



Bonus chapter

Miraculous ministries

Over the years, I have attended a few large rallies or local church meetings that have featured the practice of ‘speaking in tongues’, the sharing of ‘prophetic words’, and many stories of miraculous events. Such ‘miraculous ministries’ are not only exercised in the context of a local church by its members, but also by traveling evangelists who seek to proclaim the gospel and demonstrate the power of God through signs and wonders. But this has never been a major part of my own ministry, church life or personal experience. I am an outsider to supernatural healing ministries and prophetic ministries. Yet this doesn’t mean I have nothing to do with them. In the course of my ministry, I talk with those who attend such meetings; some come away enthused, while others come away troubled. When I meet those who have had such experiences first-hand, they often report how these experiences can make God seem alive to them in a whole new way—as if their former spiritual life was theoretical or humdrum by comparison. And so I need to know how to respond when someone begins to talk to me about such powerful experiences. What do I say when I am asked my opinion? Why do I not promote such ministries or seek to incorporate their practices into my own work?

As we meet and work with Christians from different backgrounds, we are all forced to think about these issues. When people express enthusiasm for these miraculous ministries, their leaders and their practices, we have to be ready with some kind of response. At the very least, we need to know how to theologically digest their ideas, claims and promises.

In this chapter, I will primarily focus on the reasons for my caution about such ministries. I will outline my understanding of the place of miraculous healing in the Christian life and ministry, before listing some doctrinal and moral concerns with the teachings and practices of miraculous ministries. For the sake of simplicity, I will primarily focus on miraculous healing rather than prophetic words or ‘speaking in tongues’, although I will touch on these topics from time to time.

The place of miraculous healing in Christian life and ministry

The first thing I want to do is strongly affirm that *our heavenly Father has the power to heal, and he hears and answers our prayers*. James says, “the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective” (Jas 5:16b). I am confident that as I pray to our heavenly Father for physical or psychological healing in Jesus’ name by the power of the Holy Spirit, he may well choose to answer this prayer by granting miraculous healing. The creator God can grant healing by sovereignly working through ordinary natural causes, or he can work in an extraordinary, supernatural way, suspending the ordinary operations of the natural world to heal. It is a good thing to pray to God for healing; it is an expression of our confidence that our heavenly Father cares for us and truly hears and answers our prayers. I don’t need to adopt a charismatic theological framework or attend a special meeting to boldly bring my concerns to my heavenly Father in prayer. All over the world, Christians from all denominations and all theological positions come before God in humble prayer for healing, and rightly so.

Miraculous healing functions as an act of mercy, an authorizing sign of gospel ministry, and a manifestation of the ultimate goal—namely, salvation. Miraculous signs are a major part of the ministry of Jesus and the apostles. Rarely are the miracles mere brute acts of power to provoke wonder and awe; they are almost always acts of mercy. The biblical Greek word for ‘salvation’ can also mean ‘healing’: there is a kind of ‘lowercase-s salvation’ that comes when someone is saved/healed from demon possession, ceremonial uncleanness, physical sickness or danger from the natural world. But more than simply being the ability to do good to people, the miracles of Jesus and the apostles were also authorizing signs, giving credibility to their claims about themselves and their message (John 20:30-31; Acts 2:22; 2 Cor 12:12; Heb 2:3-4). These extraordinary acts of healing (or control over the natural world, or supernatural knowledge, or the supernatural ability to speak in foreign languages the speaker had not previously learned) are not absolute proof that Jesus and his apostles were truly sent from God. But they do serve as evidence towards this conclusion.

More than this, the biblical miracles are ‘signs’: they usually bring meaningful significance with them. More than just the reaction of awe to wonder-working—“Only God could have done that!”—signs also tell us something about the purposes of God—“I see what God is like and what his purposes are”. Miracles paint a visible picture of the meaning and nature of God’s salvation and the role his messengers have to play in those purposes. For example, Jesus’ feeding of five thousand men (plus women and children) with loaves and fish is not merely an astonishing display of supernatural power and a practical solution to the hunger of the large crowd that had followed him (John 6:5-13); it is also a meaningful sign that draws a connection between Jesus’ ministry and the ministry of Moses (6:14): he is the greater Moses, saving his people through a greater exodus to a greater promised land, where we will not merely receive bread for our stomachs, but eternal life (6:30-59).

