

THE CESSATION OF HEALING MIRACLES IN PAUL'S MINISTRY

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This article addresses the issue of the cessation of the exercise of the gift of healing by the apostle Paul on the basis of the historical-theological evidence of the New Testament record. Three lines of evidence suggest that Paul was unable to perform healing miracles near the end of his ministry. The first line of evidence comes from a study of Pauline literature. The second line of evidence is from an evaluation of the record of the three men Paul failed to heal, their circumstances, and arguments that Paul would have healed them if he could. A third line of evidence stems from Hebrews 2:3–4. These three areas of evidence indicate that miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit were no longer being distributed to the body of Christ by the end of the first century, but that the church was being given gifted individuals (Eph. 2:20; 4:11). Nonmiraculous spiritual gifts, of course, continued to be given to believers by the Holy Spirit. Further, even those who had previously had the ability to perform miracles were no longer able to exercise that gift as they had previously done. God's interventions through individuals gradually ceased in the waning years of the first century.

MIRACLES AND MIRACLE WORKERS

The range of opinion on the issue of miracle workers is spread between those who believe God continues to work miracles today in the same manner and number as in the first century¹ and

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¹ Karen Ball, "An Evaluation by Theologians," *Christian Life*, October 1982, 67; Dennis Bennet, "Does God Want to Heal Everybody?" *Charisma*, September 1983, 59; Peder Borgen, "Miracles of Healing in the New Testament," *Studia Theologica* 35 (1981): 101; Herald Bresden with James F. Scheer, *Need a Miracle?* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1979), 16; Nick Cavnar, "Miracles: Do They Really Happen?" *New*

those who see miracle workers as a first-century phenomenon.²

Part of the difficulty in the debate stems from the way a miracle is defined. For example some accuse cessationists of being antisupernatural, of denying all miracles. Yet this is only rarely the case. Almost all evangelicals affirm that God can and does intervene today in miraculous ways. The issue for them, however, is whether He does so through human agents, or whether He sometimes performs miracles in answer to prayer apart from so-called "healers" or miracle workers.

Warfield identified miracles with the apostles and their generation and said their purpose was to authenticate the validity of

Covenant 12 (November 1982) 5, Kenneth Copeland, *Walking in the Realm of the Miraculous* (Fort Worth KCP, 1979), 64–65, Robert C Dalton, *Tongues Like as of Fire* (Springfield, MO Gospel, 1945), 119, A De Groot, *The Bible on Miracles*, trans Jos A. Roessen (De Pere, WI St Norbert Abbey, 1966), 13, Christiaan De Wet, "Biblical Basis of Signs and Wonders," *Christian Life*, October 1982, 28, Guy P Duffield and Nathaniel M Van Cleave, *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology* (Los Angeles L I F E Bible College, 1983), 377–84, 388–92, Gordon Fee, "On Being a Trinitarian Christian," *Crux* 28 (June 1992) 2–5, Oral Roberts, *A Daily Guide to Miracles* (Old Tappan, NJ Revell, 1975), 190–91, Pat Robertson, *My Prayer for You* (Old Tappan, NJ Revell, 1977), 57, 64, Ken Sumrall, "Miracles and Healing," in *The Holy Spirit in Today's Church*, ed Erling Jorstad (Nashville Abingdon, 1973), 105–8, G Aiken Taylor, "Miracles—Yes or No?" *Presbyterian Journal*, August 14, 1974, 7–9, C Peter Wagner, "Healing without Hassle," *Leadership* 6 (Spring 1985) 114–15, idem, "A Vision for Evangelizing the Real America," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 10 (April 1986) 59–64, and idem, "Spiritual Power in Urban Evangelism Dynamic Lessons from Argentina," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 27 (April 1991) 130–37

² Robert Anderson, *The Silence of God* (New York Dodd Mead, 1897), 18, John L Booth, "The Purpose of Miracles" (Th M thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1982), 202–3, Thomas R Edgar, *Miraculous Gifts Are They for Today?* (Neptune, NJ Loizeaux, 1983), 260, Anton Fridrichsen, *The Problem of Miracle in Primitive Christianity*, trans Roy A Harrisville and John S Hanson (Minneapolis Augsburg, 1972), 135, 147, Henry W Frost, *Miraculous Healing* (New York Revell, 1931), 127–29, A C Gaebelien, *The Acts of the Apostles* (New York "Our Hope," n d), 146, John B Graber, "The Temporary Gifts of the Holy Spirit" (Th M thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1947), 56, Ada R Habershon, *The Study of the Miracles* (London Pickering & Inglis, n d), 240, 242, C Everett Koop, "Faith Healing and the Sovereignty of God," *Tenth* (July 1976) 62, Rolland D McCune, "A Biblical Study of Tongues and Miracles," *Central Bible Quarterly* 19 (Fall 1976) 19, John Phillips, "Miracles Not for Today," *Moody Magazine*, July–August 1982, 73, Charles C Ryrie, "Greater Works Than These," *Good News Broadcaster*, June 1983, 33–34, Paul E Sywulka, "The Contribution of Hebrews 2:3–4 to the Problem of Apostolic Miracles" (Th M thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1967), 47, and John F Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit at Work Today* (Chicago Moody, 1973), 43–44

