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Are Signs and Wonders for Today?

- Message by John Piper
- Scripture: Acts 4:29-31 Topic: Kingdom of God
- Series: Are Signs and Wonders for Today?

"And now, Lord, look upon their threats, and grant to thy servants to speak thy word with all boldness, while thou stretchest out thy hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of thy holy servant Jesus." And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.

Do you think that we should pray like that today? I mean the way they prayed in verses 29-30: "Grant to thy servants to speak thy words with all boldness, while thou stretchest out thy hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of thy holy servant Jesus." Should we pray for boldness of witness and signs and wonders like healing? Or should we pray only for boldness of witness? Were the signs and wonders specially designed by God to confirm the authority of the apostles so that after the apostles have done their work in providing the church with the foundation of revelation in the New Testament the signs and wonders cease?

Heart-Wrenching Uncertainty

I confess that as far as I can remember there has been no question in all my preaching ministry that has caused me more heart-wrenching uncertainty. I sit at my desk with my head in my hands and plead with the Lord, on the one hand, "Oh, Lord, if there is a wind of true, biblical, spiritual power blowing in our day with signs and wonders and healing and prophecy, forbid that I should stand in the way! Don't pass Bethlehem by. Make me the leader you want me to be for the greatest blessing of this church, and the greatest missionary effectiveness." But then, on the other hand I pray, "Oh, Lord,

forbid that we should lose our biblical bearings; forbid that we become trendy or faddish and begin to substitute the sand of experience for the rock of revealed truth. Show us the fullness of the power of the gospel, Lord, and keep us from preoccupation with secondary things, no matter how spectacular."

Here are two stacks of books by evangelical pastors and teachers. One stack argues that signs and wonders (like healings) were designed by God to help people recognize and believe in the Son of God and then to vindicate the authority of his apostles as they laid the foundation for the church with their inspired teachings and writings. After the apostles died and their writings were gathered in the New Testament, the place of signs and wonders was past, and we should not seek them today. The other stack of books argues that signs and wonders should be sought and performed today in Jesus' name. The reason we don't see so many is because of how little expectancy there is in the church. But God is at work doing a new thing in our day awakening the church to the reality of these things.

I read these two stacks of books. I comb the Scriptures. I pray. And I wind up again and again somewhere in the middle with a lot of uncertainty. So the best I can do for you this morning is to show you some of what I see that pulls me in both these different directions. Then perhaps as we study and pray together, the Lord will give us more light.

1. Signs and Wonders Limited to the Apostolic Age

Let me begin with the view that says signs and wonders are limited to the age of the apostles. This doesn't mean miracles don't happen. It just means they are not the typical or normal way ministry is to be done. The healing ministry of Jesus and the apostles was unique. Signs and wonders were not done by Christians in general, but were the signs of the apostles, and when the apostles died out, the signs died out.

I'll mention five pieces of evidence for this view.

1.1. The Special Ministry of the Apostles in Acts

In the book of Acts it looks like Luke, the author, means for us to see signs and wonders not as the common occurrence among Christians in general but as the special ministry of the apostolic group.

First of all, Luke reminds us that signs and wonders were important in the ministry of Jesus. Acts 2:22, "Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him."

Then, Luke shows us the importance of signs and wonders in the ministry of the apostles.

- Acts 2:43, "Fear came upon every soul; and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles [not through the Christians in general]."
- Acts 5:12, "Now many signs and wonders were done among the people by the hands of the apostles [not by the hands of all the Christians]."
- Acts 14:3, "So they [Paul and Barnabas] 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."
- Acts 15:12, "And all the assembly kept silence; and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles [as though this were something remarkable, not something being done daily by average Christians]."

So it looks like Luke intends for us to see signs and wonders in the book of Acts as having a special role in the ministry of the apostles. This suggests that neither then nor today were signs and wonders intended to be a normal part of church ministry or evangelism. They were intended to vindicate the authority of the apostles once for all.

1.2. 2 Corinthians 12:12

The second piece of evidence is 2 Corinthians 12:12. Paul is writing to defend his apostleship at Corinth against the claim that some other men were the true or greater apostles. He says, "The signs of an apostle were performed among you in all patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works."

Paul insists that he has given sufficient evidence of his authenticity as an

apostle—he had worked the signs of an apostle in the midst of hardship. And "signs and wonders" were part of what Paul did when he performed the signs of an apostle. So again it looks like signs and wonders have a special role to play in authenticating apostles (cf. Romans 15:19). That would imply that when the apostles had finished their founding work and died, signs and wonders would cease as a part of gospel ministry.

1.3. Hebrews 2:4

Hebrews 2:4 looks back on the time when the apostles brought the gospel to this people and says, "It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him [i.e., apostles], while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his own will." It looks like the miracles were not an every day occurrence in the church but something the church looked back on at a very special time when the eyewitness' of the Lord first brought the gospel.

1.4. The Uniqueness of Jesus' Ministry

Fourthly, this view points out that the ministry of Jesus was unique in some ways; and so you can't jump to the conclusion that just because he sent his disciples out to heal during his lifetime, he means for us to do ministry just that way when he is gone. For example, in Matthew 10:7-8 Jesus does say to the twelve, "Preach as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick . . ." (cf. Luke 9:2). So, yes, there is a command for his disciples to heal the sick as part of their ministry.

