

THEMELIOS

Editorial: Miracles then and now

theological students, expounding and defending the historic Christian faith. It year jointly by the British Theological Students Fellowship, a constituent part leges Christian Fellowship, and the International Fellowship of Evangelical ss itself to questions being faced by theological students in their studies and t a clear biblical faith.

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TSF, 233 Langdon, Madison, Wisconsin 53703, USA

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if Ireland please pay in sterling. (Payments can be made to our National 16, marked for Themelios.)

iding bank charges) for orders through the appropriate address shown

0 US \$9.00
0 US \$17.00
0 US \$25.00

ld for each year's subscription £2.75/\$5.00.)

only contain a few articles; but there is a wealth of useful material in back contents and availability of back issues may be obtained from ceister LE1 7GP, England.

Miracles and the supernatural are very much on the Christian agenda at the present time. There is the historical question of Jesus' miracles, including his exorcisms; there is the contemporary question of 'signs and wonders' in the church today; and bearing on the discussion of both these issues are questions about philosophy, psychology and medicine.

Some recent books

Recent literature on the subject includes Colin Brown's *You May Believe: Miracles and Faith Then and Now* (Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1985), which presents in a helpful and quite popular form some of the ideas worked out in his earlier *Miracles and the Critical Mind* (1984), though his new book explores not only the biblical and philosophical issues but also questions such as 'Can we expect miracles today?'. Michael Harper's *The Healings of Jesus* (Hodder, 1986) is primarily a biblical study, but the author writes out of the conviction that the signs and wonders of Jesus' ministry 'are necessary today as much as then'. The same concern is reflected in John Wimber's and Kevin Springer's *Power Evangelism: Signs and Wonders Today* (Hodder, 1985); this book is more a tract advocating the sort of charismatic healing ministry for which John Wimber has become famous in the last ten years than an historical or exegetical study, but as well as striking stories of modern miracles it includes stimulating discussion of Jesus' teaching about the kingdom and about the way our world view can affect our expectations about, and experience of, God's work in the world.

Graham Twelftree's *Christ Triumphant: Exorcism Then and Now* (Hodder, 1985) is a narrower study than the others mentioned, and combines critical-exegetical study of the New Testament account of Jesus' exorcisms with reflection on contemporary attitudes to exorcism. Twelftree also contributes to *Gospel Perspectives 6: The Miracles of Jesus* (ed. D. Wenham and C. Blomberg, JSOT Press, 1986). This collection of scholarly essays addresses the historical and philosophical issues rather than the issue of miracles today. Finally, mention may be made of one particularly valuable article and one particularly valuable book: the article on 'Principalities and Powers Opponents of the Church' by P. T. O'Brien (in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church*, ed. D. A. Carson, Paternoster, 1984, pp. 110-150) considers various interpretations of the New Testament teaching on principalities and powers, among other things questioning the simple identification of the 'powers' with political structures; the book *Signs and Wonders Today* by Donald Bridge (IVP, 1985) must be one of the most balanced discussions of the subject available.

What, if anything, comes out of this small sample of recent writing on the subject of miracles? One of the most obvious things to emerge is that there is a wide divergence of opinion

among Christian thinkers about the subject, both about its historical and its contemporary dimensions.

Historical questions

Historically, all of the authors mentioned are relatively conservative in their approach to the gospels. Graham Twelftree is the author who has most reservations about the historicity of parts of the gospel tradition, tending to accept the questionable scholarly opinion that 'redactional' material in the gospels is unhistorical; but even he has no doubt that exorcism was a significant part of Jesus' ministry, as the gospels suggest. Twelftree compares Jesus with other exorcists of the ancient world, and reminds us that Jesus and his followers were not the only miracle-workers at that time. The New Testament itself makes that clear (e.g. Mt. 12:27), though it also makes it clear that Jesus' miraculous authority was extraordinary and unprecedentedly great, hence the evangelists' interest in it.

Demythologization?

