



# SIGNS & WONDERS

A REFORMED LOOK AT  
THE SPIRIT'S ONGOING WORK

JOHN A. ALGERA

# SIGNS & WONDERS

A REFORMED LOOK AT  
THE SPIRIT'S ONGOING WORK

JOHN A. ALGERA



Grand Rapids, Michigan

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations in this publication are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION, © 1973, 1978, 1984, International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

*Signs and Wonders: A Reformed Look at the Spirit's Ongoing Work*, © 2006 by Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2850 Kalamazoo Ave. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49560. All rights reserved. With the exception of brief excerpts for review purposes, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission from the publisher. Printed in the United States of America on recycled paper.

We welcome your comments. Call us at 1-800-333-8300, or e-mail us at [editors@faithaliveresources.org](mailto:editors@faithaliveresources.org).

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Algera, John A.

Signs and wonders: a reformed look at the spirit's ongoing work / John A. Algera.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 1-59255-291-9 (alk. paper)

1. Holy Spirit. 2. Miracles. 3. Gifts, Spiritual. 4. Reformed Church—Doctrines.  
I. Title.

BT121.3.A44 2006

234'.13—dc22

2006016810

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

**TO DEBRA JOY**



“Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

—Acts 4:29-30



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**F**irst of all, I thank my congregation at Madison Avenue Christian Reformed Church in Paterson, New Jersey, for their faithful support and for their love and care for me and my family over 27 years of ministry together. I am grateful for the study leaves they granted me to work on this topic for my doctoral thesis, and for a recent two-month sabbatical. I am thankful for those who tested this material when it was first taught as an adult course and for their openness to learn with me. I am continually surprised at God's work and how God uses people, through the love of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit, to teach one another.

Second, I wish to thank Christian Reformed Home Missions for their sponsorship of the "Kingdom Power and Evangelism" conference in 1988. At this conference God opened me up to God's work and the ministry of the Holy Spirit in new ways. Following this conference I experienced renewal in my personal walk with the Lord and renewed energy in my pastoral ministry. Along with that renewal came a time of personal struggle and congregational suffering. I discovered that walking with the Spirit is not always an easy or painless road but that God is with us on it.

Third, I wish to acknowledge some of the individuals who helped make this book possible. I thank my advisor and friend, Dr. Manuel Ortiz, who mentored me through my doctoral program and the writing of this material as a course. I am grateful for his love, insights, direction, encouragement, and advice. I thank Peter and Donna Dykstra for their use of "the cabin" on the Delaware as a place of writing, reflection, and rewriting. I also thank Waldron Scott for his keen and insightful criticism, his questions, his challenges, and his invaluable assistance with the current revision. I thank my best friend and colleague in ministry, Rev. Stafford Miller, with whom "iron sharpens iron," for helping me to continue to grow in the work and power of the Holy Spirit and for encouraging me to publish this material. Finally, to all my colleagues in ministry—and especially to the pastors of the Paterson Pastor's Workshop, who have accepted me and allowed me to learn from their wisdom and African American experience—I am deeply indebted.

Fourth, I want to thank my family. I thank my parents for teaching me from an early age by their example and life what it meant to believe in and follow Jesus. I thank my son Benjamin for his encouraging love for me and for his patience with me when I was too preoccupied with min-

istry. I thank especially my wife, Debra Joy, for her selfless love and inspiration, her faithful support and encouragement, her keen insights and questions, and her constant testing and prodding. Through our hours of debates and discussion the truths of Scripture became more clear and concise. Through her hours of reading and correcting draft manuscripts, I was given the opportunity to clarify what I was trying to say.

Finally, I thank God, my Father; Jesus Christ, my Lord and Savior; and the Holy Spirit, my counselor and comforter. Truly I have learned as much about myself as I have about God.

