

Miracles

For more than a millennium Biblical teachings on the mystery of miracles have been seriously beclouded by the scholastic distinction between God's "ordained power" (*potentia ordinata* – providence) and His "absolute power" (*potentia absoluta* – miracles). Among thinkers who stress the *will* of God, the idea of the "absolute power" of God often ended in pure voluntarism. On this view God's hand reaches out directly and immediately into the affairs of our world. God can do anything He wills to do – a caricature of the Biblical teaching that "with God all things are possible." The ongoing acts of divine providence are conceived of in a crassly arbitrary, even capricious way. Such voluntarist notions of "absolute power" negate Biblical teachings on God's covenantal constancy in His dealings with the world, securely anchored in His mediating Word for creation. Other thinkers, emphasizing divine *rationality*, appeal to the idea of "absolute power" to argue that God is able to do whatever is consistent with the laws of logic. Only such divine acts are logically conceivable which do not involve a violation of the rule of noncontradiction (even the sacramental miracle of the mysterious transubstantiation of bread and wine in the eucharist was held to be logically defensible). The case for such rational demonstrations of the absolute power of God to perform miracles relies heavily on Aristotelian methods of reasoning, introduced into Western Christianity by Boethius, canonized in the *Sentences* of Lombard, and elaborated by the great thinkers of the medieval church. Such thinking was largely repudiated by the Reformers, but was soon revived in Protestant scholasticism through the influence of Beza and Melancthon. The lingering effects of this tradition are present, though ambiguously, in the following definition of the sovereign power of God by Louis Berkhof:

Power in God may be called the effective energy of His nature, or that perfection of His being by which He is the absolute and highest causality The *potentia ordinata* can be defined as that perfection of God whereby He, through the mere exercise of His will, can realize whatsoever is present in His will or counsel. (*Systematic Theology*, pp. 79-80.)

On traditional scholastic assumptions, the mighty acts of God in history are reduced to rational problems to be analytically solved by the human intellect. Divine decrees are accommodated to the laws of causality, resulting in the

tyranny of logical probability. God himself is reduced to the major premise undergirding an extended process of deductive argumentations. Thus the active, holy, covenant-keeping God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the father of our Lord Jesus Christ, disappears behind the arguments of philosophers and theologians (Pascal). The deeply spiritual tenor of the biblical message is largely silenced. The idea of “the analogy of being” (*analogia entis*), with its correspondence theory of knowledge, dominates the discussion, encompassing God and man in a shared network of logical intricacies. The autonomy of human reason rivals divine revelation as an operative principle. Christian thinkers become blind to the fact that rationality is itself a created function subject to creaturely norms and limitations. Thus the Creator-creature distinction suffers nearly total eclipse.

This scholastic tradition in theology results in a number of dubious approaches to the question of miracles. Some argue that miracles are *contra naturam*: they operate contrary to the established norms for the creation order. Others characterize them as *supra naturam*: from time to time and place to place God momentarily and locally suspends his “natural law” which normally governs the orderly course of events in order to make room for supernatural interventions. Both positions rest on dialectical-dualist worldviews. As Diemer points out, when modern man seeks to explain miracles by an appeal to the supernatural, the miraculous is itself actually denied.

I fear that a number of contemporary Christians, with their concept of miracles as supernatural, and with their knowledge of present-day medicine and psychology, would doubt the miraculous character of the cures told about in Scripture if they occurred in Europe today. Supernatural events neither occurred in Palestine then, nor do they occur in Europe today {For} the supernatural was, is, and always will be an *asylum ignorantiae* into which one can push anything and everything which cannot be explained I am {therefore} convinced that it is not at all necessary to posit supernatural interventions as an explanation for the miracles that Scripture relates. Anyone who uses the supernatural as an explanation cuts himself off from gaining insight in the real nature of those events. (*Nature and Miracle*, pp. 21-23)

