

DOES GOD WANT CHRISTIANS TO PERFORM MIRACLES TODAY?

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INTRODUCTION

One of Satan's most insidious purposes, through the ages, has been to enter a wedge between God's people and God's infallible, inerrant Word. It all began in the Garden of Eden when "the father of lies" asked Eve, "Yea, hath God said . . . ?" and it continues today without abatement. Two distinct but related levels of this Satanic strategy can be detected in our day:

(1) Rationalistic doubts and denials of the supernatural acts of God as recorded in Scripture. This is being most keenly felt in evangelical circles today through various compromises with the theory of organic evolution, which attempt to reduce the great creative miracles of God to mere providential processes.

(2) The other strategy of the enemy is to encourage Christians to imagine present-day miracles where there are none, through the claims of self-appointed miracle workers.

The goal of the first strategy is to take away the Bible from us piece by piece, until we wonder what pieces of infallible Scripture are still left to us.

The goal of the second strategy is to take us away from the Bible by centering our attention on new claims of divine revelation by modern prophets, or on new and supernatural experiences and powers so that we have little time or interest in searching the Scriptures for God's truth and for God's revealed ways of perpetuating and promoting it.

THE PRESSURE IS ON

In every generation men have gravitated to religions that offer signs and wonders as their basic appeal. This has been a principal source of power for Roman Catholicism, which claims a continuing revelation accompanied by continuing signs. And what modern, fast-growing cult is devoid of prophets and miracle-workers? Old-line Pentecostalism, and now the "Neo-Pentecostal" movement, offer the miracle of tongues, the interpretation of tongues, and even faith-healers that attract millions. In tune with the times, Protestant liberalism has abandoned its old rationalistic formulas in favor of a more vibrant existentialism called Neo-Orthodoxy, which offers a direct "word" from God to sincere individual seekers the world over, whether they have actually heard of the historical Christ or not.

What may be considered a natural desire by men to see some token of God has surely been accelerated by the suffocating atmosphere of twentieth-century uniformitarian scientism. If Satan cannot take away the true God by the pressure of theoretical or practical atheism in the academic world, he will attempt to do so by pushing men to the invention of false gods that cannot really save or satisfy. That is surely the crisis of the present hour.

The prophet Isaiah felt such pressures in Judah 700 years before Christ. On the one hand, the deep skepticism of that age was represented by King Ahaz himself, who completely rejected God's offer of a great supernatural sign (Isa. 7:12). On the other hand, superstitious men (possibly including King Ahaz) were encouraging one another: "Consult the mediums and the wizards who whisper and mutter" (Isa. 8:19). The true answer to such pressures was not that God never performs miracles, but that He does so on His terms only, and in accordance with His revealed program of history and redemption. "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn" (Isa. 8:20). Thus, Isaiah himself cried out to God for global and spectacular signs of His power as in the days of Moses at Mount Sinai (Isa. 64:1-3). And an even greater prophet, John the Baptist, sent two of his friends to Jesus to ask why the full glory of the Kingdom Age was not yet being manifested (Matt. 11:2-6). Our Lord was continually teaching His disciples to pray for stupendous miracles when he taught them to pray: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, in earth as it is in heaven." Their minds fascinated by this prospect, the disciples came to Jesus and pointedly asked Him, after His resurrection, "Lord, dost thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" His answer was not that there would never be such a literal kingdom and that God would never reveal His great power and glory to men. His answer to them was, in effect, "Not yet" (Acts 1:7).

GOD'S PLAN AND PURPOSE FOR MIRACLES

People often ask why it is, if God is still alive and powerful, He does not perform through men of faith today the same kinds of signs and wonders He performed when Christ and the apostles were here. The answer is that God has a plan in His dealings with men, and that plan does not happen to include a constant repetition of the same kinds of miracles in every time and place. If this were His plan, then miracles would lose their unique sign value because they would be taken for granted. God has wisely protected the significance of miracles in history by the rarity of their occurrence, even in Bible times. Enoch's translation was the only miracle in over 1,700 years between Adam and the Flood. For centuries Israel suffered in Egypt with no special voice from heaven. Only rarely did a miracle occur during the centuries from Joshua to David. And God protected the absolute uniqueness of His Son's miraculous ministry by withholding all miracles for centuries beforehand--even from John the Baptist, the forerunner himself (John 11:41).

