

The Messages of Miracles

Abstract

Historically, miracles have played an important role in the ministry of the church. The writings of the Patristic Era explained this role was communicative, delivering specific messages to specific audiences. These messages, in turn, prompted the audiences receiving them to respond in specific ways. According to the Fathers, there were three primary audiences to which miracles addressed themselves: those who were ignorant of or indifferent to Christ, those who were antagonistic to Christ, and those who were faithful to Christ. Given the usefulness of miracles to impact these audiences in the past, the present day church in the West needs to reconsider the use of miracles in its life and ministry.

Introduction

Miracles in the Bible consistently engendered varied responses from those who encountered them either through direct experience or through hearing about them from others. These responses ranged from bewilderment and fear to joy and amazement. Peter's healing of the lame man at the Beautiful Gate provides an especially clear example of this. After the healing, the healed man himself was ecstatic in his praise (Acts 3:8), the people were awed and drawn to the message of Christ (Acts 3:10-11, 4:4,21), the Pharisees were confused and troubled by the power wielded by Jesus' followers (Acts 4:13-17), and the disciples were encouraged in their faith (Acts 4:31).

These multiple reactions to miracles are not only found in the Bible. Christian history is likewise witness to miracles giving rise to dramatically different responses. These responses were particularly noted in the earliest centuries of the church's history when both those inside and outside of the church accepted supernatural occurrences as a part of life.

In this paper I will develop a schema for understanding why miracles prompted these varying responses. In doing this I will draw primarily from the writings and actions involving miracles by church leaders, missionaries and monks from the Patristic Era.¹ My reason for focusing on the writings from these individuals is because their regular involvement with miracles caused them to develop a uniquely robust and practical understanding of miracles.

Out of this understanding, the Church Fathers determined that miracles were supposed to evoke different responses when different individuals encountered them because God intended miracles to communicate different messages to different audiences. The Fathers differentiated three unique audiences to which miracles delivered specific messages meant to prompt specific responses. The first audience was composed of those who were ignorant of or indifferent to Jesus Christ. For this audience miracles communicated an invitational message which prompted them to respond by placing their allegiance in Christ. The second audience was formed of those antagonistic to Christ. Miracles conveyed a message of condemnation to this audience which prompted its members to flee in defeat, thus protecting the faithful from the harm these enemies of Christ and the church could have inflicted upon them. The third audience consisted of those faithful to Christ. These miracles offered a message of encouragement to this audience which promoted the faithful to commit themselves to Christ more deeply.

A Message of Invitation

That miracles offered an invitational message to those who were ignorant of or indifferent to Christ was a lesson the Church Fathers drew first from the biblical witness to the miracles Jesus Christ performed. In remarking on the miracles of Christ Athanasius wrote, “For who that saw His power...will hold his mind any longer in doubt whether this be the Son and

¹ For shorthand, I will be referring to this group as the “Church Fathers” or “Fathers” throughout the paper.

Wisdom and Power of God?”² John Chrysostom likewise insisted that Jesus performed “miracles to convince the hearers that He was the Son of God.”³ The Fathers held that those who saw Jesus during his earthly ministry would be awed by his miracles and led to believe that Jesus as God Incarnate.

Unlike Christ, the Fathers were not seeking to evangelize Jews who already had a religious background amenable to placing one’s allegiance in Jesus Christ alone. Rather, the Fathers faced polytheistic pagans for whom a singular allegiance to any deity would have been highly abnormal if not incomprehensible. To break through this barrier, the Fathers came to recognize that miracles could be used to demonstrate to pagans the power of Christ was superior to all other powers. By this show of power, the miracles would open the door for the Fathers to invite the pagans to place their allegiance in Christ.

The importance of the Fathers meeting pagans on the grounds of miracles can be found in the fact that pagans in the first several centuries of the church’s existence believed in the reality of miracles just as fully as Christians did. Ramsay MacMullen describes this mindset by stating, “They, however, took miracles quite for granted. That was the general starting point. *Not* to believe in them would have made you seem more than odd, simply irrational, as it would have seemed irrational seriously to suppose that babies are brought by storks.”⁴

The reason that pagans accepted the evidential force of miracles is that they had witnessed what they considered to be miracles through their pagan religions. The pagans believed that their gods – Jupiter, Minerva, Venus, Neptune and the like – would visit the world

² Athanasius, *The Great Catechism*, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 2, vol. 4. [CD-ROM], trans. and ed. Archibald Robinson (Albany, OR: AGES Software, 1997), chapter 20, section 2. (italics added)

³ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew* in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 1, vol. 10.[CD-ROM], trans., George Prevost and M. B. Riddle, ed. Phillip Schaff (Albany, OR: AGES Software, 1997), Homily 17, section 1

⁴ Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire A.D. 100-400* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 22.

of mortals to engage in supernatural work.⁵ And, much like Christians, they told stories of miracles wrought by these deities.

