

Wonders and Signs¹

Willem J. Ouweneel

Note from Editor of Sophie:

At the invitation of the editorial staff Willem Ouweneel responds to Jan Hoogland's article in the previous edition of Sophie: "What a Miracle Signifies." Are there still miraculous healings? May or must the faithful reach out to such healings? What are we to make of contemporary healing services that are so popular today?

In his article, Hoogland refers several times to the distinction natural/common vs natural/uncommon. Rightly so. The Bible considers things that are perfectly "natural" to us as "miracles:" e.g., meteorological phenomena (Job 37:14, 16) and the development of a child on its mother's lap (Psalm 139:13ff). In the Bible, a miracle is simply all that moves us to wonder or admiration and to surprise, amazement and astonishment (Psalm 17:7; 31:22; 40:6; etc.). In such an environment, the (traditional Western dualistic) formula of nature/supernatural is totally foreign to Scripture and out of place. As far as the Creator and Preserver of the world everything He does is "natural," whether He heals via a medical doctor or via spiritual healer. I believe that Hoogland would agree with this, but the consequence of it is that, according to my opinion, there is something wrong with the title of Hoogland's piece: Miracles usually do not have the character of a "sign."

By the way, I am somewhat surprised at Hoogland's thesis that with the closure of the Canon, "God's authoritative revelation"² is also closed. Firstly, is there a divine revelation that is not authoritative? Secondly, in Reformed theology and philosophy it is emphasized that God continues to reveal Himself through both creation and through His Word, but also in history and even through human cultural achievements. In I Corinthians 14, members of the congregation receive "revelations." To claim that such

¹Willem J. Ouweneel, "Wonderen en tekenen." Transl. Jan H. Boer. *Sophie*, September 2013, pp. 32-35.

² All non-Dutch quotations in this article are Boer's translations from this Dutch article; they are not translation from the foreign original and thus may differ from that original.

revelation is a thing of the past with the closure of the Canon is really nothing but “cessation theology.”

The Bible often speaks of “signs and wonders,” by which it seems to indicate that these two are not the same. Compare, e.g., Deuteronomy 13:4. The rainbow is a “sign” (Genesis 9:12-13), but not a miracle, unless one regards all natural phenomena as miracles. A thunderstorm is a “miracle,” but not a sign, unless one regards all natural phenomena as signs of God’s power. A significant example of phenomena that were both signs and wonders are the Egyptian plagues (Exodus 7:3; 10:4): They were miraculous deeds that signified something and the Israelites had to explain to their children what it signified.

Protestant / Catholic

Then there is the question whether Protestants are by nature more skeptical about wonders than Roman Catholics are. I dare to call that into question. Before a healing in Lourdes is accepted as a genuine miracle—and that happens only a few per year—a very basic and extensive medical research takes place. In contrast, There are many Protestants, whether Reformed or Evangelical, who are quick to accept all sorts of healings in healing services as genuine miracles and who all too easily run after healers, even when they are charlatans and manipulators. In this respect there is indeed the danger of increasing superstition among Christians. However, we should not throw out the baby with the bathwater as I explain below.

I appreciate the fact that in the Roman Catholic Church a condition for being declared a saint is that the person in question has performed miracles. Such miracles are told of all church fathers and subsequent men and women of piety. Modern Christians often deride such stories, but on basis of my own experience I am inclined to accept that such “legends” just about always contain a kernel of truth. In my opinion, that also holds for the Amersfoort miracle in Hoogland’s article. Who dares to contend that the Amersfoort miracle is *complete* nonsense and that among the thousands of

healings there, none were authentic? I prefer covering my mouth to laughing at such stories as so many do.

Protestantism has always known about miraculous healings. Luther wrote in his *Tischreden* that the devil is involved in *all* serious illnesses and that healing is thus also a form of exorcism. He applied this in a practical: When Melancton was deathly ill in 1540, Luther visited him and exclaimed, “How the devil has defiled this organ of God!” He took his friend by the arm and said, “Have courage, Philip, you will not die! Trust in the Lord, who can both kill and resurrect, strike and heal.” Melancton healed miraculously: He was called back to life from death by divine power,” according to Luther.

Elsewhere, Luther testified, “Prayer does great miracles. In our time it has resurrected three people from the dead: Me, when I was sick unto death; my wife Kathe, who was also deathly sick; and Magistrate Philippus Melancton, who was deathly ill in Weimar in 1540.” In a letter to pastor Severin Schulze, Luther described extensively how he and his colleagues regularly conducted healing services. In another place he wrote, “How frequently it has happened and still happens that the devils are exorcised in the Name of Christ. Also the sick are healed by calling upon His name in prayer!” With reference to James 5:14, he wrote, “Where is the prayer of faith in the current practice of the anointing with oil? Who prays with a sick person with such a faith that he has no doubt that the patient will heal? If today such a prayer were to be offered over a sick person, that is to say, a prayer by the eldest respected and holy men, there is not a single doubt that as many people as we desire would be healed. For what restraints are there on faith?”

