

THE  
BIBLIOTHECA SACRA.

---

ARTICLE I.

ARE MIRACLES TO BE EXPECTED?

BY THE REV. LUCIUS E. SMITH, D. D., NEWTON, MASS.

IT is a remarkable example of opposite developments, that, while at the present time a philosophy has gained extensive credence which denies the possibility of any supernatural action controlling or modifying the course of nature, a considerable number of Christians firmly believe and confidently assert that miracles are now wrought, and that more would be witnessed but for a lamentable want of faith. Scepticism that doubts the being of God exists beside a faith that might remove mountains, if it only *would*. This heroic faith is not only held and avowed, but is supported by learned and devout interpreters of Scripture, and advocated in books that have the prestige of eminent names, and that make a plausible appeal to religious minds. It cannot be denied that this is a matter deserving of earnest consideration. It is time to inquire whether such faith has its warrant in the teachings of Scripture. Have miracles ceased, as has long been the common belief of the Protestant church? Or are signs and wonders still to be looked for in answer to prayer offered with a due measure of faith?

This is a question which cannot be intelligently or profitably discussed without an attempt, at the outset, to define the meaning of terms. What do we, or ought we, to mean

by *miracles*? What is the relation of miracles to other supernatural acts? Are there supernatural acts that fall short of the miraculous? It is not merely with reference to the subject of the present inquiry that these preliminary questions are important. The whole subject of providential divine government and of the reasonableness of prayer is needlessly perplexed by a confused use of language.

We are making this inquiry as Christians, and assuming as true the fundamental beliefs of Christianity. To us there is one God, the Father, and all things by him. In him we live, and move, and have our being. He is the creator and upholder of all things. By this we understand that he maintains not only the order of the universe, but its existence. Created existence is dependent existence, and is dependent not only in the moment of its creation, but in every subsequent moment. In the light of this truth, the distinction often drawn between a general and a particular providence vanishes. To every person, to every thing, to every particle of matter, God is present, and nothing can happen to any person or thing or particle of matter without his knowledge or permission. What we term the laws of nature are simply forms of expression denoting certain regular modes or conditions of existence which he has established and which he maintains—conditions imposed by him upon the material universe, including the material portion of man's being, but by no means limiting or restraining himself. Man can deal successfully with matter only by conforming to its laws. But God is above nature; he transcends nature; and all laws of nature, known and unknown, are but parts of his ways.

Man, as to one constituent of his being, is a part of nature, and subject to its laws. But he is also a spiritual

natural laws. By a knowledge of those laws he is able to direct natural forces to the fulfilment of his personal ends; as when he uses the electric force to communicate his messages or to illuminate his house. We observe, therefore, two classes or orders of events constantly taking place. First, what we term in the strictest sense, natural events. "The stars in their courses" fulfil the law of their being. The planets revolve about the sun, satellites around their primary orbs, in their assigned orbits and punctual to the fixed period of their revolution. The changing year brings the phenomena of the seasons in due succession. The vegetable world goes through the appointed order of germination, growth, and decay. The animal races are subject to birth and growth, and, after a brief average of normal activity, to death. Man, allied to the animals by his physical nature, passes through the same succession, from the cradle to the grave. And in the depths of the earth, as geological evidence apparently certifies us, is the record of æons of change, through which our planet was brought from a chaotic state to a habitable condition and to a fitness for the habitation of man. The whole order of natural events is characterized by uniformity, necessity, succession, each event resulting inevitably from its antecedent event, as link follows link in a chain. The other class of events depend not upon physical necessity, but upon the determination of will. The forces of nature, working according to their law, never evolved a house, a water-wheel, a steam-engine, or even an axe or a hammer. Geological investigation discovers in a stratum supposed to have been deposited myriads of years ago, some sharpened flints; and the existence there of so rude an implement is held to be demonstrative proof that man existed in that remote age. Nature does not even shape a flint knife; wherever found, it is recognized as an artificial product. It has been justly remarked as an evident inconsistency, that men who see proofs of intelligent design in a

chipped flint are unable to discover a trace of it in the solar system.

