

THE SUPERNATURAL AND MISSIONS

Why is there not more commitment to world missions? What is the main factor that lies behind our failure to go all out for world evangelism? Is it that we are lacking faith? Yes, to some degree, but it is deeper than the faith issue. The real issue is our inability to grasp and apply what the Bible so clearly teaches about the supernatural.

This is an issue that pervades all of modern Christendom, but is especially true of those who call themselves “Reformed” in theology. The Reformed Faith causes one to think through theological issues (and that is good), and that is also the problem. We think logically beyond what Scriptures teach. We often approach the Bible very rationalistic. So I ask the question, “Can one be Reformed and believe in the supernatural?” This is obviously a rhetorical question. One can be Reformed and believe in the supernatural. Yet, how many Reformed people really do live like the supernatural exists? It seems to be that there are many Reformed people and pastors who are reformed-deists. They believe God created the world but then it goes on according to natural law. God can and does occasionally break into His creation, but it is a very rare occurrence. Even when it appears that some supernatural phenomena has taken place; we Reformed people try to give a rationalistic explanation. The whole subject of supernatural phenomena seems to be taboo or placed on an intellectual level where the possibility of supernatural “stuff” ever entering into everyday life consistently would be inconsistent with the plan of God.

If anyone should believe in the supernatural, it should be Reformed people since they have such a high view of the sovereignty of God. Sovereignty means that God rules and reigns over this world, and He can break into this world whenever, however and on whom ever He pleases and do a mighty supernatural work. He is God!

Maybe you are saying at this point, “Dr. Arnold has gone charismatic and wants everybody to experience the extraordinary spiritual gifts like tongues, prophecy and miracles.” Not so, I do not consider myself a charismatic and I am not talking about the charismatic gifts. I do, however, desire to see all of God’s people live in the realm of the supernatural by faith, believing God for the humanly impossible. Sometimes when we live in the realm of the supernatural, we see God do things that are strange and odd to our normal everyday experience, but the supernatural is just that – a working of God outside the normal, ordinary, expected events of life. Often we will be surprised by God.

What I am going to say to you is something that I am personally working through as a missionary who travels all over the world and can now see the workings of a sovereign, supernatural working God in a different light. I was raised in the public school system that essentially teaches an anti-supernatural, naturalistic, and humanistic way of thinking. From K-4 through two years of college, I was brainwashed to believe that the supernatural did not exist.

Soon after I became a Christian I went to an evangelical seminary where I was taught Angelology and Theology Proper. The supernatural was accepted theoretically by the seminary but practically it was not made relevant. I knew very little experientially about the spiritual world and spiritual warfare. After four years as a Christian, I became a Calvinist whereby I saw the sovereignty of God in a new light. In fact, when I understood the total sovereignty of God it was like a second new birth and the other half of the Bible came alive to me. However, I fell into the trap of many young Calvinist. I had God all figured out and put Him into my little theological box. As a Calvinist, I was taught to challenge everything that did not meet my concept or understanding of the sovereign God of Scripture. Supernatural phenomena was now more theoretical than ever for me, and while I believed that it could happen, I had never seen it happen and therefore, at worst, it must not happen today, or at best, the supernatural rarely happens. Whatever, the world of the supernatural

became very fuzzy in my thinking and not a vital part of my world and life view.

In 1997, God allowed me to start training pastors overseas. I have been to about 12 countries, have crossed the Atlantic or Pacific about 18 times, have taught doctoral students to pastors in the bush who get no biblical training, and talked to hundreds of Christians. I have learned that in the third world there is a different world and life view among Christians. For them, the spiritual world and the possibility of the supernatural are not just theoretical but they are a living reality in everyday life. They come out of cultures that are more in tune to the spiritual world. In the third world, there are no atheists. All believe in some kind of god. All believe in the supernatural. It many times is a world-view that is perverted and demonic, but they believe and live in the realm of the supernatural. Therefore, it is not uncommon for Christians to speak about angels, demons, dreams, visions, healing and miracles. For them, out of the ordinary events are accepted as total reality with supernatural explanation. This has caused me to rethink my whole world and life view as it relates to the supernatural. I used to put all supernatural phenomena into my God-box and say that those who are experiencing these phenomena are 1) lying; 2) exaggerating; 3) operating in the flesh; 4) being led by the devil, or 5) ignorant. I came to realize that I was the one with fuzzy thinking. I had a sovereign God who does not do supernatural phenomena. I had a devil that could do supernatural phenomena but not my God. My friends in the third world are scholars, students, and bush people. They are reliable and trustworthy people, and I have no reason to deny the stories they tell me about supernatural phenomena that actually happened to them.

I admit that my experience has forced me to take another look at the Bible. I confess, as a Calvinist, that I do not know how to evaluate all that I am seeing and hearing. I do not claim to have arrived where others are in the dark. Yet, when I look at the inspired, infallible Bible, it seems to me that my brothers in the third world have a world and life view that is more consistent with the Old and New Testaments than our western views of the world.

I feel like Jonathan Edwards in the Great Awakening in America. Edwards kept copious notes on what he observed in this mighty revival, and he tried to make sense of all the supposed supernatural phenomena he observed. He did not experience much of these supernatural phenomena himself but his wife did.

SUPERNATURAL PHENOMENA IN THE BIBLE

2 Kings 6:15-18: When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. “Oh, my lord, what shall we do?” the servant asked. Don’t be afraid,” the prophet answered. “Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” And Elisha prayed, “O LORD, open his eyes so he may see.” Then the LORD opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

Elisha and his servant Gehazi were surrounded by the army of the king of Aram. Gehazi panicked when he saw the vast army. Elisha told him not to panic because there was a bigger army supporting them. Yet, there was no visible army to be seen to support Gehazi and Elisha. Gehazi probably thought Elisha was crazy. He was one brick short of a full load. Then Elisha prayed that God would open Gehazi’s eyes to see the heavenly army. Gehazi saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire. Gehazi saw an angelic army. With this vision, came supernatural phenomena – the army was struck with blindness.

