

Acts 5:12-16

Introduction

In Acts chapter 4, after Peter and John had been arrested, threatened, and then released, we remember how they went back to “their own [people] and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them” (4:23). In response to this report, they all lifted their voices to God with one accord. They acknowledged God as the Master (*despotes*) of all, the one who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them (4:24). They acknowledged that God had foretold (that He had purposed and predestined) all that Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, did to His holy Servant Jesus (4:25-28). And then they concluded their prayer with this request:

- Acts 4:29-30 — “And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your slaves may speak Your **word** [*logos*; message] with all confidence, while You extend Your hand to **heal**, and **signs and wonders** happen through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus.”

Notice the relationship between the two parts of this request. The apostles pray that God would grant that *they* might speak His word (*logos*) with all confidence *while (en)* God extends His hand to heal, and signs and wonders happen through the name of His holy Servant Jesus. The “healings” and the “signs and wonders” that are to happen through Jesus’ name are all—always—in the service of the “word” (*logos*; message) about Jesus Christ and the salvation that is in His name (cf. 2:41; 4:4; 8:4, 25; 10:36; 13:26; 15:7; 16:30-32; 18:5). We read in the very next verse in chapter 4:

- Acts 4:31 — And when they had prayed earnestly, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the **word** [*logos*; message] of God with confidence.

Here’s the first part of the answer to the disciples’ prayer (the speaking of the word with confidence). It’s not until after Luke’s summary description of the unity and love that characterized the “multitude” [*plethos*; 4:32] of those who believed” and after Luke’s account of Ananias and Sapphira and the “great fear [that] came over the whole assembly [*ekklesia*]” that Luke comes now to the second part of the answer to the disciples’ prayer.

I. Acts 5:12-16 — Now through [*dia*] the hands of the apostles many **signs and wonders** were happening among the people, and they were all with one accord in Solomon’s Portico. Now none of the rest dared to associate with them; but the people were holding them in high esteem. Yet more than ever believers in the Lord were added to their number, multitudes of men and women, to such an extent that they even carried the sick out into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, so that when Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on any one of them. Also the multitude from the cities in the vicinity of Jerusalem were coming together, bringing people who were sick or afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all being **healed**.

The Apostles asked that they might speak God’s word with all confidence while God extended his hand to heal, and signs and wonders happened through the name of His holy Servant Jesus

(4:29-30). And now Luke tells us that “through [*dia*] the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were happening among the people,” and the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits were all being healed. So what are we to make of all these “healings”—of all these signs and wonders? What does it mean? And why don’t we see the same kinds of things happening today? Wouldn’t it be beneficial in all sorts of ways if God was still extending His hand today to heal multitudes of sick people through the name of His holy Servant Jesus? Wouldn’t it be a good and desirable thing if God was still extending His hand today to perform signs and wonders? That’s what we might be tempted to think, but in fact, this reveals a potential fundamental flaw in our understanding of Scripture. To the extent that we could wish these things were still happening today, we may find ourselves unable to explain why they *were* happening *then*; and to the extent that we’re unable to explain biblically why these things were happening then, we may find ourselves somewhat awkward or even embarrassed in telling a non-Christian today that we believe the miracles in the Bible but certainly not the contemporary claims to miracles (miracles performed by human agents). Why? What’s the difference? What do these things mean?

II. “Signs and wonders” in service of the “word.”

Remember how we saw that the “healings” and the “signs and wonders” that happened through Jesus’ name were always in the service of the “word” (*logos*; message) about Jesus and the salvation that’s in His name (4:29-30). In other words, the purpose of the “signs and wonders” that are performed in the name of Jesus is to authenticate and validate the “word” (the message) about Jesus and the salvation that is in His name. We saw this with the healing of the lame man in chapter three (3:1-10) and the subsequent sermon that Peter preached (3:11-26) as well as Peter’s and John’s testimony before the Sanhedrin (4:1-12). The healing of the lame man authenticated and validated the word/message about the arrival of the eschatological days of fulfillment in Jesus Christ. We see this, also, in the following passages in Acts:

- Acts 8:4–7 — Therefore, those who had been scattered went about, proclaiming the good news of **the word [*logos*]**. Now Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began **preaching Christ** to them. And the crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was being **said** by Philip, *as they heard and saw the signs* which he was doing. For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were **healed**.
- Acts 14:3 — [Paul and Barnabas] spent a long time [in Iconium of Galatia] speaking boldly with reliance upon the Lord, who was testifying to **the word [*logos*] of His grace**, granting that **signs and wonders** be done through their hands.