Now, if man is able to work out his will in the sphere of nature, through his knowledge of natural laws and by availing himself of natural forces, why should we think it incredible that God may accomplish his will, not only in the uniformities of nature, but in the production of results by means corresponding with the volitional action of man? Why may He not do this without suspending or in any way interfering with the uniform course of nature? The Bible tells us that the battle is not to the strong, but it is God who gives the victory. With his infinite knowledge of both man and nature, his doing this does not imply the overruling or setting aside of any physical law. That the divine will works in and through man and nature with determining effect, yet without miracle and without impairing moral agency, is not irrational, and is the plain teaching of Scripture. The promises that God will not suffer his people to be tempted above that they are able to bear, that he will guide and keep them, and that all things shall work together for their good, do not mean or in any way imply that miracles will be wrought, but that the end thus assured will be accomplished through the wise control of events by Divine Providence. Prayer for any particular result which we may believe to be included in these promises is not a prayer for miraculous interference, but for a providential direction of the event. A prayer for recovery from sickness may be answered without anything properly called miraculous. It is a supernatural relief, for it is from a putting forth of the divine will. but there may be no interference with the laws

which we can discern only the succession of natural causes ; the switch and the hand that sets it are invisible.

The classes of events thus far considered—natural events, and personal acts within the fixed conditions of nature—include nearly all changes of condition of which we have knowledge, or which we believe with reasonable faith. Even supernatural acts done in answer to prayer, we have reason to believe, are in most cases put forth along lines of natural causation, after the analogy of the human will. But there are—or, there have been, as we believe—events of another class, called miracles<sup>1</sup>—events ascribed to divine efficiency acting in disregard of natural laws, but not in violation or contradiction of them. An event which is viewed as naturally impossible is made to come to pass,—as when the waters of a river parted that men might pass over dry-shod; or iron was made to swim; or a man who had been dead four days, in whose body the process of putrefaction had begun, was recalled by a word to life. Or an event which normally occurs only as consequent upon certain physical antecedents comes to pass with no apparent physical cause,—as when water was made wine, or loaves of bread were multiplied. Here is no interference with the laws of cause and effect, but the introduction of a superior, more efficient cause. Candid sceptics admit this. They deny not the possibility, but the reasonable probability of miracles. They refuse to credit the testimony that such things have ever happened, but admit that, on theistic principles, their occurrence cannot be pronounced impossible. If we believe in the existence of a personal God, as distinct from the universe as the builder of a house is from a house, the creator and sustainer of all things, we cannot say that he is unable to do the mighty works referred to; and whether we believe that he has done

them, or not, depends on our estimate of the antecedent probability, and on our faith in the testimony to the fact. And we believe the facts to be both probable, and sustained by plenary evidence.

The sacred record shows that such events have not been of constant or of very frequent occurrence. From after the Deluge there is no express mention of any in the history of the patriarchs, except in connection with the destruction of Sodom, and Abraham's transactions with Abimelech. A series of miracles preceded and attended the exodus from Egypt, the wilderness-march, and the settlement of the Israelites in Canaan. From Joshua to the Captivity they are of very rare occurrence. The ministry of Elijah and Elisha, which seems to have been a special interposition for the revival of the worship of Jehovah in the kingdom of the Ten Tribes, was distinguished by miraculous signs. At a critical juncture in the affairs of the kingdom of Judah, the faith of Hezekiah was fortified by a miracle. In Babylon, signs and wonders were wrought for the protection of Jehovah's servants and the conviction of heathen kings. The Old Testament history of miracles shows that they occurred at important crises of the kingdom of God on earth, and not as a part of his ordinary providence; and they are very uniformly found in connection with the exercise of the prophetic office.

With the advent of Christ and the beginning of the gospel dispensation, miracles again appear. Signs and wonders and mighty works attest the divinity of our Lord's mission. Their main purpose was undoubtedly that which is stated near the conclusion of the fourth Gospel: "These are writ-

wonders done by our Lord a large proportion were miracles of healing: blindness, deafness, palsy, leprosy, insanity, were healed at a word or a touch. A divine life, divine teaching, divine claims, were fitly matched and vouched by acts of divine power. In sending out his apostles on their temporary mission, he commissioned them, not only to preach, but to "heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons."<sup>1</sup> In his final commission as recorded in the conclusion of the second Gospel, he said, "These signs shall follow them that believe: in my name shall they cast out demons; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover." It is added that "they went forth and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word with signs following."<sup>2</sup> There are serious doubts as to the authenticity of this passage. But it is proposed to take no advantage of such doubts. Let it be assumed that these verses are genuine. The question to be settled is, From the commission of Christ, the record of its fulfilment in the labors of the apostles, and the testimony of their writings, what are we authorized to believe as to the probability that miraculous gifts will be manifested in the present day? Reserving the terms of the commission for later consideration, let us attend to the record.

