

## **Signs and Wonders Necessary But Not Sufficient**

by Alan Johnson

There is a popular assumption in many Pentecostal circles that if something powerful happens in Jesus' name—a healing, dramatic answered prayer, dream—conversion to Jesus will immediately follow. Signs and wonders are seen as the answer to the mission problem of a slow response to the gospel. My thesis in this essay is that among the great world religions with their vibrant folk religious practices “signs and wonders” acquire a much more ambiguous status. While works of power are necessary to bring people to faith in such environments, they are generally not sufficient in and of themselves to create a robust commitment to Jesus. I begin by defining “signs and wonders” and then offer a definition of the notion of “necessary but not sufficient” as it relates to encountering God’s power. In this section I narrate some of my experiences with people in the Thai setting where the manifestation of God’s power was not a fast track to conversion and which caused me to start investigating this subject. In the second part I theorize as to why works of power are not always sufficient to produce faith in the context of a world religion like Buddhism and then in the third section look at the biblical evidence for a mixed response to miracles. Finally, I examine some of the implications for ministry on the ground among people with worldviews where signs and wonders are not likely to lead to immediate allegiance to Jesus Christ.

### **Defining “Necessary But Not Sufficient”**

When we look at the idea of miracles in the Bible there is a diversity of terms in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek that in general can be categorized into three distinct emphases. There are discrete sets of words that carry the notions of distinctive and wonderful, mighty and powerful, and meaningful or significant (Cressey 1996, 771). These terms are expressed in English translations by a variety of words like “miracles,” “wonders,” “signs,” “might acts,” and “powers” (1996, 771; Hofus 1971, 620–35). In missiology the idea of “power encounter” is often used as a broad cover term for the miraculous but as developed by mission theorists it

actually has a very specific meaning as a kind of experience of God's power. In this essay I take the definition of signs and wonders given by Greig who examines the lexical field of power in the New Testament and concludes that signs, wonders and miracles denote healing, deliverance from evil spirits and spiritual gifts (1993, 137–38). Similarly Grudem notes that “signs and wonders” can be used as a stock expression for miracles (such as Ex 7:3, Deut 6:22, Ps 135:9, Acts 4:30 Rom 15:19) and that three times signs, wonders and miracles appear in combination (Acts 2:22, 2 Cor 12:12 and Heb 2:4) (1994, 356). For my purposes here Grudem's definition of miracle fits well with this broader coverage: “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” (1994, 355). Thus the kinds of events that I am speaking of are encounters with God's power in a broad sense with the divine activity pointing to God and arousing wonder.

The missiological concept of “power encounter” had a very specific original setting in the South Pacific islands when it was coined by Alan Tippett and was later broadened by current theorists to include healing and deliverance from demons (Kraft 2000, 775). Kraft sees power encounter in a rubric of spiritual warfare as dealing with ground level issues of inner healing, deliverance, and inter-generational curses and a host of other power related practices that both enslave people and are manipulated by them (Ma 2010, 186; Kraft 2005, 361). In his model of the three encounters of truth, power and allegiance, power deals with the affective or feeling realm and the normal routing would be that power encounters move people to a greater appreciation of truth and on to allegiance (Shaw 2003, 179, 191).

In my reflections here on signs and wonders and their relationship to conversion the idea of encounters with power includes this more specific use of power encounter but goes beyond it to include things that point people beyond the natural realm and create a sense of wonder. This can include things like dreams or visions, more obvious miraculous answers to prayer such as a dramatic healing for oneself or another, or even an answer to prayer of a seemingly small event but which has sign value for the person who prayed. In such a case the “supernatural” part is the juxtaposition of the answer experienced to the timing of the prayer.