Particular people are given a gift of healing and other miraculous gifts. Jesus granted miraculous power and authority to his apostles (Luke 9:1). The miraculous powers were especially important in demonstrating continuity between the ministry of Jesus and his apostles.

But such miraculous gifts are not entirely restricted to the apostles. During Jesus' earthly ministry, he also gave miraculous power to a group of 72 (Luke 10:9, 17). In the book of Acts, we read of others who performed miracles or who prophesied, such as Simon, Philip and his daughters, and Agabus. Other New Testament passages also tell us of Christians with gifts of prophecy, healing,¹ speaking in and interpreting languages, and other possibly supernatural gifts (Rom 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12-14; 1 Thess 5:18-22; and possibly Gal 3:1-5).²

In addition to the confidence that God might answer the prayer of any Christian for healing, he may also choose to grant an individual the miraculous power to heal. Wherever such gifts are in operation, in New Testament times or today, they would serve the same functions as described above: as acts of mercy, authorizing signs of gospel ministry, and manifestations of the ultimate hope of salvation.³ They are, like other gifts given by Christ, "for the common good", which is to "build up the church" (1 Cor 12:7; 14:3-5, 12, 26). Miraculous gifts build up the church by pointing back to the message of the gospel itself and expressing some aspects of Christian hope.

Our heavenly Father has done and can do remarkable things. It is good and right to pray that he might bless us today in these ways—even that he might give such a gift to ourselves or a member of our church.

But while we pray for such blessings, we should also keep in mind the Bible's curious ambivalence towards miracles.

The biblical ambivalence to miracles

Miracles are not necessarily a sign that God is at work. It is not only the true servant of God who can do miracles. Moses not only warns against the false prophet whose prophecies are evidently inaccurate (Deut 18:21-22), but also against those whose prophecies come true and who then seek to draw people away to worship false gods (13:1-5). Jesus, Paul and John all warn against false prophets who will perform miracles (Matt 24:24; 2 Thess 2:9; Rev 13:13-14).

Jesus often asks those whom he heals to remain quiet about their healing. Jesus is often circumspect about his identity as the Christ, more commonly choosing to identify himself as 'the Son of Man'. He prevents demons from announcing his identity (Mark 1:34), and urges those he heals to not tell anyone about their experience (1:43-45). This 'messianic secret' is

1 Curiously, 1 Corinthians 12:9 speaks about gifts (plural) of healings (plural). It is unclear exactly why the plural is used. Some guess that it might mean certain gifts enable the ability to heal only certain diseases (e.g. S Storms, *Practicing the Power: Welcoming the gifts of the Holy Spirit in your life*, Zondervan, 2017, p 73), but this is merely a guess.

2 The gifts of faith, words of wisdom and words of knowledge might also refer to miraculous abilities.

3 Like healing, supernatural prophecy can serve to attest to the authenticity of gospel ministry, but it also serves slightly different functions. In the case of prophetic words of guidance or insight about the future, prophecy is a practical help for planning and action. In many cases, the revelation is a word of "strengthening, encouraging and comfort" (1 Cor 14:3), functioning very similarly to other teaching gifts. A supernatural prophecy is also a remarkable manifestation of the general reality of spiritual intimacy that marks the new covenant (Jer 31:34; Joel 2:28-32); what we see in striking expression in a supernatural prophecy is true in general of every Christian. Such intimacy reaches its full expression when Christ returns and prophecy passes away, for then we shall "know fully, even as [we are] fully known" (1 Cor 13:12).

partly an enacted parable: the coming of the kingdom of God will be in secret and can only be truly seen for what it is by faith (as Jesus explains in a parable in Mark 4:1-20). On a more practical level, Jesus seeks to delay the type of quick and disruptive popularity that was based around mere wonder-working (Mark 1:38-39, 3:9-10) or nationalistic zealotry (John 6:15). While this reserve only applied during his earthly ministry, it is a caution against what might seem to us like common sense: that extraordinary miracles must be harnessed as a public spectacle.

