

# Miracles & the Holy Spirit

*“How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will” (Hebrews 2:3, 4).*

Miracles are an important part of the work of the Holy Spirit. The Scriptures indicate that the Father used the Holy Spirit as the agent through whom He performed miracles (Hebrews 2:3, 4). Through the miraculous activities of the Spirit, God testified that the men speaking were His men (Mark 16:20). Thus, through the Spirit, He presented, confirmed, and preserved His Word.

## MIRACLES WILL NOT BE REPEATED

What God has proved through a miraculous act, He does not need to prove again by repeating the miracle. Through creation God once and for all times presented evidence of His existence and His nature (Romans 1:20). God has displayed the majesty of His power in the expanse of the starry heavens (Psalm 19:1) and the greatness of His creative genius in the almost numberless forms of life on our planet. Since the days of creation, all that is needed to prove God’s power and nature is contained in what He created.

Early in human history, polytheistic religions manufactured many gods, creating a need for proof that there is one God and proof as to who that one God is. God chose to prove Himself in Egypt, a country filled with false gods. In a setting infested by a multiplicity of gods, the pharaoh of Egypt asked, “Who is the Lord that I should obey His voice to let Israel go?” (Exodus 5:2a). In response, God displayed His majesty and power over the gods of the Egyptians through miraculous acts. He demonstrated that He alone is God. He said, “. . . and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments—I am the Lord” (Exodus 12:12). Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, drew the correct conclusion concerning God’s miracles in delivering Israel from Egyptian slavery. He said, “Now I know that the Lord is greater than all the gods; indeed, it was proven when they dealt proudly against the people” (Exodus 18:11).

God did not need to prove to each succeeding generation that He is the only God. He told Moses that He would perform signs in Egypt, “that you may tell in the hearing of your son, and of your grandson, how I made a mockery of the Egyptians, and how I performed My signs among them; that you may know that I am the Lord” (Exodus 10:2). God would not repeat the miracles He performed

in Egypt for Israel's sons or grandsons to show them that He had power above the gods of the Egyptians. The generation who saw these signs was to tell them to following generations so that they could accept God as the one and only true God.

Years later, Gideon asked, ". . . if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all His miracles which our fathers told us about, saying, 'Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt? . . .'" (Judges 6:13). His question is evidence that (1) miracles like those which delivered Israel from Egypt were no longer being performed and (2) later generations were being told about those miracles.

Likewise, those who saw Jesus perform signs recorded them so that future generations might believe (John 20:30, 31). We learn of His life, miracles, death, burial, and resurrection through the written Word. The events will not be repeated.

### **MIRACLES HAD A SPECIFIC PURPOSE**

Jesus sometimes performed miracles out of compassion for people (Matthew 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34). However, every miracle beginning with the Creation has had the same main purpose behind it.

1. The purpose of the magnificence of cre-

### **JESUS REMAINS THE SAME**

Some religious groups expect continuing signs and wonders today because of the statement "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). This conclusion cannot be correct; for this passage is not discussing miracles, but rather the providential and steadfast care of God for His people (Hebrews 13:5, 6). Further, the passage cannot be teaching that all aspects of Jesus' existence or activities have been, are, and always will be the same. Jesus has not always been the same in every sense; for example, He existed in a spirit form before He came to earth and took on a human body (John 1:14; Hebrews 10:5c), and then He returned to His original nature when He ascended to the Father (John 17:5). Jesus is not here on earth in person now, nor will He come again in person to perform miracles so that we can believe that He is the Son of God. The signs and wonders He did while on earth were for that purpose and have been recorded so that we can believe (John 20:30, 31). Likewise, His redemptive death on the cross is not an ongoing act, but was once and for all times accomplished and never will be repeated (Hebrews 1:3; 7:27; 9:12, 24-26; 10:12-14).