We read in Hebrews:

- Hebrews 2:1–4 — [I]f **the word [*logos*]** spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every trespass and disobedience received a just penalty, how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? **That salvation, first spoken by the Lord**, was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also testifying with them, both by **signs and wonders** and by various miracles and by gifts of **the Holy Spirit** according to His own will.

And then in Romans:

- Romans 15:18–19 — For I will not be bold to speak of anything except what Christ has brought about through me, leading to the obedience of the Gentiles **by word [logos] and deed [ergon]**, in the power of **signs and wonders**, in the power of **the Spirit**; so that from Jerusalem and all around as far as Illyricum **I have fully preached the gospel of Christ**.

But again, wouldn't it be immensely helpful to have these same authenticating signs and wonders today for our own preaching of the Gospel of Christ? Why isn't God testifying to the word of His grace today, in the same way as He was then? The answer is both very simple and very profound.

III. “Signs and wonders” in service of a “word” that was redemptive-historically new.

The most important thing for us to understand is that this “word”—this *logos* or message—about Jesus Christ was *at that time* “redemptive-historically” *new*. That the Messiah would come had been prophesied for thousands of years, but that the Messiah was *Jesus*, now resurrected from the dead and ascended to the right hand of God and that the salvation accomplished by this Messiah was now being applied to an “assembly” that was defined by faith in Him and composed (ultimately) of Jews and Gentiles alike was a wholly new reality. This was the inauguration of the final and climactic act in redemptive history—the last step in the unfolding in time of God's eternal plan of salvation. (Note that no other religion can claim such a thing as “redemptive history.”) It's essential, then, for us to understand that these “signs and wonders” and “healings” were all in the service of a “word” that was, *at that time*, “redemptive-historically” *brand-new*. This was, specifically, the “word” that the promised Messiah is Jesus (crucified, buried and raised from the dead) and that now He's building His own new assembly (*ekklesia*/"church")—a new Israel. There's no way to overstate the earth-shaking, epochal significance of those first transitional days for that first generation of believers. So now we remember what we read in Hebrews chapter two:

- Hebrews 2:3b–4 — That salvation, **FIRST** spoken by the Lord [it had never before been announced as an accomplished reality], was **confirmed** to us **by those who heard**, God also testifying with them, both by **signs and wonders** and by various miracles [*dynamis*] and by gifts of **the Holy Spirit** according to His own will.

Do you see how these “signs and wonders” and “various miracles and... gifts of the Holy Spirit” were functioning? They were authenticating the reality that this brand-new, never before heard announcement of salvation in Jesus was, in fact, the *redemptive-historical fulfillment* of all the covenants, and types, and shadows, and prophecies that had come before. It was this specific redemptive-historical moment in time, therefore, that gave to all these “signs and wonders” their *raison d'être*—their “reason for being.” Or we could turn it around and say that these “signs and wonders” were all bound up together with this specific redemptive-historical moment in time. We see the same thing in Acts chapter 15. When some believers from the sect of the Pharisees were saying that it was necessary to circumcise Gentile converts and to command them to keep the Law of Moses, Peter stood up and said:

- Acts 15:7–12 — “Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear **the word [logos] of the gospel** and believe. And

God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them **the Holy Spirit**, just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.” And all the multitude kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what **signs and wonders** God had done through them **among the Gentiles**.

The “signs and wonders” that God did through Barnabas and Paul among the Gentiles as they preached “the word [*logos*] of the gospel” from the “Old Testament” Scriptures “legitimized” the brand-new redemptive-historical reality that there was no longer any distinction between Jews and Gentiles. No longer does circumcision count for anything, but only the cleansing of the heart by faith. It took time even for the apostles to fully grasp this reality. The signs and wonders that God did through Barnabas and Paul *among the Gentiles*, therefore, were key to the authentication of this brand-new, never before heard of redemptive-historical state of affairs. This, then explains what Paul later wrote to the Galatian Christians:

- Galatians 3:2, 5 — This is the only thing I want to learn from you: **did you receive the Spirit** by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? ... [*D*]oes **He who provides you with the Spirit** and works **miracles** [*dynamis*] among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?

Do you see what Paul is saying? This distinction between “works of the law” and “hearing with faith” is a redemptive-historical distinction (cf. Old Covenant / New Covenant). As one commentator puts it: “Who ever knew a *Judaizer* to whom the Lord granted a single [miracle]? But wherever the apostles went, these [miracles] followed, [yes], in abundance, granted lavishly by God” (Lenski). Another commentator paraphrases Paul’s words similarly:

Was the person by whose instrumentality [you] received the Holy [Spirit], and who confirmed his doctrine among you by miracles, [was he] an upholder of the Mosaic law? Or was he a preacher of the simple gospel? ... Have any of those who are of “the works of the law” and not of “the hearing of faith,” have any of *them* “ministered to you the Spirit, or wrought miracles among you?” (Brown).

