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# *Covenant Reformed News*

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## **Christ's Command Not to Tell**

A reader from Uganda writes, "A friend asked me, Why did Christ always tell those whom He healed not to tell anyone who healed them, yet we are commanded to testify about Him? Could you please explain?"

This is an interesting question for it brings up an important aspect of our Lord's miracles of healing.

But it might be well, first of all (and this fact has some bearing on the answer to the question), to note that Jesus did not always command those whom He healed to be silent and tell no one what He had done for them. This was only true on some occasions.

The answer to this question has to do with the reason why the Lord performed miracles. The Lord did not perform miracles for the mere sake of performing them—as, for example, the Pentecostals do. The "miracles" of Pentecostals are mere "show case" miracles of no significance or value, done in an arbitrary and purposeless manner. The Lord did not perform miracles in this way. Probably the clearest instruction on why the Lord performed miracles is found in John 5. Jesus had healed a man at the pool of Bethesda. The man was lying in one of the porches, waiting to enter the water when an angel came to stir the water. (I might mention, in passing, that higher critics omit John 5:3b-4 from the Scriptures, and the NIV and other translations do the same. But this is a mistake. The textual evidence for its retention is strong, but it consists of manuscripts that higher critics wrongly denigrate.)

The man was unable to get into the water because of his paralysis, and others could get into the pool faster than he, and only the first one in the water was healed. There were many such people at the pool, but the Lord Jesus healed only one of them. That is striking.

The Jews charged the Lord with sin, because He had healed this man at Bethesda on the Sabbath. Christ's defence of His actions is not only a justification for that miracle on that Sabbath but also an explanation of why He did all His miracles. It is a powerful explanation and worthy reading for all those who have no real understanding of the necessity of miracles.

Let me explain. The Lord came into the world to do the work of His Father, which was to accomplish salvation for all the elect whom God had chosen from eternity to be His church (Eph. 1:4). When Jesus testified that the (Old Testament) Scriptures witness of His divinity and the reason for His coming in our flesh, the Scriptures were not then complete, for the New Testament was not yet written. It was true then as it is true now: "The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is in the New revealed." Or, perhaps more accurately, "The New is in the Old

contained; the Old is in the New explained.”

The work of Christ and the gospel He preached could not be completely and clearly explained and tested by the people who heard Him because they had no complete Scriptures. And so miracles were necessary to substantiate the truths of the gospel that Christ preached.

Miracles witnessed to the truth of the gospel, because they were signs of that truth. All sicknesses and diseases are the result of sin, but each disease pointed to a specific result of sin. Blindness was a picture of our spiritual inability to see the kingdom of Christ (John 3:3; 9:39-41). Demon possession was a picture of the complete dominion of Satan in our lives. And so I could go on.

Healing all these illnesses were signs that accompanied the preaching of the Lord and illustrated the truth of the gospel. Christ came to deliver us from the power of Satan and heal all our diseases—spiritual and physical (Ps. 103:3). When the Scriptures were completed, the need for miracles also ceased. The Scriptures, now completed, testify of the truth of the gospel.

But just as the gospel is preached in the audience of elect and reprobate, so also miracles were performed on true people of God and on those who never believed. The miracle of the healing of the ten lepers, for example, showed that only one of the lepers returned to give glory to God—and he was a Samaritan. When Jesus fed the 5,000, while this was not a miracle of healing, it was a sign that Jesus is the true Bread of Life (John 6). But all were not elect by any means, for the majority, when Jesus refused to be an earthly king, forsook Him.

Many unbelieving people simply saw in Jesus a miracle worker and did not understand that He was the Son of God, sent into the world for the redemption of the church. Christ did not want unbelievers spreading abroad the miracle He had performed on them, for their description of the miracle would be totally concentrated on the miracle itself and not on the gospel of which the miracle was only a sign. Many disobeyed the Lord, as Scripture tells us, but that does not refute the point.

So the Pentecostals do the same. People come for the miracle itself and not at all for the gospel of salvation. They are like the nine ungrateful lepers.

We need miracles no longer, for we have the full Scriptures. And the Scriptures are sufficient. The rich man in hell wanted a miracle to convince his brothers of the reality of hell, but the words of Abraham are decisive for all time: “They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.” Again, when the rich man contradicted Abraham, this testimony is repeated and enforced: “If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead” (Luke 16:30-31). *Prof. Hanko*

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### **“Common Operations of the Spirit”**

Sometimes people appeal to the “common operations of the Spirit” in *Westminster Confession* 10:4 (and *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. & A. 68) as if this phrase in the *Westminster Standards* taught common grace. The erroneous notion of common grace is

variously understood. For most who hold this view, it means that Jehovah loves the reprobate (those whom He has eternally ordained to destruction in the way of their sins) and that by His love He makes them something less than totally depraved, thus enabling them to do things ethically good in God's sight in this world.

Aside from the polemical aspect of the issue, it is worthwhile to underscore that the Holy Spirit certainly does work upon unbelievers, not just externally but also internally. This necessarily flows from the universal scope of God's providence and the truth of the Holy Trinity, that the Father works all things through the Son and by the Holy Spirit.