—John A. Algera



# CONTENTS

Introduction . . . . .	9
Chapter 1: Biblical Teachings on Signs and Wonders . . . . .	14
Chapter 2: What's Your Worldview? . . . . .	30
Chapter 3: Purposes and Results of Signs and Wonders . . . . .	46
Chapter 4: Proclaiming the Word of God . . . . .	62
Chapter 5: Demonstrating the Presence of the Kingdom of God . . . . .	77
Chapter 6: Demonstrating the Power of the Holy Spirit . . . . .	89
Chapter 7: Testifying to the Power of Prayer . . . . .	106
Chapter 8: Giving Evidence of Our Faith in Jesus . . . . .	124
Chapter 9: Defeating the Devil . . . . .	137
Chapter 10: Discerning the Spirits: Dangers and Cautions . . . . .	154
Chapter 11: Personal and Congregational Application . . . . .	168
Chapter 12: Societal and Structural Application . . . . .	188

# INTRODUCTION

**T**he power and work of an almighty god has captured the interest and imagination of people for centuries. Every culture and religion cherishes stories of how its gods performed miracles and displayed power. In the Old Testament, Yahweh reveals himself as the one true God over all others. In the New Testament, Jesus, as the only begotten Son of God, reveals God through proclamation and demonstration. He commissions his disciples to do the same and pours out his Holy Spirit on all true believers.

Throughout church history, people have experienced, witnessed, and documented miracles. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, miracles were frequently evident in the great revivals in England and the United States. In the last 100 years of church history, the Pentecostal movement has highlighted the miraculous and supernatural work of God and the power of the Holy Spirit. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Charismatic or Neo-Pentecostal movement continued this emphasis and influenced many mainline denominations. In the 1980s the Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal began to have a dramatic impact on world evangelization and the growth of the church.

The so-called “third wave” that began in the 1980s is similar to and yet distinct from the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement of the ‘60s and ‘70s. This “third wave” is characterized by

- ▶ spiritual renewal
- ▶ use of all spiritual gifts
- ▶ signs and wonders
- ▶ healing
- ▶ power encounters
- ▶ deliverance
- ▶ spiritual warfare

It has its theological foundations in the power of the Holy Spirit and in the presence of the kingdom of God and rule of Christ here and now.

The Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal in the Holy Spirit now sweeping across the globe has important lessons to teach my own denomination and others of the Reformed stream. Because of growing interest in this movement and because of some expressed concerns, Synod 2004 of the Christian Reformed Church appointed a study committee to

examine the biblical teaching, Reformed confessions, theological implications, and pastoral dimensions related to third wave Pentecostalism (spiritual warfare, deliverance ministries, and so forth) with a view to providing advice to the churches.

— *Acts of Synod 2004*, pp. 608-609.

Denominational leaders are coming to a growing realization that in order for the church to be an effective witness in today's world it must be open to the work of God in new ways. For the last 20 years, Reformed missionaries and pastors engaged on the front lines of ministry have been calling the church to see what God can do. I'll share three examples from leaders within the Christian Reformed Church.

In 1984 pastor and author Donald J. Griffioen concluded a chapter on spiritual gifts with this summary of the need for the power of the Holy Spirit in ministry: . . . I am suggesting that a spirit of renewal in the church should keep us open to new, unexpected, and surprise workings of God in our day that do not rule out the possibility of miracles. God wants his church today equipped with the same power of the Holy Spirit and variety of spiritual gifts experienced in the early church. We must be open to these gifts in the church today, for not to do so is to resist the Spirit of God.

— *Open Windows and Open Doors* (Christian Reformed Board of Evangelism of Greater Grand Rapids, 1984), p. 132.

In 1988 I attended a conference sponsored by Christian Reformed Home Missions called "Kingdom Power and Evangelism." This conference was held to explore the vital need for the power of the Holy Spirit in carrying out the evangelistic ministry of the church. In one keynote address, Dr. Gene Rubingh, former missionary and missionary executive, challenged us with the need for proclamation *and* demonstration of God's power in evangelism:

I maintain that our laudable balance on the issue of the scope of salvation is not complemented by a balance on our view of the demonstrations of salvation. We have worked almost exclusively with program evangelism, with structures, projects, timelines, budgets, and reports and omitted the immediate, the existential, and the confrontational. It is out of our orbit. We have engaged in a battle of the intellect, but the world is not asking,

“What does your God know?” The world is asking, “What does your God do?”

—“*Kingdom and Power in Scripture and Theology*,” (Church Development Resources, Christian Reformed Home Missions, 1988).