Christian miracles, then, had two functions that were critical to their invitational message to pagans. First, they had to show that Christ was supremely powerful. Second, they had to show the impotence of all other deities before Christ. According to MacMullen, this is just what Christian miracles did: “the unique force of Christian wonder-working that does indeed need emphasis lies in the fact that *it destroyed belief as well as creating it* – that is, if you credited it, you then had to credit the view that went with it, denying the character of god to all other divine powers whatsoever.”⁶

Augustine is an excellent example of a Church Father who sought to use miracles to invite allegiance in Christ by demonstrating Christ’s supremacy over the pagan gods. In *De Civitate* Augustine did this in two ways. First, Augustine declared the impotence of the pagan gods by suggesting that a great many things which seemed to be miracles wrought by those gods were just natural processes that humans had not fully understood. As such, many pagan “miracles” were natural, not supernatural, occurrences that did not deserve the title of miracle at all.⁷

However, Augustine did acknowledge that pagan practice had occasionally succeeded in performing a genuine miracle, and he even went so far as to report situations in which he believed pagan practitioners had tapped into supernatural power.⁸ Rather than giving the pagans quarter by this acknowledgment, though, Augustine used it to prove the superior power of Christ.

⁵ Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1986), 117.

⁶ Fox, 108-109.

⁷ Augustine, *City of God against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. R. W. Dyson (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Book XXI, Chapter 5.

⁸ See, for example, the miraculous healing of a Roman peasant in front of the senate (Book 5, Chapter 26) and hidden messages declared to King Numa through hydromancy (Book 7, Chapter 35). In both cases, Augustine agrees that a supernatural act occurred, but points to demons, not gods or spirits of the dead, as the perpetrators.

For, Augustine stated, the reason that the pagans had access to supernatural powers was because they were enslaved by demons. “The demons first of all most cunningly seduce them, either by inspiring their hearts with a hidden poison, or by the false appearance of friendship. In this way, they make a few of them their disciples, who then become the teachers of many...But above all, the demons possess the hearts of mortals.”⁹ By revealing that it was demons that provided the potency for pagan miracles, Augustine was able to use the pagan claims of miracles against them. “These very deeds are of service to the argument which we are here developing. For if unclean demons can do such things, how much mightier are the holy angels? And how much greater than all of them is the power of God, Who has made the angels themselves capable of performing miracles?...to His power they are easy.”¹⁰ Thus, Augustine turned the pagan claims of miracles on their head, demonstrating that, since the pagan miracles were the actions of demons, those miracles in fact only proved the inferior nature of the pagan beliefs. It would be far better for the pagans to give their allegiance to the omnipotent God who is the source of Christian miracles.

Several other Church Fathers likewise sought to prove the superiority of the miraculous power of Jesus Christ over the powers of the pagans by wonder-working as missionaries in the far reaches of the Roman Empire. Three of the most notable wonder-workers were Gregory Thaumaturgus, Martin of Tours and Porphyry of Gaza.

Gregory Thaumaturgus, was a celebrated miracle-working bishop who lived in the third century and became well-known through the hagiographic work *The Life of Gregory Thaumaturgus* by Gregory of Nyssa. Appointed the bishop of the outlying Roman province of Pontus, Gregory earned his appellation (Thaumaturgus, meaning “wonder-worker”) through

⁹ Augustine, Book XXI, Chapter 6.

¹⁰ Augustine, Book XXI, Chapter 6.

performing numerous miracles in this capacity. He is recorded to have exorcised demons from people as well as from pagan temples, to have altered the flow of a river to protect a town from floods and to have dried up a lake that had caused two brothers to feud.¹¹ In each of these cases Gregory demonstrated the power of Christ over the destructive powers of demons, chaotic natural events and human sin. In so doing, he offered a powerful incentive for pagans to give their allegiance to Christ. His success in this was found in that he is credited with almost completely converting the population of Pontus to Christianity. Gregory of Nyssa remarked that when Gregory arrived in Pontus there were only seventeen Christians and when he died there were only seventeen pagans, the balance having all converted to the Christian faith.¹²

Martin of Tours was a prominent miracle-working bishop in the fourth century who served in Gaul. Confrontational and often viewed as uncouth, Martin challenged the pagans of Gaul to match the power that he wielded in the name of Jesus Christ. He was said to have seen numerous visions of supernatural creatures, have telekinetic powers, be able to affect the weather, and to have healed one person by writing him a letter.¹³ The impact of his overt challenges to pagan powers, in which he consistently displayed the superiority of Christ's power through miracles, was found in the numerous pagans who converted to Christianity and sought to enter the monastic life during his ministry. Under his influence, monasticism expanded and flourished in Gaul, especially with the founding of the Marmoutier monastery.¹⁴

Porphyry of Gaza ministered in the ancient Philistine city of Gaza during the early fifth century. He is attributed with having ended a severe drought that the locally worshipped pagan deities could not affect, with saving a woman and her child during an extremely difficult labor,

¹¹ MacMullen, 60.

