

"SIGNS AND WONDERS"

(Acts 3:1-22)

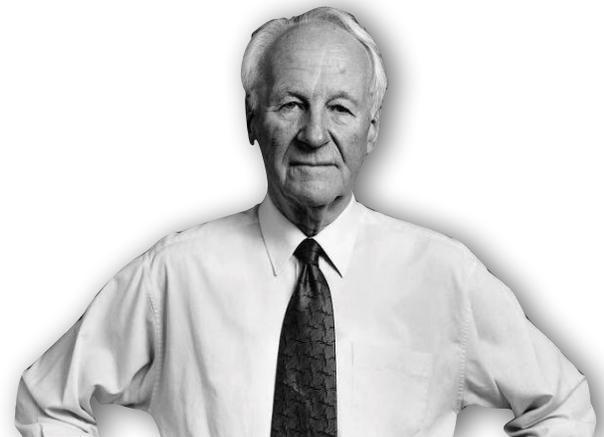
(John Stott)

Perhaps the three most notable features of Luke's narrative in Acts 3 and 4 are (i) the spectacular healing miracle and the prayer for more, (ii) the Christ-centered preaching of Peter, and (iii) the out-break of persecution. Because Peter's testimony to Christ has already been considered in some detail during the exposition, and because we will revert in the next chapter to the subject of persecution, we will concentrate now on the other topic of miracles.

The current controversy over signs and wonders should not lead us into a naive polarization between those who are for them and those who are against. Instead, the place to begin is the wide area of agreement which exists among us. All biblical Christians believe that, although the Creator's faithfulness is revealed in the uniformity and regularities of his universe, which are the indispensable bases of the scientific enterprise, he has also sometimes deviated from the norms of nature into abnormal phenomena we call 'miracles'. But to think of them as 'deviations from nature' is not to dismiss them (as did the eighteenth-century deists), as 'violations of nature' which cannot happen, and therefore did not and do not happen. No, our biblical doctrine of the creation, that God has made everything out of an original nothing, precludes this kind of skepticism. As Campbell Morgan put it, 'granted the truth of the first verse in the Bible, and there is no difficulty with miracles'. Moreover, since we believe that the miracles recorded in the Bible, and not least in the Acts, did happen, there is no *a priori* ground for asserting that they cannot recur today. We have no liberty to dictate to God what he is permitted to do and not to do. And if we have hesitations about some claims to 'signs and wonders' today, we must make sure that we have not confined both God and ourselves in the prison of Western, rationalistic unbelief.

The popular exponent of 'signs and wonders' teaching today is John Wimber of the Vineyard Fellowship in California. He and Kevin Springer have summarized his position in *Power Evangelism* (1985) and *Power Healing* (1986). Although it is impossible to do justice to it in a few sentences, its leading ideas are (i) that Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of God, demonstrated its arrival by signs and wonders, and means us similarly both to proclaim and to dramatize its advance; (ii) that signs and wonders were 'everyday occurrences in New Testament times' and 'a part of daily life', so that they should characterize 'the normal Christian life' for us too; and (iii) that church growth in the Acts was largely due to the prevalence of miracles. Signs and wonders occurred fourteen times in the book of Acts in conjunction with preaching, resulting in church growth. Further, on twenty occasions church growth was a direct result of signs and wonders performed by the disciples.

John Wimber argues his case with sincerity and force. But some unanswered questions remain. Let me ask three, especially in relation to our study of the Acts. First, is it certain that signs and wonders are the main secret of church growth? John Wimber supplies a table of fourteen instances in the Acts in which, he claims, signs and wonders accompanied the preaching and 'produced evangelistic growth in the church'. One or two cases are indisputable, as when the Samaritan crowds 'heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did' and so 'paid close attention to what he said' (8:6, 12). In a number of other cases, however, the connection between miracles and church growth is made by John Wimber not by Luke. For example, to take the only two cases he gives from the chapters we have so far considered, there is no evidence in the text that the Pentecostal phenomena of wind, fire and languages (2:1-4) were the direct cause of the three thousand converts of verse 41, nor that the healing of the congenital cripple (3:1ff.) was the direct cause of the increase to five thousand (4:4), as John Wimber's Table claims. Luke seems rather to attribute the growth to the power of Peter's preaching. In this sense all true evangelism is 'power evangelism', for conversion and new birth, and so church growth, can take place only by the power of God through his Word and Spirit.