It is wrong to accuse noncharismatic evangelicals of denying miracles. Men such as Henry Frost, while arguing against modern miracle-working, recognize that God still does perform miraculous healings in answer to prayer, though not always (*Miraculous Healing*, 6, 117). Ryrie also says God still performs miracles today. Even so, he holds that the miraculous gifts are past, since their purpose of authenticating God's message and messengers is no longer needed (*The Holy Spirit* [Chicago Moody, 1965], 87).

the apostles and the witnesses of their generation. He argued against modern miracle workers on the grounds that the gospel and its bearers no longer needed to prove they were from God. He also argued that history indicates that miracles ceased with the first-century generation of Christians.³ A belief in the closing of the biblical canon often includes an understanding that miracles must necessarily have ceased with its completion.⁴ Historical evidence seems to indicate a lack of miracles within the years immediately following the end of the apostolic age. Miracles then began to reappear in later centuries.⁵ This position is opposed by those affirming modern miracle workers. Adherents of both positions quote the same church fathers to support their positions.⁶

C. Peter Wagner, Gordon Fee, Oral Roberts, and others claim that miracles performed by miracle workers have continued and can and should be experienced in the church today. Proponents of the modern faith healing movement base their position on the doctrine of healing in the atonement and/or they argue that God must work in the same way now as He did in the first-century church.⁷ According to Wagner, "The power that worked in Jesus for His miraculous ministry not only is related to the power available to us today; it is exactly the same. As we relate to God in prayer, faith and obedience we have abundant resources to go forth in Jesus' name to preach everywhere 'with signs following' as did the early disciples."⁸

³ Benjamin B. Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1918; reprint, London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1972), 5-6.

⁴ The meaning of τὸ τέλειον ("the perfect") in 1 Corinthians 13:10 is often a part of the argument.

⁵ Erroll Hulse, "Can We Do Miracles Today?" *Banner of Truth*, July 1981, 26; and Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles*, 9-10.

⁶ Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles*, 25-31; A. J. Gordon, *The Ministry of Healing* (New York: Revell, 1882), 237-42; Charles Hummel, "Healing: Our Double Standard?" *Christian Life*, November 1982, 33; and John C. Whitcomb, "Does God Want Christians to Perform Miracles Today?" *Grace Journal* 12 (Fall 1971): 10-12.

⁷ William F. Bryan, "Miraculous Continuity," *Alliance Witness*, January 24, 1979, 3-4; Charles E. Carlston, "The Question of Miracles," *Andover Newton Quarterly* 12 (November 1971): 99-107; and J. Rodman Williams, *The Gift of the Holy Spirit Today* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1980), 59. It is not the intention of this article to address every area of the modern faith healing debate. Rather, it examines only one aspect of the debate, namely, the New Testament evidences concerning the status of "miracle workers" as the Apostolic Age drew to a close.

⁸ C. Peter Wagner, "The Power of God and Your Power," *Christian Life*, July 1983, 46. In extreme contrast to them are groups such as the Bay Area Skeptics and the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion. These have investigated men such as Peter Popoff, David Paul, and W. V. Grant and have documented evidence that they are actively engaging in deception rather than truth when they promote

Roberts says present-day “miracles” are something “that we can’t explain but that makes a profound change for the better in our lives.” Such a miracle may have “a completely extraordinary nature” or “a nature that I alone might appreciate.”⁹ Thus for him, the individual is free to determine if something is miraculous. Booth defines a miracle as “an observable phenomenon effected directly or indirectly by supernatural power in which the laws of nature are not suspended or violated, but a supernatural power outside of nature intervenes with new effect for a specific purpose.”¹⁰ This definition is adequate for miracles when used of all supernatural events. Yet it is too broad when considering the question of signs performed by men. The miracles discussed in this article are those that involve a human agent through whom they are worked. The following is a suggested definition: “Miracles by miracle workers are those acts of God which He chooses to perform through the agency of either an apostle or a gifted person with the authority and ability to exercise miraculous power at will.” Only those performing supernatural acts at will are considered miracle workers.¹¹ This definition does not imply that God no longer intervenes supernaturally on behalf of His own in answer to prayer. “It should be noted that the issue is not whether God works miracles today, for all evangelicals agree that He does. It is rather whether He works them through individuals today in the same way as He did in Acts.”¹²

themselves as healers. See the Summer 1986 issue of *Free Inquiry* for articles on these men. Peter Popoff’s deceptions are especially well documented. It can be argued that though they preach about miracles, in actuality they are nothing more than “con” artists, wolves in sheep’s clothing.

