

SYMPHONIC THEOLOGY

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CHAPTER 10: PASTORAL HEALING IN THE MIRACLES CONTROVERSY

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Now we should ask how the insights developed about miracles can be applied fruitfully in pastoral ministry to people with inadequate conceptions of biblical teaching.

PRINCIPAL PRACTICAL CONCERNS

In our day the debate about miracles is related to the evaluation of the Charismatic movement as a whole. (For convenience, I include in this movement both the established Pentecostal denominations and various varieties of Neo-Pentecostalism within other denominations.) But we should not imagine that analysis of miracles will simultaneously answer the many other questions that are connected with the Charismatic movement. Several principal concerns are related specifically to miracles. For one thing, the stress on the miraculous within the Charismatic movement, and sometimes a preoccupation with it, should be seen as at least in part a reaction to and criticism of the closed-universe world view of modern science. This reaction has an element of truth (see the discussion about natural law in chapter 9).

Second, people who are preoccupied with the extraordinary and the spectacular need to recognize their immaturity (1 Cor. 12-14). Those who are enamored with the extraordinary need to learn to appreciate God's presence in the apparently ordinary. This attitude cures the lust after the extraordinary. To a person who seems preoccupied with the extraordinary and who is prone to say, "A miracle happened to me today," someone might well reply, "Great. Ten miracles happened to me in the last ten minutes. Isn't it miraculous how my fingers can move when I want them to?"

Third, people in this camp need to realize the uniqueness and foundational character of biblical miracles and biblical revelation. Knowing that God has proved himself true once and for all and that he has accomplished salvation once and for all, they will be less dependent on having spectacular new assurances each day. As the story of Job illustrates, God wants us to trust him not only when we can see that he is caring for us but when we cannot see it.

There are also problems to confront among people who believe that miracles have ceased and who may be antagonistic to the Charismatic movement. Some are too quick to deny the occurrence of the extraordinary. They are afraid of it, particularly if it is associated with immaturity in other respects. We must remember that God takes special care of the lambs of his flock (Isa. 40:11). People who have been Christians for only a little while can be likened to lambs. Sometimes young Christians meet with extraordinarily blessed experiences even though they have immature expectations about guidance and miracles. We need not deny God's care for them in these instances but can simply point out that lambs are supposed to grow up. Moreover, we are not to eliminate from our reckoning the possibility of God's surprising us with his miracle-working power. The power that raised Christ from the dead is working among us (Eph. 1:19-20, 3:20).

ADVANTAGES AND LIABILITIES OF PERSPECTIVES

Can we see, then, that there are both advantages and liabilities to identifying ourselves with one of these camps? Suppose that we teach "miracles have ceased." We may truthfully make this statement if we use a narrow definition of miracles, in which miracles convey special revelation. By choosing such a definition, we put into prominence the uniqueness of the great acts of God in which he accomplished salvation once-for-all in the course of history (the Exodus, the life of Christ, Pentecost). Such an emphasis is an advantage. But we have the liability of being identified with unexpected negativism that characterizes some members of this camp.

Suppose, on the other hand, that we say, "Miracles occur in our day." We may truthfully affirm this statement if we use a broad definition of miracles, in which any gracious acts of God out of the ordinary are included. By choosing such a definition, we stress the continuity of the present with the past. Christ's resurrection power is at work among us and in us, because he lives. This emphasis is also an advantage. But we have the liability of being identified with the preoccupation with the spectacular that characterizes some members of this camp.

The Bible itself indicates *both* continuity and discontinuity between foundational acts of God in Bible times and the present day. In our teaching we want to say everything that the Bible says and help people who are one-sided to come to grips with their imbalance. In the long run, we best accomplish this goal by stimulating appreciation for God's personal, intimate, glorious, powerful, "miraculous" presence as Lord in the *ordinary* events of our lives. We attain this appreciation precisely through the insights furnished more strikingly by the *extraordinary* works of God given in the Bible.

Here the extraordinary, once-for-all works of God become a perspective on the ordinary. We are able to identify the powerful hand of God in the ordinary as we extend what we learn from the extraordinary. In the Psalms, Israel demonstrates this experience. Israel was enabled to see God's hand in providence partly by the experience of the Exodus, in which God's hand was spectacular (Pss. 107, 135).

But we can also work in the opposite direction. Suppose that we start, as the Charismatic person likes to do, with an extraordinary work of God in our own time (a "miracle"). Such a thing is intended to be treated not as something self-sufficient but as a pointer to the fact that God is still the same God he demonstrated himself to be in the redemption accomplished through Jesus Christ. A miracle today starts with us here and now in order to introduce us to larger vistas of history. We ought to see from today's miracle that God is present not only now but in all of history. His power and presence are so certain that we do not lust for continual reassurance of it. Rather we look to that central assurance given to us in Christ's death and resurrection. That foundation underlies any "miracle" today. Thus today's miracle can become a perspective on all of God's work in history, one that leads us beyond narrow, subjective preoccupations.