Although the historic Reformed Creeds, including the well-loved Question and Answer 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism, speak boldly of how Christ has “set me free from the tyranny of the devil,” many in our Reformed circles are unequipped to fully experience that freedom. Several years ago at a training event held by our classis (a regional group of churches), we invited pastor and author Jeff Stam to speak on spiritual warfare. In the introduction to his book, Stam explains why there is a need—especially in Reformed circles—for yet one more book on the subject of spiritual warfare:

. . . mainly because my Reformed tradition hasn’t done much with this topic. That’s not because people in our churches are not affected or interested (we have addressed some related topics). I’m convinced our neglect is due to our need to tie up all the theological “loose ends.” Perhaps we need to remind ourselves that dealing with the reality of Satan and his powers was so central in Reformation thinking that it became the major theme of the Reformation’s “fight” song (“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”).

—*Straight Talk About Spiritual Warfare*, CRC Publications, 1999.

I mention these examples because I have noticed a large gap between belief and practice in Reformed thinking. We have a rich heritage of biblical teaching and Reformed theology, but we have impeded our ministry by failing to apply that theology. Our theology of the kingdom of God has found expression in many kingdom ministries, yet we’ve missed aspects of kingdom power. Our theology of the Holy Spirit has stressed holy living, yet we’ve missed the full use and outpouring of all the gifts of the Spirit and the power of the Spirit. Although we pray for healing for those who are sick, we don’t usually expect that God will miraculously heal them. Although we believe Satan exists, we have little consciousness of his daily personal attacks. Although we believe in the Holy Spirit, we have not been taught what it means to be “filled with the Spirit.”

The challenge facing my own denomination and others of the Reformed tradition is to combine the richness of our Reformed understanding of Scripture and Christianity with a new awareness of the power of God



available to us today. Recognition of the lordship of Christ, the presence of the kingdom of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit are vital ingredients for the growth of the church in the world today. This recognition finds expression in the use of all the gifts of the Holy Spirit and is demonstrated in the fruits of the Spirit. It is manifested in signs, wonders, and miracles today. It has implications both personally and congregationally for prayer, worship, word and deed evangelism, discipleship, and fellowship. It also has implications for social, political, and economic structures. It is evidenced in the “healing” and “exorcisms” of both personal and structural “ills.”

In a recent Bible study on the book of Acts, our class observed that the proclamation of the gospel was accompanied by signs and wonders that resulted in the growth of the church. These signs and wonders included

- ▶ healing of illness and disease.
- ▶ casting out of demons.
- ▶ mass conversions.
- ▶ deliverance from prison.
- ▶ speaking in other languages.
- ▶ other extraordinary events.

During our study one class member asked, “Why doesn’t God still do such signs and wonders today?” That question has become the foundation for this book.

It is my prayer that this book will help you, through personal study or as a member of a small group, to

- ▶ gain a biblical understanding of the presence of the kingdom of God and the lordship of Christ.
- ▶ develop an openness to the power of the Holy Spirit, to the use of all the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and to continual filling by the Spirit.
- ▶ increase awareness of the ongoing battle still fought on earth between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan.
- ▶ develop an openness to the experience and practice of signs and wonders at personal, congregational, and societal levels.
- ▶ more readily recognize and celebrate signs and wonders that God is already doing.
- ▶ appreciate how signs and wonders fit into a Reformed worldview and way of worship and witness.

Each of the twelve chapters of this book include

- ▶ words from other sources that help set the stage for the section's topic.
- ▶ a brief introduction to each section's topic.
- ▶ an in-depth look at each topic.
- ▶ testimonies from people who have witnessed the power of the Holy Spirit in all ages.
- ▶ "Reformed Reflections" with passages from one or more of the Reformed creeds and confessions and a suggested thought for personal or group reflection.
- ▶ suggestions for prayer and practice to stimulate spiritual growth and discipleship.

Each section concludes with a list of suggested references for further reading and study.

One of my favorite hymns when I was growing up and one I still love to sing is "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty." The third stanza concludes with this line: "Ponder anew, what the Almighty can do, as with his love he befriends you" (Joachim Neander, 1680; tr. Catherine Winkworth, 1863, alt.). This book is an attempt to do just that—to ponder anew what the Almighty can do. May you be blessed as you too ponder anew!