The first important fact to be noted is the small number of miracles described. Peter and the other apostles at Jerusalem are connected with six, including two at Joppa;<sup>3</sup> Paul, at Damascus, Paphos, Lystra, Philippi, Troas, and on the island of Melita, with six.<sup>4</sup> Certain general statements are made, as that, on two occasions, "many signs and wonders

great wonders and signs;<sup>1</sup> that at Iconium "signs and wonders," and at Ephesus "special miracles," were wrought through the hand of Paul.<sup>2</sup> In Rom. xv. 18, 19, Paul speaks of the things which Christ wrought through him "in the power of wonders and signs." Similar allusions are found in the Epistles to the Corinthians and Galatians. Twelve examples are circumstantially stated, two occasions are specified, on which it is said indefinitely that miracles were performed, two occasions on which "many" are spoken of, and two or three slighter allusions are made to them as well-known facts. And where numerous miracles are collectively referred to, the connection always shows that each group of wonders took place in rapid succession and within a short time. This is the record of more than thirty years in Asia and Europe, and seems to show that the display of miraculous energy took place at wide intervals of time and space.

It is further to be observed that the apostles cannot be shown ever to have wrought or to have professed to work miracles on the initiative of their own will. In this respect they conform to the law under which the prophets of the Old Testament did their supernatural works. Moses did miracles when and as Jehovah commanded him. The recorded wonders of Israel's exodus and conquest were accomplished under express and even minute divine direction. Elijah and Elisha seem to have been under the same dependence. So at least our Lord interprets in his discourse in the synagogue at Nazareth. "There were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah . . . . and unto none of them was Elijah *sent*, but only to Zarephath, in the land of



ting Paul's first recorded miracle upon Elymas the sorcerer, the sacred historian says, "But Saul, who is also Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fastened his eyes upon him."<sup>1</sup> But Saul was not now for the first time the recipient of the Spirit's power. He received that gift under the hands of Ananias. The language implies that he acted under a special inspiration, moving him to denounce the judgment of the Lord. At Iconium, it is said "the Lord . . . . bare witness unto the word of his grace, *granting* signs and wonders to be done by their hands."<sup>2</sup>

Again, there is nothing to show that miracles were wrought mainly, if at all, to satisfy the personal wishes of either the person through whom or on whom the wonder was performed. No doubt the sick desired to be healed, but if there had been no other reason for it, no supernatural power would have been put forth. Paul suffered much anxiety with reference to the illness of Epaphroditus,<sup>3</sup> but did not supernaturally shorten it; he left Trophimus at Miletum sick;<sup>4</sup> instead of miraculously healing Timothy's "often infirmity," he prescribed a little wine.<sup>5</sup> He could foresee the safety of the passengers with whom he was voyaging to Rome,<sup>6</sup> but not his own fate at the bar of Nero.<sup>7</sup> It is plain that miraculous power was not something possessed by Paul to be used on his own or his friends' occasions, or for any personal reason, but was communicated to him, or rather through him, at such times and under such circumstances as God's good pleasure appointed and God's Spirit revealed to him.

works recorded of him. They said he did them by the help of Beelzebub, but did not venture to say that they were optical illusions or deceptions or nervous fancies. They said, later, of the apostles, "That indeed a notable miracle hath been wrought through them is manifest . . . and we cannot deny it."<sup>1</sup> Christ said of his second coming, that, though sudden as lightning, it would be as visible and as unmistakable.<sup>2</sup> His supernatural works, whether done in his own person or through his apostles, seem to have had something of that revealing light. Hence they are commonly called "signs." Their significance was not to be hidden. When, therefore, events are related to us as supernatural which leave room for a reasonable or even an unreasonable doubt as to the reality of the supernatural character claimed for them, is it not a sufficient reason for withholding our assent to the claim? Whatever such manifestations may be, they are not manifest signs of something divine.

Such are some of the conclusions arrived at from a view of the recorded facts. As to the general statements, that at certain times and places "many" miracles were performed, it seems reasonable to interpret them in the light of the instances described in detail; that is to say, it is to be presumed that each miracle or group of miracles thus referred to was performed under the same conditions of divine guidance and direction that limited the exercise of miraculous power in the instances more circumstantially narrated.

It remains to consider the prophecies and promises on this subject. It may be remarked that upon these seems to be placed the chief reliance of those who maintain that miracles are now to be looked for. It will therefore be proper in this connection to examine the position taken by that class of writers, and, as one of the ablest and fairest of them, Dr. Gordon is selected, whose work is in its third

<sup>1</sup> Acts iv. 16.      <sup>2</sup> Matt. xxiv. 27.

edition in this country, and has been much sold in England.<sup>1</sup> It is of course not to be expected that his book will be critically and thoughtfully examined in the space that remains for this discussion; but, wherever our conclusions conflict with his, we hope to consider the point of difference candidly, and to do the esteemed author no injustice.