For Gehazi, the invisible kingdom was made visible. He got a glimpse into the spiritual kingdom of God. Notice God had to open Gehazi’s eyes so that he would see the invisible kingdom. If we today are going to understand anything about this spiritual kingdom, it will be as God opens our eyes to its reality.

The spiritual kingdom is more real than the physical kingdom. The invisible world (the spiritual kingdom) undergirds, surrounds and interpenetrates the visible world. This spiritual kingdom is unrestricted, unlimited

and infinite. It is another spiritual dimension. The invisible world is where nothing is impossible for God to effect the visible world. The invisible world is more real than the visible world. We live in the realm of the five senses – taste, smell, touch, sight and hearing, but the spiritual realm is more real and more permanent. The visible world as we know it will come to an end, but the invisible world will continue on forever.

The question then is, “How can we make the invisible world visible?” We enter into the invisible world through faith. Faith goes beyond the five senses and trusts God to have the invisible kingdom break into the visible world. This is the world of the miraculous. It is living in the realm of the supernatural. While faith in the Bible is reasonable, there comes a time when reason ends and faith begins. There is a leap of faith. We accept the Bible at face value. We accept it as truth whether we understand every thing rationally or whether we have experienced all the Bible says about the supernatural.

Ephesians 6:10-12: Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. The Apostle Paul makes it very clear that our real struggles in this world occur in the spiritual realm against Satan and his demons. We need to understand the invisible world so we can live with power in the visible world.

Over and over, we are told about supernatural power for the Christian. In Ephesians 1:18-20, we are told: **I pray also that you may know. . . his incomparable great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms. . .** There is supernatural power available for Christians to open up the invisible kingdom and make it visible. How is this done? It is done through faith. Faith is the key that opens the door to the spiritual kingdom. In another prayer in Ephesians 3:16-20, Paul prays for Christians: **I pray that he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being . . . so**

that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you. . . may have power to grasp. . . the love of Christ. . . Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us. . . The Apostle Paul wanted Christians to experience Christ-centered and Holy Spirit directed power so that the invisible world could become a reality to them in the visible world.

There is a supernatural power within the gospel. **I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation. . . (Rom. 1:16).** The preaching of the gospel is to be accompanied with power. **Because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction (I Thess. 1:5).** My personal observations are ministers in America particularly and Christians in general do not need more knowledge (although knowledge is important). They need power, Holy Spirit power. They need faith to believe God to make the invisible kingdom break into the visible kingdom.

SUPERNATURAL PHENOMENA TODAY

I am Reformed. I am a Calvinist. I am committed to inspired and infallible Scripture as the only rule of faith and practice. I believe the canon is closed. I believe there is no more inspired revelation occurring today. However, there are things happening in this world that I do not grasp completely. Just because I do not understand this phenomena or I have not experienced it myself does not mean it is not true. Today I will examine all supernatural phenomena in light of the Word of God. I will not put God in a theological box. I will not accept all supposed supernatural phenomena are from God, nor will I deny that some supernatural phenomena are from God.

As Presbyterians, we ascribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith. The Confession, under the heading of Providence says, *“God, in His ordinary providence, maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them at His pleasure” (5:3).*

Today there is well-documented evidence that God is using dreams, visions, healing and miracles to reach many in the third world, especially in the Muslim world. They are not being saved by these phenomena but are driven to Christians who tell them the way of salvation. Last year I was having dinner with the four major leaders of the Pentecostals in Siroti, Uganda. I asked them how they were saved. All four had supernatural phenomena happen to them that caused them to seek out Christians to tell them about Christ. One had a vision, another a dream and two had healings. I do not think they were exaggerating or lying.

Not too long ago I had a chat with Tom Cheely who is the missions pastor at Briarwood Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Alabama. Tom told me that when he went to Sri Lanka, he saw many people healed and other supernatural phenomena. The day it first happened he was reading in Luke 7:21-23 for his devotions:

At that very time, Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. So he replied to the messengers, “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.

He saw with his own eyes miraculous things happen. I said to Tom, “Did this scare you?” He said, “No, but I did have fear.” I said, “What kind of fear?” He replied, “I feared going back to America to explain to my Reformed and Presbyterian brothers what I had heard and seen, trying to explain to them supernatural phenomena.”

SUPERNATURAL PHENOMENA AND MISSIONS

So how does one’s view of the supernatural affect his or her view missions?

First, we will live in the realm of the supernatural expecting and anticipating God to powerfully work in us, through us and for us for the furtherance of the spiritual kingdom on earth.

Second, we will pray believing God to do the humanly impossible, not for our glory but for God's glory alone. We will anticipate answers to our prayers about life in general and missions in particular.

Third, we will take the gospel to our families, our church, our communities, our country and to the nations of the world, believing God will supernaturally save souls – the greatest of all miracles – and in the process there may be other supernatural phenomena appear that we will evaluate biblically.

Fourth, will commit our lives to Christ alone, expecting Him to supernaturally work in us to change us to be more Christ-like and be zealous for world evangelism. We will anticipate a call from God to part-time or full-time missionary work.

Fifth, we will believe God to supernaturally provide for us financially so we can give to world missions generously and with a liberal spirit. We give so others may go to preach the gospel and to train the saints. The result will be a continuing extension of the spiritual kingdom on earth. We also will believe that God will give us more as we give Him plenty, so that we will have more and more to give for world missions.