

# How God Shapes Society

## The Sociology of Miracles in Modern Christianity

By

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*This thesis represents my own work in accordance with University regulations.*

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## Introduction

Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour. And a man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple that is called the Beautiful Gate to ask alms of those entering the temple.

Seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked to receive alms. And Peter directed his gaze at him, as did John, and said, “Look at us.” And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, “I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!” And he took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. And leaping up he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. And all the people saw him walking and praising God, and recognized him as the one who sat at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, asking for alms. And they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. (Acts 3:1-10)<sup>1</sup>

The significance of this passage lies not only in its extraordinary claim, but also in the context in which this event occurred and its impact on any discussion of miracles in modern day Christianity. The primary purpose of Acts is to chronicle the lives of the Apostles (the disciples of Jesus) and the early church after Jesus had already ascended into heaven and was no longer with them on earth. The Bible relates that, up until that day, Jesus’ disciples had often performed miracles in his presence and typically under his guidance. The passage above is the first recorded account of anyone performing a miracle since the ascension of Jesus, setting the precedent from then on and throughout history for Christians to expect, witness, and perform miracles in the age after Jesus’ ascension and before his expected return. The legacy of such claims continues to this

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations in this paper are from the English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible.

day, as Christians report thousands of miracles every year, many of which will be discussed in this paper.

The purpose of this paper is to determine the effects of miracles in modern day Christianity and the function that they serve in a given context such as a church or family. First, a point of clarification is in order. Given that the Christians who claim to have witnessed or performed miracles believe that they did indeed occur and were “miraculous” (the definition of which will be discussed later), then the report is already significant for the sociologist, hence the purpose of this paper is *not* to prove or disprove or otherwise offer an opinion on the validity of their claims. The simple fact that Christians around the world often report miracles is enough of a remarkable phenomenon to merit this study. The veracity of reported miracles will be left in the hands of the witnesses, philosophers, and theologians, though this paper will discuss the relevant theology in order to provide a clearer context for such claims.

The study of sociology is interested in religion because religion is an inextricably social entity. Christianity is no exception. The founding fathers of the study of sociology all noted that religion is an undeniably important aspect of society. Karl Marx went so far as to say that “Religion is the opiate of the masses.” Emile Durkheim claimed that, “Religious beliefs proper are always shared by a definite group that professes them and practices the corresponding rites. Not only are they individually accepted by all members of that group, but they also belong to the group and unify it. The individuals who comprise the group feel joined to one another by the fact of common faith.”<sup>2</sup> The experiences, rituals, worship, fellowship, attitudes, and behaviors that make a religion distinct which are shared by its members, are the result of shared beliefs.

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<sup>2</sup> Durkheim, Emile. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. The Free Press. New York, NY. 1912. Pg, 41.

Therefore an understanding of the shared beliefs of a religious group helps the sociologist to predict the various types of social outcomes that a certain group might produce.

Furthermore, the sociology of religion shows how people derive meaning from their social contexts. For example, if a man becomes unreasonably enraged at his wife, then his religious convictions may lead him to believe that one or both of them has been afflicted by a demon, a curse, or bad karma among other possibilities. Similarly, a series of miraculous healings in a church may shed new meaning on concurrent events in the town surrounding the church. Shared experience is a key factor in creating community, therefore understanding the interpretation of a miracle witnessed or believed in by many people will be useful in determining the types of social bonds the community has.

By understanding how a set of beliefs correlates with a set of behaviors and practices, the sociologist can create typologies of religious groups or, more specifically, a set of typologies of social factors that tend to yield certain phenomena. If proven reliable, these typologies are useful in determining social trends within a religious group and understanding any changes in their behavior. For example, if it is discovered that a certain theological teaching is emphasized more in a certain denomination of Christianity than others, and more reports of miracles come from members of that denomination, then I may be able to predict similar outcomes if a different denomination were to start emphasizing that same theological teaching. Understanding the doctrinal reasoning behind a religious social phenomenon is therefore highly important.

### **Research Questions**

What types of people experience miracles most frequently? More specifically, can particular social factors or combinations thereof be identified that lead people to experience miracles? What theological teachings are emphasized among those who witness miracles? How

is a person or group of people changed by the occurrence of a miracle? Are miracles more often witnessed by one person or by many people? Does a person experience more miracles if they have already experienced one? Why do or don't miracles happen to certain people (or in certain places)? Do certain kinds of miracles happen to people with certain social criteria? What kinds of miracles happen most frequently? What social factors change as a result of a miracle?

## **Hypotheses**

This study will focus on two primary hypotheses; the first is concerned with what factors are present when a miracle happens and the second is concerned with the sociological effects after a miracle. The first hypothesis is that Christians who witness miracles will chiefly emphasize that Christians ought to have faith and be expectant of miracles and to seek them through prayer. Also, that they will offer theological teachings that support faith and expectancy of miracles as the primary reason why they have witnessed them and why others don't. It is likely that, if pressed, these Christians would still maintain that God has the free will to decide when and where He performs miracles. However, it is also likely that they will see a strong and possibly necessary connection to their own expectancy and prayer as a catalyst for miracles. The second hypothesis is that a miracle produces a faith community that holds onto these stories and retells them as a part of their social narrative and is as much a part of their understanding of God as what they read in the Bible or what they hear in a sermon. Their interpretation of the miracle will shape their behaviors in that community and determine what they pray for, whom they choose to tell about their faith and the miracles they've witnessed, and how they relate to others in their community.

## **Methodology**

This study will be limited to the Christian tradition due to my experience, familiarity and interest in that tradition and also due to the sheer number of miracles reported by Christians compared to other religions as well as relevant literature and access to this kind of data. After discussing the definition of “miracle” in the first chapter, the second chapter will expound on theological justifications for why certain Christians expect miracles to happen today in order to provide a context in which to understand many of the reports. This will include brief examples of miracles recorded in the Bible and why they are pertinent to understanding why Christians believe that miracles happen today. While these sections are important to build a contextual framework to work in, the primary interest of this study and the bulk of the research is a series of interviews conducted with people who claim to have experienced miracles. These interviews took place in person and over the phone with people from all around the United States as well as a few from abroad. They were first asked questions about their social and religious background. Then they were asked to give a detailed account of their first miraculous experience followed by as many others as they were willing to share. Finally they were asked a series of questions about beliefs, interpretations, and social effects of these experiences. By sharing their thoughts about their experience they will reveal how they have interpreted their experience and identify what factors led to their interpretation. A more detailed exposition of the interview questions is included in the introduction to the interviews in the third chapter. Afterwards, there is an analysis chapter to expand on any differences, commonalities, or other significant findings.



## **Chapter 1**

### **Defining “Miracle”**

The word “miracle” has many different meanings today. If a survey were to ask everyone in this country for an example of what they would consider a miracle, some would say, “resurrection from the dead,” or, “the parting of the Red Sea.” Others would say things like, “love,” or, “the birth of our child,” or, “the fact that I made it to work on time this morning.” Due to the large spectrum of what people consider to be a miracle, it becomes important to understand what people are talking about when they use that word. While I am limiting myself to a sociological study of religion, and modern Christianity within that, even within those restrictions we would still find a wide variety of definitions like these.

It is important to understand the theological context surrounding miracles in Christianity. In order to interpret what meaning they have for those who believe them and their sociological significance, we must first understand the mindset of the Christian in relation to his or her beliefs. This can be very problematic due to the wide range of beliefs even within Christianity; however, in this research of the miraculous it has become apparent that there are certain beliefs that are generally agreed upon by Christians who believe in miracles. This chapter will discuss these foundational beliefs, how they support miracles, and their role in interpreting miracles. By addressing the relevant points of Christian doctrine, the word “miracle” will be defined as theologically accurate as possible. However, regardless of the accuracy of the definition, it will not be sufficient for everyone that has been interviewed. Thus, the purpose of this chapter isn’t so much to define “miracle” for use in this study as it is to survey the range of theology concerning miracles. This will also provide a foundation for understanding any variations of

meaning that the interviewees suggest. So, “miracle” will be defined broadly yet accurately while still allowing the others to claim their own variation of the definition.

### **God’s Activity in the World**

If we are to understand why God performs miracles, then we must first understand his relationship to the world. The perfect place to start is where the Bible starts, with the book of Genesis: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” (Genesis 1:1) God is established as creator of the earth and everything beyond the earth. In the rest of the chapter, God gives form and order to his creation and gives life to plants and animals. After everything he creates the Bible says, “And God saw that it was good,” implying that God’s creation is inherently good rather than neutral or evil. All of this takes place during the first five days of creation. Finally on the sixth day, Genesis describes the creation and blessing of man:

Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’ And God said, ‘Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.’ And it was so. (Genesis 1:26-30)

God creates humans in his image or in his likeness and gives them dominion over all the earth. Right away we see the special part that humanity plays in God's created order. Humans are God's ruling authority on earth over creation and humans find their identity with God rather than with animals or any other part of creation. The relationship between God and humans is described in many different ways throughout scripture but by far the most frequent metaphor used is that of a loving father with his children. "My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights." (Proverbs 3:11-12) As a son resembles his father, is loved by his father, and is blessed and provided for by his father, humans resemble, are loved by, and are blessed and provided for by God. "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father..." (James 1:17) If God works a miracle for humans it is likely interpreted in the context of God's fatherhood over humans. Christians can understand such an action of God more clearly in this way because they can see how human parents interact with their children.

God is also the supreme ruler and authority over all of creation and has limitless power or omnipotence over it. "But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases." (Psalm 115:3) "Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh; is anything too difficult for Me?" (Jeremiah 32:27) "For nothing will be impossible with God." (Luke 1:37) In other words, God is not limited in what he can do. There is no higher law or power that governs or constrains his actions. The Bible maintains that God does not answer to anything greater than himself. Although what we consider to be the natural order may seem constant, it does not restrain him from performing any action that doesn't seem to comply with the way the world works.

Miracles are often seen as exceptions to what naturally occurs. If miracles occurred all of the time, there wouldn't be a reason to define them as something apart from any other natural

event. The limited frequency with which miracles seem to occur begs the question of how much God is involved with the world at any given time. Deism is a belief that God was like a clockmaker in the creation of the world. He created it and set it in motion but has never touched it since and is not involved with its everyday events. This view of God has been popular for centuries and was held famously by many Enlightenment thinkers and by many of the founding fathers of this country.<sup>3</sup>

In slight contrast to this view, if God's work is more apparent sometimes and less apparent at others, then it may seem logical to think that God only takes an active role in the world at certain points in time but otherwise allows it to maintain its own natural course. This "semi-deistic" view is widely held by people of many faiths. While this view is popular, even among Christians today, there is little biblical precedent for it. In numerous places, the Bible tells of God's constant and meticulous activity in the world, even in the most mundane phenomena. Biblical scholar and theologian Dr. Wayne Grudem addresses this "semi-deistic" view saying, "This is certainly not the biblical view, according to which God makes the rain to fall (Matt. 5:45), causes the grass to grow (Ps. 104:14), and continually carries along all things by his word of power (Heb. 1:3)."<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, in reference to Jesus, the Bible states that, "...by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together." (Colossians 1:15-17) In these passages and in many others like them it is apparent that God's creation is always in his constant care. Assuming that God has created the world to operate without him for any length of time ignores these parts of

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<sup>3</sup> Holmes, David. *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, USA. 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. 1994. 355

the Bible. The famous 20<sup>th</sup> century Swiss pastor and theologian Karl Barth said, “The love of God... should be continually proclaimed because God’s love is a reality, not as a general truth about God, but in God’s constant activity.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Definitions of Miracles**

A common term used to describe and even define a miracle is “divine intervention.” The term “divine intervention” implies that all things live and move by their own forces unless God intervenes, interrupting the established order of creation. If the biblical stance is that all events happen through God’s direct and constant activity, then defining a miracle as “divine intervention” is meaningless. By this definition raising the dead, a beautiful sunrise, or even getting out of bed in the morning would be considered a miracle. Everything that happens would be considered a miracle because they are all caused by divine activity. Grudem states, “Yet another definition of miracle is ‘an exception to a natural law’ or ‘God acting contrary to the laws of nature.’ But the phrase ‘laws of nature’ in popular understanding implies that there are certain qualities inherent in the things that exist, ‘laws of nature’ that operate independently of God, and that God must intervene or ‘break’ these laws for a miracle to occur.”<sup>6</sup> According to the Bible, God has the power to do all things and there is nothing greater or above God’s power. The Bible makes no mention of natural law. In fact, the Bible makes very little use of the words “nature” and “natural” and when it does it is almost always in reference to “human nature”: the way God intends humans to live.

However, many of the reports of miracles involve words like “supernatural.” This is likely due to the fact that “supernatural,” like “miracle” and other terms like it have become so

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<sup>5</sup> Barth, Karl. Church Dogmatics, Volume 4, Part 2. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Thomas Forsyth Torrance. Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000. (812)

<sup>6</sup> Grudem, Wayne. 356

commonly used that they have come to mean a much wider variety of things than what they were originally intended to. Not every Christian believes the exact same doctrine in regards to miracles and it is not in the interest of this study to only interview people whose experiences fit into a strict and accurate definition of the word. The purpose here is to show the relevant theology involved in coming to a definition so that when other variations are observed we can more fully understand their theological contexts and the significance of their differences, if any.

Another definition of miracle is ‘an event impossible to explain by natural causes.’ This definition is inadequate because (1) it does not include God as the one who brings about the miracle; (2) it assumes that God does not use some natural causes when he works in an unusual or amazing way, and thus it assumes again that God only occasionally intervenes in the world; and (3) it will result in a significant minimizing of actual miracles and an increase in skepticism, since many times when God works in answer to prayer the result is amazing to those who prayed but it is not absolutely impossible to explain by natural causes, especially for a skeptic who simply refuses to see God’s hand at work.<sup>7</sup>

With regards to the second point that Grudem brings up in this passage, it is noted throughout the Bible that miracles are often performed with the use of natural means. For example, when Jesus fed the crowd of five thousand (Matthew 14:13-21) he used the food that they had with them, five loaves of bread and two fish, and multiplied them in order to feed the crowd. Regarding the third point that Grudem makes, theologically he is correct to say that miraculously answered prayers are often seen in completely natural means. However, this study will focus more on miracles that do not appear to be brought about by natural means. Miracles that are brought about by natural means are easier to dismiss as being non-miraculous. While a report of a

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<sup>7</sup> Grudem, Wayne. 356

miracle that produces skeptics within the community of believers is sociologically interesting, this study will be limited to examples that were generally agreed upon by those in the community of believers to be miraculous. This will significantly narrow the scope of this study and will provide more dramatic social changes as a result of shared experiences.

