

# MIRACLES

## All that glitters isn't necessarily gold

Many Churches in the 1970s and early 80s took a keen interest in miracles, in some cases, viewing the miracles as a 'latter rain' movement of God to make way for the return of Christ. The return of Christ did not come, and the miracles in the vast majority of cases, turned out to be fake.

The Pentecostal Churches had welcomed unintelligible tongues as a sign that the speaker had an extra measure of the Holy Spirit. However, when several prominent leaders in the Pentecostal movement were found to have serious moral failings, the idea that those with the 'tongues' gift were spiritually stronger, came under strain. The last straw was when the most prominent of the Pentecostal TV evangelists - Jimmy Swaggart - made his confession on Sunday 21 February 1988, "I have sinned!"<sup>1</sup> Soon afterwards, speaking in unintelligible tongues was dropped in Pentecostal Church services.

For many years, speaking in tongues was an exciting thing to do, but as we will see in this article, all that glitters isn't necessarily gold. A shift in thinking in this period was a drift away from presenting solid evidence for the Christian faith to a simplistic 'feel good' experience centred message. As we will see, this thinking has a serious flaw.

### A problem

A Christian moves to a new location and decides to share his faith with his neighbours. He informs Terry, the neighbour to the right of his house that he has placed his faith in Christ, with the result that his life has been wonderfully transformed. Furthermore, two months earlier, he had gone to a faith healing meeting where an ache in his back was prayed for, and it vanished. He also prayed for and received the gift of tongues (unintelligible tongues). Since that time, he feels God is a little closer to him. He then challenges Terry with the question, "Do you know what I am talking about?" "Oh yes!" Terry replies, "I am a Christian too. Some of the founding fathers of our Church spoke in tongues and healed the sick. I love going to Church. It is a wonderful feeling being in Church with fellow believers."

The Christian replies, "Oh wonderful!". "So you are a Christian then; what denomination do you belong to?" Terry replies that he is a Mormon (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints). The Christian is shocked because Mormons deny the cardinal teaching of the Christian faith, for instance, they believe there are many gods. The Mormon god is not God as Christians understand him. He is simply a being who was once a man and has become one of many gods. Furthermore, we are not saved through the work of Jesus Christ, but rather, through keeping the precepts of the Mormon religion.

The Christian decides to emphasise just how real and wonderful the presence of God in his life is. The Mormon then relates how wonderful it is to follow the precepts of the Mormon religion, it gives him a certain joy and comfort.

After some discussion over which faith gives the most

wonderful experience, the Christian realises his is not advancing in his attempt to bring his neighbour to a saving faith in Christ, so he decides to end the conversation for the time being.

Several days later, the Christian becomes involved in a conversation with Barry, the neighbour on the left hand side of his house. As with the conversation with Terry, he relates the wonderful change in his life, the healing, and the additional positive feeling through speaking in tongues.

Barry becomes quite enthused by the testimony and decides to relate his own story. He asserts that he too is a Christian. He too has prayed for healing, and has been healed. He too has sought and gained the gift of tongues, with the result that he now has become more devoted.

The Christian however, is rather perplexed when he discovers the healing came after much praying to saint Mary Mackillop - a Roman Catholic nun who died in August 1909. The Roman Catholic Church recognised two miracles which were attributed to her intercession, so she was declared to be a saint (canonised) in October 2010.

The Christian is further concerned when he discovers his Roman Catholic friend has no personal trust in Jesus Christ. Just a devotion to the rituals of the Church, such as the mass, confession, and praying to the dead (Mary Mackillop). A puzzle for the Christian is how did the Roman Catholic, a non-Christian, speak in tongues? And why is Barry more devoted to the mass after learning to speak in tongues?

### A Mistake

A mistake the Christian is making is to accept something which is not real evidence at all that Barry is a Christian - speaking in unintelligible tongues. A further problem is with his testimony to the Christian faith.

He has limited his testimony to his subjective (inner experience). A concern here is that the focus of the Christian faith is not on inner experiences, as are many other faiths. The Apostles, after being baptised in the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, did not testify that they had just received a most wonderful experience. Rather, they gave glory to God in many languages. The people declared, "... we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." (Acts 2:11). Please note; they were telling 'the mighty works of God'. Their focus was on God, not on themselves.

The Christian faith is far greater in its evidence than any other faith in two major areas. It is far greater in its subjective evidence - inner assurance of salvation. It is also far greater in its objective evidence.