9 Roberts, *A Daily Guide to Miracles*, 139.

10 Booth, “The Purpose of Miracles,” 8.

11 As Fee notes concerning the use of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 14:2, Paul’s instruction there “lifts Christian ‘inspired speech’ out of the category of ‘ecstasy’ as such and offers it as a radically different thing from the mania of the pagan cults. There is no seizure here, no loss of control; the speaker is neither frenzied nor a babler. If tongues is not intelligible, it is nonetheless inspired utterance and completely under the control of the speaker. So too with prophecy” (Gordon D. Fee, *1 Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 696).

12 Sywulka, “The Contribution of Hebrews 2:3–4 to the Problem of Apostolic Miracles,” 15. Again, all evangelicals agree that when God intervenes miraculously, He at times can and does so through a human agent. This may be through an “insight” (what charismatics might call a “word of knowledge”) or a touch that leads to a sudden restoration of health (“the gift of healing”). However, the question is, Does God give individuals the authority to function as healers today in the same way the apostles and others were healers? Or is what is seen today different as He responds to prayer at times according to His purposes, but without granting a level of

AN ARGUMENT FROM SILENCE

To argue a theological position based on the silence of Scripture is tenuous at best. Thiessen points out that an "argument from silence never settles a question conclusively."¹³ This is true of the question of the continuance or cessation of miracles, because silence is used to argue both for their cessation¹⁴ and for their continuance.¹⁵ For example Duffield and Van Cleave ask, "Where is the statement in the Bible that miracles would cease to be performed?"¹⁶ Though the New Testament includes no instruction on the use and abuse of miracles in the church, the New Testament is not completely silent on the presence or absence of miracles. It becomes silent in Paul's writings that follow his Roman imprisonment.¹⁷ This study seeks to show that the New Testament does have evidence indicating that God's use of miracle workers ceased in the first century.

MIRACLES IN ACTS

The Book of Acts abounds with miracles, both described and implied.¹⁸ Though few miracle workers are named, Luke's record implies more were active than simply those whose deeds he recounted.¹⁹ An examination of Acts has led some to conclude that a decline in miracles occurred in the time period covered by that book.²⁰ But miracles are reported throughout Acts, beginning in

authority or ability similar to what He gave in the first years of the church's life? More importantly, is there evidence that God chose to act differently even in the first century? If things changed with the apostles, then they could change for others also.

¹³ Henry C. Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 300.

¹⁴ Edgar, *Miraculous Gifts: Are They for Today?* 38; Don W. Hillis, *Tongues, Healing, and You!* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969), 2:28; John F. MacArthur Jr., *The Charismatics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 76; and Wayman D. Miller, *Modern Divine Healing* (Fort Worth: Miller, 1956), 303.

¹⁵ Taylor, "Miracles—Yes or No?" 9.

¹⁶ Duffield and Van Cleave, *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology*, 406.

¹⁷ Miller, *Modern Divine Healing*, 317.

¹⁸ Certain incidents, though supernatural, were not miracles performed by human agents. These include Jesus' ascension (Acts 1:9), visions (7:56; 9:3–16; 10:3–6, 10–16; 16:9; 18:9), Philip's transportation by the Spirit (8:39–40), angelic activities such as Peter's rescue (12:7–11) and Herod's demise (12:20–23), and Paul's rising after he was stoned and left for dead outside Lystra (14:19–20).

¹⁹ Edgar, *Miraculous Gifts: Are They for Today?* 271.

²⁰ James N. Forge, "The Doctrine of Miracles in the Apostolic Church" (Th.M.

the second chapter and ending in the last chapter with Paul's healing everyone on Malta who was brought to him.²¹ Time gaps between miracles, whether singular or multiple, do not indicate inactivity on the part of the apostles or others.

Acts was written not only to show how the gospel spread to the Gentiles, but also to validate Paul's apostleship. The miracles Luke recorded were adequate to authenticate Paul's apostleship. Thus rather than a full accounting of all miracles, only a sampling is provided, by which Peter, the foremost apostle, and Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, can be compared. Both are said to have performed multiple signs and wonders (2:43; 5:12; 6:8; 14:3; 19:11–17; 28:7–9). Luke recounted typical examples and unusual ones. That he did not mention miracles in every city and journey does not mean they did not occur.²² In fact the reports by Paul and his companions in Acts 15 indicate that they did occur.

MIRACLES IN THE EPISTLES

Silence about miracles in many of the New Testament epistles makes it difficult to argue for either a continuance or a decline in miracles. No direct scriptural statement is made about their con-

thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1951), 46; Frost, *Miraculous Healing*, 124; Roy E. Knuteson, "Are You Waiting for a Miracle?" *Kindred Spirit*, Fall 1979, 22; and Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit at Work Today*, 41.

²¹ Acts records twelve miracles having a single beneficiary or victim. These include Peter and John healing the lame man (3:1–4), the Lord's taking the lives of Ananias and Sapphira (5:1–11), Ananias of Damascus healing Saul of his blindness (9:17), Peter healing Aeneas (9:32–35), Peter raising Dorcas from the dead (9:36–42), Agabus prophesying (11:27–28), Paul blinding Elymas (13:4–11), healing a lame man (14:8–10), casting out a demon (16:16–18), raising Eutychus (20:7–12), and ignoring the bite of a venomous snake (28:1–6).

