sign" (σημεῖον), John says. He changes water into wine. This sign stands as a finger post of God. It points us then and now to Christ. Among other lessons, it also is a sign for our modern ministry. For encouragement think of this as a sign of the King's power, a sign of the King's love, a sign of the Kingdom, and a sign for the ministry of the Word.

## I. WATER INTO WINE A SIGN OF THE KING'S POWER

A sign of power! Our modern world grasps and respects the idea of power. Early in a new decade we can look back over the "fateful fifties." Fresh in our memories stand demonstrations of more power than men ever possessed before—the first explosion of a hydrogen bomb, the launching of atomic submarines, the firing of rockets, first around the earth and then away from the earth into space.

Such huge signs of science—a mushroom cloud in the sky 25 miles high and 100 miles wide—startle us. Fear knocks at the door of our minds and hearts. In

St. Louis we can imagine ourselves and our loved ones among the 933,000 estimated casualties from just two H-bombs dropped here. Our imagination staggers and then in sheer horror rejects the picture of 23 million Americans killed outright and 25 million more fatally injured in an atomic attack of 263 nuclear bombs!

Serious-minded men may very well ask, then, "Where can I spend my energies and use my talents to count most toward the control and constructive use of this awesome power?"

Why did you choose to be a Christian minister rather than serve God in some other vocation, say, the physical, social, or political sciences? Was it also because you know God has the power to change both nature and people? Indeed, scientists, statesmen, and military men handle the power. But in the Gospel ministry pastors and people handle a power which can change and control the power holders of this atomic age.

How far away and long ago Cana seems from Washington and Moscow and Peiping! What a difference there seems to be between the quiet power which changes water into wine and the spectacular power of modern science!

### *Power over Nature*

But do not sell short the power Jesus displayed at Cana. The sign of water into

wine clearly means, "God is present." And God, you know, has the ultimate power over the world of nature. The collect for the second Sunday after Epiphany reinforces the truth of our Gospel lesson. "*Almighty and everlasting God, who dost govern all things in heaven and earth. . .*" This all-powerful God works in and with Jesus at Cana. John saw through the wine and beyond the sign; he looked back to the beginning of the world. This Jesus, the Signer here at Cana, John said, was "in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made" (John 1:1 ff.). Again, our propers for this Sunday quote Ps. 66 and Ps. 107. The psalmist catalogs the wonderful works of God for the children of men. "He turned the water into dry land, and His people went through on foot" (Ps. 66:6). "He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still" (Ps. 107:29). Jesus made the waters; He divided them; He dried them up; He stilled them. Now, with the same kind of power, He turns water into wine.

#### *Power over Human Nature*

What encouragement this sign gives us for our modern ministry! Jesus has this power, not only over nature but also over human nature. The waters "were made wine" (KJV); the waters "became" wine (RSV). And this Bible word for "made" and "became" (*γίνομαι*) also means "to be born, to change one's nature, to enter into a new condition."<sup>1</sup> And here's where the modern ministry comes in. This word

is used more often of changed *people* than of changed *things*. The context alerts us to this added dimension of Jesus' power. He gave power for water to become wine, but here are also disciples who had become the children of God. Shortly after this Nicodemus said, "No man can do these signs [like water into wine] unless God be with him." Then see Jesus pointing to a creation more significant than wine born of water—a man born of water and of the Spirit! (John 3:5)

#### *Power to Make Us Signs!*

We stand amazed at this sign of water into wine, because we know the same power at work there has been at work in us to make us miracles and signs. We have been born, John says, "not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man but of God" (John 1:13). Water into wine then only seems long ago and far away. Actually this sign is as close and as recent as sinners changed into saints. Stand amazed at stone pots full of wine up to the brim. Stand more amazed at Christian men, women, and children filled with the Spirit of God.

#### *A Ministry of Power*

Because ministers have become signs themselves and are living evidence of God's miraculous power, they channel this power into people by His Spirit through the Word and the sacraments.