### **The Purpose of Miracles**

Finally, before arriving at a conclusive definition for “miracle” God’s purpose in working a miracle must be discussed. Inasmuch as the Bible was written for humans and because humans were created in the image of God, then God’s ultimate purposes are most clearly expressed in his motive for creating humans. Isaiah 43:7: “...everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made...” Psalm 86:9: “All the nations you have made shall come and worship before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name.” Isaiah 60:21: “Your people shall all be righteous; they shall possess the land forever, the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I might be glorified.” Romans 11:46: “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.” 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 6:20: “...for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” Revelation 4:11: “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.” All of these verses align the purpose of all creation, including humans, with God’s glory. The Westminster Shorter Catechism, a Presbyterian document that consists of a series of questions and answers summing up the key doctrines of Christianity, claims this point in its opening statement: “What is the chief end of man? Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever.” God created man so that man would glorify God. Indeed, according to the Bible, all of creation glorifies God: “For his invisible attributes, namely, His

eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.” (Romans 1:20)

If God created man and indeed all of creation for the purpose of glorifying Himself, then it follows that any of God’s actions regarding his creation, including miracles, serve this same purpose as well. Therefore, theologically, God’s glorification is essential to the definition of a miracle. This part of the definition offers an important question to ask the witness of the miracle regarding its meaning, specifically; “How did this miracle glorify God, if at all?” An honest answer to this question yields important information about their theological beliefs, their interpretation of the miracle, and the effects of the miracle.

In conclusion, the most logical definition for “miracle” as found in the Bible is something along the lines of what Grudem proposes: “A miracle is a less common kind of God’s activity in which he arouses people’s awe and wonder and bears witness to himself.”<sup>8</sup> While this definition is theologically accurate, it will often times serve as too broad of a definition for this study, and many of the interviewees do not follow as strict or as broad a definition, especially in terms of the vocabulary to be avoided, such as “supernatural.” This study will use Grudem’s definition flexibly with this chapter as a backdrop to understand any other definitions encountered in the interviews.

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<sup>8</sup> Grudem, Wayne.



## Chapter 2

### The Expectancy of Miracles

According to the Bible, should a Christian expect miracles to happen in today's world? If so, why? How often should they happen? Should Christians pray for specific miracles? What kinds of miracles should be prayed for? What kinds are possible? Are all miracles good? What is "reasonable" to pray for? In order to answer these questions, this chapter will discuss the relevant theology and the range of beliefs that people hold concerning miracles.

#### Reasonable Prayers

In 2008, two sociologists, Wendy Cadge and M. Daglian conducted a study called "Blessings, Strength, and Guidance: Prayer Frames in a Hospital Prayer Book" on what sort of things people prayed for and what prayers they thought were reasonable. As its title suggests, the researchers examined entries in a hospital prayer book from 1999 to 2005. They looked at the form and content of the prayers in order to find out what people believed about God and what they thought was reasonable to pray for. Their findings revealed that miracles weren't discussed often. "Although more than two-thirds of Americans tell survey pollsters that they believe in miracles, the word 'miracle' is rarely mentioned explicitly in these prayers as the majority of prayers are framed in broad psychological language without mention of specific discrete results."<sup>9</sup> Vague language in this prayer book may have been due to the fact that the authors of these prayers might have felt uncomfortable praying for more specific things in a book that anyone could read. However, despite widespread belief in miracles, these people seldom mentioned specific requests such as healing and did not see miracles as something reasonable to pray for. While their belief that God is real and can hear them is present, there is little evidence

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<sup>9</sup> Cadge, Wendy and M. Daglian. "Blessings, Strength, and Guidance: Prayer Frames in a Hospital Prayer Book" *Poetics* 36 (2008) 359.

that they believe that a miracle is something that can be asked of God. Cadge goes on to speculate that this might be due to theological worries.

Alternately, in the same way that writers in this quasi-public space reframe difficult experiences of illness and hospitalization so they might coexist with a loving God, writers may frame their prayers so broadly that they can believe they were answered and can continue to believe in a loving God regardless of what happens in the situations that are the subjects of their prayers. Rather than asking God for particular news at a doctor's visit, a request that may not be met, for example, a writer asked God to "remember M. as we go to see his doctors today. Remember him in prayer and bless him always," a request the writer could interpret as met regardless of what actually takes place in the doctor's office. Similarly, rather than asking God to not allow a loved one to die, another writer asked for 'strength to get through this time' when describing an aunt who was dying and asked that God be with another relative "as he deals with all of this." The emotional and psychological frames rather than those calling for other kinds of supernatural intervention suggest that writers offer prayers broadly in ways that allow for a range of interpretations.<sup>10</sup>

This seems to indicate that these people have little faith that God can perform miracles or that He responds to prayers in such a way. While many of them might say they believe miracles are possible, there is little evidence they believe miracles do happen with any sort of frequency today, at least not in their own lives. Their belief in miracles seems to be a fact of doctrine rather than a fact of experience. If Christians have a small amount of faith in what God can do, then they are desperate to protect that small amount of faith from anything that would hurt it or cause them to doubt. In this case it would be a direct prayer for a specific outcome that goes unfulfilled. If a Christian believes in a very personal and relatable God who is close and

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<sup>10</sup> Cadge, Wendy and M. Daglian. 369.

accessible and readily hears their prayers (as many Christians do) then any perceived evidence of God's absence or inaccessible nature would certainly cause an uncomfortable shift in their understanding. Hence, the article reasons that they keep the language of their prayers broad so as to minimize the risk of a prayer going unanswered.

This kind of prayer also tells us a lot about beliefs regarding the character of God. "God is a source of strength, blessings, and guidance rather than an authoritarian God to be bargained with or who has the answers to difficult questions and/or the supernatural potential to intervene in events if writers appropriately curry favor."<sup>11</sup> Here we see how personal theological beliefs shape language and behaviors in specific ways. If a Christian doesn't believe that God performs miracles today then it's unlikely that he or she would pray for miracles. Prayers, reflect a person's beliefs about God. Personal interpretation of the Bible, teachings received from religious authority figures, and personal experiences with miracles (or lack thereof), all shape what a Christian is accustomed to pray for and what he or she thinks is reasonable to ask for from God.

This leads to the hypothesis that the Christians who tend to witness miracles are those who expect to see them, pray for them, and look for them. However, a skeptic could easily say, "Of course the people who are looking to see miracles are going to witness them, just as the people looking and expecting to see the Loch Ness monster can claim they've seen it whenever a piece of wood floats by out in the water." John Piippo, a pastor and philosophy professor and one of the interviewees for this study, had another useful analogy from the point of view of a believer. "Let's say a team of great brain surgeons was operating on someone and I got to be in the room and witness it, and all of a sudden everyone gasps but myself and they said, 'Did you see that?'

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<sup>11</sup> Cadge, Wendy and M. Daglian. 370.

‘Well, no, not at all.’ I did see the man’s hand manipulating the physical brain... but I don’t have epistemic access to what just happened.” In other words, because he hasn’t been educated as a brain surgeon, he may have seen the exact same thing physically, but it is devoid of meaning. To the brain surgeons, the action may be incredibly significant and even shocking but Pastor Piippo has no mental framework within which to understand the phenomena. He argues that the same is often true of witnessing miracles.

Many Christians are in complete agreement that people who expect and believe in miracles will witness more, but from a theological perspective, rather than a philosophical one. The few that disagree or hold slightly different views also hold their opinions from a theological perspective. So, if a Christians use theology to explain why miracles do or don’t occur today, then understanding the theological justification of miracles will yield an understanding of a Christian’s mental framework and their approach to interpreting a miracle.

### **Biblical Analysis**

Aside from witnessing a miracle or hearing about one, what would prompt a Christian to believe that miracles happen today? Among those Christians who do believe that miracles happen today, certain passages in the Bible are emphasized to support this belief that other Christians tend to gloss over or simply don’t believe can be applied today. Christians who don’t believe that miracles happen are typically called cessationists. Cessationism teaches that miracles were reserved for the early church documented in the Bible and that at some point miracles ceased to be necessary and so God stopped giving them to believers. There are variations of cessationism concerning exactly when these miracles stopped and why they did. Some believe that once the Bible became a complete document and was canonized there was no longer any need for the same miraculous workings of God because the Word of God in the Bible had been

completed and was sufficient for believers. Other cessationists believe more broadly that these sorts of miraculous gifts were needed when the Christian church was first starting out because of the harsh persecution and suffering that the first Christians endured. They believe that these miracles were needed in order to keep the faith alive and to spread the message of Christianity in the face of great opposition. At a certain point the church could survive on its own without consistent miracles. Regardless of these “when and why” reasons, cessationists at least agree that the Holy Spirit no longer works in the miraculous ways that He did among the early church in the Bible.

As for the Christians who do believe that miracles happen today, many of them, including many of the interviewees, do not adhere to cessationism and rather believe that miracles are just as present in today’s church as they were in the early church in the Bible if not more so. The verses in the Bible that are most frequently used to support this belief come from the New Testament. I have broken these verses into two categories: those concerning what may be asked of God in the name of Jesus Christ and those concerning the ministry of the Holy Spirit through “spiritual gifts” after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension into Heaven.

### **In Jesus’ Name**

It is well known that the four gospels of the Bible, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John contain stories of Jesus performing miracles. These include healing the sick (e.g. Matthew 4:23), multiplying food (e.g. Mark 8:1-10), casting out demons (e.g. Luke 4:31-37), walking on water (e.g. Matthew 14:22-33), and raising the dead (e.g. John 11:38-44) among a few other instances of more creative miracles. However, according to the Gospels, Jesus’ disciples also performed miracles. At one point, Jesus sends his twelve disciples out to Jewish towns and cities with the instruction, “Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons.” (Matthew 10:8) He

sent another group of seventy-two followers out in pairs to the towns that he was about to go to. After they had gone out, “The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!’” (Luke 10:17) In one instance recorded by two of the Gospels, the disciples were confused and asked Jesus why they were unable to cast a demon out of a boy, clearly implying that they were usually able to do so (Matthew 17:14-20, Mark 9:14-29).

For Christians who believe in miracles today, these passages offer great hope that Jesus gave his power to commoners and anyone who would follow him rather than only to people trained and appointed for ministry. In John 14:12, Jesus says, “truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father.” This is one of the more explicit statements in scripture in support of believers being able to perform miracles. This promise is predicated on belief in Jesus. In the following verse (John 14:13), Jesus says, “Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the son.” Jesus taught his disciples that the power they would be allowed to use came from him and could only be accessed “in his name.” There are many teachings of Jesus in which he emphasizes that *anything* asked for in his name will be done for his followers. With each of these teachings there come a variety of qualifications such as: being in agreement with other believers about the request (Matthew 18:19-20), having faith (Mark 11:22-24), asking for things that will glorify God (John 14:13-14), abiding in Christ (John 15:7), asking for things that will yield righteousness (John 15:16), and asking for things that will make our joy complete (John 16:23-24). Although Jesus never gave a formula for receiving a miracle, these passages show that Jesus encouraged his followers to ask for miracles and to believe that they could receive them. There is no verse in the Bible that says these promises have ceased to be true for current followers of Jesus, so many Christians use these verses to justify their belief in

miracles and their prayers for miracles.

## **Spiritual Gifts**

According to the Bible, spiritual gifts, often called “charismatic gifts,” are special abilities given to every Christian by the God. There are many passages in the Bible, especially in the letters of Paul that contain lists of these gifts and instructions for their use. There is no exhaustive list of spiritual gifts in the Bible and many of these lists mention gifts that the others don’t. One of these lists is in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians:

Now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the spirit for the common good. For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

1 Corinthians 12:4-11

The subject of “spiritual gifts” has caused a lot of debate among Christians. Many cessationists claim that these gifts are no longer available to Christians and others simply deny that they ever existed. Other Christians only believe in some gifts and not others. However, the Christians who believe in spiritual gifts will almost definitely believe in miracles. This is because the Bible says that the working of miracles is one of the spiritual gifts. In addition, some Christians consider many spiritual gifts to be miraculous because of their supernatural qualities.

It is important to discuss a few of the spiritual gifts that are pertinent to this study. To

many, gifts like wisdom and faith don't appear to have anything particularly supernatural about them. However, other gifts such as prophecy, healing, distinguishing spirits and, of course, working miracles, are all beyond normal human ability. Although Paul clearly distinguishes between miracles and healing, many Christians don't and would consider an instantaneous healing to be a miracle. Prophecy, visions, dreams, hearing God's voice, seeing angels or demons, and other gifts are also often considered miraculous. All of these things are discussed in the Bible as gifts that are given to Christians but not all are labeled as miracles. Understanding how Christians view these gifts in light of their definition of the word "miracle" provides further insight into their interpretation of the Bible and what they expect to see from God.

These gifts will be discussed further as they are encountered in the interviews. All of the people who were interviewed said that they believed in spiritual gifts. Any stories in which they mention a spiritual gift include a brief description of that gift if necessary.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Witness Interviews**

I have been privileged to interview seven people who have experienced miracles. They are from all over the United States and Canada and one is an immigrant from Rwanda. All but two of these interviews take place over the phone with the audio being recorded on my computer. The interview questions consist of three sections. The first section deals with their personal context, their upbringing, and what they believed prior to witnessing a miracle so as to better understand the framework of their answers. For the second section I asked them to give detailed accounts of any miracles that they witnessed. If they had witnessed more than one or many, I asked them to give special attention to the first miracle that they witnessed and then to describe as many others as they wanted or felt were significant. The final section is on the sociological significance of these stories and their effects.<sup>12</sup>

Although I did have a set list of questions, I made it clear that the interview was to be conversational in nature, that the list was a guideline, and that I might ask other questions that came to my mind or for clarification. With the questions that I had created, I had anticipated that the interviews would last roughly an hour. To my surprise, most went past the two-hour mark. For some, this was because of the sheer number of stories and eyewitness accounts that they were glad to share with me. Others simply had much to say about the sociological and theological significance of their experiences with miracles. Because of the wealth of information that I was given, this chapter will primarily consist of interview quotes and my summary of their statements. My commentary will be reserved for the Analysis chapter following this one. Due to the vast amount of information obtained in each interview, I have not included all of their

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<sup>12</sup> This list of questions can be found at the end of my thesis in Appendix A.

answers to my questions, but have selected only the parts that are the most relevant and significant to my thesis. I created a section for each interview in the order that I interviewed them. Each of them has given me permission to use their real names and all information that they shared during our interview.<sup>13</sup>

### **Andrew Ohsberg**

The first interview I conducted was with Andrew Ohsberg. He is the Pastoral Intern for Highland Christian Ministries in Stratford, Ontario. Currently in his mid-twenties, Andrew was born and raised in Woodland, CA and Pacific Grove, CA and moved to Stratford, Canada in 2007. He was born into a Christian family who attended a Pentecostal church in his childhood in Woodland, CA and then a Presbyterian church when his family moved to Pacific Grove, CA. I asked him if he believed in miracles before he witnessed one. He said that he did and from a very early age he was accustomed to praying for people who needed healing, including his own mother when she was sick with breast cancer, having faith that a miracle could happen. Although he grew up with his parent's beliefs, he did not stay with them all the way through his youth.