Jesus shows distrust of those who seek after miracles or primarily believe because of miracles. This theme stands out especially strongly in John's Gospel. Jesus doesn't entrust himself to those who believe in him because of his miracles (John 2:23-25); Nicodemus praises Jesus on the basis of his miracles, but doesn't understand the basics of the kingdom of God (3:1-12); and Jesus rebukes the crowd for seeking miracles to fill their stomachs (6:26-27). Ultimately, he pronounces a blessing on those who will come to believe in him through the testimony about him, not through miraculous signs (20:29). Although we are no longer in the unique time of Jesus' earthly ministry (see Matt 10:27), it is clear that miraculous powers are not unequivocally positive things for godly ministry. While miraculous signs do serve an attesting and symbolic function, they are not crucial; they are not 'game-changers' in assuring effective evangelism and robust faith. They may, in fact, become a distraction from evangelism and provoke a superficial faith.

Gospel preaching and eternal salvation are more central to the ministry of Jesus and the apostles than miraculous signs. This is strikingly illustrated in Mark 1. Peter comes to Jesus and exclaims, "everyone is looking for you [for healing]!" But Jesus replies, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come" (Mark 1:36-38).

Elsewhere, Jesus warns that "a wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah" (Matt 12:39). This reinforces that the most important sign Jesus performs is his saving death and resurrection. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus has Abraham say that "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16:31). Jesus promises that whoever believes in him "will do even greater things than these [works], because I am going to the Father" (John 14:12). But in the context of John's Gospel, where "greater things" have previously been spoken of as direct access to the Father (1:50-51) and the gift of spiritual new life (5:20-21), the focus here is probably not on "lots of greater miraculous signs".

When Jesus describes the purpose of his ministry, he describes it primarily in terms of preaching the kingdom and his death and resurrection. So also the apostles of Jesus are given authority to exorcise and heal as well as being entrusted to preach (Luke 9:1). But when the purpose of their ministry is described, it is primarily described in terms of preaching and making disciples (Matt 28:18-20; Mark 13:10; Acts 6:1-4, 20:17-35; 1 Cor 1:17-24). Miraculous signs may accompany gospel preaching, but they are not central and necessary

in the same way as gospel proclamation.

The message of Jesus and the apostles is primarily about salvation from sin and the wrath of God. While Jesus and the apostles were able to perform glorious acts of supernatural healing, the blessing of healing in this life was not explicitly central to the message they preached. They preached the coming of the kingdom of God in Jesus, the Christ—a message about his atoning death and resurrection that brings forgiveness of sins and the hope of eternal life to all who repent and believe. There are many duties and blessings that flow from this gospel proclamation—which may include the blessing of miraculous healing in this life—but these are not central to the apostolic gospel proclamation.

Miraculous signs are not promised for every church in every age. There is no clear teaching in the New Testament that all miraculous signs will completely cease after the foundational ministry of the apostles. But neither is there any clear teaching in the New Testament that miraculous signs are a normal, necessary and therefore expected part of church life. Miraculous gifts may be given to the church, just like other gifts, but there is nothing in the Scriptures that suggests these are always needed for healthy church life. So there is no reason to think that they will always be present. “Gifts of healing” are only mentioned once in the New Testament’s various lists of gifts (1 Cor 12:9; see other lists in Rom 12:3-8, Eph 4:11 and 1 Pet 4:10-11).⁴ It seems that these lists are not exhaustive, but rather offer examples of some of the gifts that might possibly be given. And whereas gifts of teaching and leadership are necessary for the ordinary life of the church, many other possible gifts (both ordinary and miraculous) are not so fundamental to the nature and purpose of the church.⁵

One New Testament passage about healing associates it with the elders of the church because the sickness is associated with sin (Jas 5:13-20). As we visit the sick, we ought to delicately ask them to prayerfully consider whether their illness might be the direct result of some particular sin, while also comforting those who are too quick to draw such a connection—after all, it is usually the case that neither we nor they will be able to know with confidence. But apart from this specific circumstance, there is little indication that miraculous healing should be considered a normal or necessary part of church life. We can pray for this blessing and rejoice when we enjoy it, but we have no grounds for boasting when we do enjoy it, nor should we worry if it is absent.

