

# THE HANDS OF THE APOSTLES

BY JAMES E. SMITH

**INTRODUCTION:** The most important office in the New Testament church is that of Apostle (1 Cor. 12:28). Failure to appreciate the unique role and function of the Apostles has resulted in religious confusion and false teaching. By way of introduction to this study, four important facts about the Apostles should be noted:

- A. The Apostles Received a Special Call From the Lord. They were chosen and set apart for this work by Christ Himself (Luke 6:13; Gal. 1:1). Only those who had been eyewitnesses of the resurrection of Jesus were qualified for this office (John 15:27; Acts 1:21, 72).
- B. The Apostles Were Delegated Special Authority. Jesus gave to the Twelve Apostles "the keys to the kingdom". They would be responsible for setting forth the terms of entrance into the Kingdom. All commandments that they bound upon men would be bound in heaven. In other words, they would speak with the authority of God (Matt. 16:19; 18:18). Jesus said that these Apostles would sit on twelve thrones ruling over the tribes of Israel (Matt 19:28). By "Israel" Jesus is probably referring to His kingdom, the new Israel of God (Gal. 6:16). The authority of the Apostles in the church is further seen in the discipline that the Apostle Paul exercised over the members of the Church at Corinth (1 Cor. 5:3-6).
- C. The Apostles Were Endowed with Special Guidance. Jesus promised that His Apostles would be aided in remembering the teaching that He had given to them during His earthly ministry (John 14:2f). The Holy Spirit would also guide the Apostles into new truth (John 16:13, 14). See also 1 Cor 2:6-16.
- D. The Apostles Were Given Special Power. Just before His ascension, Jesus told the Apostles that they should tarry in Jerusalem until they received power from on high (Acts 1:4, 8). Ten days later on the Jewish feast of Pentecost, there came a rushing as of a mighty wind. Cloven tongues of fire descended and rested over the heads of the Apostles and these twelve men began to speak in languages that they had never before studied (Acts 2:1ff). The Book of Acts abounds with examples of apostolic power. In his second epistle to the Corinthians, Paul alluded to "the signs of an Apostle" (2 Cor. 12:12). Apparently the Apostles possessed miraculous power that clearly distinguished them from other Christians of the first century.

All that has been said to this point is generally accepted by Bible-believing Christians. So what is the point? What bearing does the correct understanding of the apostolic office have on the question of modern-day miraculous gifts?

It becomes clear as one reads the history of the early church that **ONLY THE APOSTLES AND THOSE UPON WHOM THEY LAID THEIR HANDS COULD PERFORM WONDERS, MIRACLES, AND SIGNS IN NEW TESTAMENT TIMES.**

## I. BY THE HANDS OF THE APOSTLES MIRACLES WERE PERFORMED

- A. Who did the miracles in the earliest days of the church? The answer is clear if one will study carefully the first five chapters of Acts. Concerning the situation in the early Church immediately following that first Pentecost, the sacred writer says: ***And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles*** (Acts 2:43). 1901 American Standard Version, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.) 1994.

Acts 3 contains an example of the kind of wonders and signs being performed by the Apostles. Peter and John met a lame man at the gate of the Temple. In response to the begging of this man Peter said: ***Silver and gold have I none; but what I have, that give I thee. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk*** (Acts 3:6). It should be noted here that Peter did not hold a prayer service for this man. Apostles never prayed over sick folks. They commanded them in the name of Jesus to arise. God does answer prayer in reference to the healing of the body; but that is altogether different from the authoritative, instantaneous and miraculous healing performed by the Apostles. The narrative of the lame man continues: ***And he took him by the right hand, and raised him up: and immediately his feet and his ankle-bones received strength. 8 And leaping up, he stood, and began to walk; and he entered with them into the temple, walking, and leaping, and praising God*** (Acts 3:7-8).

The healings performed by the Apostles do not appear to have depended on faith of the recipient, or prayer on the part of the agent. THE APOSTLE COULD AND DID PERFORM INSTANTANEOUS HEALING MIRACLES BY VIRTUE OF THE POWER VESTED IN THEIR APOSTOLIC OFFICE.

Acts 4 contains a prayer for miracles. In the face of threats by their Enemies, the Christians prayed for two things: ***And now, Lord, look upon their threats: and grant unto your servants to speak your word with all boldness, 30 while you stretch forth your hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of your holy Servant Jesus*** (Acts 4:29-30). This prayer for boldness to preach the word and miracles to confirm that word was immediately answered. The Christians began to speak the word of God with boldness (4:31). That God also answered the prayer as regards signs and wonders is indicated in the following words: ***And with great power gave the apostles their witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all*** (Acts 4:33).

