

Why We Need Supernatural Manifestations in the Church Today

I believe this article is coming in due season, particularly with all of the recent talk of “strange fire” concerning modern Pentecostalism and an increasingly wariness in the charismatic movement (of all places) toward supernatural manifestations and unusual phenomena. Also, Jennifer LeClaire recently posted a most timely article about how a church that was birthed in the flames of Pentecost—namely, speaking in tongues—has all but abandoned this glorious gift in pursuit of “relevance.” This is unacceptable, and I contend that to be relevant for the kingdom, we should not only tolerate but earnestly desire supernatural manifestations and phenomena.

My Encounter With Supernatural Manifestations

Last November, I had an unforgettable experience at Bethel Church in Redding, Calif., that completely rocked my world. This experience was hardly limited to just me or even those attending that particular service. Supernatural phenomena has been gaining momentum in places like Bethel and in other houses of worship across the globe. The physical, visible glory of God is being revealed in an increasing measure—and rather than approach it with immediate skepticism, I believe we need to adopt an entirely new approach to supernatural phenomena and unusual manifestations of God’s presence.

He might just be saying something to us.

The Travesty of Toning Down the Supernatural

Yes, even we—the charismatic church that has a rich history in the supernatural—have had the tendency in recent years to try and tone down the supernatural in fear of excesses. But there will always be excess. There will always be those who abuse and misuse something genuine and authentic. We need to deal

with it, learn how to biblically navigate it, shut down the distractions, kick the dust off and continue pursuing the real deal. Counterfeits will always follow the genuine, and tares will always grow alongside the wheat. Counterfeits are the enemy's strategy for getting believers to throw important truths and realities out the window.

My theory? If there is something circulating in the body of Christ that produces confusion and uncertainty and cannot be easily categorized, it demands careful study, observation and evaluation through Scripture. Supernatural manifestations are just such a topic.

The Glory Came Down

Back to my Bethel experience. I was attending a Friday night service. Everyone was worshipping ... and then the glory came. Now, when I say "the glory came," people have all sorts of impressions and responses.

I stand shocked at what we have reduced the glory of God to be. We use the phrase *God's glory* as flippant Christian jargon, so it can mean anything from God being the focus of a worship song (and, by default, He receives glory) to a warm flutter in our chest and a tear trickling down our cheek. I refuse to devalue those experiences, as God's presence produces a myriad of responses, from simple and quiet to electric and overwhelming. At the same time, I also refuse to equate emotional behavior and feelings with a manifestation of God's glory.

What I saw and experienced at Bethel did not require faith. It was not in my head. It was not some spiritual vision or hallucination. I, along with 1,000 other worshippers, witnessed what has become identified as the "glory cloud." Shiny, transparent, golden, sparkling embers started falling out of the sky near stage right of the church platform. This caused some commotion and excitement. Rightly so! The commotion was not at all distracting, but rather fuel for more intense worship and focus on Jesus.

I was excited, but of course still a bit unsure, as my natural mind was in full swing, trying to make sense of the supernatural—that is, until the embers started coming up out of the ground. At this point, I was thoroughly convinced that some person was not up in the rafters sprinkling glitter on the congregation. God was in the house, and this visible manifestation of His presence filled my heart with incredible joy and praise but also intense fear and awe.

God is bigger than my box. He comes in unusual, unexpected ways. He is glorious and actually enjoys sharing this glory with His awestruck children. That is where I want to land this article, as I believe there is a powerful purpose for signs, wonders and unusual supernatural manifestations—such as the glory cloud phenomena.

A few things to know:

1. Unusual supernatural phenomena should be expected and welcome, as they are scriptural validation that we are living in the last days' outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

“I will show wonders in heaven above and signs in the earth beneath: blood and fire and vapor of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord” (Acts 2:19-20).

The “last days” signify the Pentecostal era since the book of Acts, as all these items originally listed in Joel have been coming to fruition—from the initial outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to sons and daughters prophesying to young men seeing visions and old men dreaming dreams.

