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SIGNS FROM GOD

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Many years ago sociologists predicted that around the turn of the century a social phenomenon would overtake the earth. They called it *millennium fever*. It would be evidenced by an increased interest in religion and much speculation about the apocalyptic events of Christ's return and the end of the world. But their predictions came not so much from astute observation of social trends, but rather from observation of history. Interest in end-time events has always been at its zenith at the turn of any century. But this is not just the ticking over of another hundred years - it's a whole new millennium. Actually, the new millennium doesn't begin until 2001 - a fact which most commentators conveniently ignore - everyone's attention is fixed, it seems, on the calendar turning from 1999 to 2000. In most people's minds at least, this is the beginning of the new epoch.

It seems the sociologists were right. But millennium fever is actually not as intense as I would have expected. The Christian church in the late 70s and early 80s was much more abuzz with speculation of Christ's return - fuelled by books such as Hal Lindsay's *The Late Great*

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Planet Earth, and others such as *Cosmic Conspiracy*. Every evangelical and his dog had his own angle on who the Antichrist was going to be and when 'the rapture' was going to take place. I remember thinking to myself in 1980 that Jesus' return would be in no more than five years. Twenty years later we are still waiting. Perhaps our expectation has waned, but hopefully not because we've grown indifferent - I hope we've just grown a little wiser and like those wise virgins of Jesus' parable we've just "trimmed our lamps"¹ in preparation for what could be a longer wait.

But the fact is, we have more reason today to expect Jesus' return than we did before. Many of the signs are here: War in the Middle East and Europe, significant developments in Israel, the recent earthquake in Turkey - just to name a few. But it seems now that even the secular world is starting to suspect that something cataclysmic is afoot. TV networks at least are recognising an increased interest in these things and are airing overtly religious programs in prime time - something we would not have seen just a few years ago. Highly respected Australian journalist Mike Willesee recently co-hosted one of these programs which went to air live throughout the US and was recently shown here in Australia. *Signs from God* had a distinctly Catholic flavour and quite impressively documented some paranormal phenomena which would worry many Protestant evangelical believers. Much of their suspicion is provoked by references to the virgin Mary who, it was alleged, had a mediating role in some of this. Stigmata (the phenomenon whereby wounds similar to those suffered by Christ on the cross miraculously appear and disappear), bleeding photographs and statues, apparitions of Mary, spontaneously appearing miniature portraits of Jesus and Mary on rose petals - all

of these get a good evangelical's blood boiling and reaching for his Bible to refute why such things cannot possibly be from God.

Signs from God particularly focused on a Catholic Bolivian woman named Katya. Katya claimed to be able to actually see and hear Jesus and was able to write messages in various languages. These messages, she claimed, were shown to her by Jesus. She was also able to accurately predict when the next stigmata would occur and surprised Willesee and his film crew by giving them a personal word [from Jesus] that their work in documenting all this was blessed by him. When the stigmata occurred - as predicted - it appeared convincing. We saw the appearance of small wounds which progressively grew into severe sores on her hands, feet and face. Her agony throughout all this was apparent. The next day her wounds had substantially healed and DNA tests on samples taken from the wounds confirmed it to be real blood.

I watched all this very critically as the 'Science Tests Faith' presentation unfolded. The scientific analysis was unconvincing in its attempts to appear objective. It appeared at times as if they were trying to confirm certain presuppositions rather than analyse every aspect of the phenomena. But I was reasonably convinced that something supernatural was happening and that if it was all a hoax, it would have required the complicity of the film crew as well.