Think, for a moment, of Baptism. You have studied the theology of Baptism. Repeatedly you have gone through the mechanics of the rite of Baptism. You may think baptizing children less exciting than changing water into wine. But is it? In your ministry hundreds of infants are changed into new creatures of God through

<sup>1</sup> W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 157.

## WATER INTO WINE: A SIGN FOR THE MODERN MINISTRY

the waters of Baptism you pour as you speak His name. The sponsors hold children in their arms, and you baptize them. At the same time you placed these children into the Father's everlasting arms.

Weddings too may become just routine as you, like Jesus, attend one after another. Rehearsals can be pretty trying at times, and ceremonies can become just another job. Marital counseling can leave you exhausted and wide awake on your bed when you want to sleep. But you carry on your ministry to married couples because you are convinced the Word of God you speak in wedding sermons and counseling is still power packed and miracle working today. By it Christ will be changing the quality of married life as surely as He changed the water into wine. That wine at Cana's marriage feast gave the guests a brief lift and a fleeting glimpse of the wider happiness God intended for all men. In contrast, when you bring Christ through His Word to modern marriages you will lift them into a higher and broader level of living.

Water into wine! Look at this sign of the King's power—His power then and now. Read His power over nature, and experience His power over your nature. Look behind the sign to Jesus, the Signer. Draw from Him the power for a modern ministry of signs.

## II. WATER INTO WINE A SIGN OF THE KING'S LOVE *Power with a Purpose*

Bible students remember this was not the first time—nor the last—that there was put up for men a sign which read, "God at work to redeem people."

The Gradual for the Second Sunday after

the Epiphany exhorts men to praise God "for His wonderful works to the children of men"; it thinks back to the numerous times God had "delivered them from their destructions." Most of these signs and mighty works seem to be concentrated in three special periods of the history of Israel.<sup>2</sup> In Egypt, Jehovah, through His servant Moses, faced the demonic powers behind the Egyptian idols, magicians, and Pharaoh (Ex. 5 ff.). What signs God gave His people in the 10 plagues, at the crossing of the Red Sea, and during the wilderness wanderings! Again, at the time of Elijah and Elisha, the nation seemed almost lost because pagan cults of Baal and Astarte had led the people astray (1 Kings 17 ff.). Also at that time God clustered signs of His power and love. Finally, as Assyrians camped outside the Holy City and threatened to destroy the throne of David, the temple, and the nation, including God's "remnant," God Himself made bare His right arm and showed His almighty power with other miracles. (Is. 6 ff.; 36 ff.)

Notice always this is power with a purpose. It is power harnessed in the service of love. Repeatedly, at crucial points in God's plan of salvation, He rushed to redeem His own with signs and wonders and mighty works.

### *Pivotal Points of Redemption*

Now again God in Christ had come to do battle with the demonic powers and set His people free once and for all. Just as

<sup>2</sup> J. J. von Allmen, ed., *A Companion to the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 268, sub "Miracles." Alan Richardson, *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), p. 152, makes a similar observation.

the Red Sea and Jerusalem in past ages were decisive turning points in the destiny of Israel, even so Cana and Calvary were pivotal points in the ministry of God bent on redemption!

This water into wine at Cana, then, is a sign of power. And what gracious power! Jars full of wine! Wonderful! God's heart brimful of love for people. More wonderful! God's feet walking to a wedding at Cana. Astounding! God's feet walking to Calvary for us. More astounding! Jesus realized that it is not far, either in years or in miles, from Cana to Calvary. "Mine hour is not yet come," He said at Cana. He usually spoke these words at a time of crisis and referred to His hour of suffering and death (cp. John 7:30; 8:20; 12:33; 13:1; 17:1). Could it be that Jesus looked beyond the sign of the wine to the sign of the cross, where men would not offer Him good wine from wedding cups but vinegar in a dirty sponge on a stick?