Even as a charismatic community, we have embraced the outpouring of the Spirit, dreams, visions and the prophetic. But for some reason, we stop short of the wonders in heaven and signs in the earth. Why? They are noted very plainly in Scripture.

2. Unusual supernatural phenomena reintroduces the fear of the

Lord to a generation that has become overly comfortable with the church experience.

Time after time, we note a correlation between extraordinary supernatural phenomena and the fear of the Lord.

Jesus raises a young man from the dead. This is undeniably supernatural phenomena. The result? Fear of the Lord. We read, "Then fear came upon all, and they glorified God, saying, 'A great prophet has risen up among us'; and, 'God has visited His people'" (Luke 7:16).

The early church moved in the fear of the Lord, and this was directly connected with the demonstration of signs and wonders: "Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles" (Acts 2:43).

When God shows up in ways that bust open our 21st-century "safe" spiritual boxes, we come face to face with the fear of the Lord. Let's be honest: In many contexts, church has become overly predictable. We know what to expect from the church service, and we assume we know to expect from God. I believe it's high time leaders embrace the shift and earnestly contend for the Spirit to break out once again.

Sadly, many poorly respond to this glorious invitation to tremble before Almighty God. Supernatural phenomena is purposed to increase our reverence for the awesome One who is uncontainable, indescribable, and does what He wants, moves how He wills and is utterly supernatural. We poorly respond to supernatural manifestations when we either reject them as a whole or place inappropriate emphasis on the signs or wonders.

The pursuit is never the manifestation. Many contemporary charismatics have made that very clear, and I totally agree. However, we must welcome and celebrate the manifestations, for they are invitations to experience a truly awesome God. I'm tired of worship songs with lyrics that describe experiences and revelations of God that we as the church are living beneath. It's time to finally catch up with what Rich Mullins

wrote about in his classic praise chorus “Awesome God”—and experience God as such.

3. Unusual supernatural phenomena should be experienced, as they are part of our Pentecostal inheritance.

Modern Pentecostalism was actually birthed out of unusual manifestations. Many of our contemporary Pentecostal denominations emerged from the revolutionary outpouring at Azusa Street in 1906 to 1909, which included visible flames of fire appearing over the Azsua Street mission to similar glory cloud phenomena to limbs literally growing out of people’s bodies.

To divorce ourselves from a rich heritage in the supernatural is to simply consent to an insidious form of “seeker sensitive” Christianity. Many of us may be under the banner of a historically Pentecostal denomination, but if someone walked into our churches, they would not be able to distinguish it from the seeker-friendly congregation down the street. We cannot afford to live beneath our supernatural Pentecostal inheritance, for it is actually the spiritual birthright of all born-again believers.

Whether we define ourselves as Pentecostal (by denomination or paradigm) or not, all believers have a Pentecostal heritage. If we are born again, we received the same Holy Spirit that was poured out at Pentecost. This is the same Spirit that empowered Jesus to work miracles and even rise from the dead. This is the Holy Spirit who resides in every believer on the planet. Everything the Holy Spirit did, He is fully capable of doing again. It’s not a matter of waiting for some new sovereign outpouring or us crying out for heaven to open. Heaven has been opened for 2,000 years. So here’s the kicker of a question: What are we going to do about it?

Pastor Bill Johnson summed it up perfectly in his response to the manifestations Bethel has experienced over the years: “You can’t invite God into the house and not have something outside of your box happen. He’s bigger than our understanding.”

Of course, we keep our eyes and focus on Jesus. We are God-centric. Bethel is one of the most Jesus-centered, God-focused churches I've ever experienced. That said, it is time to pursue His presence—without strings attached. Let's welcome Him and everything He brings. Let's take one step deeper into our Acts 2, Pentecostal inheritance and contend for everything promised—that His glory would be seen, the church would be struck again with the fear of the Lord and “many will see it and fear, and will trust in the Lord” (Ps. 40:3).

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