¹² Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 36.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁴ Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 119.

and with striking a pagan prophetess dumb when she sought to debate against the gospel. In all of these cases, converts were gained from the pagans, often with them shouting in awe, “Great is the God of the Christians!” as they renounced their former spiritual allegiances in favor of Christ.¹⁵

The Church Fathers maintained that the message of miracles to the audience of those ignorant of or indifferent to Christ was evangelistic: it invited them to pledge their allegiance to Christ alone. In dealing with the pagans, this message came through as the miracles demonstrated the superior power of Christ and the impotency of the pagan gods. This demonstration proved remarkably effective during throughout the first millennium of the church’s missionary work, as seen by the growing number of pagans who converted during this time.

A Message of Condemnation

While the Church Fathers held that miracles conveyed a message of invitation to those who had been ignorant of or indifferent to Christ, they also believed miracles conveyed a message of condemnation to the second audience: those who knew Christ and were antagonistic to him. This message, in turn, prompted these enemies of Christ to withdraw from tormenting the faithful, thus providing protection for the faithful from them. According to the Fathers, this audience was populated by both dark spiritual powers and unrepentant human beings.

The Fathers argued that the first miracles which conveyed the message of condemnation to the dark spiritual forces were those performed by Jesus which led to his victory over the devil. The clearest expression of this is found in Gregory of Nyssa’s christology, which pointed to Jesus’ miracles as catalysts for the devil’s defeat and the safety that defeat purchased for humanity. Gregory posited that the devil desired to claim Jesus because Jesus was so evidently

¹⁵ MacMullen, 87-88.

full of divine power as evidenced by his miracles. To gain Jesus, the devil decided to barter with God. The devil gave up his right to torment all humans, who were under the devil's power because of sin, for the opportunity to kill Jesus. As Gregory explained, "The Enemy, therefore, beholding in Him such power, saw also in Him an opportunity for an advance, in the exchange, upon the value of what he held. For this reason he chooses Him as a ransom for those who were shut up in the prison of death."¹⁶ Upon making this transaction and killing Jesus, however, the devil found that he had been duped, for Jesus was in truth the very Incarnation of God, not simply a miracle-working human. As a result, the death of Jesus was quickly overturned in the Resurrection and the devil was left with nothing while God had regained humanity and humanity had regained the way to be divine.¹⁷ The miracles during Jesus' earthly ministry set the trap for the devil and the grand miracle of the resurrection of Jesus closed the trap that destroyed the power of the devil once and for all thus protecting humanity from the devil's claim. As Gregory concluded,

in order to secure that the ransom in our behalf might be easily accepted by him who required it, the Deity was hidden under the veil of our nature, that so, as with ravenous fish, the hook of the Deity might be gulped down along with the bait of flesh, and thus, life being introduced into the house of death, and light shining in darkness, that which is diametrically opposed to light and life might vanish; for it is not in the nature of darkness to remain when light is present, or of death to exist when life is active.¹⁸

One of the results of Jesus using his miracles to bait and destroy the devil was to give an even greater measure of protection against the devil to those who pledged their allegiance to Christ. Antony of Egypt, as reported through Athanasius, learned the extent of this protection in an unusual encounter he had.

¹⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism*, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 2, vol. 5. [CD-ROM], trans. William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson, eds. Phillip Schaff and Henry Wace (Albany, OR: AGES Software, 1997), chapter 23.

¹⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, chapter 24.

¹⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, chapter 24.

