

Not Miracles, But Truth

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"John did no miracle: but all things that John spake of this man were true" (John 10: 41).

That was the verdict on John the Baptist's ministry shortly after his death. A large number of people who had been fairly familiar with John and his ministry found themselves powerfully drawn after the One to whom John had pointed, and resorted to Him while He was staying at the very place where John had at first baptized. This evidently awakened reminiscences of John, and as they recalled his life and sayings and then considered the One to whom those sayings had reference, they bore ungrudging witness to the truth of John's testimony. Evidently, then, their verdict was no mere flattery, but based upon well-considered facts. It falls naturally into two parts — the negative and the positive. Both parts are well worth consideration.

"*John did no miracle.*" He was the last of a long line of prophets (Matt. 11: 13), and though last, by no means least. If not *greatest*, he was at all events amongst the greatest, for none were greater than he (Luke 7: 28). Seeing, then, that he stood in the very front rank of prophets, comparable only for spiritual vitality and force with men whose miraculous deeds rang throughout the centuries of Israel's history, and bearing in mind that his lot was cast in the hour of the most supreme crisis of all, one might naturally have supposed that of all the prophets he would have been marked by the performance of the most striking wonders. But it was not so. John did *no* miracle.

How astonishing! Are we to suppose that, after all, John was on a low spiritual level? Was the absence of anything sensational a sign of weakness, or was there something that accounted for it? Why was it that John did no miracle?

The answer undoubtedly is: Because his lot was cast at the end of the dispensation of law, when miracles were no longer a part of God's testimony.

The supernatural element was strongly in evidence at the inauguration of the law dispensation at Sinai, and also in connection with Israel's entrance into possession of the promised land. Later on, when the great national apostasy was developing and Jehovah set Himself by the prophets to recall His erring people and stem the rising tide of idolatry, there was another great display of miraculous power, particularly in connection with Elijah and Elisha. When, however, the apostasy was so complete that the Babylonian captivity resulted miracles disappeared. God did indeed miraculously preserve the three Hebrew lads in the fiery furnace and Daniel in the den of lions. He still, up to the time of Malachi, about 350 B.C., sent His prophets, and there was of course a miraculous element in the revelations which reached them and the inspired writings that came from their pens, but they themselves did no miracles. The time for such had passed.

There is nothing surprising in this. Is it likely that God would allow that which was a notable symbol of His presence to remain connected with a nation that had rejected Him? If the fleet mutinies it can hardly expect to be permitted still to fly the Royal Standard or the Union Jack!

The miracles performed by the Lord Jesus when on earth, those which marked the Pentecostal era, or even the miracles which happened during the Babylonian captivity, were not inconsistent with this.

The miracles of Christ were unique. They came after long years during which not one is recorded,

and they signified the actual presence of Jehovah in the midst of His people. The Sovereign Himself having arrived, in the midst of His mutinous fleet, the Royal Standard is of course unfurled by His side!

The miracles of Pentecost marked the inauguration of the church period, just as formerly they had signalled the beginning of Israel's national history. The "church" ship was launched and the flags flew fittingly enough. When once launched other and sterner work awaited her than flag-flying. With regard to the miraculous preservation of God's witnesses in Daniel: the dominion had passed from David's line to the Gentiles, and the haughty Gentile monarchs must learn to respect the faithful remnant of God's people, and God intervenes out of the accustomed order on their behalf. But thenceforward amid the increasing defection and gloom amongst those who had professedly gathered to the divine centre — Jerusalem — the godly had to be content to pursue their way without any outward manifestations until John.

John blazed like a meteor across their sky. He observed the most rigid separation from the hollow religious profession of his day. He preached with astonishing fervour and power. He drew the attention of multitudes for a time, but he wrought not *one* sign in attestation of his words. "*John did no miracle.*"

"But all things that John spake of this Man were true." Here we reach the positive side which reveals to us at once the secret of John's greatness. He never swerved from rendering true testimony to the One who is the great subject of all testimony — CHRIST. NO wonder that John ranks amongst the greatest prophets that have ever lived!

Let us not suppose that to render true testimony to Christ is an easy or simple thing. It is not. Within the best and greatest of God's servants there has been the flesh with all its inveterate tastes and habits. Hence the dangerous tendency to put self in the foreground and Christ in the background, even when ostensibly witnessing of Him. John the Baptist was remarkably proof against this, as the first three chapters of John's Gospel prove. As the forerunner he pointed steadily to his Master. As "the voice" he spake only of Christ. To Him he witnessed as the Messiah, the Lamb of God, the Son of God, the Bridegroom.

Splendid opportunities were presented to him of exalting himself at his Master's expense (see particularly John 1: 19-27; John 3: 26-30). He turned them into striking occasions for exalting his Master. He proclaimed Him as so great that His shoe latchet he was unworthy to unloose (John 1: 27). He testified to Him so forcibly that he detached his own disciples from himself and attached them to Christ (John 1: 37). He plainly said, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3: 30), and said it evidently with joy.

A great servant of God was this man, in spite of his non-miraculous ministry. The secret of all was this: "*All things that John spake of this Man were true.*"

Is it not evident that we live in days strikingly analogous to the times of John's ministry? The last days of Paul's Second Epistle to Timothy are upon us. We have reached the Laodicean stage of the church's history as recorded in Revelation 3. — that which corresponds with the Malachi stage in Old Testament history.

A distinct analogy undoubtedly exists between the course pursued by Israel betwixt their start as a nation under Moses and the first coming of Christ, and that of the church between Pentecost and the second coming. For the sake of clearness we may summarise them in separate columns:

ISRAEL

A bright start under Moses, Joshua, and the elders, who outlived the latter.

Declension sets in, only checked here and there by God's dealings in chastisement.

