

False Miracles—Part One

By Dr. Norman Geisler

Distinguishing a true from a false miracle is important to the defense of the Christian faith. For miracles are the unique way God confirms a truth claim to be from him. But the counterfeit cannot be detected unless one knows the characteristics of a genuine.

A true miracle has preconditions. A miracle is a special act of God, and there cannot be acts of God unless there is a God who can perform these special acts. Miracles can occur only within the context of a theistic worldview. A miracle is a divine intervention in the world. God cannot “intervene” unless he is in some real sense transcendent over it. Transcendence must also mean that God has *super-natural* power. A God who created the world out of nothing, *ex nihilo*, has the power to intervene.

Atheists look at the same event as a theist, for example the resurrection of Christ, and from the viewpoint of their worldview see no miracle. Whatever happened must be an anomaly, unusual, perhaps, but someday explainable through natural processes. If confronted with a resurrection, pantheists do not admit a divine intervention has occurred, for they do not believe in a God who created all things. Pantheists hold that God is all things. Hence, a resurrection could only be an unusual even within the world, not a supernatural event from outside it.

Description of a True Miracle. The three words Scripture uses to describe a miracle help delineate that meaning more precisely. Each of the three words for supernatural events (sign, wonder, power) delineates an aspect of a miracle. From the human vantage point, a miracle is an unusual event (“wonder”) that conveys and confirms an unusual message (“sign”) by means of an unusual power (“Power”). From the divine vantage point a miracle is an act of God (“power”) that attracts the attention of the people of God (“wonder”) to the Word of God (by a “sign”).

According to the Bible, a miracle has five dimensions that together differentiate a true miracle from a false miracle. First, a true miracle has an *unnatural dimension*. A burning bush that is not consumed, fire from heaven, and walking on water are not normal occurrences. Their unusual character commands attention. Second, a true miracle has a *theological dimension*. It presupposes the theistic God who can perform these special acts. Third, a true miracle has a *moral dimension*. It manifests the moral character of God. There are no evil miracles, because God is good. A miracle that punishes or judges establishes God’s nature as just.

Forth, a miracle has a *teleological dimension*. Unlike magic, miracles never entertain (see Luke 23:8). Their overall purpose is to glorify the Creator. Though unnatural, they fit into creation and befit the nature of the Creator. The virgin birth, for example, was supernatural in its operation, unnatural in its properties, but purposeful in its product. It was unnatural, yet not anti-natural. Mary’s virgin conception resulted in a normal nine-month pregnancy and birth.¹ Fifth, miracles in the Bible, particularly the gifts of miracles, had a *doctrinal dimension*. They directly or indirectly verified truth claims. They show that a prophet is truly sent from God (Deut. 18:22). They confirm the truth of God through the servant of God (Acts 2:22; 2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:3-4). Message and miracles go hand-in-hand.

Distinguishing Marks of a Miracle. In addition to its dimensions, a true miracle has distinguishing marks. The most basic is that a true miracle is an exception to natural law. Natural laws are regular, predictable events, but miracles are special, unpredictable events. Of course, there are some unusual natural events or anomalies that are sometimes confused with miracle. Meteors, eclipses, and other natural phenomena were once thought to be miracles, but are not. Meteors pass our way infrequently, but they are purely natural and predictable. Eclipses are natural and predictable. Earthquakes are relatively unpredictable, but as scientists understand them better they know where they will occur, if not precisely when. That they are not miracles does not mean they do not belong to God's special providence. He uses them and is in control of them. We can be sure that sometimes he intervenes in their operation in dramatic ways. A fog at Normandy aided the Allied Forces' invasion of Europe on D-Day and the eventual defeat of Nazi Germany. Fog has natural causes, but the timing of this one was an evidence of God's providence. But it was no miracle. Bullets bouncing off the chests of Allied soldiers would have been a miracle.

A true miracle also produces immediate results. In Matthew 8:3, Jesus touched a man and immediately he was cured of his leprosy. All of the miraculous healings by Jesus and the apostles had such immediacy. No miracle took months, or hours. Only one required a few minutes, because it was a two-stage miracle—actually two interconnected instantaneous acts of God (Mark 8:23-25). By contrast, natural events take time and process. It takes a whole season to grow, harvest, grind and mix wheat flour for bread, but Jesus made it instantly (John 6). It takes eighteen years or longer to grow an adult human being, but God created Adam immediately (Gen. 1:27; 2:7).

A characteristic of a true miracle is that it *always brings glory to God*. Occult "magic" brings glory to the magician, and psychosomatic "cures" to the one who performs them. Satanic delusions (see 2 Thess. 2:9; Rev. 16:14) are lies (2 Thess 2:9) that do not glorify the God who cannot lie (Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18).

While miracles are not natural events, *they bring good to the natural world*. The resurrection is the ultimate example. It reverses death and brings back the good of life (see Romans 8). Healing restores the body to the way God made it, which was "good" (Gen. 1:27-31). Even "negative" miracles are good in that it is good for God's justice to defeat sin.

True miracles never fail. They are acts of the God for whom "all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26). Since God cannot fail, neither can miracles. This does not mean that any servant of God can perform a miracle at any time. Miracles occur only according to God's will (Heb 2:3-4; 1 Cor. 12:11). Further, true miracles have no relapses. If a person is miraculously healed, that healing is permanent. Pseudo-miracles, particularly the psychosomatic kind, often fail. They do not work on people who do not believe, and sometimes they do not work on those who do believe. When they do work, their effect is often only partial and/or temporary.

(to be continued)

(from *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1999)

Note:

¹ Since James Frazer published *The Golden Bough* (1890, 1912), it has been common to charge that Christianity is not unique in its story of Christ's incarnation, but that stories of supernatural births are common to pagan gods. If true, this would appear to undermine Christianity by showing that it might have borrowed ideas from other religions.

Several lines of evidence that refute that pagan myth source theory are discussed throughout my *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*. Here the main points are summarized:

1. The New Testament was written by contemporaries and is not the result of late myth development. Legends do not develop if the stories are written while eyewitnesses are still alive to refute inaccuracies.

2. The virgin birth records do not show signs of being mythical, nor do they include borrowed elements from known pagan birth myths.

3. Persons, places, and events identified in connection with Christ's birth are accurate historically. Even details once thought to be errors have been vindicated by research.

4. No Greek myth spoke of the literal incarnation of a monotheistic God into human form. In Christianity the second person of the Godhead became human. In pagan religions gods were only disguised as humans; they were not really human. In pagan myths, a god and human invariably mated sexually, which was not true in the Christian account.

5. Greek myths of gods who became human postdate the time of Christ, so the Gospel writers could not have borrowed from them. (*Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1999), pp. 201-202.)