From a theological perspective it is no surprise that supernatural things happen. The question, however, is this: from where do these 'miracles' originate? We ought not automatically assume that these signs are from God when the Bible clearly tells us that the devil is quite capable of supernatural trickery². Most Christians are open to the possibility of supernatural occurrences: conservative

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evangelicals believe in answered prayer, the fulfilment of Scripture, etc. Pentecostals and charismatics are more ready to accept 'signs and wonders' such as miraculous healing, speaking in tongues, prophecy and a host of other miracles. But even most Bible-believing and Bible-centred Christians have to stop and think when it comes to 'signs' of the type covered in *Signs from God*. These 'signs' were exclusively Catholic. Perhaps this reveals the particular bias of Willesee and his crew who did not venture outside the Catholic church in their search for signs from God, and consulted only Catholic clergy to assess the validity of them. The challenge for many non-Catholic believers is to know what to do with phenomena which are immersed in Catholic tradition and beliefs. What do we assume about Mary's alleged role in all this when the Bible clearly says that Jesus is the only mediator between God and men?³ What do we do when Jesus allegedly refers to Mary as 'my mother' during one of these 'prophetic' sessions? Do we discount it altogether? The Catholic church itself seems hard-pressed to know what to make of it all.

This much is clear: when it comes to subjecting supernatural phenomena to biblical scrutiny the problem is always in filtering out the human factor. It's reasonable to assume that even genuine experiences are sometimes distorted as they pass through the filter of an individual's own belief system. Should the fact that these events are subject to embellishment or interpretation cause us to discount them altogether? Embellishment of spiritual revelation certainly happens within pentecostal circles: How often have you heard a prophecy from the Lord delivered in King James English? (I thought God would have a Hebrew accent!) How often have you heard words of prophecy preceded by the phrase, "And the Lord God would say unto you this day..."? This is clearly a manifestation of pentecostal religious culture - a very human phenomenon - but it is not [in and of itself] necessarily a valid reason to discount the message or its spiritual validity. What if Katya was really hearing from God? Could it be that she simply interprets everything she hears through

the filter of her Catholicism? Some things in *Signs from God* were clearly spurious. No matter how convincingly supernatural any occurrence is, if it draws people away from Christ to Mary worship (or anything else) we should rightly view it as spiritually suspect. God may very well speak in unusual ways, but we still need a reliable criterion for filtering what is spiritual deception.

One thing that struck me about Katya was her apparently genuine humility. The cross was central in all of it [albeit in a very unusual way] and the nature and character of God did not appear to be misrepresented. Apart from some uncomfortable references to Mary and the nature of the 'signs' being completely outside my own paradigms of the way God works, the final thrust of her message was thoroughly biblical: "The Lord Jesus is alive today, don't try and live independently from God, turn from your sins, judgement is coming and Jesus is returning soon." To that we can say a wholehearted "Amen!".

There is no doubt that we live in confusing times. Jesus warned that false prophets would abound and possibly deceive even God's own people. We must be ready to carefully evaluate everything. But we cannot be closed to the fact that God may choose to operate outside of our own paradigms in order to reach some people who come from a background completely different from our own. Claiming to be exclusively right will not, in the end, protect us from error. After centuries of church history it should come as no surprise that God is not particularly committed to defending our favoured religious institutions or rigidly narrow definitions of orthodoxy. Jesus will not be held captive by any denomination or tradition - the eternal message of salvation through Christ is far too important for that.

Bibliography

¹Matt 25:7

²2 Cor 11:14; Exodus 7:10,11

³1 Tim 2:5

SENIOR PARTNER

by Ivan Vail

There is a story I love to tell about Stanley Kresge and his wife that illustrates the giving principle. I trust it will encourage you; it is not meant to coerce.

Apparently Stanley, when first setting up a business, decided that he would make God the 'senior partner'. When thinking to himself about the implications of what that meant he concluded that God would have to take 51% of the profits. A short time after applying that principle he found he could give 80% and then 90% and finally 99%. You ask how is that possible? Well Stanley and his wife started the K-Mart chain in the United States. The fruits of honouring God are very evident in this story.

But wait; there's more. Wesley Dewell tells the story of staying with the Kresges and noting how this couple continued to drive an adequate car rather than the latest 'state-of-the-art' model in accord with their philosophy of living frugally in order to give more to the Lord's work. Wesley saw this best exemplified one morning as he noticed Mrs Kresge standing beside an automatic pop-up toaster that had lost its pop, waiting for the tell-tale click to say the toast was ready. This is the wife of the man who holds the franchise to K-Mart. When queried on it, she said that they refuse to buy a new model if the current one does the job. That way they can give more to support missions around the world.

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