#### *Significant Symbol*

At best the human love of this man and woman wedded that day would grasp for things it wanted for itself. In contrast this sign of water into wine reminds all of God's kind of love, which lavishes gifts upon others with no thought of itself. Such love wants to give a significant gift. Now, we today may not think wine is particularly significant. It's a common item on the shelves of almost any corner store and not too expensive. Many Americans think of wine as a luxury, others as an evil. But the Jewish people of long ago considered wine a necessity along with cereals for even the humblest meal. Besides, sacred writers speak of wine as one of the most

significant gifts God gave to man.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it may symbolize all of God's gifts to men. God, who gave man this gift to make glad his heart, now changes water into wine at a marriage feast of happiness (Ps. 104:15; Eccl. 9:7). And servants and steward know that His love is not poor or stingy; the pots contain more than 100 gallons of fine wine.

His disciples read the sign correctly. They saw the glory of His power in the service of love; they believed in Him. Do we?

#### *Genuine Love Suffers for Us*

"Let love be genuine," the epistle says (Rom. 12:9 RSV). Jesus' heart spilled over with such genuine love. He who is good did not hate men, who are evil. He sacrifices Himself utterly for the objects of His love, unlovely people, like us!

And our text has overtones of this self-sacrificing quality of divine love. "The water *became* wine," the inspired writer says here. Other New Testament writers pick up this word, "become," and place it in the center of some of the most beautiful Gospel passages we know.

"Water became wine," John says here; shortly before he also said, "The Word became flesh." This water was changed into wine above the laws of nature. At Cana Jesus talks to His mother, in whom He had been conceived above the laws of nature, so that He might "be born under the Law to redeem those who were under the Law" (Gal. 4:5). Water became wine; on the other hand, Jesus, who worked the sign, "became a curse for us; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.'" (Gal. 3:13)

<sup>3</sup> Von Allmen, p. 450.

The price of water becoming wine was small—a quiet word spoken to some servants, and it was done. The price of men becoming righteous before God, however, was the high price of the blood of this Signer, Jesus. Recall please that ordinarily grapes were crushed to produce wine. The grapes went through a painful “death,” as it were, so that wine might arise from them. In ancient Canaan, then, wine became a symbol of suffering.<sup>4</sup> Men even noted the similarity between the color of some wine and blood. The sacred writer, for example, speaks of wine as the “blood of the grape” (Deut. 32:14). Therefore it does not stretch our Christian imagination too far to see the sign of the cross fall over the sign of the wine. The hour of the cross, My hour, Jesus called it, came less than three years later. Under olive trees in Gethsemane Jesus feels the crushing weight of our sins and sweat, as drops of blood, trickle down His face. On Calvary He is crushed in the winepress of God’s wrath over our sins, and there comes forth “blood and water” (John 19:34). What fruitful suffering! The unrighteous *became* righteous as a result of the sign of the cross on Calvary. “For He made [Jesus] who knew no sin, to be sin for us that we might be *made* the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21; Rom. 5:18). By comparison the amazement of water made wine fades, and we stand lost in wonder before this greater glory of His grace.

His disciples saw the sign of the King’s love at Cana; they believed in Him. Do we?

#### *Love Seeks Communion*

“Let love be genuine.” Such genuine love also seeks to establish communion

<sup>4</sup> Von Allmen, p. 451.

with those who know not His love. The young couple at Cana were beginning a life under a wedding covenant they had made together. And if they had a wedding address, it might very well have said, “This new husband and wife should remind all you guests of the relationship of God and His people. This bridal pair pictures the union of God with Israel.”<sup>5</sup> With His first sign Jesus causes us also to remember the beginning of His work to set up a new covenant relationship for all people who believe in Him. Here is God seeking through Jesus to establish communion with all men who had separated themselves by rebellion and iniquity. He wanted to dwell in fellowship with mankind under a gracious New Testament.

#### *“Happy Anniversary!”*

His first disciples must have wondered at this sign. But more important, they read its meaning correctly; they believed in the glory of such love which sought them for God.

Do we wonder at this sign of water into wine? Or have we read it so often that we cease to wonder and ponder its meaning? Are we so used to this sign that we don’t see it at all?