"I backslid around sixteen, seventeen, and eighteen. I fell into drugs and the party scene and then came out of that pretty radically at eighteen years old and was just on fire for the Lord. We were running meetings about seven nights a week in this little Presbyterian church and then I went to a Presbyterian camp... We were there one night, we were praying and the Holy Spirit landed on me so powerfully that it felt like a thousand volts were going through my body and from that point forward I was never the same."

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<sup>13</sup> All other names that they shared in their stories have been changed. A list of additional information and websites for the people I interviewed can be found in Appendix B.

After that point in the summer of 2005, Andrew started having “open visions” from God and started seeing miracles, especially healing miracles.

I asked Andrew to describe his first miraculous experience, aside from this initial “landing” of the Holy Spirit. The first miracle he experienced happened in his hometown of Pacific Grove, shortly after returning from the summer camp in 2005:

One day I was driving and I saw an open vision of my friend that was sick... I showed up at her house... and I prayed for her... she had a cold and some flu symptoms... and instantly she was healed. I prayed over her sister and her sister was healed too; their whole house was sick. It was interesting because her other sister... there were three girls... her other sister didn't want prayer and didn't get prayer, and she was the one that didn't get healed.

Andrew then told me about a couple of mission trips that he went on where he witnessed many more miracles. In a small church in Italy, he began ministering in front of the people, of whom there were only about twelve, where he said that he started calling out “words of knowledge.” In the Christian tradition, a “word of knowledge” is often classified as a form of prophecy in which the person receives a single word or sometimes a phrase that gives pertinent knowledge or insight into a situation. For example he might hear the word of a certain disease and then know that there is someone in the room suffering from it. In this case he said that he received these words of knowledge for almost just about everyone in the church. “I called out arthritis and arthritis got healed. I called out back problems and somebody's spine straightened up. This man that was sitting in the second row... I went over to him... I called out a word of knowledge for deafness; that God was opening up deaf ears. And so I stuck my fingers in his ears... and I said ‘Be opened in Jesus' name,’ and his ears opened right up.”

He took another mission trip to a small village in Mozambique, Africa. There he visited a church that was held on the grounds of a garbage dump. “Funny enough, God was just in the business that day of healing legs.” He told stories of three different people who had leg injuries who were healed when he prayed for them. One widow woman went up to him, grabbed his hand, and put it on her knee. He did not speak her language but understood her aggressive sign language. He prayed for her knee to be healed, and started walking around with her. All the while she had a significant limp. Then they walked outside the church and in a few moments she stopped limping and was healed. The other two healings involved a man’s mangled knee and a bone in a woman’s hip joint that was out of place. The man’s knee was healed after Andrew prayed for it and as the man lifted up his leg by faith – something that he could not do before. The woman’s hip was healed as Andrew began to pray. She interrupted the prayer to tell the interpreter that her bone had just popped back into place, got up, and walked around fully healed.

I asked him about the social context around these miracles, the characteristics of the people involved, and what he thought the main contributing factor was in seeing these miracles happen. He said, “God goes to the ones that are hungry and desperate... those in want and those that are in need... Jesus said, ‘The healthy don’t need a doctor, I go for the sick.’” This is a reference to what Jesus said in Mark 2:17, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous but sinners.” Jesus said this to the religious leaders who asked why he spent his time with sinners and tax collectors rather than with the other religious teachers in the synagogue. In keeping with this point, Andrew went on to say that Jesus’ ministry “was very rarely in the church. And that’s what I think the Lord was trying to teach to me that day we healed so many people in Africa because we took them all out of the church and then they got healed.” The missionary aspect of the Christian faith, extending the reach of the

message and the power of the Gospel, struck him as an important catalyst for miracles. While his experience has shown him that God frequently works outside the church and with the poor, desperate, and needy, he also shared that these qualities were not the only means that produced miracles. I asked him what sorts of things God looks for when He wants to produce a miracle. Andrew's emphasis was on faith and expectancy. According to him, God is attracted to faith. Faith just so happens to be found where there is need because often times people in need have nothing besides a miracle to hope in. Andrew believes that it is not need that God is attracted to, but because need frequently yields faith and expectation, needy people see more miracles.

Later I asked him about what reactions to miracles were common, both in him and with others, and how people carried out their reaction in the days and weeks after a miracle had occurred. He premised his answer with the following statement: "Testifying about a miracle is the most important part because it creates an atmosphere of belief and expectation." In his own experience and for most of the people that he could recall, people typically were joyful and told close friends and family members about a miracle. However, he did recall some specific examples of people who use their miraculous experience as a testimony when they go out and evangelize to strangers. One high school girl from his church in Canada was miraculously healed from depression, drug addictions, and eating disorders and now she actively goes out and shares that experience with everyone in her school and strangers on the street, using that testimony to spread the gospel.

The major behavioral change that he has seen in his own life is his increasing willingness to approach people about his faith and about the subject of miracles. He said that his experiences have increased the likelihood that he might approach someone and engage them in conversation with the intent of sharing his testimony with them. God and miracles are on his mind more

because of these experiences, so these things tend to flow out of his speech and actions more freely. He felt that the same was true for the other people who witnessed miracles with him. He also noticed that people's speech is sweeter, gentler, and generally more loving after they had received a miracle. Once they have acknowledged that God is near and loves them, they tend to love others more.

One of the more tangible social effects of miracles that he has seen has been the change in a worship service at a church. "When people get the expectation for miracles, they set aside a time for it in their service. It's being available in a group setting... such as a church... to leave room for the Holy Spirit to move." He has seen this take the form of an invitation for personal prayer at the end of a service, and also during singing and worship when people feel free to go to others and pray for their healing. Before witnessing miracles, these aspects of the service had not existed in his church.

I wrapped up the interview with some questions regarding his interpretation of miracles and how they glorify God. To him, miracles are proof of God's love, and their chief purpose is to show God's love to His people. He said that there have been interpretations of certain miracles that were specific to different situations (such as a sign of God's favor on a specific person) but that the underlying message within these interpretations is ultimately that God loves us enough to come down to earth and perform miracles for His people. These miracles glorify God in that they draw people to give their lives to God and yield to His will, thus showing to those around him that He is worthy of praise and is the most important thing in their life.

## John Piippo

John Piippo is currently the pastor of Redeemer Fellowship Church in Monroe, MI, an Adjunct Professor of Philosophy at Monroe County Community College, an Adjunct Professor and Project Director at Palmer Theological Seminary in the Renewal of the Church for Mission in Philadelphia, PA, a Visiting Professor at Faith Bible Seminary in New York City, and a highly sought-after speaker and minister who leads Christian conferences in destinations as far as Kenya, Singapore, and India.<sup>14</sup> He has been the pastor of Redeemer Fellowship Church for eighteen years now. Redeemer Fellowship is an American Baptist Church although Piippo himself grew up Lutheran. His Finnish family and his Scandinavian community in the upper peninsula of Michigan held strongly to their Lutheran tradition. In high school and in his early years of college, he fell away from his family's faith and says, "At most I might have been a Deist if I thought about it." He flunked out of college after two years due to alcohol and drugs, and then enlisted in the military where he did more alcohol and drugs. After the military he went back to school and pursued a two-year degree in music theory. He became a follower of Jesus at twenty-one years old, cleaned up his life, and changed his major to philosophy. After graduating he went back to be a youth leader at his Lutheran church. From there he met friends who were members of American Baptist churches and subsequently attended Northern Baptist Theological Seminary where he earned his Master of Divinity. Afterward, he entered into full-time ministry where he remains.

I asked him whether or not he believed in miracles before he first witnessed one. He replied, "Theoretically I did but I also had a skepticism... My philosophical training teaches me to be a reductionist. I was in this philosophical environment, and one of the things it was

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<sup>14</sup> *John Piippo: Theological/philosophical/cultural/spiritual thoughts about God and the Real Jesus.* <http://www.johnpiippo.com/>. <http://www.blogger.com/profile/10629118383980527338>

teaching me was to reduce all mystery to knowledge... I wasn't in an environment that talked much about it except for the historical miracles and the resurrection of Jesus." I asked him about what kinds of miracles he thought were possible before he witnessed one and what kinds he might have had an expectancy to see. He prefaced with an interesting definition: "There are miracles sometimes called 'constellation miracles' where a series of events lead to a certain outcome that might be the kind of thing that one was praying for... and the series of events then form...a highly improbable sequence of events that cause one to think, 'That was a non-natural event.' I definitely had an expectancy about constellation miracles, but about direct intervention miracles like healing – I didn't have a great expectancy for that."

The first miracle that he experienced happened in his family. Before he had become a Christian, his grandmother used to live with him and his family for six months out of every year. During that time she developed breast cancer at the age of eighty-five. "My mother would bathe her and felt the tumors. This was around 1965 or 66. They weren't going to do anything about it. My grandmother bought a dress to be buried in." He recalled that his mom used to pray for her but that he never did. His grandmother then went back to live with his aunt for the next six months. "My aunt called one day and she said, 'Your grandmother's breasts are normal.' She was about four hundred miles away from us. My mother made a trip to see my grandmother and examine her herself and found that that was the case. My grandmother lived another twelve years, bought three more dresses to die in, and finally died at the age of ninety-seven." He believes his mother's testimony of this miracle, especially because he lived with his grandmother and knew that she had this dire condition.

He told another story about a miracle that happened in his church a couple of years ago. "There's a man in our church named Ted. Ted's probably about sixty-five years old now. He's a



long distance runner... He ran in the Boston Marathon. So Ted just kept running; it's his hobby; he would run seven miles to the store around here just to keep in training and all that. Two summers ago Ted was on vacation and he broke his foot. He knew that something horrible happened to his foot and when he went to the doctor they took the x-ray and his foot was broken. He came back and at our church he asked some people to pray for him. The next week he went to the doctor again and the x-ray shows no break and he's running again. I have in my office here the hospital records that show the break, where it is, and what it is and the date. Then it shows the next week and no break. And in between that time we prayed for him."

He also told a story about a couple in his church: a religious studies professor and her husband who is a neuroscientist who developed a brain tumor. "About four years ago Alice emailed me and told me about her husband Rick, a neuroscientist who was found to be with an inoperable brain tumor. In my naiveté I asked her, 'What did they do? How did they treat it?' and she said, 'Well they didn't because it was inoperable.' We went and had some Christians pray for him and the tumor went away... Then *they* began praying for people and seeing people healed." Both of them are now working on research involving miraculous healings.

His church in Monroe, MI sees around four to five hundred people in attendance on a Sunday. Even before he was a pastor there, he said that the congregation was used to praying for and expecting miracles. If they believe that a miracle has happened, they invite the person to share the testimony in front of the church. I asked him about the social impact that these miracle stories have on his congregation. "It builds faith, it creates expectation, it builds hope, and then we operate sometimes off of that testimony." He gave an example of what he meant by this. Previously he had shared another story in the interview about Sarah, a college girl in his church who used to have an anxiety disorder and suffer from panic attacks. After prayer she stopped

having the attacks and she believed that God healed her. When she gave her testimony in front of the church Pastor Piippo says, “I felt God say, ‘Pray for people who want prayer for this right now and have Sarah and her sister do that.’ And so I said, ‘If there’s anyone else here who struggles with anxiety and panic attacks and you’d like prayer, I’m going to have Sarah and her sister just pray for you... and about ten to twenty people went up’ ...It creates expectation, it creates faith, it creates hope, and it also creates action in a sense that we feel, ‘Why wouldn’t God want to do some more of this here right now? Why would he just dangle this out in front of other people?’” The social impact in his church due to miracles is ongoing, since there continue to be many reports of miracles there. He also mentioned that he always encourages people in his congregation to pray for people they do not know out on the street or at the mall or wherever they go. He thinks that people should not keep their prayers restricted to the church and that miracles should be expected to happen outside the church.

As for the impact on individuals, the results seem to vary. “The individual who has experienced a miracle may or may not act differently.” He offered some examples. He told the story of a married couple who were not believers but who visited his church when friends invited them. The wife had seven golf-ball sized cancerous tumors in her body. After prayer from people in the church the tumors went away. The woman became a believer almost instantly and the husband did also about a week later. “This one couple... when her cancerous tumors went away, their whole life changed. Not in theory, not in words, but in actions. Now they’re the main leaders in this great soup kitchen movement that we’ve got going on.”

By contrast he offered another example that took place at an evangelism conference they had at their church. The main leader of this conference was a visiting minister from another church who began to call out words of knowledge in front of the congregation. A man that Pastor

Piippo knew was in the audience of about five hundred. He was a homebuilder and was struggling with his faith. He had become desperate with his lack of work due to the housing and financial crisis in Michigan. He prayed alone before the meeting got under way that if he was the first person called out by this leader in a word of knowledge that he would receive it as a sign from God and would listen to whatever he had to say. This visiting leader, who had no knowledge of this man or his situation, did call him out first and said, “God’s telling me that you’re a builder... Next week the job opportunity is going to be provided...” Pastor Piippo said, “The next week this guy got a call from the city of Detroit to build fifty houses and a multi-year contract.” The service at which he heard this prophecy was recorded and this man got a copy of the DVD. “He took the DVD and played it for the city of Detroit officials that were hiring him. And some of them were Christians and were really glad for him.” While this story would seem to be something that would help him in his faith, Pastor Piippo said that this was not the case. “He has since then, struggled, and gone in and out of doubt. The commitment, the following of Jesus, is not highly evidenced in his life, even though this amazing thing happened to him. We’ve also seen people where it looks like they’ve been healed and then it’s off to business as usual.”

