

CESSATION OF MIRACLES

Miracles are common claims in the books and rallies of the Charismatics. These include healings from the common backache and headache, to the more spectacular like the lame and the blind, and at times even raising the dead. This desire to see miracles was greatly popularized by John Wimber whose ministry is called the Vineyard Ministries. Wimber believed that the proclamation of the gospel must be accompanied by signs and wonders, as it was in the days of Jesus.

Today, seeing miracles has become a common, even expected phenomenon in Charismatic churches. Thousands of their church members see this as a norm in their Christian experience. They talk about them and sing praises to God, believing that those who do not believe in what they believe are missing a key ingredient in their Christian walk.

The Christian community outside of this fraternity is confused. Are the claims of the Charismatics for real? Have they monopolized all the miracles and are we losing out? Or can the Devil perform miracles?

THE GIFT OF MIRACLES

- A. "Miracle" defined – The word "miracle" comes from the Latin for "miraculum". Literally it means "a marvelous event" or "an event which causes wonder." This general meaning is insufficient for our understanding of its usage in the Bible.

In Christian theology, the word "miracle" means more than just something that causes amazement in the minds of man. A miracle is: (1) an extraordinary event, inexplicable in terms of ordinary natural forces; (2) an event which causes the observer to postulate a super human personal cause; and (3) an event which constitutes evidence (a sign) of implications much wider than the event itself. All three aspects must be present before it is called a biblical miracle.

Wayne Grudem defines miracles as "a less common kind of God's activity in which he arouses people's awe and wonder and bears witness to Himself." This was the definition accepted by Jack Deere, which allowed him to argue for a continuation of the miraculous today: that there are no "epochs" of the miraculous as taught by Benjamin Warfield, that the miracles of the Apostles should not be compared with that of the spiritual gift of miracles, etc.

This definition by Grudem is not acceptable. The reason is that it is too subjective. What is "awe" to one person may not be very awesome to another. For example, the glorious sunset may cause someone to be filled with wonder because he saw it for the first time; to someone else who sees it every day, it is just another sunset. The former calls it a miracle but the latter calls it another day! In light of this, Grudem's definition of the miraculous cannot be accepted. The biblical definition of the miracles of the Bible is crucial in order to understand any claim of the miraculous of our time.

B. Distinction between biblical miracles and other works – God’s miracles must be distinct from the following:

1. Works of providence (general and not special providence) are not to be regarded as miracles. The broad usage of the word “miracle” has a metaphorical or hyperbolic meaning. Every sunrise, every tree, every blade of grass is a “miracle” in that sense. But in the strict biblical definition of the word, it is not to be understood as “the providence of God”. Works of general providence are the ordinary works of God through secondary sources. When a miracle is performed by God, even unbelievers must acknowledge it when they see it. Consider the following biblical instances: Exodus 8:18-19, “And the magicians did so with their enchantments to bring forth lice, but they could not: so there were lice upon man, and upon beast. Then the magicians said unto Pharaoh, This is the finger of God: and Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he hearkened not unto them; as the LORD had said.”

Acts 4:16, (the unbelievers said), “What shall we do to these men? for that indeed a notable miracle hath been done by them is manifest to all them that dwell in Jerusalem; and we cannot deny it.”

Acts 14:11, (we hear them say), “And when the people saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in the speech of Lycaonia, The gods are come down to us in the likeness of men.”

2. Answers to prayer do not constitute a “sign” and should not be considered a miracle. The Christian may experience many events that demonstrate the Hand of God in his life. However, if there is no evidence that it is a demonstrative “sign”, then it should not be called a miracle. It is important to realize that “God gives us abundant evidence of His love and care without any exaggeration on our part.”
3. Works of magic are not miracles. In magic, the magician possesses a formula that produces the alleged result. The alleged supernatural power is controlled by the performer (Exo 7:11; 8:7). In the miracles of God, the results depend entirely on God. The “miracle worker” is merely God’s instrument.
4. Mere exotic occurrences are not miracles. Such are events in nature which excite wonder. Oddities do not equal the miraculous. These belong to the “believe it or not category.” Genuine miracles are always a sign that teaches a spiritual truth. Every miracle of God is a part of God’s great integrated system of revealed truth.
5. Works of Satan are not miracles of God. Matthew 24:24 says, “For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.” These are the words of the Lord Jesus Christ which warn of Satanic miracles in the last days. The Apostle Paul concurred when he wrote in 2 Thessalonians 2:9, “Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan

with all power and signs and lying wonders” (Rev 13:14; 16:14; 19:20). We do not deny the existence of Satanic miracles, but these must be distinguished from God’s.

Therefore, it is interesting to note that in Matthew 24:24 Jesus predicted that in the last days, false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders. The miracles in the Bible originated from God; He is their Source. The false miracles were from Satan and his followers. The purpose of God’s miracles is to reveal; the purpose of Satan’s miracles is to deceive.