Dr. Gordon's leading position is that Christ is set before us "as the sickness-bearer as well as the sin-bearer of his people," from which it is inferred that "he bore" our sicknesses "that we might not bear them." This doctrine is derived by him from the text which declares that Christ's work of healing fulfilled the words of Isaiah, "Himself took our infirmities and bare our sicknesses."<sup>2</sup> Hence he feels authorized to say, "The yoke of his cross by which he took hold of our iniquities took hold also of our diseases." But where is it said or intimated that *in his death on the cross* our Lord bore our sicknesses? His own words certainly make a distinction between his ministry and his death. "The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many."<sup>3</sup> His life was a ministry; his death, a ransom. Is it not true, also, that whoever receives Christ by faith receives him in all his offices, as Prophet, Priest, Redeemer, King, Advocate? Are we required to experience so many separate kinds of faith, in order to be assured that he will be ours in each and all these aspects, and more? It seems to us that the question admits of but one answer. If Christ bore our diseases in the same sense and with the same effect as he bore our sins, the great commission as given in the end of the second Gospel should read, He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved *from both sin and disease*. But the miracles

<sup>1</sup> The Ministry of Healing, or Miracles of Healing in All Ages. By A. J. Gordon, Pastor of the Clarendon Street Baptist Church, Boston. Third Edition.

<sup>2</sup> Matt. viii. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Matt. xx. 28.

enumerated are predicted as signs, not promised as the uniform effect of faith. "These signs shall follow," but not necessarily in every instance of faith. They "shall follow" when, where, as often, and as long, as to the Lord shall seem good. We have no reason to suppose that the three thousand converts on the day of Pentecost all spoke with tongues, cast out demons, and healed the sick, much less that all of them who had any bodily infirmities were made whole and sound. "Are all workers of miracles?"<sup>1</sup>

On the whole, it must be confessed that our author said wisely, in beginning his comment on the text from which he inferred so much, "In the atonement of Christ there seems to be a foundation laid for faith in bodily healing. Seems, we say, for the passage to which we refer is so profound and unsearchable in its meaning that one would be very careful not to speak dogmatically in regard to it." Only he went forward to reason and infer, and to support his reasonings and inferences by collateral evidence, with such apparent confidence, that, if he did not forget his own caveat against dogmatism, there is danger that his readers may.

Advancing from this profound and comprehensive speculation, the author rests his cause upon explicit promises. The first of these is the passage already briefly but perhaps sufficiently considered, the prophecy of signs to follow on the preaching and receiving of the gospel.<sup>2</sup> Waiving the doubt which hangs on the authenticity of this passage, it is a promise that miraculous signs shall follow the preaching and reception of the gospel—but, how often and for how

him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: and the prayer of faith shall save him that is sick, and the Lord shall raise him up." Stress is laid on the circumstance that the promise is unconditional: "The prayer of faith shall save him that is sick." But these words, "the prayer of faith," our author says, "should be strongly emphasized. It is the intercession accompanied by the special miraculous faith alluded to in the Scriptures as 'the gift of faith' and 'the gift of healing.'" We cannot but think it remarkable that, so far as we have observed, there is in the whole volume no definition, or description, or collation from the Scriptures, of the characteristics of this indispensable kind of faith. It is merely alluded to as something supposed to be well understood. If, however, this be accepted as a correct interpretation, it amounts to a surrender of a very important position. For the promise is no longer "unconditional." Prayer shall save the sick, provided it be the prayer of a *miraculous* faith; and on the question, whether such miraculous endowments are now to be looked for, the text thus interpreted leaves us where it finds us.

But, now, are we at liberty to suppose that such was the apostle's meaning? Did he intend to be understood as saying, Call in the elders of the church, provided they, or any of them, have the gift of healing? Such is not the obvious sense of the passage. The direction to call in the elders implies that, as a general rule, the elders may be expected to do what is described, and with the expectation of the predicted result. This promise, by the way, is no warrant for the resort of persons from far and near to some person

tle. The state of society and of the churches presupposed by the writer is one calling for sharp rebukes. Instead of the faith of Christians being extraordinary, he implies that it decidedly needs fortifying. The very passage under consideration is part of a section evidently designed to strengthen a deficient faith in the readiness of God to hear prayer.