How quickly wedded people start taking one another for granted! The wedding band, for example, at first makes us pause and think often of our beloved. Over the years, however, we wear the ring as we work and play. It’s always near, but we notice it less and less. Less frequently it makes us aware of the loved one. Then an anniversary comes. We stop. We focus

<sup>5</sup> Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, reissued 1942), I, 352, 353.

on the wedding ring for a time. We remember. We look up from the ring to the person we love. We renew our vows of faithfulness. We hear this Gospel of the wedding feast at Cana every year. Shall we think of it as an anniversary which points to the love of God in Christ for us? The sign of the water into wine at the wedding will have achieved a purpose for us if we stop and ponder this sign for a few moments. His Spirit will take the lines of its meaning, which perhaps have grown thin from much wear, and etch them clearly once more on our hearts. That meaning of the King's love will make this Sunday a "happy anniversary."

### III. WATER INTO WINE A SIGN OF A KINGDOM

#### *The Sign Points Back*

As our faith looks closely at the sign at Cana it seems to point back to the predicted rule of the Messiah.

In the Old Testament an abundance of imagery and figures keeps trying to tell God's people—and us—of the wonders, splendor, and blessings of the promised Savior's rule. For their "object lesson," among other ordinary things, sacred writers choose the vine, grapes, and wine to describe the coming kingdom. An abundance of wine pictured rich blessings from God. For example, recall Jacob blessing his sons. Judah, he said, would have the ruler's staff between his feet. How settled and prosperous he would be! He would "bind his foal unto the vine and his ass's colt unto the choice vine; he washed his garments in wine and his clothes in the blood of grapes" (Gen. 49:10, 11). Then Shiloh, the Messiah, the promised King, would come from the tribe of Judah.<sup>6</sup> Later on,

the ownership of vines in a land came to symbolize rest and prosperity. And so Amos foresees the Messiah's times. "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when . . . the treader of grapes shall overtake him who sows the seed, the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. . . ." (Amos 9:13 ff. RSV; Zech. 9:17; cp. also Joel 3:18)

Now the days are fulfilled; Shiloh arrives. As one sign of His rule He turns water into wine abundantly.

#### *The Sign of a King's Presence!*

The sign also clearly means, "The King is present. He has begun His long-promised rule! That which was to be now is."<sup>7</sup>

The King had been at home subject to His parents. Quietly He had grown in stature and in favor with God and men. As a child in the temple He had early shown His Messianic consciousness. Now, about 18 years later, the King had once more left home and begun to be about "His Father's business" of redemption. At Cana in a private home He manifests His glory.

Immediately thereafter He shows His authority publicly by cleansing the temple in Jerusalem (John 2:13 ff.). Look at this beginning of signs. Realize that here we stand on the threshold of the new age. As we pass with the disciples over the threshold, we find ourselves in the New Testament era. The future age has begun.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the O. T., The Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids, Mich., Eerdmans, reissued 1949), I, 397, 401.

<sup>7</sup> "Every miracle in the gospels may be regarded as the fulfillment of some O. T. conception of God and His Messiah," says Richardson, p. 154.

<sup>8</sup> Edersheim, I, 356.

The King is here. What exciting truth! This excitement touches all Christians because He is present in them. At Cana disciples tasted wine God had made. The writer to the Hebrews says we Christians have "tasted the beautiful Word of God"; by it we have been enlightened and made partakers of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, we have already tasted of the powers of the age to come!<sup>9</sup> The divine energies of another world have broken in upon ours, worked in us, brought us under His rule, and we now serve in His kingdom. We stand on tiptoe as we see our King here begin to make public a rule under which we also now live.

*The Sign Makes Us Look Forward!*

In addition, the water into wine signs not only what was to be and what came to be but also what is yet to be. It spells prophecy as well as fulfillment.