- C. The Purpose of Miracles – Miracles were performed by Jesus and the Apostles for the purpose of revelation and edification. After calling attention to the many unrecorded miracles of the Lord Jesus Christ, John adds, “But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name” (Jn 20:31). Jesus’ miracles were evidences of the genuineness of His message (Mk 2:1-13). Jesus says, “But I have greater witness than that of John: for the works which the Father hath given me to finish, the same works that I do, bear witness of me, that the Father hath sent me.” (Jn 5:36)

To the generation who were with Christ at His first coming, although Jesus preferred that they should accept His message for its intrinsic worth, to believe Him because of His miracles was not wrong. Jesus says, “If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not. But if I do, though ye believe not me, believe the works: that ye may know, and believe, that the Father is in me, and I in him” (Jn 10:37-38). Today, every true believer must believe by faith, for without faith in God’s Word it is impossible to please Him.

The Apostles (and apostolic men like Stephen and Philip) performed signs and wonders (Acts 6:8; 8:13) in order to attest to the fact that they were sent by the Lord Jesus Christ. The Apostles had a unique ministry to establish the early church as commanded by Jesus in Mark 16:14-18,

“Afterward he appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat, and upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him after he was risen. And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; 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.”

The church today does not need such authentication because the church has already been established by the Apostles. They had completed the writings of the New Testament. The Church now has the fullness of the Old Testament and New Testament Scriptures that serve as her authoritative foundation. There is thus no need for these sign miracles today to authenticate the unique ministry of the Apostles. Those who believe in Jesus Christ need no signs to believe. Those who preach the gospel of Jesus Christ need no miracles to preach.

The Bible says in 1 Corinthians 1:19-25, “For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”

The Apostle Paul confirms this truth when he wrote in Romans 1:16-17, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.”

- D. The Nature of Miracles – Are miracles a violation of the natural laws? Miracles are not violations of natural laws. They are intelligent acts of a personal God. They are not erratic or exotic occurrences. Miracles are part of God’s cosmic programme of revelation and redemption. There is no greater logical problem in the act of God in raising the dead than there is in the act of a man in lifting his hand. We speak or signal to our children by raising our hands with appropriate gestures. God in turn reveals Himself and His plan to us with “signs” or by other means in accordance to His will.

Christianity is a supernatural faith. For the biblical writers and all true believers of the God of the Bible, it was perfectly natural for God to perform the supernatural acts of the Bible like parting the Red Sea and the raising of people from the dead. These biblical miracles came to an end when the Bible was completed. All Christians need today is God’s Word.

- E. The Issue of True Spirituality – The Charismatics claim that their brand of worship has caused lives to be changed, which proves that their spirituality is true. They conclude that the laughing, barking, meowing, shaking and rolling are all legitimate because many lives have been changed for the better by these practices. They claim that people are reading the Bible more and praying more because of such experiences.

It must be understood in the light of Scripture that the worship of God is not something subjective and arbitrary as espoused by some Charismatics. The Bible gives clear guidelines on what is acceptable worship. The worship of God is one of the most important aspects of the Christian’s life. It must be pointed out that the ultimate and final yardstick to determine what is right and wrong is not the person’s changed life.

The only objective guide for what is truth and what is erroneous, and what is true spirituality is God’s inerrant and infallible Word. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 say, “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction

in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.” See also 2 Peter 1:16-21 and Deuteronomy 13:1-18.

Many on the outward may display a changed life but it is the changed heart that God looks at. This is only possible when the person has believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. Galatians 2:20 confirms this truth, “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.” This truth is also taught in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”

A changed life is not the measure of truth or error. Rather, it is the assimilation of and obedience to God’s truth. The Bible does tell us that if a person says he has faith, then he should show his faith by his works (Jas 2:14-26). We recognize that a new life is the result of the new creation that God has produced in his life. However, this new creation cannot be used as a measure of truth and error. A transformed life is proof of the heart application and assimilation of the truth, but it is not the measure of truth. Truth (the Bible) is objective, not subjective.

The final word must be from God’s holy, infallible and inerrant Word:

Deuteronomy 13:1-5, “If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and giveth thee a sign or a wonder, And the sign or the wonder come to pass, whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them; Thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams: for the LORD your God proveth you, to know whether ye love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. Ye shall walk after the LORD your God, and fear him, and keep his commandments, and obey his voice, and ye shall serve him, and cleave unto him. And that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams, shall be put to death; because he hath spoken to turn you away from the LORD your God, which brought you out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed you out of the house of bondage, to thrust thee out of the way which the LORD thy God commanded thee to walk in. So shalt thou put the evil away from the midst of thee.”