Is it asked, What interpretation shall be given to this promise of healing? Perhaps we may not be able to answer to any one's satisfaction, even our own. But it is safe to say that it does not mean that Christians have a divine warrant for expecting that every sickness will be averted and healed, or might be, if they were not so blamably wanting in faith. On this principle, health should be in proportion to piety, which we apprehend is not the fact. Nay, more, if freedom from sickness were guaranteed, freedom from liability to die would be enjoyed, and death, instead of being the "last enemy" to be destroyed, would be now already dethroned. It cannot mean that supernatural help is to be sought while the proper means of cure are neglected. We might as well say that the injunction to pray for daily bread excuses from laboring for it. In this, as in all other matters, faith without works is dead. It cannot mean that the desire for health is excepted from the general principle that our desires are to be offered in prayer subject to be overruled by the supreme wisdom and perfect will of God, our hearts saying, as our Lord said in his agony, "Not my will, but thine be done!"

Is it still asked, What interpretation shall we give to this promise—this "unconditional promise" of healing? We shall do with it as with other unconditional promises—*understand* those conditions which other parts of God's word require us to understand; as we do with the promise, "If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything they shall ask, it shall be done for them;" or with the promise, "If ye ask anything in my name, I will do it." This neces-

sity of supplying something which is not there expressed, is recognized by Jehovah himself in his word to Ezekiel: "When I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; if he turn from his sin and do that which is lawful and right . . . he shall surely live, he shall not die."<sup>1</sup> The unconditional denunciation has an understood condition of forgiveness upon repentance. Now, the duty of reverently submitting our will to the will of God is most clearly taught; and though it be not brought in as an express condition limiting a promise, it must be understood. We believe that in more cases than the world knows of, sick persons have been raised up in answer to prayer, the blessing of God giving effect to means, or possibly in rare instances exceeding the natural effect of the means or superseding them altogether. But it must not be supposed that recovery is promised more unconditionally than other blessings that are contingent on the will of God.

Perhaps we separate these verses too much from their connection. The entire paragraph inculcates a deportment becoming Christians in various circumstances of life. "Is any afflicted? let him pray." Let him not indulge the sorrow of the world. "Is any merry? let him sing psalms." Let his mirth be that of a Christian. "Is any sick?" Let him meet *this* affliction in a Christian way. Let him pray and send for the elders to pray. That, in the time when these words were written, there were cases of miraculous healing, may be admitted, and that the language used had a greater fulness of application then than it has now. But in its spirit and general meaning it is applicable to all times.

The two passages thus far considered are the only explicit promises cited by Dr. Gordon from the New Testament. But the use which he makes of another passage in the Epistle of James is worthy of at least a passing notice. "Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are"—not some privileged courtier of the King of kings, not some high

<sup>1</sup> Ezek. xxxiii. 14, 15.

and mighty chancellor of the exchequer of heaven, having rights of access and intercourse with God of which we know nothing—'and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain, and it rained not on the earth for the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again; and the heavens gave rain and the earth brought forth her fruit.' If he could shut and open the heaven, not the less can you, the children of a day" (p. 37). If our author believes this, one is tempted to ask, why he and others like-minded, did not open heaven when, as has more than once happened since the book appeared, drought has parched the fields, dried the wells, and sadly diminished the water courses of New England. But either he wrote without due conviction in this place, or he wrote with strange forgetfulness in the next chapter: "Miracles on external nature, like the turning of water into wine, and the multiplying of the loaves, belong exclusively to the Lord. We do not find them perpetuated beyond his own ministry, either in fact or in promise. Miracles of cure, on the contrary, being in the direct line of the Lord's redemptive work, abound in the ministry of the disciples as they do in that of the Lord, and have the clear pledge of Scripture for their performance" (p. 53). We are in some doubt as to the meaning attached to the phrase "external nature." The word "external" in such a connection usually distinguishes that which is exterior to the mind contemplating it; and in that sense every miracle is "on external nature." It is only by its deviation from "the course of [external] nature" that a miracle is distinguished as a supernatural event. A supernatural effect produced upon the human body is as "external" as one produced upon a tree or upon the weather. But, assuming, for the present occasion, that there is properly a distinction such as the author indicates, the assertion that there is no promise of miracles on external nature reaching beyond our Lord's personal ministry, is made in forgetfulness not only of the passage in



the Epistle of James last cited and his comments thereon, but of our Lord's words to the apostles: "Whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed and be thou cast into the sea, and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those things which he saith shall come to pass; he shall have whatsoever he saith."<sup>1</sup> If this promise runs to the end of the world, it authorizes the present expectation of *such* miracles. If there is any limit, why not also to other promises relied on?