But two verses earlier he says, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Everybody agrees that this command is temporary. For a short time there was a limit to the Jewish people during Jesus' ministry. But after the resurrection Jesus commands us to go to all the nations. So you can't just assume that everything Jesus commanded during his lifetime he means to be continued as a ministry priority after his resurrection (cf. Luke 22:35-36). There was something unique about the time of the incarnation and the unusual upsurge of signs and wonders was part of that uniqueness.

1.5. No Parallel in Church History

One final argument from church history is that there has never been anyone that we know of that regularly healed people the way Jesus and the apostles did—instantly, completely, and the hardest cases. Most healing since the days of the apostles deals in the easier cases, fails often, and does not happen instantly. This does not mean it is unreal, only that it is of a different order than the signs and wonders of Jesus and the apostles.

So for reasons like these, one group of evangelicals says that signs and wonders ceased as a normative part of the ministry when the apostles finished their work. We should not pursue them today.

2. Signs and Wonders To Be Pursued Today

The other view says that we should see more signs and wonders today than we do. They are given both for the blessing of the church and for the spread of the gospel. Here are some of the reasons this view demands serious consideration.

2.1. Continuity Between Jesus' Ministry and the Church's

Jesus does seem to teach a continuity between his own ministry and the ongoing ministry of the church. "As the Father has sent me so send I you" (John 20:21). Luke says in Luke 9:2 that when Jesus sent out the twelve, "He sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal." And in Luke 10:9 when he sent out the 70, he commanded them, "Whenever you enter a town . . . heal the sick in it and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near you.'" So the preaching of the kingdom seems to be very closely linked with the ministry of healing.

Then in Matthew 24:14 he says, "This gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all the nations; then the end will come." In other words, the same gospel of the kingdom that Jesus preached is to be preached until all the nations have heard it. And it would seem natural that we should spread that kingdom pretty much the way Jesus did except in those points which he tells us to change or in which some other part of the New Testament tells us to change. So, for example, we do stop limiting the ministry to Jews, because he said to stop, but we don't stop

healing, because he didn't say to stop.

In fact in John 14:12 he said, "Truly I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do." Whatever this means in detail, it surely seems to suggest continuity between the signs and wonders of Jesus and the ministry of those who believe (not just apostles). So the first piece of evidence is that Jesus seems to teach a continuity between his ministry and the ministry of the church. He does not say, "Make healing part of the ministry while I am here, but not after I am gone."

2.2. Signs and Wonders Done in Acts by Non-Apostles

The second piece of evidence is the fact that in the book of Acts it is not just the apostles who do signs and wonders. Two "deacons"—two of the seven chosen in Acts 6, Stephen and Philip (Acts 6:5)—also do signs and wonders as part of their ministry.

In Acts 6:8 Luke says, "Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people." And in Acts 8:6 it says, "And the multitudes with one accord gave heed to what was said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs which he did." What makes Philip's ministry to the Samaritans so interesting is that later the apostles came down and laid hands on the Samaritans. This means that Philip was not acting somehow in the place of an apostle when he did signs and wonders. He simply had sign-working power in his evangelistic ministry.

2.3. Galatians 3:5

The third piece of evidence is found in Galatians 3:5. Paul writes to the churches of Galatia and says, "Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?" The point is that God is now supplying his Spirit to the Galatians (not to the apostles) and working miracles among them when he is not there. So the working of miracles does not seem to be limited to the ministry of the apostles in the early church.

2.4. Gifts of Healing and Miracles

Finally, the fourth piece of evidence is that in 1 Corinthians 12 Paul teaches that in the church there were gifts of healing and miracles for various believers not just for the apostles. He says in verses 7-10, "To each is given

the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good . . . to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom . . . to another gifts of healing, to another workings of miracles." Then in verse 28 he distinguishes this from the apostolate when he says, "God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings . . ." So it seems pretty clear that there were gifts of healings and miracles that were not limited to the apostles.

So for reasons like these, a second group of evangelicals believes that signs and wonders were not limited to the apostles or to that age, but are available for today and should be sought for the good of the church and the spread of the gospel.

What Shall We Say to These Two Views? So what shall we say to these two views? Virtually all the great pastors and teachers of history that I admire and that have fed me over the years belong to the first group who believe that signs and wonders were only for the apostolic age (John Calvin, Martin Luther, John Owen, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Charles Spurgeon, Benjamin Warfield, my own father). But I am not fully persuaded by their case. On the other hand, there does seem to be something unique about the way God did signs and wonders in the ministries of Jesus and the apostles.

So what I think I can say for our guidance is this. On the one hand, we ought to honor the uniqueness of Jesus and the apostles and of that revelatory moment in history that gave us the foundational doctrines of faith and life in the New Testament.

1. On the other hand we ought to be open to the real possibility that this too might be a unique moment in history, and in this moment it may well be God's purpose to pour out his Spirit in unprecedented revival—revival of love to Christ and zeal for worship and compassion for lost people and a missionary thrust with signs and wonders.

I want to have my keel deep and stable in the once-for-all biblical revelation of God, and I want to have my sails unfurled to every movement of God's Spirit upon the deeps. John Piper (@JohnPiper) is founder and teacher of desiringGod.org and chancellor of Bethlehem College & Seminary. For 33 years, he served as pastor of Bethlehem Baptist

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