Given that the miracles of Jesus have a firm place in history, as argued particularly in *Gospel Perspectives 6*, many questions remain about the interpretation of the gospel traditions in question. Is it possible, for example, that what the evangelists describe as miraculous, we today would explain in other terms? This is the contention of those who advocate the demythologizing of the New Testament (and indeed of the Old Testament). It is argued that the supernatural features of the New Testament, including stories of miracles and demons, were part of the first-century way of thinking — part of their mental furniture — whereas we think in different, more scientific categories. Thus, for example, we might identify as mental illness what they called demon possession, and what they saw as miraculous healing we might explain as auto-suggestion or in some other psychological terms.

Twelftree cautions us against dismissing this approach too quickly. It is important to recognize that effective translation from one language and culture to another requires a sensitivity to the cultural and linguistic differences between biblical and modern times, and must involve not just the replacement of the words in one language with the equivalent words in another — this may sometimes be quite misleading — but the re-expressing of the original idea in terms which convey that idea in the new context and culture.

Is it then the case that the language of the supernatural in the New Testament is simply a first-century way of expressing something that we would explain differently? Twelftree believes that *some* of what the New Testament refers to as demonic we would explain in other terms; but he does not believe that *all* New Testament demonology is so explicable. Some of the accounts of Jesus' exorcisms cannot easily be translated into modern psychological terms (the same is even

more true (many of the miracle stories), and indeed (as Tweedtree and others argue) there is a strong case for saying that in our world today there is such a thing as demon possession which is to be distinguished from normal mental illness and to which the gospel exorcisms correspond.

Those who indulge in wholesale demythologizing tend to work from the Western, secular presupposition which explains everything in terms of natural cause and effect and excludes the supernatural—a view that has a long history, but which is philosophically and experientially inadequate (on the philosophy behind it see Brown and a number of the articles in *Gospel Perspectives* 6). They also tend to assume that people in the first century were credulous about the supernatural and unable to distinguish between it and the natural. This is, however, to exaggerate the differences between biblical and modern times. There were, of course, credulous people then; but so there are in our world today. There were also many highly sophisticated thinkers, some of them quite sceptical about the supernatural (e.g. the Jewish Sadducees and various of the Greek philosophical schools). It is false to assume that supernatural explanations of things were inevitable or easily accepted in the first-century world. So far as disease is concerned, the evangelists do not regard it all as directly demonic. So far as the miracles are concerned, the evangelists are quite specifically concerned to assert that unlikely, supernatural and so exciting things happened in Jesus' ministry. This was good news for an unbelieving world, and it still is.

As Christians in the modern world we should not be credulous or naïve about the subject of miracles, nor should we feel obliged to defend or preserve fanciful ideas from the past, such as traditional notions about demons with horns, pitchforks and the like; such pictorial ideas may well have had their value at one time, but today they are liable to trivialize our view of evil. We cannot, however, dispense with Jesus' miracles, which were an essential feature of the kingdom which he proclaimed and inaugurated.

Miracles today?

But what about the supernatural in the world today? One reputable Christian opinion is that the supernatural phenomena which accompanied Jesus' ministry were exclusively or almost exclusively confined to the biblical period of divine revelation, and that we should not expect them today. This view offers a convenient way of explaining the absence of New Testament-style miracles in much of the history of the church and contemporary Christian experience. It can also claim some exegetical support, insofar as the Bible itself suggests that God's miraculous interventions in our world have taken place more at some times than at others, e.g. at the time of the Exodus, in the days of Elijah and Elisha, and supremely in Jesus' ministry. At other times miracles are much less in evidence, even apparently absent. It has been inferred from this that God gives miracles at times of particular revelation and that we therefore cannot necessarily expect the sort of miracles that accompanied Jesus' ministry to be seen today.

that the church's frequent failure to experience God's miracles reflects its capitulation (especially in the West) to secular, anti-supernatural thinking and a failure to obey the commands and appropriate the promises of the New Testament.

What is to be made of this divergence of opinion which is represented in the authors we have mentioned, with Colin Brown appearing to come close to the first opinion and John Wimber and Michael Harper opting for the second? It is not possible here to do more than make a number of observations.

