

## **ARE THE MIRACULOUS GIFTS FOR TODAY?**

**Isaiah 61:1-3, Luke 7:18-23, Acts 4:23-31, 5:12-16, 1 Corinthians 12:1-11**

### INTRODUCTION

I'm doing something this morning that I think I've only done once or twice in the twelve years we've been a church: I'm going to preach a topical sermon that is not tied to one particular passage of the Bible. I decided many months ago to use this Sunday to seek to answer this question: Are the miraculous gifts for today? My reason for doing so is because we are currently working our way through the book of Acts in the NT. We have noted that this book, written by Luke, is a theological history of how Jesus is continuing to speak and to act in this world in and through his church, particularly as embodied in his apostles. Luke's narrative includes numerous descriptions of miracles being performed by the apostles and by a few others who were closely related to the apostles. We have seen for example that in Acts 4, after being warned and threatened by the Jewish authorities to stop preaching the gospel, the apostles Peter and John returned to the gathered church and they prayed together. Part of their prayer was this: "Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus." Then in the next chapter we are told that the "apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people... Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed." This appears to be normal operating procedure in the early church. Not only does Acts record numerous occasions of miraculous healings and exorcisms and other miracles but it also records numerous examples of God's leading his people through dreams and visions and words of prophecy. God directly spoke to his people on a regular basis, providing comfort and direction.

Therefore as people who take the Bible seriously, who believe it is God's word to us, revealing his saving work in Christ and giving to us instructions as to how to live as his church in the world, we must ask whether or not we should expect these same sorts of things to be happening among us and through us. In addition to Acts we also have Paul's teaching on spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12-14 where it appears that he says that God has given a number of miraculous spiritual gifts to the church. It appears in these chapters that Paul expects gifts of healing and of working miracles and of prophecy and speaking in tongues and the interpreting of those tongues to be a part of normal church life. So what are we to make of these descriptions and teachings? Should we expect people among us to be able to heal like Jesus and the apostles? Should we expect people to be receiving information from God by revelation that they then report to the whole church as God's word and will to us? Should we expect that people among us will be praying to and praising God in languages they have never learned and that others among us will be able to understand those languages and tell us what these tongue speakers are saying?

Historically, through the last 2000 years of church history, the majority opinion, but by no means the unanimous opinion of the church has been that we should not expect these same kinds of miraculous gifts to continue. However, in the last 50 years a growing percentage of Bible believing Christians have come to believe that all of these miraculous abilities still exist and ought to be practiced by the modern church. At the same time a large plurality of Christians are convinced these gifts no longer exist in the church. Many Christians, perhaps most., are not sure what to think. A vigorous and at times harsh debate has gone on over the last 50 years regarding this question. This morning I aim to provide for you an outline of the debate and to share some of my own conclusions regarding it. It is important for all of us to recognize that we have in our congregation people who have grown up in Christian churches that have adamantly taught that none of the miraculous gifts still exist and others who have grown up in churches that have insisted that all exist and are to be practiced. Many others of us have no opinion and no experience with the issue. We have people among us who speak in tongues privately. We have others who have been taught that anyone who speaks in tongues is possessed by the devil. In light of this broad diversity of opinion in our own congregation and in view of the enormity of this subject I know that I will not be able to answer every question that needs answering. I will most certainly say things with which

some will disagree. Therefore, we will have a Pizza with the Pastor on July 17 where we will continue this discussion and you can ask your questions.

You will find in your program a list I took from a book edited by Dr. Wayne Grudem called, “Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views.” The list describes positions that all the contributing authors and Dr. Grudem believe have no biblical warrant and when taught only serve to harm the church of Jesus. I concur with their list. You can read through them on your own and if you find a statement you believe to be true, give me a call and we can talk about why I would say you are wrong. You can see my outline in the program or on the screen: First I want to clarify the question by defining what is a miracle and what are the miraculous gifts, then give the broad outline of the argument that each side in the debate gives as to why they believe the gifts have ceased or why they believe they continue and then share where I think the weaknesses of each argument lie. I want to identify a few of the very significant areas of agreement between the two positions. Finally, I want to make a few comments about what we are going to do here at RHCC.

### **CLARIFYING THE QUESTION:**

What is a miracle? I have been most helped by the definition that Dr. Grudem gives in his “Systematic Theology” which he adapted from a definition given by Dr. John Frame from Westminster Theological Seminary: “A miracle is a less common kind of God’s activity in which he arouses people’s awe and wonder and bears witness to himself.” The reason I like this definition is because it recognizes that God is always at work in his world. As Paul summarizes in Ephesians 1:12, God is the one who “works all things in conformity with the purpose of his will.” Everything that comes to pass in this created world is the result of God’s sovereignly working out his own purposes and will from the sun rising each day to who will be the President of the U.S. (I have written about this “providence” of God over the last year in our newsletter which you can read on our website.). Miracles then are simply a less common kind of God’s work for the purpose of arousing our awe and wonder and bearing witness to himself. I highly recommend you read chapter 17 of Dr. Grudem’s Systematic Theology for an excellent and concise description of miracles.