Not a single example of a non-Apostle performing miracles can be found in the first four chapters of Acts. Who did the miracles in the earliest days of the Church? The Apostles!

- B. Five years into the history of the church, who did the miracles? New Testament scholars believe that the events recorded in Acts 5 transpired in about the fifth year of the history of the infant church. A husband and wife sold some property and pretended to

donate the entire amount to the Lord. They blatantly fled to the Apostles and thereby to the Holy Spirit. Both dropped dead at the feet of Peter. Here again one can see the tremendous power that God invested in His Apostles.

The inspired author of Acts seems to go out of his way to stress that in the fifth year of Church history the miracles were still being performed by the Apostles: *And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people* (Acts 5:12). The sick were being laid in the streets so that the shadow of Peter might possibly overshadow them (Acts 5:15). The multitudes could see that the Apostles had tremendous God-given power; but in the first five years of church history there is not a single example of a non-Apostle who performed a miracle!

- C. Paul also demonstrated the signs of an Apostle. Because some question Paul's apostolic credentials, it is perhaps appropriate here to pause in this chronological survey of Acts to note that Paul certainly possessed the same power as the original Twelve. Luke relates that *God wrought special miracles by the hands of Paul: 12 inasmuch that unto the sick were carried away from his body handkerchiefs or aprons, and the evil spirits went out* (Acts 19:11-12).

## II. BY THE HANDS OF THE APOSTLES THE DEAD WERE RAISED.

The most spectacular demonstration of divine power is the conquest of death itself. When Tabitha (Dorcas), a faithful Christian, died, the brethren sent immediately for Peter. By the time the Apostle arrived, the disciples had washed her body in preparation for burial. Upon his arrival, Peter requested the mourners to leave him alone with the corpse. The Apostle then prayed. While the Apostles never prayed before they performed healing miracles, prayer regularly preceded resurrections (cf. 1 Kings 17:19-22, John 11:41-42). After his prayer, Peter took the hand of Tabitha and bade her to arise. He then presented her alive to the brethren (Acts 9:36-42).

The Apostle Paul had a similar experience during his farewell visit to Troas. While he was preaching late at night, a young man fell from his perch in a window and "was taken up dead". However, Paul embraced the lad and said, "Trouble not yourselves: for his life is in him" (Acts 20:10). The lad was restored to life.

## III. BY THE HANDS OF THE APOSTLES OTHER CHRISTIANS RECEIVED MIRACULOUS POWERS.

Six specific examples can be cited in the New Testament where the Apostles laid their hands on other Christians and transmitted to them supernatural power.

- A. The Case of Stephen (Acts 6:1-8). The Apostles directed the Jerusalem Christians to select seven men to oversee the distribution of food to the needy widows. The seven men were placed before the Apostles, *and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them* (Acts 6:6). One of those so honored was Stephen. Two verses after the statement that Stephen received the laying on of the Apostles' hands, the sacred

historian writes: *And Stephen, full of grace and power, wrought great wonders and signs among the people* (Acts 6:8).

Stephen is the first Christian other than an Apostle specifically said to have performed miracles. Is there significance in the fact that in the first five chapters of Acts no non-Apostle ever performed a miracle? Is it mere coincidence that immediately after Stephen received the laying of the Apostles' hands he began to perform miracles? Or is the Holy Spirit through the Word attempting to indicate here the method by which God distributed special gifts to Christians in the first century?

- B. The Case of Philip (Acts 8). The account of Stephen's ministry and martyrdom is found in Acts 7. Then in Acts 8 the attention shifts to Philip, another of those seven upon whom the Apostles had laid their hands (Acts 6:5-6). When forced by persecution to depart from Jerusalem, Philip began to evangelize Samaria. The sacred record states: *And the multitudes gave heed with one accord unto the things that were spoken by Philip, when they heard, and saw the signs that he did. 7 For from many of those that had unclean spirits, they came out, crying with a loud voice: and many that were palsied, and that were lame, were healed* (Acts 8:6-7).

The most notable convert during the Samaria campaign was Simon the sorcerer who for years had beguiled the populace with his witchcraft. The account of this conversion reads as follows: *And Simon also himself believed: and being baptized, he continued with Philip; and beholding signs and great miracles wrought, he was amazed* (Acts 8:13). When did Philip get the power to perform miracles? At the same time Stephen got his power, when the Apostles laid their hands on his head and prayed over him. What other conclusion is possible in the light of the evidence thus far presented?

