

"SLAIN IN THE SPIRIT": WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

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One of the growing crazes in the church today is the phenomenon of being "slain in the spirit." It is something that needs to be discussed because of its continued growth in the Charismatic and Pentecostal movements. This occurrence is so closely connected with the "laughing revival" it is becoming quite commonplace.

Before I get into the actual discussion of this experience, I want to clarify a few things.

First, let me say that God is God, and He is sovereign. He can move and operate in His church in any fashion He deems necessary and appropriate. I would not, and cannot, limit the way God has, or will, deal with individual believers or sinners.

Secondly, I am not denying, nor will I try to show, that this phenomenon which we have come to call "slain in the spirit" cannot be real. Whatever manifestations may accompany this "falling out" (these will be discussed in detail later) there is no doubt that the experience can be real. (It also can be faked.) But there is equally no doubt that there is no scriptural precedent for this phenomenon as a sign of God's moving or blessing in the life of a believer.

NOT TO BE SOUGHT AFTER

While being "slain" has become a much sought-after experience, Scriptures would indicate that such a phenomenon is not a sign of spirituality. In fact, a study of incidences similar to this modern manifestation would indicate just the opposite. That is, it is more likely evidence of sin in the individual's life. But we mustn't make that broad accusation either.

I have many good friends, fellow preachers and relatives who will be disturbed by what I have to say because they have experienced this phenomenon themselves or have seen it occur in their services. I trust they will read this entire article before concluding that I have lost what little good sense I had.

Nothing said in this article is intended as an indictment of any individuals who have been "slain in the spirit" nor is there any veiled innuendo regarding their spirituality, nor their salvation.

In recent years, this phenomenon has become a sign of the spirituality (or anointing) of the minister or of the person being "slain." It is a much sought-after experience, particularly in Charismatic circles. Several current ministries have developed quite a reputation for such experiences happening during their services. These include Charles and Frances Hunter, John Jacobs and Kenneth Hagin. The most widely known today for this phenomenon is Benny Hinn. But Rodney Howard-Browne, the latest star on the Charismatic stage, is gaining ground.

SOME EXPLANATIONS

There are several explanations for the experience that are given by those who have studied phenomenon. The most common explanation is that the experience is merely human

response to auto-suggestion or mental manipulation by the minister. Those who attend a rally sponsored by a ministry that specializes in this manifestation go prepared mentally and spiritually to experience this manifestation. When it happens, it may seem the participant had no control over what has occurred, but from the instant the individual began planning to attend the meeting, she has prepared herself (or himself) for the experience.

Another factor is "peer pressure." Spirit-filled believers in a service where many are being slain feel pressured to fall out themselves lest they be considered less spiritual.

It is also possible that the congregant "succumbs to the power" so as not to disappoint the minister. A blind woman in an Oral Roberts healing service claimed to have been healed during the service, but later admitted nothing had changed. "I didn't want to disappoint him (Oral)," she confessed to Oral's biographer.

There are other possibilities, like just wanting to experience the experience. One woman friend admitted in an open meeting at her church that she had faked the experience on occasions to "feel like part of the crowd."

And it would be a grave oversight not to mention the possibility of a demonic source for the phenomenon. At least two former occultists have told us that they believed "familiar spirits" were responsible for many of the manifestations in Benny Hinn services they had attended. Many scholars are comparing this Charismatic phenomenon with "trance possession" experienced by many false religions. Sociologists claim that the phenomenon is not peculiar to the Charismatic movement, nor even to Christianity in general.

OCCULT EXAMPLES

Ellis Stewart, research director for Bill Rudge Ministries, in an article titled "Hindu Occultism" wrote:

"The most feared and revered deity in Hinduism is the goddess Kali (Durga), the wife of Shiva the destroyer. She is also known as Shakti, which means force and represents the impersonal force that occultism teaches runs the universe. The divine power-touch of the guru is called Shakti pat. This is a term used for the touch (or near touch) of a guru's hand to the worshipper's forehead that produces supernatural effects.