Once someone knocked at the door of my cell. And when I went out, I saw someone who seemed massive and tall. When I asked, “Who are you?” he said, “I am Satan.” I said, “What are you doing here?” And he asked, “Why do the monks and all the other Christians censure me without cause? Why do they curse me every hour?” When I replied, “Why do you torment them?” he said, “I am not the one tormenting them, but they disturb themselves, for I have become weak. Haven’t they read that ‘the swords of the enemy have failed utterly, and that you have destroyed their cities?’ I no longer have a place – no weapon, no city. There are Christians everywhere, and even the desert has filled with monks. Let them watch after themselves and stop censuring me for no reason!” Marveling then at the grace of the Lord, I said to him, “Even though you are always a liar and never tell the truth, nevertheless, this time, even if you did not intend to, you have spoken truly. For Christ in his coming reduced you to weakness, and after throwing you down he left you defenseless.” Upon hearing the Savior’s name, and being unable to endure the scorching from it, he became invisible.¹⁹

Not only did the victory of Jesus over the devil afford the faithful protection from the dark spiritual powers, they conferred on the faithful continued power over the forces of evil through miracles. Again, Antony is an excellent example of this. Athanasius’ accounts of Antony battling demons and performing numerous exorcisms proved that miracles performed in the name of Jesus Christ by the faithful carried a clear message of condemnation to the dark spiritual powers. This message prompted them to flee, thus keeping the faithful. And, far from suggesting that only the great saints, such as Antony, were capable of declaring this message of condemnation to the devil and demons, Athanasius wrote elsewhere, “whereas formerly demons used to deceive men’s fancy, occupying springs or rivers, trees or stones, and thus imposed upon the simple by their juggleries; now, after the divine visitation of the Word, their deception has ceased. For by the Sign of the Cross, though a man but use it, he drives out their deceits.”²⁰ Through a simple gesture symbolizing Jesus, any Christian could perform a miraculous exorcism and deliver the message of condemnation to the dark spiritual powers, and thus receive divine protection by causing those powers to flee.

¹⁹ Athanasius, *The Life of Antony*, trans. Robert C. Gregg (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), Section 41.

²⁰ Athanasius, *Catechism*, chapter 47, section 4.

The enemies of Jesus Christ were not only evil spirits, however. There were also human beings who chose to array themselves against Jesus. These people fell broadly into two categories for the Fathers: persecutors of the church and heretics.

During the first five centuries of the church's life there were two primary groups that persecuted the church: pagan priests who saw Christianity as a dangerous rival religion and state agents intent on driving Christianity from the Roman Empire. We have already met the former group in the first section in their encounters with the missionary wonder-workers. Pagan priests frequently hoped to prove the superiority of their deities over Jesus Christ, but were consistently humiliated. Often, they faced personal punishment for their obstinate refusal to allow Christianity to be spread. Porphyry of Gaza struck dumb a pagan priestess who sought to debate with him. In another instance, the ascetic Hermoupolis of Egypt caused a group of pagan practitioners to freeze in place during a worship procession through the city streets. They were unable to move until they renounced their errors.²¹ Even more severe, a Syrian pagan ascetic named Aphraates was said to have the power to kill pagans outright through his prayer.²² In each case, the message of condemnation was clear and the unrepentant pagans were rendered incapable of harming the faithful.

State persecutors of the church fared no better. Ambrose, in addressing a group of frightened worshippers gathered in the basilica for several days after the judge Auxentius had ordered the closing of all basilicas, comforted the people by explaining that God was miraculously protecting the faithful against the power of the judge. One way God had done this was by causing the soldiers under Auxentius' command to be peculiarly blinded so that they

²¹ MacMullen, 62.

²² MacMullen, 62.

could not see an open door by which they could have entered the basilica. He stated this in his sermon to the people,

Was it not also discovered two days ago, as you remember, that a certain entrance on the left side of the basilica was open, which you thought had been shut and secured? Armed men surrounded the basilica, they tried this and the other entrance, but their eyes were blinded so that that could not see the one that was open. And you know well that it was open many nights. Cease, then, to be anxious; for that will take place which Christ commands and which is for the best.²³

Antony, in spite of his life as a hermit, likewise was an instrument of God's miraculous punishment against state persecutors. In one instance, Antony was divinely prompted to send a letter of warning to one Balacius, a military commander who "was so savage as to beat virgins and to strip and flog monks." However, Balacius "laughing, threw the letter to the ground, spit on it, and he insulted those who brought it." He also vowed to carry out his next persecution against Antony directly. Five days after this display, however, Balacius was riding together with a friend on two horses that Balacius himself had broken and that were reckoned as "the gentlest of all he had trained." Notwithstanding, "the gentler horse...bit Balacius, threw him down, and attacked him. And he tore his thigh with his teeth so badly that he was carried immediately back to the city, but within three days he died." Athanasius hardly needed to add the postscript he did in recounting this event, "And all were amazed that what Antony foretold was fulfilled so quickly."²⁴ In this case, then, the condemnatory miracle against Balacius not only protected the faithful, it also invited onlookers who were part of the audience composed of the ignorant and indifferent to consider the power of Christ and pledge their allegiance to him.

