

Church 2.0

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”
(Acts 1:8 ESV)*

“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Acts 28:28 ESV)

Many Signs And Wonders

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Acts 5:12-16

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Acts 5:12; that's on page 913 in the pew Bibles. We've been slow walking through the Book of Acts and using these foundational stories to evaluate everything we think and believe about the church. This morning we are going to read about the many signs and wonders that God was doing in the church through the hands of the Apostles. What was that all about? What was it for? And what is the significance of these events – if any - for us as modern day Christians moving forward? Those are some of the questions that we are going to try and answer today, by God's grace, as we make our way through the text. Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 12:

Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. ¹³ None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. ¹⁴ And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, ¹⁵ so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. ¹⁶ The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed. (Acts 5:12–16 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Alright the first thing we need to figure out here is the PURPOSE for signs and wonders in the early church. Why is Luke showing us this picture? How did he understand signs and wonders to function?

The Purpose of Signs And Wonders:

Well most commentators will point out here that Luke clearly understands these signs and wonders as the answer to the prayer he recorded for us back in Acts 4:29-30. We talked about that story before Christmas. That was the END of the story about the early church's first brush with persecution. The Apostles were arrested. They were ordered to stop preaching and they were warned that there could be further consequences if they carried on. And so, as Pastor Rob explained to us, the church came together and immediately began to pray. Do you remember what they prayed for? They said:

“And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, **while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.**” (Acts 4:29–30 ESV)

They said: “God, help us to preach! And when we do CONFIRM our Gospel proclamation through the granting of signs and wonders.”

Alright, well, you don't have to have been to seminary to understand that THIS is THAT. This is the Lord in chapter 5 answering the prayer that was prayed in chapter 4. This is God confirming the Apostolic Gospel by working through them many signs and wonders. That's how Luke seems to understand it and that's how the early church seemed to understand it as well. In Hebrews chapter 2 verses 3-4 it says, speaking of the Apostolic Gospel:

“It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, **while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles** and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.” (Hebrews 2:3–4 ESV)

So the original purpose of signs and wonders was to authenticate the apostolic preaching of the Gospel. I don't think there can be any doubt about that. Apostolic Christianity was one of several competing movements within Judaism at this time. The Pharisees were over here saying, "this is the way forward". The Sadducees were over there saying "This is the way forward". The Essenes were out in the desert saying: "This is the way forward", and the Apostles of Christ were over here saying, "No, no, no. This is the Way forward."

So how could anyone know for sure who was REALLY and truly speaking for God?

Well, when Peter's shadow is healing people and the Apostle Paul's handkerchief is healing people – as we read about in Acts 19 - I think that makes a pretty compelling argument that God is at work over here. That the true message of salvation is being proclaimed over here. That Jesus really is the way, the truth and the life – and no man cometh unto the Father, but by him.

The primary purpose of the signs and wonders that we are seeing in the Book of Acts was to affirm and validate the Gospel being preached by the Apostles. By performing these miracles not just GENERALLY – not just OUT THERE IN THE WORLD – God was DEMONSTRATING the essential continuity between the person and work of Christ and the continuing ministry and teaching of the Apostles and so we notice as we read through the Book of Acts that many of the miracles that are done by the Apostles MIRROR miracles that were done by the Lord Jesus in his earthly life. We don't have to time to look at all of them, but just flip forward to Acts 9 for a second. Look at verses 32-34. It says:

Now as Peter went here and there among them all, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda. ³³ There he found a man named Aeneas, bedridden for eight years, who was paralyzed. ³⁴ And Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed." And immediately he rose. (Acts 9:32–34 ESV)

What does that sound like? It sounds almost exactly like the healing of the paralytic in Matthew 9:6 where Jesus says:

"Rise, pick up your bed and go home." (Matthew 9:6 ESV)

Remember that healing took place right outside Peter's front door; so he's just doing stuff and saying stuff that he saw Jesus say and do.

