

# GIFTS, MIRACLES

(Heb. 2:3-4)

By Paul T. Butler — OBC Convention, Feb. 1977

## Introduction

### I. DEFINITION OF MIRACLE

A. "An event occurring in the natural world, observed by the senses, produced by divine power, without any adequate human or natural cause, the purpose of which is to reveal the will of God and do good to man." (McCartney, in *Twelve Great Questions About Christ*)

1. Hume once argued: there is more evidence for regularity in nature than for irregularity; therefore, regularity and not irregularity must be the truth of the matter.
2. Certainly there is more evidence for the regular occurrence of nature than for any supernatural occurrence. If there weren't we could not talk of miracles.
3. The argument of miracle rests on the regularity of nature generally.
4. Only if all the historical evidence available to man could show there is no being outside nature who can in any way alter it can there be an argument against the possibility of miracles. This evidence does not do—indeed cannot do!

B. In our text four different words are used:

1. *semeiois* = signs
2. *terasin* = wonders
3. *dunamesin* = powerful deeds
4. *merismois* = distributions (of the Holy Spirit)
5. Milligan (Hebrews) says these words classify miracles as:
  - a. to their design (signs)
  - b. to their nature (wonders)
  - c. to their origin (supernatural power)
  - d. to their Christian aspect (distributions of the Holy Spirit)

### II. THE FACT OF MIRACLES RESTS ON THE HISTORICITY OF OUR NEW TESTAMENT TEXT

- A. Were these writers eyewitnesses?
- B. Are they credible
- C. Are the documents authentic?
- D. This is another subject—but it is the fundamental subject.

### I. PURPOSE OF MIRACLES

- A. As our text points out, the primary purpose of miracles was to "bear witness" that the message from Jesus and that Jesus Himself was from God. Jn. 10:25, 37, 38; 14:10-11; Mt. 9:1-8

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The miracles do not prove Jesus to be the Son of God—many men worked miracles—but they prove Him to be a truthful messenger, and this truthful messenger says that He is God. Christ may have wrought miracles and not have been God; but He could not have wrought miracles and said that He was God without being God.

- B. To demonstrate the mercifulness of God in the case of individual men. Miracles illustrate and explain the teaching of Jesus on the love and mercy of God.
- C. To demonstrate God's wrath upon sin and rebellious sinners Mt. 21:18-19 (cursed fig tree), Acts 13:11 (blinding of Elymas) Acts 5:5-10 (Ananias and Sapphira). Bible miracles taught not only God's love and goodness but also His power and authority, and sometimes His righteous and fearful judgments.
- D. Miracles of the Bible demonstrate clearly that miracles were never intended to be universal:
  - 1. In extent: for they were always limited to few and special cases. Never have they been used to relieve suffering or prolong life here for all of God's people universally.
    - a. Some received no miraculous deliverance here (Heb. 11:35-40)
    - b. John the Immerser, greatest born of women, worked no miracles, nor was he delivered miraculously (Mt. 11:7-11; Jn. 10:41).
    - c. Jesus could have healed all or raised all from dead but He didn't.
    - d. Paul healed many, but did not heal Trophimus and Timothy (II Tim. 4:20; I Tim. 5:23).
  - 2. In result: All who were delivered from sickness had at other times to suffer again and die. All who were raised from the dead had to die again. Peter was delivered twice, but not a third time (God was no less compassionate and Peter no less believing).

## II. PASSING OF MIRACLES (AS SUCH)

- A. It would take some convincing to persuade me that God does not work providentially in history today. I believe He answers when we pray (sometimes yes, sometimes no, sometimes without acting at all).
  - 1. I teach Life of Christ, Old Testament Prophets and Revelation. You cannot study and teach those books and believe them for 20 years without believing God is active in the affairs of men and nations.
  - 2. I do not deny that God could reinstitute an age of miracles such as we read in the Old Testament and New Testament if it suited His purpose.

