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Enjoying God Ministries

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Are Signs, Wonders, and Miracles for Today?

Romans 15:18-19

Here in Romans 15:18-19 Paul mentions four important truths to account for the success of his evangelistic ministry. He refers to the primary instruments by which he successfully led pagan Gentiles to believe the gospel. **First**, Paul points to the “word” he proclaimed. He verbally declared the truth of who Jesus is and what he did. **Second**, his ministry was also characterized by “deeds.” This could conceivably include everything he did, be it acts of mercy or generosity or compassion or serving the poor. But the more likely reference is to the “signs and wonders” that he was enabled to perform, which is the **third** expression of his evangelistic ministry. **Fourth**, he accomplished all this, both word and deed, signs and wonders, “by the power of the Spirit of God.”

It’s important to note that Paul does not say that his ministry was supported by signs and wonders or that they accompanied or even bore witness to his gospel ministry. Instead, Paul says that his ministry was a combination of both *message and miracles*. In other words, miracles or signs and wonders were central to his gospel ministry.

We see confirmation of this just a few pages past Romans 15 in 1 Corinthians 2 and 4. Listen to Paul describe the nature of his ministry in Corinth:

“And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:1-2).

Stop right there. You might think that this means the only thing Paul did was preach, that the proclamation of the “word” was the beginning and end of his ministry. But let’s continue in this passage:

“And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:3-5).

Paul later in 1 Corinthians confirms this truth:

“For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power” (1 Cor. 4:20).

We should also notice that here in Romans 15 Paul does not say that he proclaimed the gospel. Paul actually says, “I have *fulfilled* the ministry of the gospel of Christ” (Rom. 15:19b). For Paul, therefore, his work in relation to the gospel involves not only words or propositions but also actions or deeds empowered by the Spirit, in particular miracles. All this to say that for Paul, the gospel was a combination of both the audible message and the tangible presence of God’s power. The gospel was both human words about Christ Jesus and divine power through the Holy Spirit.

The way in which Paul operated in signs and wonders was not by virtue of his personal character or his education or anything that he might attribute to himself. It was by the “power of the Spirit of God.” Every Christian possesses this same power. But are we to expect that God might operate in the same way today when we share the gospel with the lost or pray for supernatural expressions in the life of the church?

There is, as you know, a wide spectrum of beliefs among Christians when it comes to the subject of miracles today. I’m talking about what Christians believe, not atheists, but people who claim to know Jesus as Savior and claim to believe the Bible is the Word of God.

First, at one far end of the spectrum are those who argue that miracles no longer occur. They once did, in biblical times, during the OT, during the life and ministry of Jesus, and during the early church as seen in the book of Acts. But God no longer works miracles. Anything that appears to be miraculous can be explained scientifically given enough time and analysis. God always and only operates through normal cause and effect. These people don’t deny the reality of the supernatural realm, but they might as well, because anything that anyone might suggest is a miracle often evokes from them condescending scorn. Thus, their response to claims for the miraculous is one of *cynicism*.

Second, moving a bit farther down the spectrum are those who believe that miracles *might* still occur today, but they are extremely rare. Even if miracles might occur today, you should not seek them; you should not pray for them; and your response should be one of heightened *skepticism*. There is a difference between cynicism and skepticism. Cynics are snide and snarky and often treat with scorn anyone who believes in modern day miracles. Skeptics are simply, well, skeptical. They aren’t necessarily mean or nasty and they don’t typically mock those who believe in miracles.

The third perspective is one that affirms that miracles still happen, but when they do happen, they occur independently of any human involvement. In other words, God sovereignly works miracles but without the agency of any human being. These are people who believe in miracles but deny that the spiritual gift of working miracles is still operative in our day. There are no miracle workers. These people aren’t cynical, nor are they skeptical, but they are *doubtful*. It takes a great deal to convince them that a miracle has occurred. This is the view that I embraced for the first 35 years of my life.