Of course, we cannot simplistically determine the meaning of an extraordinary event in our time. We need to have the Bible as our framework or guide in order to interpret properly the significance of the event. Miracles simply do not prove the authenticity of an alleged prophet (Deut. 13:2)! Nor do miracles granted to or through a person show that that person is more holy or more doctrinally sound than others. For this very reason it is important that we have the Bible as a final and sufficient point of reference for our understanding of God and our assurance of salvation. We need to see that the great miraculous acts of God that inaugurate new epochs of history are our basis and our security. No multiplication of extraordinary works of God today could replace that foundation. On the other hand, the whole world is God's, including the extraordinary. In principle, then, a modern event can be used as a starting point for looking at the whole.

CONDUCTING AN ARGUMENT

A controversy such as the debate over miracles is not always what it appears to be. Frequently other issues, not directly addressed, may be the real reason for disagreement. We always need to ask what the real point or points at issue are. In this case, is the real question whether God does extraordinary things today? Or is it more in the area of what our expectations should be and what our understanding should be of anything extraordinary?

Then we may ask, "What is the strongest point and strongest love of my opponents?" Frequently it is possible to start with this point and expand it into a perspective in order to introduce greater balance into their understanding and to point them in the direction of a solution. We need not be disappointed if we do not always get complete agreement. We are not aiming for an all-or-nothing solution.

TALKING WITH PEOPLE WHO BELIEVE THAT MIRACLES HAVE CEASED

In talking with those who believe that miracles have ceased, we first ask ourselves what the real issue is or where there is a central need, an ignorance, or a confusion. Such people may have a need in one of the following areas: (1) they may view natural law or ongoing ordinary processes as something semi-independent of God; (2) they may fear the irrational or inexplicable; (3) they may lack appreciation for the ongoing character of God's powerful and sometimes surprising presence through the power of Christ's resurrection at work for us (Eph. 1:19-20); or (4) they may fear that admission of miracles will sanction the immaturities associated with some people in the Charismatic movement. Their strong point is often their appreciation for the objectivity of God's finished work in Christ, recorded once-for-all in Scripture. Our comments to such people could start with this strong point.

If the problem is with a certain view of natural law, we may appeal to the resurrection of Christ and to other miracles in the Bible. We point out that they are demonstrations of how powerful God is, how completely in control. God is in control in the same way, even in the case of apparently ordinary events. Thus we eliminate the idea of natural law as an intermediary keeping God from direct contact with the world.

As an alternative, we might use natural law itself as a perspective to stretch a person's conception of law. A law is a general rule about events. But it may take into account particular circumstances and situations. Formulations of physical laws always tacitly include the qualification "other things being equal." Good laws by human governments make provision for certain extraordinary circumstances

when exceptions are in order. Such taking into account of particular circumstances is not irrational or inconsistent but rational.

We can utilize analogies between this type of law and God's rule of the universe. God has a plan for the universe that includes human beings in important roles. Human beings are primary inheritors of redemption and combatants in spiritual war. God's plans and rules, therefore, may be expected not to be wholly expressible in terms of simple mathematical formulas but to take people into account in an essential way. Moreover, it is wise of him to include in his plans provision for the unusual case. Now, miracles in the Bible itself are precisely unusual cases. They are associated with God's great acts of redemption, acts that have a special role as crucial upheavals in the war against sin. There is a periodicity in God's works, so that certain times are times of great crisis and upheaval. The coming of Christ himself is the greatest time of upheaval, precisely because Christ's presence is the presence of God himself in an unprecedented way. Precisely at such points we may expect the laws of nature to have vastly different form.

But this line of thought suggests that we cannot always anticipate beforehand what God will do in unusual circumstances. Nor do we, with our limited vision, always know when other things are *not* equal. Hence there is no bar to admitting that the laws of nature may include all the miraculous apparent exceptions that may occur.

This approach is one way to deal with problems associated with the idea of natural law. Other people, however, may fear the inexplicable and may be insensitive to God's presence in the power of Christ in this age. To help such individuals, we might begin once again with the strong point: respect for the miracles associated directly with the giving of Scripture. People need to submit themselves totally to Scripture, which means being willing to be surprised by God's thoughts. God's lordship is not what we in our merely human will might desire. God's acts are beyond what we dream (Eph. 3:20); his mercy is truly surprising. For example, God heals people that have very imperfect ideas of faith (Luke 8:48). Let's relax about the possibility of his healing people today who have imperfect understanding of his purposes. Extraordinary works of power today all point back to that one source of power for us--the resurrection of Christ. Because of the Resurrection, God displays his grace so lavishly now.

We can also show that the sufficiency and clarity of Scripture leads to this open attitude toward modern miracles. The Bible's message gives us certainty about who God is, what he desires from us, and how he saves us. Precisely *because* of that certainty, we do not need to be anxious about how to identify God's will from guesses about the significance of what he is doing today and how he is doing it. We will be disposed to admit that God can do extraordinary things today, because his doing so does not threaten us. We can pray boldly, leaving it to God

to answer in either extraordinary or ordinary ways, because the extraordinary will not unbalance our security.