1. *One of the most perplexing differences between the writers concerned has to do with their estimate of modern claims to miraculous healing.* To put the matter bluntly: Wimber and Harper see undoubted miracles frequently; Brown, on the other hand, though he and Wimber have worked in the same city and institution, is aware only of 'minor' and 'trivial' cases of effective faith healing, but of nothing that constitutes an unmistakable revelation of the power of God at work. This difference could be taken by some to prove uncritical naïveté on the part of Wimber and Harper and by others to show an unbiblical scepticism on the part of Brown. An alternative, and probably preferable, conclusion is that Wimber and Harper have indeed experienced many remarkable things in the context of prayer for healing, but that few of them, if any, can be unequivocally described as miraculous in the sense that Brown proposes, i.e. in the sense that God has overruled the normal order of the world he created.

Brown is concerned that Christians should not overstate their claims. He notes that faith healing is not an exclusively Christian activity and that spontaneous remission of certain medical conditions is a well-known phenomenon. To claim, then, that a given healing necessarily proves special divine intervention may be to go too far: it may be in some cases that the Christian faith healer is employing the same powerful psychological techniques as the non-Christian faith healer. There is nothing necessarily wrong in this, and there is nothing wrong in seeing such healing as a gift of God in response to prayer. But that also applies to the use of aspirin and other medicines: the Christian can and should use such medicines in the context of prayer, and can and should see the gracious hand of God in their effectiveness. But to call such cures miraculous is to use the word in a potentially misleading way, and may be to invest the 'miracles' with a significance that is not justified.

To make this important point is not to pass judgment on the experiences of John Wimber and others, let alone to suggest that they are all explicable in natural terms: they do not read that way at all. It is to suggest that Brown is right to alert us against the dangers of a naïve assessment of the claims of *any* faith healers, Christian or non-Christian.

2. *If one danger is that we may read more of the supernatural into some experiences than we should, another is certainly that many Christians are inclined to discount the supernatural and to see miracles as the possibility of God's miraculous action in the world.* John Wimber is right in believing that many Christians have absorbed the unbelief of their contemporary culture, while believing in theory in God's rule in the world. This is a serious distortion of the biblical view of a God who controls the destinies of nations and governments, of

the weather, of life and death and disease. Effectively fall into deism, not expecting God to intervene in the world he set going (like a wound-up clock) but now leaves alone. The exception to this is that evangelical Christians at least reckon on God's miraculous activity in converting, sanctifying and guiding people. One of the reasons that we allow for such miracles, but not for more 'physical' miracles, may be that we experience the one sort of miracle much more than the other. But another reason may be that we have allowed the secular outlook to push God out of the physical world into a purely spiritual sphere. It is right that this limited view of God should be challenged and that we should reckon with a God who is really at work in all aspects of our world.

3. *But what does the New Testament evidence lead us to expect in terms of miracles in the church?* The view that miracles were limited to Jesus and the apostles or were only intended for the apostolic era is hard to justify from the New Testament. Paul includes gifts of healing and miracle-working, as well as other gifts such as 'tongues', in his list of gifts to the church in 1 Corinthians 12:9-10, though admittedly not in his gift-lists in Romans 12 and Ephesians 4; James gives instructions for the elders to pray for the sick in James 5 and, despite Brown's different opinion, it seems on balance probable that James thought of the sick person being literally healed; and the synoptic evangelists, when describing Jesus' sending out of the twelve and the seventy-two, probably saw their commission, which included healing, as paradigmatic for the church as a whole. We may therefore accept the view that healing is part of the church's ongoing missionary commission.¹

The early church obeyed that commission. Acts describes a good number of miracles, and Paul refers to his own powerful miracle-working ministry (e.g. in Rom. 15:18, 19). On the other hand there is some reason to think that miracles were a less prominent aspect of the early church's life than either they had been in the context of Jesus' ministry (particularly in the first part of his ministry) or than some modern writers would wish them to be today. There are miracles in Acts, but the impression given is more of the occasional striking healing or series of healings rather than of remarkable healings all the time. The same impression is given by Paul's own letters, in which miracles are mentioned but not frequently referred to.²

To argue in this way is to argue to some extent from silence; more significant is Paul's specific teaching about miracles and healings. In 1 Corinthians 12 gifts of healing and the working of miracles are described as being given to some but not to all, according to the Spirit's choosing. It may not be significant that he does not mention these gifts in Romans 12 and Ephesians 4, but it is probable that Paul was aware not only that the Spirit gives sovereignly as he wills to different individuals, but also in different measure to different churches.