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3. It is just that I believe He will not because He has no further need of such miracles and signs. Here is why I believe that:
- B. "When that which is perfect is come, that which is in part shall be done away . . ." I Cor. 13:10.
1. The reason for the election of the Jews in Christ (Eph. 1) was for "a plan in the *fulness of time*, to unite all things in him. . . ." (not for heaven, but for earth). Thus the plan was to unite both Jew and Gentile, slave and free, man and woman, into one body, the church. This is why the spiritual miraculous gifts were given in Eph. 4:11f., for this ministry of unifying. These miraculous gifts were to last until the *teleios* "man" was formed (Eph. 4:13).
  2. The identical context, outline, illustrations, and terminology in I Cor. 12—14 lead us to conclude that such is also the meaning of *teleios* there . . . to perfect both Jew and Gentile in the one body.
  3. It is unquestionably apparent that the problem in both Ephesians and Corinthians was the immaturity and schismatic tendencies of the early church. In light of the frequent association of love with perfection (maturity)—and in light of the fact that the entire epistle of I Cor. deals with the grand theme of divine love in the context of the childish immaturity of so many Christians at Corinth, it seems best to define "the perfect" in terms of the ultimate goal, aim, and end which Paul seeks to accomplish in bringing God's people to the fulness of spiritual growth and maturity in Christ.
  4. Paul's description of the carnal immaturity of Christians at Corinth serves to underscore his emphasis on the ultimate goal which he sets for them in chapter 13. Chapter 13 must be read in the context of the whole book and may not be interpreted apart from his charge in 14:1—"Make love your aim," and in 14:20 "Do not be children in your thinking; in malice be babes, but in thinking be perfect."
  5. When the "perfect" comes, says Paul, the tongues, etc. would cease. These miraculous gifts were not proofs of spiritual maturity. Paul does not say that these will cease when Jesus comes again, nor when the Corinthians get to heaven. Rather, that in time, during their life on earth, the miraculous demonstrations will cease.
  6. I do not think "perfect" means just the completed canon of New Testament books; it also has to do with a "perfected" church.
    - a. The canon's formation was by uninspired men (so far as we know). I believe every book in the New Testament is inspired

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and apostolic. But what if another scroll of antiquity is found with the same credentials as the books we now have? We would not have a "perfect—complete" New Testament!

b. The "perfect law of liberty" was already at work when James wrote of it in James 1:25. This perfect law was in action before the completion of our 27 books of the New Testament were formed in a New Testament. One could look into this law then and be blessed in obedience to it. It was the perfect law of freedom because it accomplished what the incomplete Law of Moses could not do. It is significant in this context that James also speaks of the children of God as being perfect and complete in the church (James 1:4-5).

C. The end for which miracles were wrought, to attest to the veracity of Christ and His claims, to bring the church to maturity, and to bring about faith through which we may partake of the divine nature (II Pet 1:3-4)—this is the ultimate goal of God's work with us. **MIRACLES CAN NEVER BE AN ACCEPTABLE SUBSTITUTE FOR THIS INDWELLING** (I Tim. 1:5; II Pet. 1:3-11; I Jn. 1:5-8; 3:1-6; I Cor. 12:31—14:1; II Cor. 3:18). (See "A Study of the Work of the Holy Spirit in Christians," by Seth Wilson, mimeo, OBC bookstore.)

1. Miracles are signs or works of the Holy Spirit, not the Holy Spirit Himself. They are the effects of which He is the cause. Miracles have been found where the personal indwelling of the Holy Spirit did not occur. (Mt. 10; Lk. 10, apostles and 70 disciples worked miracles months before Jesus said the Holy Spirit had not come yet, Jn. 7:38). King Saul on his way to murder God's anointed was made to prophesy by the Spirit of God (I Sam. 19:18-24). Balaam's ass (Num. 22:25-30). Cornelius (Acts 10:44-48).
2. It is evident that some men whom Christ called "workers of iniquity" claimed to have worked many miracles in His name. If they speak that boldly to His face, at judgment, does it not appear that they will be sincerely convinced that they have actually wrought such mighty works by His power here?
3. It does not appear that miraculous demonstrations are necessary effects whenever or wherever the Holy Spirit dwells in men. I Cor. 12:3, the man who honestly says Jesus is Lord manifests he has the Holy Spirit. I Cor. 12:29-30 shows that not all in the New Testament church had the gifts of miraculous works.
4. The word of God has the power to regenerate and to sanctify through faith which allows the Spirit of God to dwell in us. Eph. 3:16-19; I Tim. 1:5; Gal. 5:22-25; II Pet. 1:3-4; II Cor. 3:18.