And that's the point. Now look at Acts 9:40-41. Here a lady has died and everyone is already mourning her, but the Bible says:

Peter put them all outside, and knelt down and prayed; and turning to the body he said, "**Tabitha, arise.**" And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. ⁴¹ And he gave her his hand and raised her up. Then, calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. (Acts 9:40–41 ESV)

What does that sound like? It sounds EXACTLY like the healing of the girl who had died in Mark 5:41. It is clearly MEANT to sound exactly like that. Listen to how Mark's Gospel – which comes from Peter – describes that event. He says:

Taking her by the hand he said to her, "**Talitha cumi,**" which means, "Little girl, I say to you, arise." (Mark 5:41 ESV)

Are you seeing that? There is one letter difference between the name of the woman Peter healed and the name by which Jesus addressed this little girl.

The point is patently obvious with anyone with eyes to see. These miracles are saying: The Apostles are the authorized spokespersons and representatives of the Lord Jesus Christ on earth. The salvation HE SECURED is available now through the message they are preaching. To listen to them, is to listen to Jesus. To touch them is to touch Jesus.

That's the point.

I think that's 90% of what is going on in this story – but I think there is a little something extra that Luke wants us to see. Look again at Acts 5:13; Luke says:

“None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem.” (Acts 5:13 ESV)

Ok; so there was FEAR and ATTRACTION here. In verse 14 he says:

“more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women” (Acts 5:14 ESV)

So people were getting SAVED and joining the church, but the idea seems to be that nobody was coming in CASUALLY after the whole Ananias and Saphira incident. Remember THIS story about the signs and wonders follows right after THAT story about the severe judgment upon their act of hypocrisy. The two stories together are making a compound point. John Stott summarizes the situation very helpfully, he says:

“It was a remarkable demonstration of the power of God to heal and free human beings, as the Ananias and Sapphira episode had been of his power to judge them.”¹

You see, a PART of the purpose of these signs and wonders – including the miraculous judgment upon Ananias and Sapphira – was to position the church as the place where the Lord was at work. These events served to identified the church as the NEW TEMPLE of the Living God.

Again – the church was making CLAIMS that were CONTESTED. There were Jews over here saying: “This is the TEMPLE OF THE LORD” and now you’ve got the Apostles over here saying – “No, this is the temple of the Lord; the church is the temple of the Lord”.

So which is it?

Well, WHERE DO YOU SEE THE FIRE FALLING? That was the question that these stories were posing to the first century citizens in Jerusalem. These signs and wonders were authenticating the claims of the Apostles to speak for Christ and they were positioning the church as the new Temple and household of God.

¹John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, The Bible Speaks Today. Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 113.

But they did not come without a cost – and we need to spend a moment or two talking about that as well.

The Danger of Signs And Wonders:

Jesus had a complicated relationship with signs and wonders; I'm sure you've noticed that. He understood the value of communicating in this particular fashion; he said in Matthew 9:6:

“But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”— he then said to the paralytic—“Rise, pick up your bed and go home.”
(Matthew 9:6 ESV)

Jesus USED that miracle to communicate something about his own identity and authority. And yet, he also understood that DOING these sorts of signs and wonders made it far more difficult to preach the Gospel. When he healed Peter's mother-in-law, news of that healing spread through the region like wildfire. Within hours there was a massive line up of sick people outside Peter's door. Do you remember what Jesus did? Mark 1:35-38 says:

“he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. ³⁶ And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, ³⁷ and they found him and said to him, “Everyone is looking for you.” ³⁸ And he said to them, “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.” (Mark 1:35–38 ESV)

Jesus HID from people who were seeking a miracle! And then he bypassed them so that he would not be distracted from his primary mission which was to preach the Gospel. Jesus understood human nature. He understood that people will always obsess over their immediate needs often to the neglect of their ultimate needs. And that continues to be an issue still today.

I've had people say to me a week after 5 people got baptized, “Pastor what do you think is wrong with our church? We haven't seen anyone healed in ages.”

And I'm not sure how to answer that. 5 people just got baptized. 5 people just passed over from life to death. That's the greatest miracle in the history of the universe. They have just been given FUTURE FOREVER HEALING. They will have new bodies that will never get sick, that will never age and will never die.

That is the ULTIMATE MIRACLE!

Do you not understand, brothers and sisters, that everyone who gets healed of cancer, very shortly thereafter gets sick with something else and dies. So HEALING is GREAT! But it is not ultimate.