Why did Christ perform miracles during His public ministry? Was it to prove that God existed? Was it primarily to help people who were sick, crippled, or in special physical need? No, the purpose was to identify Himself as Israel's true Messiah and to confirm the new revelation He was bringing to the nation (John 20:30-31; Acts 2:22). Thus, the healing of the paralytic man was not for the primary purpose of helping him, or to prove that God exists, but "that ye may know that the Son of Man hath authority on earth to forgive sins" (Matt. 9:6; cf. Deut. 18:22). When John the Baptist momentarily questioned His Messianic identity, Jesus pointed to the people He had just healed as a fulfillment of the Messianic promise of Isaiah 35:5-6 (cf. Matt. 11:4). Israel was thus historically conditioned to expect signs as the proper credentials of their Messiah and His apostles (John 4:48, I Cor. 1:22, II Cor. 12:12, Rom. 15:19, Heb. 2:3,4). The great tragedy, of course, was that Israel willfully rejected the signs God did give to them (Matt. 12:38, I Cor. 14 21-22).

If supernatural signs were thus intended to serve as confirmations of God's special messengers and their message, it seems obvious that such signs would no longer be needed after these messengers had brought their message. In fact, a sign without a message is worse than useless, as Paul and Barnabas discovered to their horror at Lystra (Acts 14:8-18). Thus, the superstructure of the true Church is built upon a foundation which consists exclusively of Christ and His apostles (Eph. 2:20, I Cor. 3:10-11, Rev. 21:14). Since the foundation of a building only needs to be laid once, we may be sure that God has not given any new revelation to His people since the apostles died. The fact that only His apostles belonged in the foundation is seen clearly in our Lord's high priestly

prayer, when He prayed for those who would believe on Him "through their word," namely, the word of the apostles to whom "all the truth" would be given by the Holy Spirit (John 17:20; 16:13). To invent a message as from God when God has not spoken is dangerous indeed, for God is infinitely jealous of the boundary lines of His revelation to men (cf. Deut. 4:2, 12:32, 18:20; Prov. 30:5-6; Jer. 23:30-32; Gal. 1:8; Rev. 21:18-19). New Testament history suggests that the various sign-gifts, including the gift of tongues, were no longer in use after the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and that the gifts of knowledge and prophecy were set aside after the Book of Revelation was completed about A.D. 90. Thus, only the Apostle John lived to see the coming of "that which is perfect" (I Cor. 13:10), namely, the completed Bible. The Bible is perfect, because no one before John wrote the final chapter had anything more than a "part" of the truth (I Cor. 13:9; Heb. 1:1). For someone now, in this superstructure phase of church history, to claim a new revelation from God would be a colossal step backward and downward to the "pre-perfect" foundation phase. Instantly, all of our Bibles would be incomplete! None of us could teach or preach authoritatively and effectively again, until, like Apollos, we could find someone to expound to us "the way of God more accurately" (Acts 18:26).

CHRIST'S MIRACLES WERE UNIQUE

If God is indeed giving to certain men the power to perform healing miracles today, why are there so few of them, and why are their powers so limited, and why are the results so doubtful? By contrast, the miracles of Christ and His apostles were fantastically abundant, utterly spectacular, and totally undeniable. Let us consider each of these in more detail. First, our Lord's miracles were abundant. The Gospel narratives make it quite clear that Christ healed vast numbers of people in many parts of Palestine and over a period of several years (cf. Matt. 14:14, Luke 6:19, etc.). With regard to the apostles, see Acts 5:12-16, 19:11-12. But Church history since the days of the apostles, even in times of great revival and reformation, has not been characterized by physical miracles including healings (see Appendix). Second, our Lord's healing works were spectacular in nature. Consider the healing of the man born blind (John 9:32); the replacement and healing of a man's amputated ear (Luke 22:50); and the immediate and complete resuscitation to mortal life of a man who was not only dead but who had been decomposing in a tomb for more than half a week (John 11). By contrast, modern so-called faith-healers concentrate on those types of physical ailments that are functional rather than organic, and which can more easily be explained as psychotherapeutic rather than genuinely supernatural (for an excellent analysis of this entire problem, see Edmunds and Scorer, Some Thoughts on Faith Healing, The Tyndale Press, 39 Bedford Square, London W. C. 1, 1956).