Steady and increasing conformity to the abominations of the surrounding nations.

The Babylonian captivity sets in.

A remnant returns to Jerusalem, the divine centre of Israel, in various detachments under Zerubbabel, Nehemiah, and Ezra.

Sad defection appears in that remnant until comparatively few among them fear the Lord. The majority of them reject their Messiah when He appears.

THE CHURCH

A bright start under the apostles and some faithful men who were instructed by them.

Equally rapid declension only checked by the fire of persecution allowed by God.

Steady assimilation of the church and the world.

The full-blown Romish system arises, capturing Christianity as an outward profession.

Beginning with the Reformation (so called) God begins to deliver a remnant in varying stages over the course of years.

Equally sad defection: Sardis and Laodicea (Rev. 3.) express it. A few hear His voice and open the door. But as regards the mass He is yet outside.

Seeing, then, that John the Baptist's day and our day have so much in common, may we not take this witness concerning him as special instruction for us? We believe that we may, and there is — unless we wholly misjudge the signs of the times — every reason why we should.

At the present moment many excellent Christians are filled with a great longing for some display of spiritual power of a wholly extraordinary sort. Impressed, doubtless, with the low estate of the professing church, they long for something unprecedented — at all events in these latter times — something miraculous which may rehabilitate her in the eyes of the world, rally her scattered forces, and close the mouths of her critics. The desire runs particularly into two channels just now — miraculous powers of bodily healing and speaking with tongues.

We do not, of course, presume to say either that God cannot or that He will not bestow such gifts upon His church or individual believers in these days. We remember that Scripture declares His judgments to be unsearchable and His ways past finding out, and asks,

"Who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been His counsellor?" (Rom. 11: 33, 34). We do, however, unhesitatingly affirm three things:

1. *Scripture gives no support to the expectation that such gifts will be revived.* Indeed, as we have seen, the very opposite. In the closing days of the professing church, when apostasy is ripening, miracles would be no more fitting than they would have been at the end of Israel's responsible history up to Christ. Further, and yet more positively, the miracles and signs predicted in Scripture for the end of this age are evil and Satanic in origin (see Mark 13: 22; 2 Thess. 2: 9-11; 2 Tim. 3: 8).

2. *The genuineness and divine origin of such manifestations as have occurred (particularly in*

connection with tongues) are, to say the least, open to the gravest suspicion. We need name but two significant features: The almost total omission of reference to the Lordship of Christ in the recorded utterances and in the literature connected with the movement (1 Cor. 12: 3) — "Jesus" is continually used with irreverent familiarity. Secondly, the disregard of Scripture. In 1 Corinthians 14: 22, 23 we are distinctly told that the normal use of the gift of tongues is in connection with the unconverted: "Tongues *are for a sign*, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not." That believers should come together in one place and there speak with tongues as a kind of spiritual exercise is discouraged. Their proper use is in keeping with that which took place when first they were given, as recorded in Acts 2.

These apostolic instructions given in 1 Corinthians 14 cannot be lightly brushed aside; they are "the commandments of the Lord" (1 Cor. 14: 37). Yet the modern gift of tongues (so called) is exercised in just that way which the Apostle here forbids, whilst we wait in vain for tidings of their use amongst the heathen, or even amongst the many nationalities which throng our great seaport towns at home. Scripture, we repeat, is disregarded.

3. These gifts of such sinister aspect are diverting many from that which really is their great business. At the present moment attacks, more persistent than ever, are being made upon the very citadel of the faith of Christ. New cults are springing up by the dozen. Beneath the jargon of discordant sounds there is, however, an undertone of harmony. They ALL agree in denying the true Christ of God! Use His name — omitting His titles — they may. Confess the truth of His person, they do not.

Moreover, the tide of apostasy from "the doctrine of Christ" (2 John 9) runs strongly in the hitherto "orthodox" denominations. Many religious leaders are crying "Hail, Master!" and imprinting the kiss of professed admiration on His brow, whilst they treacherously betray Him by the denial of all that He really is. One would have supposed that every earnest believer would have fervently repudiated such men and their teachings and made it their supreme business to render true testimony to Him. Alas! no. Many are wasting their energies in seeking miraculous endowments. They think of nothing but gilding the turrets of their castle when the enemy is sapping the foundations and thundering at the gates.

Enough, however, of these things. It evidently behoves both writer and readers to look carefully to themselves.

Such are Satan's tactics in these days. Let us not play into his hands.

We are just simple and ordinary Christians without any claim to distinction or note. We have never wielded miraculous powers, nor do we perhaps expect to. Miraculous power is one thing, SPIRITUAL POWER another, and vastly more important. John the Baptist had none of the former, in the latter he excelled. And the secret of such power is — what? Simply unswerving fidelity in the testimony of life and lip to Christ. As His representatives are we left in this world. To speak true things concerning Him, be *this*, then, our chief concern.

The Spirit of God, the Comforter, is here that this may be so. "And when the Comforter is come . . . the Spirit of TRUTH . . . He shall testify of Me" (John 15: 26). He, then, is our only sufficiency for this holy business. He is still with us and in us. Miracles have gone, but He remains, and with Him remains the ability of the simplest and weakest believer to rightly testify of Christ.

Life first, then lip. That is the order. The character of Christ written upon the inner man of the heart, godly behaviour flowing therefrom, and then faithful adherence to the whole truth of Christ as enshrined in Scripture, and courageous proclamation of the truth publicly and privately — these are the

things which go to make up a true testimony to Him.

"John did no miracle: but all things that John spake of this Man were true." A splendid epitaph that!

If a few more years shall roll and He for whom we wait has not yet come, and we in our turn need an epitaph, may one similar be truthfully ours!