In order to set up my definition of the notion of signs and wonders being necessary but not sufficient to bring people to faith, I will begin by narrating some specific events that caused me to question my original assumptions. I came to Thailand with the baseline understanding from my Pentecostal background that once Thai people experienced the power of God it would set them on the sure road to becoming a follower of Jesus Christ. This has turned out to be true, but in a more qualified sense,

and not nearly as “automatic” as I first thought. Over my years of listening to Thai people tell their stories of how they came to faith in Jesus Christ, there is an unmistakable theme—the frequent demonstration of God’s power particularly in healing and unusual answers to prayer. Relatively few come to faith just through someone sharing the Gospel verbally or reading Scripture. Convert narratives are peppered with experiences of the supernatural. However, I also began to accumulate a great deal of evidence first from my own ministry experiences and later through hearing similar stories from others that forced me to rethink the signs and wonders/conversion relationship.

One of the first incidents happened when we were showing the JESUS film in a village on the edge of a major city and praying for the sick. We discovered that a woman had been healed of back pain and sent her son to the gathering the next night to also be prayed for. We found out where this woman lived and went to visit her a few days later. Her living area was filled with all kinds of Buddha images. We sat down, telling her we heard from her son that her back pain had been healed. When we asked how she was feeling, she surprised us by saying “horrible,” because her back pain was back. We asked her what happened and she said she came home from our gathering and bowed before her images and gave thanks to Buddha for healing her. Soon after that her back pain returned. When we offered to pray for her, she put up her hands and refused saying, “These are two different powers that don’t get along.” This was the first time I had met an instance of a person receiving prayer in Jesus name but giving thanks to Buddha.

Another time a small house group that I had started in a slum was told that a man who lived in their community was dying. So we went to pray for him; he was unable to rise, and doctors told him they could not help him. We prayed. Several weeks later I ran into him. He was walking and looking healthy and I asked him what happened. He said he got better. So I told him I would visit him. When I met him I went over how we had prayed in Jesus’ name and he got better and would he like to follow Jesus? He said no. So I reviewed everything again and asked the same question. He said no again. When I asked him why not, he told me that he had previously done what Thai’s call *rap ong*, which is to invite a spirit to indwell you generally for the purpose of being healed from some ailment. They are taught that if you deny this spirit and do not make its annual offering it will drive you insane or kill you. Since in the past he had done this he was unable to follow Jesus, even though that particular spirit had been unable to heal his nearly fatal ailment.

More recently a local Thai church that I work with developed a relationship with a family that has a child with Down’s syndrome. He also had a hole in his heart and the parents were told that it would

require surgery one day. This church was actively helping the family, who were quite poor, taking them to the doctor when the child was sick as well as bringing them to church and praying for the little boy's healing. At one point the doctor said it was time to do the surgery but when they did another test before prepping for the surgery, they discovered the hole was closed and the boy was totally healed. The local Thai pastor was very upset after all of this prayer and help in Jesus' name that upon his next visit to the family he discovered the mother had put a Buddhist amulet around her son's neck. He was dumbfounded. The mother continues to remain friendly and to talk about faith with us but has not become a Christian.

In addition to my own personal experiences and the things that I have heard from others, I found supportive empirical evidence in the work of Marten Visser on Protestant conversion patterns in Thailand (2008). Visser developed a hypothesis based on the work of Edwin Zehner who found in the convert narratives he collected the themes of love and power. Visser tested to see whether or not perceived miracles are as important in bringing people to a decision to become Christians as experiences within social relationships. He found that only 21 percent of respondents listed a miracle as the most significant factor in their conversion and concluded that "perceived miracles play a decisive role for a significant minority, but experiences directly set in social relationships are decisive for four times as many people." (ibid, 137).

Experiences like this set me on the path to try and understand what is happening around the nexus of supernatural power and moving towards or away from Jesus. I began to formalize my interviews with converts and to question their experiences of God's power and its role in their decision to become a Christ follower. What I began to see more clearly was that for people who came to faith the supernatural was embedded in a set of relationships with believers and other experiences. This fit well with what Visser found in his research. In trying to find a way to explain this I landed upon the idea of signs and wonders being necessary but not sufficient in and of themselves to bring people to faith. Thus by "necessary but not sufficient" I mean that powerful manifestations alone generally do not result in robust faith unless they are happening in a set of conditions that facilitate turning to Jesus.

With this definitional work as background, I will now offer some possible explanations as to why signs and wonders alone are often insufficient to bring people to faith by looking at Buddhism and how it is practiced in Thailand. I then proceed to examine the biblical data to see if there is a mixed response to miracles there.