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In the third place, our Lord's miracles were undeniable. Note, for example, the testimonies of such unregenerate men as Nicodemus (John 3:2) and the chief priest (John 11:47, Acts 4:16). In stark contrast to the present situation, no one who saw the Lord Jesus Christ at work ever questioned the completely supernatural character of His healing miracles. The debate was centered entirely on the issue of whether God or Satan was the source of His power (Matt. 12:24). The question we must ask, in the light of this fact, is not whether God still has the power to perform those kinds of miracles today, but whether it is His plan. For we may be perfectly sure that if it were His plan to do now exactly what He did through certain men nineteen centuries ago, there would be no modern day deniers of the reality of miracles, even as there were none in Jesus' day!

IS GOD HEALING SICK PEOPLE TODAY?

It is my firm conviction that God is healing some sick Christians today (and I have seen this happen twice in my own family), but in a very different way than He did when Christ was here, and for a very different purpose. It is true that God occasionally raises up some desperately sick Christians to a continued life of worship and service; but He never does so through a faith-healer, and He never does so in such a spectacular way that godless men are absolutely forced to admit that a genuine miracle occurred.

God's basic provision and pattern for the healing of Christians is outlined in James 5:13-16. Note carefully, in the first place, that the sick Christian asks for "the elders of the church" to come to him. He does not request to be carried to a miracle-healer! Secondly, God does not promise immediate and spectacular healing, nor does He exclude recuperation processes or the help of doctors and medicines. It is a "family affair," and is not for "show." In other words, it is not intended to serve as a sign to Israel or the unbelieving Gentile world that God is real. Its purpose is to encourage Christians to keep on trusting and serving the gracious Lord who renews their strength according to His will and purpose. In the third place, the healing is not automatically guaranteed each time! Otherwise, no Christians of the early Church would ever have died! We must therefore assume that "the prayer of faith" which was essential to the healing of sick Christians (James 5: 15) was not always granted by the sovereign Lord, even as other gifts were provided only according to the will of the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 12:11).

PAUL HIMSELF LIVED TO SEE THE PASSING OF MIRACLES

If faith-healers are a vital part of God's program for the Church today, why did the Apostle Paul experience the end of such powers during

his own lifetime? While at Ephesus, he healed many people by miraculous means (Acts 19:11-12); but God chose not to answer his prayers for his own bodily healing (II Cor. 12:7-10). The reason for this is exceedingly important: "My grace is sufficient for thee; for my power is made perfect in weakness." What, then, shall we think of a modern faith-healer who states or implies that certain saints of God must continue to be cripples because they have insufficient faith or because they have not come to the right man? Is this the reason why great Christians such as John Calvin, David Brainerd, Frances Havergal, Robert Murray McCheyne, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, and Fanny Crosby, among others, suffered many years of ill health or died young? If God's power is made perfect in weakness, is robust physical health necessarily a measure of one's spiritual well-being?

Paul's last recorded miracles were performed on the island of Malta, one of which was a remarkable fulfillment of our Lord's promise to the apostles that they would not be hurt by deadly serpents (Acts 28: 1-10; Mark 16:18). But after Paul arrived in Rome, his miracle-working powers were apparently withdrawn by the Lord. In a letter to the Philippian church, he explained how Epaphroditus, their messenger to him, had almost died from a sickness, and the clear implication is that Paul was unable to help him (Phil. 2:25-30). After a time, Paul was released from prison, visited the Aegean area again, and was brought back to Rome for execution. In his final letters to Timothy he explained that he had left Trophimus at Miletus sick (II Tim. 4:20). In fact, he knew of no faith-healer who could help Timothy either, so he recommended to him: "Be no longer a drinker of water [which was often dangerously polluted], but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities" (I Tim. 5:23).

Thus, step by step, God was removing the scaffolding of miracles from the early church as the New Testament Scriptures were being completed and the apostles and prophets were dying off. The Holy Spirit was now focusing the eyes of Christians exclusively upon the written Word, apart from which there is no salvation or spiritual maturity (II Tim. 3:15-17). God's plan for this age, said Paul, is for men to walk by faith rather than by sight (II Cor. 5:7), just as our Lord reminded Thomas, the sign-seeker, "blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed" (John 20:29).