Besides these definite citations, we find some general assertions as to the teaching of Scripture which should, perhaps, be briefly referred to. For example, against the idea that miracles gather around certain epochs, our author says: "In the Old Dispensation were miracles of healing shut up within some narrow and special age? Run through the list and see: Abraham healing Abimelech and his household by his prayers to God; Moses crying unto God for Miriam, 'Heal her now, O God, I beseech thee,' and the Lord answering with the promise that after seven days her leprosy should depart; God's cure of the bitten Israelites in answer to Moses' prayer and through a look at the brazen serpent; Naaman the Syrian recovered of his leprosy by the faith of Elisha; Hezekiah raised up from his death-bed in answer to prayer, and his life lengthened out fifteen years; and other instances which we have not space to refer to" (p. 35). Here, in proof that miracles of healing were a constant characteristic of the old dispensation, facts are appealed to that are separated by centuries: from Abraham to Moses, four hundred years; from Moses to Elisha, five hundred and fifty years; from Elisha to Hezekiah, one hundred and eighty years; not to speak of separation in space as well as in time.<sup>2</sup>

It must be confessed, we think, that the scriptural grounds

<sup>1</sup> Mark xi. 23.

<sup>2</sup> These are round numbers and the chronology is Usher's. Hale's chronology would increase one, at least, of the number.

for expecting a continuance of miraculous gifts, are somewhat precarious. It is true that there is no express limitation of them to a particular age. But there are certain indications tending to support the belief that they belong to the initial stage of Christian development, not to the ordinary conditions of the Christian life. For example, the revelation of "the man of sin" is predicted, "the mystery of iniquity," whose work must precede "the day of Christ,"—"even him whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders and with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish." But the apostle Paul does not suggest that Christians are to be protected against the arts of "that Wicked" by counter-supernatural demonstrations of a more authentic character. He rather founds his hope of their steadfast assurance upon their "sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth," in accordance with the purpose and calling of God, in which truth he exhorts them to stand fast.<sup>1</sup> The apostle John, in connection with his warnings against the antichrists and false prophets that had gone out into the world, presents only this test for the trial of the spirits,—whether they confess or deny the truth of the gospel. "Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh, is of God; and every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh, is not of God."<sup>2</sup> The apostle Jude, also, after describing with terrible energy the character and doom of false teachers, proposes to his brethren this safeguard only, "But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in

this agrees the tenor of the Epistles to Timothy and Titus. Nothing is said to them of signs or wonders. They are to preach, teach, rebuke, give themselves to reading and meditation, speak things becoming sound doctrine, do the work of an evangelist; to be gentle, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing them that oppose themselves; and they are to commit the same work with a like charge, "to faithful men who shall be able to teach others also." No one would infer from these Epistles that a transmission of miraculous power was provided for as a permanent characteristic of the Christian dispensation. This is more remarkable when we take into account their prophetic character. Dr. Gordon thinks we have fallen on a time when there is special need of special divine interpositions. "Certainly," he says, "the time has come for us to make use of all the divine assistance that is within our reach. If there are any residuary legacies of power and privilege accruing to us since the fathers fell asleep, and yet remaining unclaimed, every consideration is pressing us to come forward and take possession of them" (p. 16). But Paul writes to his son Timothy, "This know, that in the last days perilous times shall come." Does he bid him or his successors invoke miraculous weapons with which to meet the coming perils? Nay, verily. He says, "But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; and that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures." In possessing those Scriptures, he declares, the man of God is "thoroughly furnished unto every good work."<sup>1</sup> It would seem that no "residuary legacies" of power were supposed by the apostle to be needed in the most perilous times that he foresaw.

On the whole, in view of the survey that has been taken

signs is supported by two or three passages, taken in their greatest intensity of meaning, and without qualification from other relevant passages; but that the general tenor of Scripture is against it. The point is nowhere explicitly determined. The indications of fact also point to a negative conclusion. The ministry of the apostles was inaugurated at Jerusalem by the wonders of the day of Pentecost, the healing of the lame man and of many sick, the death of Ananias and Sapphira, and miracles wrought by Stephen. After this we hear nothing more of the supernatural in that city, except the deliverance of Peter from Herod, and the prophecy of Agabus. But the word was confirmed by signs following in Samaria, and in the conversion of Paul, and at various points along his missionary progress. He reminds the Corinthians that the signs of an apostle were wrought when he was among them,<sup>1</sup> yet he tells them that the miraculous gifts are not the most important or the most desirable, but that he shows them "a more excellent way."<sup>2</sup> As we have seen, in his latest Epistles, the subject is not alluded to.

