

HAVE MIRACULOUS GIFTS CEASED?

A Review Article

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OBAN

*Counterfeit Miracles*¹ by B. B. Warfield contains the Thomas Smyth Lectures for 1917-18 delivered at the Columba Theological Seminary. First published in New York in 1918, it was reprinted under the title, *Miracles Yesterday and Today: True and False* by Eerdmans in 1953. When the Banner of Truth Trust reprinted it in 1972 they returned to the original title. The present volume, with a picture of Lourdes on the cover, is the third printing from the Edinburgh-based publishing house.

B. B. Warfield (1851-1921) was latterly Professor of Didactic and Polemical Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary (1886-1921). He was the best known opponent of the rationalism and anti-supernaturalism which threatened the life of the Church in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His work presently under review has long been regarded as the classic Reformed expression of the view that the extraordinary spiritual gifts of the New Testament Church have ceased. The six lectures that make up the work are 1. The Cessation of the Charismata; 2. Patristic and Medieval Marvels; 3. Roman Catholic Miracles; 4. Irvingite Gifts; 5. Faith Healing; 6. Mind Cure.

I will attempt to give an outline of Warfield's argument, paying special attention to the opening chapter, and then seek to make some critical assessment of the work.

Review

Warfield begins by defining the charismata as 'the extraordinary capacities produced in the early Christian communities by direct gift of the Holy Spirit'. They were part of the credentials of the Apostles as the authoritative agents of God in founding the Church. Their function thus confined them to distinctively the Apostolic Church, and they necessarily passed away with it. In support of this plea Warfield adduces two arguments: 1) the testimony of later ages as to the cessation of the charismata 2) the teaching of the New Testament as to their nature and origin.

In dealing with the first argument the author instead of offering direct proof examines the chief views which have been held favourable to the continuance of the charismata beyond the Apostolic age. He quotes Conyers Middleton as saying 'The most prevailing opinion is that they subsisted through the first three centuries, and then ceased in the

1. Republished by the Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 328 pages, pbk, £2.95.

beginning of the fourth, or as soon as Christianity came to be established by the civil power'.

'The facts', says Warfield 'are not in accordance with this'. The writings of the early Fathers contain no clear and certain allusion to miracle-working or to the exercise of the charismatic gifts, contemporaneously with themselves.

The theory behind the view that they continued is that they were needed throughout the period of the Church's weak infancy, being, as Fuller calls them, 'the swaddling-clothes of the infant churches'. Warfield refutes this and shows that the charismata were given not to establish the Church but to authenticate the Apostles as messengers from God. They belonged in a true sense to the Apostles and constituted one of the signs of an Apostle. Miracles and miraculous gifts are the marks and credentials of revelation. They belong to revelation periods, like the founding of the theocracy under Moses and the inauguration of the prophetic era in the ministry of Elijah. 'Their abundant display in the Apostolic Church is the mark of the richness of the Apostolic age in revelation; and when this revelation period closed, the period of miracle-working had passed by also, as a mere matter of course'.

In turning, in chapter 2, to 'Patristic and Medieval Marvels' Warfield observes that when we pass from the literature of the first three centuries into that of the fourth and succeeding centuries, we leave at once the region of the indefinite and undetailed references to miraculous works said to have occurred somewhere or other, and come into contact with a body of writings simply saturated with marvels. The marvels are recounted by scholars, theologians and preachers. Even the great Augustine is rather confusing on this matter. Warfield attempts an assessment of these marvels: 1) they do not seem to have met with universal credence when first published; 2) sometimes rather with definite disbelief; 3) the very fathers who recorded these marvels betray a consciousness that miracles had ceased; 4) a great mass of the wonders had been wrought in interests of grave errors; 5) these ecclesiastical miracles differ fundamentally from Biblical miracles; 6) they represent an infusion of heathen modes of thought into the Church.

It is this last point that Warfield takes up in chapter 3 in connection with Roman Catholic Miracles. The Church of Rome has refused to free itself of the accretions which had attached themselves to Christianity during its long struggle with invading superstition. The whole religion of the heathen world turned on miracles. Belief in miracles was involved in belief in the gods. There is a sense in which the saints are the successors of the gods. The great majority of miracles of healing wrought throughout the history of the Church have been wrought through the agency of relics of the saints. The use of relics is at bottom a species of fetishism.

The cult of relics, says Warfield, has one rival which threatens to regulate it to the background — the cult of the Virgin Mary. There follows an examination of the claims made in connection with her shrine at Lourdes. The author does not wish to suggest that the cures at Lourdes are not in the main real cures. 'We cannot pretend to a complete knowledge of all the forces which may work toward a cure in such

conditions as are present at Lourdes'. However there is the principle that no event can be really miraculous which has implications inconsistent with fundamental religious truth: 'Even though we should stand dumb before the wonders of Lourdes, and should be utterly incapable of suggesting a natural causation for them we know right well they are not of God their ultimate connection with a cult derogatory to the rights of God who alone is to be called upon in our distresses, stamp them, prior to all examination of the mode of their occurrence, as not from God'.