In 2 Corinthians 10-12 Paul defends himself against those who see him as inferior to other apostles, and he insists that he performed 'signs' among them (12:12). But Paul is reluctant to refer to such accomplishments, which the Corinthians evidently overvalued, and prefers to boast of his weaknesses. For Paul, the supreme mark of the Christian is not his miraculous power but his conformity to Christ's death. There is a striking similarity between this teaching and that of Mark's gospel. The first half of the gospel describes Jesus

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the weather, of life and death and disease. We effectively fall into deism, not expecting God to intervene in the world he set going (like a wound-clock) but now leaves alone. The exception to this is that evangelical Christians at least reckon on God's miraculous activity in converting, sanctifying and guiding people. One of the reasons that we allow for such miracles, but not for more 'physical' miracles, may be that we experience the one sort of miracle much more than the other. But another reason may be that we have allowed the secular outlook to push God out of the physical world into a purely spiritual sphere. It is right that this limited view of God should be challenged and that we should reckon with a God who is really at work in all aspects of our world.

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power in miraculous deed and word, but the second and climactic half describes Jesus going to the cross. It is as though both Mark and Paul recognize the importance of the miraculous works, but see in the suffering of the cross the greatest work of all. It is the teaching of the New Testament that the greatest grace is seen not in the miraculous removal of suffering, but in a Christ-like endurance of suffering.

Paul's famous 'thorn in the flesh' of 2 Corinthians 12:7 fits in at this point. The view that Paul is here referring to a physical ailment remains quite the most plausible, and it is instructive that his request that the trying condition be removed is refused; he is told that God's grace is sufficient for him and that God's power is made perfect in weakness. This makes it clear that it is not necessarily God's will to free us of satanic thorns in this life: he always gives his grace, but sometimes it is the grace to endure suffering with patience and courage, as Christ endured, rather than grace to escape from suffering.

We are reminded of Hebrews chapter 11, where the heroes of faith in some cases 'conquered kingdoms . . . received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire . . .', *etc.* but in other cases 'suffered . . . were stoned . . . were sawn in two . . . were killed with the sword . . . destitute, afflicted, ill-treated, of whom the world was not worthy' (11:33-38). The grace and power of God is manifested both in acts of supernatural power and in the experience of humiliating suffering. Paul would explain that all is the work of 'the same Spirit who apportions to each one individually as he wills' (1 Cor. 12:11). In this context, the observation that God gives miracles at certain times and places in history and not at others may make sense: the Spirit has given special manifestations of his power at some times more than at others. Sometimes, not least in difficult missionary contexts, he has called his church to be faithful in weakness and in the absence of obvious works of power.

What may be concluded from this look at the New Testament evidence? First, it is correct to see that the church has a commission to heal in the name of Jesus and to expect God's power to work miraculously. It is good to be challenged to such expectancy.

Second, it is not the case that there is guaranteed healing for every sickness — such universal healing belongs to the future, when the kingdom which Jesus inaugurated will be consummated (Rev. 21:4) — or that God's miraculous gifts will be seen in every church and time in the measure they were in Jesus' ministry.

Third, the miraculous workings of the Spirit are wonderful, but they are by no means the most important work of the Spirit. The Spirit's major work is converting sinful people to Christ and then making them increasingly like him, producing in them the fruit of the Spirit, notably love, and helping them in suffering, not necessarily by removing it but often by giving the grace to endure.