On a biblically directed, holist worldview, God and the world are not competing forces. Accordingly, in what we call miracles God does not eliminate the instrumental agency of his creatures. They remain his servants responding to

the commanding power of his Word. These mighty acts of God, therefore, neither contravene nor supersede his dynamic yet stable order for creation. The potential for miraculous deeds is given from the beginning in and with God's abiding Word for our life in his world. Miracles are therefore not supernatural "breakthroughs" over and beyond the creation ordinances. In his wonder-working power God does not withdraw his providential care, or set it aside, or bypass it, or hold it in abeyance, or cancel its impact. The will of God revealed in such awesome signs and wonders resides in the very impinging power of his word itself. There is nothing arbitrary or capricious about them. From our perspective they may appear as surprising, unexpected, extraordinary interventions of God's hand in history. For God, however, miracles are not miracles as we perceive them. They are rather the outworkings of his will in other ways, ways which to us appear unusual and exceptional, ways which are, however, consistently at God's command. For, citing Diemer once again, "with the signs and miracles of God's providence in the history of mankind no laws or fixed relationships are circumvented. But under other than the ordinary, well-known conditions, other powers are opened up. This happens when man lives and acts out of faith and prayer. The potentials and powers of nature are thus harnessed in the service of the coming of God's kingdom on earth" (*Nature and Miracle*, p. 16). In the biblical view, therefore,

a miracle is not a sign that a God who is usually absent is, for a moment, present, ... [but rather] a signal that God is, for a moment and for a special purpose, walking down paths He does not usually walk, ... a sign that God who is always present in creative power is working here and now in an unfamiliar way. (Lewis Smedes, *Ministry and the Miraculous*, pp. 48-49)

All creational possibilities are God's servants. Miracles therefore do not contradict, but rather open up in dramatic ways the holding and healing power of God's Word for creation. That Word includes stunning potentials of which we are barely aware, which often escape our attention, and to which we are largely insensitive. In the words of Berkouwer,

It is not that in miracles a greater power is revealed than is present in the ordinary course of things. Everything that God brings into being is a work of His singular

omnipotence. But in miracles God takes another way than that which had come to be expected of him in the usual course of events. This “otherwise” of God’s working is often discernible in Scripture and it lays the foundation for the witness character of miracles. This accounts for the arousal of amazement. (*The Providence of God*, p. 231)

We must therefore be sensitive to God’s providential care not only in our “mountain top experiences” and in our “narrow escapes” from threatening disaster, but also in our “daily routines.” God’s provision of manna in the wilderness is hardly more miraculous than casting seed into the ground, where it dies, bringing forth new grain in the field. His answer to fervent prayer can be as real in medical therapy as in the dramatic healings performed by Jesus and his apostles. In the words of Bavinck,

[Providence] manifests itself not only and not primarily in extraordinary events and miracles, but just as much in the stable order of nature and in the common occurrences of daily life. (*Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, Vol. II, p. 580.)

The deepest and fullest meaning of God’s special providence, which we call miracles, is indeed shrouded in mystery. But this is true of his general providence, too. No aspect of created reality, no event in history, is rationally transparent. Rationalism is proud pretense. The mysterious depth-dimensional meaning of miracles is, accordingly, more to be reverentially adored than intellectually fathomed. Such humility “spares us from both a superficial optimism, which fails to sense the riddles of life, and from a proud pessimism, which despairs of the world and our destiny” (Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, Vol. II, p. 580).

It is difficult to draw a clear line of demarcation between regular providence and miracles as God’s “other way” of dealing with creation. Calvin posits a close relationship between these two aspects of divine providence in commenting on two “miracles,” the sun standing still in Joshua’s day and its moving backward on the sundial in response to Hezekiah’s request. These are his words:

God has witnessed by those few miracles that the sun does not daily rise and set by a blind instinct of nature, but that he himself, to renew our remembrance of his fatherly favor toward us, governs its course. Nothing is more natural than for spring to follow winter; summer, spring; and winter, fall – each in turn. Yet in this series one sees such

great and uneven diversity that it really appears each year, month, and day is governed by a new, a special providence of God. (*Institutes*, I, 16, 2)

All God's acts have a mysteriously miraculous depth-meaning. Belief in the historical reality of miracles is accordingly an enduring aspect of the historic Christian faith. The biblical doctrine of providence and a Christian view of history are unthinkable apart from such mighty acts of God as creation, the exodus, and the resurrection, integrally woven as they are into the total fabric of biblical revelation.