²³ Ambrose, *Sermon Against Auxentius on the Giving up of the Basilicas* in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 2, vol. 10. [CD-ROM], trans. H. De Romestin, E. De Romestin and H. T. F. Duckworth, eds. Phillip Schaff and Henry Wace (Albany, OR: AGES Software, 1997), section 10.

²⁴ Athanasius, *Antony*, section 86.

The clear message of the Christian miracles performed before the persecutors of the church, pagan practitioners and state officials alike, was that the enemies of Jesus Christ have been defeated and stood condemned. Just as the devil had been overthrown, so now these persecutors, who were in league with the work of the devil, were toppled as well. In the downfall of these evil ones, Christians found comfort in the protection offered them through the miraculous power of God.

The heretics received a similar message, but in a somewhat different way. In challenging and defeating the persecutors by the power of Jesus Christ through miracles, the Fathers' implicitly acknowledged that the persecutors could summon power of a sort, either by pagan ritual or by dint of military force. In the case of heretics, however, the Fathers not only claimed miracles condemned the heretics, but that the heretics had no power of their own.

The Church Fathers maintained that miracles were a sign of God's favor. God would not allow someone to perform miraculous signs in the name of Jesus Christ if that person were not in a proper relationship with Christ. Based on this belief, miracles became a sort of litmus test for orthodoxy. If a group of people claiming to be Christian was able to perform miracles, it showed God was validating that group as faithful. However, if the group failed to perform miracles, that group was clearly apart from the power of God. For the Fathers, the latter situation was the case for the heretics. Irenaeus of Lyon (ca.130-202), in *Against Heresies*, offered one of the more dramatic renditions of this argument, when writing to refute the Valentinian Gnostics' claims of performing miracles.

Again, while they assert that they possess souls from the same sphere as Jesus, and that they are like to Him, sometimes even maintaining that they are superior; while [they affirm that they were] produced, like Him, for the performance of works tending to the benefit and establishment of mankind, they are found doing nothing of the same or a like kind [with His actions], nor what can in any respect be brought into comparison with them. And if they have in truth accomplished

anything [remarkable] by means of magic, they strive [in this way] deceitfully to lead foolish people astray, since they confer no real benefit or blessing on those over whom they declare that they exert [supernatural] power; but, bringing forward mere boys [as the subjects on whom they practice], and deceiving their sight, while they exhibit phantasms that instantly cease, and do not endure even a moment of time, they are proved to be like, not Jesus our Lord, but Simon the magician.²⁵

The heretics, in spite of their assertions to the contrary, could not perform a single miracle, and, as Irenaeus acidly observed, they could not manipulate what little power they did have as well as even the pagans manipulated their own dark powers. Incompetent as they were, however, they were still dangerous because they employed their power to deceive the faithful in an effort to draw them away from the orthodox church. For Irenaeus, as well as the other Fathers, this activity classified the heretics as the worst sort of enemies of Christ. As such, heretics needed to be condemned and the faithful needed to be protected from them. Fortunately, Irenaeus maintained the miracles performed within the orthodox church were up to this task.

Unlike the miracles against the persecutors, the miracles performed within the church were not direct attacks on the heretics that caused them to suffer death or some other ill effect. Rather, in their robustness, these miracles condemned the heretics by demonstrating that the orthodox church was the only community in which humans could participate in the power of God. This same message also served to protect the faithful by helping convince them of the counterfeit nature of the power wielded by the heretics. This made the faithful far less likely to be deceived by the heretics and defect to their camp.

According to Irenaeus, the church had no lack of these miracles with which to convey the message of condemnation to the heretics and to provide protection to the faithful. In a famous

²⁵ Irenaeus, *Irenaeus Against Heresies* in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1* [CD-ROM] ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Albany, OR: AGES Software, 1997), Book 2, Chapter 32, Section 3.

passage, which would be cited over a hundred years later by Eusebius in his *Church History*,²⁶

Irenaeus described several of the miracles common to the church:

Wherefore, also, those who are in truth His disciples, receiving grace from Him, do in His name perform [miracles], so as to promote the welfare of other men, according to the gift which each one has received from Him. For some do certainly and truly drive out devils, so that those who have thus been cleansed from evil spirits frequently both believe [in Christ], and join themselves to the Church. Others have foreknowledge of things to come: they see visions, and utter prophetic expressions. Others still, heal the sick by laying their hands upon them, and they are made whole. Yea, moreover, as I have said, the dead even have been raised up, and remained among us for many years.²⁷

Miracles sent a clear message of condemnation to all those who chose to stand as enemies of Jesus Christ. The miracles performed by Jesus himself had destroyed the spiritual powers of darkness, including the devil himself. The result of this was that Christians, performing miracles in the name of Jesus, could likewise defeat both demons and humans who rejected the lordship of Jesus. Persecutors of the church, whether pagans or state officials, were taught that their power was miniscule compared to the power wielded by the Christians. Heretics were taught that they had no power at all, and so were even worse than the pagans. The miracles were indeed frightening messages from a powerful and judgmental God for those who would reject God's Son and God's Church. At the same time, they were sources of comfort for the faithful who found protection from their foes through them.