### **Impact of Local Religious Context on Insufficiency of Signs and Wonders**

In the folk Buddhist world it is not hard to see that miracles, healings, dreams, visions and remarkable answers to prayer are vitally important to people coming to faith in Jesus. It does not take long to realize that you can talk about religion, compare religions, and point out the excellencies of Jesus, yet it will make very little sense to those listening. Local people are convinced of the superiority of the belief system they were born into and are aware of the difficulties that will accrue to them if they leave it. Works of power grab the attention of people; they shake up and destabilize worldviews, opening people to new options. I have heard over and over again in Thai conversion testimonies how a person had a problem and “tried everything” they knew—visits to temples, shrines, ceremonies to reverse bad luck and misfortune, meditation, making extra merit all to no avail. Then someone told them that Jesus can help, and prayer in his name brought results.

It is a bit harder to understand why powerful supernatural manifestations might not always be sufficient to bring people to faith or keep them in it. Practical experience from people working in the Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist worlds shows that it is not just a straight linear movement from a power encounter to following Jesus. In trying to shape a more nuanced view of the signs and wonders/conversion relationship I have found it fruitful to look in two different directions. The first, which I will deal with in this section, examines how the local religious context impacts the person who experiences God’s power. At the individual level this concerns their interpretive framework and then at the social level the religious context provides filters for making sense of the kind of experiences I have narrated above. The second, which I will examine in the section below, looks at Scripture and shows that in biblical history works of power and signs and wonders were no guarantee of a faithful response to Yahweh in the Old Testament or to Jesus in the New Testament.

Andrew Walls talks about the three great intakes of peoples into the Christian faith, each of which has shifted the center of gravity of the faith. The first was when Jewish Christians proclaimed the good news to Greeks and brought Hellenistic civilization to faith in Christ, the second was when the barbarian peoples, who were seen as the destroyers of Christian civilization, turned to the God of the Christians; and the third has been the “massive movement towards Christian faith in all the southern continents” that is still happening today (1996, 68). Walls notes that “the obvious feature which these three great intakes of Christians have in common is that each has consisted overwhelmingly of adherents

of the primal religions; by comparison, converts from the other religious tradition have been few” (ibid.). In trying to account for why this is the case Walls introduces the idea that while taking on the Christian faith caused great social change, it also “was often part of the mechanism of adjustment to social change” (ibid., 68–69). Primal religions under the impact of social change found tools for coping with this change particularly in the areas of values, hierarchy of leadership and the provision of a universal point of reference, “linking the society with its traditionally local and kin-related focus to a universal order” (ibid., 69).

I think that Walls’ observations here can be turned around to provide a useful perspective on why the great religious traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam have proven less susceptible to the Christian faith. Not only do their religious systems give them tools to deal with social change, but the interpretive schemas of people raised in these religious worldviews provide a powerful force that is constantly pulling all experiences back into their frames of reference and plausibility structures. This makes the woman’s experience I narrated above more understandable. While we prayed for her back to be healed in Jesus’ name, her Buddhist worldview provided her a more compelling explanation of why she got better.

In folk Buddhist worldview Jesus is just one of many power options. Jesus is inside the boundaries of *samsara* and is on par with the many kinds of demi-gods and powerful beings who have enormous stores of merit but who at the end of the day are still subject to the law of karma and are in need of enlightenment. Others have achieved enlightenment but choose to remain as *bodhisattva* in order to help other sentient beings. Practically, what can happen is that people will turn to Jesus initially but with the internal caveat that if things do not work out they will seek out other power sources. So you can see people make a profession of faith, come to church, read the Bible, and even bear witness, but all the time keep their options open should Jesus not “deliver” what they need. This leads to people becoming disappointed when prayer does not “work” and a shift to engage other powerful beings for help. What I have observed is not so much a syncretistic playing of both sides as the end result but rather that people in these circumstances move away from faith and the church on their own.