—John Algera



## CHAPTER ONE

# BIBLICAL TEACHINGS ON SIGNS AND WONDERS

AND MOSES LIFTED UP HIS ROD OVER THE RED SEA; AND GOD WITH A BLAST OF HIS NOSTRILS BLEW THE WATERS APART. AND THE WAVES ROLLED BACK AND STOOD UP IN A PILE, AND LEFT A PATH THROUGH THE MIDDLE OF THE SEA DRY AS THE SANDS OF THE DESERT. AND THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL ALL CROSSED OVER ON TO THE OTHER SIDE. WHEN PHARAOH SAW THEM CROSSING DRY, HE DASHED ON IN BEHIND THEM—OLD PHARAOH GOT ABOUT HALF WAY CROSS, AND GOD UNLASHED THE WATERS, AND THE WAVES RUSHED BACK TOGETHER, AND PHARAOH AND ALL HIS ARMY GOT LOST, AND ALL HIS HOST GOT DROWNED. AND MOSES SANG AND MIRIAM DANCED, AND THE PEOPLE SHOUTED FOR JOY, AND GOD LED THE HEBREW CHILDREN ON TILL THEY REACHED THE PROMISED LAND. LISTEN!—LISTEN! ALL YOU SONS OF PHARAOH. WHO DO YOU THINK CAN HOLD GOD’S PEOPLE WHEN THE LORD GOD HIMSELF HAS SAID,  
LET MY PEOPLE GO?

—James Weldon Johnson, “Let My People Go,” *God’s Trombones*, Penguin Books, 1927, p. 52. © 1927, Viking Press, Inc.; renewed © 1955, Grace Nail Johnson. Used by permission of Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Group (USA), Inc.



One day a cardinal was showing off St. Peter's basilica in Rome to a visiting country priest. Pointing to the beautiful buildings around the huge courtyard, the cardinal boasted: "No longer do we have to say like Peter said at the temple, 'Silver and gold have I none.'" "Yes, that's true," observed the priest, "but neither can we say, 'Take up your bed and walk.'"

Unfortunately the same has become true in many churches.

Some of the Bible stories I remember best from Sunday school were of the healings performed by Jesus and the disciples. I can still remember making a house out of a shoebox, cutting a hole in the roof, and lowering down a cardboard man on a cardboard stretcher suspended from four strings. We learned about the faith of the man's four friends and that Jesus made him walk. But as I recall this and other Bible stories, I realize that as I grew up I was unintentionally taught that such miracles occurred during Bible times only—not today.

I recently reread the Bible. My goal was to observe the place of signs, wonders, and miracles in the life of God's people and in the growth of the early church. It was a wonderful experience. I saw how free God is to accomplish his purposes in ordinary *and* extraordinary ways.

This chapter will explore the idea of "signs and wonders" in depth. We'll look at exactly what they are and how they were understood by the biblical writers and those who experienced them. We will

- ▶ review some of the miracles of the Old and New Testament.
- ▶ study the Greek and Hebrew words used to describe signs, wonders, and miracles in the Bible.
- ▶ reflect on the theological and historical uses of these words.

## OVERVIEW OF MIRACLES IN THE BIBLE

### PHYSICAL HEALINGS

The Old Testament provides many references to miraculous healing of physical illness, including the healing of

- ▶ Miriam, who was struck with leprosy when she and Aaron opposed Moses (Num. 12:10-15).

- ▶ the Israelites, who were bitten by snakes after complaining against God and Moses (Num. 21:9).
- ▶ Naaman, who also suffered from leprosy (2 Kings 5).
- ▶ Hezekiah, who at the point of death was given an extra fifteen years of life (2 Kings 20).

The New Testament gospels are full of references to people healed by Jesus. In Matthew 4:23 we read, “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.” When questioned by John the Baptist if he was the Messiah, Jesus answered, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor” (Matt. 11:4-5).