But it sure SEEMS ultimate to an awful lot of people – and Jesus was well aware of that.

And so signs and wonders must be handled carefully – that's the bottom line. There is a purpose for them – but their capacity to distract is IMMEASURABLE. God knows that and Bible readers ought to know that as well.

The third thing we need to talk about is the ongoing controversy in the church around signs and wonders.

The Controversy Around Signs And Wonders:

Now I think most Christians would agree with absolutely everything we've said thus far. MOST Christians would agree that the Bible CAUTIONS us about the potential of signs and wonders to distract. Most Christians would agree that the original reason for signs and wonders was to authenticate the apostles and to validate the claims of the early church. The controversy has to do with what comes after that. Not everyone agrees as to the role of signs and wonders moving forward.

I want to be careful here because I recognize that human beings have a tendency to justify their own experiences and opinions. If we know someone who was miraculously healed then that's going to incline us in a particular direction, on the other hand if we know someone who was scammed by a

televangelist selling snake oil, then that's going to incline us in a particular direction. But a Christian, by definition, wants to be led by the Word of God – so let's take a look at that. One of the things we notice when we do that is that there does not appear to be the same sort of emphasis on signs and wonders as an indicator of authority in the SECOND GENERATION of the church.

In the FIRST generation – the FOUNDATIONAL generation of the church, it was common for Apostles to point to signs and wonders as proof of their authority and Apostleship. When Paul was being questioned by the Corinthians he reminded them:

“The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works.” (2 Corinthians 12:12 ESV)

You couldn't just CLAIM to be an Apostle in the first generation – you had to prove your bona fides and Paul could do that. He could say: “I did the signs and wonders. I met the criteria, so you need to listen to me.”

But you don't see anything like that as you transition from the foundational generation to the generations that follow. Paul never says to Timothy or Titus: “Pull out your signs and wonders to remind everybody of your authority.” He never says to a church: “Don't hire a pastor or appoint an elder unless they have done signs and wonders.”

Instead he says stuff like:

“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” (2 Timothy 2:15 KJV)

“Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress.” (1 Timothy 4:15 ESV)

“an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,³ not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.” (1 Timothy 3:2–3 ESV)

So all of the sudden, the emphasis is not on miraculous bona fides but rather on fairly mundane stuff like doing your homework, practicing your craft and growing in Christian character. That's how leaders in the SECOND generation are supposed to prove themselves. Not by doing miracles but by being good people, growing in the Lord and studying the Bible.

So there can be no doubt, there is something different in the second and subsequent generations of the church. The first generation is the foundation. Paul says that the church is:

“built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.” (Ephesians 2:20–21 ESV)

The Apostles needed SPECTACULAR AUTHORITY to lay the ground floor of the church – the temple of the 3 times holy God. That was a massive undertaking. That was a SEIZMIC SHIFT and so they needed extraordinary, manifest VALIDATION and the signs and wonders served that end – but now, as we transition into the second generation, the emphasis clearly shifts to FAITHFUL STEWARDSHIP. Listen to what Paul says to two very prominent second generation leaders. He says:

“By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.” (2 Timothy 1:14 ESV)

“what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.” (2 Timothy 2:2 ESV)

“But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine.” (Titus 2:1 ESV)

Isn't that interesting? He doesn't say to these next generation leaders: “Further extend the footprint of Christian doctrine” he says “teach what accords with sound doctrine.” He tells them to BUILD UP – not out! And he tells them to pass these instructions on to the THIRD generation of leaders. He tells Titus to appoint elders in the churches of Crete and he tells him what to look for in a candidate; he says:

“He must **hold firm** to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and **also to rebuke those who contradict it.**” (Titus 1:9 ESV)

According to the Apostle Paul, the job of second and third generation leaders was to FAITHFULLY STEWARD and DEFEND the Apostolic Gospel. Not to further develop it. Not to expand upon it. But to STEWARD and DEFEND IT.

That’s a DIFFERENT TASK and it does not appear to have REQUIRED supernatural attestation – or at least no mention of those things appears in the text.