4 Prophecy is mentioned in the lists of gifts more frequently than healing (Rom 12:6; 1 Corinthians 12-14; see also 1 Thess 5:20). The exact nature of New Testament prophecy—whether it is as authoritative as Old Testament prophecy—and how it is recognized is not totally clear. Confident and detailed teaching about prophecy is suspect. What is important to note is that the most extended discussion about prophecy focuses on its benefits as intelligible speech that builds up the church in the faith (1 Corinthians 14). One of the most valuable things about prophecy then, is not its supernatural origin, but its capacity to edify others. In that sense, the bulk of 1 Corinthians 14 has relevance to other teaching and preaching gifts.

In ‘weighing’ prophetic speech (1 Cor 14:29-33; 1 Thess 5:20-22) in the church, I would suggest it be assessed not only for glaring heresy or falsehood, but also to ask such questions as “Does this prophecy have substantial edifying content to merit sharing in the church?” and “Is this prophecy of sufficient relevance to the whole gathering, or should it be shared in private with the individual(s) concerned?”

5 “Some clearly bear a supernatural character while others tend to be more like natural gifts that have been heightened and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. The former were more prominent in the early days of the church; the latter are more characteristic of the church in its normal historical development” (H Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* [J Bolt ed], abridged edn, Baker Academic, 2011, p 598). See also Acts 8:18-24.

Doctrinal and moral concerns of miraculous ministries

In addition to focusing on something about which the Bible is largely ambivalent, miraculous ministries usually bring with them concerning doctrinal emphases and ministry practices that need to be guarded against. I will highlight six common errors.

1. Distorted concepts of faith

There is something of a collection of distortions about faith associated with miraculous ministries. Firstly, the very particular theology of faith and the miraculous—sometimes characterized as the ‘Word of Faith’ movement—teaches that there are certain divine laws at work in the world that can be harnessed through the authoritative claiming of divine blessings (such as healing and prosperity). Such a view of faith shifts it from being humble trust in the sovereign will of a personal God, to an almost mechanical or magical principle.⁶ This is not the biblical view of faith or prayer or healing. Among the many problems with this view, it leads to the conclusion that if someone does not enjoy physical healing it is most likely because of sin or a lack of faith.

Secondly, even those ministries that do not accept all the principles of the Word of Faith movement tend to teach or imply a quantitative view of faith: if you don’t have enough faith, you may not enjoy the full blessing of God. Such teaching misappropriates Jesus’ comments about “little faith” (Matt 6:30, 8:26, 14:31, 16:8, 17:20; Luke 12:28). In the Gospels, “little faith” is functionally the same as “no faith at all”. The point of such passages is not that if people had a slightly greater quantity of faith they would receive greater blessings as a result, but rather that they need to trust Jesus. All that is needed is “faith as small as a mustard seed” (Matt 17:20). At the worst extreme, such thinking can become very destructive when it leads someone not to pursue other medical treatments, because they are led to believe that this would betray a lack of faith.⁷ A Christian full of faith in God can rightly persevere in the normal Christian life and ministry, knowing that God may or may not grant miraculous gifts of one sort or another, but in no way being discouraged if he or she doesn’t experience such things.

Thirdly, an expectant faith that looks for God to operate in miraculous ways in the church today is considered a prerequisite for healing or other miraculous events. People are urged to eagerly desire and persistently seek such miraculous gifts; they are told that without a faith marked by such openness and confidence these gifts may not be given, or at the very

6 This theology makes much of Jesus’ saying, “Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours” (Mark 11:24). See WK Kay, *Pentecostalism: A very short introduction*, Oxford Very Short Introductions, Oxford University Press, 2011, pp 67-68.