In one church I worked in a couple who had a business failure and were in great financial straits began to attend the local church. They experienced divine provision, mediated in part by a dream with very specific instructions. They attended church services regularly and were studying the Bible. However, when they had recovered and started a new business it required that they bid on projects. After the loss of a crucial bid they began to go to a local shrine to ask for help, while initially

attending church. As time went on, rather than continuing along in a dual state, it was not long before they simply stopped attending church and moved away from their faith.

Local religion also provides a powerful social system that dampens response to miracles. In many societies religion is woven warp and woof into everything and is central to personal and national identity formation. When a person comes to faith in Jesus it places them outside of the group and in the eyes of others; they are no longer seen as an insider. Thus the compulsion to conform can overcome the worldview destabilization that an answer to prayer or miracle creates. Social pressure is often combined with the pull of the interpretive framework when a convert goes through difficult times. They are told that the reason for their current problem is that they have left the ancestral ways. This kind of constant pressure can wear down those who have experienced signs and wonders in the past and yet have troubles in the present that do not seem to resolve easily with prayer.

Another source for insights into why encounters with God's power may not be enough to move people to religious change comes from the work of Horton and Fisher who proposed conflicting theories in the 1970s and 1980s on the conversion of African's practicing traditional religion to Islam and Christianity. Horton saw the pre-Islamic or pre-Christian cosmologies and the socio-economic matrix as the source of change linked with Islam or Christianity acting as catalysts (1975, 219–21). Fisher disagreed and saw the religion (either Islam or Christianity) as having the momentum and unleashing new forces (1985, 153, 156). The insight that seems relevant to our discussion here is Fisher's observation that what begins to break down conditions and creates the space for change either in the traditional religion cosmology (Horton's view) or in the initial stage Fisher calls quarantine, before new local converts actually come in, is "fundamentally compatible" (1985, 156).

The key here seems to be conditions creating an environment open to change. If this is the case in the move from traditional religion to Islam or Christianity, it would seem to be just as likely to apply to a change from Islam to the Christian faith. The difference however would be that where an encounter with power is itself an agent of change in the traditional worldview, challenging the superiority of their gods, it does not have the same effect in a great tradition religion. This is because great tradition religions not only create and reinforce identity but have ultimates, whether liberation from *samsara* in Buddhism or Hinduism or paradise in Islam, that are not destabilized by an encounter with power in the same way as a traditional religion. They are true no matter what kinds of situations prevail. By contrast, traditional religion needs to

deliver results and a power encounter in Tippett's sense (see Kraft 2000), or miracles that show the superiority of God's power provide a direct challenge. This then links back to my observation above about the reinterpretive power of great tradition religions. An encounter with the living God's supernatural power can be re-absorbed much easier under religious concepts found in the great tradition religions.

### **The Biblical Evidence of Mixed Response to Miracles**

Biblically we also find that mighty works are insufficient to draw out faith and obedience. In the Pentateuch, from the Exodus to the renewing of the covenant before crossing the Jordan to take possession of the land in Deuteronomy, there is arguably no cohort of people who has ever seen mightier works. Yet they continually forgot Yahweh (see the prophetic testimony in Amos 5:25–27, cited by Stephen in Acts 7:42–43), and they actually worshipped other gods in the sojourn in the desert even after seeing all of Yahweh's mighty works.

Jesus himself upbraids Chorazin and Bethsaida for their hard-hearted rejection of the mighty works he did there that did not lead them to repentance (Matt 11:20–24; Luke 10:13–15). Early in Jesus' ministry his healing, rather than stimulating faith, draws a reaction against him for breaking Sabbath laws (Matt 12:1–14; Mark 3:1–6; Luke 6:6–11). Only one of the ten lepers healed in Luke 17 returns to give thanks to Jesus, the raising of Lazarus in John 11 gets a very mixed response, and the healing of the ear of the high priest's servant after Peter cuts it off during Jesus' arrest does nothing to inspire faith in those who have come to arrest him (Luke 22:49–51).