When we pass from the New Testament to the testimony of ecclesiastical history, we discover, at the outset, that there is no evidence to prove a *continuous* exercise of miraculous power from and after the apostolic age. For half a century after the apostles, there is no mention of it. The Apostolic Fathers, so-called, do not claim such power for themselves or for any of their contemporaries. Beginning with Justin Martyr in the second century, the claim is peremptorily and confidently made by the Fathers. But those Fathers do not say that they themselves wrought signs and wonders, nor the bishops, nor any other ministers. They give no names. They only say that such and such things are done "among us," by "many." While, as we have seen, miracles were wrought by the apostles at considerable intervals of time and space and at particular junctures, the ecclesiastical writers declare

<sup>1</sup> 2 Cor. xii. 12.      <sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. xii. 31.

that they were wrought constantly, and that anybody who wished might see them at any time. These marvels, visible at pleasure, are distinguished by that very circumstance from the miracles of Scripture, and by a broad line. While the signs done by the apostles seemed intended to initiate conversion by convincing the unbelieving, it is somewhat remarkable that the alleged ecclesiastical miracles appear first in the second century, in places where the religion had gained the most adherents, and that they become more numerous as the church grows stronger,—that is, as the need of miracles diminishes. These circumstances are suspicious, and assertions having such a presumption against them require to be supported by very explicit and unexceptionable testimony. Is such testimony producible?

Irenæus affirms that the dead were often raised. "Men," he said, "have lived among us several years after their resurrection." But he mentions no names, specifies no places, gives no dates. Moreover, the heathen affirmed that the thing was impossible. Theophilus, Bishop of Antioch, a contemporary of Irenæus, was challenged by Autolychus, a pagan, to produce one of the persons said to have been evoked from the grave, and gave no satisfactory answer. But if the fact was of such notorious frequency, it is not easy to explain these denials. The rulers of the Jews did not call in question the raising of Lazarus.

Several writers speak of the healing of diseases as very common, sometimes through the imposition of hands, sometimes, and perhaps oftēnest, on the application of oil. But the evidence in these cases is unsatisfactory, partly from its vagueness and generality, and especially from the fact that no proper evidence of a miracle seems to have been given to those who beheld. Now, the Jews might or might not admit the reality of Christ's claims, but they could not help marvelling at his wonderful acts of healing. Apart from any ultimate effects of conversion, all Jerusalem was moved,

when the lame man at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple was made to walk, through the power of the name of Jesus. Not many of the Lycaonians may have believed Paul's preaching, but they were ready to worship him as a god when at his word the cripple leaped up and walked.<sup>1</sup> But the cures boasted of by the Fathers were either denied as impositions, or boldly declared to be no greater than were performed in the name of pagan gods; to which no better answer was forthcoming than that those were done by demons.

The casting out of demons, by the way, was the miracle of which the most was made. That was to be seen at almost any time. In fact, the great number alleged to have been possessed is one of the most incredible features of the case. They seem to have abounded everywhere. Yet it is not easy to discover from the descriptions given that the subjects exhibited anything more than the ordinary symptoms of certain forms of bodily and mental disease. It is to be remarked, also, that the Christian writers do not claim that their exorcists did anything that was essentially different from what was asserted to have been done by Jewish and heathen exorcists. The sons of Sceva the Jew, at Ephesus, discovered a difference between their exorcism and that of Paul.<sup>2</sup> And whatever may have ailed these patients, they were not, in fact, healed. Unlike those of whom we read in the Gospels, they were constantly liable to fresh seizures. They were taken under the care of the church, and kept together under the supervision of the exorcists in apartments appropriated to their use. It was the duty of the exorcists

was taken away from the professional exorcists by the Council of Laodicea, A. D. 367, and committed exclusively to persons appointed by the bishops, the miraculous energy suddenly declined and in a short time disappeared, so that the form of prayer for the possessed became obsolete. Whiston—"poor Whiston," as Macaulay says, "who believed everything but the Trinity"—deplores this step of "that unhappy council," as the fatal occasion of the loss to the church of an eminent gift of the Spirit.

It may be objected that some of the things we have referred to are aside from the matter in hand, which is miracles of healing—the only kind of miracle claimed to be credible in our day. But we cannot be asked to accept the testimony of the Fathers without cross-examination. We must have the whole story. If they made claims of having supernatural signs to show, we judge of their capacity to testify by examples of their discernment, in the several parts of their testimony. And it must be added that on this subject the most eminent of the Fathers are chargeable with inconsistency. Thus Chrysostom, who is by no means backward to tell tales of the supernatural, nevertheless says, "Because no miracles are wrought now, we are not to take it as a proof that none were wrought then," i. e., in the times of the apostles,—“for then they were of use, but now they are not.” “They ask us,” says Augustine, “Why are not miracles now wrought which you declare to have been wrought formerly? I would tell them that they were then necessary, before the world believed, for the very end that the world might believe; but he who still requires prodigies that he may become a believer, is himself a great prodigy, believing not when the world does believe.” Yet he attempts to prove, after all, that miracles were still wrought, and re-