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5. Miraculous deeds did not guarantee a spiritual church. The Corinthian church "came behind in no gift" and was enriched "in all utterance and in all knowledge" (I Cor. 1:5-7); yet that church was notorious for errors in doctrine and evils in practice.
6. Are such wonders and signs always caused exclusively by the Holy Spirit? May some of the experience and utterances be caused by the workings of the subconscious mind, by something like hypnotic influences? (See *The Psychology of Speaking in Tongues*, by John P. Kildahl, Harper & Row.)
7. Isolated wonders do not necessarily prove a divine revelation from God. Bible miracles were part of a coherent combination of many miracles and messages to which they were significantly related. The extent and quality of Bible miracles and revelations is different from the many alleged miracles and prophecies of today or any century since apostles. Philip's miracles and those of Simon Magus were different. Even Pharaoh could see (or should have) the difference between Moses' miracles and those of his magicians. (Gal. 1:6-9) Even a gospel by angels, if different than Paul's would be condemned.
8. I Jn. 4:6 says it is not the Holy Spirit if men show they do not hear (heed and keep) the word of the apostles.

James 3:13-18 shows that the Spirit of God does not cause men to be jealous and factious—divisive.

WHEN THERE ARE SO MANY DENOMINATIONAL FACTIONS, ALLEGING TO HAVE THESE MIRACULOUS SIGNS AND WONDERS, YET STRIVING TO MAINTAIN THEIR DENOMINATIONAL DIFFERENCES EVEN IN THE FACE OF PLAIN SCRIPTURAL TEACHINGS?! What are we to conclude about their claims?

### III. FUNCTIONAL GIFTS (Rom. 12:1-13)

- A. I believe all men and women have gifts from their Creator.
  1. All may not have the same gifts or latent potentialities.
  2. Some may have many more potentialities than others.
  3. BUT THEY ARE ALL NEEDED AS FUNCTIONS IN THE BODY OF CHRIST. This is the important point: No gifts, capacities, talents, abilities (all given by the grace of God) are more important FUNCTIONALLY, than others.
  4. The whole context here indicates Paul is talking *not* about miraculous gifts given by God for the same purposes as those of

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- I Cor. 12-14; but of functional gifts, one of which at least every member of the body has (“... I bid every one among you. . .”).
- B. I like the way Carl Ketcherside explains it in *Mission Messenger*, Vol. 36, No. 10, Oct. 1974, “Functioning Gifts.”
1. Any gift freely bestowed by God is a gift of the Spirit, regardless of how it is communicated to the recipient. That is why I object to designating any period of time a charismatic age. There is no such thing as a charismatic age, for the simple reason that there is no non-charismatic age. There has never been a time when the will of God was not enhanced and promoted by gifts of grace. A gift is not charismatic because of its nature, method of reception, or effect, but because of its origin. It is charismatic because it is a gift of *charis*, grace.
  2. The man who has the enviable gift of understanding and relieving the needy is “charismatic” as surely as one who has the gift of prophecy. The one who can give cheerfully and freely as his contribution to the work of the saints is “charismatic.” In view of this, I am not turned on by such expressions as “The Spirit is working again in our time.” The Spirit has never ceased working.
  3. The gifts of God are varied. Paul wrote to a congregation which came behind in no gift and told them that the ability to restrain sexual passion, making marriage unnecessary was a *charisma* of God. But he also implied that the gift of sexual need which could be gratified in marriage was a *charisma*. “I would that everybody lived as I do; but each of us has his own special gift from God—one in one direction and one in another” (I Cor. 7:7). It is quite evident that Paul’s gift was in a different direction than that of the majority.
- C. Eph. 4:7 “But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.”
1. Do not the parables teach that men are *given* (how else, but by the grace of God) “talents” and “pounds” according to different measures, and each one is expected to *use* (none are non-functional) and be rewarded according, not to what he does not have, but according to how he uses what he does have?
  2. Now if we will follow the leading of the Spirit in His revealed will and make sure instead of worrying about “having the Spirit” that the “Spirit has all of us,” we will “use” our *praxin* (function, or action) *charismata* (gifts) for the benefit of the one body. Actually, if we simply let ourselves be “transformed” by “the renewing of our minds . . .” (Rom. 12:1-2) we will use our gifts of grace for the upbuilding of the body in love.