John's Gospel goes even further than the Synoptics and develops the idea of the inadequacy of a faith based on signs. Keener points out that while John shares with the Synoptic tradition the idea that signs faith is inadequate in such texts as Matthew 12:38,39; 16:1–4; Mark 8:11,12; 15:32; Luke 11:16, 29, signs “perform a more ambiguous function in the fourth Gospel, which emphasizes the potential hiddenness of God's revelation to those who may not prove to be persevering disciples” (2003, 275). Keener says that while the synoptics use signs to authenticate Jesus' missions, John places them in a Christological context and uses them and their connected discourses to interpret Jesus' identity and call for faith (*ibid.*).

Keener observes that, while John frequently mentions that many “believed” in Jesus (2:23; 7:31; 10:42; 11:45; 12:11, 42), at least in many of these cases this faith proves inadequate to preserve for salvation. John here echoes earlier biblical portraits of human nature in general and perhaps of recipients of God's revelations in particular; for instance, the



Israelites believed when they saw Moses' signs (Exod 4:31), but their faith collapsed when it was challenged (Exod 5:21–23). (ibid., 746)

Signs are not unimportant in John. The story of Thomas shows how signs-faith, while seen as inadequate is still valid faith (ibid., 275). "If they would not believe Jesus' words and identity directly, Jesus invites them to believe by means of his works (10:38; cf. 14:11); these were his Father's works (10:37; cf. 5:17), hence revealed his origin" (ibid., 830). Keener affirms that signs serve a revelatory purpose but "they do not control one's response, and response to the Spirit's testimony in the word is a higher stage of faith, they are among Jesus' works which testify to his identity (10:32, 37–38; 14:10–11; 20:29–3)" (ibid., 275). He concludes that signs are not negative, just inadequate:

Thomas's unwillingness to believe without seeing reflects a thread that runs throughout the Gospel: many respond to signs with faith (1:50; 10:38; 11:15, 40; 14:11) and refuse faith without signs (4:48; 6:30), but unless this faith matures into discipleship, it must prove inadequate in the end (8:30–31). (ibid., 1208)

Thinking about signs-faith in this way has helped me to understand the phenomena of partial healings I have seen over my years in Thailand. It used to puzzle me how some people would receive a great measure of healing and yet be left with a specific physical problem. I have now come to see such partial healings as having a kind of parabolic function where people can either choose to seek more light and go deeper or to turn away. It is Jesus' role to reveal his glory (John 2:11) but there is an inherent ambiguity that allows for varying understandings. The sign invites to faith, but the ongoing physical problem can serve as a reminder that a relationship with Jesus will not be predicated solely on benefits conveyed.

### **Some Missiological Implications of Mixed Response to Signs and Wonders**

In this section I discuss briefly four implications for cross-cultural ministry that follow from the thesis that signs and wonders are necessary but not sufficient to bring people to faith. My hope is that the reflections here can provide grist for the development of ministry methods that incorporate signs and wonders as a part of a larger strategy for evangelism and discipleship.

Let me begin by saying that I am not intimating here that there are people who would pray for miracles to happen for people and then

simply leave them on their own. People who believe God for signs and wonders to confirm the proclamation of the Gospel are very interested in people becoming Christians. What is problematic is when people feel like the hard work is done when a work of power happens and push for a “profession of faith” without much concern for ongoing discipleship. People often wonder why converts do not “stick” or will not come to church. To rely on works of power without engaging worldview issues can short circuit the process of rooting people in faith.

A reductionist approach that sees signs and wonders as the silver bullet of missionary strategy, the single answer to bring people to faith, can discourage cross-cultural workers from doing the kind of labor intensive cultural homework that will help to deal with the worldview issues of the potential convert.

In what follows I develop four areas that can help start us on the road to ministry approaches that will help provide the environment where encounters with God’s power can more easily facilitate the movement to conversion and discipleship.

1. A key first step is to prepare specifically to deal with worldview issues that are related to understanding signs and wonders. If we know that people can reinterpret what has happened through prayer in Jesus’ name in terms of their own religion, we can prepare the ground for understanding by teaching that Jesus is not bound by the worldview they hold. Helping people to see that Jesus is outside of *samsara* and not subject to it means Jesus is qualitatively different than all beings that are bound by karma.