“if even they were told abroad to other people, yet they are not recommended with such authority as to be received without difficulty and doubting, though by true believers related to true believers.” Nay, when the records were read publicly in the church, “those who heard them . . . seldom or never took the pains to tell anybody else whom they knew to be absent.”<sup>1</sup> Stories that were not plausible enough to win respectful attention from the Christians of that time cannot be said to make a very strong claim upon our faith. Very early in the history of the church we encounter instances of alleged miracles that excite lively suspicions of fraud. The name of Ambrose is mixed up with transactions of this sort that reflect no honor upon his saintship. The pretended miracles of the monks and the “lying wonders” of Rome even down to our own day, need no more than a passing mention.

What, now, is to be said of the claim set up in our day, that an age of miracles is dawning? We must admit without reservation, first, that there is no impossibility in the supposition. God is as able to work miracles now as he was two thousand years ago. We must admit, also, that the Scriptures nowhere reveal a limit of time within which miracles were to be expected, and beyond which they were not to be hoped for. We often hear it said that the age of miracles is past. But no age of miracles is defined by inspiration. All such *dicta* are to be set aside. They establish nothing and explain nothing. Yet it would be strange if we could not find in the word of God some principles by



prophetic, apostolic, or evangelistic ministry. "The Lord," it is said, "worked with" the apostles, "*confirming the word with signs following.*" "The Lord . . . . . bare witness unto the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done." If miracles are signs to confirm the word, we have reason to look with suspicion upon wonders that are supposed to have been performed for their own sake, or for merely personal ends. We shall be compelled to be incredulous of the therapeutic value of any man's faith, who is neither a pastor nor an evangelist, to whom invalids resort as they would to a physician, and whose prayers are sought as medical prescriptions are sought by their patients. We shall perhaps think such manifestations of divine power less improbable in our foreign missions than elsewhere. There are a few reports to that effect—few and vaguely stated, needing verification, as to which our judgment must be suspended.

But when we come to instances of alleged cure in answer to prayer without medical aid, we have to deal with a lawless variety of phenomena, among which there must be discrimination. No one rule or principle will cover them all. Physicians tell us that many diseases are self-limited, that any person whose constitution is not seriously impaired is more likely to recover from sickness than not, even without medicine; so that when medicine is administered, the cure may not be due to it,—in logical phrase, it may be merely *post hoc*, not *propter hoc*.<sup>1</sup> It follows that when recovery

<sup>1</sup> The mother of Chief Justice Parsons, his son records, "came deliberately to the conclusion that medical science was no science at all, and that in many cases quite as much was to be feared as hoped from medical treatment. . . . . In the summer following my grandfather's death [1784], she removed to Boston, and there lived until her death in December, 1794, when she was seventy-five years old. While thus living with one of my uncles in Boston, she had a violent and long-continued fever. Not one particle of medicine would she take from the beginning to the end. As her disease increased in violence, and she apprehended delirium, she called her sons together and solemnly charged them, come what might, to give her no medicine whatever. And such was her hold upon them, that they obeyed her, when she could not have known it had they disobeyed. She recovered and lived some years in excellent health."—Memoir of Chief Justice Parsons, p. 15.

from sickness follows prayer, it is not a certain proof of the effectual character of the prayer. Some cases are to be accounted for by an effect produced upon the nervous system through the force of mental excitement. That this accounts for some wonderful instances of apparent cure is evident from the fact that similar effects are produced by men who do not pretend to be religious, and the still more decisive fact that some alleged cures are only temporary and are followed by relapses. These and like cases being eliminated, there remain some instances that, as reported, leave little or no room for doubt that sick persons were raised up in answer to prayer. We may perhaps desiderate more thorough sifting of the evidence in some cases. But if examples are found that bear all reasonable tests of evidence and still lead to that conclusion, it is a conclusion which we may not be reluctant to admit. We believe that God is a hearer of prayer. We believe that he is the God of providence, controlling all the agencies of nature for the working of his own will, and that he is able to answer prayer by such control over second causes as secures the result he designs. He may thus answer prayer for healing, either by giving effect to remedies, or in some other way. But it does not follow in either case that a miracle has been wrought, to be compared with the mighty works done by our Lord or through the apostles in his name. We do not in such cases recognize miracle, and fail to discover any occasion for miracle that is recognized as such in the word of God.