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Even unconverted men and women have *charismatic gifts!* *functional gifts*—whatever they have in potentialities they have by the grace of God but they are not allowing the Spirit to use them for the upbuilding of Christ's body.

- D. Does all this mean that the special *supernatural* gifts should also be continued by the Holy Spirit in the church today? No.
1. They were for special needs. The functional gifts will always be needed.
  2. I do not need to see a miracle performed by anyone else, nor have one performed upon me, to produce faith in the revealed Word of God.
  3. The original envoys of Jesus who gave the message were thoroughly accredited and their message was confirmed by miracles, wonders and signs. There is no sense in having miracles to confirm miracles, and once truth is confirmed it never needs to be confirmed again.
  4. The spectacular, *supernatural*, signs and wonders were to cease (there is no doubt about that), but the functional gifts through which every member of the body may *love* man and God will abide!
  5. AFTER ALL, THE GRACE OF GOD HAS GIVEN EACH OF US GIFTS FOR FUNCTIONING IN THE CHURCH AND WE USE THEM ACCORDING TO THE MEASURE OF OUR FAITH.

The miraculous, supernatural gifts could be given and made to function regardless of the measure of the faith of the person.

## CONCLUSION

Accepting the possibility of miracles is a matter of morality. C. S. Lewis wrote, “. . . the question whether miracles occur can never be answered simply by experience. Every event which might claim to be a miracle is, in the last resort something presented to our senses, something seen, heard, touched, . . . etc. and our senses are not infallible. If anything extraordinary seems to have happened, we can always say that we have been the victims of an illusion. If we hold a philosophy that excludes the supernatural, this is what we shall always say.”

What we learn from experience depends on our philosophy of epistemology (theory of how one learns) and that ultimately rests on our moral honesty. Many people think one can decide whether a miracle occurred in the past by examining the evidence according to the ordinary rules of historical inquiry. But the ordinary rules cannot be worked *until* we have

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decided whether miracles are possible, and if so, how probable they are. So, we are back to whether we are being honest or not.

Man's ability to think and reason gives evidence that something beyond nature exists. The Naturalist cannot deny the thinking-reasoning process without thinking and reasoning! It is obvious that the thinking process is not just a natural event composed of cells, electric impulses, etc. Therefore, something other than nature exists.

Morality is another undeniable evidence of the possibility of that which is beyond nature. Even the great determinist Karl Marx held there was "good" behavior and "bad" behavior and subjected what he determined to be "bad" behavior to withering moral scorn. He could justify this only with the presupposition that there is a moral responsibility—something beyond natural reflex.

Why does liberal theology exclude miracles? Because it excludes the "living God" of Christianity and believes instead in a kind of God who obviously would not do miracles, or indeed anything else outside of nature.

Men are reluctant to face up to the fact of a *living* God. They much prefer an abstract "Idea" to a Person. An idea does nothing, demands nothing. It is there for a person to change, manipulate or obliterate as the whim calls for. But a living, supernatural, all-sovereign Person is something else! It is shocking to discover there is a Person, a feeling, thinking, moral Person who is Creator and Sustainer of life, alive and active in our everyday affairs. It is even more alarming to think this Person has the right to demand mental and moral control of our lives. C. S. Lewis puts it thus: "You have had a shock like that before, in connection with smaller matters—when the fishing line pulls at your hand, when something breathes beside you in the darkness. So here; the shock comes at the precise moment when the thrill of life is communicated to us along the clue we have been following. It is always shocking to meet life where we thought we were alone. 'Look out,' we cry, 'it's alive!'"

An impersonal God—well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth and goodness, inside our own heads—better still. A formless life-force surging through us, a vast power which we can tap—best of all. But God Himself, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching at an infinite speed, the hunter, king, husband, that is quite another matter.

There comes a moment when the children who have been playing at cops and robbers hush suddenly: was that a *real* footstep in the hall? There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion (called, "man's search for God") suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found Him? Supposing He has worked miracles over and above and outside the natural order of things? We never meant it to come to *that!* Worse still, supposing He has found us?