Regarding the objective evidence, the Judaeo-Christian faith is at least partly founded at the foot of Mt Sinai when God spoke to Moses in the presence of the whole nation of Israel in broad daylight. "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Tell the Israelites this: 'You have seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven:'" (Exodus 20:22).

Both Buddhism and Islam are founded upon the private experiences of their founders with their respective god during the hours of darkness. By way of contrast, the writings of Moses can be trusted because of the very public display of God's power while he was on Mt Sinai. Furthermore, Jesus, who is proven to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead (Rom. 1:4), declared, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17). When Jesus declares Scripture to be the *truth*, that settles the matter. For more on this point, see my paper, "*The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture*".

### Central message

The central message of the Church is the Gospel. It is "... the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: ..." (Rom. 1:16). The message of the Gospel is a Christ-centred message. If Christ and his saving work has not been preached, then the Gospel has not been proclaimed.

The Christian in our earlier example spoke of his wonderful personal experiences, but failed to proclaim the Gospel. An acquaintance several years back handed me a recording of a message given by a famous sports personality who had come to trust in Christ. The message was interesting, and contained humour. At the end of the message, an invitation was given to people to place their faith in Christ. Several people came to the front of the Church to indicate their commitment.

When the content of his message is considered, you need to wonder why people came forward. Was it because they wanted to be associated with the sporting success the speaker had achieved? Or did they like the people in the Church, and wanted to be associated with them? One thing is clear, they could not trust in the work of Christ for the salvation of sinners, because that message was not declared.

It is little wonder that some make a sham profession of faith when the Gospel has not been faithfully proclaimed in the first place.

The Gospel should not be supplanted with interesting personal stories, even if the story contains a miracle or two. Many Christians have been somewhat derailed in their Christian walk through paying a lot of attention to miracles. We need to be mindful of the fact that many belief systems contain stories of miracles/healings. As indicated earlier, many Roman Catholics cling to their false teachings because of an alleged miracle in their personal life, or of someone in the wider Church.

Through my investigations as to why people become involved in a sect or cult, it has become clear to me that many are attracted because an alleged miracle has occurred. In one case, it was simply the supernatural warm glow of a light in the bedroom one night after attending a meeting run by the sect/cult.

In another case, the pastor had not completed any formal theological training. He had a poor grasp of biblical doctrine, however, that did not deter him from proclaiming his ideas. He was able to gain a following because he was able to convince people that a new move from God was

coming upon the worldwide Church, and he - along with his followers - were going to have a significant part in that move of God. Furthermore, he often preached a confused, rambling sermon with the claim that God was 'heavy upon him'. That gave the idea to dedicated followers that the message was somewhat directly from God.

When people struggled to understand the message, the dedicated followers simply concluded that the message was a heavy message from God, and therefore, beyond their comprehension. But, never mind, something mysterious and great was happening in the Church, and that was all that mattered.

The idea that God will give a message to his people which is incomprehensible goes against the clear teaching of Scripture. The Apostle Paul informs the Corinthians, "... I would rather speak five words with my mind, in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue." (1 Corinthians 14:19). God wants his people to be well informed, not baffled with mysteries.

When faith healers and miracle workers aim to apply their false teaching, a distortion of what Scripture is saying about miracles is often applied to make way for their ministry. One such device is a misapplication of what Jesus told his disciples toward the end of his ministry.

### Greater things

Jesus said:

"I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father." (John 14:12).

How are we to understand the above statement from Jesus? Are we to believe that all Christians - or at least some modern-day miracle workers - should perform more spectacular miracles than Jesus, as some have asserted?

Jesus made the above comment to the disciples in the context of his proving that he is the Son of God. That He and the Father are one. Jesus, in his conversation with the disciples had just said, "Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves." (14:11).

Jesus is quite clearly pressing the disciples to believe that he is part of the Godhead; that he is the Son of God. If the disciples should find it difficult to believe his statement, then they should believe on the evidence of the miracles.

