

## CESSATION OF MIRACLES

By Rev Dr Quek Suan Yew (061105)

Miracles are common claims in the books and rallies of the Charismatics. These include healing the common backache and headache to the more spectacular like the lame and the blind and at times even raising the dead. This desire to see miracles was greatly popularized by John Wimber. John Wimber's ministry is called the Vineyard ministries. Wimber believed that the proclamation of the gospel must be accompanied by signs and wonders just as Jesus did in His day.

Today seeing miracles has become a common and expected phenomenon in Charismatic churches. Thousands of their church members see this as a norm in their Christian experience. They talk about it and sing praises to God all the time as if those who do not believe in what they believe as missing a key ingredient in their Christian walk.

The Christian community outside of this fraternity is confused. Are the miraculous claims of the Charismatics for real or not? Can the Devil do miracles? Why do they seem to have monopolized all the miracles and we appear to be losing out?

### The Gift of Miracles

**A. "Miracle" defined** -- The word "miracle" comes from the Latin for "*miraculum*". Literally it means "a marvelous event" or "an event which causes wonder." This general meaning is insufficient in our understanding of its usage in the Bible.

In Christian theology, the word "miracle" means more than just something that causes amazement in the minds of man. A miracle is: (1) an extraordinary event, inexplicable in terms of ordinary natural forces; (2) an event which causes the observer to postulate a super-human personal cause; and (3) an event which constitutes evidence (a sign) of implications much wider than the event itself.<sup>1</sup> All three aspects must be present before it is called a biblical miracle.

Wayne Grudem defines "miracles" as "a less common kind of God's activity in which he arouses people's awe and wonder and bears witness to Himself."<sup>2</sup> This was the definition accepted by Jack Deere which allowed him to argue for a continuation of the miraculous today, that there are no "epochs" of the miraculous as taught by Benjamin Warfield, that the miracles of the apostles should not be compared with that of the spiritual gift of miracles, etc.

This definition by Grudem is not acceptable. The reason is that it is too subjective. What is filled with "awe" to a person may not be very "awesome" to another. For example the glorious sunset may fill someone with wonder because he has seen it for the first time but to another who sees it every day it is just another sunset. The former calls it a miracle but the latter calls it another day! In light of this, Grudem's definition of the

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<sup>1</sup>Buswell, **Systematic Theology**, 1:176.

<sup>2</sup>Wayne Grudem, **Systematic Theology**, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 52.

miraculous cannot be accepted. One's definition of the "miracles" of the Bible is crucial in understanding the claims of the miraculous of our time.

**B. Distinction between biblical miracles and other works** -- God's miracles must be distinct from the following:

(1) Works of providence (i.e. general and not special providence) are not regarded as "miracles." In the broad usage of the word "miracle," it has a metaphorical or hyperbolic meaning. Every sunrise, every tree, every blade of grass is a "miracle" in that sense. But in the strict biblical definition of the word, it is not to be understood as "the providence of God". Works of general providence are the ordinary works of God through secondary sources.

When a miracle is performed by God, even unbelievers must acknowledge it when they see it. Consider the following biblical instances: Exodus 8:18-19, "And the magicians did so with their enchantments to bring forth lice, but they could not: so there were lice upon man, and upon beast. Then the magicians said unto Pharaoh, This is the finger of God: and Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he hearkened not unto them; as the LORD had said." In Acts 4:16, the unbelievers said, "What shall we do to these men? for that indeed a notable miracle hath been done by them is manifest to all them that dwell in Jerusalem; and we cannot deny it." Acts 14:11 we hear them say, "And when the people saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in the speech of Lycaonia, The gods are come down to us in the likeness of men."

