Church Without Miracles

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I recently heard a very prominent evangelical leader (followed by millions worldwide) express that it is unrealistic to expect that certain sinners who are entrenched in a particular lifestyle of sin can ever renounce that lifestyle and live in purity and holiness. And to expect them to do so in order to be saved is like expecting a disabled person to get out of a wheelchair and walk!

In other words, it would require a miracle.

Paul prophesied that in the end times we would have a kind of spirituality with 'a form of godliness but denying its power' (2 Timothy 3:5). This prophecy is being fulfilled in the modern Ted-Talk style Christianity that is all around us.

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You will see it in the pervasive Christian moralism; in the 'Seven habits of successful people' style books and sermons, in the motivational messages that come from life coach-style pastors. It's the kind of Christianity that subtly replaces the power of God at work in the believer with self-

help wisdom.

The result of this mode of thinking is compromise. It's inevitable, because the power of sin can only be broken through the power of the Spirit. Christianity is not merely another self-help message. But once this shift happens in the mind, certain biblical expectations of holiness seem unrealistic, even harsh.

Following a tough teaching which Jesus had given about the love of money, the disciples were astonished and reacted, 'Who then can be saved?!' Jesus replied, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." (Matthew 19:26)

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Put simply, God's righteous requirements are not only very difficult, they are impossible. Salvation requires a miracle. It requires the transformational power of God within.

There is another popular modern notion that runs along parallel lines, which says that in the 'apostolic age' God moved in power and confirmed the Gospel with miracles, but today we must content ourselves with the Holy Scriptures. The Bible is sufficient.

But friends, the Bible is not sufficient on its own. It has never been sufficient. Not in the history of the Kingdom. Not sufficient like that. It can never replace the power of the Spirit.

Some preachers go even further. They preach that we don't even need the Scriptures – all we need is to believe in the resurrection of Christ as an historical fact. After all, in this skeptical age, many folks have trouble believing in the authority and inerrancy of Scripture.

The Effects

Only recently did I discover the complete devastation that this lie has wreaked on the Church.

This is how the garment of faith unravels:

First, the Church reassures itself that 'We don't need all that weird stuff.' Prophecy, tongues, supernatural healing and such. It's too disorderly, too messy, too excitable and emotional. It's too freaky for the visitors. Let's content ourselves with a short service. A few hymns. A short sermon followed by a nice Sunday roast with the family.

Next, we moderate our expectations of what God will do in our lives. Miracles are not the norm but rather the rare exception. They are in the probability realm of winning the national lottery: nice if it happens, but let's not get our hopes up. God tends to allow life to run its course according to the natural flow of things – He prefers not to 'interrupt the natural order'.

But here's the problem – and it's a big problem – the 'normal' Christian life requires miracles. "Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh is born of flesh, but spirit is born of the Spirit."" (John 3:5-6)

What does this mean and what are the implications of this?

The Miracle of Salvation

It means that there is a miraculous spiritual rebirth that must occur in order for us to 'enter the kingdom of God'. There is a new work of creation that God does in us that empowers us to live a new life. This new life is commonly referred to as the 'new man' within us.

This does not mean that all our sin problems go away, but it does mean that thereafter we must daily make the decision to live according to our new identity, within the grace of God, and not fall back into living according to the 'old man'. Therefore we are told: "You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness." (Ephesians 4:22-24)

Therefore, the whole Christian life is premised on the miraculous 'new birth' experience. Christianity, even modern Christianity, requires a 'divine interruption' of the 'natural order'. It requires a miracle.

If we don't believe the Spirit is still at work in the Church today, we must give up true Christian living as a lost cause. And that, as dramatic as it may sound, is exactly what many prominent 'evangelical' preachers and leaders are doing.

> The Christian life requires the active, ongoing work of the living Spirit of God.

But here is how Scripture speaks: "Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you." (1 Corinthians 6:9-11)

In fact, we all suffered from the debilitating disease called sin – it paralyzed us. The Bible says we were 'dead in our sins', unable to walk. But we have been given new life – a miracle! And so we speak of our old life of sin in the past tense, 'such were some of you'. We are no longer defined by the sins that used to be our slave-masters.

What is Left Without Miracles?

So what is left if we remove miracles from the modern church?

We have man-made, pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps religion that does not have the power to save. Sermons filled with quotations that come as often from the thought-leaders of our day, celebrities and culturally-perceived 'gurus' as from Scripture.

Here is a telling question: if God never actually came and made Himself evident in our Sunday service, would anyone really notice?

In seeker-sensitive churches, the whole service is choreographed to accommodate what an unbeliever would expect to find in church. But there can never be the seamless transition from the world into the Kingdom that is hoped, because "The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit." (1 Corinthians 2:14)

The Christian life requires the active, ongoing work of the living Spirit of God. We need miracles now as much as they did in the apostolic age. There is simply no way around it.

> If we don't ever witness anything miraculous happening in our churches, we inevitably slide into a diminished view of the power of God.

I have made much of the miraculous nature of the new-birth experience, but we need all the miraculous gifts! The Scriptures say that all the gifts (including the miraculous ones) were given 'for the common good' (1 Corinthians 12:7).

We need to see divine healing, prophecy, tongues, miracles. They are grace gifts to us. They encourage us in our faith. We need to see demons quaking and fleeing as they are confronted by the power of God with us. We need regular reminders that our God is a miracle-working God! If we don't ever witness anything miraculous happening in our churches, we inevitably slide into a diminished view of the power of God.

Here is the good news: there is no sin that is more powerful than the blood of Jesus. Jesus died to save us from the power of sin ("...sin will have no dominion over you" Romans 6:14). You have been bought back, redeemed from your old master of sin, and you now walk in the new way that Christ has opened up for you. You are a new creation!

May we never settle for a church without miracles. We have as much need of the supernatural work of the Spirit today as the Church ever has.