

# How Come I Never See a Miracle?

## Introduction

### **Expect a Miracle?**

I was a guest on a radio talk show. The subject was, *Are You Disappointed in God?* The question we threw out to the listening audience was, “Has the Christian faith been presented to you in such a way as to make you think that you are not getting some things that the Bible promises you should get?” Two of our earliest callers were women who were blind. My question for them was, “When you became a Christian and started acquainting yourself with the gospels, noticing that nearly everybody was healed – including the blind – did you expect that this should also happen to you?” They both answered, “No.”

Was that a faithless answer or a proper answer? When we read the pages of Scripture and see supernatural things take place, should we, today, expect those things to be happening in our lives? Should we, as the bumper sticker indicates, “Expect a Miracle”?

### **What’s a Miracle?**

The issue before us can be classified as signs and wonders.<sup>1</sup> We usually call them miracles. These are supernatural things. They are miraculous. We are not talking about amazing coincidences or the beauty of childbirth or something wondrous or astonishing. Hodge defines a miracle as something that,

**...take[s] place in the material world, i.e., in the sphere of observation of the senses...and...are produced or caused by the simple volition of God, without the intervention of any subordinate cause<sup>2</sup>**

In other words, the podium rises to the ceiling without strings or anything else helping it except the word of God Himself. Walking on water is done without skis, sufficient speed, or any flotation device. Water becomes wine without the necessary interval of time or additives. People speak languages they were never taught. People heal others by the mere word of their mouth. People know things without having received the knowledge through ordinary means. And all of this can be observed by anyone with the required senses of observation – whether they have faith in the miracle worker or not.

## Introduction

### **Topics**

In this portion of the series on Remedial Christianity I intend to address a number of subjects as they relate to the miraculous: 1) I intend to show that Christians should not

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<sup>1</sup> The word *miracle* is not actually biblical.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, (Eerdman, reprinted 1989), p. 618.

expect miracles – at least in the way we saw them performed by Jesus or the apostles.<sup>3</sup> 2) With this I intend to show why there were miracles performed in the Scriptures. 3) I will show the principles for cessation – the ceasing of certain types of events or actions we see in Scripture. 4) We will address the error of believing in the second blessing of the Holy Spirit or subsequent baptism of the Holy Spirit – which was accompanied by miraculous things. 5) Along with this we will examine the baptism of the Holy Spirit versus the baptism of fire. 6) We will finish with an examination of the flagship passage used to argue for the continuation of these miraculous activities in the church – 1 Corinthians 12-14.

What we will find to be at stake in all of this is the very foundation of the Christian faith – *Sola Scriptura*. In other words, if Christ is the cornerstone of our faith the apostles and prophets (i.e. their message) are the foundation (Ephesians 2:20). And once you've cracked the foundation then all hell can break loose – and has that not been the case!

### **Among Brothers**

Allow me to state up front, that my thesis for this message runs a head-on collision with, what is generally called, Pentecostalism – or the doctrine of the Charismatics. And it is not merely at odds with these forms of Christianity but with those who have been influenced by them; for their influence is strong and wide.

I would, therefore, like to preface this sermon (or sermons) with a couple of words on confrontation and debate. But even before that, I would like to put forth, that although I am in disagreement with Christians commonly known as Neo-Pentecostal, Full Gospel, Charismatic, or Second Blessing believers, it would be wrong, and uncharitable, to consign these people to the ash can of paganism.

An examination of the doctrines of the Assemblies of God, or many other Pentecostal denominations, shows much orthodoxy in their belief systems and understanding of Christianity. Furthermore, I think the enthusiasm and energy many of our Charismatic brothers and sisters exude on behalf of the gospel is to be admired and emulated. I say this with all sincerity, and not merely as an obligatory prelude to my criticisms.

### **Error is Destructive**

I must still insist, however, that the (what we will call) Charismatic view of the work of the Holy Spirit is faulty. And because it is faulty it is destructive. I don't necessarily have to connect the dots as to why doctrinal error is destructive. As Christians, by faith, we know that it is. One need not look too far or too hard, though, to see the destructive nature of this approach to the faith.