The fourth option is the one I embrace. I believe that miracles still happen. I believe that the spiritual gift of miracles is still operative in the church. I believe that this gift is what I call a circumstantial or occasional gift. That is to say, no Christian can work miracles at will, whenever they please, at any time. Any Christian might be given the power to work a miracle on a particular occasion, dependent on God’s sovereign will and his purpose. Miracles are to be prayed for. The spiritual gift of working miracles is one that we should all seek. Whether or not it is given is entirely up to God. And simply because you receive a gift of working a miracle on one occasion does not mean you will always operate or minister at that level of supernatural power. This view is not cynical, not skeptical, or doubtful, but *hopeful* (and prayerful).

The fifth and final option is at the far end of the spectrum from the first view. The first view is that miracles never occur. God never wills to perform supernatural displays of power. This final option argues that God *always* wills to perform miracles in our midst. Not only does God always will to perform them, he always will perform them, and if he doesn't, the fault is always ours. How do these people respond to the claim for the occurrence of a miracle? They are not cynical or skeptical or doubtful or even just hopeful. They are often *gullible*. They tend to be naïve and accept without question any and all claims to the miraculous.

What is a Miracle?

When you make a trip to an overcrowded mall on “Black Friday” after Thanksgiving and discover a space has suddenly opened up for you directly in front of the store where you planned on shopping, was that a miracle? Should we refer to the majestic and awe-inspiring development of a human being in the womb of his/her mother as a miracle (Ps. 139:13)? Can something that happens with such unbroken regularity qualify as a miracle?

Consider this scenario. You suffer a flat tire on your way home from work at midnight on Friday and then discover that you left your cell phone at home. It's more than a little scary being alone and without transportation, when suddenly one of your best friends just happens to drive by and sees you. He tells you that at 11:50 p.m. he had a sudden and irresistible craving for ice cream and rushed out to get some before the grocery store closed at midnight. Is that a miracle?

When your close friend is declared cancer free after a rigorous regiment of radiation and chemotherapy following surgery, at the same time she was the focus of hundreds of fervent prayer requests that she be healed, is that a miracle? If we should conclude that it was God who made effective the radiation and chemo that she received, and that without this medical treatment she would have died, do we call that a miracle?

What these examples show us is that the word miracle is used somewhat promiscuously and freely to describe everything from healing a person blind from birth to a simple answer to prayer to a providential coincidence when you run into an old friend at the airport whom you haven't seen in 20 years. So, what is a good, biblical working definition of a miracle? British NT scholar Max Turner uses the term to describe any event that combines the following traits:

“(1) it is an extraordinary or startling observable event, (2) it cannot reasonably be explained in terms of human abilities or other known forces in the world, (3) it is perceived as a direct act of God, and (4) it is usually understood to have symbolic or sign value (e.g., pointing to God as redeemer, judge, and Savior)” (*The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts: Then and Now*, 272, n. 31).

One factor that has contributed to our confusion about miracles is the unbiblical belief on the part of countless professing Christians that God is largely cut off from the routine affairs of daily life. Although they may not openly assert what we know as deism, they live as if God were cut off from the world and rarely engaged with the minutia of our daily existence. One need only read Psalms 104 and 139 to see

how intimately and directly God is involved in everything from the growth of a blade of grass to the development of a fetus in the womb of his/her mother. It is “in” God that “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Indeed, “in him all things hold together” (Col. 1:17b). Strictly speaking, then, God does not intervene in the affairs of this world. He is actively orchestrating and providentially directing everything that comes to pass (Eph. 1:11; Heb. 1:3). So we must look elsewhere for a proper definition of a miracle.

Perhaps a miracle occurs when God operates directly and apart from any means or instrumentality to accomplish his purposes. On this basis we would point to such events as the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Yes, the latter was undoubtedly a miracle, but God seems more pleased to make use of means or intermediary causes to produce extraordinary results. He certainly could have produced enough food, *ex nihilo*, to feed the 5,000, but preferred instead to make use of the contents of a boy’s lunch.