I asked him if it was possible for him to typify the kind of person who witnesses a miracle. He said, “One answer to that would be: the kind of people who have a worldview that allows for it. Also, I think it’s important to have a sense of expectancy that it could happen. Otherwise the person doesn’t have epistemic access to the event.” He then gave the analogy of the brain surgeons that I used in my chapter on expectancy. I used that answer to then ask, within that worldview that allows for miracles, what kinds of people he thought were the most likely to witness miracles. He said, “My initial guess is that, the younger a person is the less they will have been trained in the enlightenment worldview that reduces all mystery to knowledge. You

know, three-year-olds aren't little Cartesians. They may not be as awestruck [by a miracle] but they also would believe that it happened. But then, within those who have the right worldview... those that do the John 14 to 17 thing if they're Christians; that is, they abide in Christ... they'll not only see more but more will happen through them."

I asked him about some of his reactionary phenomena associated with miracles, specifically during his younger years with regards to which people he would tell a miracle story to. In referencing a "constellation miracle" that he witnessed when he was twenty-two, he said, "I shared this with my fiancé, I shared this with the Christian small group I was in, I ended up telling my friends... but I'm also a student in the philosophy department as an undergraduate [at the time] and I'm not sharing that there because they're going to think I'm whacked out... at least that's what I thought, but I don't really know; I never even tried. But I was sharing it with everyone in my Christian community and they all felt pretty cool about that."

After that, I asked him about what he thinks God is looking for if he wants to produce a miracle. He said, "The main biblical text factor is faith... because Jesus goes into a village and it says that he couldn't do any miracles there because they didn't have faith [referencing Mark 8:1-6]. Faith means risk. Every time there's an act of faith there's risk. If you have faith in somebody then you've given up some control and you've embraced them to some degree. If someone chooses not to do that, one thinks then... New Testament-wise, then Jesus won't do it. If they're not going to open the door and invite him in then he's not going to force himself on them."

Toward the end of the interview Pastor Piippo offered his opinion of what the meaning or purpose of a miracle is. "I think the ultimate meaning of it is not the healing or the demon being cast out but the recognition that Jesus is who he says he is; that he might be followed and honored and loved and worshipped and that we would be drawn into a relationship with him... A

miracle functions as a sign, and a sign in itself is not to be worshipped. A sign is an indicator of something that's nearby."

### **Frank Mazzella**

I had the privilege of interviewing Frank Mazzella in person. Frank is a founding member of what is now Nassau Christian Center, an Assemblies of God church located across Nassau Street from Princeton University's campus. He was born in Princeton in 1926 to Italian parents and has lived here for all of his eighty-four years. He was raised in a Catholic family but they were not particularly devout. He says that at the time, his family members were what he called "Christmas and Easter Catholics" because those were usually the only holidays that they would attend church. In 1941 a visiting evangelist from California came to stay at a church in Trenton. While he was there he went to visit an uncle he had in Princeton. The uncle wasn't interested in what he had to say so he referred him to a friend of his who happened to be Frank's father. Both the evangelist and the pastor of the church in Trenton visited Frank's family. "We accepted them in our house and eventually they started coming every week to explain the Bible to us... We held services in our house for about five years." So at the age of fifteen, Frank, along with his family, converted to Pentecostal Christianity. They assumed the denomination of the evangelist and the pastor: a Pentecostal denomination called the Assemblies of God. After holding services in their house for those five years, they rented a place on Witherspoon Street so that more people could come. They were there about five or six years. "Then they, more or less, told us that we couldn't have services there anymore because we were too emotional and underneath there was a restaurant." They then moved to Witherspoon Presbyterian church where the pastor allowed them to have their own room. They held their own services there apart from the existing

congregation. He said that the pastor let them use the church as if it was their own and that he “was very good to us and we stayed there until 1958.” At that time they built their own church near Princeton shopping center to hold their expanding congregation. They were there until 1978 when again, the church building became too small for them. At that point, they purchased the building that used to be the First Presbyterian Church of Princeton, which was vacant at the time. The congregation has remained there to this day as an Assemblies of God church at what is now called the Nassau Christian Center.

During World War II Frank worked for General Motors building airplanes for the air force until the war ended. After that, his dad encouraged him to learn how to fix TV’s and accurately predicted that, “it’s gonna be a big thing someday.” He went to technical school to repair TV’s, got a job with RCA for forty years as a repairman, and retired in 1986 at the age of sixty-two. After that, he and his wife volunteered at the hospital two or three days a week until she developed cancer. She had cancer for seven years and died in 1993. “After that I decided to come and volunteer at the church here.” Initially, he worked alongside other building managers for the church; one died and another moved away. “Then the pastor asked me and said, ‘Do you want to volunteer here? You can have the job. It’s yours.’ I said, ‘I don’t know if I’m able to, I’m not a young rooster anymore.’ But God has given me strength and I do just about everything there is in this building.” He paints, polishes, vacuums, repairs, and even plants the flowers by the walkway in front of the church.

He said that before he became Pentecostal he had no belief in miracles and that nobody ever talked about miracles in his Catholic church. “You did your duty by going to church... it didn’t mean anything if you didn’t get anything out of it.” I asked him at what point he first came to believe in miracles. He said, “when the preacher came from California, he was telling us

[about miracles], and my mother was sick and he prayed for her and she got well.” I asked him if that was the first miracle he had ever witnessed. He said, “Well we didn’t consider it a miracle, we just considered it a healing. To me a miracle and a healing are two different things. A healing is: God heals you and little by little you get better and you’re healed. A miracle is something that... instantaneously, it’s gone.” His mom got better over the course of a few days and although it was considered a healing, it was enough to inspire faith in miracles in his family. They started having meetings in their house, initially due to his father’s faith. Even though she was healed, his mother was more reluctant to leave her Catholic faith and wouldn’t attend the meetings at first, but eventually she found the same faith as the rest of the family.

Frank told me three stories of events that he witnessed that he considered miracles, although he mentioned that he has witnessed and heard of many more. The first one was in June of 1954. The now recently deceased Oral Roberts, a famous healing evangelist, was young at the time and held a large tent revival meeting in Trenton. “He had a big tent which seated twelve-thousand people... Our little church at the time was one of the sponsors. So I would go after work to the tent meetings and be an usher there... If you wanted to get prayed for by him you would have to take a number because you’ve got twelve-thousand people there. If he says ‘Who wants to get prayed for? Come up here,’ it would be a mad house. One night, this lady that was near me... she had this goiter, a great big goiter on her neck, bigger than a grapefruit.... One night he called her number, so she went up there. When she gets up there with Oral Roberts he says, “A lot of people have already been healed, but you didn’t see it because it’s internal. God’s going to heal this lady and you’re going to see this thing go away.’ I believed, but I didn’t really... let’s put it that way. You know, how’s that thing gonna go away, right? Well, he got under the power of God and he put his hand on her, and I’ll tell you, I’m surprised the tent was

still there. That thing just went down, down, down. The people there went wild. Then she came back and all I saw was skin there.”

Another miracle he witnessed involved his first child. He was married a year and a half when his first son, whom he named after himself, was born. “At six months old, a tragic thing happened to him. He developed a fever, a very high fever. We called the doctor over, the one that delivered him. Our son was like a rock. His body was rigid, couldn’t move, and they diagnosed it as infantile paralysis. They said it was incurable and so we started crying when we heard that. We took him to the hospital. We had a couple of our brothers from church go over there to pray for him. I didn’t go because I didn’t want to see him that way. The next morning we get a phone call from the hospital, and you always fear the worst. He said, ‘You can come and pick your son up. He’s alright.’ I said, ‘What?’ I couldn’t believe it. ‘He’s fine. We don’t know what happened but he’s fine.’ He’s fifty-five now, he’s six foot, and he’s strong.”

The last story that he told happened three months after he retired when he and his wife went to go volunteer at the hospital. Shortly after, she developed cancer and had to have her breasts removed. “She suffered a lot but we still had faith that God was going to heal her. After she had her breasts removed the doctor said that the cancer had spread through her body. He said, ‘She’ll be fortunate if she lives six months.’ That devastated us, but we still believed. We had people pray for her. She never got really healed.” Months later, his son, who at the time attended a church in New York, recommended that they bring her up there to receive prayer from his pastor. He said that this pastor had the gift of healing and that they saw people getting healed in that church. “Before that, the cancer doctor told us that she might last another week because it’s in her lungs.” Frank told me that the x-rays showed that the cancer had completely filled up her lungs. They brought her to the service in New York. “While we were in the service, he



picked her out. He didn't know who she was. He said, 'This lady here. Come up here. You have cancer. You have bad lung cancer. Doctor Jesus is going to heal you.' So he prayed for her and he said, 'Go back to your doctor and take x-rays again and you're going to find that your lungs are clean.' I saw miracles before but I still doubted." Frank called up the doctor and had to convince him to take x-rays again for the second time that week. The insurance wouldn't cover it again in the same week so Frank had to pay for them himself. Frank told the doctor the story of what had happened in the church and what the pastor there had said. They took the x-ray and the doctor called him later and said, "I've got good news for you. Her lungs are clear. All she's got is one little tiny spot." "So we rejoiced. And yet she still had cancer in her bones and everywhere else. But they told her she was only going to last another week and she lasted another three years after that. She died of cancer but not of lung cancer."

Frank told me about how the frequency with which he sees and hears about miracles has severely diminished over the years. I asked him why he thought that was the case. He said, "My opinion is that our churches are lax. Back then if you were a Christian, you acted like a Christian." He talked about the early days of his house church and the passion that they had back then. "We wanted to go to church every night, my friend and I [another Italian named Frank]. We went to church five or six nights a week, both here and in Trenton. We didn't think about girls, we didn't think about having good times, going out and drinking and this and that. We didn't even believe in drinking. I never drank. I never kissed a girl until I was twenty-five years old and that was my wife. Today, everything goes. Then we wonder why God does not work. God's not going to work. You could pray until Doomsday. If you're not living a good Christian life, forget it. Your prayers are not going to get answered." For him, obedience to God is the main thing that determines whether or not miracles will occur. Faith and obedience are

intimately linked and faith without obedience will not yield miracles. He emphasized this by paraphrasing a teaching of James 2:14-26 in saying, “faith without works is dead.”

He gave more examples of some of the sins that he saw Christians in his church committing, particularly in violating the Sabbath day by doing chores after church. He became sad and started to get choked-up. It nearly brought tears to his eyes to know that people were offending God in such a way. He expressed that sometimes he is reluctant to share with people that this is the reason they do not see miracles because he does not want to discourage them. Sometimes though, he feels like he has to. I asked him whether or not he thought it was possible for a miracle to happen to a non-believer. He acknowledged that it was possible and that it probably has happened “because anything’s possible with God, but that’s not the general rule.”

I asked him what he thought the main social change was as a result of these miracles. He said, “If somebody sees [a miracle], like I told you before about the goiter, it’s going to bring you closer to God, and at that time a lot of people were flocking to churches. But we don’t see as many miracles today and so the effect is... there’s no enthusiasm. After a while, people [in the church] don’t even believe in miracles.” For Frank, the social change he saw was that miracles increased church attendance and devotion to God. He said this was especially true among people who call themselves Christian but may not regularly attend church or be particularly devout. He did allude to another story he heard about his niece who miraculously received a brand new tooth where one was missing. Frank said that her faith was boosted for a while but that she has since backslidden into her old ways.

With regard to the type of people who witnessed miracles, he again emphasized those who are obedient and therefore close to God. He also said that, back in his early years, it tended to be the young people who would witness and experience more miracles but that the young people of

today are not like the ones back then so they tend not to witness as many. He said that most of the time a miracle tends to increase an individual's faith and strengthen his or her relationship with God, but he also said that he could remember plenty of times when people would still fall away from their faith even after they had been healed or otherwise experienced a miracle.

I asked him what his reaction was to the first miracle he witnessed, the lady with the goiter. He said, "That really built my faith up more than ever and my reaction was telling everybody what I had seen." He said that he told everyone he knew at the time, but he admitted that that was not too many people. I asked him if he could think of a person or group of people that he would not tell about that. He said, "No I'd tell everybody. Especially atheists. I mean, if God's done a miracle here, why keep it to myself? I'd tell absolutely anybody whether it's accepted or not." When I asked if he ever encountered any negative reaction or opposition to his testimony he said that he could not recall ever experiencing any.

For Frank, the key factor from a human perspective in creating an atmosphere in which miracles occur is fasting and prayer. That is what he and the rest of his church did and he says he saw miracles in response to their fasting and prayers. I asked him what he thinks God is looking for if He is looking to produce a miracle. From God's perspective he said, "Are you sincere in praying for this? Are you going to serve Him? I think sincerity is the main thing." I asked him how a miracle glorifies God. He said that God gets the glory in the testimonies. Miracles inspire people to tell others thereby glorifying God. At the end of the interview I asked him what the purpose and meaning of a miracle is. He said, "The purpose is, I think, for the unbelievers to see that God did this and He can do anything."

## **Robby Dawkins**

Robby Dawkins has been the pastor of Vineyard Fox Valley church in Aurora, IL for the past fourteen years, and he and his wife have five children together. The church is in “a poor urban setting. We have a lot of people that are coming off drugs, alcohol, and addictions; prostitutes, and gang members, things like that.” According to Pastor Dawkins, it is partially for this reason that he has seen so many miracles. He believes that miracles tend to happen where the need is greatest and when people are the most desperate. Over the course of our interview, Pastor Dawkins told me a large number of incredible stories. With the other people I have interviewed, if they have told me a large number of stories, I have limited my selection in this paper to include the stories that were the most significant for them or that were the most radical. However, in Pastor Dawkins’ life, such filters would be fairly useless. So, I will try to include the stories that were accompanied by the most pertinent sociological data.