(2) Answers to prayer which do not constitute a "sign" should be considered a "miracle." The Christian may experience many events which demonstrate the hand of God in his life. But if there is evidence that it is a demonstrative "sign," then it should be called a miracle in the sense that this word is used in the Bible. It is important to realize that "God gives us abundant evidence of His love and care without any exaggeration on our part."<sup>3</sup>

(3) Works of magic are not miracles. In magic, the magician possesses a formula which produces the alleged result. The alleged supernatural power is *controlled by the performer* (cf. Exo 7:11; 8:7). In the miracles of God, the results depend entirely on God. The "miracle worker" is merely God's instrument.

(4) Mere exotic occurrences are not miracles. Such are events in nature which excite wonder. Oddities do not equal the miraculous. These belong to the "Believe it or not category." Genuine miracles are always a sign which teach a spiritual truth. "Every miracle of God is a part of God's great integrated system of revealed truth."<sup>4</sup>

(5) Works of Satan are nor miracles. Matthew 24:24 says, "For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if

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<sup>3</sup>Buswell, 1:177.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.” These are the words of the Lord Jesus Christ which warn of Satanic miracles in the last days. The apostle Paul concurs when he wrote in 2 Thessalonians 2:9, “Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders,” (cf. Rev 13:14; 16:14; 19:20). We do not deny the existence of Satanic miracles, but these must be distinguished from God’s.

Satan as a created archangel possessed supernatural powers. In the days of Job he demonstrated his powers after God gave him permission to take away all of Job’s belongings and loved ones.<sup>5</sup> Satan controlled the evil Sabeans who killed Job’s servants. He also controlled the fire from heaven which burned up the sheep and the servants. He sent the Chaldeans to destroy the camels and kill the servants who looked after them. He sent a great wind to blow down the house and killed all the children of Job. That Satan can control evil men and nature is not disputed. The law of God is very clear concerning the importance of the Word of God in ascertaining truth even in the face of the supernatural. In Deuteronomy 13, the Law of God specifically states that even when the dreams of the dreamer come to pass but the dreamer draws the believer away from God that dreamer is a false prophet and must be put to death.<sup>6</sup> The value of the Word of God against experiences including supernatural ones is incomparable. The Word of God stands all and cannot be compared with experiences. All experiences, including supernatural ones, must be subjected to the Word of God. If they are found not in conformity to God’s Holy Word, it is to be rejected. The Word of God is the perfect yardstick for the evaluation and determination of all experiences.

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<sup>5</sup>Job 1:15-19, “And the Sabeans fell upon them, and took them away; yea, they have slain the servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, The fire of God is fallen from heaven, and hath burned up the sheep, and the servants, and consumed them; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, The Chaldeans made out three bands, and fell upon the camels, and have carried them away, yea, and slain the servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, Thy sons and thy daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother’s house: And, behold, there came a great wind from the wilderness, and smote the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young men, and they are dead; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee.”

<sup>6</sup>Deuteronomy 13:1-5, "If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and giveth thee a sign or a wonder, And the sign or the wonder come to pass, whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them; Thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams: for the LORD your God proveth you, to know whether ye love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. Ye shall walk after the LORD your God, and fear him, and keep his commandments, and obey his voice, and ye shall serve him, and cleave unto him. And that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams, shall be put to death; because he hath spoken to turn you away from the LORD your God, which brought you out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed you out of the house of bondage, to thrust thee out of the way which the LORD thy God commanded thee to walk in. So shalt thou put the evil away from the midst of thee."

Therefore it is interesting to note that in Matthew 24:24 Jesus predicted that in the last days false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders. The miracles in the Bible originate from God for He is their Source. The false miracles come from Satan and his followers. **The purpose of God's miracles is to reveal, but Satan's miracles is meant to deceive.**

**C. The Epochs of Miracles in the Bible** -- There were three great epochs of miracles recorded in the Bible. The first occurred in the time of Moses, the second during the ministry of Elijah and Elisha, and the third and the greatest of them all, in the period of Christ and His apostles.