7 In some cases, where God explicitly instructs us to await his intervention, genuine faith will manifest itself by refusing to put our trust in human means (for example, Abraham’s need to patiently wait for Isaac’s miraculous birth in Genesis 15-21). But in ordinary circumstances it is proper to be both earnest in prayer and diligent (e.g. “We prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat” in Nehemiah 4:9).

least these gifts may be suppressed.⁸ But it is not a Christian virtue to be certain that God will grant something he hasn't promised. And the Bible does not teach that God's activity is limited by our expectancy.

Fourthly, fostering a culture and atmosphere of faith in God's power to do the miraculous can often result in a culture of unquestioning credulity. But godly faith is not irrational or gullible. Questioning, discernment and scepticism are not signs of unbelief, but signs of maturity—as shown by the example of the “noble” Berean Jews who tested and examined everything according to the Scriptures (Acts 17:11). Implying that godly faith should be uncritical leaves God's people very vulnerable to manipulation and false teaching.

2. Wrong timeline for physical blessing

Modern Pentecostal theology is often summarized as the ‘fourfold gospel’: Jesus as saviour; Jesus as Spirit-baptizer; Jesus as healer; Jesus as coming king.⁹ All four of these declarations are wonderfully true: Jesus' work will be ultimately fulfilled in the new heavens and the new earth, where there will be no more sin, death, mourning, crying or pain. But in Pentecostal theology, the third component (‘Jesus as healer’) is said to be experienced much more fully in this life: Christians can expect to receive physical and psychological healing (and, in some movements, wealth and power) as part of the blessings of the gospel in this life.¹⁰ The issue here is not the promise of blessing (except in some crass expressions of the prosperity gospel), but the timeline. Full physical healing and complete moral perfection are blessings that come with the new creation (Rom 8:18-27; 2 Cor 4:7-18; 1 Pet 1:3-9).

3. Overemphasis on the power of the healer rather than God himself

It is vital to stress that the power for healing does not rest in the faith of the person praying for the miracle, but in the God to whom we pray. Likewise, when an individual is granted a gift of healing, the power for healing does not fundamentally reside in the person but in the God who has empowered the person. When too much focus is placed on the miracle worker and their meetings, confidence in God is ironically diminished, replaced by a more magical and superstitious outlook.¹¹

8 Sam Storms argues along these lines (Storms, *Practicing the Power*, pp 37-44). I think Storms puts far too much conceptual weight on the command to “eagerly desire” the greater gifts (1 Cor 12:31, 14:1), and turns this into an important set of practices of persistence, openness and expectation—an emphasis that leads people to gradually adopt charismatic behaviour patterns and experiences.

9 Kay, *Pentecostalism*, p 18. Early expressions of the ‘fourfold gospel’ speak of ‘Jesus as Sanctifier’ instead of ‘Spirit-baptizer’. Some Pentecostals retain this holiness movement emphasis and so have a ‘fivefold gospel’ formulation; see Kay, *Pentecostalism*, p 60.

10 In some branches of theology, there is also a heightened expectation around Jesus' work in our lives as ‘sanctifier’: the hope for a kind of sanctification that is sometimes called ‘full sanctification’, ‘entire sanctification’, or even ‘perfection’; see Kay, *Pentecostalism*, pp 58-59.

11 So also, we must guard against putting too much focus on ceremonial actions, relics or holy sites. The Bible occasionally describes miracles being accompanied by symbolic actions (e.g. Naaman washing himself in the Jordan river seven times; Jesus placing mud on the eyes of the blind man) or associated with objects (the bones of Elisha; the clothing of the apostle Paul). But the power does not reside in the action or the object any more than it rests in a human with a miraculous gift; God sovereignly grants this power in a provisional way. God can just as easily grant healing by merely a word (see the faith of the centurion in Luke 7:1-10).