Jesus lets the disciples know that the evidence that he is the Son of God would not come to an end when he left them. The miracle working which proves that Christ is the Son of God would continue in the ministry of the Apostles. The highly respected commentators, Matthew Henry and John Calvin - among many others - bring out this point. John Calvin puts the case best. After making the point that many are troubled by the statement of Christ, that the "Apostles *would do greater works than he had done.*" He goes on to say, "First, we must understand what Christ means; namely, that the power by which he proves himself to be the Son of God, is so far from being confined to his

bodily presence, that it must be clearly demonstrated by many and striking proofs, when he is absent. Now the ascension of Christ was soon afterwards followed by a wonderful conversion of the world, in which the Divinity of Christ was more powerfully displayed than while he dwelt among men. Thus, we see that the proof of his Divinity was not confined to the person of Christ, but was diffused through the whole body of the Church. ... *Because I go to the Father.* This is the reason why the disciples would do greater things than Christ himself.”<sup>2</sup>

Matthew Henry also sees the fulfilment of Christ’s words in the work God did through the Apostles, “Did Christ heal the sick, cleanse the leper, raise the dead? So should they [the Apostles]. ... Though he should depart, the work should not cease, nor fall to the ground, ...” (Matthew Henry, Vol. 5, p. 1,112).

Please note that neither of the above highly respected Bible scholars believe that John 14:12 is fulfilled in all Christians, but rather, in the work of God through the Apostles.

### **Miracles of the Apostles**

Firstly, a false rumour that Paul was dead after being stoned was rejected (Acts 14:19). Clearly, Scripture is not interested in false stories in order to bolster a case that miracles are happening.

Regarding genuine miracles, Jesus raised the dead, so did the Apostles (Acts 9:40, 20:9-12). People were healed when they touched the garment of Jesus in faith (Mark 5:25-34). They only needed to be in the shadow of Peter and they were healed (Acts 5:15-16).

Also, “God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them.” (Acts 19:11-12).

At the time of Christ’s death on the cross, the number who followed him was small, they were frightened, and they scattered (Matt. 26:31). However, after the ascension of Christ to the Father, and the Baptism of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles, they saw the miracle of thousands brought to faith in Christ through their preaching (Acts 2:41, 47).

Regarding the baptism of the Holy Spirit, it came upon the Apostles first - in a very dramatic way - then upon the Jews (Acts 2:1-13), then upon the Samaritans (Acts 8:14-17), and finally upon the Gentiles (Acts 10:44-45). We should not be surprised at the orderly fashion in which the baptism of the Holy Spirit came upon the Church because God is a God of order.

Christians need to be clear on the type of miracles which were performed by Jesus and the disciples. It is when the Christian is clear on this point that he will not be easily tricked into believing a miracle has taken place, when in fact it hasn’t.

### **Miracles of Jesus**

Jesus performed many miracles. In this brief examination of his miracles we will look at only those

miracles which could be clearly seen by a group of observers to be a miracle. Healing the sick through miracles that could not be seen will not be included, such as the curing of a fever suffered by Peter’s mother-in-law (Matt. 8:14), and the healing of the woman suffering from a continual bleeding (Mark 5:25-34).

Jesus raised at least three people from the dead. The three separate incidents mentioned in Scripture are:

- Widows son raised (Luke 7:12-16).
- Jesus daughter raised (Matt. 9:25, Mark 5:42).
- Lazarus raised (John 11:1-46).

Jesus visibly healed the sick, for instance:

- The leper healed (Matt. 8:2-4, Mk. 1:40-42).
- Blind man healed (Matt. 9:27-34).
- Paralytic healed (Mk. 2:1-2).
- The shrivelled hand healed (Matt. 12:10-13).

On some occasions, Jesus healed everyone who came to him (Matt. 8:14-17, 12:15. Mark 7:37). Jesus did not confine himself to invisible miracles as do modern day ‘faith-healers’ who must rely on the testimony of those they are alleged to have healed. Also, Jesus did not make a show of his miracles, and in the case of the leper who was healed, he asked that he present himself to the priests for confirmation that he was healed and to give the required sacrifice. Jesus said:

“See that you don’t tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.” (Mark 1:44).

By contrast, modern day faith healers specialise in invisible ailments, make a show of the alleged healing and usually do not tell the person to go to a doctor for confirmation of the healing.

Miracles which did not involve healing:

- The water turned to wine (John 2:1-11).
- The four thousand fed (Matt. 15:32-38).
- The five thousand fed (John 6:10-11).
- Jesus calms the storm (Matt. 8:23-27).

In this short and certainly incomplete list of miracles covering the raising of the dead, healing the sick and miracles concerning nature, we have eleven miracles among a population of far fewer than five million people over the period of his public ministry, just three years.

America is a Christian nation. It then follows that if God has raised up miracle workers in the USA with the same work-load as Jesus in our mathematical model i.e. one miracle worker per five million people, and they each perform miracles of the same type and greater than those performed by Jesus, then we should see a result which is similar to the following:

One miracle worker per five million people in a population of (I’ll greatly reduce the population here for

simplicity) 250 million = 50 miracle workers.