Acts includes ten references to multiple miracles, including tongues, healings, and raising the dead. They include the sign of tongues-speaking on the Day of Pentecost as well as tongues in Cornelius's home (10:44–48), four references to signs and wonders being performed (2:43; 5:12; 6:8; 8:6–13; 14:3), Paul's extraordinary miracles in Ephesus (19:11–17), and his multiple healings on the island of Malta, beginning with Publius' father (28:7–9). The first of these miracles may have occurred in A.D. 30 (on the Day of Pentecost), and the last may have been sometime between October 59 and February 60.

²² While miracles are recorded in Paul's first and third journeys, no mention is made of them in his second journey. This does not necessarily mean he performed no miracles then; it only suggests that Luke chose not to list any miracles at that point in his narrative. Hillis suggests that healings were spasmodic rather than continuous during the apostolic era (Hillis, *Tongues, Healing, and You!* 9). Still the general tenor of Acts suggests that with at least the apostles there was a fairly regular pattern of miracles accompanying their preaching. Miracles were the "norm" for the apostles, represented first by Peter and then Paul, at least through the time period covered within Acts.

tinuance or cessation. Both positions interpret the silence as favorable to their view.²³ But as already stated, to argue from silence alone is a weak argument. Though not a proof of the cessation of miracles, the silence of the epistles on this subject indicates miracles were not considered significant.

Noting when the epistles were written helps bring into perspective their comments and silence about miracles. Silence in the later epistles is significant when seen in contrast with the earlier epistles' references to miracles. If the record in the later epistles were mixed, with some referring to miracles as a present experience, then the silence of the others would prove meaningless. Still, silence throughout the epistles would not prove in itself that miracles had ended. Other evidence would be needed.

DATING THE EPISTLES

Though the dates of when the apostles wrote the epistles are debated, the dates of the epistles in relation to certain historical events are generally agreed on. James,²⁴ Galatians,²⁵ the Thessalonian²⁶ and Corinthian²⁷ epistles, and Romans²⁸ were written

²³ Robert L. Hamblin, "Miracles in the Book of Acts," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 17 (Fall 1974): 34; T. Norton Sterrett, "New Testament Charismata" (Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1947), 203-4; Sywulka, "The Contribution of Hebrews 2:3-4 to the Problem of Apostolic Miracles," 12; and Taylor, "Miracles—Yes or No?" 9.

²⁴ Peter Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 22; Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1970), 761-64; Harold W. Hoehner, "Chronology of the Apostolic Age" (Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1965), 356-57; and Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 276-78.

²⁵ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 464; Hoehner, "Chronology of the Apostolic Age," 241-42; Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 31; and Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 216-18.

²⁶ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 566, 579; Hoehner, "Chronology of the Apostolic Age," 262-63; Charles C. Ryrie, *First and Second Thessalonians*, *Everyman's Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1959), 12-13; and Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 192-94, 197-98.

²⁷ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 441-43; Hoehner, "Chronology of the Apostolic Age," 292; and Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 203-5, 208-9.

²⁸ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 396-97; Hoehner, "Chronology of the Apostolic Age," 293; and John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), xvi. Thiessen bases his view on the internal evidence in 2 Corinthians and Romans 15:25-27 regarding the collection for the saints (*Introduction to the New Testament*, 226). Also Romans reflects the fact that Paul was about to go to Jerusalem. Gaius and Erastus were both identified with Corinth (Rom. 16:23).

before Paul's first Roman imprisonment and during a time of apostolic miracle-working. During his first Roman imprisonment Paul sent letters to the Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, and then, just before his release, to the Philippians.²⁹ After this he wrote his first epistle to Timothy³⁰ and a letter to Titus.³¹ During the same time period, Peter penned at least his first epistle.³² When Paul was incarcerated again in Rome, he wrote his final letter to Timothy as he anticipated his imminent death.³³ Peter wrote his second letter about then. Hebrews was written after Paul's death and before the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (assuming a non-Pauline authorship of Hebrews).³⁴ Jude and the epistles of John were written after the fall of Jerusalem.³⁵

THE REFERENCES TO MIRACLES IN THE EPISTLES

The demarcation between the period of miracles and the beginning of the church's present experience seems to be Paul's first Roman imprisonment. Every epistle written before that incarceration refers directly to or alludes to miracles as a "normal" experience in the church. These include James, Galatians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Romans. The Book of Acts indicates a continuance of miracle-working by apostles and others during this period as well. Then when Paul was imprisoned, there is silence in the Prison Epistles and all other New Testament writings thereafter about any present experience of

²⁹ T. K. Abbott, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: Clark, n.d.), xxix–xxx; Hoehner, "Chronology of the Apostolic Age," 325–28; J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (London: Macmillan, 1913; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1953), 31–46; and Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 250–51.