4. Linking the promise of healing too closely to appeals for money

All parachurches need to find ways to raise financial support for their ongoing work. The risk is that financial contributions are linked (explicitly or implicitly) to receiving spiritual benefits. There is nothing wrong with appeals for financial support, nor is it always wrong to ask for some kind of entry, enrolment or subscription fee for an event or program, or to sell products such as books, courses or merchandise. In all these cases, however, it is proper to weigh up what might be made available for free—or at least cheaply.

The advantage of parachurch ministry that is funded by external donors is that it reduces the need for ministries to raise funds through fees and charges. The problem comes when appeals for finances are given a heavy focus in public meetings so that pressure to donate is placed on those seeking spiritual benefits from the ministry.¹² Itinerant ministries which take up collections as they travel create confusion about their motivations, which is why the apostle Paul made a point of not asking for financial support from the Corinthians when he ministered among them (2 Cor 11:5-11, 12:14-18). It's why the early 2nd-century Christian document *The Didache* is wary about traveling apostles, prophets and teachers who seek financial support as they travel (and who overstay their welcome!).¹³ Totally unacceptable is the sale of explicit spiritual benefits, whether supernatural healing, relics, or prayers. This is a type of 'simony'. Named after the story of Simon the sorcerer, who sought to buy the ability to give the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:18-24), 'simony' is the sin of seeking to buy religious blessings or a religious office.

5. Showy use of miraculous activity

Many modern miraculous ministries perform most of their signs in public meetings. They are promoted in advance as places where miraculous healings and prophetic revelations will take place. I realize that it is anachronistic to be talking about modern marketing and public rallies in the New Testament age, but from the information we have it is not clear that Jesus and the apostles proactively organized healing meetings, nor that they promoted their ministry as a public display of miraculous signs. When Jesus performed miraculous signs in public gatherings, he did so reactively. When the crowds flocked to him, and as news of his miraculous power spread, he healed those who came to him (e.g. Mark 1:32-34), but he also made an effort to distance himself from mere miracle-seeking so that he could teach (1:36-38, 3:9-10). On other occasions, he healed only after being interrupted while preaching and teaching (e.g. 1:23-26, 2:3-5). There is little indication that the apostles proactively conducted healings and exorcisms in their public teaching ministries either, and there was certainly no need to bring people onto a public stage in order to perform healings before large crowds. Such practices today risk

¹² There is a certain theology that amplifies this pattern: giving to the work of the Lord is claimed to be an act of obedience and faith ('a seed of faith'), which draws the blessings of God. In this case it is theologically and causally tied very closely to blessing. See Kay, *Pentecostalism*, pp 65-66.

¹³ *The Didache*, XI-XIII.

being exhibitionist, distorting the motivations of the crowd and distracting from the preaching of the gospel.

6. The claims of miraculous ministries ought to be properly substantiated

Since faith is not unquestioning credulity, it is perfectly right to test the claims of prophets and healers. Many lofty claims are made but never substantiated at all, and one is left wondering whether they are lies or second-hand rumours. Other claims of healing best fit into the category of psychosomatic healing or coincidence. Rarely do modern itinerant miracle ministries provide first-hand reports of the dead being raised to life, blind people receiving their sight, or completely crippled people being able to walk again. Most first-hand accounts are related to things such as chronic pain, psychological disorders and recession of cancer. A significant dose of scepticism is entirely justified.

Conclusion

If and when genuine miracles take place, they are good and glorious but also somewhat problematic. While bringing potential to demonstrate the power of the true and living God and portray a little of the full healing that will come with the new creation, they also bring with them the risks of superficial faith and misguided priorities, which need to be guarded against. Moreover, there is no sense in which miraculous signs or prophetic revelations are needed to enjoy a greater degree of intimacy with God or a greater degree of power and authenticity in the Christian life.¹⁴ Such claims go well beyond the teaching of Scripture and stand in striking contrast to the emphasis of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians:

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written:

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”

Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. (1 Cor 1:18-25)



¹⁴ R Doyle (ed), *Signs and Wonders and Evangelicals: A response to the teaching of John Wimber*, Lancer Books, 1987.

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