

Is Jesus God Because He Did Miracles?

by Servetus the Evangelical

One thing that made Jesus famous was that he did miracles. The New Testament (NT) gospels frequently relate that he traveled about in his native land from town to town and village to village healing people. And they provide many detailed reports in which he did so. Multitudes of people, sometimes numbering in the thousands, gathered to hear Jesus utter his pearls of wisdom and perform his mighty feats of healing.

Many traditionalist Christians—those who believe that Jesus is God—have thought that Jesus’ miracles testify that he was and is God. Robert M. Bowman Jr. and J. Ed Komoszewski assert, “The complete and total command that Christ exhibits over the natural realm in his miracles reveals his deity.” They add, “The gospel writers themselves interpret Jesus’ miracles as evidence that he is God.” But some of these traditionalists seem to have overlooked that the Old Testament (OT) prophets and Jesus’ apostles did miracles too. If Jesus was God merely because he performed miracles, those prophets and apostles must have been Gods as well, which is absurd.

Non-traditionalist and distinguished Jesus researcher E.P. Sanders explains, “A lot of Christians, and possibly even more non-Christians, think that central to Christianity is the view that Jesus could perform miracles because he was more than a mere human being.... Like other ancient people, Jews believed in miracles but did not think that the ability to perform them proved exalted status.... Historically, it is an error to think that Christians must believe that Jesus was superhuman, and also an error to think that in Jesus’ own day his miracles were taken as proving partial or full divinity.” Indeed, Jewish religious authorities never doubted that Jesus did miracles; rather, they accused him of doing them in the power of Satan (Matthew 12.22-24/Mark 3.22).

Some distinguished traditionalist scholars agree with Sanders. D.A. Carson admits, “the value of miracles as proof of Jesus’ deity is not so conclusive as some conservative expositors have thought.” N.T. Wright states it more decisively, that Jesus’ miracles were “certainly not in themselves indications or hints that Jesus was ‘divine.’”

Jesus’ miracles merely attest to God empowering him. The Apostle Peter preached his first sermon to thousands of Jews gathered at Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, saying, “Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know ...” (Acts 2.22). And Peter later preached to the house of Cornelius, saying, “You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him, with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good, and healing all who were oppressed by the devil; for God was with Him” (10.38).

Here are some of the strongest statements in the Bible indicating that Jesus was not God but that he was empowered by God. And notice in these two statements how Peter clearly distinguishes Jesus and God, which signifies that Jesus is not God.

Jesus could not heal indiscriminately, which also indicates he was not God. Instead, his power to heal depended to some degree on the faith of the beneficiary, which in turn was undoubtedly determined by whether God would heal or not heal through Jesus.

For instance, one Sabbath day Jesus taught in his hometown synagogue of Nazareth. Mark says, “He could do no miracle there except that He laid His hands upon a few sick people and healed them. And He wondered at their unbelief” (Mark 6.5-6).

Sometimes, Jesus healed people and told them, “your faith has made you well” (Matthew 9.22/Mark 5.34/Luke 8.48; Mark 10.52/Luke 18.42).

If Jesus was God, he could have healed anytime he wanted. But he always depended on God’s Spirit to heal through him (Acts 2.22; 10.38). So, Jesus’ power to heal was not intrinsic to himself but derived from God, which indicates he was not God.

James Dunn explains about Jesus’ healings, “Faith was the necessary complement to the exercise of God’s power through him, hence his inability to perform any mighty work in Nazareth ... Faith in the recipient as it were completed the circuit so that the power could flow,” that is, the power of God’s Spirit flowing through Jesus to others.

Once, Jesus taught in an overcrowded house. Four friends of a paralytic man carried him on his bed and let him down through the roof of the house. Luke says, “the power of the Lord was present for Him [Jesus] to perform healing” on this man (Luke 5.17). It was due to Jesus “seeing their faith” (v. 20), that is, the faith of the man and his friends. Luke’s account suggests that the power to heal was not always present in Jesus.

Matthew’s account of this incident relates that Jesus’ authority to heal was not intrinsic to himself, but derived from God (the Father). He says that “when the multitudes saw this, they were filled with awe, and glorified God, who had given such authority to men” (Matthew 9.8). So, Matthew says they did not think Jesus was God on account of this healing, but that God had given Jesus the authority to heal. These people glorified God because they rightly perceived that he ultimately had caused it to happen.

A similar situation arose when Jesus cast a legion of demons out of a man. Jesus then commanded him, “Return to your house and describe what great things God has done for you” (Luke 8.39). But Luke says he “went away, proclaiming throughout the whole city what great things Jesus had done for him.” Does this mean Jesus was God? Euthymius Zigabenus is no doubt right in explaining, “Christ indeed modestly attributed the work to the Father; but the healed man continued gratefully to attribute it to Christ.”

In sum, Jesus’ miracles never attested that he was God but that he was sent by God, acted for God, and was empowered by God, so that God was with him.