Shakti literally means power (so they believe) underlying the universe. The supernatural effect of shakti through the guru's touch may knock the worshipper to the floor or he may see a bright light and receive an experience of enlightenment or inner illumination, or have some other mystical or psychic experience."

Similar explanations are given for similar phenomenon in Afro-Caribbean cults.

Alan Morrison, of Diakrisis Publications in England, discusses this phenomenon. Concerning the origin of the "slain in the spirit" manifestation, he writes:

"If there is no support for this experience as a bona fide Christian practice [as he clearly established and we will too later in our discussion] then how are we to identify it? What is its true origin? [The phenomenon] can be traced back even earlier than the beginnings of Pentecostalism at the turn of this century.

"One of the earliest and most notorious advocates of this experience was an itinerant preacher in the so-called 'Holiness Movement,' Maria Woodworth-Etter (1844-1924), who also gained a reputation for falsely prophesying that San Francisco : would be destroyed by an earthquake in 1890. In her preaching in the 1880s, she advocated a religious experience which she called 'The Power,' and she would often go into a trance during the services, standing with her hands raised in the air for more than an hour. Nicknamed the 'trance-evangelist' and even the 'voodoo priestess,' she was often accused of hypnotizing people. And here we come to the very crux of the 'Slain in the Spirit' phenomenon."

Morrison goes on to say that what Woodworth-Etter had discovered was the ancient art of hypnotism, popularized almost a century earlier by Anton Mesmer, the father of hypnotism or mesmerism, as it was also known, and an occultic faith healer. Morrison quotes one researcher who says "the phenomena that are now defined as 'hypnotic' emerged from the faith healing activities of Mesmer at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth century."

One of Mesmer's famous healing sessions is described in another book on the occult:

"Mesmer marched about majestically in a pale lilac robe, passing his hands over the patients' bodies or touching them with a long iron wand. The results varied. Some patients felt nothing at all, some felt as if insects were crawling over them, others were seized with hysterical laughter, convulsions or fits of hiccups. Some went into raving delirium, which was called 'The Crisis' and was considered extremely healthful."

The real significance of Mesmer's sessions was best understood by his contemporaries. The King of France in 1784 ordered two respected bodies, the Academy of Science and the Royal Society of Medicine, to examine Mesmer's claims.

Among the highlights of this most discerning review were the following remarks:

"That man can act upon man at any time, and almost at will, by striking his imagination; that the simplest gestures and signs can have the most powerful effects; and that the action of man upon the imagination may be reduced to an art, and conducted with method, upon subjects who have faith."

Morrison drew the following conclusion from his research:

"Just as the Western psychologists are proffering ancient shamanistic practices in a guise which is more palatable to the uninitiated Westerners, so the professing Christian churches which peddle 'religious fainting' have simply made the Possession-Trance state of shamanism more readily acceptable to the undiscerning sheep who attend their heated meetings. These are the true origins of the strange phenomena which are being so widely reported today and which are bringing the gospel and the Church of Jesus Christ into so much disrepute."

ADVOCATES AND HISTORY

This historical background is helpful in refuting the current trend, but some advocates say they have history on their side. Let's take a look at some of their claims.

Although many books, booklets and tracts have been written to support this manifestation, one I have by Marvin Gorman, former executive presbyter of the Assemblies of God, is very

typical of the poor scholarship and faulty logic used to try to validate this experience as biblical.

Gorman states in the beginning of his article that the phenomenon is clearly a sign of the presence of the Lord. Then he discounts and discredits what he calls imitators and Satan inspired counterfeits. Interestingly enough, he notes that in his historical evidence there is "seldom a direct reference to the actual occurrence itself."

Gorman then begins a three-page accounting of various times from AD 115 to modern times where there are records of supernatural occurrences. The most commonly reported was speaking in other tongues. Most of his citations give absolutely no evidence of anything like being "slain in the spirit." Only in the entries for the last century is there any mention of "falling." And all of his references indicate "prostration" which is to fall face down. (This distinction will be more relevant in our later discussion.)