If each miracle worker is blessed with miracles at the same rate as Jesus, then at the very least, we should see in any three year period the following results:

People raised from the dead,  $3 \times 50 = 150$ .  
 People healed of (visible) ailments,  $3 \times 50 = 150$ .  
 People miraculously fed,  $9,000 \times 50 = 45,000$ .  
 Destructive storms stopped in their tracks, 50.  
 Water turned into wine, 75 to 115 litres  $\times 50 =$   
 $3,750 - 5,750$  litres (1,000 to 1,500 gallons).

There has not been a single recorded incident of a person being raised from the dead in the whole of America's history, not alone 150 in any given three year period. Quite clearly, the view that God would raise up miracle workers throughout every period of history is not what Jesus meant.

### Invisible healings

In recent times, the Church has seen the rise of healers who specialise in *invisible* healings. They claim that God works through them to heal arthritis, cancer, back pain, headaches and various other invisible complaints, but God can not work through them to heal visible ailments. For instance, leprosy, blindness, the deaf, twisted and broken limbs or a withered hand.

It is becoming more widely known now that people in a highly charged atmosphere, particularly where a dominant leader, and upbeat loud music is involved, can, during the sense of euphoria, release a naturally occurring drug called endomorphin into the system which deadens the sense of pain.

I entered this type of atmosphere in a church several years ago where the preacher announced to the congregation that the Lord was going to cure that night, many who had arthritis. After much very loud music, around a dozen of those who felt cured, made their way to the stage where they made a public display of their perceived cure by moving their fingers and hands, and announced that they did not feel any arthritic pain. What many in the congregation do not realise is that the arthritic pain of those who gave their testimony, returns the next day - perhaps sooner - in the calm atmosphere of their private lives.

Among the most prominent of those who have specialised in invisible healings is **Benny Hinn**. People have watched many episodes of his programme on TV and not witness one single incident of a visible healing. Those who have been to his church can testify that before each TV show begins, walking sticks and empty wheel chairs are placed at the front of the stage for effect, or perhaps we should say, to deceive.

The show relies entirely on people coming forward and confessing to a perception or feeling that they have been healed. If you were to seal the lips of those coming forward, the whole show would collapse under the weight of evidence that nothing is happening - apart from a sense of well-being and euphoria due to the very loud and upbeat music.

Kurt Goedelman in his coauthored book, "*The*

*Confusing World of Benny Hinn*", makes the point that he attended a Benny Hinn healing crusade and observed a large number of invalids, still in their wheelchairs leaving the crusade. He and a friend staged themselves at the two exits to the building; "...not a single empty one [wheelchair] passed through either of the two exits."<sup>3</sup>

I know what Kurt Goedelman is talking about because I attended a Benny Hinn healing ministry in Brisbane in about 2004. The music was upbeat and loud. I actually inserted ear plugs into my ears for hearing protection! After some time with the loud music, people were prayed for and there was the usual public announcement at the microphone that they had been healed.

One lady who was a severe asthmatic came to the meeting in a wheelchair. She announced that she was healed and to prove the point, ran up the aisle and back. Everyone smiled and clapped. When everyone was leaving, the lady with her distinct light brown scarf was being wheeled out in her wheelchair looking dejected and exhausted.

A man who had come forward with a back problem and who had announced that he was healed, was seen out of his wheelchair, but was hanging onto the handles at the back. He was moving along at a very slow pace. When I noticed him, I came over and walked behind for close observation until it was becoming embarrassing to keep walking at such a slow pace, so I then passed him.

A man with a visible problem, joined the line for the special divine healing touch from Benny Hinn. His neck was in a brace. Metal rods kept his head at a correct angle and prevented any movement. When I saw the man come to Benny, I knew there was going to be a problem, because Benny specialises in *invisible* healings. He clearly had a visible problem. Benny quite masterfully handled the situation. He prayed for the man, gave him a lot of sympathy and assurance, then moved on to the next person. I should point out that the prayer was not for healing, just comfort.

At the meeting, Benny told people with hearing aids to take them out. They would not be needed because they were going to be healed. My thought at the time was that they should not need their hearing aids because the music was very loud. Their problem - at least in an artificial sense - was fixed. They could at least hear the music! On a more serious note, a lady I knew very well went to the meeting with hearing aids. After the meeting, she still needed her hearing aids.