³⁰ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 623; and Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 262–63.

³¹ Hoehner, "Chronology of the Apostolic Age," 347; and Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 266.

³² Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 795–96; and Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 284–85, 290–91.

³³ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 623; Hoehner, "Chronology of the Apostolic Age," 348–52; and Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 269.

³⁴ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 716–18; Leon Morris, "Hebrews," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 12:8; and Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 303–4.

³⁵ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 883–84, 894, 898; and Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 295–96, 321–23.

miracles. Only in Hebrews, written between Paul's death and the fall of Jerusalem, is there mention of miracles but it is in the past tense.

In his letter to the Galatians Paul pointed to the miracles occurring among them as proof of God's work in their midst apart from the Law (Gal. 3:5). This fits well with the testimony of Acts during the time of Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 13:4–11; 14:3, 8–10). Also Paul and Barnabas reported to the Jerusalem Council that miracles were accomplished in the Galatian churches (15:12). Paul's reference to miracles in Galatians emphasizes their value as evidence of God's work.

In 1 and 2 Corinthians the presence of miracles in the experience of the church is still evident. First Corinthians 12–14 discusses spiritual gifts and miracles as a normal experience, and in his second letter Paul pointed to his own miracles as evidence of his apostleship (2 Cor. 12:12). He was confident of his ability to exercise miraculous authority on demand, whether to heal or harm individuals. This is clear from his less-than-veiled threat to his opponents (13:10).³⁶ If he did not know whether God would intervene miraculously on his behalf, he would not have written such a threat.

Romans 15:18–19 refers to miracles as part of Paul's apostolic authority. Though he was referring in this passage to past deeds, there is no inference that miracles had ceased, or that his readers should expect that Paul would be unable to demonstrate his authority similarly should he visit them.

The reference in 1 Thessalonians 1:5 to "power" might refer to Paul's exercise of apostolic authority, though the absence of descriptive terminology such as "signs and wonders" (as in 2 Cor. 12:12) indicates otherwise.³⁷

The epistles Paul wrote either during or after his first Roman imprisonment make no reference at all to miracles as a present experience of the church.³⁸ These include Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus.

³⁶ Philip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 485.

³⁷ F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 15; James E. Frame, *Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: Clark, 1912), 269; and William Neil, *The Epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians*, Moffatt New Testament Commentary (New York: Harper, 1950), 17.

³⁸ Forge, "The Doctrine of Miracles in the Apostolic Church," 53.

SUMMARY

The epistles, when placed within the time frame of Paul's travels and the spread of the church, do reflect a pattern. Those written before Paul's Roman imprisonment describe a church in which miracles and miracle workers were present and common. With the imprisonment of Paul came a silence concerning miracles in all his epistles written thereafter (as well as the epistles by Peter, Jude, and John).³⁹ This silence is broken only by the reference to miracles in the past tense in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Though this does not in itself prove the cessation of miracle-working, it may imply it. This must be supported by further evidence.

THE MEN PAUL DID NOT HEAL

EPAPHRODITUS

Epaphroditus was sent to give Paul both sustenance and help (Phil. 2:25).⁴⁰ He served Paul sometime between the middle and close of the apostle's first Roman imprisonment.⁴¹ Though the epistle does not state whether Epaphroditus's illness began during his trip to Rome or soon after he arrived, it had to be of sufficient length and severity for the Philippian church to learn of it and to warrant their concern, and for their concern in turn to be communicated back to Rome.⁴²

Paul's consternation at the severity of his friend's condition is reflected in the phrase, "God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow" (Phil. 2:27). This, along with the phrase "he came close to death" (2:30), indicates that the illness was potentially fatal.⁴³

³⁹ Koenig says 1 John 4:1–6 alludes to "the charismatic phenomena of prophecy and miracles as events in the church's life" (John Koenig, *Charismata: God's Gifts for God's People* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978], 96). Yet these verses need not necessarily be understood in that light. Bruce points to the instruction in 1 John 4:2 as the key to discernment, referring back to the Old Testament test of prophets in Deuteronomy 13:1–5 and 18:22, along with Paul's warnings in 1 Corinthians 12:3 (F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, 103–5). Marshall concurs (I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978], 203–10).

⁴⁰ Epaphroditus had gone to Paul as more than a courier; he was a representative of the church at Philippi.

⁴¹ This is seen in Paul's expectation of release in his letter to the Philippians (Phil. 2:24).

⁴² F. W. Beare, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians*, 2d ed. (London: Adam & Black, 1969), 98.

⁴³ Based on the implied meaning of *παρὰβολευσάμενος* ("having gambled with his life"), Lightfoot argues that Epaphroditus's illness resulted from exhaustion or

One might argue from Paul's sending Epaphroditus back to Philippi that he really did not need his services and thus had no need to seek to heal him.⁴⁴ Yet Paul's note of distress at Epaphroditus's near-death illness reveals that the apostle did not want to see his friend die. Another inference is that Paul could not offer healing assistance at that time. If he could, it would have been simple to heal him by the exercise of his apostolic authority.