As I was preparing for this series, I was sitting in my office and received a phone call. A man in his mid-fifties, dying of cancer, was on the other end of the line. One year earlier his wife had taken ill and died. He had a number of children, including a twelve-year-old daughter. He was raised in a Pentecostal church and believed in divine

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<sup>3</sup> I will state here that I am not suggesting that God doesn't heal in response to prayer. But He may *not* heal. When Peter, however, was confronted by the lame man at the temple asking for alms, Peter did not pray for his healing and wait for a (possibly negative) response from God. He simply declared, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk," and immediately the man was healed (Acts 3:1-11). There was no way that man was not going to be healed.

healing. His wife died and he was about to die. He conveyed to me that all he had been taught was a lie. He had departed from the faith and wasn't about to go back to church.

I sought to comfort him to the best of my ability. Not everything he was taught was a lie. I tried to explain to him that God doesn't promise to always heal. But He does promise that whosoever calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved. As delicately as possible I explained God's divine justice and Christ's substitutionary atonement (i.e. the gospel). He wondered why he hadn't been taught these things as a child. I shared his lament.

I bring this up to show one possible damaging effect of an improper understanding of what we should expect God to do – what God promises and what He doesn't promise. And although truth cannot be determined by anecdotes, even true anecdotes, we must all agree that an unbiblical notion of Christianity, no matter how well meaning, is destructive. I can bring up scores of examples (maybe not as intense as the one just mentioned) where an improper view of how God interacts with mankind has caused disruption in and alienation from the church.

### **A Spirit of Division**

The irony of the issue before us – the work of the Holy Spirit – is how it appears to do just the opposite of what the Holy Spirit promises to do, which is bring unity to the church. But “peace at all costs” cannot be the marching song of the church. Sadly, peace at all costs has been the swan song of many churches. The apostle Paul did not hesitate to bring strong and, at times, harsh correction to churches in error. In His seven letters to the seven churches, Jesus constantly brings warnings to God's people. In order for there to be genuine unity, there must be division. Otherwise the church merely becomes the church of the lowest common denominator.

Observe the words of Jesus to the church at Pergamos.

**But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. <sup>15</sup> So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. <sup>16</sup> Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth (Revelation 2:14- 16).**

In light of these statements we must surmise that, although all churches have error, to persist in error is a dangerous course, a course which may finally bring a church to the point where it is no longer a church at all.

Along with this I might point out the remedial nature of thinking that Christians ought not to argue. It is true that contentious and meaningless arguments are to be avoided (1 Timothy 1:4). There is no shortage, however, in the biblical record of Christians confronting other Christians due to life or doctrine (Galatians 2:11). It shouldn't be thought harmful to God's kingdom for an unbeliever to listen to Christians debate over critical issues; when doctors and lawyers debate it does not impugn law or

medicine. When Christians debate it does not impugn God's kingdom. Let us pray, however, that the debates are scholarly.

## **Goals**

Let us not lose sight of the goals of the task before us. It is not merely to be right. It certainly isn't to become puffed up with a sense of intellectual or doctrinal superiority.

### **Avoid Stratification**

First, our goal is one of unity. This unity will be promoted by attacking a brand of theology that seeks to stratify the church between those who do, and do not, have the Spirit, and therefore, access to these miraculous phenomena. Certainly in some senses the church is stratified. There are elders, deacons, and members. There are people who are more, or less, mature. There are people who are more, or less, knowledgeable, etc. But what I wish to address is an approach to Christianity which creates tiered levels of Christians, not based on maturity, knowledge, wisdom, etc., but based upon those who have, or don't have, the Spirit—or more specifically the baptism of the Holy Spirit. I intend to show that there is no “second blessing” or subsequent baptism of the Holy Spirit which, according to the General Counsel of the Assemblies of God,