Benny Hinn could not heal when his alleged gift of healing was most urgently needed; for the healing of his wife after a plane crash in which he himself suffered superficial injuries. As a result of his lack of ability to heal, his wife Suzanne, was admitted to the Florida Hospital in Orlando on 26 May 1983 and was not released until three days later.<sup>4</sup>

### Oral Roberts

Sometimes the secular press exercises the type of discernment that should be exercised by Church leaders to expose false claims. When Oral Roberts, a prominent TV

evangelist in the 1980s, made the claim that he had raised over a dozen people from the dead, he quickly came under attack from the secular press. “*The Australian*” made the following observation, “Some evangelists claim they can talk in tongues. And they mutter much gibberish on television - and tell the audiences that the Lord is speaking through them. That’s a good ratings ploy. Like, ‘Tune in next week to hear the Lord speak directly to you through your very own television evangelist’. Nothing, however, could possibly compare with Oral Roberts’ latest raise-someone-from-the-dead trick.”<sup>5</sup>

His remarks, which could not be backed up with any evidence, drew the scorn of others, including Jimmy Swaggart who was also a popular Pentecostal TV evangelist at the time. Swaggart remarked that Roberts was “bringing terrible reproach to the Kingdom of God”. The article finally makes the point that Roberts founded the *City of Faith Hospital*. The discerning reader will wonder why the need for a hospital if he could heal the sick and raise the dead!

Roberts made a lot of money out of the people he preached to. He had a house valued at \$750,000 and a private jet valued at \$1.3 million (1987 figures).<sup>6</sup>

### Why expose false healers?

Some may feel that it is not right that the deceitful practices of popular faith healers be exposed. After all, are they not doing a lot of good even if part of their ministry is misleading and deceitful? On the surface that may seem to be the case, but in reality they do a lot of damage for the following reasons:

- People come to physical harm when they falsely believe they are healed and discontinue their medicine. Tragically, in some cases, death has been the result.
- People can come to spiritual harm when the miraculous healing they trusted in is found to be false.
- Because of the wrong emphasis and false teachings which usually go hand in hand with a false healing ministry, Christians are stunted in their spiritual growth.
- The powerful healing ministry of Jesus and the Apostles is diminished in the eyes of those who are exposed to a false healing ministry if they believe the false ministry is the same as that carried out by Jesus and the Apostles.
- The Bible is quick to dismiss that which is false, including the rumour that Paul had died as a result of his being stoned (Acts 14:19). If left unchecked, it could have started a rumour that he had been raised to life.
- Non-Christians exposed to fake miracles may conclude that everything about Christianity is fake.
- The Church has a rock solid foundation, and Christians should be directed to that foundation, and not to a foundation of sand established by deceitful faith healers.

### The healing ministry diminishes

At the beginning, Jesus had a very big healing ministry. “Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them. The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.” (Matt. 15:30-31). See also 19:2, Luke 5:15. This healing ministry was greatly diminished toward the end of his public ministry. Many stopped following him because some of his teaching was hard to accept. (John 6:66).

At the beginning, the Apostles also had a large healing ministry (Acts 3:6-8, 5:12-16), but that was greatly diminished toward the end also, and greater emphasis was placed on a teaching ministry for the spiritual health of the Church.

The Apostle **Paul** at one stage had a powerful healing ministry. “God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them.” (Acts 19:11-12). See also Acts 14:3, 8-10. However, toward the end of his ministry, Paul did not always heal, and he himself knew sickness.

In his letter to the Galatians he said, “...my sickness was a trial to you...” (Gal. 4:14). God worked through Paul on one occasion to heal a person who had been a cripple from birth (Acts 14:8-10). Toward the end of Paul’s ministry on earth when a powerful healing ministry was not necessary, God did not heal through him. He said to Timothy, “...I left **Trophimus** sick in Miletus.” (2 Timothy 4:20). He also told the Philippians of the sickness of his good friend **Epaphroditus**, “Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him...” (Philippians 2:27). His advice to **Timothy** on one occasion was, “Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses.” (1 Timothy 5:23).

Please note that in the above incidents, Paul did not request that a handkerchief be taken from him to his sick friends for their healing. That was an option in the past (Acts 19:11-12) but not now.

Paul at one time asked that a “thorn in my flesh” be taken away (2 Cor. 12:7-8). However, God’s reply to him was, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (12:9).

