

The Litmus Test

November 2005

The young woman called to ask if we had any opportunities for studying in small groups near her neighborhood. I perked up. Most cold phone calls are requests to help with electric bills or rent. I explained that we had a number of home Bible studies in addition to our regular times of study/worship and that we would be happy to provide such an opportunity at her convenience.

I asked her if she had any familiarity with the church of Christ, or was she just randomly calling different churches. She replied that she had little personal knowledge about the teaching or practice of the church, but she had been warned that you must be “careful” about the church of Christ: you never know what might lie behind the name.

I agreed with her: the name “church of Christ” on some sign or building is no longer definitive, but such was true with many other religious groups. I offered to answer any question she might have about my view of the Scriptures.

She asked, “Are you charismatic?” I replied, “If by that you mean: ‘Do I believe the gifts of the Holy Spirit are operative today?’, the answer is ‘No, I don’t believe they are.’” After a pause, she said in a hushed tone, “Oh.”

Sensing that this is not what she had wanted to hear (and knowing my time was now limited), I tried to carefully explain that we must not be guided by our senses on this issue, that even magicians can fool us by sleight of hand. Rather, we must base our conclusions squarely upon the teaching of the Scriptures. I explained that there were limitations of purpose (to confirm the revelation) and agency of transmission (apostles) that restricted such miracles to the early days of the church.

I also tried to briefly explain that what constituted a true miracle was not what can be observed today. While she agreed that words could be misused (such as applying the term “miracle” to something merely unusual or amazing), her agreement had little enthusiasm.

I tried to salvage her waning interest by explaining that I did, however, believe in the providence of God, that He could accomplish anything He wanted to within and through the existing forces of natural law. He didn’t need a miracle to do it. (Funny, miracle-believers accuse us of “limiting God” when it is actually the other way around: they limit God by implying that He *needs* miracles to do His will. God controls entire nations and the flow of human events without working miracles. Miracles always have been *for our benefit*, not His. And the benefit that we might receive via miracles has been fulfilled.) Alas, my attempt to stir her curiosity was to no avail.

“I’m really busy. I’ve got to go,” she replied. I asked, “Does this mean you are no longer interested in a study?” “No, I’m not, but thanks anyway.” And she hung up, having closed her mind to truth that would have set her free.

What happened in this exchange? The same thing that happened to Jesus, just in reverse. Jesus *did* work miracles, but the people rejected them because He failed their litmus test: He contradicted their preconceptions which were shaped by traditions and carnal hopes rather than by revelation. Their mind was made up, and even miracles couldn’t persuade them to reconsider.

My distinct impression is that this young caller believed in miracles because she *wanted to*. Thus it is not surprising that she thinks she sees them occur. But this kind of thinking is spiritually backward. Instead, we must *commit our-selves to the truth first and then follow it wherever it may lead us*. Do you have a litmus test for God? Is there something you want to believe so badly that you willingly turn away from the truth in order to hang on to it?