A Message of Encouragement

For those who had already pledged their allegiance to Jesus Christ, having foresworn the evils of pagan belief and avoided the dangers of heretical teachings, the Church Fathers taught that miracles carried a message of encouragement meant to prompt greater commitment to

²⁶ Eusebius, *The Church History of Eusebius* in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 2, vol. 10. [CD-ROM], trans. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, eds. Phillip Schaff and Henry Wace (Albany, OR: AGES Software, 1997), Book 5, Chapter 7.

²⁷ Irenaeus, Book 2, Chapter 32, Section 4.

Christ. On a basic level, the faithful encountered this message and prompting in recognizing God's faithfulness and goodness to them through miracles. Augustine, for example, penned a lengthy chapter in *De Civitate* (Book XXII, Chapter 8) to relate numerous miracles he was privy to that had blessed the faithful. These miracles included two blind people who received sight, four people who had demons exorcised from their bodies, a woman who was healed of breast cancer, and a presbyter who was raised from the dead. Sometimes the people who received these miracles they were long-suffering Christians who were miraculously healed by God in answer to fervent prayers, sometimes they were wayward believers who found forgiveness in the form of a miraculous event upon their return to the faith. Regardless, Augustine made it clear that all Christians, no matter how tenuous their commitment to Christ, could be encouraged as they recognized God's faithfulness to them through these miracles. Likewise, all Christians were called by these miracles to deeper commitment to God in gratitude for God's goodness.

Sometimes the encouragement offered by these miracles was less focused on the goodness and faithfulness of God and more on directing the faithful to hear the exhortation of spiritual mentors who desired them to deepen their commitment to Christ. This was the case with the miracles performed by Antony. While Athanasius attributed numerous miracles to Antony, and did note that these miracles were an encouragement to the faithful in terms of reminding them of God's goodness, he was also clear that the primary encouragement these miracles offered was an encouragement for the faithful to pay close attention to the example and instructions of Antony. That Athanasius saw this instruction as the piece of central work of Antony is seen in the fact that one-third of the *The Life of Antony* is taken up with a discourse given by Antony on how young monks can develop a more advanced spiritual discipline.

Miracles by Antony and others like him encouraged the faithful to listen to the miracle-workers as worthy instructors in the faith. It was then the instruction offered by these miracle-workers that prompted the response of the faithful to deepen their commitment to Christ. This may have been a more indirect route for the miracles to convey their message of encouragement and prompt a response from the audience of the faithful, but it was no less effective. Indeed, at times it was so effective that the very presence of the miracle-worker generated a deeper commitment to Christ among the faithful instantaneously. Athanasius recorded that Antony sometimes prompted such an immediate response in one of the more dubious miracles he accorded to him, “young women who had men hoping to marry them, on simply seeing Antony at a distance, remained virgins for Christ.”²⁸

The Fathers also pointed to the sacraments as miracles that conveyed the message of encouragement and prompted the faithful to grow deeper in their commitment to Christ. Indeed, the Fathers argued that the sacraments mediated uniquely powerful and meaningful miracles in which the capacity of the participant to commit more fully to Christ was increased. In this regard, sacraments operated in a way that was the reverse of other miracles performed before the faithful. Whereas other miracles provided a sensible manifestation of supernatural power that conveyed the message of encouragement to the faithful and prompted them to commit more fully to Christ, the sacraments provided an invisible, internal miraculous transformation in the participant. The encouragement the participants received that this miracle had occurred was in their interaction with the mundane outer symbols of the sacraments – water for baptism and bread and wine for the Eucharist. Thus, the response of the participant was based on the assurance the mundane symbols of the sacraments conveyed that a miracle had indeed occurred in partaking of the sacraments.

²⁸ Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, section 88.

In regard to baptism, the water and oil administered to the participant encouraged the participant with the assurance that a powerful miracle had wrought a fundamental transformation in the life of the participant. Gregory of Nyssa explained that the miracle involved the power of God breaking the corruption of the participant's soul and transforming the participant such that the participant now shared in the deified image of Christ.

