

The Role of Signs and Wonders

Acts 5:12-16

In our study of the book of Acts, miraculous signs and wonders play a major part of the establishment of Christ's Church in the new covenant. And that raises some important questions for us. What role did signs and wonders play in the early Church. And, what role, if any, do they play today. The true believer has a sincere desire to please God. Unbelievers don't have that category. They only want to please themselves and others in so far as it will benefit them. But the believer wants to know and understand what God desires and what pleases God. True Christians seek to obey Christ's will.

Here's the problem. Solid Christians have different opinions on the answer to this question. And what makes it so difficult is that when you study the Bible on this subject, you can honestly understand why people take different positions on this. There's a lot of biblical data and all of it is not easy to interpret. And we don't have biblical texts which say, miraculous gifts end with the Apostles just like there aren't texts which say miraculous gifts operate until Christ returns.

So, we're forced to wrestle with the Scriptures. You know, you can take any verse out of the Bible, pull it out of its context, and make it mean anything you want. Subjects like this force us deep into the Word and make us work hard to interpret significant amounts of biblical data. As hard as it is, frankly, it's good for us to go deep into God's Word and wrestle with it.

We also must admit that, again, godly believers have landed on different sides on this issue. There are some great Bible teachers who have been very influential in my life and thinking who I disagree with. There are some biblical truths that Jason and I will vigorously defend. For instance, the Bible's teaching on the inspiration and sufficiency of Scripture, the deity of Christ, and substitutionary atonement are not open to different interpretations. Jason and I will get mean if we have to in order to defend those truths. But other areas of truth fall more under the category of pastoral wisdom. And today's subject falls into this category. So, it falls to me and Jason to lead the Church with a shepherd's staff in areas like this.

So, before I give you what I think is the correct answer to our main question, let me say a few things.

1. It's no exaggeration to say that I've been struggling with this topic for almost 30 years. Therefore, I don't expect necessarily to solve all your questions today. In fact I'll probably raise some.

2. I still have unanswered questions on these issues. And that's ok. I think we need to study this issue deeply enough to have confidence that we're not walking in disobedience to God.
3. I'd like you to give me a fair hearing today. Listen all the way down to the end. And if you disagree, that's ok. If you have questions for me, that's ok. We want you to know that here at The Road, this is a safe place for you to wrestle through difficult issues. You can raise questions and doubts without offending us. We want you to have that freedom.
4. These are issues which Jason and I have discussed thoroughly. We might like to make different qualifications here and there, but in principle we're unified. And we're unified in the direction we believe The Road needs to lead.

Now, let me restate my question and show you how I answer it.

“What role did signs and wonders serve in the early Church and do they continue to operate as normative in the Church today?”

Here's my answer and I'll show you how I arrive at it. Signs and wonders served primarily to authenticate the Apostles as the unique messengers of Christ. Signs and wonders were intended by God to operate during the generation of the Apostles and to diminish in the following generations. By signs and wonders I'm referring specifically to the God given ability to perform miracles. Hear me clearly!!! There is no question, in my mind, whether God still performs miracles. I believe that he does that every day. The question is whether God still gives men gifts to perform signs and wonders.

Let me give you 4 observations which lead me to believe that although God still performs miracles, he no longer gifts men those gifts as he did in the days of the Apostles.

First Observation – Miracles were not normative in the book of Acts. When I was a teenager first reading the book of Acts for myself I just assumed that the book of Acts covered several months or a few years at the most. But when you realize that the book of Acts covers a 30 year period of Church history, suddenly you see that signs and wonders were not occurring on a weekly, monthly, or possibly even yearly basis. Now, obviously, there were periods of time within those 30 years that miracles were being performed frequently, especially in the early chapters of Acts. But when you study the book as a whole you begin to

see that signs and wonders were not performed with consistent frequency for the entire 30 year period. In fact, just like we see a flurry of miraculous events early on in Acts, they become distinctly less frequent as time goes on.

Take speaking in tongues for example. First of all, in the NT, speaking in tongues is always speaking in a known human language. In the 30 year span of the book of Acts there are only 3 (maybe 4) recorded instances of people speaking in tongues. None of these instances occur during public worship services or private prayer settings. Each one of them occur at major redemptive historical events. And each instance recorded instance represents a different people group. Also, each time occurs in the immediate presence of at least one Apostle. So, in Acts 2 you have the company of the Apostles and the 120 believers with them on the day of Pentecost. In Acts 8 you have the Samaritan Pentecost. In Acts 10 you have the God-fearers (Jewish proselytes) who receive the Spirit and speak in tongues in the presence of Peter. And in Acts 19 you have the Gentile Pentecost where Paul laid his hands on the Ephesian Gentiles and they received the Spirit and spoke in tongues. Each one of these instances occurred in the presence of an Apostle. And in each instance, it's always a new and distinct people group. Speaking in tongues never occurs in the context of a worship service or prayer meeting.