His parents were missionaries in Japan, where he was born, he moved back to America at an early age. Throughout his life, he was raised in impoverished and dire conditions like that of his present church neighborhood because that was where his parents felt called to minister. He was raised with the faith of his parents and was instilled with the knowledge and expectancy that miracles do happen today early on in life. “The first time I ever saw anything that was really on the spectacular miraculous side was when I was about eight or nine years old. There was this guy who was a heroin addict that was living in our home. We always took people in... and he was a young guy, maybe sixteen or seventeen years old... and he was on his third or fourth day of coming off of drugs and it was a really messy time. There was a lot of throwing up and things like that. It looked to me like he possessed by an alien... now that I look back on it, there was probably a lot of demonic power there. On the third or fourth day, I woke up early that morning

and he had his arm on the windowsill. He was [staying] in my bedroom too; not something I recommend. Anyway, he was just looking outside the window and he had tears coming down his face. I called his name and said, ‘What’s wrong? Are you ok?’ He turned to me and I jumped back because he was pretty scary to me with his behavior. And he kind of jumped back too and when he did I said, ‘What’s going on?’ He said, ‘Jesus came in here this morning and he took it all away. All the addiction is gone, the pain is gone, the sickness is gone and he told me that he’s making me a new person.’ It was so profound to me because I had seen him so sick... I had seen many people, even at that age, go through that but this was like a light switch and he was completely changed in a moment.”

As I was listening to this story, what was even more interesting to me was his reaction to this fairly shocking scene, even as an eight or nine year old. “I walked into my parents’ bedroom and I just burst into tears. They were still in bed asleep and that woke them up. And they were saying, ‘What’s wrong? What’s wrong?’ and they were afraid that he had tried to hurt me or something... I told them what happened and I looked at my parents and I said, ‘That’s what I want to see the rest of my life. I want to be a part of that.’”

Aside from this one dramatic episode, he says that he did not witness too many miracles growing up. “I grew up around ministry but we did not see a whole lot of that when I was a kid though. We did not see a lot of healings or things like that. We believed in it, we prayed for it, but I didn’t really see it.” He grew up hearing stories of miracles and healings that happened to other people and he believed them but he did not have any firsthand experience with miracles until later on.

Now, looking back on his childhood, he has his own theory of why he did not see very many miracles. He offered this example to illustrate his point. A woman came up to Pastor

Dawkins and said, “I went to one of your conferences and I heard all these stories about all these [miracles] that God did through your prayers. I want to know why God doesn’t respond to mine.” Pastor Dawkins replied and said, “List for me, the last five things that you prayed for where you needed to see a miracle happen.” She wrote back to him with a list of items that included her husband needing a raise due to failing finances, her daughter’s severe illness, her mother’s severe illness, and car problems without sufficient finances for repair. Pastor Dawkins said, “I wrote back to her and I said, ‘All of those things are about you. There’s the problem. You don’t see Jesus performing miracles or doing anything really to benefit himself. You don’t even see Jesus healing the disciples... When you get your prayers outside of your family, outside of your circle where it’s not benefiting you, I guarantee you’ll start seeing more healings, you’ll start seeing more miracles... You want to see God heal somebody? Pray for a neighbor.’ That’s what I notice now; that a big part of the difference was that we were always praying for Christians when I was a kid. We would pray for other people to be saved, for other people to come to Christ, but we were only praying within the church, which is a strike against us. If people needed prayer we were saying, ‘Bring them to church. We’ll pray for them here.’ But where you see Jesus perform all of his miracles is outside of the synagogues and temples. So anyway, that’s my theory as to why I didn’t see quite as much when I was young.”

The next miracle story he shared with me illustrated this point quite clearly. Later in his life, his mother developed severe cancer that had her on her deathbed in a hospital. “She was a missionary, a pastor, the most godly person I’ve ever known in my entire life... and she’s laying in a hospital dying of cancer... and we’ve been praying and asking God for months to heal her, to raise her up, and for the cancer to go... no change. Right beside her room was a woman who had kidney cancer and the doctor was saying that she’d be dead within a month. She wasn’t a

Christian. Her sister asked for me to come next door to her room... they heard us singing and praying. So we went next door and we were just praying for her just for comfort and peace. She wasn't even asking for healing. As we were praying I heard the Lord say, 'Tell her I'm going to completely heal her right now and I'm going to resolve a family issue that she has in her home.' She didn't mention a family issue." Pastor Dawkins repeated what he says God told him to the woman. "We left the room... and she didn't even believe. She was like, 'Oh really?' and was kind of shocked. The next morning when we went there, her sister came and cried out to us and said, 'You won't believe this... They came and checked her catheter right when you guys left and it was just clear pure urine, there was no blood. They ran her downstairs for a scan last night and the doctor just came up here this morning and said, 'All the cancer is gone.'"' She was completely healed. Pastor Dawkins described the sister's testimony that the family issue was resolved that morning as well. But after all that, the woman who was healed "came to my mother's funeral. [At the funeral] I got up at one point and there's this woman who wasn't even a Christian, who came to Christ obviously as a result of that. And I'm there at my mother's funeral who was a missionary and devoted to God all of her life... but it punctuates the point even more." Pastor Dawkins told me a number of other healing stories, many of which happened to people who were not Christians, and who became Christians as a result.

I asked him about how people change as a result of a miracle. One of the interesting changes that he has seen is how people view his church. "We've had people say before, 'If you go to the Vineyard in Aurora, God heals cancer there.'"' He said that he gets calls from other churches in the area asking if they can bring demonized people over and have them delivered. He even received a call from a principal of an elementary school asking if he could come help a six-year-old boy stay in school because it seemed like he had a demon. When Pastor Dawkins asked

about the boy's current situation, the principal said, "Well right now he's on all fours on top of my desk, foaming at the mouth, and growling like a dog." To which Pastor Dawkins replied, "Yeah, that sounds like a demon." He says that he later met with the boy and his mother and did deliver him from the demon. With many such calls for help to his church, there has been no previous relationship between Pastor Dawkins and the person on the other end of the line. Somebody who has heard a testimony from anyone at his church knows the kinds of things that go on there. When they need help for something demonic or for healing, they don't just call up any church. They call Vineyard Fox Valley church. In that community, it has been known as the place where miracles happen.

Another major change he sees in people as a result of miracles is they begin to have faith that they can also see God respond to their prayers in the same way. "Their faith is risen because they see me operate in that way and they say 'Hey I can do that too,' and that's what they're always hearing from me anyway." But sometimes, with regards to healings, the effect is not always positive. "Sometimes, even amongst the church there can even be a little bit of jealousy." He said that there are times when someone will get healed in his church and another person will be jealous or angry that they weren't healed in the same way.

I asked him about what kinds of reactions are typical among those who witness miracles, particularly those who have never witnessed one before. He said, "Shock. There's a friend of mine who says that an act of God, many times, would be like a feather falling on your arm. In the moment you could almost ignore it and that's really true. I think that has to do with being in shock. If something changes so instantly... you're conditioned, you're prepared for pain or for struggle... and the fact that it's gone... you're like, 'Wait a minute. Is it gone?' And you're checking... which I think you should do... I always tell people, 'Go back to your doctor to get



verification and to make sure.”” He described that in their shock there’s usually a period of skepticism and many times, especially if a person has been miraculously healed, they are waiting for their ailment to come back. “Unbelievers, people who are not following Christ that are skeptics... that’s actually good because that’s when you can almost guarantee God’s going to show up and do something really big.” This again shows his emphasis on the missionary purpose of miracles. “Their immediate reaction is shock and then once it settles in, it’s gratitude.”

Then I asked him about how many people they would tell about the miracle and who they would tell. He said that it depends greatly on the person but generally people only tell those who are closest to them like family and close friends. Aside from that, people tend only to tell Christians, and he thinks that it is largely out of fear of persecution. However, he said that the people with the worst reputations tend to tell the most people. He told me a story of one guy who was a drug dealer with a tattoo of Satan on his chest and who had attempted suicide multiple times. After he was delivered of demons and became a Christian, he told absolutely everyone that he could. He went around to all of the people that he used to sell drugs to, told them the story, and invited them to church.

With regards to any negative reactions to miracle, he offered a rather unusual and incredible story as an example. “A few months ago my son and I went to visit a friend of his [at his house] whose grandmother died. They were waiting for the coroner to come. They called for their priest but the priest couldn’t come... and my sixteen year old son says, ‘Dad, let’s go raise her from the dead!’ I said, ‘Ok. Let’s go.’ They didn’t call us for that. They had wanted someone to come and perform some sort of last rites. So I walked in and I said, ‘I’m not a priest. I can’t perform last rites. But I would like to have a moment to read some scripture and pray over this woman. So we went into the room and we began to call life back into her and pray and ask God

to raise her up. The son... I don't know how to explain it but we just got the sense that he could feel something happening. He got up and came into the room was like, 'Alright, this is just creepy.' The daughter, his sister, [who also had come into the room] looked at her [the grandmother] and says, 'Oh my gosh. It's almost like she's about to speak to us.' And then he [the son] said, 'That's too weird. That would be freaky.' ...And you could almost feel the faith that she had just succumb to the unbelief of the son." He went on to say that the woman was raised from the dead. Subsequently it created a stir in the community, not necessarily inspiring faith, but arousing people's awareness that people in their community believe that something like this can happen. After she was raised from the dead, "the son became terrified." According to Pastor Dawkins, the son's awareness of God in that way resulted in fear.

One interesting phenomenon that has occurred multiple times over the course of his career is that some people will refuse prayer for their illness if they are receiving insurance money from it. After praying for a number of people in wheelchairs who were healed and could walk, one woman in a wheelchair refused to be prayed for because she wanted the money from her insurance. On another occasion, he prayed for a woman who was healed, and she never told anyone so that she could keep receiving insurance money. Eventually, her family members along with Pastor Dawkins persuaded her to do the right thing.

I asked him if there were certain demographics that tend to see miracles more often. His emphasis was on the poor. "The scripture says, 'Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.' There's a promise of seeing God come through for the poor." For him, those who are on the lower end of society in any way are more likely to witness miracles because God has special promises for the in the Bible. "Obviously I'm very partial to that because I pastor in a poor urban community... But one of the reasons why we wanted to come do this is because we

knew we'd see more signs and wonders as a result." In addition he said that desperation and persistence also seemed to be consistent factors that are present when miracles occur. He also strongly believes that when non-Christians are present, miracles are more likely to happen in order to bring them into faith. He did say that, although these factors are the most common in his experience, that miracles still do happen under different conditions.

Toward the end of the interview he spoke about why miracles do not happen, even if all the right factors are in place. In his answer to my question, he explained the purpose of miracles and what results God wants to yield through them. "Our idea of success is the perfect healing, the clear prophetic word, the perfect cleansing and healing of the individual in their soul. God's idea of success is our obedience... even when there isn't healing. The reality is, we're all going to die. Delaying death isn't God's primary goal... When miracles happen, they're little windows into the future Kingdom."

### **Geoff White**

Geoff was born and raised in California. His father attended Fuller Theological Seminary and became a Presbyterian pastor when Geoff was a year old. His father accepted a couple of jobs as a head pastor but then went on to interim work which kept his family moving a lot. They moved all around California and then to Washington where he went to high school. He graduated from Washington State University in 2006, majoring in Communications with a minor in Sociology. He worked at a Presbyterian camp called Calvin Crest in the mountains near Yosemite National Park in California for multiple summers in college and then full-time for two and a half years after college. He is now a manager at a coffee shop and lives in Elk Grove, CA with his wife, whom he met at Calvin Crest.

Geoff grew up with the faith of his parents. "Church was always very important to me. I

was excited to go, even as a kid.” However, being a pastor’s son, he “was held, fairly or unfairly, to a certain image. I didn’t like that at all.” He came to realize that his beliefs were not something that he decided upon for himself and so seriously began to consider the claims of the faith he grew up in. “That’s how Calvin Crest became a huge influence in my life.” At Calvin Crest, he was no longer labeled as “the pastor’s kid,” and there wasn’t the same sort of group standard that he had grown up with. “Calvin Crest was a place where I could ask questions that I thought I should have already known the answers to. There was much more freedom there than I was ever accustomed to at home.” He maintains that his parents were always very supportive and loving but that this new freedom was something he needed and that he could not get at home. Although he accepted Christ and decided to follow Jesus on his own when he was in fifth grade, it was during his time on camp staff that he made his faith his own. I asked him if he was raised with the belief that miracles happen today. He said, “No. I was never told outright that miracles *don’t* happen in the present day, but as a child when I learned about miracles they were always in the past.” He said he believed in those miracles in the Bible but never expected a miracle to happen today. This mindset did not change in his life until a miracle finally happened to him.

What distinguishes Geoff from all of the people that I’ve interviewed so far is that he has only witnessed one miracle, a miraculous healing, and that he was the one who was healed. He was working at Calvin Crest in the summer of 2003 with 4<sup>th</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> graders in a section of the camp called Sherwood Forest. Originally he hadn’t been hired for that summer. He hadn’t even applied. He had worked there in the summer of 2001 and had been rejected in 2002. He was hurt by this and so decided not to apply the next summer. However, two weeks before camp started, he got a call from Calvin Crest saying that one of their lead counselors for Sherwood Forest had backed out. They asked him if he would like the job instead and he accepted. “I was

just stoked to be at Calvin Crest again.” The first week of camp rolls by without a hitch and Geoff loved every minute of it. He was having the time of his life.

On the Monday of the second week of camp, the camp gathered for their late afternoon town meeting where they would sing songs and cheers, watch skits, make announcements, and hand out mail. The kids were all excited after their first full day of camp and were laughing at the antics of the counselors during their skits. Before they hand out the mail to the campers, their routine skit was to have a counselor ride on the back of another counselor as “The Pony Express” while carrying the mail bucket. Geoff did this with a female counselor. “She was tiny and I’m *not* tiny so we thought it would be funny during the Pony Express to have me hop on her back and ride her around. We were running around... having a great time. There was sawdust all around for the campers to sit on. She tripped on a tree root that was beneath the level of the sawdust. So I went flying off of her and landed squarely on my knee... all of myself which was much larger then than it is now, right on my knee. Instantly I felt and heard a large ‘pop’ and knew immediately that this wasn’t your average injury.” He tried to get back up but couldn’t due to the intense pain in his right leg. The other counselors helped him up and got him to the camp infirmary without making too much of a scene so as not to scare the kids who witnessed the whole event. They got Geoff comfortable and tried to reduce the swelling. “My knee at that point was gigantic.” The nurse told him, “Geoff, I’m so sorry, but you’ve torn your ACL.”