But as regards those who follow this Leader, their nature does not admit of an exact and entire imitation, but it receives now as much as it is capable of receiving,...It consists in effecting the suppression of that admixture of sin, in the figure of mortification that is given by the water, not certainly a complete effacement, but a kind of break in the continuity of the evil.²⁹

In addition to this miraculous internal transformation, Augustine explained that the baptismal waters might also encourage the faithful by causing physical miracles. He cited a "certain comic actor of Curubis" who was "cured at his baptism not only of paralysis, but also of a serious deformity of the genitals." In another case, a physician, who suffered from bouts of pain from demonic attacks, "as he was being baptized, he was relieved not only of the pain with which he was being tortured more severely than usual, but also of the gout itself; and though he lived a long time afterward, he never again suffered pain in his feet."³⁰ In these cases, the sacrament was doubly encouraging, conveying a physical manifestation of God's invisible transforming miracle to the participant through the ritual washing with water and through the healing. Even if a participant in baptism received only the more mundane of these encouragements, though, that was sufficient to remind the participant to make a deeper commitment to Christ now that the miraculous transformation allowing that deeper relationship had been wrought by baptism.

²⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, chapter 35.

³⁰ Augustine, Book XXII, chapter 8.

In the case of the Eucharist, the bread and wine conveyed the assurance that Jesus Christ was bodily present with the participant and was miraculously interacting with the participant's body through the sacrament. Gregory of Nyssa understood the miracle of the Eucharist to operate by making the body of the participant incorruptible by the participant receiving the body and blood of Jesus Christ, just as the baptized one's soul has been made incorruptible by baptism. As such, the participant could enter wholly into the nature of the Incarnate Lord.

Since, then, that God-containing flesh partook for its substance and support of this particular nourishment also, and since the God who was manifested infused Himself into perishable humanity for this purpose, viz. that by this communion with Deity mankind might at the same time be deified, for this end it is that, by dispensation of His grace, He disseminates Himself in every believer through that flesh, whose substance comes from bread and wine, blending Himself with the bodies of believers, to secure that, by this union with the immortal, man, too, may be a sharer in incorruption. He gives these gifts by virtue of the benediction through which He transelements the natural quality of these visible things to that immortal thing.³¹

The power of this Eucharistic miracle was such that it demanded the faithful to commit themselves to constant scrutiny of their actions and attitudes, bringing all these in line with the holy life they participated in through the miracle of the Eucharist. Chrysostom, as a presbyter in Antioch, minced no words on this point, demanding that his congregants take seriously the charge of the Eucharistic miracle to commit themselves more fully to Jesus by ceasing to sin.

Therefore I protest, and give warning to all, that if, when I have met you in private [for confession], and put the matter to the proof (and I will certainly put it to the proof), I detect any who have not corrected this vice, I will inflict punishment upon them, by ordering them to be excluded from the Holy Mysteries; not that they may remain always shut out, but that having reformed themselves, they may thus enter in, and with a pure conscience enjoy the Holy Table; for this is to be a partaker of the Communion!³²

³¹ Gregory of Nyssa, chapter 37.

³² John Chrysostom, *The Homilies on the Statues to the People of Antioch* in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 1, vol. 9 [CD-ROM], trans., W. R. W. Stephens, ed. Phillip Schaff (Albany, OR: AGES Software, 1997), Homily 20, section 24.

The message of encouraging the faithful to reform their ways in order to offer greater commitment to Jesus Christ could hardly be clearer.

All miracles presented before the audience of the faithful, whether miracles performed by holy men, physical manifestations of God's power in the lives of Christians, or the miracles offered through the sacraments, were miracles that encouraged the faithful by manifesting God's faithfulness to them in powerful ways. Based on this encouragement, the faithful were motivated to deepen their commitment to Christ, more fully participating in the holy life God had miraculously made available to them.

Conclusion: A Reappropriation of Miracles for the Church in the West

Having developed this schema for understanding the messages of miracles convey to different audiences and the responses that these messages prompt, the question remains as to what the practical application of this is. My answer to this is that it offers the church in the West a stepping stone for reintegrating miracles into its life.