(1) The First Great Epoch of miracles occurred after the Israelites had lived in the foreign land of Egypt for 430 years. It was a time of great spiritual depression. The people have more or less forgotten the Name of YHWH their God. Wholly by the grace of God the people were delivered from their bondage in Egypt. Egypt was known as the house of bondage (cf. Exod 13:3, 14; 20:2; Deut 5:6; 6:12; 8:14; 13:5, 10; Josh 24:17; Judg 6:8; Mic 6:4; etc.). In all subsequent generations the people were to remember how the Lord had delivered them out of Egypt by a mighty hand. This they did every time they kept the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread (cf. Exod 12:11-28; 13:1-19).<sup>7</sup>

The people had to be literally *reintroduced* to their own God all over again. They had no written word to guide them. So Moses wrote the Pentateuch. The miracles were necessary for the people of Israel and for Moses. The LORD had to reveal to the Israelites that He had indeed sent Moses to be their deliverer. The people had to know that the LORD is their God and the one living and true God who created the heaven and the earth. Exodus 6:6-7 says,

Wherefore say unto the children of Israel, I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will rid you out of their bondage, and I will redeem you with a stretched out arm, and with great judgments: And I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God: and *ye shall know that I am the LORD your God, which bringeth you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.*  
[Emphasis added]

The miracles of God led to the increase of Moses' faith and his growth in the LORD. Exodus 7:16-17 reveals, "And thou shalt say unto him, The LORD God of the Hebrews hath sent me unto thee, saying, Let my people go, that they may serve me in the wilderness: and, behold, hitherto thou wouldest not hear. Thus saith the LORD, In this thou shalt know that I am the LORD: behold, I will smite with the rod that is in mine hand upon the waters which are in the river, and they shall be turned to blood." The word "thou" is in the singular which refers to Moses.

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<sup>7</sup>Exodus 13:8-10, "And thou shalt shew thy son in that day, saying, This is done because of that which the LORD did unto me when I came forth out of Egypt. And it shall be for a sign unto thee upon thine hand, and for a memorial between thine eyes, that the LORD'S law may be in thy mouth: for with a strong hand hath the LORD brought thee out of Egypt. Thou shalt therefore keep this ordinance in his season from year to year."

(2) The Second Great Epoch of miracles occurred during the prophetic ministries of Elihah and Elisha. There was great spiritual decline in the days of the judges. But in the days of David and Solomon (a brief 80 years) there was a spiritual revival. During this period between Joshua's days and Solomon's there were very few miracles. Despite the lack of miracles, God did not leave Himself without a witness. Samuel and the Judges did their part in pointing the people to God.

After Solomon's reign, the nation of Israel plunged into a lengthy period of idolatrous worship. It was nation wide apostasy. The name of YHWH and Baal were hyphenated and even the good king Jehoshaphat allied himself with idolatrous Ahab (cf. 1 Ki. 21:25, 26 and chap. 22; 2 Chron. 19:1-4). At this time, God gave the second great epoch of miracles.

(3) The Third Great Epoch of miracles occurred in the time of Christ and the Apostles. There were not many miracles from the time of Elijah and Elisha to the time of Christ. Besides the miracles in the life of Jonah and of Daniel, there were the two notable miracles in the days of Isaiah (2 Kings 19:35; 20:9-11). Miracles were relatively rare after the period of Elijah and Elisha.

The time of Jesus was a time when Israel was very low in terms of spirituality. In the time of the Exodus, Israel had forgotten God's Name. At the time of Elijah and Elisha, the people had hyphenated God's Name with the name of Baal. In the time of Christ and the Apostles, Israel had made the divinely prescribed system of worship idolatrous. It was also a time when the religion of Israel became steep in self-righteousness and hypocrisy.<sup>8</sup>

The Jews read the Torah diligently but there was a veil covering their eyes and hearts (2 Corinthians 3:13-16). All the miracles of the Lord Jesus Christ, including His power over nature (Mat. 8:23-27), demons (Mat 8:16; 28-32, 9:32-33), diseases, (Mat. 8:1-15; 9:1-8, 20-22), physical handicaps (Mat. 9:27-31), and death (Mat. 9:18-19, 23-26), were categorically rejected by the people especially by the religious leaders of that time. The Pharisees and the scribes were supposed to be teachers of the law, but they had become blind leaders of the blind. Finally in their sin they crucified the only perfect man and perfect God who walked on this earth. Jesus did no wrong nor had He sinned, yet they crucified Him. It was to this kind of world that God sent His only begotten Son into the world.