If Epaphroditus's illness occurred while he was en route to Philippi or while the Philippian delegation was still with Paul, they would have returned to Philippi knowing Paul had not been able to help him. If his illness occurred after their departure, then word would have later reached Philippi of his condition. In both cases their anxiety and Epaphroditus's concern indicate that they understood that there was nothing Paul could do on his behalf.

Based on Paul's comments about his anxiety for Epaphroditus one must conclude that Paul could not heal him. The attitudes of both Paul and the Philippians indicate a general understanding in the church that by that time miracles, even at the hands of apostles, were not an expected event. All Paul could do was pray for him and hope God would keep him from death.

Duffield and Van Cleave say Epaphroditus is an example of miracle healing. They say Paul's statement that "God had mercy on him" (Phil. 2:27) refers to divine miraculous intervention.⁴⁵ But this does not address the question of why Paul himself was unable to heal him. Also God's mercy was expressed not through miraculous intervention but simply through His sparing his life.

TIMOTHY

Timothy joined Paul on his second missionary journey and was later described by Paul as one who served with him in the furtherance of the gospel as a child serving his father (Phil. 2:19–22). They had an intimate fellowship as well as a shared purpose and

some unusual exposure (*St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians*, 124–25). Martin argues for something more than accidental illness, since risking his life "suggests some deliberate action on his part, not the ill-wisdom of setting out at the wrong season of the year for travelers" (Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians*, New Century Bible Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976], 121). Whether exhaustion or exposure, the risk to Epaphroditus's life is evident from Paul's expressed concern, "lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow" (Phil. 2:27). The illness threatened to do more than just incapacitate him for a while.

⁴⁴ If Epaphroditus was well enough to travel from Rome to Philippi, he would certainly have been well enough to serve Paul. Thus his being sent home stemmed from Paul's desire to remove anxiety on the part of both the apostle and the church in Philippi (Phil. 2:28).

⁴⁵ Duffield and Van Cleave, *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology*, 411.

attitude in ministry.⁴⁶ Paul's mention of Timothy's illness is in 1 Timothy, which was written after Paul's first Roman imprisonment while he was moving freely through the Roman world. Since this is the only mention of Timothy's illness, it is not possible to say with certainty how long he had experienced physical difficulties. At any rate, Paul referred to Timothy's "frequent ailments" (1 Tim. 5:23).

Timothy's illness, related to his stomach (or intestines), was chronic. Wilkinson identified his illness as probably a chronic achlorhydric dyspepsia, which would produce disabling attacks on his health.⁴⁷ Paul's instructions that Timothy not drink water exclusively may indicate Timothy had ingested contaminated water.⁴⁸ Since the drinking water of that day was of questionable purity, drinking water that had not been "treated" with wine could have exposed him to intestinal difficulties. This would explain Paul's advice to use wine medicinally.⁴⁹

Since Paul had opportunities to heal Timothy and had expressed the desire to see him in full health, it is apparent that Paul was unable to help his favorite son in the ministry. So he told him to take medicinal measures to alleviate some of the misery. Also of interest is the fact that Paul did not tell him to call for the elders (as in James 5:14), nor did he offer to heal him at their next meeting. Unmistakably Paul was concerned for Timothy's well-being. Thus it is legitimate to say that Paul, desiring Timothy's health, would have healed him if he could have done so. Thus miraculous healing by apostolic injunction was simply not an option at that time.

TROPHIMUS

Trophimus, an Ephesian, was one of several of Paul's compan-

⁴⁶ F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 457; and Robert Rainy, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, *The Expositor's Bible* (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, n.d.), 158. Paul described him as his fellow worker (Rom. 16:21), referred to him as a fellow author of five of his epistles (Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1; Phil. 1), and used him as a messenger to several churches (Acts 19:22; 1 Cor. 4:17, 16:10; Phil. 2:19; 1 Thess. 3:2, 6). His letters to Timothy also show the closeness of their relationship and the importance of Timothy to Paul.

⁴⁷ John Wilkinson, *Health and Healing* (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1980), 110.

⁴⁸ W. E. Vine, *The Epistles to Timothy and Titus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1965), 88.

⁴⁹ Robert G. Gromacki, *Stand True to the Charge* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 153. According to Hoehner's chronology Paul was in contact with Timothy on at least two occasions between his arrival in Rome and the writing of his first epistle to Timothy ("Chronology of the Apostolic Age," 33–40).

ions on his third missionary journey (Acts 20:4–5). He was therefore a witness of Paul's raising Eutychus from the dead at Troas (20:6–12). He was later seen publicly with Paul in Jerusalem and was one of the Greeks Paul was accused of taking into the temple (21:27–29). He may possibly have been included with Luke in the "we" statements of Acts 27 and 28. He is last mentioned in Paul's letter to Timothy (2 Tim. 4:20) shortly before the apostle's death.