What are the miraculous gifts? There are three lists and one general description of spiritual gifts in the NT. While it is true that every spiritual gift is miraculous in the sense that each one is given by the Holy Spirit himself and made effective by his power, we are using this term to refer to those gifts whereby the one gifted is able to do or to know things in a less common sort of way that arouses wonder and awe. A person with the gift of healing will be able to pray for someone and without the aid of medicine the person will be completely restored to health such as when Peter and John told the man crippled from birth at the temple gate “...in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth walk” and then took his hand and raised him from his mat. A person with the gift of working miracles will be able to cast out demons or to strike a man blind as Paul did. A person with the gift of prophecy will know by revelation what God is going to do as Agabus knew there was going to be a famine or that Paul was going to be arrested in Jerusalem. A person with the gift of tongues will be able to, at will, pray to and praise God in a language they never learned. God enables people to do all sorts of things like contribute financially to the needs of others and he enables people to know and communicate all kinds of truth like a pastor preaching a sermon but the miraculous gifts are less common ways of God acting and speaking through a person that arouse a sense of awe and wonder. So our question is concerned with the presence or absence of these spiritual gifts of the more spectacular nature.

Why does the question matter? First of all this question matters because God talks about these miraculous gifts in his word and whatever God talks about matters. Second, it matters because obedience to God matters. If he wants us to expect and do these things then we should expect and do them and if he does not then we should refrain. Third, it matters because what you think about these things will make a difference in how you conduct worship services and prayer meetings and Bible Studies and counseling and evangelism. These gifts, if they are to be practiced, are to be practiced in the church and so how you “do” church will be impacted by what you believe about this.

## UNDERSTANDING THE ARGUMENT:

I am only giving very brief summations to these arguments which I hope are faithful representations of each position but do not give every piece of the argument.

The miraculous gifts have ceased: Reasonable cessationists readily admit that there is no verse in the Bible that says the miraculous gifts have ceased, though they will site several passages that they say appear to point in that direction. Rather, the argument for the cessation of these miraculous gifts is rooted in the structure of the entire Bible. The argument goes like this: The Bible is the record of the history of God saving his people and establishing his kingdom on this earth. The OT predicts and describes the arrival of God's Messiah who will establish God's kingdom by means of his life, death, resurrection, ascension, intercession, sending of the Holy Spirit and final judgment. Jesus Christ is that predicted Messiah who comes to establish God's kingdom on this earth. The arrival of Jesus is the culmination and climax of the history of God's saving work. God, to demonstrate that Jesus is his Messiah and that the apostles who proclaimed the good news of salvation by him were his spokespersons, enabled both Jesus and his apostles and those closely associated with them to perform "signs and wonders." These signs and wonders were, like the signs and wonders performed by Moses at the time of the Exodus, the token and mark of the arrival of God's salvation through his Messiah. They verified both the messengers and the message so that the whole universe would know that God was fulfilling his promises in and through Jesus. Like a road sign indicating that a curve is ahead, the sign is not the curve but indicates the fact that a curve is coming so these signs and wonders were not the kingdom of God but pointed to the arrival of the one who was establishing God's kingdom. The gospel accounts of Jesus' life and then the account in Acts of the beginning of the church are describing this one time event of the coming of the Messiah and the establishment of the church. According to passages like Ephesians 2:19-22 Jesus and the apostles and NT prophets were the foundation of the church. You only lay one foundation and once it is laid it cannot be laid again. Thus, once that foundation was laid, when the apostles died so did the need for the signs and wonders. One of the key verses that they will site is 2 Corinthians 2:12 which says, in the NIV, "The things that mark an apostle-- signs, wonders and miracles-- were done among you with great perseverance." So it would appear that Paul identifies signs, wonders and miracles with the office and gift of apostle and thus as all the apostles are dead, so too are these signs that go with them.