By the time Paul came as a prisoner to Rome, the mighty working of miracles that God had worked through him in earlier years had come to end. They had served their purpose, and they were no longer needed. Paul had a great deal of freedom for the first two years of his imprisonment in Rome. “For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Acts 28:30-31). Quite clearly, healing was not part of his ministry at this final stage in his life. We don’t need to look at some period outside of the Bible to try and discover when the

period of miracle working ended. We have the answer here in Scripture.

The Apostle Peter also became a prisoner in Rome. Both men were executed by the Roman authorities. According to tradition, Peter was crucified upside down. Paul, because he was a Roman citizen, was executed in a more dignified manner; he was beheaded by means of a sword. If either of the two Apostles had conducted a healing ministry in addition to the teaching ministry that Paul conducted, then they would have certainly gained the attention and favour of the people. It is difficult to imagine any Roman authority deciding to execute a couple of men who would be very popular with the people. Furthermore, if the Apostles did heal while in Rome, then why did the early Church fathers, Clement (c. 90-100) for instance, who wrote *1 Clement* about the year 96, fail to mention the miracles in their writings? Quite clearly, God had drawn the period of spectacular miracle working to an end.

### **The powerful healing ministry of the Church today**

God continues to work powerfully today through the spiritual healing which he brings through the Church. It is a miracle of God that the spiritually dead are raised to life through the preaching of the cross. Particularly when it is considered that the work of Christ in his suffering on the cross is an affront to the pride of man who does not want to face up to the fact that he is a sinner in the sight of God.

The Church today brings spiritual sight to the spiritually blind. The spiritually dead are raised to life and the spiritually lame walk, all because Jesus has won a great victory through his death on the cross and he has gone to the Father. Furthermore, great medical assistance, and practical assistance is given around the world because of help from Christian missionaries who are supported by people in Churches. Those with spiritual insight can see that the work of God continues.

### **Our present day association with the Apostles and the New Testament Church**

Jesus told the teachers of the law and the pharisees that they were associated with those who opposed the prophets of God.

“Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers! ‘You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.” (Matt. 23:32-35).

Quite clearly, those who associate with the wicked will share in their punishment. It is also true that those who associate with the work of the righteous will share in their reward, “I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward.” (Mark 9:41).

The Church today is part of the miracle working activity of the Apostles by way of association. We have no miracle working Apostles in the Church today. That does not mean that little is happening in the Church. The eye of faith sees that God continues to work great miracles in the Church. The miracles of the spiritually dead raised to life, and the spiritual leper cleansed.

### **Miracles in the Church today**

Miracles do occur in the Church today, including the miracle of healing, however, that statement has to be balanced with the fact that in every large Church, there will be people with a medical problem, and there is no Peter or Paul on hand to give immediate healing. The normal situation today is that people in Church are not miraculously healed of their ailments.

Sadly, there have been cases of Christians who have dogmatically insisted that they have been healed of a troubling condition, when the evidence is to the contrary. One famous case involved a couple, (named in a book on the case as) Larry and Lucky Parker. They had a son who suffered from diabetes. A visiting faith healer in their Church prayed for eleven year-old Wesley, and he was pronounced healed. The couple and the child were quite thrilled at the positive news. Wesley, full of excitement and enthusiasm told his friends that he was now rid of the sugar diabetes that had plagued him, so he would no longer be troubled with having to receive insulin injections.

The couple decided to act in faith by withholding all medication. It was believed that the greater the demonstration of faith, the greater the chance of a ‘faith healing’. When the child developed problems, the father decided to show his faith by throwing all medication into the trash bin. The praying of the couple got quite desperate with the mother at one point trying blackmail - blackmail never works with God, his arm can not be twisted. She prayed, “If You let Wesley die, I’m going to turn my back on You; I won’t serve You any longer! ... Please God. Let me see my son’s healing.”<sup>7</sup>

When the child deteriorated further, the father summoned the elders of the Church to the side of his sick son for prayer. The pastor of the Church was quite concerned over the state of the child and insisted that medical attention be sought. The father dismissed the view of the pastor with the thought that he simply lacked faith, and was therefore of no real help in the situation. The end result was that the child deteriorated further and died.

The father was unshaken in his belief that something miraculous was going to happen with his child, so he then started to pray for his resurrection from the dead. He phoned his pastor to inform him that Wesley had died, and requested prayer assistance for his resurrection. The pastor was angry that medical attention was not sought and refused to participate in prayer for a resurrection.