With the arrival of modernity, however, a radical shift set in. Enlightenment thinkers relegated miracles to the mythological worldview of ancient times. This prescientific worldview was declared obsolete. A new worldview was aborning. Modern man, now at last come of age, rules out any need for the "hypothesis" of divine providence, let alone such "variables" and "deviations" as miracles. The "god of the gaps" is dead. For we live in a self-contained universe, a closed continuum of uniform cause-and-effect relationships, a world hermetically sealed in by the law of analogy, which excludes such scientifically uncontrollable factors as providence, miracles, or a "higher hand" in history. Contemporary criticism of the biblical witness to signs and wonders and miracles is pointedly exposed by Helmut Thielicke in the following lines, where he echoes the mind of modern man:

...Certainty is possible only if the truth that claims me is analogous to what my structure of consciousness contains within it as the consciousness of truth. Since I am a rational being who is aware of being enlightened and mature, any truth-claim that reaches me can be received and appropriated by me only if it contains a rational truth. This means, however, that a truth which is only historically attested and not validated by reason is a mere scrap. If, on the other hand, it is so validated, it can be detached from the history that attests it, once it has been perceived. For religion is not true because the evangelists and apostles taught it; they taught it because it is true. I thus have my own autonomous access to truth. Perhaps in the dull and immature stages of my development the truth will first come to me by way of history. But when I perceive it and have myself appropriated it, I am independent of the one who transmits it and stand on my own feet. When the historical education of the race ends, there will be only the pure and eternal gospel of reason. (*The Evangelical Faith*, Vol. I, p. 42)

The bold, self-confident presumption undergirding this nineteenth century rationalist view of man and the world has been severely chastened by the revolutionary events of the twentieth century. Contemporary thinkers speak with greater caution and tentativity concerning the so-called “assured results of the scientific method.” They are less absolute in their statements about the fixed “laws of nature.” They concede that things appear to be more complex than formerly assumed. Notions of contingency, indeterminacy, relativity, even irrationality are common expressions in scholarly circles today. A “paradigm revolution” is upon us. Christians are sometimes tempted to rejoice in such signs of softening and retraction in the modern mechanist-determinist worldview. They may be inclined to think that this shift offers at least some slight hope of carving out anew a little room for acts of divine providence and miracle. As though miracles exist by the fortuitous shortcomings of science! Those who succumb to this negative mentality, allowing modern science to write the decisive agenda, and being content to pick up the meager bits of faith which fall from its table, can then await further scientific explorations with little else than a sense of fear and trepidation. As Berkouwer puts it,

He who rediscovers room for the activity of God in the crisis of natural science ... has already implicitly relativized this [divine] activity and has posited it over against a natural order seen as a self-existing reality. In this way the question of miracles will always be entangled in the problems of natural science. And for the most part the Biblical manner of speaking about the activity of God in this world will have been abandoned. (*The Providence of God*, pp. 219-220).

In our century, however ambiguously, Barth, Bonhoeffer, and others launched a heavy counterattack on the historical-critical hermeneutic of modern liberalism, rooted in a naturalist-secularist worldview, which stripped biblical revelation of the reality of miracles. This led Barth to take issue with the radical demythologizing method of Bultmann. Well known is also Barth’s “Yes” over against Brunner’s “No” on the miracle of the virgin birth. As with every consistent hermeneutic, however, Barth’s method of interpreting miracles finds its context of meaning in his peculiar worldview. In it he draws a sharp line of demarcation between “history” and “suprahistory.” Accordingly, he distinguishes between

“miracle” (the historical event) and “mystery” (its suprahistorical meaning). Miracles, such as the virgin birth, really happen, Barth insists, in opposition to his modernist teachers. To grasp their real significance, however, we must look beyond their historical event-character to their transhistorical meaning, the mystery of the free and sovereign act of God in Jesus Christ. In dealing with the “miracle of Pentecost,” Barth therefore distinguishes this miraculous event itself from its mysterious meaning. In his words,

The miracle is the form of the mystery. It cannot be separated from it. But it must be distinguished and considered apart. The account of it is related to that of the mystery as is the account of the Virgin Birth of Jesus to that of the incarnation enacted in this birth, or that of the empty tomb to that of His life as the Resurrected, or that of the miracles of Jesus to his Messianic utterances expressed in them. Here as everywhere miracle has the particular and indispensable function of indicating and at the same time characterizing the mystery, of giving its definite and distinctive sense and interpreting it as it is to be understood. Here as everywhere the form cannot be separated from the matter, nor the matter from the form. Here too, however, there can be no doubt that the miracle is in this sense the form of the mystery, of the divine act and revelation attested.

