The Need to Dialogue: A Review of the Debate on the Controversy of Signs, Wonders, Miracles and Spiritual Warfare Raised in the Literature of the Third Wave Movement

Thomas D. Pratt

Professors James D. G. Dunn and Donald L. Gelpi, S.J., were invited to be the plenary speakers at the annual meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies in November 1982, hosted by Fuller Theological Seminary. With the academic year nearly over, the seminary was looking forward to the Christmas break with hope that the holiday would relieve the tension of the past year.

In January of 1982, Peter Wagner had contacted Robert Walker, the editor of Christian Life, about a new course he was co-teaching with John Wimber at Fuller—MCS10 Signs and Wonders. From the start, the class proved to be an immediate hit and at the same time controversial. The late Glenn Barker, Provost of Fuller at that time and someone who was open to the charismatic movement, debated about dispensing with the class because of protests from some students, faculty and constituents. But after discussions with Pentecostal faculty members and administrators he decided to let the class continue under a watchful eye.

In an unusual and unique move for a Christian magazine, Walker dedicated the entire October issue of Christian Life to Signs and Wonders after visiting one of the classes. The articles in the magazine were meant to cover the spectrum of theological endeavors. The practical dimension was emphasized by John Wimber on the contribution of

---

*Thomas Pratt is on the faculty of Northern California Bible College and is a PhD candidate at the University of Stirling, Scotland.

1 Professor Dunn was in the process of assuming his new post on the Faculty of Divinity at the University of Durham, England, after teaching at the University of Nottingham for years. Dunn refers to himself as a "Presbyterian with Baptist leanings and Pentecostal interests." His essay was on "Ministry and the Ministry: The Charismatic Renewal's Challenge to Traditional Ecclesiology."

2 Gelpi has been a professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley since 1972 and involved in the Roman Catholic Charismatic Renewal since 1966. The essay he contributed was on "Breath-Baptism in the Synoptics."

3 The essays by Dunn and Gelpi, along with those of Richard Israel, J. Rodman Williams, Ralph P. Martin, Edith Blumhofer, H. Newton Malony, Cecil M. Robeck, Jr. and Paul G. Hiebert were published in Charismatic Experiences in History, C. M. Robeck, Jr., editor (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1985).

“Signs and Wonders Today” and their impetus in the church he served as pastor which went from “Zip to 3,000 in 5 Years.” An article taken from the MCS10 syllabus pressed the case for the legitimacy of miracles throughout Church history. In a similar vein, Christian De Wet referred to more than fifty passages of Scripture in his argument for a “Biblical Basis of Signs and Wonders.” David Allan Hubbard, Fuller’s president, gave an evaluation of the course which was especially valued by Walker. Hubbard advanced the position that: “Hazarding the risks of this approach to the life of the Spirit is part of what Fuller is prepared to do.” He concluded that an openness to God’s work in the past as well as the present gives insight into how churches grow and that God just might be gifting students to serve Him powerfully. Donald A. McGavran addressed the biblical and theological issue of healing as a genuine work of the Spirit of God for today. Wagner called for “Substantial exegetical and empirical studies” to be done on “the subject of supernatural activity.” The remainder of the volume was taken up with testimonials from the “Third World” and interviews with faculty members and students at Fuller who supported the class. Glenn Barker offered an insightful but cautionary note, that “everything must be tested by the Word of God.” He elaborated on this by stating: “I don’t think we should ever, in any of these things, move without careful theological undergirding. Especially as teachers, we must be sure that what we say is validated. In the very nature of what it means to teach others is the need to teach them according to the Word of God.”

Over the next couple of years, the class enjoyed notoriety as well as controversy. The faculty of the School of Theology became increasingly troubled by what even its Pentecostal members believed to be excesses

5Christian Life, 18–23.
7Christian Life, 28–34.
13The only objection in the magazine to the course came from a visiting scholar from Scandinavia, Ole Oystese, who raised a number of questions that need more exegetical and theological reflection (see, 74–75).
15David Allan Hubbard, “Foreword” in Lewis B. Smedes’ Ministry and the Miraculous: A Case Study at Fuller Theological Seminary (Pasadena: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1987) 15. Wagner quotes the then Dean of the School of Theology at Fuller, Robert P. Meye, who stated: ‘I know only two seminary courses which have become famous. One was the course on dogmatics taught at Basel by Karl Barth and the other is MCS10 taught by John Wimber here at Fuller.’ C. Peter Wagner, The Third Wave of the Holy Spirit: Encountering the Power of Signs and Wonders. (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1988) 25.