In chapter 4 Warfield turns his attention to Protestantism. The claim to the possession and exercise of miraculous powers by individuals has always been received in Protestant circles with a suspicion which experience has only too completely justified. He illustrates this with the history of the Irvingite movement. Edward Irving predicted the immediate advent of Christ and proclaimed the restoration of the extraordinary offices and gifts of the Apostolic age, along with an elaborate church organization in preparation for His coming. 'Never have pretensions to gifts and powers of a supernatural order suffered more speedily and definitely the condemnation of facts. The predicted coming of the Lord did not take place: the "Apostles" appointed to receive Him at His coming were gradually called to their eternal home, and still He came not; the pretenders to supernatural gifts one after another awoke to the true state of the case and acknowledged themselves deluded'.

The fifth lecture by Warfield is on 'Faith-Healing'. Although the 'gifts' of the Apostolic age form so clearly connected a body that it would be difficult to separate them from one another, some attempt this and, discarding or reflecting the other gifts, contend vigorously that the gift of healing is a permanent one. For his treatment of this view Warfield selected a book *The Ministry of Healing, or Miracles of Cures in All Ages* by A. J. Gordon. He takes Gordon to task for not defining a miracle at the outset of his book. This leads to confusion by obscuring the lines which divide miracles from the general supernatural. He deals with the three passages on which Gordon rests his argument for faith-healing. He dismisses Mark 16. 17-18 as spurious. James 5. 14-15 gives no indication that 'a peculiar miraculous faith' is intended; the emphasis falls on the official intercession of the Church and the use of means. The use of Matthew 8. 17 in support of healing confuses redemption itself which is objective and takes place outside of us, with its subjective effects which take place in us. Warfield sums up the matter in this way.

'The question at issue is distinctly whether God has pledged Himself to heal the sick miraculously, and does heal them miraculously on the call of his children — that is to say without means — any means — and apart from means and above means; and this is so ordinarily that Christian people may be encouraged, if not required, to discard all means as either unnecessary or even a mark of lack of faith and sinful distrust, and to depend on God alone for the healing of all their sickness'.

In the final chapter of the work, Warfield examines the subject of 'Mind-Cure'. He admits that in doing so he oversteps the limits of his subject. By virtue of the fact that some mental act or state is held to be

producing cause of the healing, it makes no pretence to miraculousness. Nevertheless its relation to faith healing is so close, confusion with it is so common and the lessons to be learned from it so instructive that he could not overlook it. Mind-healing is practised in a variety of forms in Christian Science, Mesmerism, Spiritualism and Faith-Healing. He deals in particular with Christian Science which teaches that 'matter and mortal body are the illusions of human belief, which seem to appear and disappear to mortal sense alone. When this belief changes as in dreams the material body changes with it going wherever we wish, and becoming whatever belief may decree. . . . 'Besiege sickness and death with these principles and all will disappear'.

Assessment

This is a valuable work and reveals the breadth of scholarship that we have come to associate with the name of B. B. Warfield. It is interesting to consider that the notes to the lectures make up about one third of the pages of the book. The subject has been well-researched and carefully documented.

The book performs two valuable functions:

1. It states very clearly the classic Reformed position that miracles are bound up with the giving of revelation. Warfield quotes Calvin to the effect that it is unreasonable to ask miracles — or to find them — where there is no new Gospel. 'By as much as the one Gospel suffices for all lands and all people and all times, by so much does the miraculous attestation of that one Gospel suffice for all lands and all times, and no further miracles are to be expected in connection with it'. What is at stake in this issue, according to Warfield, is the uniqueness and finality of Apostolic Christianity.

2. It gives, a broad-ranging survey of the counterfeit. How vital it is to 'test the spirits to see whether they are from God because many false prophets have gone out into the world' (1 John 4. 1)! Even godly men have been deceived. The Evangelical Church today suffers from a lack of historical perspective. Many of the claims to miraculous powers in our day bear striking similarity to what has been proved false by history. Warfield brings together in this volume much that would be otherwise inaccessible to the general reader.

Apart from these things, the book may not be found all that helpful to those who are seeking to counteract the claims of the Charismatic Movement of today. It is unfortunate that the opening — and basic — chapter of the book is entitled 'The Cessation of the Charismata'. Warfield does acknowledge that the name 'charismata' is broad enough to include the non-miraculous gracious gifts as well as the miraculous ones. But surely all the gifts are gracious, coming from God's unmerited love to us? Many of the gifts have not ceased. We play into the hands of Pentecostals and neo-Pentecostals if we identify charismata with the gifts of 1 Corinthians 12. 8-10.

When Warfield delivered his lectures the Pentecostal movement was in its infancy. The issue has been complicated still further by the phenomenal growth of the Charismatic Movement since the early 1960s.

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There needs to be a very careful examination of the list of gifts mentioned in the New Testament and of the relation of gift to office. We must try to establish what is meant by each gift. Are all the gifts of 1 Corinthians 12. 8-10 miraculous ones? Do they all have to do with revelation? If not, should some of them be known in the Church today?

A more recent work that deals helpfully with these questions is *Perspectives on Pentecost* (N. T. Teaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit) by Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. His approach is exegetical. Warfield on the other hand tends to be dogmatic, without revealing the exegetical foundation for his conclusions. Historians tend to disagree on the evidence for the cessation of the charismata in the early Church. Michael Green in *Evangelism in the Early Church* differs from Warfield. Can the issue of cessation be resolved by an appeal to history? Are we not likely to get more light from a thorough and careful exegesis of 1 Corinthians 13. 8-13?