What, then, is the specific meaning of the miracle of Pentecost? “...It is the absolutely divine mystery of the freedom of these men to be messengers of the risen Jesus to Israel and the world.” The crucial and decisive test of faith lies, however, according to Barth, not in the miraculous signs of the Pentecost event as such, but in the mysterious meaning of these dramatic happenings as expounded in Peter’s sermon. Nevertheless,

Luke’s account of this miracle was indispensable, not to explain this miracle, which speaks for itself, nor to enhance or establish its historicity, but to limit and define it. Its message is that in the ensuing acts of the apostles we really have to do with the wonderful works of God and not the works of men and that these works consist in the fact that they will overcome the gulf between near and distant neighbors with their word. (*Church Dogmatics*, III/4, no. 54, pp. 320-23).

Barth’s distinction between miracle and mystery, interpreted as form and matter, betrays the marks of an existentially oriented reversion to the dualist tendencies of Protestant scholasticism. A new nature/grace scheme then emerges. Such

dichotomist views, leaning toward a deist conception of the Creator/creature relationship, have long plagued our understanding of miracles. In the words of Bavinck:

The major objection to deism is certainly this, that by divorcing God and the world, the infinite and the finite, and setting them dualistically alongside each other, it turns them into competing powers, locked in ceaseless struggle, disputing each other's dominion. What is given to God is taken away from the world. The more God's providence is extended, the more the creature loses its independence and freedom. And conversely, the creature can maintain its self-activity only by repelling God and robbing him of his sovereignty. (*Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, Vol. II, p. 563)

Such worldviews proceed on the assumption that created reality operates basically in accord with natural law. Sporadically, however, we experience supernatural intrusions from beyond into the established regularities of the natural order for the purpose of demonstrating a very special grace or providential care. Behind such an interpretation of miracles lies the only slightly hidden assumption of a dualist worldview in which natural causality functions independently of the word of God, with only occasional corrective interference by a *Deus ex machina*.

Such perspectives stand diametrically opposed to the biblical worldview, which confronts us with God providentially active at every point along the way, ceaselessly sustaining and governing all his creatures by the holding and healing power of his Word. We do well therefore to discard many of the commonplace categories regularly employed to distinguish miracle from ordinary history. Among them are the following: (a) the distinction between natural and supernatural, since everything in creation is "natural" in the sense of possessing its own unique creaturely identity, yet "supernatural" in the sense of being subject constantly to divine ordinance; (b) the distinction between mediate and immediate acts of God, since in every life relationship God deals with his creatures covenantally through the mediating power of his Word – contrary to Calvin's comment that God's providence is "the determinative principle of all things in such a way that sometimes it works through an intermediary, sometimes without an intermediary, sometimes contrary to every intermediary" (*Institutes*,

l,17,1); (c) the distinction between normal and abnormal, since these categories also represent a highly pejorative way of differentiating among God's providential works. This view assumes that God's activity sometimes departs from the normed order of creation.

That method is also very suspect which (d) distinguishes miracles from God's constant superintendency of history by resorting to the Aristotelian distinction between primary and secondary logical cause in order to emphasize the supernatural and unmediated (*contra media*) nature of miraculous occurrences (cf. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 176-77). Finally, that view of miracles which distinguishes them from ordinary historical events by declaring them unexplainable or incomprehensible is also very dubious, since it implies that the meaning of most events is transparent. Actually we are unable to fathom in depth even the most commonplace happenings in our daily experience. In the words of Herman Hoeksema, therefore,