The miracles worked among the Galatians were intended to authenticate a brand-new redemptive-historical state of affairs—namely, the reception of the eschatological Spirit not by the old “covenant of circumcision” (cf. Gal. 5:1-6), but rather by “hearing [the word/message about Jesus and responding to that word/message] with faith.” The miracles worked among the Galatians were intended to authenticate even the existence of the Galatian assembly itself, as it consisted only of the spiritual seed of Abraham (both Jews and Gentiles in one body) as the true eschatological Israel. The miracles worked among the Galatians authenticated this brand-new, “word” as the redemptive-historical fulfillment of all the covenants, and types, and shadows, and prophecies that had come before. This was something that needed to be—that *had* to be.

This explains why signs and wonders and miracles of healing were especially and uniquely associated with the apostles in their redemptive-historical foundational role in the New Covenant “assembly.”

- Matthew 16:18 — “And I also say to you that you are Peter [*petros*], and **upon this rock** [*petra*] I will build My assembly...”
- Ephesians 2:20 — [You have] been built on the **foundation** of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone...

Luke says in chapter 2:

- Acts 2:43 — And fear came upon every soul; and many wonders and signs were taking place **through the apostles**.

And here in chapter 5:

- Acts 5:12 — [A]t the **hands of the apostles** many signs and wonders were happening among the people...

Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

- 2 Corinthians 12:12 — **The signs of a true apostle** were worked out among you with all perseverance, **by signs and wonders and miracles** [*dynamis*].

Even the signs and wonders that happened through Stephen and Philip (both deacons; 6:8; 8:5-7, 13) were authenticating the never before preached apostolic message/word about Jesus as the true consummation/fulfillment of redemptive history. It’s this recognition of that unique redemptive-historical moment in time—of that transitional moment from the old to the new—that enables us to understand Paul’s reference to the “gifts of healings” and “workings of miracles” (etc.) that were given to various believers in the first new covenant assemblies (1 Cor. 12:8-11, 28-29). These “gifts of healings” and “workings of miracles” were demonstrating the redemptive-historical legitimacy of those first New Covenant assemblies.

In the Bible, signs and wonders and miracles of healing can only be understood within a specific redemptive-historical context. When they’re understood in their proper context, then we can thoroughly embrace them and rejoice in them. These signs and wonders were necessary not only for that first generation of believing Jews, but also for that first generation of believing Gentiles as they were being grafted in to partake with the Jews of the rich root of the olive tree (Rom. 11:17, 24). In other words, the “signs and wonders” and the redemptive-historical context are *mutually* authenticating and necessary to each other. The signs and wonders were necessary to authenticate and explain that specific redemptive-historical moment as the true fulfillment of all the previous steps and stages in redemptive history, while that specific redemptive-historical moment was also necessary to give the “signs and wonders” their *raison d’être*—their “reason for being.” Apart from that specific redemptive-historical moment in time, the signs and wonders and miracles of healing would not ultimately have made sense. This helps us to understand the

signs and wonders that Moses did at that specific redemptive-historical moment when God was taking Israel to be His covenant assembly. Stephen says in Acts chapter 7:

- Acts 7:36 — “This man [Moses] led [the people of Israel] out, **doing wonders and signs** in the land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years.”

(Cf. The miracles of Elijah [John the Baptist (Mal. 4:5; Mat. 11:14; 17:10-12; Lk. 1:17); transfiguration (17:3-4); journey to Mt. Horeb/Sinai (1 Kings 19); parting/crossing of the Jordan (2 Kings 2); etc] and Elisha.)

This also enables us to understand the signs and wonders that Jesus did at that climactic redemptive-historical moment when He was creating His new covenant assembly. Peter said, in Acts chapter 2:

- Acts 2:22 (cf. Lk. 7:20-22) — “Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with **miracles and wonders and signs** which God did through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know...”

The Bible is, in large part, the record of redemptive history, which explains why it records so many “signs and wonders.” However, for the vast majority of the years covered by the Bible and for the vast majority of the people who lived during those years, life was just as “normal” and “unexceptional” as our lives are today. Why don’t we see signs and wonders and miracles of healing in the church today? Very simply, because there’s no need. If the point of these signs and wonders had been to “convince” unbelievers or even to prove God’s love and compassion for physically suffering people, then certainly they would have continued unabated until today. But as it is, not all sick people were always healed (people still came down with the sicknesses by which they died). And as it is, there were plenty who witnessed these signs and wonders who didn’t believe. The Sanhedrin rejected the divine origin of the signs and wonders (4:13-18). There were many who witnessed the signs and wonders and held the believers in high esteem, but who still did not dare to associate with them (5:12-13). Simon Magus was amazed by the signs and wonders and was even baptized, but then proved that his faith was counterfeit (8:9-24). Later, there will be Gentiles who witness signs and wonders, but who interpret them in the context of their own idolatrous paganism (14:8-18).