Neither have Jesus' activities outside the flesh always been the same. He created everything (John 1:3; Colossians 1:16) in six days (Genesis 2:2; Exodus 20:11), a finished act that has not been repeated so far as we know. Through the miracle of creation, Jesus has proved to mankind His existence and glory (Romans 1:19, 20; Psalm 19:1; John 1:1-3). Inasmuch as He has revealed all truth (John 14:26; 16:13; Jude 3)—which needs neither to be added to nor changed (Galatians 1:8, 9; Revelation 22:18, 19)—He is not continuing to reveal new truth.

Jesus remains consistent in His personality and His care for us, but this does not mean that He will create new worlds, die again for our sins, be resurrected or walk on water again, feed more multitudes with a few loaves and fish, or repeat any of His great miracles so that we can believe in Him. Our belief is not to be based on seeing signs. If we do not see and yet believe God's written testimony, we are blessed (see John 20:29b). His miracles were performed and recorded so that succeeding generations, including us, might believe that He is the Christ, the Son of God (John 20:30, 31).

Through Peter, God gave testimony on Pentecost that He had approved of Jesus "with miracles and wonders and signs" (Acts 2:22). Those who do not believe in Jesus doubt God's witness concerning Jesus: ". . . the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the witness that God has borne concerning His Son" (1 John 5:10; emphasis mine). This verse does not refer to the witness God "is bearing" as though God continues to bear witness. Rather, it says "has borne" (Gk.: *memartureken*, a perfect, indicative, active verb), indicating that the action has been completed but has continuing results. The verb implies that God has completed giving His witness concerning Jesus, but that this witness still exists in order to produce faith. The faith that continues to be produced because of God's past witness through the miracles of Jesus has ongoing results through the written record of His works (John 20:30, 31).

ation was to prove the existence of God (Romans 1:20).

2. Through miracles, God showed Himself to be the only true God—a God above the gods of the Egyptians (Exodus 10:2) and above the gods of the Canaanites (1 Kings 18:36–39).

3. God proved Jesus to be His Son through miracles, wonders, and signs (John 20:30, 31; Acts 2:22).

4. God identified certain men (the apostles) as His approved spokesmen “by signs and wonders and miracles” (2 Corinthians 12:12).

5. God used His divine power to reveal His Word through the Holy Spirit to select men (Ephesians 3:3–5; 2 Timothy 3:16; 1 Peter 1:10–12; 2 Peter 1:20, 21).

6. Not only was the Word miraculously given to God’s spokesmen, but it was confirmed through miracles, wonders, and signs (Mark 16:20; Acts 14:3; Hebrews 2:2–4).

7. God confirmed His will through miraculous signs. For example, He used a sign to confirm that He was opening the door of salvation to the Gentiles (Acts 10:47; 11:17; 15:7–9). Signs also showed His approval of the conversion of Samaritans (Acts 8:14–19)—a people normally not accepted by Jewish people (John 4:9)—and the rebaptism of John’s converts (Acts 19:1–6).

## FALSE SIGNS

### HAVE BEEN PERFORMED

False teachers may be able to perform convincing signs and wonders. Moses (Deuteronomy 13:1–3), Jesus (Matthew 24:24), Paul (2 Corinthians 11:13–15; 2 Thessalonians 2:8–10), and John (Revelation 13:13, 14; 16:14) all taught this truth.

We are to judge what teachers say in order to determine whether or not they are true teachers of God. The fruit of a prophet (Matthew 7:15–20), his teaching, is the basis by which we are to distinguish between a true prophet and a false one. God instructed His people:

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, . . . saying, “Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them,” you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall follow the Lord your God

and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him. . . . But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, . . . (Deuteronomy 13:1–5).

God expects His people to test a teacher by what he says (1 John 4:1, 6). Anyone who does not teach God’s revealed truth as found in the Bible is a false prophet, even though he may seem to perform signs and wonders.

The pharaoh was misled by the works of his magicians who “with their secret arts” duplicated Moses’ miracles by turning their staffs into snakes (Exodus 7:11), turning water into blood (Exodus 7:20, 22), and producing frogs (Exodus 8:6, 7). These activities, however miraculous they may have seemed, did not prove that the pharaoh’s magicians were from God. In the same way, the seemingly unusual deeds performed by modern-day miracle-workers do not prove that God is working through them.