**...is an empowering gift from God the Father that is promised to every believer (Matthew 3:11; Luke 11:13, 24:49; Acts 2:33, 38). It helps the Christian to live a holy life and also brings a new devotional attachment to Jesus Christ, making Him very real and precious. The primary purpose of the Baptism is to give greater power for witnessing (Acts 1:8). Other benefits include a greater joy in spiritual service, and a heightened sense of one's mission to the world.<sup>4</sup>**

It is not because I want to hamshackle the Holy Spirit that I denounce this teaching. Holy living, power, joy and devotional attachment to Jesus Christ are certainly good things. I denounce the doctrine because I don't believe it is biblical. I denounce it also because I believe it presents a false view of the uniform, Scriptural expectation of the Christian experience.

Many believers are looking for the e-train of Christian experience. “If I could just find the ticket, I could get out of the streets and alley-ways of life and ride the monorail of victorious Christian living.” We are asked if we have made the “wonderful discovery” of the Spirit-filled life. So, like Columbus or Magellan, we need to find this “new land” of Christian experience. And until we find it, we remain woefully on the lower tier of Christian experience. This teaching must be rebuffed.

### **Encourage the Genuine Charismatic Life**

In addition to avoiding this stratification, I wish to encourage Christians in the genuine, biblical, charismatic life. Now that I believe in Jesus, what should my life feel like? What should I expect? What is the genuine fruit of Christianity? How should

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<sup>4</sup>Assembly of God Web Page—Assemblies of God Beliefs. The General Council of the Assemblies of God.

I expect the gifts (charisma) to be functioning in my life – in my church? It is not that I want us to become lackadaisically content. I suspect most people who fall into charismatic churches do so because they desire to serve the Lord more fervently – or have access to greater power. But I also think it is a shame that so many are seeking to climb a ladder leading nowhere. There is this false promise that at the top of the ladder is the super-Christian experience. I am going to argue that the normal Christian, charismatic<sup>5</sup> experience is both more difficult and more glorious.

### **Intelligible Christianity**

Third, I will address the dangers of supposing the unintelligibility of the Christian faith. This is not to say that His ways are not above our ways. But there are aspects of the charismatic movement – specifically the modern notion of tongues – where the intellect is supposedly by-passed. There is a notion that there is this inner-spirit of man connecting with God completely separate from the mind or soul. The faith then becomes very mystical and visceral. I will argue that this, instead of being the leading of the Spirit, is being lead by various impulses (2 Timothy 3:6). The Christian faith is God’s message to the world. He has revealed it (infallibly and authoritatively) through His word – in writing. The writing consists of words, sentences, and paragraphs. There is syntax and structure. It is to be known through study.

I have been told that God is above logic. That seeking to understand logically, what can be understood of God, is thinking as man thinks. God is not above logic; logic is an expression of the character and nature of God. If I can’t trust that God is logical, how can I trust Him when I read, “whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord will be saved?” What if I get to the tribunal of God and He says, “That’s not what you thought it meant?” Unintelligible Christianity is no Christianity at all.

### **Sola Scriptura**

What is equally at stake is the foundational credo of Sola Scriptura. For if God is still operating the way He did during the time of Jesus and the Apostles, the canon<sup>6</sup> is still open. The word of God is still (infallibly and authoritatively) being unveiled. God confirmed the authority of His word through the signs and wonders of the people who delivered His word (Acts 14:3; Hebrews 2:3, 4). If the signs and wonders are still operating the same way today as they were during the age of the apostles, the word is still coming as well. Benjamin B. Warfield writes of the supernatural gifts,

**These gifts were not the possession of the primitive Christians as such; for that matter of the Apostolic Church or Apostolic age for themselves; they were distinctively the authentication of the Apostles. They were part of the credentials of the Apostles as the authoritative agents of God in founding the church. Their function thus confined them to**

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<sup>5</sup> The *charismata* merely means the gifts.

<sup>6</sup> The canon refers to the number of books in the Bible.