“I had just accepted this job, I’m super stoked to be there, and now I have this injury that’s going to take six to eight months with physical therapy to heal.” After the adrenaline and shock wore off, the pain began to set in even more along with a rush of emotions. “I didn’t get hired [in 2002], and then I didn’t apply, and then they called me, and now I’m here for a week and a day... why did this happen? Now I’m starting to entertain those thoughts. At this point I’m just

more pissed than anything... I had so many questions [for the nurse]. ‘How do you know it’s a torn ACL?’ and she’d pull up pictures: ‘Here’s a healthy knee, here’s a torn MCL, here’s a torn PCL, here’s a torn ACL. Honey I’ve seen so many of these...’” The nurse then explained to him that although an ACL tear is a serious injury, there is nothing about it that needs immediate emergency attention from a hospital, which is another thirty minutes or more down the mountain. They planned to go the following morning. She talked him through the recovery process in his future, made him as comfortable as possible, stabilized the knee, and gave him some pain killers.

Evening came and the campers finished their evening Campfire meeting and had gone off to bed. His fellow counselors and teammates had gathered outside with the camp directors and coordinators about replacing Geoff for the summer and trying to work out the logistical steps they needed to take to carry on with their program. He obviously wasn’t with them, but heard later that one of his teammates said, “Why don’t we go pray for him? Don’t we believe in miracles?” The group agreed and went in to pray for Geoff. They gathered around Geoff and laid hands on him and began to pray for his healing. I asked him about the attitudes and emotions of those praying for him. He said, “I just remember a sense of expectancy. They were praying with some pretty serious purpose.” They prayed for about ten minutes, left the room, and then Geoff fell asleep. “I woke up the next morning and [the nurse] came in to check on me because she heard me stirring. We pulled back the sheets and covers and literally, my right knee looked exactly like my left knee. There was no swelling, there was no deep contusion, no deep bruising that was there the day before. At first she was like, ‘Huh, that’s odd. Your swelling really went down. Are you in any pain?’ I was still groggy and yawning and said, ‘Umm... no I don’t.’ She said, ‘Well it looks the same.’ Then she just started to weep. She said, ‘Geoff I think it happened. I really think it happened! I think your knee is healed!’ At that point we were staring at each

other thinking, ‘Oh my gosh. Did this really just happen?’ Then she said, ‘I think you should get up and walk!’ So I got out of bed and sure enough could support my own weight, there was zero pain. We started to hug and cry. I mean, talk about an immediate one-eighty of emotion! The team got together and they were freaking out. We didn’t know what to do! I was walking! I could hop up and down!” The group started praying and singing and rejoicing in the moment. However, they soon had to get to work and wake up the campers. Geoff showed up to make French toast for his group of campers and they were all amazed with him. They hadn’t been told the extent of his injury but they knew that it was serious and that they weren’t going to see him for the rest of the summer. Geoff gave them the full story and he continued to talk about it with his campers for their rest of their stay. He went down to the hospital later on to make sure that his knee was healthy. They told him that his knee was perfectly fine, which was what he was expecting to hear at that point.

I asked him how this miracle has changed his life since the event and if he lives life differently now. “It totally changed my perception of the power and reality of God and how that affects my life and how I should act on it... I was such a confused and upset person going into it and something like that has a way of shaking you and waking you up.” He says that even to this day, the story will either come up in conversation or in his mind and rekindle his faith in God and his awe of Him. In addition, his “prayer-life took a significant boom.” This also happened in the lives of his teammates. Throughout the rest of the summer, the team began to pray for bigger things as a result. They had seen tangibly that God could do the impossible so they expanded what they thought was reasonable to pray for. However, there weren’t any other significant injuries that summer that Geoff can remember so they didn’t get too many opportunities to pray for miraculous healings.

One very significant aspect of the story for Geoff is what might have happened if he did not receive this miracle. “On the team [of counselors] that summer was a girl that I met for the first time who eventually became my girlfriend and eventually became my wife. Who knows how that would have played out, had I gone home at the beginning of week two?” On a related note, I asked him later on in the interview about what sorts of emotions his teammates were going through when he was injured. He said, “A couple of years afterward, when our relationship had progressed, my wife confessed that she was thinking [at the time of the injury], ‘Dang! I was just starting to like that guy too and now he’s going to have to go.’” In addition, as a result of this miracle, he says that he was able to make friendships with many different campers who kept coming back year after year. “I watched them grow up and got to talk with them about some pretty serious things in their lives.” He also forged a relationship with the nurse which continues today. For Geoff, none of these things would have happened if it had not been for his miracle. “It’s incredible how that event shaped aspects of multiple lives.”

I asked him about the factors that were present and important at the time of the miracle. He said, “There was touch; the physical laying on of hands. There was purpose behind the words that were being spoken. There was a need; they had already had the person that was in my position back out.” He believes that the most important factor that God would be looking for is praying with purpose and expectancy. He gave examples in the Bible when a person would go up to Jesus believing that he could heal them and Jesus would say, in multiple places in the Bible, “Your faith has made you well.” He did say that God has free reign of what He will do but “we have to be people who believe.” Toward the end of the interview I asked Geoff what his interpretation of the miracle and what meaning he derived from it. He said, “What resonates most about it is that we serve a powerful, real, living God.



## **Paul Rudatsikira**

Paul is currently a student at Princeton Theological Seminary. He is also a speaker and lecturer, and has spoken at Harvard, Yale, Stanford, and Princeton as an advocate for social activism in Rwanda. Paul was born in Rwanda but raised in the neighboring country of Burundi with his father and mother and three siblings. He and his family moved to California in 1994 when the genocide started. The Rudatsikira family has had an incredible journey to where they are today, and miracles seem to follow them wherever they go, particularly miracles of provision and protection. Our interview was the longest one I conducted, taking nearly three hours. He told me many stories of miracles that happened to his father while trying to get his family out of Burundi and others that happened when they moved to the United States. I'll give a brief overview of these events but then focus on miracles that happened directly to Paul.

Paul grew up believing in miracles. He even had certain spiritual gifts as a child. His parents tell him that when he was 5 years old, he came into the dining room where his parents and some guests were visiting, and announced that the French, who were occupying Rwanda at the time, would leave by that weekend. His prophecy turned out to be accurate. He told me of a few other stories of prophecy and divine intuition that he displayed as a child. In 1994, when he was nine years old, he and his family were caught in the genocide that had spread over Rwanda and Burundi. The majority population of the Hutus was killing the minority population of the Tutsis, of which the Rudatsikiras were members. Many of their extended family members died. Paul's father heard God speak to him and told him that He would send their family to America. They spent two weeks preparing for their trip. By faith, he and his wife both resigned from their jobs as a medical doctor and a pharmacist respectively. On a Wednesday, they gathered all their

friends and told them that they were leaving for America on Sunday. At that point they had no visas and no plane tickets. The tickets for the whole family would cost about \$13,000. They had no savings because his family believed that “saving money means somebody has to die. There’s always someone in need...” A friend back in America quickly raised the money for them to go shortly afterward. They had sold their home and almost all that they had. On Friday, Paul’s father went to the US Embassy in Rwanda to go ask for visas. He met with the woman who was second in command of the Embassy in her office. She told him, “This is a time of war and we’re not giving visas out to anyone.” Paul’s father contemplated this news along with his six non-refundable tickets for a trip in two days, his lack of a home and job, and concluded that this woman’s answer must not be the will of God. He bowed his head down in front of her and he began to pray silently. He prayed, “Heavenly Father, make this woman right here feel so uncomfortable... until she gives us the visas. In Jesus’ name, amen.” Right then her body began to shake and the shaking became increasingly violent as she began to gasp for air. His dad saw this and prayed, “Lord, more, more, more, until she gives us the visas.” She began to grab papers and sign forms and said, “Here are your six visas, just get out of my office.” Two days later they came to the United States. According to Paul, there were only seven visas given to Rwandan citizens that year and six of them were for his family.

Paul told me more miraculous stories of provision and protection that happened to his father such as: angels scaring away Hutus with guns who were trying kill him, a bus that disappeared into thin air after distracting other Hutus along a roadside from killing him, and receiving a full scholarship to an American medical school a few days after being rejected from the school outright. These stories have been a part of their family’s heritage and instilled Paul with a firm belief that God works miracles and provides for those who rely on Him.

Unfortunately, I will have to skip many of the other stories that he told me about his family. Instead I will focus on some of the miracles that he witnessed firsthand.

The first occurred when he was living in California with his family when he was about twenty years old. An African woman came to stay with them for a while who had cancer and she did not have an appetite because of it. “I don’t know what type of cancer she had but she would always point toward her stomach.” Paul’s grandmother happened to be visiting at the time as well. This woman could only speak in fragmented English and Paul could only understand parts of this woman’s language but Paul’s grandmother was fluent. They all attended a prayer meeting at their church on a Wednesday. At the prayer meeting this woman told Paul’s grandmother that she wanted prayer for healing, specifically from Paul. Two days later, Paul heard his grandmother and the woman worshipping in a room in their house. He went inside to join them and the woman with cancer said, “Paul I want you to pray for me.” So he put his hand on her and began to pray for her. After he prayed, she cried out and fell to the ground. She shouted, “Paul! I feel something! I want you to lay your hands here! Pray for me there!” So he did and began to pray more. Then she became excited and started to describe what had just happened. She felt something go down her spine and travel into the cancerous area. She was talking so fast that Paul had a hard time understanding her and his grandmother was already excited and shouting “Hallelujah!” He didn’t know what happened beyond something moving in her spine and stomach. “And then she gets up and runs into the kitchen shouting, ‘I’m healed! I’m healed!’ and my grandmother ran in with her... and I’m just sitting in the room thinking, ‘What’s going on here?’” He explained that everyone in the house, including his parents immediately celebrated and accepted her healing while he was still confused and skeptical. “She went into the bathroom, closed the door, and then the cancer comes out of her body. Black stuff and red stuff comes out

of her body.” According to Paul, her demeanor and appearance changed instantly and her appetite came back as well. Afterward she told as many as she could that she had been healed.

He told another story of when he was helping a ministry in Canada a few years later. A college-age girl was coming to the ministry meetings with severe tooth pain such that she had to take pain medications every two hours. She would frequently leave during the middle of the meetings to take more medication. Paul couldn’t provide details as to what the problem actually was but apparently the girl reported that the pain became so intense that it often spread down her neck and shoulder and into her arm. The dentists and doctors had performed many procedures on her but none of them had solved the issue. So she asked Paul to pray for her during a prayer time in the meeting. Many people from the meeting went over to pray for her including many small children who came with their parents. Paul and all of these people surrounded her and began to pray. After they had prayed, the pain in her tooth went away. After sharing this with everyone, she went back home. Paul explains that after she got home, “by habit, she goes to get out the pain medication to swallow it. Immediately, as she swallows it, the pain comes back full blown! And at that very moment she said that she realized, ‘This is spiritual. I have to fight this.’ She put her pain medication away and said, ‘I’m going to pray through this thing.’ She prayed the whole night through.” Paul said that when morning finally came, the pain was gone and it has never come back. She called Paul that morning to tell him all that had happened. “Honestly, I was surprised. I was happy, I was excited, I thanked God for what He did but at the same time I was still amazed.”

Without even asking him, Paul began to elaborate on the purpose of miracles and how some people can misinterpret them. “Miracles are for the glory of God. There are some that use miracles for the glory of men. We’ve seen that on television... it’s almost a business. A

misunderstanding of miracles is to believe that only people of God can do miracles. But people who are not even sent by God can do miracles. Miracles can happen even by people who are not saved. When Jesus says in Matthew chapter seven, ‘Many will say to me on the last day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and cast out many demons in your name and do many mighty works in your name?’ And I will say unto them, ‘Depart from me, you who practice lawlessness.’” So some people can use miracles for self-glorification and then miss out on what miracles are for.” He went on to say that while miracles achieve many things, there are two primary things that they are meant for. First, they are for the edification of the witnesses by showing them that God is real, powerful, and has control over all creation. Second, they function as a testimony to others to inspire faith.

I asked him what sorts of things are typically present when miracles occur. “Often times when Jesus would heal someone he would say, ‘your faith has made you well.’ Jesus said that all you need is faith the size of a mustard seed and that’s not very big.” For Paul, faith is the key factor that should be present if a miracle is to happen but it needn’t be much. He was also careful to say though that, “I don’t think we force God’s hand. I don’t think we can force God to do anything.” I asked him what he thinks God is looking for when He wants to work a miracle. He said, “There’s a passage in scripture that says, ‘God brings up the lowly.’ I think pride is the enemy of miracles... humility is a major thing. Often times miracles don’t come easy. Sometimes we have to press through doubts and our situations. Like the blind man who cried out to Jesus, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me.’ And the crowd tried to shut him up but he was pushing beyond his environment. He cried even louder, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me.’ To say, ‘have mercy’ you must be humble.” He also pointed out that diligence is an important factor as well and that people often don’t receive the miracle that they ask God for because they are not

diligent in asking for it.

I asked Paul about who he has shared these stories with and what kinds of people he would tell about a miracle. He cited Matthew 7:6 where Jesus says, “Do not give dogs what is holy and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.” Paul’s father taught him that his testimonies are like pearls and that he needs to be careful who he shares them with so that they won’t use them to attack him. “There are some miracles that I would tell to just about anybody. And there are others that I would only share with just a few people.” The only negative reaction to a miracle story of his that he could think of actually occurred with another seminary student. After telling this other student one of his miracle stories, the student simply said, “I don’t believe you. I’m having a hard time accepting that.” “And this was a person training to be a pastor!”

I asked Paul about what kinds of people tend to witness miracles more. He said that people who didn’t grow up in areas where Enlightenment thinking has been dominant will tend to witness more miracles because they won’t have a predisposition to disbelieve in “the spirit realm.” He claims that in Africa, everybody is familiar with the spirit realm, either for good or for evil. For him, any factor that hinders faith also decreases their chances of seeing miracles. Aside from that, “it doesn’t matter where you’re from or where you are. It doesn’t matter whether you’re at Harvard or a high school dropout. With faith, your circumstances cannot decide whether you are going to see a miracle or not.”