We may be unsure concerning the source of such deceptive practices. Are they false miraculous powers from Satan (2 Thessalonians 2:9), deceptive works of men motivated by Satan (2 Corinthians 11:13–15), delusions allowed by God (2 Thessalonians 2:11, 12), or signs performed by demons (Revelations 16:14)? Does God allow Satan such power today? We do know that God allowed Satan to afflict Job (Job 1:12; 2:6) and that a demon empowered a young man to break chains and shackles (Mark 5:2–4). However, Satan has never been able to accomplish anything comparable to the true miracles from God. Unusual powers by Satan or demons during the ministry of Jesus do not prove that Satan and demons have miraculous powers today. What we can know for sure is that those who wrote the Bible were from God, and through what they wrote we can determine who is a true teacher and who is a false teacher (1 John 4:6).

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## MIRACLES HAD A DIVINE SOURCE

Miracles were performed through the power of God and not solely on the strength of one’s faith. Jesus, having emptied Himself (Philippians 2:6, 7), performed His miracles by the power of the Holy Spirit with which He was anointed (Matthew 12:28; Luke 4:18; Acts 10:38). He gave some miraculous powers to seventy disciples (Luke 10:9, 17), as well as to the apostles during

His personal ministry (Matthew 10:1), perhaps through the Holy Spirit who was with them (John 14:17). Later, when they were baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:2–5; 2:4), they were endued with even more power. It seems significant that only the apostles were reported to be performing miracles for a time after the coming of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:43; 4:33; 5:12). Others did not begin performing miracles until the apostles laid hands on them, as was true of Stephen and Philip (Acts 6:5, 6, 8; 8:6).

Early in their discipleship—though they had been given the power to cast out unclean spirits (Matthew 10:1, 8; Mark 3:14, 15) and had even cast out demons (Mark 6:13)—the apostles failed to heal a demoniac. This happened not because they lacked authority to cast out demons, but because they lacked faith (Matthew 17:20). The lack of faith was not on the part of the father or his demon-possessed son, but on the part of the apostles.

In order to perform a miracle, the power first had to be given. Then, faith was needed to exercise the power that had been given. Jesus gave Peter the power to walk on water, but Peter failed—not because he had not been given the power, but because his faith failed (Matthew 14:28–31).

Miracles were given by God (1 Corinthians 12:4–6) through the Holy Spirit. They were not obtained by the will of man or by faith only, but through the working of the Spirit. We are told that “the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills” (1 Corinthians 12:11; see also Hebrews 2:4). The kind of miraculous gift that was given to a Christian was based on the will of the Holy Spirit and not on the desire of the individual who received the gift.

The apostles were given the power to impart the Spirit to others through the laying on of their hands, conferring miraculous gifts upon them (Acts 19:6; 2 Timothy 1:6). The ability to impart the Spirit was one of the signs of their apostleship (2 Corinthians 12:12). We have no evidence that those who had received power through the apostles were able to pass on miraculous gifts by laying their hands on others.

Even in the presence of Philip, who was able to perform miracles (Acts 8:6), the apostles—

Peter and John—were needed in Samaria to impart the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14–19). God gave the apostles a special ability to confer miraculous powers upon others.

J. W. McGarvey wrote concerning the work of Peter and John in Samaria,

Whatever other purposes may have prompted the mission of the two apostles, such as confirming the faith of the disciples, or assisting Philip in his labors, it is quite certain that the chief purpose was the impartation of the Holy Spirit. What they did on their arrival was certainly that for which they went: but the chief thing which they did was to confer the Holy Spirit; therefore this was the chief purpose of their visit. If, however, Philip could have conferred this gift, the mission would have been useless so far as its chief purpose is concerned. This affords strong evidence that the miraculous gift of the Holy Spirit was bestowed through no human hands but those of the apostles; and this conclusion is confirmed by the consideration that in the only other instance of the kind recorded in Acts, that of the twelve in Ephesus (19:1–7), the gift was bestowed by the hands of an apostle.<sup>1</sup>

The church in Corinth was not lacking in any gift (1 Corinthians 1:7), a fact which was used as proof that Paul was an apostle. Paul wrote to them, “. . . you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 9:2). If these gifts were available through faith alone or by any other means than the laying on of an apostle’s hands, then the church at Corinth would not have been pointed to by Paul as proof of his apostleship. If no other apostle had gone to Corinth, then Paul must have been an apostle, for he alone had been there to give them the miraculous gifts. Because this was true, the gifts in the Corinthian church were proof of his apostleship.