Calvin / Calvinism

So, Luther is alright—it is Calvin who has spoiled the market in The Netherlands, according to Hoogland. In order to understand Calvin’s negative stance with respect to healing services, one should know two things: (a) Calvin himself always struggled with poor health; (b) He had accepted the Catholic teaching about suffering. You can still hear that in the Heidelberg Catechism (Sunday 10), which teaches that sickness, along

with everything else, is to be accepted resignedly from God's "fatherly hand." Calvin also wrote, "Sicknesses are to serve us as medicines that cleanse us from the attachments to the world and to cut off from us that which is superfluous." And about himself, he wrote, "So, if God thought it profitable to add gout to my other sufferings, I am to patiently bear his fatherly discipline."

In 1645, a dialogue was held in Thorn of Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist and Moravian theologians. There the Calvinists declared the following with respect to the anointing of the sick, "We deny that this anointing rite remains useful in the Church after the cessation of the gift of miraculous healing." How totally differently did the Lutheran theologian J. A. Bengel of the eighteenth century write over the anointing rite: "The gift appears to have been given by divine inspiration with the intention that it would always be available to the church as an example of all other gifts of grace."

This fatal resignation in Dutch Calvinism continued its influence powerfully through, among others, the book *Ziekentroost*³ by Pastor Cornelis van Hille of the sixteenth century, that from the beginning was incorporated in the Dutch Calvinistic church's liturgical manual. There is no attention given here whatsoever to the possibility of healing, but only to passive resignation and preparation for dying. Dr. Karel J. Kraan (died 1982), himself a Reformed minister, called certain passages in this writing "purely medieval" and "terribly inaccurate," and added comments like "egocentric spiritual individualism," "a dangerous writing," "opiate in the Reformational liturgical manual," lack of "appropriate⁴ thinking," and a "dreadful document!"

It was not until 1968 that this notion was deleted from the Reformed church manual, but "without any confession of guilt that the church had for centuries given such unbiblical nonsense as food for the soul of the sick in her official manual. This must have been done in the hope that no one would read this sort of thing. Here, again, traditionalism and formalism have slain their thousands. It was through this mud of ages that we

³Translation of title: *Comfort for the Sick*.

⁴In this context, "appropriate" is the closest I can come to the Dutch "*zindelijk*."

ploughed our way through the Rite of Healing!” That is exceedingly crass language on the part of Kraan—but not altogether unreasonable. If Hoogland wants to occupy himself with the current attention given to healing services, he must not only pay attention to “cessation theology,” but also to the spirit of resignation and the medieval and Reformed images of God on which all this was based, that are more stoical than Biblical.

Fortunately, the church after the Reformation have not always been that passive. True, the established churches for the most part did not free themselves from the medieval heritage, but outside the Protestant establishment a more Biblical vision arose—and definitely not only in the twentieth century as Hoogland claims! In the seventeenth century, healing services appeared among the Quakers, in the eighteenth among Methodists and Herrnhutters, in the nineteenth among Catholic-Apostolics but also by Lutheran Johann Christoph Blumhart in Germany and the Reformed Andrew Murray in South Africa. In the twentieth century it appears not only in the Pentecostal Movement, but also, e.g., among Anglicans (James Moore Hickson) and Roman Catholics (Francis MacNutt). As a splendid symptom: Since the Second Vatican Concilium, the sacrament of the last rite (James 5:14-16) has once again been restored to a real anointing of the sick, focusing on healing, not on death. Further, see the somewhat older standard texts of “ordinary” Protestants: Otto Witt, Fadiey Lovsky, Sidlow Baxter, Karel Kraan.

New Openness

Hoogland asks how to evaluate the increasing openness of Protestants to faith in miracles. I answer, “That openness has to do with:

- (a) The Evangelical resistance to cessation theology and to medieval resignation;
- (b) A new theology of the *charismata* or spiritual gifts;
- (c) (perhaps especially) The rise of a kind of Christianity that is not only interested in whether you believe in the correct doctrines (confessionalism), but that is also concerned with experience.

People want to know whether God really exists, but are not looking for rational proofs for God so much as the *experience* of the reality of God. One single authentic healing miracle carries more weight than a hundred logical arguments.

Of course, I agree with Hoogland that such miracles need to be substantiated. I can accept an authentic healing miracle:

- (a) When it has been medically established before that the patient suffers from sickness Q;”
- (b) When there is no expectation of a medical healing;
- (c) When the healing of Q occurs in a healing service;
- (d) When the healing is medically confirmed afterwards.

(Actually, Ouweneel recognizes more situations--transl.) When the sickness can be medically healed, whether by surgery or application of medicine, but a healing has taken place in a healing service so that there is no further need for treatment, I will accept this as a miraculous healing. Even when it is “only” a psychosomatic sickness from which the patient has suffered for ten years or more, and she is healed *stante pede* (right there on the spot) and permanently, I accept that as a healing miracle as well. (I now use the term “wonder” or “miracle” in the narrower sense of the word.) For these situations, I do not need the term “supernatural.” Put stronger: in each healing service psychological factors undoubtedly play a role, but that does not explain everything. Otherwise, we could better replace all medical internists with psychologists.