Insofar as God is himself the author of all so-called “natural laws”, we shouldn’t think of miracles as his defiance or superseding of them or his acting in some sense contrary to them. There are no forces in the universe that operate outside of God’s providential control and oversight.

Wayne Grudem has proposed a simple but helpful definition that I believe is faithful to the Scriptures: “A miracle,” says Grudem, “is a less common kind of God’s activity in which he arouses people’s awe and wonder and bears witness to himself” (*Systematic Theology*, 355). No matter how we define a miracle, we must not think that it means a typically absent and uninvolved deity has chosen to intervene or involve himself in otherwise purely human affairs. Rather, the God who is always omnipresent sovereignly chooses to make his power known in ways that surprise us and alert us to his glory and greatness.

Miracles that capture people’s attention and are designed to point beyond themselves to some spiritual or moral truth about God are called “signs.” They signify something important.

There are, sadly, people who won’t accept the reality of the miraculous no matter what they see or experience. If you ask a skeptic, “Would you believe it was a miracle if you saw someone raised from the dead?” and they reply, “No,” what they are really saying is, “Miracles can’t happen, so this so-called resurrection is something inexplicable. It’s not a miracle. I just can’t account for how it happened.” So, what sort of evidence would they accept? Probably, none.

Those who refuse to believe that miracles are possible do so because of their worldview. They embrace a perspective on reality that says there is no God, no transcendent supernatural being, and therefore all events have a physical explanation, even if we can’t discern or identify at present what that explanation is. In such cases, nothing can persuade this person that miracles happen. He has from the start ruled them out.

Signs and Wonders in the Church Today

There are many reasons why people misunderstand what Paul is saying in Romans 15 and thus don’t believe that what happened in his ministry is supposed to happen or can be expected to happen in our

ministries today. I want to respond to and refute nine commonly held *errors* about signs, wonders, and miracles. In other words, these are the primary reasons why professing Christians do not live in expectation and hope that God would perform signs and wonders through the power of the Holy Spirit in our ministry today.

(1) *They were temporary, designed by God only for the first century.* There is absolutely not a single text in the NT that says this. Dreams, visions, prophecy, and tongues are portrayed in Acts 2 as characterizing the entire church age (= “the latter days”). When Jesus said in Acts 1:8 that his disciples would receive “power” when the Spirit would come upon them at Pentecost, he was talking about more than simply the ability and courage to preach the gospel. Luke uses the word “power” consistently to refer to the God-given ability to perform signs and wonders, be that in the life and ministry of Jesus or in the lives and ministries of his followers.

Related to this point is the argument that signs and wonders and miracles were intended by God to operate in the early church until the time that the final book of the NT was written or when the final canonical list of books was compiled. But no text of Scripture ever even remotely says this or that the Bible was given to us to replace the need for the miraculous.

(2) *They were so extraordinary that we should never think of them as normative.* Much here depends on what we mean by “extraordinary” and “normative.” If by “normative” you mean they are commonplace, everyday occurrences, then no, signs and wonders are not normative. Miracles are by definition unusual and special. But as we will see, the spiritual gift of miracles is listed alongside the gifts of faith and teaching and mercy and prophecy as part and parcel of what the Spirit regularly does to build up the body of Christ.

(3) *Only apostles are empowered to perform them.* According to this argument, signs and wonders were the “signs” of a true apostle and thus only they, the apostles, could perform them. Signs and wonders served to authenticate apostles as unique representatives of Jesus. They appeal to 2 Corinthians 12:12 for this.

“The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works” (2 Cor. 12:12).

The NIV contributes to the confusion by translating as follows: “The things that mark an apostle – signs, wonders and miracles – were done among you with great perseverance.” This rendering leads one to believe that Paul is identifying the “signs” or “marks” of an apostle with the miraculous phenomena performed among the Corinthians.