We can distinguish three ways in which the Spirit works upon and in all men, including the reprobate. First, the Spirit (being equal with the Father and the Son) gives all men (including reprobate unbelievers) *physical* life and strength, for it is only in God—the Triune God—that we, both elect and non-elect, “live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Second, God by His Spirit gives the reprobate *intellectual* understanding of natural things, for the good gift of knowledge in all spheres (reading, writing, cooking, farming, construction, medicine, etc.) comes from the God of all wisdom through His Son, the Word or Logos, and by the all-knowing Spirit. Third, the Spirit even gives the reprobate a *natural* understanding of spiritual things (though not a *spiritual* understanding of spiritual things). Those not elected who are brought up in covenant homes or attend church services or read Christian literature may have some intellectual understanding of biblical truths. This cannot be apart from the Holy Spirit, for all knowledge comes by Him.

In the sphere of the visible church, the understanding of some reprobate can even be said to be “enlightened” by the Spirit, so that they have a *clear* natural understanding of spiritual things (Heb. 6:4) and a sense or “taste” of the beauty of the Scriptures, the glory of heaven and the power of God (4-5). The ungodly prophet Balaam (II Pet. 2:15-16) certainly experienced this, as one can see from his four prophecies concerning Israel (Num. 23:7-10, 18-24; 24:3-9, 15-24) and especially certain parts of them (e.g., 23:10, 23; 24:5, 9, 17, 23), for he “knew the knowledge of the most High” (24:16) and spoke by “the spirit of God” (2). Through the preaching, the Spirit even gives some non-elect “joy” in their natural understanding of spiritual things, before they fall away from their (hypocritical) profession of faith (Matt. 13:20-21). After all, it is only through the Spirit that unbelievers experience (an earthly) joy in the pleasant things of God's creation like a beautiful sunset or a good meal or finally grasping a difficult concept. Even so, it is the Spirit who gives some reprobate a natural understanding of spiritual things and a (temporary) natural joy in spiritual things. Moreover, reprobate unbelievers, such as Judas Iscariot, were given power to exorcise demons (7:22; 10:1, 4) of the Father, through the Son and by the Holy Spirit (10:1; 12:28).

In connection with the three proof texts often listed with *Westminster Confession* 10:4, we note, first, that those who merely receive the “common operations of the Spirit,” such as, a natural illumination in, and a natural taste of, spiritual things in Hebrews 6:4-5 are subject to God's “cursing” (8), which is His powerful, damning wrath (Matt. 25:41). Second, sandwiched between the parable of the sower (13:3-9) and its explanation (18-23), including its word about those who experience natural joy over the mysteries of the kingdom for a time (20-21), is Christ's affirmation of God's election and reprobation as determining man's response to the gospel (14-

15; cf. Isa. 6:9-10; John 12:39-40). Third, to those not elected to salvation who have uttered prophecies, exorcised demons and performed miracles (Matt. 7:22), the Lord states that He will say, "I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (23). Since Christ, the incarnate Son of God, knows all men head for head intellectually, and must know everybody in order to proclaim this judgment upon many at the last day, "I never knew you" refers to His knowledge of love: "I never loved you, not now, not before the foundation of the world, not during your life on earth, never!" Thus all these good gifts to the reprobate come to them not in God's love and grace (Ps. 73; Prov. 3:33; Rom. 9:13; 11:7-10) but by His sovereign, all-controlling providence, which is of the Father, through the Son and by the Holy Spirit.

These "operations of the Spirit" are "common" to the elect and the reprobate in that some elect and some reprobate have performed miracles (Matt. 7:22) and all elect and some reprobate have been enlightened and given joy in, and a taste of, the mysteries of the gospel by the Spirit (13:20; Heb. 6:4-5). There are especially three differences, however, with regard to the "operations of the Spirit" in the elect and the non-elect. First, the Spirit gives to some reprobate a *natural* understanding, joy and taste of or in spiritual things, whereas the elect receive a *spiritual* understanding, joy and taste of or in spiritual things (John 17:13; I Cor. 2:14). Second, the "operations of the Spirit" come to the two groups of people with a different divine motivation and in a different way: the elect receive them in God's grace but the reprobate receive them in providence and not grace. Third, both *Westminster Confession* 10:4 and *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. & A. 68, speak of "*some common operations of the Spirit*," for there are operations and gifts of the Spirit—the greatest, permanent and saving gifts!—which are only for the elect and not the reprobate: the new birth, the forgiveness of sins, the imputed righteousness of Christ, the love of God shed abroad in our hearts (Rom. 5:5), the assurance of Jehovah's invincible love (8:37-39), etc. Amongst these "operations of the Spirit" which are particular to the elect alone is the effectual call, the subject of *Westminster Confession* 10:4: "Others not elected, although they may be [externally] called by the ministry of the word, and may have some common operations of the Spirit, yet they never truly come unto Christ, and therefore cannot be saved," for they were not eternally predestinated unto life and so the Holy Spirit never internally and effectually calls them. *Rev. A. Stewart*