When asked about what kinds of change he has seen in people after witnessing a miracle, he offered a unique response. “The huge thing, sociologically speaking, is that people sometimes make themselves slaves to other people. People may believe that they have to please another person in order to get a promotion...[he offered a few other examples]. People feel that they

have to be dependent upon other people. When these kinds of things [miracles] happen, it shows a person that they do not need to be dependent upon other people, but that they need to be dependent upon God. That is the huge sociological paradigm shift. Their actions are no longer based upon the fear of others. Their actions are based upon the freedom of God.”

### **Melisa Williamson**

Melisa Williamson is currently a student at Princeton Theological Seminary and has founded a women’s ministry of her own called Women of the Word Ministries. She was born in Los Angeles and raised in the deserts of Yucca Valley and Palm Springs in Southern California. Much of her education has been devoted to biblical scholarship. In 1995 she graduated from Loyola Marymount University with a B.A. in Greek and history. She earned a Master’s degree in U.S. and Ancient History from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. After getting married, she and her husband moved to Fort Lauderdale, Florida where she earned another Master’s degree in New Testament from Knox Theological Seminary. From there she taught New Testament Greek, Church History, and writing at Calvary Chapel Bible Institute from 2001 to 2008. She also worked for a program helping at-risk children at the same institution from 2000 to 2005. She has worked with many different church ministries and shares her testimony as a Christian speaker and educator.

Her parents were married at eighteen and seventeen years old. They were raised Catholic but only attended Mass on a few occasions for Easter and Christmas since religion was never important to them. According to Melisa, their lifestyle consisted mainly of partying and drugs. After four years of marriage, Melisa’s father discovered that he couldn’t have children and so

they planned to divorce. Before getting divorced, her mother met another man and became pregnant with Melisa. They stayed married and didn't tell anyone who Melisa's real father was. Melisa didn't find this out until she was eleven. Melisa's biological father was contacted about all this and was sent pictures of Melisa as she grew up though he had no part in raising her. He had come from a Christian family but had backslidden from his faith and fell into the party scene at the time he impregnated Melisa's mother. As Melisa was growing up though, her biological father got married to another woman, started going back to church, and recommitted his life to Christ. "So he was left with a picture of me as a toddler and his wife who [also] couldn't have children. He knew I was being raised around drugs so he began praying for me and for my safety." She told me all of this as a preface to some of her miracle stories because she believes that many of the miracles that have happened in her life would not have happened if it had not been for the prayers of her biological father and his wife.

When Melisa was four years old, her adopted father got into a car accident and she was left with his parents for three weeks. During that time her adopted father's father sexually abused her. She never told her parents about it. When she was six she moved with her parents to Yucca Valley, CA. Down the street from her lived a Pastor with his wife and daughter who was a year younger than Melisa. They soon became friends. "I would go down the street and we would play together. That was how I was introduced to the Gospel. Also our backyard-neighbor was an elderly couple and I would go over there and he would let me read the children's books. They were Bible stories." Melisa started going with the Pastor's family to a Calvary Baptist church in Yucca Valley. "For some reason, and my dad still has no idea why, they put me in a Christian school for first grade... It was through that school that I came to know Christ." A young woman at the school asked if anyone wanted to know Jesus. For Melisa, the appeal of Jesus at that point



was clear. “You have one family with alcohol and drugs and so-and-so is cheating on so-and-so and another family where the daddy and mommy are kneeling down with their little girl to pray before she goes to sleep at night which was such a big contrast for me... I knew enough to realize that the peace in their home came from Jesus.” At six years old, Melisa prayed with that young woman to receive Jesus into her life. Her parents divorced shortly afterward and she attended that Christian school only for one year.

She moved away again with her parents to Palm Springs and did not go to church again until she took herself to church when she was in junior high. From there she joined a non-denominational church and their youth-group. She was then invited by a classmate to a Foursquare church and attended their youth group throughout high school. In college she attended another Foursquare at the invitation of another classmate. I asked her if she believed that miracles were possible before she ever witnessed one. She said that through her experiences in these different churches that she had heard from people that miracles were possible and had come to believe in them. She also said “I had had experiences with God that were kind of unusual since the time I was young.”

She gave some examples of things that she would not consider to be miracles but that she thinks others would. When she was around ten or eleven years old she had a dream that was a television commercial. She knew that she had never seen it before but had a sense that it would appear in the future. She watched television for three months as often as she could until she actually saw the commercial. It was for cottage cheese. A similar thing happened later when she was in college. She had a dream about her drama class. In reality she was in intermediate drama, but in her dream there were students from both the advanced and intermediate drama classes. In her dream, the students were all gathered around talking about how one of the girls in the class

had died. “I told a friend of mine who was in the advanced class at the time about this weird dream that Anna had died.” Melisa also told the girl who died in her dream about it. They all sympathized with Melisa in thinking that it was very strange. “A year later, I had forgotten about all of this and I’m now sitting in that class and the advanced and intermediate students were in the same class now (because it was a year later) and they’re talking about how Anna died. She died in a car accident. I turned to him [the friend she had told the year before] and I said, ‘This is exactly like the dream I told you about last year.’ And he freaked out...” She went to her church and told many different people there because she was scared. Her pastor explained to her that foreknowledge is a gift of the Spirit among many others and that God sometimes reveals parts of the future to people so that they can pray about them. “Before I saw what I would call a miracle, I had already experienced things in the Spirit that perhaps other people would call miracles.”

She offered all of this as a context in which to put her first miraculous experience. Due to her troubled and abusive childhood, she said that when she grew into her teenage years she was “pretty messed up... I was bulimic.” During the summer between her sophomore and junior years of high school she spent six weeks in an institute for eating disorders getting help. “I was clinically diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder, and bulimarexia: a combination of bulimia and anorexia.” A year later she was also clinically diagnosed with depression though she states that they were all evident at the same time. At this institution they said that, “there was no healing for my eating disorder, that I would always have it, that they could teach me to cope and that they could give me coping mechanisms to alleviate it.” It was there that she heard the testimonies and life stories of other girls there and how almost all of them had experienced sexual abuse. At that time they told her that they believed that about ninety percent of all bulimics were sexually assaulted as children. At this point, Melisa began to identify her disorders

with her abusive past, something that she had tried to forget.

“I went through a lot of counseling. The way the counseled people back then for sexual abuse issues was to tell you to grieve the child within you that has died. This was 1989.”

However, she continued to suffer from her eating disorder but also continued to hear from people in her church that God could heal her of her eating disorder. She would consistently go forward for prayer in church services but not necessarily for her eating disorder. There was constant drama and abuse in her life. She was raped twice in high school and once in college. During college she would attend church but she said that she fell away from living a Christian lifestyle. She was having sex with her boyfriend and getting drunk occasionally. One day at college, when she was twenty years old, she received a nasty look from the man who had raped her which pushed her into a deep depression. She spent that night at her boyfriend’s place. “My pastor’s wife had bought me a ticket to go to this women’s conference that next morning... a brunch for the Foursquare women. I woke up very depressed and I did not want to attend. It was the kind of depression where I could’ve stayed in bed for the entire weekend... But I felt really guilty that she had paid for this ticket for me to go to this thing.” The pastor’s wife called her to make sure she was coming. Afterward she prayed. “I just said, ‘God, I can’t do it. I don’t want to go.’ And I heard the voice of God say, ‘Go.’” She said that she rolled out of bed, put on some dirty clothes and went to the conference. All was planning to do was hide in the back, eat her brunch, and leave. “All the women from my church were the greeters for this event so there was no hiding.” They all greeted her with enthusiasm and kindness because they later told her how terrible, depressed, and exhausted she looked. They then escorted her to the very front table. She felt embarrassed to be in the primary view of around five hundred other women looking over her at the speaker, who was right in front of her.

At the end of the meeting as she was getting ready to leave, the leader offered prayer for anyone who wanted it from her team of prayer counselors. “I had absolutely no intention of going forward for prayer because I had gone forward for prayer so many times and I was just too depressed... but I felt the Lord say to me, ‘Go get prayer.’” She avoided the prayer counselors and instead went and talked to her pastor’s wife. She told her what happened the day before with the man giving her the dirty look. “So she goes and gets the speaker. She says, ‘This is my friend Melisa. She’s been severely sexually abused. Will you pray for her?’” Both of these women put a hand on each of Melisa’s shoulders and began to pray for her. “I remember hearing them praying for me. My eyes were closed. Suddenly... I wasn’t there and I saw this room... a white room, rectangular shaped, largish... To my left was a table and on this table was a little coffin... and in the coffin was me as a four-year-old which was when my grandfather first molested me... and to the right was Jesus and he was looking at the little girl in the coffin... and he said, ‘Rise daughter. You’re not dead. You’re just sleeping.’ And suddenly... instead of looking at the scene... I was leaping out of the coffin and skipping in the greatest joy you can imagine into the arms of Jesus and he just held me. I opened my eyes and both of the women had their hands about three inches off my shoulders and their eyes were wide and I don’t know which one said it but one of them said, ‘I just saw the hand of God touch you.’”

“I was so filled with joy. I didn’t realize it but for all those years I was not feeling with all of my soul or body. I had been hurt so bad that I was only feeling with half of me. And now, all of a sudden, I was feeling with all of me. I had this joy I couldn’t explain and I told them what happened. For the next few days every emotion that I experienced was double... It was good but it was a little overwhelming for me. Also, immediately my eating disorder changed. It went from being an obsessive-compulsive disorder to a habit. Instead of it being an outside force controlling

me, it was like an option. After that, all I had were learned habits that had to be unlearned. It fell away very quickly. I probably binged and purged only a handful of times in my life after that.” She had been used to bingeing and purging anywhere from two to five times per day since high school. “It had nothing to do with my expectation. I didn’t know who this woman was. She didn’t even know how to pray for me. I don’t remember [the pastor’s wife] telling her I was bulimic. And she didn’t pray for my bulimia.”

She also told me what she considers to be a second part to that story that happened six years later. “This had to do with my self value and it was through another vision. It was a prayer I had by myself... actually in the bathtub. I had been married for two years and I was really depressed. Things weren’t going the way I thought they should go. And I looked at myself and I prayed. I said, ‘God, when will I ever be beautiful? When will I ever be desirable and pretty?’ And I had a vision and I saw this beautiful... I don’t know how to explain that I knew she was a princess but she was a princess. And she was standing with long straight hair coming down her back and she had her hands raised up holding a crown. I instantly knew that that was how God saw me and that this was His crown. When I opened my eyes, I don’t know how to explain it but I was completely healed of low self-esteem.” In talking about both of these stories she said, “I feel like I can’t say the one without the other because the one set me free in my daily habits... this other one set me free in my mental habits.” She said that this second vision changed her whole life because, although she was already in seminary at that point, she then felt the call to start doing women’s ministry.

She started leading a Bible study for women in her house. One time in 2005, the women all came in the front room while Melisa was busy in the kitchen preparing food. She didn’t see any of them come in. She met them for their Bible study and afterward they stayed and visited for a

while. “For whatever reason... I didn’t normally do this but I felt led to go around the room and pray for each woman specifically.” She explained that nobody had asked for any specific prayer but that they all agreed and allowed her to pray for them. “So I went around the room and prayed for each woman and when I got to Liz, I put my hand on her ankle and I started praying for healing for her ankle. I don’t know why. I don’t even remember doing that... and I moved on and I was back in the kitchen again.” The rest of the group left and went home. “The next thing you know, I’m hearing from my friend about Liz’s miracle. I said, ‘What do you mean Liz’s miracle?’ ...She said, ‘It was at your house! You’re the one who prayed for her!’ It turns out that Liz had sprained her ankle so when she came into the house... I never saw her... she had been limping and they had to help her sit down... Apparently I went back in the kitchen and when Liz got up to leave she could walk and her ankle was fine. They all freaked out in the front room without me.” Liz had to leave quickly because of her kids and they all rejoiced about the miracle without Melisa.

I asked Melisa about what social changes have taken place as a result of these miracles. She said that miracles often build confidence. She said that her Bible study group would pray for healings and miracles before with anticipation but without the confidence that they could actually see one. Now when they meet, they have more confidence in their prayers due to their experience with a miracle. “There’s probably a greater confidence in the leader and as a leader I feel a little uncomfortable admitting that because that can be manipulated.” She also explained that the main thing that was evident in her own life with all of these stories was joy, both for herself and for everyone else involved. “There was a new energy dynamic to the group. It confirms to the group that what they believe is true. In my own instance, the miracles led me on to leadership because I felt confident that I could stand before someone and talk about miracles

because I had experienced them myself. It provided for me, as a leader, a boldness to proclaim the reality of the healing available through Jesus Christ.”

I asked her about what kinds of things are typically present when miracles occur and she offered an interesting analogy. “Is it possible to have just taught somebody how to play baseball and have them hit a home run? Yeah it’s possible. But if you get someone that plays baseball every week and they practice and hit and train... you’re going to have a higher chance of seeing home runs from that practiced person. Somebody that practices their spirituality, somebody that works their spiritual muscle by prayer and fasting and reading their Bible in devotion to God and drawing close to God... they can hit ‘home runs’ more often.” She also said that prayer is a very important part of miracles and that, “My hunch is that prayer is involved with every miracle. For example, I had had plenty of people pray for me over the years for my low self-esteem.” She offered other hypothetical examples where a miracle might happen without prayer in the moment but where people had been praying for health or safety or deliverance or anything else many times before the miracle happened. She also offered the example of the pastor and his wife and their little girl being put in her life due to the constant prayers of his absent biological father and his wife.

After her first vision and healing from bulimia, Melisa told everyone that she could and was asked to share her testimony at her church the next day. Melisa says that she shares these stories as a testimony wherever she goes and speaks. She says that she will openly share these stories with anyone if it comes up. It often does come up through her ministry and speaking engagements and she sometimes gets the opportunity to share her story with other women suffering from eating disorders. Her pastor’s wife who prayed for her also began to tell everyone about what had happened to Melisa. She also says that the women who witnessed Liz’s ankle

healing have brought it up years later and reminisced about the event. “It remained a part of their personal joy.” According to Melisa, these women would share this story with anyone, including people who don’t believe in miracles.