**distinctively the Apostolic Church, and they necessarily passed away with it.<sup>7</sup>**

It is no wonder that nearly every cult has its prophet and its continuing revelation. This teaching continually pounds the walls of orthodoxy. This is yet one more effort at exposing it for what it is.

## **Method**

The following will be the method by which I will approach the subject:

### **The Ultimate Authority**

The first thing we must all recognize is that the Bible is the ultimate authority on any subject or any experience. You may have had an experience you've interpreted as the second blessing or speaking in tongues or prophecy or divine healing by a divine healer, etc.; but the primary experience of the Christian (in terms of knowledge of God) is the Scriptures. So if the Scriptures indicate that what you experienced is not, in fact, that biblical phenomenon, we must all be willing to subordinate whatever subsequent personal experiences we have had, to the primary experience of acknowledging the truth of Scripture.

### **Some Cessation**

We must also acknowledge that, at least, some of the things that happened in the Bible are not still happening now. Jesus is not still walking around on the earth. There are no Apostles – the requirement for an Apostle being one who had been with the Apostles the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among them beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from them.<sup>8</sup> An Apostle had to be one who was able to give witness with the other Apostles of Christ's resurrection (Acts 1:21, 22). There were also signs of an Apostle, these being the ability to perform signs, wonders, and miracles (2 Corinthians 12:12).

We also must acknowledge that the canon of Scripture was not complete during the apostolic period. There is a clear precedent for some cessation of the activities we see on the pages of Scripture. The accomplished work of redemption, for example, is not something we should think would continue to extend into history. We don't believe Jesus is always being crucified on a hilltop in Jerusalem or that He is ever ascending to the right hand of the Father. It must be obvious to us all that our observation of what was happening during the time of Christ, in some respects, was historically unusual. The real question, then, is not, "Have certain things ceased" but "How do we know what things have ceased?" In order to answer that question we need to find out why these things existed in the first place.

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<sup>7</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles*, (Charles Scribner's Son, 1918), p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Except for the Apostle Paul who argues as "one being born out of time" (1 Corinthians 15:8).

### **Examining Pentecostal Claims**

We will also look at some of the claims deployed by the charismatic movement, and whether or not the Scriptures actually support these claims. Since I detest the idea of building and demolishing straw men, I will take the claims directly from the General Council of the Assemblies of God. The Assemblies of God are probably a good source since they are not, generally, extreme in their views. I would also like to examine how the influence of Pentecostalism is found in conservative Protestant churches.

### **Studying the Scriptures**

Finally, I would like to examine the Pentecostal, flagship passages in Scripture to determine what these passages actually teach. A misunderstood passage doesn't merely mean we have learned the wrong thing, it means we haven't learned the right thing. These passages will include a survey of Acts, 1 Corinthians 12 through 14, and other pertinent passages.

### **The Glory of God**

Again, it is not our goal to merely lay siege to false doctrines but to promote and preserve that which is glorious to God. Signs and wonders were a means to an end—that end being the glory of God. They confirmed a message. The message is that there is a God in heaven from whom we have been estranged by our transgressions. He is a God who sent His Son to bring us back into union with Him.

## Questions for Study

1. Should Christians expect miracles today the same way we saw them in the Bible (page 1)?
2. Should Christians avoid discussing disagreements (pages 2, 3)?
3. Why is it harmful to have an improper understanding of what Christians should expect from God (page 3)?
4. Does the Spirit cause unity or division (pages 3, 4)?
5. How does an improper understanding of the Spirit stratify the church (page 4)?
6. What do you suppose the genuine charismatic life looks like (pages 4, 5)?
7. Why is the notion of unintelligible Christianity dangerous (page 5)?
8. What is *sola scriptura* and how can it be undermined by an improper understanding of the work of the Spirit (pages 5, 6)?
9. What is the ultimate authority for the Christian? How should this affect other experiences in our lives (page 6)?
10. What is cessation and why is it important to understand (page 6)?
11. Why were there signs and wonders (page 7)?