Medical Doctor versus Spiritual Healer

I also agree with Hoogland that God can heal via a doctor as well as via a spiritual healer. But in contrast to Hoogland, it does make a great difference for me. God can give five thousand people bread via the baker as well as via Jesus. The enormous difference is that the baker route does not give a powerful witness, but that of Jesus does. When we receive bread from the baker of healing via a doctor, we are grateful to God. But when five

thousand people all receive food from five loaves via a servant of God or people on whom the medical doctors have given up, are healed via a healing service, a powerful witness is present that tells us that *God is present here in a special way.*

Generally speaking, people do not come to faith simply because they receive bread from a baker or healing from a doctor. But masses of people come to faith through miracles that cannot be explained by ordinary natural laws known to us. Every day approximately 100,000 to 130,000 people come to faith, and of those around 80-90 per cent do so in response to wonders and signs. In the largely Hindu Nepal, the last decennia hundreds of thousands have come to faith, of whom, according to missionaries, 99 per cent come through signs and wonders. We may turn up our noses over such reports, but who would complain if these turns out to be permanent conversions? Besides, the contribution of the large established churches, who are hardly conscious of miraculous healings, is really minimal when it comes to world mission. Most conversions in Latin America, Africa and Asia by far are the result of Pentecostal and Charismatic missionaries.⁵

In reaction, Western Christians have also developed a massive desire to be healed in healing services. That is understandable, but, like Hoogland, I am not really happy with that trend. Certainly, God grants his children healing, also in cases where doctors have reached their limits: Lazarus, Dorcas, Eutychus came back to life; the converted Saul regained his sight; Lame Aeneas as well as the deathly sick Epaphroditus were healed. Over against those, the New Testament contains only stories of two believers of whom it is announced that they were sick without further information about their future: Timothy and Trophimus. (I doubt very much that Paul's "thorn in the flesh" was a sickness.) Those "signs" stood primarily in the service of mission and evangelization. When Jesus says that five "signs" will accompany or follow believers, he includes exorcism and healing of the sick (Mark 16:17ff), and refers clearly to missionary work (see also :20!).

⁵Note from the Transl: This claim is correct only if these missionaries include those sponsored by the indigenous churches themselves. It is *not* correct if the reference is only to Western missionaries. I know; I was/am one of the latter.

Speaking in tongues belong to the things intended for the faithful, but those (wonder)signs are for the unbelievers (I Corinthians 14:22). How fortunate: Of the rain that is intended for the unbelievers—in order for them to come to Christ—some drops occasionally also fall on believers, because God also loves them!

Prayer Does Wonders

I disagree the most with Hoogland's proposition that miracles cannot be influenced by prayer.⁶ From the Reformed perspective, i.e., on basis of a certain vision of the sovereignty of God and of a God who has determined everything that happens already before the foundations of the world, such a perspective makes sense. But is it Biblical? The core question is: Can prayer influence anything at all? In the dogmatic part of my book *Het plan van God* I have referred to numerous Biblical examples of such influence. The Bible often says that God allowed Himself to be persuaded to change His course of action by prayer. That is to say, He allowed people to persuade Him not to take the action he had announced He would (Genesis 18; Exodus 33; Isaiah 38; Jona 3). James 5:16 says that "the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." Jesus does not say, "Pray for the sick and, if God wills, He will give healing"—as Hoogland suggests. Instead, He says, "Heal the sick" (Matthew 10:8; Luke 10:9). *You* have to do it, of course in the power of God.

The emphasis here is not at all on prayer. At most there is an accompanying prayer as in John 11:41ff; Acts 28:8; James 5:14. Instead, it is about the proclamation of healing of the sick: "walk" (Acts 3:6); "get up" (Acts 9:34); "receive your sight" (Acts 22:13). Thus I reject the term "healing by prayer" that Hoogland uses. On a small scale I have been allowed to witness how In missions around the world thousands are healed, *not* because missionaries prayed, "Lord please heal this person," but by saying, "Be healed in the Name of Jesus!"

⁶Translator: I indicate my own disagreement with Hoogland's proposition in the last sentence of footnote 5 in my translation of Hoogland's article reproduced above this piece by Ouweneel.

One could ask tens of critical theological questions about the above. I have tried to answer many of them in my book *Geneest de zieken!*⁷ while I myself have no definitive answer for many others. But that does not hinder me from continuing with the laying of hands on the sick and to proclaim healing. When that sort of service bears fruit, “even” in the West, “even” among believers, then we should not be surprised that many Christians in our own time reach out for this. This especially so in our situation where many are no longer satisfied with the frequently dead “orthodoxy,” but wish to experience God concretely. Indeed, there are many “dangers” here, but that is also the case with driving a car, but we do it anyway.

⁷ The meaning of this title is “Heal the Sick!”