Shortly afterwards, police turned up at the Parker’s house. That resulted in their being brought before a court of law. They were both convicted and sentenced to five years

probation. They were awakened to the serious error in their thinking which resulted in the writing of a book, *"We Let Our Son Die"*. Many copies of this book were sold in the 1980s.

### **Shane Clifton**

One very notable incident of a healing not taking place involves Dr. Shane Clifton. Shane is Dean of Theology at Alphacrucis, a large Pentecostal College in Australia. He graduated with a PhD in theology from the Australian Catholic University. On 07 October 2010, Shane had an accident on a pushbike which left him a quadriplegic. The accident took place at a Pentecostal run event, furthermore, we can be confident that his Pentecostal Church, and the college where he lectures prayed for his healing. However, seven years later (2017) Shane remains a quadriplegic. This incident is a powerful lesson to Pentecostals in particular that we have moved on from the powerful display of God's healing which was so evident under the early ministry of the Apostles.

In the early 1970s and 80s many Pentecostal Churches practiced words of knowledge and interpreting tongues. In reality, the tongues were merely something which the person had learnt to do, and the interpretations were simply imaginations of the interpreter. Thankfully, both tongues and interpretation have ceased in Pentecostal services. The point I want to make here is that no one was able to warn Shane about an impending accident. It is not in man's power to turn on a prophesying ministry. Some positive news is that Shane is able to move about by means of a special mobility scooter, furthermore he is still able to lecture and write. God is victorious through all our sufferings.

### **Exciting stories**

A pastor must not replace Scripture as the means ordained by Christ to sanctify the people (John 17:17) with interesting stories. I give this warning because I know of a Pentecostal pastor who tickled the ears of his congregation with many stories of healings, but failed to adequately teach. He failed to heed the warning of Scripture that in the last days people will turn aside from sound doctrine (2 Tim. 4:3-4). A lady who was part of his congregation ended up in an aged care facility and came under the teaching of a Lutheran minister. She was very impressed with his level of understanding of Scripture. Previously she was deceived by the view that Pentecostal pastors have a special anointing from God. Her comment to me on the Lutheran pastor was, "He makes you think". I was quietly pleased that she had finally escaped a superficial and entertainment level of teaching.

While on the subject of exciting stories, I must say something about an excitement which abounded in the 1970s over the possibility of receiving revelations from God if you were a very spiritual person.

### **Dangers of fine tuning the Spiritual antenna**

The first step in the process of gaining revelations from

God was to speak in (unintelligible) tongues. Never mind that non-Christians, those involved in sects and cults, and even those involved in the occult can speak in unintelligible tongues.

A further step was to meditate quietly and pray, either with others on a similar spiritual journey, or alone. Sometimes the desire to feel God's presence or hear his voice could get a bit extreme. One chap who was a friend of my father came to believe he heard the voice of God tell him to give up his business and go prospecting. He followed his inclination, but unfortunately for him, the venture failed.

Another chap who considered himself to have a very good spiritual antenna as it were, decided to air his opinion to his congregation that God had told him while on vacation in Rome to shout in a public place, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus." This he dutifully did. He alleges that he was then told, "No, not down here; up at the top of St Peter's" (cathedral). So he went with a group of tourists to the top of the cathedral, found a spot by himself, and shouted the words again.

He seemed to be conveying the idea to everyone in his congregation that he is a very spiritual person who is willing to obey the voice of God, even though the instructions are a bit ridiculous. The trouble with his plan is that while he is supposedly making himself look like a great servant of God, the reality is that he is diminishing the character of God with the alleged nonsense instructions. The true servant of God should be engaged in his duty of proclaiming the Gospel which is a clear Christ-centred message.

I will present one more case of a man who tried to get very close to God. It was the view of many in the 1970s that if you somehow absorbed more of God into your life, you would become a more spiritually powerful person, and therefore more effective in the service of Christ. Also, Churches who labelled themselves as 'Charismatic' - having several spiritual gifts, especially unintelligible tongues - were seen as more spiritual than others.

A Baptist pastor, noticing the attention charismatic Churches were receiving at the time, decided he should get more of God into his life. He went to the top of a hill, away from the distractions of the world, and spent a lot of time in prayer, urging God to come more into his being. As he meditated and sought in his spirit, a sign of a deeper presence of God, he suddenly experienced a deep feeling of divine love. He was filled with joy as he experienced what he felt was like 'wave after wave of divine love flooding over him'. He knew he was experiencing a very powerful spiritual event, but it suddenly occurred to him that he had not tested the spirit as commanded in Scripture (1 John 4:2). So he asked the spirit, "Did Jesus Christ come in the flesh to die for sinners?" The pastor received his response. The experience stopped immediately! The pastor realised an evil spirit was giving him the experience. He repented of his lack of trust that God is with him, and moved on in a greater trust which is anchored in the sure Word of God.