I will spare you the explanation based on Greek grammar, but contrary to what many have thought, Paul does not say the insignia/marks/signs of an apostle are signs, wonders and miracles. Rather, as the ESV more accurately translates, he asserts that “the signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with [or better still, accompanied by] signs and wonders and mighty works.” I’m not denying that apostles performed signs and wonders. There can be no doubt that such phenomena accompanied the ministries of men such as Peter and Paul. But Paul is not saying that only apostles

operated in these supernatural phenomena. As we will shortly see, Stephen and Philip were deacons and their ministries were characterized by signs and wonders.

One could hardly claim to be an apostle of Jesus Christ (at least in the sense in which the original twelve, plus Paul and a handful of others were apostles) in the absence of these supernatural works (see Acts 5:12). But the mere presence of such works was not in itself sufficient to prove that one was an apostle. Signs, wonders and miracles were, undoubtedly, attendant elements in Paul's apostolic work. But they were not themselves the "signs of an apostle" as if to say that only apostles performed them.

We know this for two reasons. First, non-apostles performed signs and wonders, men such as Stephen and Philip. More on that later. Second, Paul refers to the spiritual gift of "miracles" in 1 Corinthians 12:10 as one that is distributed to average believers in the local church for the building up of the body of Christ.

What, then, did Paul have in mind when he spoke of "the signs of an apostle"? The signs of an apostle, the distinguishing marks of true apostolic ministry were, among other things:

- (1) the fruit of his preaching, i.e., the salvation of the Corinthians themselves (cf. 1 Cor. 9:1b-2, "Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? If to others I am not an apostle, as least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord"; cf. 2 Cor. 3:1-3);
- (2) his Christ-like life of holiness, humility, integrity, etc., (cf. 2 Cor. 1:12; 2:17; 3:4-6; 4:2; 5:11; 6:3-13; 7:2; 10:13-18; 11:6,23-28);
- (3) his sufferings, hardship, persecution (cf. 2 Cor. 13:4; 4:7-15; 5:4-10; and all of chapter eleven). Paul patiently, in perseverance, displayed these "signs" of his apostolic authority; and
- (4) the special insight given to someone like Paul into the mysteries of God (Eph. 3:1-6).

As I mentioned, consider Stephen and Philip, neither of whom was an apostle:

"And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people" (Acts 6:8).

People in Samaria "saw the signs that he [Philip] did" (Acts 8:6).

"Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed" (Acts 8:13).

Consider also Luke 10 and the 72 normal, average, non-apostolic disciples of Jesus who were given authority and power over the demonic. But it wasn't merely power over demons that Jesus authorized and empowered the 72 to do. It was also to "heal" the sick in every town (Luke 10:9). And their healing of the sick was at least in part the reality of what it means for the "kingdom of God" to have come near. We should also take note of Galatians 3:5 where "miracles" were operative in Galatia even though no apostles were present.

(4) Anyone today who operates in signs and wonders must do so at the same level of intensity, accuracy, and effectiveness as the first-century apostles. Why do we simply assume this to be the case? Acts 19:11-12 indicates that apostles like Paul operated not simply in the miraculous but in “extraordinary miracles.” No one denies that the early apostles were extraordinarily gifted in the miraculous. And what happens if we apply this notion to other spiritual gifts. No one teaches like Paul. No one evangelizes and plants churches like Paul. All operations of the Spirit will vary from one person to another, depending on their maturity, their faith, their experience, their contexts, etc. The fact that Christians who lived beyond the first century don’t minister as frequently or effectively as the apostles is no reason to conclude that they don’t minister in the power of miracles at all.

(5) It is wrong for us to pray for signs and wonders. To do so reveals an unhealthy obsession with the supernatural to the exclusion of the ordinary ways in which the Spirit works through us. Many point to Matthew 12:38-39 to justify this conclusion.

“Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, ‘Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.’ But he answered them, ‘An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah’” (Matt. 12:38-39).

But these were unbelieving cynics who had no intention of believing in Jesus. They were testing him, demanding that he perform some circus trick. But if the followers of Jesus humbly cry out for a supernatural work so that others may be edified and Jesus may be exalted, he would happily approve of such a request. In fact, we see precisely this in Acts 4:29-30,

“And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus” (Acts 4:29-30).