CHRIST CLEARLY IMPLIED THAT PHYSICAL MIRACLES WOULD BE SUPPLANTED BY EVEN GREATER WORKS DURING THE CHURCH AGE

The very night of His betrayal, the Lord Jesus told His disciples: "He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do because I go unto the Father"

(John 14:12). What did He mean by these words? The works that Jesus performed during His public ministry were fantastically great. Diseases were banished, demons were cast out, dead men arose, wine, bread, and fishes were created, and mighty storms were instantly calmed. But it must be recognized that each of these miracles was intentionally superficial and temporary in quality! In other words, no one was permanently helped by any of them, nor were men's deepest needs met by such works of power! Creating food for one occasion did not automatically supply the need for later occasions. And with regard to bodily ailments, every diseased, crippled, leprous person Jesus ever healed finally died anyway--every one of them! And poor Lazarus! It is true that Jesus raised him from the dead, instantly and completely, with no convalescence needed. But later on he died again! Would you like to die twice? When Christ raises your dead body some day, would you want it to be raised to mortal life again? This was certainly no favor to Lazarus, nor was it intended to be! It was rather a mere temporary and limited sign of Christ's power to do the greater work of resurrection to glory in the Day of the Lord (John 5:28-29).

In this light, our Lord's words take on new meaning: "greater works than these shall ye do because I go unto the Father." Can there be any greater works than the miracles of Jesus? Yes, there can be and there are. When our Lord returned to heaven, the Spirit of God came ten days later and baptized the disciples into the Body of Christ. Peter then arose, preached a sermon to a vast multitude of Jews, and three thousand men experienced the spiritual miracle of regeneration in one day! This was the "greater work" because it met man's basic need, and met it permanently. Let it be remembered that our Lord's purpose in coming to earth was not to preach the Christian Gospel but to make such preaching possible (I Cor. 15:1-4). If He had not died as our substitute for sin, there could be no Gospel (John 12:20-24). But since His death, resurrection, and ascension, many pastors, evangelists, and missionaries have won more men to saving faith than the Son of God did, and physical miracles have not been the cause of their success.

For a few years, the apostles and prophets did both the lesser works (sign-miracles) and the "greater works" (winning men to saving faith); but as the apostolic age reached its close the sign-miracles phased out and the "greater works" continue as God's basic program for the Church age, until Jesus comes again. Then, at last, our need for complete and permanent physical transformation will be met, for "the Lord Jesus Christ shall change our body of humiliation, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself" (Phil. 3:21). And there will be no debate about the genuineness of that miracle, "for the earnest expectation of the creation waiteth for the revealing of the sons of God"

(Rom. 8:19). God does care about our physical needs and sufferings; but He has a special plan and program for dealing with these needs; and continual, guaranteed healings through special men and gifts does not happen to be in that program for the Church in its superstructure stage of maturity.

No, the Church doesn't need new revelation from heaven today! We already have a completed Bible and the Holy Spirit of God to interpret and apply it! The Church doesn't need more apostles to guide her through the troubled waters of this Satan-dominated world. An apostle might fail us, as Peter did at Antioch. That is why the Holy Spirit wrote, through Peter himself, that "we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place" (II Pet. 1:19). The Church doesn't need special powers, like those which Christ promised to the apostles in Mark 16:17-18, namely, (1) to cast out demons, (2) to speak with new tongues, (3) to pick up serpents, (4) to drink deadly poisons, and (5) to heal the sick. The Church doesn't need any holy places, healing centers, faith-healers, or signs and wonders to appeal to the five senses. WHAT THE CHURCH NEEDS IS A NEW CONFRONTATION WITH THE WHOLE COUNSEL OF GOD, PROCLAIMED IN THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT WITH AUTHORITY AND LOVE, BY MEN WHO KNOW THEIR GOD AND WHO HONOR HIS ONLY WRITTEN REVELATION. Then, and then only, may we expect our deepest needs to be supplied, and God's purpose for His Church to be accomplished in our day.