If miraculous powers were given directly by God in the absence of an apostle, the apostles Peter and John would not have needed to go to Samaria and Paul would not have needed to go to Rome to impart a spiritual gift to the Christians there (Romans 1:11). This could have been done without the presence of an apostle if God worked in this way. The only exception to this rule is the household of Cornelius.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>J. W. McGarvey, *New Commentary on Acts of Apostles*, vol. 1 (N.p., 1892; reprint, Delight, Ark.: Gospel Light Publishing Co., n.d.), 142.

<sup>2</sup>See the discussion concerning Cornelius and his household on pages 22 through 24.

Since that time (the days of the apostles), miracles, wonders, and signs have ceased. No apostles are alive today to confer such gifts. If those who claim to be miracle-workers today could walk on water, calm a raging sea, raise the dead, multiply food to feed multitudes, or work other obvious miracles, they would demonstrate these abilities time and time again. They are unable to perform miracles like those described in the New Testament.

### **MIRACLES WERE PERFORMED BY SPECIFIC BELIEVERS**

Jesus stated in Mark 16:17, 18 that “signs will accompany those who have believed: in My name they will cast out demons, they will speak with new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly poison, it shall not hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.” This passage does not answer the following questions: (1) Will all believers be able to cast out demons, speak in new languages, pick up serpents or drink poison without being harmed, and heal the sick? (2) Will these gifts be limited to certain believers? (3) On what basis will those who perform these acts be able to do them? (4) How long will these signs continue? (5) What is the purpose of these signs?

A statement by Paul provides evidence that not all believers possessed gifts (1 Corinthians 12:7–11, 27–31). He asked rhetorically, “All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they? All do not have the gift of healing, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they?” Only certain believers had miraculous gifts, and each had his own specific gift.

Those who had miraculous gifts did not have them solely because they were believers, but because they had been empowered by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:11). Their miraculous powers were the result of the apostles’ imparting of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of their hands (Acts 8:14–17; 19:6). For this reason, miraculous gifts were given only when apostles were present (note Romans 1:11). They were for the purpose of confirming the truths of the gospel (Mark 16:20; Acts 14:3; Hebrews 2:3, 4) as the foundation of the church was being laid upon the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 2:20).

McGarvey correctly stated concerning Mark 16:17, 18:

The promise is, not that these signs shall follow for any specified time, nor that they should follow each individual believer; but merely that they shall follow, and follow “the believers” taken as a body. They did follow the believers during the apostolic age—not every individual believer, but all, or nearly all, the organized bodies of the believers. This was a complete fulfillment of what was promised.<sup>3</sup>

### **MIRACLES WERE PERFORMED IN JESUS’ NAME**

The night before Jesus was crucified, He told the apostles, “If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it” (John 14:14). From this some have concluded that if we ask in Jesus’ name, a miracle will happen. However, this was stated to the apostles, who were the only ones present with Jesus at that time (Matthew 26:20; Luke 22:14). The Book of Acts tells of men who asked in Jesus’ name for a demon to come out of someone. The demon answered, “I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?” (Acts 19:13–15). Jesus had given the power to Paul, but not to the sons of Sceva. The demon understood this and did not obey those who were unauthorized to command them.

Jesus will deny knowing the lawless ones who say to Him, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?” (Matthew 7:22).