The miraculous gifts continue: Like the cessationists those who say the miraculous gifts continue talk about the Bible as the history of God's saving work and begin with the OT promises that the Messiah will come and establish God's kingdom on this earth. They point to the numerous OT statements which characterize the "day of the Lord" as the time when the Holy Spirit is poured out upon God's people. They point to Peter's quotation of Joel 2 on the day of Pentecost in the first Christian sermon in which Peter quoting Joel describes what is happening in this way, "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below..." They would argue that the coming of Jesus and the sending of the HS on Pentecost inaugurated the day of the Lord and that day will be consummated when Jesus returns. Thus we are still in the day of the Lord and should therefore expect that the signs predicted by Joel continue throughout this entire age. The OT predicts and the NT records that the entire "day of the Lord" is to be marked by these signs on the earth and all the people of God prophesying. They would argue that there is absolutely no place in the NT which indicates that these gifts have ceased. The absence of the abundance of these miracles in church history is due in part to a selective recording of that history, that is, there were far more miraculous things happening than the institutional church recorded and the church for a variety of reasons resisted the work of the Holy Spirit.

### The weaknesses of each position:

Let me say a word about the fact that there are disagreements among Christians who all claim to believe the same Bible. It is a regular argument of the enemies of the gospel that the fact of disagreements among Christians who all say they believe the same book is proof that Christianity is a man-made thing and not from

God. If God were behind the Bible and the church there would not be so many divisions and disagreements. The first reason there are disagreements is not because the Bible is unclear but because we are finite and fallen people. There is only one truth but our humanity interferes with our apprehending the unity of that truth. At the same time, as I'm going to show in a minute, while there are profound disagreements among us, yet we share far more in common with each other than we disagree about. Our own pride causes us to accentuate the differences to such a degree that it appears our differences are greater than our agreements. Another related reason for these disagreements is so that we can show the world the glory of Christ and his gospel by our loving and respecting our brothers and sisters who disagree with us about non-essential doctrines. Now, as I share what I see to be weaknesses in the arguments you need to know that each position has an answer to these criticisms.

It seems to me that the cessationist position founders upon the fact that in Paul's lists of spiritual gifts in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 & 14 he lists both the "miraculous" gifts and the "non-miraculous" gifts side by side. Especially in 1 Corinthians he speaks as though all the gifts are to be practiced in the church. The cessationist position requires that significant portions of these passages have very little to say to us. In addition, in his letter to the Galatians Paul in seeking to show that salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone and not by our works says, "Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law or because you believe what you heard?" It would appear from this statement again that there are miracles regularly taking place within the churches of Galatia. It is a weighty fact that the NT does seem to treat these gifts as a regular feature of church life.

Those who argue for the full continuation of all the gifts have difficulty explaining how it is that they can, together with the rest of the orthodox Christian church, say that the office and gift of apostle has ceased when that office and gift appears in the lists that contain the gifts they say continue. For example, 1 Corinthians 12:28-29, "And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, *various* kinds of tongues. All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not *workers of* miracles, are they?" They dismiss out of hand any claim that the NT says that any of these things have ended and yet they agree that the gift and office of apostleship has ended which is listed right next to the gifts they say continue. If apostles have ceased, why is it wrong to say the gift of working miracles has ceased? A second point of difficulty they face is describing what the gifts actually are. The NT data on the miraculous gifts is scant. What exactly is a "word of wisdom" or what is the "gift of prophecy" or the "gifts of miracles"? The only miraculous gift that is clearly explained is the gift of tongues. But its corresponding gift, the gift of interpretation is not really explained as to how it functions. Third, if the miraculous gifts play as prominent a role in the life of the church as they say, then why are they so seldom discussed in the NT letters?

**WHAT EVERYONE AGREES ON:** (I only have time to mention a few of the things we agree upon.)

1) God's Word and not our experience must control what we think, believe and do. This goes both ways. Just because you do not speak in tongues or have never witnessed it or have never witnessed the gift of healing or working of miracles does not mean they do not exist. Or, just because you are able to speak in tongues or have witnessed healing miracles does not mean that these gifts still exist. My experience, your experience does not determine what is true. Our experience must be submitted to the critique of the Bible. We must fight to not interpret the Bible in light of our experience. Jesus and the apostles warn that false teachers and false prophets will be able to perform miracles. Jesus and the apostles warn that it is possible for humans to resist the HS and to quench the work of the HS. I have a dear friend who was abused as a child and who went to see a "Christian" counselor who helped her. However, he also held to a strange and unbiblical doctrine regarding Satan and his relationship to Christians. My friend has embraced his false views and has stubbornly refused to give up these views because he helped her. This is a common malady of human beings. If I have been helped, then that which helped me must be true. That is a dangerous way to live your life. All experience must be subjected to the critique of Scripture and not the other way around.