At least forty miracles were done by Jesus. For John says, "And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: (John 20:30)." The Apostles of Christ did many miracles too; the first being the healing of the man who could not walk since birth (Acts 3:1-11). The first miracle after the ascension of Jesus Christ was the miracle of "tongues" in Acts 2.

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<sup>8</sup>Buswell, 1:178.

**D. The Purpose of Miracles** -- Miracles were performed by Jesus and the Apostles for the purpose of revelation and edification. After calling attention to the many unrecorded miracles of the Lord Jesus Christ, John adds, "But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name (John 20:31)." Jesus' miracles were evidence of the genuineness of His message (cf. Mark 2:1-13). Jesus says, "But I have greater witness than that of John: for the works which the Father hath given me to finish, the same works that I do, bear witness of me, that the Father hath sent me. (John 5:36)"

Although Jesus preferred that man should accept His message for its intrinsic worth, to believe Him because of His miracles was not wrong. Jesus says, "If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not. But if I do, though ye believe not me, believe the works: that ye may know, and believe, that the Father is in me, and I in him (John 10:37-38)."

The Apostles (and apostolic men like Stephen and Philip) performed signs and wonders (Acts 6:8, 8:13) in order to attest to the fact that they were sent by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. The Apostles had a special and unique ministry to establish the early church as commanded by Jesus in Mark 16:14-18,

*"Afterward he appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat, and upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him after he was risen. And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover."*

The church today does not need such kinds of miraculous authentication because the church has already been established by the Apostles. They had completed the writing of the New Testament. The Church has been established and now has the fullness of the Old Testament and New Testament Scripture which serves as its authoritative foundation. There is thus no need for these sign miracles today to authenticate the special and unique ministry of the Apostles. Those who believe in Jesus Christ need no signs to believe. Those who preach the gospel of Jesus Christ also do not need any miracles.

The Bible says in 1 Corinthians 1:19-25, *"For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men."*

Matthew 24:24 warns that the signs and wonders of today would be false ones performed by false Christs and false prophets who will appear in the last days just before Jesus returns.<sup>9</sup>

**E. The Nature of Miracles** -- Are miracles a violation of the natural laws? Miracles are not violations of natural laws. They are intelligent acts of a personal God. They are not erratic or exotic occurrences. Miracles are part of God's cosmic programme of revelation and redemption. There is no greater logical problem in the act of God in raising the dead than there is in the act of a man in lifting his hand. We speak or signal to our children by the raising our hands with appropriate gestures. God in turn reveals Himself and His plan to us with "signs" or by other means in accordance to His will.

Christianity is a supernatural faith. For the biblical writers and all true believers of the God of the Bible, it was perfectly *natural* for God to perform the *supernatural* acts of the Bible like the parting of the Red Sea and the raising of people from the dead.

But what are the miracles of today like?

Charismatic theologian Jack Deere<sup>10</sup> does not disagree that miracles were for the sake of authenticating the ministry of the apostles. His contention is that the miraculous is still needed today in the preaching of the gospel.

I believe that miracles do have an authenticating function, and after I will argue that they can open wide doors for preaching the gospel and even bring people to repentance. However, the simple preaching of the gospel could do all these things without miracles at **any** time in history and can still do them today. When miracles are given by God to authenticate gospel preaching, it is done on the basis of grace, not out of a divine necessity to make up for a deficiency in the gospel message.<sup>11</sup>

On the basis of his experiences, he concludes that people can perform miracles today. He argues that the main reason why cessationists are cessationists is that they have never experienced the miraculous.<sup>12</sup> According to him, the doctrine of cessationism did not originate from a careful study of the Scriptures. The doctrine of cessationism originated in *experience*."