And that is the reason for the controversy. Some say that signs and wonders should still be looked at as an indicator of God’s affirmation upon a person’s ministry. There are people today who call themselves Apostles and who claim special authority and who point to signs and wonders as affirmation of that. And there are others who say that particular function has expired – and there are a range of other opinions in between.

So where does that leave us today?

Principles And Guidelines Moving Forward:

Some principles and guidelines moving forward. The first and most important thing I would say is this:

1. Trust in the Apostolic Gospel

That’s the main point of the passage, and therefore it ought to be the main takeaway of the message. The signs and wonders that were done through the Apostles were done so as to establish them as the authorized spokespersons of Jesus.

So listen to them. Jesus wants you to listen to them. Jesus made a rock-solid connection between himself and his Apostles. He said:

“Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.” (Matthew 10:40 ESV)

So no one gets to say: “Well, Jesus never said anything about that, therefore it must not be very important.”

People say that today about matters of human sexuality. They say: “Jesus never spoke about homosexuality in his earthly ministry, therefore it must not be very important to him.” But here’s the thing: the Apostles DID speak about that matter – on multiple occasions – and therefore if we believe that the Apostles are Jesus’ authorized spokespersons then that’s a distinction without a difference. Jesus DID speak about those things – he spoke about them through the mouths of the Apostles – and he provided affirmation and attestation of that fact by working through them many signs and wonders. The miracles we just read about in Acts 5 are making the point that when the Apostles speak, Jesus speaks and therefore we need to listen to them.

The second bit of encouragement I would give to you is this: try to avoid saying more or less than the Bible does on these matters.

2. Don’t say more or less than the Bible

I think the charismatics and the cessationists are both saying MORE than the Bible says about signs and wonders. Charismatics generally are saying that we should expect the same level of miraculous activity in the church today as we read about in the Book of Acts, and if we don’t see that it is probably because we lack faith. But that’s not what I see in the Bible. I don’t see the same emphasis or expectation with respect to signs and wonders in the second generation as I see in the first. So I think the charismatics are saying too much here. They are writing cheques the Bible does not feel the need to cash.

But I think the cessationists are saying too much as well. They generally want to say that signs and wonders CEASED with the generation of the Apostles, but just because the signs and wonders we just read about were FOR a specific purpose does not necessarily mean that they could not be given again in the future for another purpose. According to the Bible:

“Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.” (Psalm 115:3 ESV)

So I don’t want to say all that the cessationists are saying because I think many of them are saying too much. We have to watch out for that – but we also have to be careful not to say too little.

Because God does heal. God does speak. God is ALIVE and at WORK in this world.

So just say what the Bible says and if you get asked a question about something the Bible doesn’t specifically address, put your hand over your mouth and get back to work.

And that’s the third bit of counsel I’d give you anyway:

3. Focus on the task you were assigned

Jesus was pretty clear about that. He said:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19–20 ESV)

So according to Jesus our JOB is to make disciples. Our job is to baptize folks who have believed the Gospel. Our job is to teach folks everything that Jesus has taught us – either directly or through the Apostles - about how to live before God and how to love one another.

That’s the job – and it’s plenty big enough to warrant the best of your time, talent and attention for probably this lifetime and ten lifetimes to come. So focus on that.

But then also; do remain open to whatever God may choose to do in the future.

4. Be open to whatever God may choose to do in the future

My reading of the Bible inclines me to believe that God focuses most of his miraculous activity around the great events and interventions in redemptive history. I think of all the plagues and works of power in the time of the Exodus. I think of the miracles of Christ. I think of their echo in the time of the Apostles – and I think of some of things that are said in the Bible about the Second Coming of Christ. It does sound as if we are to expect some further fireworks associated with that event. And I would hate for us to still be in a season of over correction and over reaction to the excesses of the Charismatic movement of the late 20th century.

But how like the devil to rob us of hope and expectation by overwhelming us with counterfeit and deceit just prior to the arrival of the real thing!

Let's not fall for that.

Let's believe the Apostolic Gospel, let's content ourselves with the teaching of Holy Scripture, let's focus on the task we were given, and let's position ourselves for whatever further fillings and future graces the Lord, in his wisdom sees fit to give. Thanks be to God! Let's pray together.