Gorman later notes that some were "under the power." I'm assuming from his "pro-being slain" position that he believes this to mean people were knocked to the ground. But he never makes it totally clear what he means or what his sources meant by "under the power."

In his many attempts to validate the experience from Scripture, he wrenches the text to fit his predisposition. For example, he attempts to show that Abram's "deep sleep" in Genesis 15: 12 indicates "a total extinguishing of the natural mind while God speaks by His Spirit to one's heart."

First of all, Abram's deep sleep bears no resemblance whatsoever to the modern version of "being slain." Secondly, Gorman's concept of "extinguishing of the natural mind" is reminiscent of the foolish and unbiblical teaching of Rodney Howard-Browne concerning trying to understand God's workings with the natural mind.

STRETCHING A POINT

Gorman cites many other scriptures, most of which we will be discussing later. A couple, however, are absurd enough to make note of here. He claims that the disciples at the Transfiguration were slain in the spirit (Matthew 17:6). But it clearly states in the text that out of fear, they fell on their faces when God spoke. That doesn't resemble any of the manifestations that I've observed. Secondly, he indicates, but never clearly claims, that the Philippian jailer was also slain (Acts 16:29). But again the text destroys Gorman's claims. The jailer, acting out of fear for his life and not fear of God or because of a blessing of God, "came trembling, and fell down before Paul and Silas."

Gorman lists among the "lasting effects" of the experience: 1) one person said she received an answer to prayer; 2) another saw a vision of the Lord; and 3) another said, "everything around became insignificant;" 4) and another sensed a "greater love for God." These seem more temporal than lasting and, assuming they're all true, they could have been accomplished by God without the theatrics. He's accomplished all these things in the Scripture without ever knocking someone down to do it. Gorman concludes his message with this challenge:

"Let us all seek God more earnestly even if it means that more people will be 'slain in the Spirit' or will 'fall under the power.'"

I'm all for seeking God more earnestly, but I don't think we should be seeking after manifestations, even legitimate, biblical ones, and certainly not one that has such a spurious history.

Let's forget historical (and sometimes hysterical) arguments for a while. Let's look at what Scripture says, or doesn't say, about the experience. It is the final authority on all matters. Although proponents of the experience use a large number of proof texts to justify the "use" of the phenomenon, there is no clear biblical reference or precedent for being "slain in the spirit."

Several of the occasions cited as proof of the experience's spiritualness must be rejected because those who experienced something like the modern phenomenon were not believers, but unregenerated men. In fact, there are only two instances that I can find in Scripture where anything like this happened to "believers." Those examples involve Ezekiel (1: 28 and 2: 1) who "fell face down" (not backwards) and John on the Isle of Patmos (who also fell face down). Also, these experiences seem to be visions rather than trances, unconscious states or other altered states of consciousness.

(And let me say that the direction of the fall neither validates nor negates the current craze. One woman concluded after a discussion on the issue that falling forward made the difference between the true and the false experience. That's not true either. She has fallen into the current trap of assuming that since there is an imitation there must be a real. You can counterfeit a \$5 bill, but you can't counterfeit a \$3 bill. You have to create one. And while we're on the topic, let me mention that it does not matter how long a person "stays down." Again, undiscerning Christians have tried to create a standard for judging the valid and invalid experiences.)

Some of the citations used to justify the experience, besides those already alluded to, are the guards in the Garden of Gethsemane, the guards at the tomb and Paul's Damascus road encounter with Christ. But it should be sufficient to point out that in all instances, those men involved were unbelievers, including the Apostle Paul who was known as Saul at the time. Only in his case is there any hint of a redemptive work being done. The closest thing in the Bible to the experience being practiced today is the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. They were "slain by the Spirit" for lying. They never got up to testify of their euphoric feelings.

In the early days of Woodworth-Etter's meetings, she wrote about those who fell under the power. She identified them as the "mockers" and "scoffers" (unbelievers) that fell under the power. Similar reports occurred during the revivals of George Whitefield and Charles Finney.

WHY SEEK IT?

