

Remedial Christianity

Correcting Deficiencies in Popular Christianity
#13b How Come I Never See a Miracle?

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Then Moses answered and said, “_But suppose they will not believe me or listen to my voice; suppose they say, ‘_The Lord has not appeared to you.’_”⁻²⁻ So the Lord said to him, “_What is that in your hand?_” He said, “_A rod._”⁻³⁻ And He said, “_Cast it on the ground._” So he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from it.⁻⁴⁻ Then the Lord said to Moses, “_Reach out your hand and take *it* by the tail_” (and he reached out his hand and caught it, and it became a rod in his hand),⁻⁵⁻ “_that they may __believe that the __Lord God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you._”⁻⁶⁻ Furthermore the Lord said to him, “_Now put your hand in your bosom._” And he put his hand in his bosom, and when he took it out, behold, his hand *was* leprous, _like snow.⁻⁷⁻ And He said, “_Put your hand in your bosom again._” So he put his hand in his bosom again, and drew it out of his bosom, and behold, __it was restored like his *other* flesh.⁻⁸⁻ “_Then it will be, if they do not believe you, nor heed the message of the __first sign, that they may believe the message of the latter sign.⁻⁹⁻ And it shall be, if they do not believe even these two signs, or listen to your voice, that you shall take water from __the river and pour *it* on the dry *land*. __The water which you take from the river will become blood on the dry *land*__” (Exodus 4:1-9).

Why Signs and Wonders?

What is, or was, the purpose for miracles? Jesus would walk through towns, the sick would be laid in the marketplace, and as many as would touch the hem of his garment were healed (Mark 6:54-56). Groups of people were healed by Peter’s shadow (Acts 5:15) and Paul’s aprons and handkerchiefs (Acts 19:12). Paul had the ability to raise Eutychus from the dead (Acts 20:9) and Peter could supernaturally execute church discipline on Ananias and Sapphira without a trial or any due process (Acts 5).

How are we to view these miracles? It didn’t seem as if the people being healed had any special faith or ability. Some had no faith at all, such as the lame man at the temple (Acts 3) or the blind man in John 9. Some were dead. I have spoken to more than one Christian today whose desire is that their shadow would heal people. Is this a realistic expectation? Is it a realistic expectation that mobs of people should be miraculously healed today the way they were during the time of Christ? It certainly doesn’t seem to be taking place so what’s wrong?

Some argue that this is happening in Africa or the darkest places in South America. But in the Scriptures we see this happening in the bosom of the church.

A common accusation is the lack of faith of the people. That’s quite an indictment against the vast majority of Christendom in history—including martyrs who were burned at the stake while their families watched. Is it reasonable that one who is faithful enough to die for his faith wouldn’t be faithful enough to exercise the miracles of the first century church? Again, it didn’t seem as if great faith was necessary to be involved in the miraculous.

The Goal

It is not my desire to rob people of the hope of being healed of a sickness or delivered from some trial in life. I certainly would not seek to limit the power of God in any respect whatsoever. God is perfectly able to heal and deliver at He sees fit.

But what is at stake is the very foundation of the Christian faith—the apostles and the prophets (Ephesians 2:20)—the word of God. The foundation has been laid by the apostles (1 Corinthians 3:10) and we are not to add to that foundation but rather build on it. The types of miracles we read of in the Bible were unique in that they were not necessarily answers to prayer as much as they were authoritative actions performed by specific people for a specific purpose. And if we believe those types of faith-healers and miracle workers still operate today in the same manner as the apostle Paul, then we must bow before the message they give as absolute! It is just this type of mystical miracle pursuit we see in Roman Catholicism—the face of Jesus or Mary appearing someplace or a bleeding statue or wine turning to blood, etc. Romanists realize this is necessary for them to claim that the authority of the Pope and church are equal to Scripture. This is no small matter. If there is no agreement as to sole ultimate authority, i.e. the Scriptures, then there is no hope for the church.

Add to this how easy church members can be victimized by modern false apostles. Peace with God is no longer a result of the wonderful promises of Scripture but rather ones ability to experience sufficient wonders to justify the legitimacy of their faith. How many sad souls, under this spiritual tyranny, have had to face their toil with the increased indictment of faithlessness!