The power to perform miracles first had to be given; then a miracle could be performed through faith, by asking in Jesus’ name. An example of this is found in Acts 3:1–16. Peter and John, who had received power when the Spirit came (Acts 1:8; 2:4), healed the lame man in Jesus’ name (v. 6) and through their faith in His name (v. 16). Miracles were not performed on the basis of faith only or simply by asking in Jesus’ name. The power had to be given; then a miracle could be performed by faith in Jesus’ name.

### **MIRACLES WERE NOT PERFORMED FOR MONEY**

Peter told a lame beggar, “I do not possess

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<sup>3</sup>J. W. McGarvey, *Matthew and Mark*, The New Testament Commentary, vol. 1 (N.p., 1875; reprint, Delight, Ark.: Gospel Light Publishing Co., n.d.), 375.

silver and gold" (Acts 3:6a). Jesus had instructed the apostles, "Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons; freely you received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8). Paul wrote that he had often labored "in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure" (2 Corinthians 11:27). Jesus said, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" (Luke 9:58).

Those who had miraculous powers did not use them in order to receive monetary benefits. Jesus stated that they had received without cost and were to give without cost. Today's so-called miracle-workers receive enormous amounts of money and live in luxury far above the poor people from whom they receive money. In this they are not following the pattern of Jesus, Paul, Peter, and the other early Christians, who were not greatly financially benefited from the miracles they performed.

### MIRACLES WERE NOT A "CURE ALL"

Jesus believed in doctors, which would imply that He approved of the use of medicine. He stated, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick" (Matthew 9:12; Mark 2:17; Luke 5:31). Luke was a physician. When Paul alluded to him, he did not state that he *had* been a physician but referred to him as "Luke, the beloved physician" (Colossians 4:14), an indication that he continued to be a doctor even after becoming a Christian.

Paul commended the use of medicine when he wrote Timothy, "No longer drink water exclusively, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments" (1 Timothy 5:23). Paul was not commending drinking wine as a beverage, but as a medicine for Timothy's stomach and other infirmities.

The fact that Paul did not heal his companions is an indication that healing was not just for the benefit of the sick, but had another purpose. Paul wrote, "Trophimus I left sick at Miletus" (2 Timothy 4:20b). Paul was not healed of his "thorn in the flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:7, 8).

The following observations may be made from the above statements: (1) sick people are to use doctors. (2) Even though Paul had the powers of an apostle and had healed people (Acts 14:9, 10; 19:11, 12), he did not heal Timothy or

Trophimus. (3) Medicine was recommended to Timothy so should be used today to help cure our sicknesses. (4) Either Paul's faith was not strong enough to heal Timothy and Trophimus, they did not have enough faith to be healed, or healing was not in order to benefit all sick people. We would not doubt the faith of Paul and perhaps should not question the faith of Timothy (2 Timothy 1:5) or Trophimus. (5) Paul did not recommend faith and prayer to Timothy to heal him, but rather medicine as a remedy. If faith alone can heal, then Paul gave Timothy the wrong advice. (6) If Paul could have healed Timothy and Trophimus but did not, then he did them a great injustice.

(7) Healing must have been done only as a sign when such was needed to attract unbelievers or to confirm the message was from God. (8) Timothy and Trophimus knew Paul's teaching was from God so needed no proof of that fact. (9) The written Word gives us the evidence we need (John 20:30, 31), so God will not give us other evidence. For example, no evidence beyond Moses and the prophets was given to the rich man in Luke 16:29-31. (10) We should use whatever means we have today to recover when we are sick. We should pray for help, but not for miracles.

### CONCLUSION

Signs and wonders performed through the work of the Holy Spirit were important in proving to those who witnessed them that God is God and that He has revealed Himself to us through His Word. The Holy Spirit is not in Christians today to work directly on them or in them in a miraculous way. This work stopped at the death of the last person who had received the gift of the Spirit through the laying on of an apostle's hands.

Teachers must be judged by their teaching and not by apparent miracles. We are to try the spirits (1 John 4:1), not by signs and wonders they claim to perform, but by their teaching. God has given us a standard for evaluation: "They are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error" (1 John 4:5, 6). ■