Moreover, one might appeal to people who are in fear by pointing to the advantages in persuasion. We can better persuade those in the Charismatic movement if we do not get sidetracked by debating the existence of modern miracles. Rather, we show that even their own experiences, so far as they may be genuine, actually call them back to trusting uniquely in the resurrection of Christ.

I propose, then, taking this approach to people who argue that miracles have ceased. But our words, by themselves, will probably not make much impact unless our own lives exhibit the stability that comes from being rooted in Scripture. For this reason, the Charismatic movement has not won over more people from the opposite camp.

TALKING WITH PEOPLE WHO BELIEVE THAT MIRACLES CONTINUE

Now we should consider how to talk with people on the opposite wing, those who believe that miracles continue. Some of these people are sound and mature in the faith, but others have problems. Personal lacks are likely to be (1) lust for the spectacular; (2) devaluation of the ordinary; (3) lack of appreciation for the accomplished character of God's finished work in Christ's life, death, and resurrection; and (4) weak use of the Bible as the unique foundational interpretation of these unique events. Their strong point is typically their appreciation of God's continued presence and their expectation of seeing great and surprising works of God.

To help deal with the first two needs, we can use the spectacular as a perspective on everything. Can we see everything as a miracle, as spectacular? We might start with Ephesians 3:20-21. This passage speaks of God's doing "immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine." Does not such a passage lay before us as a goal an experience of "continuous miracle"? God can work "immeasurably more," which would include accomplishing his works in more circumstances and times than we now envision. What would it be like to have continuous miracles? If we had nothing but one surprise after another, it would be chaos. The alternative to chaos is regularity, some pattern to our lives. God's power will be present, but sometimes in a way that might strike unbelievers as not obvious. Sometimes such regularities might seem ordinary to them. Perhaps things seem ordinary to us now because we do not fully appreciate how God *is* at work.

According to Ephesians, we grow into an understanding of God's mighty works by growing in the love of Christ (Eph. 3:18-19). We mature in the love of Christ, Paul says, by studying and meditating on what Paul has written (Eph. 3:3-4). If we seriously and prayerfully apply ourselves to understanding what Paul says about the significance of Jesus Christ, we will become centers of "continuous miracle." Study and meditation on the Bible is necessary. And so we come around to touch on the last two weaknesses above. Having our lives rooted in the finished work of Christ and in the teaching of the Bible is precisely the way to grow into a person who is the center of Christ's power today.

Our answer will not mean much, however, unless our own lives show consciousness of God's presence in power. For this reason, the doctrinalists have not won over more people from the opposite camp. Often we do not express the whole truth in our arguments. Or if there is truth in our arguments, there is not an equal amount of truth in our lives.

Moreover, we should bear in mind that some church divisions and doctrinal divisions have existed for centuries. Even the difference with respect to charismatic miracles, which primarily belongs to the twentieth century, promises to be with us for a long while. We should make a positive contribution toward reconciliation, rather than giving up, in those cases in which, for example, someone is not totally convinced and will not adopt the totality of our viewpoint, including our exact vocabulary.

THE CREDIBILITY OF BIBLICAL MIRACLES

We have pondered almost exclusively the debate between Charismatics and non-Charismatics over modern miracles. But there are other areas of debate. For instance, modern secularism denies the possibility or credibility of miracles recorded in the Bible itself. How do we respond to this denial? Modern secularism often requires discussion oriented in different directions. The real points at issue are usually not miracles as such (though they may be the starting point). The debate involves the entirety of one's world view and especially one's views of God and of modern science.

Even here, there are obvious ways of using perspectives to appropriate the opponent's strong point. For instance, we may expand the idea "law of nature," as we did above, until it includes the miraculous. Or we may use the idea of God's speaking as a perspective on modern science. [1](#) God's speech is the real "law" of the universe. All scientific study works at uncovering some of the regularities of God's word, which governs all things. Modern scientific triumphs then become so many exhibitions of the faithfulness of God in ruling the world harmoniously day by day. Miracles are alternate modes of his faithfulness in extraordinary ways. But I cannot here develop these points fully.

I have been concerned to illustrate the symphonic method of examining a single theological problem. The symphonic character of the approach appears particularly in the attempt to weave together genuine insights held by each of the two main views. Using each of the positions as a perspective on miracle, we are led to a standpoint that is not strictly identical with either of them--at least when the positions are held in their more one-sided forms. Yet we do not use a frontal attack or abandon the past. We attempt to appreciate people's concerns and then build on them. Their concerns become the different "instruments" in a symphonic articulation of biblical truth. This approach is far from relativism, as I have already shown in chapter 5. We grow in understanding the truth by using a multiplicity of perspectives.

Footnotes

1. For an expanded discussion, see Vern S. Poythress, "Science as Allegory," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 35 (1983): 65-71.