It is true that we cannot understand how the Lord can multiply the few loaves of bread in His divine hands, so that a veritable multitude can be fed thereby. But no more does it lie within the limits of my conception how a seed can fall in the earth and die, in order to bring forth fruit a hundred fold. It is certainly true that my mind is amazed when the Saviour calls Lazarus out of the grave after he has been four days asleep in the dust; but no less does the birth of a little child transcend my boldest comprehension. How the Lord Jesus at the wedding of Cana could change water into wine is certainly a mystery for us; but it is no less incomprehensible for us how the vine can produce grapes and in that way change different elements into wine. In other words, it does not make any difference for my understanding whether God by His almighty power operates in the common and known way upon the vine and causes it to bring forth grapes, or whether by the same almighty power He works upon water to change that into wine. When the sun and the moon stand still upon the word of Joshua, we confess that we cannot comprehend this phenomenon; but when the Lord every morning anew causes the sun to rise on the eastern horizon, that work of God also transcends my comprehension Miracle causes us to stand amazed and draws our special attention. But the cause of this must not be found in the fact that we comprehend the common events and acts of God's providence, while the wonders transcend our comprehension; but it must much rather be found in this, that we become so accustomed to the daily works of God's omnipresent power that we usually pay no attention to them. In the miracle God certainly performs something special which exactly through its special character draws

the attention. Nevertheless, neither in the so-called supernatural, nor in the immediate character, nor to the incomprehensible character of a wonder can the proper idea of a miracle be found. (*Reformed Dogmatics*, pp. 242-43)

The biblical accent falls not on miracles as a problem to be solved, nor on puzzling over their possibility or probability, but on their matter-of-fact reality. Naturally miracles happen! What else should we expect? Concerning the resurrection, critics may exclaim: Impossible! Scripture, however, speaks a wholly different language: It was impossible for death to keep Christ down (Acts 2:24-28). Miracles are confirmations of the invincible truth of God's Word. They are not raw displays of power. Their purpose is not to impress people with overwhelming demonstrations of divine omnipotence. Nor are they given to satisfy our curiosity. Miracles are laden with a revelational intent, purpose, and meaning.

Scripture accordingly posits a close relationship between miracles and faith. Faith has an eye for the wondrous works of God, being itself a wonder of divine grace. In the Gospels, where unbelief struck people blind, we read that "[Jesus] could do no mighty work there ..." (Mark 6:5). Perhaps our frequent spiritual impotency is related to lack of faith in the "greater works" (John 14:12-14) which our Lord promised. There is no good biblical reason, therefore, to restrict God's wonder-working power to certain (past) times and (faraway) places – such as during the biblical era. To reject out of hand the reality or even the possibility of miracles in our times betrays our surrender to the secular spirit of our day. Life is as open to miracles today as it ever was. To capitulate to a closed worldview is to impoverish the power of prayer. On the other hand, an obsessive fascination with miraculous signs easily blinds us to God's providential care in the common occurrences of everyday living. Miracles are not out-of-this-world sensations. They are integral to our down-to-earth experience. More things are wrought by miracles, in response to prayer, than most of us ever dream possible. In them God acts not *contra naturam*, but *contra peccatum* –counteracting the sinful misdirection, distortion, and perversion of life in the world, not contravening his creational handiwork.

Miracles are therefore not abnormal or unnatural happenings. Such notions presupposes the normalcy of "natural law." Rather, they are reaffirmations of the normativity of the good creation order, of God's abiding faithfulness to his

covenant promises. Miracles are signs and wonders of God's intended shalom, now shattered, but restored in Christ, a shalom whose final restoration is held up before us as an eschatological hope. They represent manifestations of the future kingdom within present reality. They are forceful reminders of the "already" dimension of the coming kingdom. As Jesus declared, "If I by the finger of God cast out demons, then has the kingdom of God come upon you" (Luke 11:20). But the amazement they conjure up among us is also an emphatic reminder of the "not yet" dimension of the kingdom. Nevertheless, their seemingly exceptional occurrence should not mislead us into thinking that they are "detours," excursions into some "never, never land." Miracles are rather kingdom signposts, firmly planted along that christologically reopened way which ushers in the renewal of that good earth in which perfect righteousness dwells.