

CHRISTIANITY TODAY



||| A PRESBYTERIAN JOURNAL DEVOTED TO STATING, DEFENDING
AND FURTHERING THE GOSPEL IN THE MODERN WORLD |||

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Christianity and the Miraculous

IN our February issue we indicated, as fully as the limits of our space permitted, the kind and measure of that supernaturalism that real Christianity recognizes and demands. In this issue we seek to indicate the place that those particular manifestations of the supernatural we call miracles occupy in Christianity.

It is important that we distinguish between the supernatural and the miraculous. The latter is related to the former as the species to the genus. The recognition of the miraculous necessarily involves the supernatural but there may be a recognition of the supernatural where there is no recognition of the miraculous. A man who believes in God, in other than a pantheistic sense, believes in the supernatural; but such a man does not necessarily believe in the miraculous. Even if we confine our attention to what is specifically Christian, the supernatural includes a great deal more than does the miraculous. Regeneration, the new birth, for instance, is a supernatural event, but, properly speaking, it is not a miraculous event. Regeneration has this in common with the miraculous, namely, it is an event due to the immediate power of God. A miracle, however, is not only an event wrought by the immediate power of God; it is an event in the external world. While then all miracles are supernatural events, all supernatural events are not miracles. A miracle, it may be well to add, is not merely an event in the external world that we are at a loss to explain. If that were the case, the number of events we call miraculous would decrease as the

extent of our knowledge increased. As a matter of fact the number of events we are warranted in calling miracles would be exactly the same even if we possessed knowledge like the Most High. A miracle, in the strict sense of the word, is an event in the external world that the forces ordinarily operating in this world are incapable by themselves of producing, no matter how divinely led—an event that demands the immediate activity of God as its only adequate explanation.

There are those who affirm their faith in those manifestations of the supernatural in the form of the miraculous recorded in the Bible but who class these miracles among the non-essentials of Christianity. These maintain, as a rule, that miracles have only an evidential value. They were “signs” to convince men that Christianity was of God and when they accomplish that end their purpose is fulfilled. The essential thing, therefore, is not that we

believe the miracles but that we believe the things that the miracles evidence as true. Once we have arrived at such faith the miracles have no further significance for us. If we can arrive at such faith without the aid of the miracles or while denying the miracles, well and good. There is some truth in this contention. The miracles do possess evidential value. They are “signs” that are fitted to convince men and that have convinced men that Christianity is of God. NICODEMUS showed sense above that of many modern would-be apologists when he said to JESUS: “We know thou art a teacher come from God, for no man can do these signs, that thou doest, except God be with him.” It is true also that the miracles had greater evidential value, relatively speaking, for the first Christians than they do for us. We have other evidences, such as the historical effects of Christianity, which they did not possess. Moreover all the miracles must have had evidential value for those who first witnessed them. For us, however, the one miracle that has outstanding evidential value is the resurrection of JESUS. But while there is truth in this contention, it comes far short of expressing the whole truth. What it fails to recognize is that miracles enter into the very substance of Christianity. They are not merely “the bell which draws men to God’s sermon:” they are an important part of the sermon itself. Apart from them the sermon itself would be radically different from what it actually is. It is true, of course, that all the miracles do not enter into the substance of Christianity in the same degree. We

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might conceivably be ignorant of some of them and still have essentially the same conception of Christianity that we possess. There are miracles, however, that so enter into the very substance of Christianity that apart from them there is and could be no such thing as Christianity in any proper sense of the word. With such miracles as the incarnation and the resurrection in mind every one who has any intelligent understanding of what Christianity is will join in saying that Christianity de-miracalized is Christianity extinct.

That as regards Christianity the choice is between a miraculous Christianity and no Christianity at all appears most clearly when we consider that we cannot eliminate the miraculous without eliminating JESUS Himself. JESUS Himself is the greatest of all miracles; and yet it is He who stands at the center of Christianity and makes it what it is. How is it possible, then, to eliminate the miraculous, or even to treat it as non-essential, and still retain Christianity? We might as well suppose that we could eliminate the sun from the heavens without destroying our solar system as suppose that we can eliminate JESUS CHRIST from Christianity and contend that what is left behind can honestly and intelligently be called Christianity. No doubt we might still call what is left behind after this miracle of miracles is eliminated Christianity, but it would be something *other* than Christianity and hence something that ought to be called by another name. In fact the question whether miracles have occurred is one with the question whether it is indeed true God so loved this world as to give His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth on Him might not perish but have everlasting life. To scoff at the miraculous is therefore to scoff at the reality of redemption. It is the miracles, let us never forget, that give us a Gospel. If the Gospel merely gave us *good advice*, merely told us what we should do to save ourselves, we would not need to be so greatly concerned over the question of miracles; but since it primarily consists of the *good news* of what God has done to save us from the guilt and power of sin, we can deny the miraculous only at the cost of denying that God has intervened in human history to accomplish our redemption.