There's only one other NT book outside the book of Acts where speaking in tongues is mentioned and that is in 1st Corinthians. We do not have time to even scratch the surface of 1st Corinthians. However, Paul's entire purpose for writing on the miraculous spiritual gifts in chs. 12-14 was to correct the Corinthian Church's abuse and misuse of those gifts. When you see that Paul's teaching on the miraculous gifts not a "how to guide" but a rebuke against the Corinthian Church, I think it is reasonable to conclude, that if the Corinthians followed Paul's instructions for practicing them, their practice of the miraculous gifts would have ceased altogether. For instance, women were not allowed to speak in tongues in a public worship service (1 Cor. 14:34). No more than 3 men could speak in tongues during any given worship service (14:27). And only one man at a time was permitted to speak in another tongue, that is another language (14:27). Finally, Paul did not permit them to speak in tongues unless there was an interpreter.

So, my first observation is that signs and wonders, or the exercise of the miraculous gifts, were not normative or consistently frequent in the book of Acts. And therefore we shouldn't expect them to be commonly practiced today.

Second Observation – The miraculous gifts were not widespread among believers in the early church. In the same way that a cursory reading might lead you to believe that signs and wonders were happening frequently and consistently over a long period, it is easy to miss the fact that very few individuals performed miracles in the NT. It's not every Tom, Dick, or Harry who exercised the miraculous gifts. We've already seen how that there are only 3 instances in the book of Acts where people spoke in languages which they had never learned.

In the book of Acts, Luke stresses repeatedly that signs and wonders were being done by God through the hands of the Apostles. Consider these passages:

Acts 5:12 Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles.

Acts 2:43 And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.

Now, there are two main exceptions to this in the book of Acts. In Acts ch. 6 seven men are selected to assist the Apostles in ministering to the physical needs of the people. Out of those 7, Stephen and Phillip rise to prominent roles of publicly preaching the Word. In Acts 6 Luke tells us that Stephen was “full of grace and power, and was doing great wonders and signs among the people.” Also in Acts 8, God greatly used Phillip in the spread of the gospel to the Samaritans. Acts 8 says that he performed “signs.” Acts even says that he had 4 unmarried daughters who prophesied.

The point is this, after the ministry of Christ, the Scripture points us to the fact that the Holy Spirit gave gifts to perform signs and wonders primarily to the Apostles and to very few individuals outside their number. And those very few were directly and intimately connected to ministry of the Apostles. The simple fact is that ordinary believers were not gifted to perform miracles. In my opinion it's a big jump to say that God specifically gifted the Apostles to exercise the miraculous gifts and therefore we should expect that as common place in the life of all believers in all ages. So, if in the book of Acts signs and wonders were not common over a 30 year period and very few individuals were gifted to perform them, why should we draw the conclusion that signs and wonders would be more common than they were in the book of Acts and

that wider groups of believers would be gifted by the Spirit to perform them? That leads me to our third observation:

Third Observation – The role of signs and wonders. What role did God intend the signs and wonders serve? In other words, what was God’s purpose for granting signs and wonders? If the Scriptures tell us what role these gifts served in the early Church, then perhaps we can see what role if any they play today. In the early Church, signs and wonders served to certify and authenticate the Apostles as the unique messengers of Christ. In John 17:8 Jesus is praying to God the Father for the Apostles and he says, “I have given them the words you gave me, and they have received them.” You come down to verse 20 and Jesus expands the scope of his prayer, “I do not pray for these only [the Apostles}, but also for those who will believe through their word.” So here’s the pattern. Jesus entrusts the word the Father had given him to the Apostles, and he tells them that the Spirit will supernaturally enable them to communicate it infallibly. And then Jesus prays for the people who will one day believe in him through those words which Christ gave to the Apostles. My argument is that Jesus anointed the Apostles with the Spirit to faithfully and perfectly communicate his word and God attested to the fact that they had that authority by giving them power to exercise the miraculous gifts.

First let’s see the role signs and wonders played in the ministry of Christ.

Acts 2:22 “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know;

Let’s break this down. The word “attested” is a word that means to prove, confirm, or demonstrate. This passage says that God the Father, attested to Christ by “mighty works and signs and wonders.” In other words, God proved that Jesus Christ was exactly who he said he was through signs and wonders. So, Jesus would say in John 10:38 “[E]ven though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.”

Now, let’s look at the case of the Apostles and their miraculous acts. Look with me at Acts 14:3. Here we get the same formula as we saw with Christ.

Acts 14:3 So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands.