2) There are no apostles like the original 12 and Paul who are revealing the word of God any longer. The office and gift of apostle ended with the death of John in approximately 90 A.D (1 John 1:1-4 & Hebrews 1:1-4). There are no new words coming from God through people now that if you disbelieve or disobey them you will be disbelieving and disobeying God. Only the words of the Bible are God's words without mixture. Thus, the signs and wonders that were performed by Jesus and the apostles and those associated with them as the gospel came to new peoples were unique and foundational and are not currently being done to the same degree. You may be surprised to know this but most who believe the gifts continue recognize that with the ending of the office and gift of apostleship there has been a diminishment in the quantity of signs and wonders. Everyone agrees that the signs and wonders performed by Jesus and the apostles did function as a sign that the long awaited "day of the Lord" had arrived with the coming of Jesus and were unique.

3) Everyone agrees that God still does miracles in answer to the prayers of his people. God still is in combat with the forces of evil in the world so that Christians have authority to command demons to flee and they must flee. In many ways the disagreement is over how often does God do miracles? Those who say the gifts continue expect God to do many miracles and those who say they do not exist have less of an expectation that God will miraculously intervene. All agree that God is the one who determines when and where these miracles and miraculous gifts will appear. No reasonable and orthodox Christian says that God always heals or always performs miracles at the hands of his people. All agree that God sovereignly determines both the distribution of gifts and the manifestation of his power in response to the prayers of his people. No responsible person says that our faith or our words are the ultimate factors in what God does or does not do. At the same time all recognize that our prayerlessness, our unbelief does interfere with God's working in our midst. As John Calvin says, "God has promised us nothing that he has not also commanded us to ask of him in prayer." God manifests his presence by fulfilling his promises to those who ask him to fulfill his promises. The disagreement is over what exactly has God promised us?

4) Everyone agrees that the primary miracle and the greatest miracle that the coming of Jesus effects is the conversion of sinners. All engaged in this debate want to keep at the forefront the chief purpose in the coming of Jesus and the chief evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit: that sinners repent of their sins and trust in Jesus Christ alone for their salvation. The chief evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit is not speaking in tongues or the working of miracles. The chief work of God in the world is to manifest his glory in the gospel in such a way that sinful people discover that he is the treasure for which we seek; that being loved and forgiven by him, knowing and loving him is the purpose for which we were made. A happy, pain free life on this earth is not the purpose for which we were made. We were made to be taken up with the greatness and glory of God as he is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit and to live forever in the enjoyment of God's glory in the new heavens and the new earth. Thus, all agree that the main things for which we are to pray are for the HS to make Jesus appear grand and glorious so that men and women and children embrace him as their life and then manifest that faith in their holy lives, patient and joyful endurance of suffering and love for others. We can all pray with absolute confidence that God would cause the faith of his people to endure and grow. We can all pray with absolute confidence that God would cause the love of his people for him and for one another to increase and overflow. We can all pray with confidence that God would cause the lives of his people to more fully correspond to the life of the Son of God. Everyone who believes the Bible recognizes that if I, John Swanson, love God and love people and hold fast to Christ in the midst of great trial and resist sin and love righteousness it is a greater miracle than God healing my son Jared right now. Fred and Charity Fisher holding fast to Jesus and loving their children and living for the glory of Jesus is a greater miracle than if God were to right now heal little Patience. If you do not believe that, then you do not believe the Bible and you do not understand the reality of human sin and of the glory and power of Jesus Christ.

## **WHAT WILL WE DO HERE AT RHCC?**

1) We will grow in our knowledge of and joy in this great salvation so that we love others for the glory of Christ.

2) We will accept one another and keep investigating God's word together.

3) We will grow in believing, expectant prayer. It is at this point that I am most challenged by my brothers and sisters who expect the miraculous gifts to be practiced in the church. They expect God to tangibly manifest his presence among and his love for his people. While I cannot embrace the cessationist position; I cannot say the miraculous gifts have ceased, yet I am not sure that those who argue for the continuation of the gifts are right in their assessment either. What I do long for and admire in them is the expectation they have for God to make his presence known for his glory and for the joy and help of his people. Thus, I want us to grow together in our practice of believing, expectant prayer. I want our hearts to be encouraged in the love of God for sinners when we come together in worship. I want people as a result of being among us to have a "spiritual sense of divine things" so that our hearts do love God, so that sin is forsaken, love for others is stimulated, action to build the body and proclaim the gospel is taken.

4) We will trust the sovereign God to distribute his gifts according to his will. My comfort in this matter lies in the fact that Jesus is Lord of his church and that the Holy Spirit distributes his gifts according to his will. Thus I would simply ask that we ask the Lord of the church to give us what he wants to give us and to give us the discernment and wisdom that comes by his Spirit and Word as we exercise those gifts he gives.

5) Finally, I want each of us to exercise our gifts, whatever they may be, for the building up of the body of Christ and the glory of our great Savior. God wants every Christian sitting in this room to use their gifts and abilities to encourage and help the other Christians sitting near you to know and experience and trust the love of God given to us in Christ in greater ways.

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