The same Signer, Jesus, will appear in the sky as the last and greatest Sign. This beginning of the manifestation of His glory here at Cana will be completed perfectly when He comes on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory to take His disciples and all believers to the radiance of His kingdom in heaven (Matt. 24:30 ff.). Then He will ultimately have abolished disease and death and transformed this creation into a new heaven and earth.

And this revolutionary nature of His work appears already in His early signs.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Heb. 6:5, B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, reissued 1955), p. 149.

<sup>10</sup> Von Allmen, p. 270.

He will rule victoriously over disease. What was the second sign He did in this same Cana of Galilee? By the power of His word, from a distance, He caused fever to leave a child sick unto death. The nobleman's son was healed in the same hour Jesus spoke (John 4:46-54). Jesus will also rule over death. In this same chapter the Jews asked, "What sign do you show us for doing this?" Speaking of the temple of His body, Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). The sign of the empty tomb shortly after the sign of the wine meant that the King, who raised Himself, would also raise up all those who trusted in Him. Already He speaks of the abolishment of death. Moreover, this King transforms water into wine and thereby shows us the power by which He will transform all nature and release her from her bondage to decay (Rom. 8:18 ff.). The generation of wine holds the promise of the regeneration of nature. And wine new from water foreshadows the creation of a new heaven and earth. Here the King offers hope to His creation subject to futility! Well might nature tremble in excitement as she experiences the transforming power of His Word over her. While groaning, she also knows that this King can one day strike off the shackles of decay which bind her and let her participate in the glorious liberty of the children of God.<sup>11</sup>

*Preaching with a Future!*

The disciples believed and remembered in their ministry the sign Jesus erected near the beginning of His public ministry.

<sup>11</sup> R. C. Trench, *Notes on the Miracles of Our Lord* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, reissued 1949), p. 74.



Let the remembrance of it also fill us with hope for our ministry. We are preaching a kingdom that has a future.

Many voices today want people to believe the future lies with them. Moscow and Peiping broadcast daily: "History moves toward the climax of the rule of the proletariat. The Communistic state will finally rule over all." Hollywood says, "Pleasure will rule over men as the greatest good." Washington says, "Democracy and social security will rule the future ages." Wall Street says, "Capitalism will give us a bright future." In despair many say, "No one will rule anything anywhere. Mankind has no future; man will destroy civilization and himself!"

As a countervoice, we preach the kingdom of God, which has been sweeping through the ages to a smashing climax and decisive victory. And this first sign—which points back to the promised King, which turns our eyes to the King present, which looks forward to the King's final coming—this sign, I say, confirms our confidence in the triumph of our King!

The King spoke about many signs of His coming (Matt. 24:3 ff.). Today we see these signs of the end multiply around us. Remember, however, "this Gospel of the Kingdom must be preached for a witness unto all nations, and then shall the end come" (Matt. 24:14). Our preaching becomes part of the fulfillment of the last great "sign of the times" before Jesus, the Sign from heaven, will appear upon the clouds (Matt. 24:30).

How are we preaching this Gospel? We can only preach it, the epistle says, "according to the proportion of faith" He gives us (Rom. 12:6). Preachers keep on tasting the beautiful Word of God, so that they

can receive a greater proportion of faith. We keep on tasting this beautiful Word also in the Lord's Supper. In Holy Communion we not only preach His death until He comes but also receive strength to believe and serve until the time when He will drink it new with us in His Father's kingdom (Matt. 26:29). Through the means of grace He gives grace to the "stewards of His mysteries" as well as their parishioners. In this way He makes us, like Stephen, full of grace and power, so that hearers are not able to withstand the wisdom and grace with which we speak (Acts 6:8, 10).

Through the Word we preach we receive the power to preach until His great hour shall have arrived when He comes as the Bridegroom to meet His church at the marriage feast of the Lamb (Rev. 19:7, 9). Then our preaching voice will become the singing voice. We will blend our voices with those of the great multitude and exult in Him and rejoice, because He who changed water into wine will have changed our sorrow into joy, and no man will ever take that joy from us.

