

DO MIRACLES HAPPEN TODAY?

by Ra McLaughlin

In Reformed theology, belief in miracles is based on the conviction that God sovereignly and freely controls his world. He does precisely as he pleases with his creation (Pss. 115:3; 135:6; cf. WCF 2.2). Modern scientific skepticism about miracles derives from a denial of this cardinal Christian belief. In reality, many of the miracles recorded in Scripture are essential to the Christian Faith, such as Jesus' incarnation and his resurrection from the dead. To deny miracles entirely is to deny the heart of the Christian Faith.

Even so, well-meaning Christians have disagreed on whether or not miracles continue to take place today. To one degree or another, three outlooks have tended to appear. First, some Christian traditions that have affirmed that God intended for the same kinds of miracles that happened in biblical history to take place in every generation of the church. Second, others have stressed that some kinds of miracles should be expected and others not. Third, some believers have argued that miracles belonged to biblical times and do not continue today. With rare exception, Reformed theologians have fallen into the second and third camps.

In many respects, much controversy on this matter has risen in Reformed circles because not everyone agrees on what a "miracle" is. The Scriptures themselves use many terms and phrases to describe what most people today mean by the term "miracle:" "Sign," "wonder," "great work," "mighty deed," "power" — the list goes on and on. But the Bible never explicitly defines "miracle" or any of these related terms.

Some branches of the church define miracles as events that violate natural law. When considering this definition, it is important to remember that Reformed theology teaches that the universe is constantly upheld not by natural laws, but by the providence of God. So, rather than speaking of exceptions to natural law, Reformed theologians have tended to distinguish between God's ordinary and extraordinary providence. Normally, God works *through* creaturely or second causes to accomplish his ends. For example, he normally uses rain to water the ground so that plants will grow. Yet, God he is also free to work *without, above and against* second causes as he pleases (WCF 5.2-3).

In general terms, both the Bible and theologians tend to apply words expressing the miraculous to examples of extraordinary providence more than to examples of ordinary providence. Even so, at times the timing and placement of very ordinary events are also described as miraculous. In this general sense, therefore, it is proper to say that the miraculous continues even in our day.

It is important to realize, however, that a crucial distinction is often made in Reformed theology between spectacular events in general and miracles that serve as “signs.” Sign miracles are awesome events that occur to verify the claims of God’s inspired spokesmen. These sign miracles are very similar to miracles in general; they are not of a unique sort. Yet, they are closely associated with the actions of a person claiming to speak for God, and thus presenting authoritative special revelation (see Ex 4:1-9; 1Ki 17:24; Jn 10:38; 14:11; 2Co 12:12; Heb 2:3-4). This (often repeated) close association between signs and authoritative special revelation draws attention to the special role the miracle worker plays in the history of salvation. Such signs do not convince everyone noticing, but they are compelling evidences for those who look with eyes of faith (e.g. John 2:11; 4:39,46-53; 7:31). Even so, because God no longer sends authoritative spokesmen (the apostles were the last; cf. Acts 1:21-26), we should no longer expect to see sign miracles today.

At the same time, we need to realize that throughout the history of the church, Christians have claimed to witness miracles, and that there is nothing in Scripture to indicate that all miracles have now ceased. Certainly God continues to work without, above and against second causes (WCF 5.2-3).

In short, we should be careful not to go to extremes in affirming or denying modern miracles. On the one hand, the cessation of authoritative spokesmen implies an end to miracles designed as signs. On the other hand, even today God answers prayers, and the Holy Spirit displays his power among God’s people (e.g. Rom. 15:13; 1 Cor. 2:5; 5:4; Eph. 3:16). For this reason, we should expect to see God move on behalf of his people with many extraordinary blessings, even blessings that we may rightly call miraculous.