Preview

What I intend to show is 1) Miracles were designed to confirm the authority of the message of the person performing the sign. 2) These miracles were done (in the New Testament) initially by Jesus. 3) Jesus conferred this power to His apostles to confirm the authority of their message—thus completing the canon of Scripture. 4) False miracles have as their design a false message. 5) The miracles in the New Testament ushered in the turning point of history and should not be the expectation of the uniform and perpetual Christian experience.

Signs of Confirmation—Initially by Jesus

What we must realize is that miracles were not done willy-nilly or vagrantly. There was a specific purpose and design for signs and wonders—to confirm the message of the one performing the sign. There is no shortage of passages that convey this idea. Let us begin to make our biblical argument with a very well-known miracle performed by Jesus:

So He got into a boat, crossed over, and came to His own city. ² Then behold, they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, “Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you.” ³ And at once some of the scribes said within themselves, “This Man blasphemes!” ⁴ But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, “Why do you think evil in

your hearts? ⁵ For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Arise and walk'? ⁶ *But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins" – then He said to the paralytic, "Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house."* ⁷ And he arose and departed to his house (Matthew 9:1-5, Italics mine).

Jesus confirmed the authority of His teaching by the power of His actions. Observe how Jesus authenticates Himself to John the Baptist.

And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples ³ and said to Him, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?" ⁴ Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: ⁵ The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them." (Matthew 11:2-5, Italics mine).

Jesus confirmed His Christ-hood by His supernatural actions; He tells the two disciples to tell John what they saw—miracles. This proved that Jesus was the Christ. This was obvious to Nicodemus.

This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him" (John 3:2 Italics mine).

Nicodemus recognized that the miraculous signs established Jesus as a teacher from God. Jesus gives explanation for the purpose for miracles.

But I have a greater witness than John's; for the works which the Father has given Me to finish—the very works that I do—bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me (John 5:36).

The supernatural works of Jesus bore witness that the Father sent Him. In the many records of Jesus' miracles we often miss the reason given for the miracle; for example the feeding of the five thousand.

Therefore they gathered *them* up, and filled twelve baskets with the fragments of the five barley loaves which were left over by those who had eaten. ¹⁴ Then those men, when they had seen the sign that Jesus did, said, "This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world" (John 6:13, Italics mine).

The sign—the feeding of the five thousand—confirmed Jesus' office as Prophet. There was a common and legitimate expectation regarding a person with divine authority.

Therefore they said to Him, "What sign will You perform then, that we may see it and believe You? What work will You do (John 6:30).

The request assumes that the legitimate Messiah would have the ability to do miraculous things. This is stated multiple times.

But many of the multitude believed in Him; and they were saying, "When the Christ shall come, He will not perform more signs than those which this man has, will He" (John 7:31 NASB).

Another well known miracle, the raising of Lazarus, had a specific goal.

Jesus said to her, "Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?"⁴¹ Then they took away the stone *from the place* where the dead man was lying. And Jesus lifted up *His* eyes and said, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me."⁴² And I know that You always hear Me, *but because of the people who are standing by I said this, that they may believe that You sent Me.*"⁴³ Now when He had said these things, He cried with a loud voice, "*Lazarus, come forth!*"⁴⁴ *And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with graveclothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Loose him, and let him go"* (John 11:40-44, Italics mine).

The raising of Lazarus was done that those standing by might believe Jesus was from the Father. The chief priests understood the threat of a miracle-worker.

Then the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered a council and said, "What shall we do? For this Man *works many signs.*"⁴⁸ If we let Him alone like this, *everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation*" (John 11:47, 48, Italics mine).

The chief priests and Pharisees feared that people would believe because of the signs. The signs and wonders of Christ were a two-edged sword.

If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would have no sin; but now they have seen and also hated both Me and My Father.²⁵ But *this happened that the word might be fulfilled which is written in their law, 'They hated Me without a cause.'* (John 15:24, 25).

The signs Jesus performed so confirmed His message that they left His detractors with greater accountability. Peter explicitly states the reason for signs and wonders.

Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know...(Acts 2:22).