In offering this answer, it is important to for me to clarify that I am not suggesting that miracles need to become overly prominent in the church's life. Fox offers an important historical observation on this point. Speaking specifically of potential converts, he explains that while Christian miracles may have garnered the attention of the residents of the Roman Empire, they did not guarantee that the witnesses of these miracles would convert. "Whereas pagan cults won adherents, Christianity aimed, and contrived, to win converts. It won them by conviction and persuasion, long and detailed sequels to the initial proof that faith could work."³³ The "initial proof" Lane cites was the miracles the Christians performed. These miracles needed to be followed with substantial Christian instruction if their audiences were to understand their messages and respond appropriately to them. Antony, in discussing miracles performed before

³³ Fox, 330.

the faithful, even went so far as to argue that instruction was superior to miracles. In his discourse to the monks he stated, “We ought not to boast about expelling demons, nor become proud on account of healings performed; we are not to marvel only at him who casts out a demon, and treat with disdain him who does not. Let one learn well the discipline of each, and let him either copy and emulate it or correct it.”³⁴ The Fathers’ teachings about the sacraments as only providing the miraculous capacity for developing a deeper commitment to Christ further supports this point. Miracles require Christian instruction if they are to be effective.

This idea that miracles cannot stand apart from the arduous process of instruction and maturation in the faith is at the heart of the Christian understanding of miracles. Setting the precedent for this was Jesus Christ, whose miracles were always performed in conjunction with his teaching. The Fathers, as catechists, missionaries, apologists, church leaders and spiritual mentors, followed this example of setting their miracles within the context of instruction regardless of the audience they were addressing. Antony even instructed the devil before exorcising him.

Thus, if the church again seeks to practice miracles, it must recognize that, as impressive as miracles are, they cannot stand alone. They are only one tool for use by Christians in relating to the various audiences in the world. For would-be converts, miracles are a tool to break up the rocky soil of ignorance, indifference and previous allegiances so the gospel seed can find a place to take root and flourish. Against enemies of Jesus, miracles are a tool to demonstrate their error and weakness and to protect the faithful from their persecutions. For the faithful, miracles are a tool to remind them of the faithfulness of the God they serve and to draw them to commit more fully to that God. However, apart from Christian instruction, these messages would be lost on many in all audiences. Augustine may have had the most succinct understanding of this

³⁴ Athanasius, *Antony*, section 38.

interrelationship between miracles and belief, “[miracles] have become known in order to produce faith; they have become more clearly known through the faith which they have produced. They are read among the peoples, so that the peoples may believe; but they would never have been read among the peoples, had they not been believed.”³⁵ Only if the church offers instruction with its miracles will the messages of those miracles be understandable to all audiences and prompt the appropriate response.

But is it really possible for the church in the West – as thoroughly influenced as it has been by the Enlightenment – to reintegrate miracles into its ministry? This is a significant question, as it probes whether the church can truly be the church unless it makes use of miracles. The Church Fathers would have thought it impossible for a church to be the church without miracles. At best, such a lack of divine manifestation would have shown the church to be anemic in its relationship with Christ; at worst it would have identified the church as heretical. It is this serious charge from its deep heritage that the church in the West must struggle with as it considers its relationship to miracles. William Abraham makes this point: “To be sure, we meet here a kind of watershed decision in theology. We are faced with tough alternatives that have a bearing on our fundamental cosmological and metaphysical convictions... Either we follow through on a robust and full account of the gospel...or we adopt one of the revisionist alternatives of the Christian tradition.” He goes on to suggest how the church should approach this situation, “the mature Christian theist will seek to retrieve the fullness of the work of the Holy Spirit, including that mysterious, dynamic activity represented by direct manifestation both to individuals and to the gathered community.”³⁶

³⁵ Augustine, Book XXII, Chapter 8.

³⁶ William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1989), 157.

Abraham gets it right. Miracles should not be dismissed because of the intellectual embarrassment they portend to the heirs of David Hume in Western culture. To let go of miracles, to pretend that we who make up the church today are not part of the audiences that God sent the miracles to speak to and to speak through, is to let go of a marvelous tool of the Christian faith, and is to be deaf to the otherwise clarion voice of God. Moreover, as Philip Jenkins and Lamin Sanneh have observed, the church is in an excellent position to begin reviving its supernaturalism in the West.³⁷ Both scholars point to the success of charismatic movements in Europe that are garnering growing numbers of adherents even as state churches continue to decline. Likewise, the often noted interest in spirituality in the United States shows the door is opening again for miracles to be given a place in the ministry of the church in the West. By recapturing a clearer understanding of the messages miracles convey and the responses they prompt, the church could use them effectively and responsibly to reach out to those indifferent to Christ, silence those antagonistic, and revive the faithful.

³⁷ Philip Jenkins, "Godless Europe?" *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* vol. 31, no. 3, July 2007, 115-120. and Lamin Sanneh, "Can Europe Be Saved? A Review Essay," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* vol. 31, no. 3, July 2007, 121-124.

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