But these acts weren’t only for Jesus to do. Jesus commissioned his disciples to “heal the sick” (Luke 10:9)—a task they continued after Jesus’ ascension. In Acts, Luke (who was himself a physician) records numerous physical healings, including those done by

- ▶ Peter, who healed “a man crippled from birth” (Acts 3:1-10).
- ▶ Stephen, who “did great wonders and miraculous signs” (6:8).
- ▶ Philip, who did “miraculous signs. . . . evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed” (8:6-7).
- ▶ Ananias, who placed his hands on Saul, and “immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again” (9:10-19).
- ▶ Paul and Barnabas, who were enabled by God’s grace to “do miraculous signs and wonders” (14:3).
- ▶ Paul, who healed “a man crippled in his feet, who was lame from birth and had never walked” (14:8-10).

## RESURRECTIONS

In the Old and New Testament we also read of people being raised from the dead. Consider these specific examples:

- ▶ Elijah raised the widow of Zarephath’s son (1 Kings 17).
- ▶ Elisha raised the Shunammite woman’s son (2 Kings 4).
- ▶ Jesus raised Jairus’s daughter (Matt. 9:18-25), the widow of Nain’s son (Luke 7:11-17), and his friend Lazarus (John 11:1-44).
- ▶ Peter raised Dorcas (Acts 9:40).
- ▶ Paul raised Eutychus (Acts 20:10).



- ▶ give victory to Joshua when the sun stood still for a full day (Josh. 10).
- ▶ feed Elijah when ravens brought him bread and meat morning and night (1 Kings 17).
- ▶ protect Daniel by closing the lions' mouths (Dan. 6).
- ▶ shelter Jonah from the heat by causing a vine to grow up over him (Jonah 4).

In the New Testament, miracles in nature were a part of Jesus' life, beginning with his birth to a virgin (Luke 2). During his ministry, Jesus

- ▶ turned water into wine (John 2:6-10).
- ▶ stilled a storm (Mark 4:35-41).
- ▶ walked on water and invited Peter to come to him (Matt. 14:25-29).
- ▶ multiplied a boy's bread and fish to feed 5,000 people (John 6).
- ▶ caused a fig tree to wither (Mark 11:21).
- ▶ filled empty nets with fish (John 21:6).

During the last three hours of Jesus' suffering on the cross, a deep darkness came over all the land, and the earth shook at the moment of his death (Matt. 27:45-51). After his resurrection, Jesus was able to appear and disappear instantly (Luke, 24:31, 36) and pass through doors (John 20:26).

Miracles in nature continued after Jesus' ascension. Paul and Silas were released from prison by a violent earthquake (Acts 16:26), and Philip was transported to another place by the Spirit (Acts 8:39).

## WORD STUDY: SIGNS, WONDERS, MIRACLES, MIGHTY WORKS

The Bible uses several different words in the Old Testament Hebrew and New Testament Greek to describe what we call miracles. These words include *signs*, *wonders*, *miracles*, and *mighty works*. Let's briefly review the biblical usage of each and note how they are sometimes used together.

### **SIGNS**

The word *sign* or *signs* is used by itself to refer to a distinguishing mark or indication, as in these two passages:

- ▶ “This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger” (Luke 2:12).
- ▶ “You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times” (Matt. 16:3).

This term may also refer to something that is unusual and different from nature. In this use the word is translated as *sign*, *miraculous sign*, or *miracle* depending on the context and translation. When Jesus changes water to wine, this is called “the first of his miraculous signs” (John 2:11). The Pharisees ask Jesus for a “miraculous sign” to demonstrate his authority (Matt. 12:38).

In most New Testament references, signs are performed by God himself, by Jesus Christ, or by the people of God. But the term can also refer to a miracle performed by Satan, demons, or people serving him. Jesus warns of this: “For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible” (Matt. 24:24).

The word *sign* is used in the Old Testament to denote something that can be visibly seen to demonstrate God’s power or care. David pleads, “Give me a sign of your goodness” (Ps. 86:17). A sign always points beyond itself to someone or something else.

## WONDERS

A *wonder* is an awe-inspiring or terrifying act that manifests supernatural power. The word *wonder* in the Old Testament refers to a “special display of God’s power” or “token of future event” (Brown, Francis; S.R. Driver; and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Clarendon Press, 1907, pp. 68-69).