Paul and Barnabas spoke boldly for the Lord and the Lord was doing something. They spoke boldly and the Lord bore witness to the word of his grace, granting that signs and wonders be done by their hands. Do you see how big this is? The Lord was verifying Paul and Barnabas' authority to speak on behalf of Christ through signs and wonders.

Now look at Hebrews 2:3-4. We're going to see the same formula only, I think, a little more strikingly because this passage is written by a person who was a disciple of the Apostles.

Hebrews 2:2-4 For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, 3 how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, 4 while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

We see three generations in these verses. 1 – It was declared at first by the Lord. 2 – Those who heard Christ (the Apostles) 3 – The Apostles begin to proclaim God's word, and here the writer of Hebrews says that it was attested to them, God bore witness to the word through signs and wonders." Two things we see in this passage. 1.) The purpose of signs and wonders was to attest to the fact that the Apostles had authority to speak on Christ's behalf. 2.) The writer is speaking of the confirmation by signs and wonders in the past tense. By the time of the writing of Hebrews, which is before 70 AD, the writer is writing of signs and wonders as something that is past.

One more passage under this heading. In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul is defending his Apostleship against, false apostles who were questioning his authority. Listen to what he says in verse 12

2 Corinthians 12:12 The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works.

There were three qualifications to hold the office of a NT Apostle. 1. You had to be personally chosen by Christ for the office. 2. You had to have seen the resurrected Christ. And 3.) Here Paul says the sign of a

true Apostle is the ability to perform signs and wonders. The ability to exercise the miraculous gifts were a sign, an evidence that a person was a true Apostle. Here's the thing. If the miraculous gifts are open to every believer, then they in no way can serve to identify or verify true Apostles. If signs and wonders are not unique to the Apostles, then they cannot serve to attest to true Apostleship as Paul describes in this passage.

So, my third observation is that when the Bible gives us an explanation for the purpose or the role of signs and wonders, it says they were to verify the authority of the Apostles to speak on behalf of Christ.

Fourth Observation. The history of signs and wonders. A strong circumstantial argument for God's limitation of signs and wonders primarily to the ministry of the Apostles, is the biblical evidence that signs and wonders became less central and less prominent even before the close of the NT canon. In other words, we see, beginning with Pentecost, a flurry of miraculous activity in the early ministry of the Apostles. As I said earlier, as we move throughout the book of Acts toward the end there is a decline in the consistency and frequency of signs and wonders. Outside of the book of Acts there is only one NT book that deals in any significant way with the exercise of the miraculous gifts. That is 1 Corinthians. Two important things to remember about 1 Corinthians. 1.) It is one of the earliest NT books written. 2.) Paul's handling of the miraculous gifts in 1 Corinthians is a rebuke not a commendation or a how-to manual for practicing them.

As we proceed throughout the unfolding of the remaining letters written by Apostles to the NT Churches, teaching regarding the ongoing practice of miraculous gifts is conspicuously absent. We already saw how the author of Hebrews viewed signs and wonders as something that God did in the past, during generation of the Apostles.

Also, this is a very powerful and convincing piece of evidence. Near the end of Paul's life, he penned three letters to young pastors. We call them the pastoral epistles. 1 and 2 Timothy and the book of Titus. And Paul's specific stated purpose for writing those letters was instruct young pastors how believers should behave and act in the Church (1 Tim. 3:14-15). And also Paul is very specific to instruct these young pastors in identifying, training, and passing down the Apostle's teaching to future generations of pastors. And in these three books, there is not a single mention of the exercise of the miraculous gifts.

And finally, there's the Apostle John who writes three letters toward the close of the first century. And again, no mention of any ongoing practice of signs and wonders.

So, we've seen that signs and wonders were not normative or consistently frequent in the 30 year history of the book of Acts. We've seen that God gave miraculous gifts to the Apostles and only a very few individuals which were directly connected to the ministry of the Apostles. I've shown you how the Bible claims that God's purpose for giving signs and wonders was to authenticate the Apostles. And we've seen how signs and wonders diminish from the creation of the NT Church to the close of the NT Canon, to the point that there is no mention of them in Paul's instructions to following generations of pastors.

All this historical evidence serves to illustrate the foundational role of the Apostles in the life of the early Church. In the early Church God demonstrated that the Apostles were uniquely chosen by Christ to serve as his mouthpiece and transmit the word of God to the world. God attested to their authority with signs and wonders that accompanied their teaching. And once God confirmed the testimony of the Apostles through signs and wonders, we see a transfer of the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit moves from confirming the word of the gospel by miracles to infusing the gospel itself with his power.

So today you can be confident that we don't need miracles to prove the Word of God is true. God has established that foundation in the ministry of the Apostles and he doesn't need to continue laying the foundation over and over. The Holy Spirit works in the hearts of sinners and he anoints the message with power. So, we can be confident that the power of almighty God is present when we are faithful to his word and he will accomplish, through his Word, all that he plans to do.