#### IV. WATER INTO WINE A SIGN FOR FAITH *Giants or Pigmies?*

Did you ever dream about a ministry of signs today? I have. Have you ever wished secretly that you might perform signs, wonders, and miracles? Wouldn't it be effective, we think, if we could go to a wedding ceremony and change some water into wine. Then they would listen to the wedding address we deliver and take Christ into their homes. Or we may picture ourselves going to a sickroom and saying, "Be healed," and at the touch of our hand

the fever disappears. Suppose we forgot at the funeral all about the funeral sermon, walked to the coffin, touched the dead, and he sat up and talked. What a ministry! We can just imagine the headlines. Masses of people lined up to talk to us and reserved seats in the services held every night. "The disciples and the apostles were giants in those days," we may conclude. "Why can't we be giants today with wonderful signs of the same kind? Are we just going to settle for the role of pigmies in the faith?"

As we read the Scriptures, however, we stop dreams of that kind of a ministry. Such dreams are not even close to the true picture God wants us to have of an effective ministry.

This is "the beginning of signs" which Jesus gave. Other passages speak of "wonders." And strangely enough the Bible never uses the word "wonders" by itself.<sup>12</sup> Holy Scriptures don't seem to be interested in the amazing, the wondrous, or even miraculous, by itself and for itself. The "wonders" are important only to the extent that they point past themselves to the presence of God and His purpose to redeem.

### *Rejected Signs*

A public ministry of wonders and miracles would not produce widespread faith in Christ, as we sometimes wistfully think. Recall the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. For the next 10 chapters after the record of this first sign John recounts many other signs and wonders and mighty works. And many others occurred which John could not record for us (John 20:30). But after all the miracles and signs John says,

"Though He had done so many signs among them, yet they believed not on Him" (John 12:37 ff.). Like Isaiah before Him, Christ reported how the arm of God had been made bare to help people (Is. 53:1), but they "kept on not believing in Him." Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead; people came in crowds to see Lazarus and Jesus. But the chief priests plotted how they might kill Lazarus, and the crowds a few days later put to death Him who had brought Lazarus from the dead. (John 12:9, 10, 18)

### *Sinful Sign Seekers*

Let's think for a moment of the reason why miracles and wonders in themselves will not lead people to believe in Christ.

Jesus Himself reminds us that this demand for signs is a sign of unbelief. "A wicked and adulterous nation seeks a sign" (Matt. 12:39). Through a covenant of solemn promises Israel was bound to Jehovah as a wife to her husband. But Israel had been unfaithful; she had proved an adulterous nation spiritually. Because they had already broken their ties with God, they "spoke against" Jesus, the Sign from heaven, and the signs and wonders which He did (Luke 2:34). Pharisees showed their unbelief by disputing with Him and demanding signs from heaven (Matt. 16:1; Mark 8:11). When He gave signs, they said the sign came not from heaven but from hell, that He represented not God but Beelzebul, the prince of demons (Luke 11:15). The signs pointed to the glory of God in Christ, but they called Him a Samaritan, a demon-possessed, mad man (John 8:48; John 10:20). And even when they favored His signs and wonders and wanted to make Him a king by force,

<sup>12</sup> Arndt-Gingrich, *sub* τέρατα.

if necessary, it was not because they believed in His divinity as the Messianic King but because their stomachs were filled with bread He provided. (John 6:14, 26)

If God gave you power in your ministry to turn water into wine publicly and people demanded to see this deed, you would not want to do it, because the very demand would not be a sign of faith but a frantic signal of a weak and dying faith looking for props other than Christ. The world wants the sensational, the bizarre, the fantastic, the miraculous. The "world" in Christians may seek these same things in the church and expect visions, miracles, healings, snake handling, or drinking poison without harm. A few years ago, for example, two little girls in Bavaria claimed to see a vision of the Virgin Mary. Two other children went to the same hillside and claimed to see a similar vision. The news spread like wildfire. Within two years 1,500,000 people came to the shrines erected on the hillside. Another young woman began to schedule visions here promptly at 3, 5, and 7 o'clock each day for the crowds of people. However, the authorities of the Roman Catholic Church knew that all this activity signaled weakness of faith. After an investigation Roman Catholic Church authorities declared that the visions were not miraculous and forbade their members to participate in the hillside rites. On another occasion the official paper of the Vatican warned of "blind religiosity" which causes "thongs to go to the scene of presumed visions and pretended miracles and desert the church, the Sacraments, and the sermon."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Time*, Feb. 21, 1951, p. 70; Aug. 18, 1952, p. 64.