Melisa has encountered some negative reactions to her stories though. She told her boyfriend what had happened to her at the conference and he was in disbelief. “My boyfriend was a negative reaction because what he really wanted to know was if I was going to keep having sex with him. He wanted to know how religious I had suddenly gotten. He was ok with me going to church but he wanted to know how this was going to affect him.” He questioned the actual story but he did acknowledge that she had stopped bingeing and purging. The only other negative reactions that she hears are when others hear her story and complain that they were prayed for and weren’t healed in the same way. Now she prefaces all of her talks by saying that people are healed in many different ways and that not all will experience a miraculous healing.

For Melisa, the function and purpose of miracles is to show that God is real and that miracles have not stopped occurring since the stories in the Bible. “God is active in the lives of people today in the same way He said He would be. The scriptures describe miracles and I still see those same miracles happening today... People have an intrinsic value to God and He cares about every aspect of their lives... A miracle is a testimony to the power and reality of God and of Jesus... It’s God’s way of calling attention to Himself.”



## **Chapter 4**

### **Analysis**

#### **Factors Associated with Miracles**

In these interviews, everyone states, in a variety of ways and in different degrees, that faith in miracles is a key factor in witnessing miracles. Most of them also provide biblical principles to back up their claim. In almost every story that they tell, there is someone who believes that God can work a miracle and who anticipates seeing it. Most often, the faith is evident in those who pray for the miracle. In many instances a person seeking healing also has faith that God can do it miraculously and seeks out a person who is known to heal others. These were backed up with Bible verses that focused on the role of faith in interacting with God, including Hebrews 11:6 which states, “Without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”

However, there are plenty of examples where there is seemingly little faith by those receiving prayer. Geoff and Melisa had no faith or expectancy that they would be healed. In one of Pastor Piippo’s stories, the neuroscientist with the brain tumor had no faith in being healed. The woman with kidney cancer in the room next to Pastor Dawkins in the hospital also had no faith in being healed. Yet in all of these situations there are people involved who do believe in miracles and pray for them. Even in Melisa’s case, those who prayed for her in that moment may not have had any specific faith in her healing but many others had prayed for her healing with faith before that.

With regard to certain demographics, both Andrew and Pastor Dawkins emphasize that the poor and needy are more likely to see miracles. They believe in the special promises that the Bible makes for those on the bottom of society. They also cite different verses in the Bible to

support the same position. Frank and Pastor Piippo both think that young people tend to witness miracles more. For Frank, it's because young Christians in his era were more obedient and faithful to God and had more zeal to seek after God and miracles. For Pastor Piippo it's because young people aren't as set into the ways of Enlightenment thinking that dismisses supernatural phenomenon such as miracles. Paul has similar feelings toward Enlightenment thinking but links it to region rather than age. For Paul, the Western world is much less likely to see miracles than other places like Africa because of the spread of Enlightenment thinking in the West.

Pastor Piippo, Pastor Dawkins, and Andrew all believe that miracles are for bringing nonbelievers into the faith. They specifically emphasize the importance of praying for people outside of the church. They think that miracles serve a missionary purpose and they told a number of stories of people praying for nonbelievers, many of who became Christians. Andrew learned this when he had to take three people out of the church building in Mozambique before they were healed. Pastor Dawkins illustrated this point vividly with the story of his mother in the hospital and the woman next door who wasn't a believer. He backed up this point further by noting that the Bible rarely shows Jesus performing miracles in the church or for his disciples and that most of his ministry and miraculous works were done out among the common people.

Out of all the interviews, Frank Mazzella is the only one who emphasizes obedience to God as an important and even necessary factor in seeing miracles. While Pastor Dawkins believes that miracles often inspire obedience, he never explicitly states that obedience is important if one wants to see miracles. Other interviewees note that people who spend more time with God are more likely to see miracles (especially Melisa) but they don't emphasize obedience to God's commandments to the extent that Frank does. While Frank does believe that God is looking for faith, a "good Christian life" is the evidence of that faith. He brought up the teaching

of James 2:26 which says, “for as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.” The “works” in this verse refer to acts of obedience.

This was significant because Frank’s beliefs are so evidently shaped by events that happened forty or more years ago. Although he still enjoys his church, he admits feeling estranged due to the changed behaviors around him, particularly the lack of zeal for God’s commandments. He doesn’t have the same set of shared experiences with his current community that he had when he was young. As a young Christian, his experiences with miracles were always accompanied by stretches of strict adherence to God’s laws and fervent prayer. For Frank, the mark of true faith is obedience and it’s obedience that creates an environment that welcomes miracles. That environment is now gone in Frank’s eyes. This has led him to his conclusion that miracles won’t likely happen in his church.

### **Effects of Miracles**

The data collected from these interviews yielded a more diverse set of effects than expected. All of the interviewees generally agreed that the desired effect of a miracle is to inspire faith and arouse an awareness of God and a commitment to Him. However, the actual effects didn’t always hit the mark. Certain people were not changed at all. Pastor Piippo told a story about a man who received a prophecy about a work contract. He rejoiced for a while in his miracle but then later fell back into the same place of doubt that he was in before. He also hinted at the fact that they’ve seen people miraculously healed in their church who went back to “life as usual.” Frank told a similar story of his niece who miraculously received a new tooth and after rejoicing for a while, slid back away from faith and into old habits again. No one offered a direct explanation as to why this happens. Pastor Dawkins told stories about people who refused prayer for healing because they wanted the insurance money. One person even began to commit

insurance fraud after being miraculously healed.

In the stories from these interviews, some of the more desired effects of miracles from a Christian perspective include conversion (woman healed next to Pastor Dawkins' mother), rejuvenated faith, increased church attendance and obedience (Frank), volunteerism (couple at Pastor Piippo's church), long-lasting relationships (Geoff and his wife), new ministries (Melisa), academic research on miracles (other couple at Pastor Piippo's church), escape from genocide (Paul's family), bolder prayer for miracles (Melisa's Bible study and Geoff's team), bolder evangelism (Andrew), joy and life-transformation (Melisa), a new time created to pray for miracles in a church service (Andrew's church experiences), and freedom from dependence on people (Paul's emphasis).

There were also a few noted cases where these miracles became part of a social narrative for a group. Melisa's Bible study group still discusses the story of the healed ankle. Geoff still tells the story of his healed ACL when an opportunity arises. His teammates told the story for years up at the camp. Paul and his family consistently retell the story of their journey to America and the miraculous provisions they got along the way. These shared experiences have enhanced the solidarity of these social groups. The context in which the miracle happened gives their shared experience a common interpretation as well. For Melisa's Bible study and for Geoff and his teammates, the miracles gave them a greater awareness of God's activity in response to their prayers which gave them greater boldness and confidence in praying for miracles at other times. For Paul's family, these miracles have shown them God's constant provision for them despite dire circumstances. This has given them the ability to look at a situation and make a decision based on what they believe God has promised them rather than what their circumstances tell them.

Andrew, Pastor Dawkins, and Pastor Piippo have accumulated so many miracle stories in their own lives and in the lives of those around them, that the churches they work in have become known for their miracles throughout their communities. Miracle stories come from these churches at such an impressive rate that many outside the church have identified them as a sort of mental, physical, and spiritual hospital open to believers and nonbelievers. Because these three ministers have seen so many miracles happen to nonbelievers and others outside the church, their ministry's emphasis is on outreach and evangelism to nonbelievers. This emphasis helped create a soup kitchen for the homeless at Pastor Piippo's church and a desire in Pastor Dawkins' life to work with those who are neglected and of ill repute on the bottom of society. The context of many of their experiences with miracles helped to shape their interpretations, their beliefs regarding miracles, and their ministry goals and programs.

## **Conclusion**

Regarding my first hypothesis, the people I interviewed did generally agree that faith in miracles and expectancy for them are important factors in determining the likelihood of a miracle. All of them supported this point with theological defenses although Pastor Piippo added a few philosophical reasons as well. There were more factors that were commonly emphasized as well. Expectant prayer was evident in almost every story and emphasized as another important component of miracles. Therefore, I cannot reject my hypothesis that Christians emphasize faith and expectancy as important factors in miraculous events. In fact, all of the interviewees shared very similar hypotheses. However, other interesting demographic factors were important to some people such as age, region, and social class. Other factors like obedience or the involvement of nonbelievers were also important to some.

Regarding my second hypothesis, there were very concrete examples of faith communities that hold onto their miracle stories and retell them as a part of their social narrative. The interpretations of these stories yielded particular beliefs that shaped the actions of those who adhere to them. The outcomes of these interpretations varied greatly, usually in positive ways for the group or the person involved. However, it was interesting to hear that this was not always the case. Certain people had negative reactions to miracles and miracle stories such as doubt or fear, and some people had no reaction at all. Sociologically, it's likely that these people were not connected to the community of faith in a strong enough way so as to provide them with a meaningful interpretation of the miracle they experienced. If a person doesn't perceive their miraculous experience as a shared experience with members of that faith community, it's less likely that the community's interpretation will have any relevance to that person. So while many of these miracle stories did produce the anticipated positive effects, my hypothesis is not

necessarily true for every miracle case. I cannot completely reject my hypothesis though, because there is strong evidence that faith communities are created around miracle stories with significant social change as a result.

For a future study, I would interview Christians from a wider variety of countries and cultures who witness miracles. The cultural differences that were apparent in Paul's stories made me curious as to how other cultures interpret miracles and what social factors they think are important components in a miracle. If other parts of the world do not have to overcome Enlightenment thinking as much as the West, then perhaps faith is not the primary factor in seeing a miracle. Faith might be abundant, so maybe righteous living or persistence in prayer and fasting would be more important. Also, it would provide a wider view of the kinds of social change that are possible or seen as desirable in other cultures. Another interesting study would be to interview people from predetermined demographics who had witnessed miracles and analyze the differences and similarities between them. This could potentially yield highly useful and predictable data if people from the same demographic tend to agree on particular interpretations of their miraculous experiences.

The people interviewed for this study, however, have provided valuable basic insight regarding the interpretation of a miracle. In particular, the interpretation of scripture and the use of theology to support a particular view of a miracle have a significant effect on the social outcome of the miracle. Sociology benefits from these interpretations in discovering the wide range of social changes they produce. Also, the social factors that people find important in determining the likelihood of a miracle bear witness to what kind of interpretation might be expected from them if they witness a miracle and what social change might happen as a result. With these data, sociologists can begin to understand mysticism in other religions and what kinds

of social change are brought about by emphases on certain religious teachings.

Regardless of the veracity of these miracle stories, the people who report them have shown that these events yield significant social change. Their testimonies inspire faith and the miracles they report have changed the course of many lives. The effect is undeniable and God continues to be increasingly real to those who seek after miracles.



## Appendix A: Interview Questions

### **Context**

1. Where are you from? Currently located?
2. What is your occupation?
3. Please give a brief history of your religious background and upbringing.
4. Did you believe that miracles were possible before you witnessed one?
5. Did you expect miracles to happen at all to anybody? Did you grow up with the mindset that miracles can and do happen today?
6. If you believed they were possible today, what kinds of miracles did you believe were possible?

### **The Event (Clarification questions if necessary)**

1. Please give a detailed account of the miracle. If there has been more than one or many please give an account of your first miraculous experience and then give accounts of as many others as you want.
2. How many people witnessed this miracle?
3. How much time passed during the miracle?
4. Was the miracle prayed for or otherwise conducted by one person, was it a group effort, or was it completely unexpected?

### **Sociological Significance**

1. In general, what would you say is the overall social impact that this/these miracle(s) have had on you and the others who witnessed it? What kinds of change did it bring in people's lives?
2. In what social context did this miracle occur? What were the emotions, attitudes, relationships, circumstances, needs, timing, of this situation?
3. Describe the people who witnessed this miracle. (Demographics)(Young or old, rich or poor, believers or not, leaders, etc...). Is it possible to typify the kind of person who witnesses a miracle?
4. If multiple people witnessed this miracle, what was everyone's relationship to the group? (church, family, friends...)
5. Did you have any sort of expectancy or faith that this miracle might or would occur? Did the group?
6. What was your immediate reaction after the miracle? In the days after? Weeks after?
7. What was the group's reaction?
8. Did you/they tell others about it? Who? How many people?
9. Was there anyone or any group of people that you/they did not tell about it for some reason?
10. Do you/they still tell others about it? How frequently? In what setting(s)?
11. Is there ever any negative reaction to these stories?
12. Is this miracle a story that gets retold often among the people who witnessed it or even people who just heard about it? If so, how often and with what purpose?
13. How many of the other firsthand witnesses still speak about the miracle today?
14. Has experiencing a miracle changed the way you/they interact with others? How?

15. Was there a noticeable difference in any routine parts of your/their spiritual life? (prayer, Bible reading, fasting, fellowship, evangelism, etc.)
16. Has this experience changed your/their beliefs at all? If so, how?
17. What is your/their interpretation of this miracle? Overall, what does it mean? What is its significance?
18. Were there any significant differences in interpretation among those who witnessed it or even those who heard about it?
19. From a human perspective, what factors would you say are typically present when a miracle occurs? (Prayer, righteous living, intercession, ritual, fellowship, fasting, need, poverty, desperation, emotion, persistence...)
20. Are these factors a necessity?
21. From God's perspective, what do you think He is looking for when He wants to produce a miracle?
22. Why don't miracles happen sometimes, even if they are prayed for and all of the right factors are in place?
23. What is your definition of "miracle?" What about these events make them miracles?
24. How did this miracle glorify God?

## Appendix B: Additional Information About the Interviewees

### **Andrew Ohsberg:**

Pastoral Intern at Highland Christian Ministries of Stratford. Ontario, Canada.

Church website: <http://www.hcm-stratford.org/>

Personal website: <http://www.praynow.tk/>

### **John Piippo:**

Pastor of Redeemer Fellowship Church. Monroe, MI.

Church website: <http://redeemerfellowship.net/>

Personal Website: <http://www.johnpiippo.com/>

### **Frank Mazella:**

Member of Nassau Christian Center. Princeton, NJ.

Church website: <http://nassauchristian.org/>

### **Robby Dawkins:**

Pastor of Vineyard Fox Valley Church. Aurora, IL.

Church website: <http://vineyardfoxvalley.org/>

### **Paul Rudatsikira:**

Social Activist and Student at Princeton Theological Seminary. Princeton, NJ.

Personal website: <http://www.paulrudatsikira.com/>

### **Melisa Williamson:**

Founder of Women of the Word ministry and Student at Princeton Theological Seminary

Ministry website: <http://www.wow4jesus.org/>

Personal website: <http://melisawilliamson.com/>

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