Some of the same conclusions may be applicable also to the question of demons and supernatural evil. It is right to recognize the existence of demons, but there is a danger of making too much of them and of seeing demons behind every problem, sickness or trouble. There is a good side to this attitude in that it takes evil and Satan seriously in a way that the New Testament encourages: we live in a world of conflict

between God and Satan, and we need to be more aware of this than we often are. However, there is a difference between recognizing the reality and power of evil and seeing demons round every corner in a semi-animistic way. The Bible recognizes the existence of demons and the reality of demon possession, but these things are a relatively small (though often noisy and noticeable) part of Satan's activity and of the evil in our world. Satanic activity in the Bible includes all sorts of evil. 'Ordinary' sickness is a work of Satan — see the paralysed woman bound by Satan in Luke 13:16. False theological teaching is a work of Satan, as Paul explains in 2 Corinthians 11:13, writing about false apostles who are servants of Satan disguised as angels of light. Temptation to sin is, of course, Satan's work, and commonplace sins like immorality and crude talk are works of darkness (see Eph. 2 and 4). Most important, and worst of all, the world's unbelief is satanic in origin (e.g. 2 Cor. 4:4). All these sorts of things are Satan's work, much less spectacular and much more respectable than demon possession, yet arguably much more pervasive and perhaps even more deadly through being less obvious.

The importance of these conclusions, both about miracles and about demons, is not just theoretical but personal and pastoral. On the one hand, if we fail to reckon with the reality of divine intervention in our world, we and those we minister to miss out on one of the most exciting things in the world that should affect our outlook enormously, not least when faced by some of the mountainous problems of life (cf. Mt. 21:21). On the other hand, if we have an exaggerated interest in the miraculous we may be in danger of wrong priorities, of putting power before love and obedience (see Mt. 7; 1 Cor. 13:2) and of misleading and hurting those who suffer by speaking too much of the grace of healing (which may not be given to them) and too little of the grace of suffering and enduring with Christ. Similarly the danger with the 'demon-round-every-corner' mentality is that it may be extremely damaging pastorally if we try to exorcise things and people when their problem is not possession but something like mental illness.³ In addition, too much attention to the spectacular manifestations of evil may distract us from the other, more subtle, activities of Satan.⁴ The main dangers we and our churches face are not demons, but rather satanically inspired apathy, false doctrine and lack of love.

A reference to the need for love is an appropriate note on which to end. Differences between Christians on matters such as healing can be perplexing and divisive. Paul faced such problems in Corinth and, as well as maintaining a brilliantly balanced position on the issues himself, he stressed

more than anything else the need for Christians to avoid being divided over such issues and to keep their love at full strength.

¹ It may, however, be of interest that none of the evangelists gives special emphasis to the ministry of healing when they summarize the risen Christ's missionary commission (i.e. in Mt. 28, Lk. 24, Jn. 20, 21; Mk. 16:9-20 is usually regarded as an addition to the original text of Mark). It has been argued that the words 'teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you' (Mt. 28:19) includes the command to heal, but it is likely that the primary emphasis is on obedience to ethical teaching such as is found in the Sermon on the Mount (cf. 7:21-27).

² It has been suggested that the different levels of success that Paul seems to have had in Athens and Corinth were because he relied on philosophy in Athens (and so failed) and on 'power evangelism' in Corinth (and so succeeded). This interpretation presupposes the improbable, though not uncommon, view that in 1 Cor. 2:1-5 Paul is implying that he changed his evangelistic strategy when he came from Athens to Corinth, abandoning the apologetic approach described in Acts 17:22-31. But 1 Thes. (a letter written from Corinth after Paul's arrival from Athens) makes it clear (a) that Paul had an effective ministry in Thessalonica with apparently 'charismatic' effects (cf. 5:19, 20), and (b) that his evangelistic approach there was as in Athens — note the similarity of 1 Thes. 1:9, 10 to Acts 17:22-31 (a confirmation of the historicity of the Acts speech). If there is anything to be deduced from Paul's apparent lack of great success in Athens, it is probably that there is no guaranteed formula for evangelistic success. It is likely that his evangelistic approach was similar in Thessalonica, Athens and Corinth, but that he found some people, notably the poor and 'unsophisticated', to be more responsive than others (cf. 1 Cor. 1:26-31), an experience not without parallels today.