### *Pretended Signs*

Pastors warn Christians today against anyone who comes performing signs and miracles and claiming to speak for God. Miracles alone are not proof that God sends a man. Indeed, just the opposite may be quite possible. Jesus, the true Sign Worker, told His disciples, "False Christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect" (Matt. 24:24 RSV). And St. Paul says that the coming of the adversary, the lawless one, will be with "all power and with signs and lying wonders." (Cf. 2 Thess. 2:9)

### *The Word Works Wonders*

Now how do you picture your modern ministry? Thank God, your faith and that of your parishioners does not rest on signs but on Jesus, the Signer. Be grateful He has assigned a ministry of the Word and the sacraments. As you preach and teach the Word of God, people come to see in Jesus the glory of God's power and love. They grasp, not some mighty work you or other men perform today but the mighty work of redemption, which He worked for all men in His life, death, and resurrection! Faith today does not come by seeing some signs and wonders but "by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" (Rom. 10:17). This Word is a record of His mighty acts. Here faithful witnesses give their testimony to the authenticity of the miracles Christ worked. If people will not believe the record of these wonders, they will not believe further wonders, though you did them before their very eyes. "Abraham saith unto him [the rich man in torment], They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them. And he said, Nay,

Father Abraham; but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent. And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead" (Luke 16:29-31). But as you communicate this Gospel, the Spirit of Christ thereby changes sinners into saints, the spiritually dead into new creations, the spiritually captive into free men. As you teach and preach God's Word, people do not stand open-mouthed at some wonder, but they bend their knees before Jesus, the greatest Sign ever given by God. Christians sit before you. You look at them and know every one of them is a miracle. You do not lament "the good old days of the early church," but you know the power of God still working today makes these also good days for the church.

#### *"Greater Works" Today*

In this Epiphany season and always perform the work of your ministry joyfully, hopefully, and confidently. Also in your ministry God has promised to do "even greater things than these." Remember, Jesus said shortly before His death, "He who believes in Me will do the works I do, and greater works than these will he do because I go to the Father" (John 14:12). Jesus kept this promise. Peter at Pentecost and St. Paul in his ministry did similar and greater works through the Holy Spirit sent by Jesus. Christ permitted His disciples and apostles to reach more people and cover more territory than He Himself did in His own short ministry. The swift

growth and expansion of the Christian church gives the best commentary on the words of Jesus "Greater works than these will you believers do." Today, with mimeograph and printing press, radio and television, automobiles and airplanes, and soon rockets, Christ gives ministers instruments to speak His Word to far more people than He did. One minister today reaches an estimated 25 million persons each week on the radio. Another helps direct a television program seen by 10 million persons every week. Most pastors do not reach such huge audiences, but they still declare the good news to greater numbers than Christ and the early disciples.

Fix your eyes upon the sign of turning water into wine once more. Read its rich meaning correctly. This is a sign of the King's power over nature and human nature; it is a portent of new people as well as a new heaven and earth. It is a sign of the King's power geared to His redemptive purpose, even at the cost of His life's blood. It is a sign of a glorious kingdom—a kingdom promised and fulfilled, fulfilled but prophetic of a glorious future. It is a sign to confirm those in whom the King has already worked faith by His Spirit through His Word. It is a sign of expectation of even greater things among us who carry on His ministry today. Continue, then, your ministry of "modern miracles." Let your ministry give glory always to Him who gave the sign of water made wine at the beginning of His ministry!

St. Louis, Mo.