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APPENDIX

THE TESTIMONY OF EARLY CHURCH FATHERS CONCERNING THE CESSATION OF MIRACLES AFTER THE APOSTOLIC PERIOD

(Quoting B. B. Warfield, MIRACLES:
YESTERDAY AND TODAY. Grand Rapids:
Eerdmans, reprinted, 1965)

With regard to Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of the second century A.D., Dr. Warfield states: "The writings of the so-called Apostolic Fathers contain no clear and certain allusions to miracle-working or to the exercise of the charismatic gifts, contemporaneous with themselves" (1, 10). And after discussing the writings of third century A.D. writers such as Tertullian, Minucius Felix, Origen, and Cyprian, he concludes:

"And so we pass on to the fourth century in an ever-increasing stream, but without a single writer having claimed himself to have wrought a miracle of any kind or having ascribed miracle-working to any known name in the church, and without a single instance having been recorded in detail" (p. 12).

Beginning in the fourth century, however, Christian leaders apparently became so desperate for miracles to match the "miracles" they heard about from heretical and heathen sources, that they began to see "ecclesiastical miracles" everywhere. This trend increased into the Middle Ages, when nearly every "saint" in the Roman Catholic Church had to be supplied with a full display of miraculous powers! At the same time (and this point is exceedingly important for our discussion), they as much as admitted that these miracles were on a much lower level than the great miracles of Christ and the apostles!

For example, Augustine (died 430 A.D.), who in later life felt obliged to testify of many miraculous works going on in his day (though perplexed that no one was taking notice of them!--p. 45), stated in earlier days that none were occurring! "Why do not these things take place now?" he asked about 392 A.D. His answer: "Because they would not move unless they were wonderful, and if they were customary they would not be wonderful . . . God has dealt wisely with us, therefore, in sending his miracles once for all to convince the world, depending afterward on the authority of the multitudes thus convinced" (p. 41).

Chrysostom (4th cent.), the most eloquent preacher of his day, stated: "Argue not because miracles do not happen now, that they did not happen then . . . In those times they were profitable, and now they are not. . . Of miraculous powers, not even a vestige is left" (pp. 46-47).

Isodore of Pelusium (4th cent.) speculated: "Perhaps miracles would take place now, too, if the lives of the teachers rivalled the bearing of the Apostles" (p. 47).

Gregory the Great (6th cent.), commenting on Mark 16:17, asked: "Is it so, my brethren, that because ye do not these signs, ye do not believe? On the contrary, they were necessary in the beginning of the church; for, that faith might grow, it required miracles to cherish it; just as when we plant shrubs, we water them until we see them to thrive in the ground, and as soon as they are well rooted we cease our irrigation" (p. 47).

Isodore of Seville (7th Cent.), in similar vein: The reason why the church does not now do the miracles it did under the Apostles is, because miracles were necessary then to convince the world of the truth

of Christianity; but now it becomes it, being so convinced, to shine forth in good works Whoever seeks to perform miracles now as a believer, seeks after vainglory and human applause" (p 47).

Bernard of Clairvaux (13th cent.) asks concerning Mark 16:17, "For who is there that seems to have these signs of the faith, without which no one, according to this Scripture, shall be saved?" and answers by saying that the greatest miracles are those of the regenerated life (p. 48).

In struggling to explain this strange paradox in the thinking of early Christian theologians, namely, the absence and at the same time the presence of miracles, Dr. Warfield concludes: "The miracles of the first three centuries, if accepted at all, must be accepted on the general assertion that such things occurred--a general assertion which itself is wholly lacking until the middle of the second century and which, when it does appear, concerns chiefly prophecy and healings, including especially exorcisms, which we can scarcely be wrong in supposing are precisely the classes of marvels with respect to which excitement most easily blinds the judgment and insufficiently grounded rumors most readily grow up" (p. 12). And speaking of theologians of later centuries, he concludes: "No doubt we must recognize that these Fathers realized that the ecclesiastical miracles were of a lower order than those of Scripture. It looks very much as if, when they were not inflamed by enthusiasm, they did not really think them to be miracles at all" (p. 48).

Thus, church history confirms the clear inferences of Scripture that sign-miracles of all types ceased with the death of the apostles.