God is always behind a wonder, and God does wonders as part of his rule and reign. “Remember the wonders he has done, his miracles and the judgments he pronounced” (1 Chron. 16:12). The word itself describes the human reaction to God’s act—wonder!

## SIGNS AND WONDERS

In the translation of the Old Testament Hebrew into Greek, the phrase *signs and wonders* refers primarily to the plagues God brought upon Egypt to deliver Israel. “Before our eyes the LORD sent miraculous signs and wonders—great and terrible—upon Egypt and Pharaoh” (Deut. 6:23).

In the New Testament Greek, the word *teras* ("wonders") is used only together with the word *semeion* ("signs"). *Signs and wonders* is a technical term used in Greek to refer to miracles done by

- ▶ Jesus (John 4:48; Acts 2:22).
- ▶ the disciples and apostles (Acts 4:30; 5:12; 6:8; 7:36; 14:3; Rom. 15:19; 2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:4).
- ▶ Satan or his agents (Matt. 24:24; Mark 13:22; 2 Thess. 2:9).

Whether performed by Jesus or Satan, signs and wonders always relate to an extraordinary event that calls for our attention.

In three passages, the word *power* (*dunamis*) is added to *signs and wonders* and translated as "miracles." In one reference, *power* is substituted for *wonders* to make the phrase *signs and miracles* (Acts 8:13).

## MIRACLES

Biblical words that are translated as "miracles" often have to do with God's power and strength. *Power* (Ex. 15:6; Ps. 77:14) and *strength* (Ps. 46:1; 84:7) carry a unique emphasis in the Old Testament. They refer to a personal God who uses his power to care for his people. The exodus event was a unique example of the power of God to deliver his people (Ex. 12:31-51).

This sense of power is carried over into the New Testament in the use of *dunamis* in Greek. This word is defined as "the outward expression of power; deed of power, miracle, wonder" (Bauer, Walter, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, University of Chicago Press, 1957, p. 207). It is

- ▶ used with *signs and wonders* occasionally (2 Thess. 2:9; Acts 2:22; 2 Cor. 12:12)
- ▶ simply translated as *miracle* (Heb. 2:4).
- ▶ used independently (Matt. 7:22; 11:20, 23; 13:54, 58; Luke 10:13; 19:37; 1 Cor. 12:10, 28).

Another Greek word for power is *exousia*. This word is never translated as "miracle" and is used to describe the distinct power of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and how that power is given to God's people.



One position recognizes an event as a miracle only if scientific evidence confirms that the laws of nature or human reason can't explain it. A second position sees miracles as part of God's revelation before the canon of Scripture was closed. This position states that miracles ended with the age of the apostles and today God's providence is the evidence of God's ongoing work and power. A third position denies the existence of miracles at any time, believing that God only works through naturally created channels. A fourth position holds that the miraculous is based on subjective experience, not on scientific evidence. A brief historical review will explain each of these positions.

**THE EARLY CHURCH**

In the early centuries of the Christian church, miracles were recorded and recounted. They involved physical and mental healings, exorcisms, unexplained food supplied to the poor, and extraordinary conversions. Saint Augustine lists many in his classic work *The City of God*, written in A.D. 425. Often these miracles were closely related to the relics of martyrs and sacred places or images. Miracles were considered "extraordinary" works of God that defied the laws of nature or other explanation. This position is still evident in the lengthy Roman Catholic process of confirming and authenticating a miracle.

**THE REFORMATION**

A different position on miracles arose at the time of the Reformation. In reaction to Roman Catholic "supernaturalism," John Calvin and the Reformers taught that the miracles and supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit only accompanied the initial presentation of the gospel and ended with the apostles. They believed that the miracles of the Scriptures were real and that God could still do miracles. But since God now revealed himself through the Word, God chose not to reveal himself in other supernatural ways. In Reformation thinking, miracles were specific, supernatural, and extraordinary works of God, but they were isolated to the age of the apostles, so no verification or confirmation was needed.

**THE ENLIGHTENMENT**

A denial of miracles arose out of the seventeenth century enlightenment and a scientific approach to theology and the Bible. It sought to explain miraculous events through scientific evidence or to deny them completely.

This position appears in much liberal Christianity and in attempts to prove the truth of the Bible through scientific inquiry alone.