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<sup>9</sup>Matthew 24:24, "For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect."

<sup>10</sup>Deere, a former professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, was sacked for joining the Third Wave movement. He is now their unofficial theologian.

<sup>11</sup>Jack Deere, **Surprised by the Power of the Spirit**, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 110.

<sup>12</sup>Deere, 99.

Deere's basis for miracles today is his experience. His charge against the cessationists is its lack of experience. It looks like a stalemate. Deere says that he will only be convinced of cessationism if only there is a text in Scripture that categorically states, "miracles will cease after the period of the apostles." If there is no such text, then he cannot be convinced. For Deere, experience is his final authority if the Bible is silent on any issue.

Such lines of arguments will inevitably add to Scriptures. Doctrines must be Bible based. It cannot be based upon the argument of silence.

**F. The Issue of True Spirituality** -- The Charismatics (especially the Third Wave) claim that their brand of worship that has caused lives to be changed proves that their spirituality is true. They conclude that the laughing, barking, meowing, shaking and rolling are all legitimate because many lives have been changed for the better by these practices. It is claimed that people are reading the Bible more and praying more because of such experiences.

It must be understood in the light of Scripture that the worship of God is not something subjective and arbitrary as espoused by the Third Wavers. The Bible gives clear guidelines on what is acceptable worship. The worship of God is one of the most important aspects of the Christian's life. It must be pointed out that the ultimate and final yardstick to determine what is right and wrong is not the person's changed life (not that a changed life is unimportant). The Bible does tell us that if a person says he has faith, then he should show his faith by his works (Jas 2:14-26). It must however be understood that a new life is the *result* of the new creation that God has produced in our lives. But this new creation cannot be used as a measure of truth and error. A transformed life is proof of the heart application and assimilation of the truth, but it is not the measure of truth. Truth is objective not subjective.

The final and only objective guide for what is truth and what is error, and what is true spirituality is God's inerrant and infallible Word. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says, "*All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.*" See also 2 Peter 1:16-21 and Deuteronomy 13:1-18. Many on the outward may display a changed life but it is the changed heart that God looks at. This is only possible when the person has believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. Galatians 2:20 confirms this truth, "*I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.*" This truth is also taught in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "*Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.*"

Experience is not the measure of truth or error. It is admitted that everyone comes to the Bible with some form of biasness. It is impossible to claim 100% objectivity in our reading and understanding of the Bible. But that does not mean that we cannot have an objective understanding of God's Word when we study it. The key is in not denying or

avoiding our prejudices but in recognizing them for what they are and to prevent them from affecting our understanding of God's Word. We must approach the Bible with certain presuppositions. These presuppositions must be from God's Word itself. One of them is that the word of God is inerrant, infallible and divinely inspired. It is God-breathed. It is the very Word of God.

Therefore whenever there appears to be a contradiction in the Bible, the problem is not with the Bible but with the interpreter. Man is sinful and error-filled but the Bible is perfect and will always be right in all that it affirms and teaches. If man is to understand and apply the truths of the Scriptures objectively, he must submit to the Bible fully, and not question or doubt it at all.

The final word must be from God's Holy. Infallible and inerrant Word:

**Deuteronomy 13:1-5** says, *“If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and giveth thee a sign or a wonder, And the sign or the wonder come to pass, whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them; Thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams: for the LORD your God proveth you, to know whether ye love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. Ye shall walk after the LORD your God, and fear him, and keep his commandments, and obey his voice, and ye shall serve him, and cleave unto him. And that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams, shall be put to death; because he hath spoken to turn you away from the LORD your God, which brought you out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed you out of the house of bondage, to thrust thee out of the way which the LORD thy God commanded thee to walk in. So shalt thou put the evil away from the midst of thee.”*