Related to this is the argument that to pray for or focus on signs and wonders is dangerous, as it will invariably **undermine our confidence in the cross** and will distract people from the centrality of the gospel of what God has done for us in Christ. But Paul clearly believed that gospel ministry was a composite of both “word” and “deed” (see 1 Cor. 2:1-5). The presence in his ministry of miraculous “deeds” or “signs and wonders” in no way undermined the truth of the “word” he proclaimed.

Furthermore, if it were true that signs and wonders detract and distract from the gospel, then God has a problem, not us. Look closely at Acts 14:3. Paul and Barnabas were in Iconium, and Luke describes what happened there: “So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly [there’s the “word” of Romans 15:18] for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders [there’s the “deeds” of Romans 15:18] to be done by their hands.”

Who is bearing witness to the truth of the gospel? It is God, the Lord. If signs and wonders are antithetical to the “word” of God’s “grace” in Jesus Christ, if miracles necessarily undermine the centrality of the gospel message, then only God is to blame for this. It is, after all, God who has chosen to bear witness to the truth of the gospel in this way. We find the same emphasis in Acts 15 at the Jerusalem Council. “And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles” (Acts 15:12). Who performed these miracles that brought Gentiles to faith in Jesus? God did.

(6) Signs and wonders serve only to fuel sensationalism and are largely ineffective in being a means by which the Spirit can bring individuals to saving faith in Jesus. Quite to the contrary, see Acts 9:32-43, where, as a result of Peter's healing a paralyzed man, "all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him and they turned to the Lord" (9:35). Again, when Peter raised Tabitha from the dead, "it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord" (9:42).

(7) Signs and wonders served to confirm or attest to the apostles as trustworthy authors of Scripture. No text ever says this. It does say that signs and wonders attest to the truthfulness of the message proclaimed by the apostles. But no text says that signs and wonders attest to the authenticity of the apostles themselves. Some conclude from this false argument that we no longer need signs and wonders, nor should we live in hope or expectation that they will occur in our day. But this is a valid argument only if the sole and exclusive purpose of signs and wonders is to confirm/attest the truth of the gospel message. But they have numerous other purposes: expression of compassion and love for the hurting, evangelistic outreach, building up of the church, exalting the glory and power of God, etc.

Contrary to what many say, not one author of a biblical book ever appealed to a miracle or to signs and wonders to support their claim that they were writing Scripture. "No text of Scripture says that the authority of Scripture rests on miracles! In reality, it is just the opposite. Scripture tests miracles, but miracles are not a test for Scripture" (Deere, 106). If you think that only apostles wrote Scripture and that signs and wonders and miracles testify to that fact, how do you account for the fact that some authors of Scripture were not apostles and are never recorded as having performed a miracle? Consider Luke, Mark, Jude, and the author of Hebrews. Do the books they wrote have a lesser authority than what Paul and Peter and John wrote simply because they weren't apostles? No.

(8) Signs and wonders and miracles and displays of supernatural power have no capacity to help Christians live their daily lives. They were all designed solely to launch the first-century church until it was established and were not designed by God to build up or edify or encourage or bless believers. What, then, of 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 which say that prophecy, healing, and miracles (1 Cor. 12:7-10), indeed, all spiritual gifts are given to edify and build up and strengthen the body of Christ (1 Cor. 14:26)?

(9) Signs and wonders were designed by God solely to declare or attest to the fact that the kingdom of God was here. Signs and wonders certainly did that. But such supernatural phenomena not only served as evidence of the in-breaking of the kingdom. They constitute the *essence* of the kingdom. They don't simply point to the kingdom. They *are* the kingdom. They comprise the very presence of the ruling King, Jesus, among us. They are what he intended to introduce to the world when he proclaimed that the kingdom of God was at hand. There is more to the kingdom than signs and wonders and miracles. But the kingdom is by no means less than these phenomena.

Conclusion

Stories of signs and wonders in our day . . .