We are constantly told that great evil results from identifying Christianity with the miraculous. Everywhere there are voices telling us that its miracles are the one great obstacle that keeps the modern world from accepting Christianity, that the Church must preach a non-miraculous Christianity if it would win the men of today. We do not believe that such is the case; but even if we did we would not advise the preaching of a non-miraculous Christianity; and that because it is to us a matter of indifference whether men accept Christianity unless the Christianity they accept be a miraculous Christianity. We readily admit that those who commend to us a non-miraculous Christianity commend to us much that is attractive, much that is worthy of our attention, and yet the Christianity (so-called) which they preach does not differ essentially from what has been preached, or is being preached, under non-Christian auspices. Even if we should succeed in winning the whole world to such a Christianity nothing much would be gained; and yet there is joy among the angels of heaven when one sinner turns from his sins and puts his trust in that miraculous CHRIST who is able to save unto the uttermost. We have, therefore, everything to lose and nothing to gain by preaching a non-miraculous Christianity. If we must evacuate Christianity of all that gives it unique value before we can preach it in a form that will commend it to the modern world, why preach it at all? What is needed is not a Gospel that is easy to preach, or a Gospel that can be preached without giving offense, but a Gospel that is worthwhile. It is a miraculous not a non-miraculous Christianity that provides us with such a Gospel. We hold, therefore, that it is not the part of wisdom to attempt to denude Christianity of its miracles so as to bring it into accord with the prevailing world-view; rather we hold that it becomes us, as best we may, to strive to bring the conceptions of this later, and as it would fain believe itself better instructed age, into harmony with those of CHRIST and His apostles.

Living as we do in an age in which miracles are everywhere spoken against, in which disbelief in miracles is even regarded as one of the hall-marks of culture, we, as Christian men and women, are under constant temptation to weaken if

not to surrender our confession at this point. This temptation, however, must be resisted if we are to witness a good confession, if in fact we are to remain Christians at all. And that because as regards Christianity the choice is not between a miraculous and a non-miraculous Christianity. It is between a miraculous Christianity and no Christianity at all. A non-miraculous CHRIST is neither a proper object of worship nor one who is capable of saving us from the guilt and power of sin. Surely a Christianity that knows nothing of a CHRIST in whose presence we can say "my LORD and my GOD," nothing of a CHRIST who as our substitute bore our sins in His own body on the tree; nothing of a CHRIST who proved conqueror over death and the grave and thus wrought in us a living hope of an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away—is, to put it mildly, a Christianity other than that of CHRIST and His apostles.

The Christianity of CHRIST and His apostles, whatever may be true of much that calls itself Christianity today, is through and through a miraculous Christianity. Christianity, as already intimated, is a miraculous religion because it is a redemptive religion, more particularly because it is that redemptive religion that offers mankind salvation from sin, conceived as guilt as well as pollution, through the expiatory death of the GOD-MAN, JESUS CHRIST. No miracles, no incarnation; no incarnation, no GOD-MAN; no GOD-MAN, no Saviour from the guilt and power of sin; no Saviour from the guilt and power of sin, no Christianity in any distinctive sense of the word. Or again no miracles, no resurrection of CHRIST; no resurrection of CHRIST, no confidence in His claims, His teachings and His promises, no assurance of His power and ability to save, no assurance that He is today LORD of heaven and earth; no confidence and assurance on these points, no Christianity in any proper sense of the word. Surely it should be as clear as day to all that Christianity denuded of its miracles is Christianity extinct. What is left after the miracles are eliminated may be called Christianity but it is not thereby made Christianity. A rose given another name will smell as sweet. But it does not follow that whatever we choose to call a rose will distil a rose's fragrance.