### **THE PENTECOSTAL MOVEMENT**

A fourth position arose out of a synthesis of the first two positions. Movements arising out of the Reformation, and later revivals leading up to and including the Pentecostal movement, combined elements of both of these views. Every aspect of God's providence that contradicted the laws of nature or was not readily explainable was labeled a miracle. This could include the end of a toothache, the finding of a parking spot, the healing of cancer, or deliverance from demons. Confirmation of miracles was no longer required by "the Church," but was based on individual subjective judgment that included all aspects of God's providence.

## **TOWARD A WORKING DEFINITION**

None of the above four positions satisfactorily answers the question of whether there are miracles today. According to our word study, the Bible refers to miracles as the intervention of God in the lives of people in new, surprising, and extraordinary ways. Signs are events that point to something beyond themselves. Wonders leave people awe-struck by the power of God. These occurrences may or may not violate the laws of nature and may or may not be scientifically verifiable.

Theologian Vern Poythress warns of the dangers of definitions with "fuzzy boundaries" and offers a brief working definition that stresses more the purpose than the character of a miracle. "A miracle is an extraordinary visible act of God to deliver his people and attest his word" (Poythress, Vern S., *Symphonic Theology*, Academia Books, 1987, p. 105). Although Poythress believes that miracles have ceased because special revelation is complete, he still recognizes mighty acts of God in our day, though he does not call them miracles.

On the other hand, anthropologist Charles Kraft recognizes the ordinary and extraordinary power of God in defining miracles as normal events in the kingdom of God. He says:

What we call "miracles" then, are expected by Jesus to be normal occurrences in our part of the kingdom, as in all other parts. They are not, as we have been taught, to be regarded



as interferences by God in a domain from which he ordinarily keeps his distance.

—*Christianity with Power*, Servant Publications, p. 115.

Kraft appeals for a removal of the term *miracle* from the realm of the extraordinary. He sees miracles as a normal expectation within the kingdom of God along with salvation, obedience, healing, deliverance, and every other aspect of Christian service and love. This emphasis recognizes that miracles and signs and wonders are “extraordinary” events that happen in the ordinary routines of life.

Dr. Lewis B. Smedes, in a study for Fuller Theological Seminary, warns of the danger of preoccupation with miracles and the distorted belief that God is only present when something spectacular is being done.

In the Biblical view, a miracle is a signal that God is, for a moment and for a special purpose, walking down paths he does not usually walk. A miracle is not a sign that a God who is usually absent is, for the moment, present. It is only a sign that God who is always present in creative power is working here and now in an unfamiliar style.

—*Ministry and the Miraculous*,  
Fuller Theological Seminary, 1987, pp. 48-49.

We can conclude that miracles and signs and wonders that are of God will always point to God. Also, we must recognize that although God’s miracles are always at God’s discretion, God also responds to his peoples’ requests. Biblically, God’s mighty acts are not bound to scientific confirmation but to faith testimony. Also, in their biblical use these terms do not refer to every aspect of the grace or providence of God but to extraordinary evidences of that providence. Although God is at work in every aspect of our lives, not every aspect of his providence in our lives is considered miraculous. Although miracles may be *ordinary* for God, their occurrence is always *extraordinary* for people.

An evidence of the Reformed emphasis on the sovereignty of God is that we cry out to God for such miracles, and we put our faith in God’s response. When defining such miracles, we may not be able to avoid fuzzy boundaries. A miracle may come with or without medical technology. A miracle may be subjectively experienced by only one person. But when God does a miracle, people know it and testify to it.

For our working definition, we will consider signs, wonders, miracles, and mighty works of God to be exceptional, extraordinary moves of God that

- ▶ reveal God's power and glory.
- ▶ change situations and circumstances.
- ▶ cause people to wonder—to sit up and take notice.
- ▶ demonstrate the Word of God and the presence of the kingdom of God.

As God says, "Behold, I am making a covenant with you. Before all your people I will do wonders never before done in any nation in all the world. The people you live among will see how awesome is the work that I, the LORD, will do for you (Ex. 34:10).