Jesus was attested (to affirm to be genuine) by God through miracles. But of course Jesus wasn't the only miracle workers. But the reason for the miracles remained the same—to confirm the authority of the messenger.

Conferred to the Apostles

The ministry of Christ would continue through His apostles. One might argue that His ministry continues throughout history. This is true. But there is a specific aspect of His ministry that did not continue throughout history—the compilation of the books and letters we refer to as the Bible. *Sola Scriptura* is the (epistemological¹) foundation of the Christian faith. Let us keep in mind Jesus' words to His apostles.

**These things I have spoken to you while being present with you.
²⁶ But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you (John 14:25, 26).**

“But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me.²⁷ And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning (John 15:26).

The Apostles would be endowed with a Spirit-given knowledge of all the things Jesus said to them. If this weren't such a misused passage I wouldn't find it necessary to point out that no one living today has ever been in the physical and audible presence of Jesus' instruction, nor have we been with Christ from the beginning.

The work of redemption wouldn't be fully accomplished until Christ ascended and sent His Spirit to secure the message of His victory. Again, we call this the Bible. Along with the apostles' supernatural prophetic knowledge came the supernatural signs to confirm the knowledge. Speaking to the eleven apostles (not all His followers) Jesus promises to confer supernatural power to them—and that for a specific reason—to confirm their message.

Later He appeared to the eleven as they sat at the table; and He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen.¹⁵ And He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.¹⁶ He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.¹⁷ And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues;¹⁸ they will take up

¹ Epistemology is the theory of knowledge—how we know what we know.

serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.”

¹⁹ So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. ²⁰ And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs. Amen (Mark 16:14-20, Italics mine).

Tongues, immunity to serpents and poison, healing by the laying on of hands were all signs that confirmed the message. In Acts we see examples of miracles following those who believe. Again, this would confirm the authority of the apostles as the mouthpieces of Christ.

In the second chapter of Acts we read of the fulfillment of Jesus' promise to the apostles.

And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation.” ⁴¹ Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added *to them*. ⁴² And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. ⁴³ Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles (Acts 2:40-43).

They continued in the Apostle's doctrine and signs and wonders are done through the Apostles. Again, we see the signs confirming the doctrine.

Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, ³⁰ by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus” (Acts 4:29, 30).

Peter recognized that his own authority and boldness of speech was dependent upon God's confirmation through miraculous signs. His prayer was answered.

And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. And they were all with one accord in Solomon's Porch. ¹³ Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly. ¹⁴ And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, ¹⁵ so that they brought the sick out into the streets and laid *them* on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them. ¹⁶ Also a multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed (Acts 5:12-16).

No one dared join them—words for the modern faith healer. Of Paul and Barnabus we read,

Now it happened in Iconium that they went together to the synagogue of the Jews, and so spoke that a great multitude both of the Jews and of the Greeks believed. ² But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren. ³ Therefore they stayed there a long time, *speaking boldly in the Lord, who was bearing witness to the word of His grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands* (Acts 14:1-3, Italics mine).

The Lord was bearing witness of their authority through signs and wonders. Notice what always goes hand in hand in Paul's writings.

For I will not dare to speak of any of those things which Christ has not accomplished through me, in word and deed, to make the Gentiles obedient— ¹⁹ *in mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and round about to Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ* (Romans 15:18, 19 italics mine).

I have become a fool in boasting; you have compelled me. For I ought to have been commended by you; for in nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles, though I am nothing. ¹² Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds (2 Corinthians 12:11, 12).

Signs and wonders accompanied the preaching of the gospel. See again how God bears witness of His word.

Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. ² For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, ³ how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him, ⁴ God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will (Hebrews 2:1-4, Italics mine).

God bore witness of what was first spoken by the Lord, then by those who heard Him (Apostles) with signs and wonders.

Signs and wonders, as we read of them in Scripture, had a specific purpose. They confirmed the absolute authoritative message of the miracle worker. For those who believe in *Sola Scriptura* miracles have served their purpose. The message of God has been sufficiently and once for all delivered to the church. The quest for miracles has been more of a burden than a blessing to the church and those who claim access to this power are to be cautioned against.