Paul's report to Timothy about Trophimus gives scant information on the nature of his illness. All that is known is that it occurred at a time when several men had left Paul and when Paul had sent some key men to key cities. Demas had deserted him (4:10) and all his other companions except Luke had left Rome (4:10–12, 20). Then Paul mentioned that he had left Trophimus at Miletus because he was sick and unable to continue with Paul. Trophimus's illness came at a time when Paul could not afford to be losing the company of additional men. Thus if Paul had had the ability at that time to heal, he certainly would have exercised it. Only Luke was with Paul in Rome (4:11). Thus the loss of a companion, especially if Paul was en route to Rome as a prisoner, would sorely hurt the apostle. His need for helpers was good reason for wanting to restore Trophimus. This is further seen in his request not only for Timothy to come to him, but also for Timothy to bring John Mark who would be "very useful."⁵⁰

The clear inference is that Paul could do nothing to help Trophimus.⁵¹ Still the question is whether this nonhealing means that Paul did not have the freedom to heal, or whether it means something else. Duffield and Van Cleave respond by saying that "healing is not always instantaneous."⁵² This response is weak, since there is only one noninstantaneous healing in the New Testament. Jesus healed a man born blind in two steps (Mark 8:22–26). Though there was a minute or two between Jesus' spitting on his eyes and then the man's full restoration, the second step in his healing brought instant relief. Thus Paul's not healing Trophimus cannot be ignored.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PAUL'S INABILITY TO HEAL

The evidence of these three close associates of Paul whose illnesses were left to their natural course points to his inability to heal. Though this does not conclusively prove a loss of healing

⁵⁰ John R. W. Stott, *Guard the Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), 119.

⁵¹ Booth, "The Purpose of Miracles," 203.

⁵² Duffield and Van Cleave, *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology*, 411.

ability, it implies that loss. Either Paul could heal them and chose not to, or he was helpless with regard to their conditions. To justify the position that Paul chose not to heal them, one must demonstrate either that they were not essential to his ministry or that he viewed their suffering as “filling up that which is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” (Col. 1:24). But their illnesses came at times when their services were needed. It would not be strategic for Paul to weaken his team by eliminating key personnel, especially if he had the ability simply to speak the word or touch them and restore them to full health. His having delivered Eutychus from death shows his ability (at that time) and willingness to restore even those who were not essential to his ministry (Acts 20:7–12). This also shows that Paul could exercise this option at will, even when he was not being watched by an unbelieving audience.

Some explain that Paul did not heal his three friends because his healing ministry was only for nonbelievers in areas where the gospel was first being preached.⁵³ Again Paul’s restoration of Eutychus rules out that view. Paul’s statement in 2 Corinthians 12:12 about his ability to demonstrate his apostolic authority may well have included an ability to heal believers since that authority was to be demonstrated before believers, not unbelievers. Also Peter’s raising of Dorcas, a believer, shows that other apostles readily aided believers. The gifts of healing in Corinth show that at least in the early days of the church, believers could expect relief from illnesses. Thus one cannot argue that healings were for unbelievers only.

To argue that each of the three men either lacked faith or had unresolved sins is not acceptable either. They had each been with Paul on his missionary journeys and had seen him performing miracles, including healings. There is no reason to expect them then to doubt Paul’s ability. Further, Paul’s references to Epaphroditus in Philippians 2:25–30 present the picture of a man of faith, courage, and commitment rather than of sin or faithlessness. Thus some other answer must be sought.

When the circumstances are reviewed, especially for Epaphroditus and Trophimus, their need as well as Paul’s requires one to conclude that Paul lacked the ability to intervene. Otherwise their suffering and his loss of their assistance were needless. From this one can say that there is evidence of a decline in

⁵³ David Clark, “Miracles Lead to Revivals,” *Christian Life*, November 1982, 34; De Wet, “Biblical Basis of Signs and Wonders,” 33; and C. Peter Wagner, “Signs & Wonders: What Difference Do They Make?” *Christian Life*, November 1982, 78.

miracles even within the experience of the apostles, who were the principal miracle workers of the church. Those who wish to press for a continuance of miracles through the apostolic period into the present must explain Paul's failure to heal his friends and assistants in the ministry.⁵⁴

Miracles, though of some impact, were never an emphasis of the apostles' ministry; they were not ends in themselves. The gospel was of primary importance. It was not miracles that drew people to Christ; it was the Holy Spirit working through the message of salvation. Paul did not point his readers to miracles as the key to conversions; instead, "faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17).

Miracles authenticated the apostolic messengers (2 Cor. 12:12). The experience of miracles among the Galatians was proof that they had received the Spirit by faith and not by the works of the Law (Gal. 3:5). In Corinth proof of Paul's apostleship lay not in his miracle-working power but in the Corinthian believers themselves (1 Cor. 9:1-2). Thus the decline and cessation of miracles would not illicit any further attention. The silence would be understood as the result of a consistent nonemphasis on miracles in light of the greater need for people to respond to the gospel and to live by faith and not by sight before God. Therefore, though silence alone is a weak argument, silence combined with other evidences supports the position that miracles through miracle workers ended within the first century.