## TESTIMONIES FROM . . .

### **SAINT AUGUSTINE (A.D. 426)**

Even now, therefore, many miracles are wrought, the same God who wrought those we read of is still performing them, by whom He will and as He will. . . . There were seven brothers and three sisters of a noble family of the Cappadocian Caesarea . . . all of them were seized with a hideous shaking in all their limbs. Two of them came to Hippo. . . . Easter arrived, and on the Lord's day, in the morning, when there was now a large crowd present, and the young man was holding the bars of the holy place where the relics were, and praying, suddenly he fell down, and lay precisely as if asleep, but not trembling as he was wont to do even in sleep. All present were astonished. Some were alarmed, some were moved with pity; and while some were for lifting him up, others prevented them, and said they should rather wait and see what would result. And behold! he rose up, and trembled no more, for he was healed, and stood quite well, scanning those who were scanning him. Who then refrained himself from praising God? . . . the church was full, and ringing with the shouts of joy. "Thanks to God! Praised be God!"

—*The City of God*, translated by Marcus Dods,  
Random House, 1950, p. 830.

### **REV. CHARLES UKEN (1992)**

Umbanda is a modern, urban, Brazilian religion that is growing in both numbers of adherents and influence. It is a syncretistic religious stream in Brazil and touches the lives of people in every social class. . . . The most important point of contact is the point of need. Can the Christian pray for deliverance for the sick, the oppressed and the unemployed? Can he or she expel a demon in the name of Christ? Does the Christian have faith to expect the intervention and action of God? Signs, wonders, and God's miraculous power speak to the Umbandist's heart where charity, medicine, or financial assistance leave him cold.

—"Spiritism and the Brazilian City,"  
*Urban Mission*, May, 1992, pp. 20, 31.

# REFORMED REFLECTIONS

## THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM, Q&A 26

**Q. What do you believe when you say,  
“I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator  
of heaven and earth”?**

- A. That the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
who out of nothing created heaven and earth  
and everything in them,  
who still upholds and rules them  
by his eternal counsel and providence,  
is my God and Father  
because of Christ his Son.

I trust him so much that I do not doubt  
he will provide  
whatever I need  
for body and soul,  
and he will turn to my good  
whatever adversity he sends me  
in this sad world.

He is able to do this because he is almighty God;  
He desires to do this because he is a faithful Father.

Reflect on the relationship between the providence of  
God and the miracles of God.

## QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

- ▶ On the basis of the biblical teachings we’ve discussed and of our word study, do you believe that God still does signs, wonders, and miracles? Why or why not?
- ▶ According to Scripture, do miracles have to be “unusual” or “extraordinary” experiences? Explain.
- ▶ How would you respond to someone who says that a miracle must be scientifically verifiable?



- ▶ Briefly describe a miracle that you have experienced personally or heard about.
- ▶ What are some dangers in the miraculous?
- ▶ 1 Corinthians 12:28 refers to “workers of miracles” as being part of the body of Christ. Who are the “workers of miracles” today?

## PRAYER AND PRACTICE

Pray aloud the first part of the song Moses and the Israelites sang after crossing the Red Sea:

“I WILL SING TO THE LORD,  
 FOR HE IS HIGHLY EXALTED.  
 THE HORSE AND ITS RIDER  
 HE HAS HURLED INTO THE SEA.  
 THE LORD IS MY STRENGTH AND MY SONG;  
 HE HAS BECOME MY SALVATION.  
 HE IS MY GOD, AND I WILL PRAISE HIM,  
 MY FATHER’S GOD, AND I WILL EXALT HIM.”  
 —EXODUS 15:1-2

Praise God right now for ways you have experienced God’s strength and salvation in your life.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### BOOKS

- ▶ Gundry, Stanley N., ed. *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? 4 Views*. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.; Robert L. Saucy; C. Samuel Storms; Douglas A. Oss. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1996.
- ▶ McClung, Grant. “Pentecostals: The Sequel.” *Christianity Today*, April 2006.
- ▶ Trammel, Madison and Rob Moll. “Grading the Movement: Three Leaders Talk Frankly About Pentecostalism.” *Christianity Today*, April 2006.
- ▶ Wagner, C. Peter. *The Third Wave of the Holy Spirit*. Ann Arbor: Servant Publications, 1988.