Again, this is not to say that God cannot or does not supernaturally heal or deliver from toil or respond to prayer. The distinction we make is the power and authority of the human instrument, i.e. apostle or prophet. When Moses through his staff down he wasn't praying God would turn it into a serpent. The miracle was absolute as was Moses' word as a prophet of God.

False Signs For a False Message

Since it was common knowledge that the message of Christ would be confirmed through signs and wonders, it follows that those who sought to put forth a false message would seek to confirm their message through lying signs and wonders.

"Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'Look, He is there!' do not believe it. ²² For false christs and false prophets will rise and show signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. ²³ But take heed; see, I have told you all things beforehand (Mark 13:21-23).

And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming. ⁹ The coming of the *lawless one* is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, ¹⁰ and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. ¹¹ And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, ¹² that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness (2 Thessalonians 2:8-12).

It is not beyond the realm of a Christian world view to recognize that supernatural things might be done through evil. In the following passage we see it as a test.

_If there arises among you a prophet or a __dreamer of dreams, _and he gives you a sign or a wonder, ⁻²⁻ and __the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, '_Let us go after other gods'—which you have not known—'_and let us serve them,_' ⁻³⁻ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the Lord your God __is testing you to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul (Deuteronomy 13:1-4).

Here we read of an apparent miracle. But the table is turned a bit. The legitimacy of the miracle worker is tested by his doctrine. Similarly the Apostle Paul warns the New Testament church at Corinth.

“If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord (1 Corinthians 14:37).”

The authority of the Apostles is ultimate. Praise God He has preserved their message on the pages of Scripture.

Non-Apostolic Miracles?

We will read of non-apostles doing miraculous things but what is conspicuously present in these accounts is the laying on of the hands of the Apostles. Warfield points out,

“...in the entire New Testament we meet with no instance of the gifts showing themselves—after the initial instances of Pentecost and Cornelius—where an Apostle had not conveyed them.”²

Of course all the Apostles were at Pentecost and in Acts 10 we clearly see Peter superintending all that took place with Cornelius and his household. Unless we are to maintain that the Apostle’s presence (and laying on of hands) is merely coincidental, rather than causal—and since, as we have earlier established, there are no longer Apostles, it seems that these are not repeatable events.

Turning Point in History

The supernatural phenomena we read of in the New Testament were signs of the turning point in history—the coming, and work, of Christ. The new covenant (especially in terms of the revelation of the work of Christ and its international beginnings) were kicked off, as it were, at Pentecost. These were signs of a fulfillment of a promise made by God. This is why Peter (regarding the events of Pentecost) taught,

But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ “And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, That I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, Your young men shall see visions, Your old men shall dream dreams. ¹⁸ “And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; And they shall prophesy. ¹⁹ “I will show wonders in heaven above And signs in the earth beneath: Blood and fire and vapor of smoke. ²⁰ “The sun shall be turned into darkness, And the moon into blood, Before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord. ²¹ “And it shall come to pass That whoever calls on the name of the Lord Shall be saved (Acts 2:16-21).”

The coming of Christ ushered in both deliverance and judgment. The changing of the covenants—the turning point in history—B. C. to A.D. All this

² Benjamin B. Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles*, (Charles Scribner’s Son, 1918), p. 23.

would be accompanied by wonders and prophecy. These wonders would start with Jesus. Then we would see them done by the apostles and through the direct contact of the apostles. The modern fascination with miracles and miracle workers has become a blight to the church. Instead of immersing ourselves in the sin-bearing glory of the miracle worker, we ask for a sign. The sign has been given; let us trust in its attending message.

Questions for Study

1. Did miracles require great faith on the part of the recipient (page 3)?
2. What was the purpose of miracles (pages 4-8)?
3. Why did Jesus confer this power to the apostles (page 8)?
4. Will the Holy Spirit teach me (the same as the apostles) everything Jesus taught? Explain your answer (pages 8, 9).
5. What is the purpose of false signs (pages 12, 13)?

6. What about miracles performed by non apostles? Should we expect to perform these types of miracles? Why or why not (page 14)?
7. Discuss miracles as they relate to the turning point in history (pages 14, 15).