### Dangers of hedonism

Hedonism is the belief that the greatest good is pleasure. Pleasure is king. A few years back, I needed to counsel a chap who had been part of a Pentecostal congregation, which at the time, placed some emphasis on material prosperity and healing for those who have sufficient faith. This man, due to circumstances beyond his control, was on the disability pension which of course, gave him significant financial challenges. His prayer requests were that he be healed, obtain a house, car and a beautiful wife. Over time, the requests turned into a demand that God do something, after all, God can do miracles!

My counsel to him was that perhaps God was doing a far greater miracle in his life than provide material comfort and pleasure. A person who rejoices in the Lord in the midst of difficulties bears a far greater witness than the person who rejoices in the middle of worldly wealth and splendour (Habakkuk 3:17-18). At this point, I must share the words of a sticker I noticed on the back of an old car I passed many years back. It read, "The devil gives want power. God gives will power".

Christians need to be mindful of the fact that our Lord experienced suffering. The prophet Isaiah informs us, "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering." (Is. 53:3). Please note the word 'familiar'. That means there were many occurrences of suffering. If our Lord went through suffering, then the Christian can not expect that he will always escape suffering. Suffering is part of this fallen world. However, for the Christian, suffering works for the good. We do not suffer as those who have no hope.

"... we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character hope." (Romans 5:3-4).

### The role of the preacher

The role of the preacher is to declare, among other things, the great acts of God. Such as, the fall of man, the great flood, the tower of Babel, the crossing of the Reed Sea and the voice of God speaking with such volume to the whole nation of Israel from Mt Sinai that the earth shook (Heb. 12:26).

He must also declare the miracles of Christ, his resurrection from the dead, and the great miracles performed by the Apostles. He must not substitute the great miracles of God in the past in preference for events in his own life or in the life of others.

There is a big difference between God speaking from Mt Sinai with such a loud voice, the earth shakes under the feet of a whole nation, and a quiet voice to a single individual.

Preachers need to be clear on what the devil and his agents can do and not do. Satan can tempt, deceive, lie, appear as an angel of light. He can perform small tricks, even heal - particularly through the agency of the occult and witch doctors. Satan usually obtains devotion to himself through the lowest level of influence. When a person

refuses to acknowledge the God of Heaven and Earth, Satan may try his influence, not by directly telling a person to bow to an image of stone or metal, but by simply giving the person a nice warm feeling when he is led by someone to bow to the image. With repeat wonderful experiences each time the image is honoured, the person becomes a devotee to the image. In reality, the person is bowing to an evil spirit (1 Cor. 10:20-21).

There are many things that Satan can not do. He can not make a man humble and more righteous, and he can not gather a whole nation to a mountain and declare his will to the people as God did at Mt Sinai. We need not be fearful of Satan, however, we need to be mindful of his deceptive ways (1 Timothy 3:6-7, 1 Peter 5:8, James 4:7).

One man who was not led astray in his preaching to stories of minor miracles in the lives of others was Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892). Charles Spurgeon ranks as possibly the greatest preacher since the time of the Apostles. I commend, "Spurgeon: A new biography by Arnold Dallimore" (Banner of Truth, 1991).

A man decided to attend the large Metropolitan Tabernacle in London to hear Spurgeon so as to judge for himself just how great Spurgeon was. He testifies that he walked out of the Tabernacle having a greater appreciation of how great the Lord Jesus Christ is. That is the mark of a great preacher - the preacher must decrease, while Christ must increase (John 3:30).

### End Notes

1. "Time", New York USA, 07 March 1988, p. 44.
2. John 14:12, John Calvin Commentary, Ages digital Library, CD.
3. G.R. Fisher and M.K. Goedelman, "The Confusing World of Benny Hinn", Personal Freedom Outreach, 1997, p. 213.
4. "The Confusing World of Benny Hinn", p. 60.
5. Martin Daily, "The Australian", 04 July 1987.
6. Martin Daily, "The Australian", 04 July 1987.
7. Larry Parker, Don Tanner, "We Let Our Son Die", Harvest House Publishers, California USA, 1980, p. 62.

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