Why don’t we see signs and wonders and miracles of healing in the church today? Because there’s no need. Because they’ve already fully accomplished their intended purpose. The redemptive-historical legitimacy of the word/message about Jesus as the promised Messiah and so the redemptive-historical legitimacy of the New Covenant assembly has already been established; it’s already been authenticated by signs and wonders and miracles of healing. There’s no need, therefore, to be perpetually reestablishing and re-authenticating in each successive generation that which has already been fully established and authenticated. In fact, that doesn’t even make any logical sense unless we suppose that signs and wonders are intended to—or even capable of—producing saving faith. (But this misunderstands the true nature of conversion.)

None of this is to say that God doesn't still miraculously heal or that we should no longer ask God for physical healing. The point here is *signs* of healing done "through the hands" of Spirit-filled believers (5:12; 14:3; 19:11). It's these "signs" that we should no longer be expecting or looking for today because their *raison d'être*—their "reason for being"—very simply no longer exists. Today, as always, "the Spirit of God makes the reading, but especially the preaching of the *word*, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation" (BC Q.94).

Conclusion

While it's important for us to understand "negatively" why we don't see signs and wonders and miracles of healing today, and why we should not be looking for these things today, it's even more important for us to understand and rejoice in the positive side of this same reality. Brothers and sisters, two thousand years ago, "at the hands of the apostles *many* signs and wonders **were** happening among the people..." (5:12). Two thousand years ago, "the multitude from the cities in the vicinity of Jerusalem *were* coming together, bringing people who were sick or afflicted with unclean spirits, and they **were** all being healed" (5:16). Luke records these things not so that we can expect the same things today, but so that we can *know* that these things happened *then*. And Luke wants us to know that these things happened then so we can rejoice more fully in those eschatological realities that we're still partaking of today as believers in Jesus the Messiah and members of His New Covenant assembly. We ought to love reading about the "signs and wonders" and miracles of healing that took place in the book of Acts (this ought to thrill our souls) because we see in these things the announcement of the arrival of these last days; the proof, as it were, that these days truly are the redemptive-historical fulfillment of all the covenants, types, shadows, and prophecies that came before. With all this in mind, we can read again:

- Acts 5:12–16 — Now through the hands of the apostles many **signs and wonders** were happening among the people, and they were all with one accord in Solomon's Portico. Now none of the rest dared to associate with them; but the people were holding them in high esteem. Yet more than ever believers in the Lord were added to their number, multitudes of men and women, to such an extent that they even carried the sick out into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, so that when Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on any one of them. Also the multitude from the cities in the vicinity of Jerusalem were coming together, bringing people who were sick or afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all being **healed**.

Those signs and wonders and healings are just as powerful a "proof" today—they're just as powerful an authentication today—as they were then. We see in them, by faith, the validation of the message about Jesus and His assembly as the fulfillment of redemptive history.

While these signs and wonders and miracles of healing ceased with that first generation, the "word" (*logos*; message) that these signs and wonders and miracles of healing authenticated is still the same "word" that we preach today; and the water baptism that accompanied this preached word in Acts (2:41; 8:12, 36-38; 9:18; 10:47-48; 16:14-15; 16:33; 18:8; 19:1-5) is still

the same baptism that we administer today. We remember what happened on the day of Pentecost after Peter preached the good news of salvation through Jesus' name:

- Acts 2:37–39, 41 — Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Men, brothers, what should we do?” And Peter said to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ [“calling upon His name”; 22:16] for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.” ... So then, those who had received his **word [logos]** were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.

Baptism is not an authenticating sign because it's not, in itself, a “miracle” or a “wonder” and because authenticating signs are no longer needed or relevant. But baptism *is*, now, the outward sign to us of our real participation by faith in the fulfillment of redemptive history—in those eschatological realities of cleansing from sin, of union with the Messiah in His death, burial, and resurrection so that we're now dead to sin and alive to God, of having passed safely in Christ through the waters of death and judgment (even as Noah in the ark), and therefore also of our membership in the Messiah's own assembly. All of these things are signified to us by the water of baptism, even as we remember the promise of Jesus: “[A]nd behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Mat. 28:18-20).