Ok, so I understand in a message like this I'm leaving lots of questions unanswered. I'm certain I'm giving you a lot to think about. Let me just clarify a few things. The things I've said today flow out from a heart that has wrestled with these things for decades. And as I've said, I still have my own questions.

I am not questioning whether God is able or if God is still in the business of miracles. He is. What I doubt is that God still gives men gifts to perform the miraculous in the way he did the Apostles.

While I believe that the role of signs and wonders was limited to the age of the Apostles, I understand that good, godly men, who are far more intelligent than me would disagree with me. The fact that solid, sound, men have different positions on this should lead us to deep humility and patience with those we disagree with. I assume that I still have a lot to learn in this lifetime, and in the world to come I won't be surprised if I get there and Jesus chuckles at me for all the things I had wrong here on Earth.

I'm also open to entertaining the possibility of God using miraculous events in contexts where the gospel and Christianity have not already taken root. So, in people groups, who do not have the Scriptures in their own language and an established gospel witness, I can see how God would use the miraculous in opening the door for the witness of the gospel.

I know that there are all different types of charismatic believers. On the one hand, you have people who believe that the miraculous gifts are still possible don't expect them to pop up on a regular basis. And there are folks who expect to see signs and wonders every week. I do think there is danger the further you get toward expecting signs and wonders to be a normative part of the Christian experience. It seems to me, and this is a generalization, that extreme forms of Pentecostalism tend toward serious false teaching and falsedoctrine.

I also think it's dangerous to pursue signs and wonders. If God decides to perform miracles among us, that's his prerogative. On two separate occasions in Matthew's gospel, Jesus said that it is an "evil and adulterous generation that seeks for a sign." (Mt. 12:39, 16:4). The more you make signs and wonders a preoccupation or central to your expectation of Christian experience, the more you open the door to unbiblical beliefs and practices. We ought to be preoccupied with the work of the Spirit raising those who are dead in sin to life and Christ. What does it say about us if we are more excited about miracles than we are about our union with Christ? That's the goal of salvation! The goal of salvation is not that we get a ghost who does magic tricks for us. The good news of the gospel is that there is a triune God who has compassion for broken sinners and the love of a Father's heart, has sent his only Son to purchase our redemption, and has given us in great power his Spirit to bring us into a life of eternal fellowship and joy with this happy God. Friend, if you are here today and you don't yet know this God, we are happy you are here. And this is why we call on people to turn away from their fallenness and brokenness and run into the arms of a gracious God who stands ready to forgive you.

Also, I don't think we need to fall into the trap of thinking that God isn't working unless we are experiencing the miraculous. God is always working in all the details around us all the time. We need to be amazed by the tender care he exercises toward us daily in his providence in even the smallest details of our lives. For the believer, God is working all things together for our good, all the time. He doesn't have to suspend or interrupt the normal laws of nature and physics for that to be true.

Someone will ask about the Holy Spirit. To believe that the miraculous gifts were intended by God for the age of the Apostles does not in any way imply that we don't need the Holy Spirit. We are desperate for the work of the Holy Spirit. We depend on the Holy Spirit for every aspect of the Christian life! We cannot experience or possess one blessing of salvation without the work of the Holy Spirit. I really appreciate the words of Ian Hamilton: **"I'm a continuationist. I believe in the continuing, powerful, personal, mighty, supernatural, transforming, quickening work of the Holy Spirit... I believe that without the Holy Spirit, we may as well burn our Bibles. I believe that the Christian life is a life of intimate fellowship with a triune God"**

I also can't help but notice that sometimes our personality types tend to affect which way that we lean in this discussion. Sometimes very expressive, outwardly emotional people tend to lean towards charismaticism. And sometimes people who prefer a more stoic style of worship and self expression shy away from it.. Can I please say, that while I don't expect the miraculous charismatic gifts to pop up in our worship services and life together as a Church, that does not in any way mean that I expect our worship to be boring or stoic. I think our worship should be passionate and expressive. I think we ought to get excited about worship and get excited when we're worshipping. I think our emotions should be engaged and moved. I just think that the Holy Spirit will engage our emotions with the truth of God's word. I'm ok with you raising your hands when we sing, or clapping, or even shouting at appropriate moments. If our worship is boring, then we have one of two problems: 1.) We're not doing it right, or 2.) We're not born again.

Alright, last thing... Thank you for listening to all of this. I want to renew my desire for us to have patience and kindness toward believers who believe differently than we do on this subject. Your beliefs on this subject do not determine whether you are a Christian. In the new heavens and new earth we will spend eternity with people who had different opinions on this subject. So we can agree to learn together, grow

together, live humbly before one another. And we can observe the old adage: In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things Charity.