Secondly, is it certain that signs and wonders are meant by God to be 'everyday occurrences' and 'the normal Christian life'? I think not. Not only are miracles by definition 'abnorms' rather than norms, but the Acts does not provide evidence that they were widespread. Luke's emphasis is that they were performed mostly by the apostles (2:43; 5:12), and especially by the apostles Peter and Paul on whom he focuses our attention. True, Stephen and Philip also did signs and wonders, and perhaps others did. But it can be argued that Stephen and Philip were special people, not so much because the apostles had laid hands on them (6:5-6) and because each was given a unique role in laying the foundations of the church's world-wide mission (see 7:1ff. and 8:5ff.). Certainly the thrust of the Bible is that miracles clustered round the principal organs of revelation at fresh epochs of revelation, particularly Moses the lawgiver, the new prophetic witness spearheaded by Elijah and Elisha, the Messianic ministry of Jesus, and the apostles, so that Paul referred to his miracles as 'the things that mark an apostle'. There may well be situations in which miracles are appropriate today, for example, on the frontiers of mission and in an atmosphere of pervasive unbelief which calls for a power encounter between Christ and Antichrist. But Scripture itself suggests that these will be special cases, rather than 'a part of daily life'.

Thirdly, is it certain that today's claimed signs and wonders are parallel to those recorded in the New Testament? Some are, or seem to be. But in his public ministry by turning water into wine, stilling a storm, multiplying loaves and fishes, and walking on water, Jesus gave a preview of nature's final, total subservience to him—a subservience which belongs not to the 'already' but to the 'not yet' of the kingdom. We should not, therefore, expect to do these things ourselves today. Nor should we expect to be miraculously rescued from prison by the angel of the Lord or to see church members struck dead like Ananias and Sapphira. Even the healing miracles of the Gospels and the Acts had features which are seldom manifested even in the signs and wonders movement today.

Let me come back to the Acts to illustrate this, and take the healing of the cripple as my example. It is the first and longest miraculous cure described in the book. It had five noteworthy characteristics, which together indicate what the New Testament means by a miracle of healing. (i) The healing was of a grave, organic condition, and could not be regarded as a psychosomatic cure. Luke is at pains to tell us that the man had been a cripple from birth (3:2), was now more than forty years old (4:22), and was so handicapped that he had to be carried everywhere (3:2). Humanly speaking, his case was hopeless. Doctors could do nothing for him. (ii) The healing took place by a direct word of command in the name of Christ, without the use of any medical means. Not even prayer, the laying on of hands or anointing with oil were used. True, Peter gave the man a helping hand (3:7), but this was not part of the cure. (iii) The healing was instantaneous, not gradual, for 'instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong', so that he jumped up and began to walk (3:7-8). (iv) The healing was complete and permanent, not partial or temporary. This is stated twice. The man had been given 'this complete healing', Peter said to the crowds (3:16), and later stood before the Council 'completely healed' (4:10, 1978 edition of NIV). (v) The healing was publicly acknowledged to be indisputable. There was no doubt or question about it. The crippled beggar was well known in the city (3:10, 16). Now he was healed. It was not only the disciples of Jesus who were convinced, but also the enemies of the gospel. The as-yet-unbelieving crowd were "filled with wonder and amazement" (3:10), while the Council called it (an 'outstanding miracle' which they could not deny (4:14, 16).

If, then, we take Scripture as our guide, we will avoid opposite extremes. We will neither describe miracles as 'never happening', nor as 'everyday occurrences', neither as 'impossible' nor as 'normal'. Instead, we will be entirely open to the God who works both through nature and through miracle. And when a healing miracle is claimed, we will expect it to resemble those in the Gospels and the Acts and so to be the instantaneous and complete cure of an organic condition, without the use of medical or surgical means, inviting investigation and persuading even unbelievers. For so it was with the congenital cripple. Peter took his miraculous healing as the text of both his sermon to the crowd and his speech to the Council. Word and sign together bore testimony to the uniquely powerful name of Jesus. The healing of the cripple's body was a vivid dramatization of the apostolic message of salvation.