³ The dangers of dabbling in exorcism, demonology and the like are real and well documented (e.g. by Twelftree). There is danger both when we imagine specifically demonic activity where there is none, and also when there is real demonic activity, since demons are powers, not indeed to be feared by Christians going in the name of Christ, but not to be played with or underestimated.

⁴ It has been plausibly suggested that the devil's strategy is sometimes to encourage such interest in the demonic as will distract attention from his subtler works and at other times to conceal himself and his demonic forces so as to foster secular unbelief. But it may be that the recent rise in the West of interest in the occult and the demonic has a lot to do with the decline of orthodox Christian faith.

Editorial notes

Dr John Webster has been appointed professor at Wycliffe College, Toronto, and so is stepping down as British Reviews Editor of *Themelios*. We are very grateful for all he has done for *Themelios*, and our best wishes go to him in his new position. We are glad to welcome as his successor Mr Tony Lane of the London Bible College.

Paul and the law: observe some recent debates

John M. G. Barclay

The author, who recently completed his PhD on Galatians for Cambridge University, is lecturer in New Testament at the University of Glasgow.

1. The problem

Paul's statements on the law have always been a source of confusion and controversy. Even his own churches were confused by his insistence on freedom from the law (see 1 Cor. 6:12 with Rom. 3:8 and 6:15), and Christians in other parts of the early church were incensed by what they understood of his proclamation of a law-free gospel (see Acts 21:21, 28; Jas. 2:14-26). Small wonder, then, that ever since his letters became accepted as Christian scriptures, Paul's remarks about the law have sometimes been hailed as the essence of the gospel, sometimes rejected as incoherent and idiosyncratic, and frequently misunderstood.

If one gathers together Paul's chief statements on the law and related issues they present a bewildering appearance. Sometimes the Greek term *nomos* clearly refers to the Mosaic Torah (e.g. Rom. 2:17; 1 Cor. 9:9; Gal. 3:17), but sometimes it seems to have the generalized sense of 'rule' or 'principle' (e.g. Rom. 3:27?; 7:21; 8:2?). On many occasions Paul declares categorically that Christians have died to the law and are free from it (e.g. Rom. 6:14; 7:1-6; Gal. 2:19; 5:1), while in some instances he is confident that they uphold and fulfil it (Rom. 3:31; 8:4; 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14). In several extended passages he contrasts the law with faith or with Christ (Rom. 2-4; 2 Cor. 3; Gal. 3-4), but on one occasion he refers to a *nomos* of faith (Rom. 3:27) and on two occasions alludes to a *nomos* of Christ (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2). Moreover, in what seems to be intended as a summary statement about the relationship between Christ and the law (Rom. 10:4) it is unclear whether the crucial Greek noun *telos* is to be understood as 'end/termination' or 'goal/fulfilment'. How can Paul insist that there is no justification by works of the law (Rom. 3:20; Gal. 2:16; 5:4) and yet talk of judgment by works (Rom. 2:1-16; 2 Cor. 5:10; Gal. 6:4-8)? When circumcision is one of the commands of God in the Old Testament, how can Paul tell the Corinthians that it does not matter if they are not circumcised so long as they keep the commands of God (1 Cor. 7:19)? Did Paul think that it was impossible to be justified by works of the law because no-one can keep the law (Rom. 3:9-23; 7:7-25; Gal. 3:10), or because even keeping the law would not be the proper path to justification (Gal. 3:11-12, 21; Phil. 3:2-11)? And, most fundamentally of all, if the law is the holy law of God (Rom. 7:10-14; 9:4) how could Paul regard it as responsible for sin, curse and death (Rom. 7:5; 2 Cor. 3:6-9; Gal. 3:10-13), and how could he play down its significance because it was 'ordained by angels through an intermediary' (Gal. 3:19)?

These are only some of the most important questions raised by Paul's remarks about the law. But they will suffice to

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