If, as it appears from church history and from Scripture, this phenomenon is experienced by unregenerated men, why would so many seek the experience? In my personal and unscientific survey of many people who have experienced the sensation, most admit that there was no noticeable change in them as a result of the experience (no salvation, no healing, no baptism in the Holy Spirit, no visions, etc.) other than a certain euphoria. There is a large number who have testified of such supernatural results. As I said, this is unscientific, but there does not appear to be any guarantee that something will change after having experienced being "slain in the spirit" nor that there is a pattern to what does happen to those who testify to a change.

Another quick consideration. Attention is drawn to the minister; then to the person "slain." Man is lifted up instead of Christ. Anything that draws attention to the instrument rather than the Master must be suspect. The Word says that the Holy Spirit will testify of Christ and point men to Him. It is also interesting to note that in all the accounts the proponents cite from history and Scripture, not one time is the "power" channeled through an intermediary. In all their claims for validation, the event occurs as a direct action between God and the individuals --- no middle man. But in today's Charismatic circles, God "moves" through a man or woman to accomplish this feat. I've often wondered how the "channel" is able to stand such a surge of power through his spirit that will flattened hundreds of people at one time and never affect him and generally not his of catchers. "

There are obviously many phonies who are trying to capitalize on the gullibility of believers. I have been in services and have seen evidence on unedited video tapes that many who are "slain" are, in fact, pushed down, muscled down or pulled down by "catchers."

I always liked what Pastor Bert Clendenen said one time: "If there were less catchers, there would be less fallers." Amen! Some who travel with ministries that specialize in slaying in the spirit claim that their ministry calling is as a "catcher." I've read and re-read Ephesians 4: 11 (where Paul lists God's ministry gifts to the church) and I have yet to find "catcher" (even in the newer versions) listed among the apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher. I have said facetiously that only one man was called to be a catcher --- and that was Yogi Berra.

LACK OF DISCERNMENT

I would think it would be unnecessary to mention these examples of rank foolishness (which border on blasphemy) but I'm constantly amazed by the lack of discernment and accompanying gullibility of the average Christian and even some "leaders" today.

As I said in the beginning, God is sovereign and if He chooses to move upon a person in this way that is His right. But an examination of Scripture clearly shows that there is no evidence for such an experience. There is no record in the Bible of anyone falling under the power of the Spirit when the apostles, or the Lord Himself, prayed for them or laid hands on them. Who was more full of the Holy Ghost than Jesus, the Son of God?

It borders on blasphemy, in my opinion, for anyone to claim to have an anointing with power beyond that which Christ Himself had. Yet, such claims are being made frequently. And while I'm at it, how can anyone be so puffed up by his own sense of spirituality that he believes he can merely breathe (blow) on someone and they will receive his anointing and the baptism of the Holy Spirit?

Christ breathed on the apostles the evening of His resurrection and said, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost" but they didn't "fall out." The baptism of the Holy Ghost is not something that can be passed on by breathing on or laying hands on someone. Jesus is still the Baptizer in the Holy Spirit. He has not given that honored position to mankind and certainly not to any one man.

Some of you will say, "What's the harm? If it makes people feel more spiritual or closer to God why not let them indulge in their little fantasy?" It is just that kind of attitude that has led to terrible deception in the church today. This "anything goes" attitude not only opens the church to demonic influences but also lets the spirits of men reign where only the Spirit of God (the Spirit of Truth) should reign.

To tolerate unbiblical practices in the church is to say that the truth of God's Word can be altered to fit our needs and desires. To say that God's ways are not separate and unique from all others is to deny the truth of His Word. That cannot be allowed.

I realize that what has been written contradicts much of what has become widely accepted as normal and acceptable in the Charismatic and Pentecostal churches today. But I believe with all my heart that we must look to the Scriptures alone for the precedents, examples and limits of spiritual experiences.

Spiritual experiences that cannot be honestly justified by God's Holy Word should be suspect and certainly not be sought after.

This article is a reprint from Larry Thomas' newsletter, *The Inkhorn*. Rev. Thomas was the president of Amazing Grace Ministries as well as the founding visionary for A.B.P. Br. Larry went to be with the Lord at the end of 1997.

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