2. We need to begin to develop field-based research on the three encounters of power, truth and allegiance (Kraft 2005, 364). Knowing their order and timing before and after their conversion could enable us to build grids for helping people navigate their current encounters and prepare for those that are to come. Since so many Thai experience something supernatural in their journey to faith, learning how they made meaning from their encounter with God’s power could be extremely helpful to those working in discipling seekers and new converts. It also helps us to know how to pray when we understand better where a person is in their journey.

Thai conversion narratives I have listened to show that most of the people who persevere and become solid Christians had all three of these encounters, but not in the same order. Power is the most common because it awakens interest. However there are people who will begin with a tentative allegiance to Jesus by committing to his people and later on strengthening that through encounters with truth and power. Others are confronted with truth, through studying Scripture or some exposure to the Christian message, and then often it is power that moves them

to full commitment to Jesus. I am wondering if more research on this would not reveal a kind of developmental sequence or set of pathways that could be similar to what J. Robert Clinton did with leadership development in *The Making of a Leader*. If it turns out there are discernible patterns this could guide us in the evangelism and discipleship process to know what kind of experiences and biblical content to insert and in what appropriate sequence.

3. If signs and wonders are necessary but not sufficient I believe it also means we should be more intentional about setting up strategies that go beyond only exposing people to God's power and include assessing the claims of the gospel. We can let people know that the Jesus who can heal their body or deliver them from evil spirits or provide for financial needs can also help them come to know the living God personally and free them from the cycle of rebirth to live in his eternal family. Chris Wright in his article "Salvation Belongs to Our God" looks at the breadth of the idea of salvation in both Testaments:

Since the experience of salvation lies within the historical covenant relationship, it has a very broad and comprehensive range of significance—in both Old and New Testaments. "God saves" covers a huge range of realities precisely because of the immense variety of circumstances in which God's saving engagement with people takes place through the great sweep of biblical history . . . So in both Testaments, then, God saves people in a wide variety of physical, material, and temporal ways from all kinds of need, danger, and threat. But of course, and also in both Testaments, God's saving action goes much further. The Bible recognizes that all those proximate evils from which God saves his people are manifestations of the far deeper disorder in human life. Enemies, lies, disease, oppression, false accusation, violence, death—all of these things from which we pray to be saved are the *results of rebellion and sin in the human heart*. That is where the deepest source of the problem lies". (2010, 4, italics in the original)

Signs and wonders are very often salvation from what Wright calls proximate evils and as such can serve as signposts to a more ultimate salvation from the source of all such evils. Framing works of powers in this way has important methodological implications as we share our faith. It is tempting to make Jesus into the one who can solve all of our problems, giving a nod to sin and brokenness with God. In a folk Buddhist world people will seek help but do not have a notion of being broken in a broken relationship with their creator. Telling more of the

story of God's salvation from proximate and ultimate evil can help provide interpretive grist for them as they experience God's power in their lives.

4. Finally, helping Thai people deal with the disappointment of unanswered prayer is needed. The Thai worldview that looks to powerful spiritual beings of great merit who are still in *samsara* and can be supplicated for help with life's problems can set them up for disappointment when God does not answer prayer. When people with desperate problems hear about Jesus and their prayers are answered it starts their process towards faith. The back side of this is that there are also many people who experience the same thing and begin to move towards faith or make a full profession of faith, but upon experiencing unanswered prayer they begin to seek help from other spirit beings.

It is a spiritual version of what happens in social relations with patrons and clients; when the flow of benefits diminishes clients will seek new patrons. Developing theological resources to help people understand biblical prayer as based in relationship rather than the tit-for-tat of a transactional relationship where promises are made and fulfilled is critical. If the Christian faith is presented only in patron and client terms where Jesus becomes the big patron dispensing benefits, then it is too easy for new believers to simply move on when the benefits stop.

### **Conclusion**

Signs and wonders are absolutely necessary in the process of drawing people to faith in the Buddhist world but not sufficient in every case to bring people to a robust faith. When we understand the inherent ambiguity of works of power among people in the world religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam we can begin to add appropriate content and experiences to our evangelism and discipleship that will facilitate people to become Christ followers for the long haul.

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