Seeing the purpose of miracles as authentication of the apostles explains the early nonemphasis on miracles in the apostolic literature and then silence concerning them in later epistles. Also it explains why Paul's three friends were not healed. Since miracles had authentication as their primary purpose, it would be expected that they would decline as the apostles were accepted by the church as true representatives of God. Paul's loss of miracle-working ability came as he was more widely accepted as an apostle and as the gospel spread throughout the Roman Empire.

HEBREWS 2:3-4

The Epistle to the Hebrews mentions the miraculous only once. Its sole reference connects miracles to the apostles and those who heard Jesus' teachings. The inference made from this link is that with the passing of that generation of believers came the passing

⁵⁴ Booth, "The Purpose of Miracles," 202-3.

of miracles, since they were linked to eyewitnesses.⁵⁵

"After it [the message of salvation] was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will" (Heb. 2:3b–4). Several observations can be made about this statement. First, the main verb, "was confirmed," is in the aorist tense, indicating that miracles had been experienced in the past. Second, the progression of revelation was from Christ, to those who heard Him, and then to "us." Third, the ones to whom God was bearing witness ("them") were the generation who heard Jesus, not "us." Fourth, God's bearing witness included signs, wonders, miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, given according to God's own will.

Of course the aorist tense is sometimes used without a past time meaning. But within the chronological structure of the sentence and the use of the temporal participle, "bearing witness," the aorist verb "was confirmed" here strongly argues for miracles being past at the time Hebrews was written.⁵⁶ The author clearly identified himself and his readers as a generation different from those who heard Jesus' revelation directly. He also noted that God authenticated the original hearers' testimony of their revelation by miraculous signs.

CONCLUSION

Arguing for the noncessationist position, the Bennetts write, "Paul's power in the Holy Spirit did not decrease as he grew older. We find him manifesting God's miraculous keeping and healing power more strongly, if anything, in the last chapter of Acts, than in the earlier times (Acts 27–28). Paul never slowed down even in his old age."⁵⁷ However, the evidence examined, especially concerning the men Paul was unable to heal, argues for a

⁵⁵ Edgar, *Miraculous Gifts: Are They for Today?* 269; Charles C. Ryrie, "Miracles (or What Happened to Your Handkerchief, Paul?)," *Moody Monthly*, September 1980, 83; and Sywulka, "The Contribution of Hebrews 2:3–4 to the Problem of Apostolic Miracles," 43, 47.

⁵⁶ The author's use of the present tense participle *συνεπιμαρτυροῦντος*, "bearing witness," identifies God's testimony through signs, wonders, and gifts of the Holy Spirit as being contemporaneous with the time of the main (aorist) verb, *ἐβεβαιώθη*, "was confirmed."

⁵⁷ Dennis Bennett and Rita Bennett, *The Holy Spirit and You* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos, 1971), 131.

decline if not an end, of his ability to perform miracles near the end of his ministry. This decline is noticeable in the record of those epistles Paul wrote in his first Roman imprisonment. By itself, silence in these epistles is not conclusive. But Paul's own testimony of being unable to help Epaphroditus, having to leave behind Trophimus, and only offering Timothy medical counsel point to his loss of miracle-working ability. Clearly toward the end of his ministry Paul was unable to perform the same miracles he was able to perform earlier.⁵⁸ "The important thing here is to understand that even those who lived just prior to A.D. 70, before the close of the canon of Scripture, did not see and did not have some of the signs and wonders and miracles that the contemporaries of Christ had experienced."⁵⁹

Thus the evidence of Scripture favors the view that miracles declined as their usefulness in God's purpose ended.

Proponents of the charismatic movement have managed to shift the burden of proof regarding the temporary nature of some gifts to their opponents. They have done this by assuming that all things are to be the same throughout the church age, and they have demanded proof otherwise. . . . Since the facts of church history reveal that the Holy Spirit has not been functioning in all the ways that He did in the book of Acts, then the basic assumption that all things remain the same is false. It is contrary to the facts; therefore the burden of proof properly falls upon those who claim that all gifts are for the entire duration of the church age.⁶⁰

This study has sought to demonstrate that evidence in the New Testament shows that it is wrong for proponents of faith healing to claim that God must work the same today as He did at the beginning of the church. Even within the New Testament era there are strong indicators that all did not remain the same in the way God was working.

⁵⁸ Booth, "The Purpose of Miracles," 202-3; Knuteson, "Are You Waiting for a Miracle?" 22; Brian G. Peterson, "The Significance of Miracles within the Transitional Framework of the Book of Acts" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1976), 30; and Whitcomb, "Does God Want Christians to Perform Miracles Today?" 7.

⁵⁹ Ryrie, "Greater Works Than These," 33.

⁶⁰ Edgar, *Miraculous Gifts: Are They for Today?* 267.

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