- C. The Case of the Samaritans (Acts 8:14-20). When the Apostles in Jerusalem heard of the phenomenal success of Philip in Samaria, they dispatched Peter and John to go to Samaria to assist in the effort. In what way did the two apostles assist Philip? *...who, when they were come down, prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Spirit: 16 for as yet it was fallen upon none of them: only they had been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus* (Acts 8:15-16). The situation is clear. The new Samaritan Christians had been baptized with Christian baptism, and presumably had thereby received the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). However, the Spirit had not yet "fallen" upon them, i.e., they had not yet received any miraculous manifestation of the Holy Spirit. The Apostles were able to remedy this situation: *Then laid they their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit* (Acts 8:17). The receiving of the Holy Spirit here must be equivalent to the falling of the Spirit alluded to in the preceding verse. AGAIN IT IS CLEAR THAT THE MIRACULOUS GIFT OF THE SPIRIT WAS TRANSMITTED THROUGH THE LAYING ON OF THE APOSTLES' HANDS.

- D. The Case of the Twelve Disciples at Ephesus (Acts 19:1-7). During his missionary travels, Paul came upon some disciples of John the Baptist at Ephesus. These men

had not even heard about the Holy Spirit. Paul carefully explained to them the difference between Christian baptism and the baptism of John the Baptist. The record then states: *And when they heard this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. 6 And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them; and they spoke with tongues, and prophesied* (Acts 19:6). Here again the record is clear. The miraculous gift of the Holy Spirit (and consequent miraculous manifestations) was transmitted by the laying on of the hands of the Apostles.

- E. The Case of the Roman Christians (Rom 1:11). In the opening verses of his letter to the Romans, Paul expressed his desire to come to Rome to impart some spiritual gift to these new Christians: *For I long to see you, that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end you may be established;* (Rom 1:11). It is interesting here to note that Paul could not merely pray for these Christians to receive the spiritual gift; nor does he encourage the Romans to pray that they might be endowed with such a gift. The Apostle had to be there in person to transmit the gift to them.
- F. The Case of Timothy : *For which cause I put thee in remembrance that thou stir up the gift of God, which is in thee through the laying on of my hands* (2 Tim 1:6) Here some special gift had been given to Timothy through the laying of the hands of the Apostle Paul. This gift was likely some special miraculous power that Paul gave Timothy to aid him in his ministry.

In the five cases stated above, the Scriptures make clear that the miraculous gifts of the Spirit were given to Christians through the laying on of the Apostles' hands. This is a Bible doctrine referred to in Hebrews 6:2. Only through the Apostles could Christians receive the miraculous gifts. Now, since there are no Apostles in the church today--and since no one today could ever meet the Biblical requirements of Apostleship--NO PERSON TODAY CAN POSSIBLY POSSESS THE BIBLICAL GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT.

- G. But what about Cornelius? At first glance, it appears that the episode in Acts 10 contradicts the conclusion just reached. The account states: *While Peter yet spoke these words, the Holy Spirit fell on all them that heard the word. 45 And they of the circumcision that believed were amazed, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Spirit. 46 For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God. Then answered Peter, 47 Can any man forbid the water, that these should not be baptized, who have received the Holy Spirit as well as we? 48 And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then prayed they him to tarry certain days* (Acts 10:44-48).

That the episode in the house of Cornelius was unusual in the early church is made clear. In Acts 11, Peter recounts to the church leaders the events surrounding the baptism of Cornelius. He says: *And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them, even as on us at the beginning. 16 And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized in the Holy Spirit. 17 If then God gave unto them the like gift as he did also unto us, when we believed on*

*the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I, that I could withstand God? 18 And when they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then to the Gentiles also hath God granted repentance unto life (Acts 11:15-18).*

It is important to note that Peter compared the Cornelius incident to what had transpired at Pentecost eight to ten years earlier. If it was common that the Holy Spirit fell directly from heaven on the first century Christians, why does Peter liken this episode to the Pentecost experience when the Apostles received the Spirit directly from heaven? Why does he link the Cornelius episode to the prediction of John the Baptist--which prediction is also connected to the episode in Acts 2 (see Acts 1:5)? There can be only one reasonable conclusion. The Cornelius episode was unusual. Nothing like that happened since Pentecost.

But why did God overwhelm Cornelius with the Holy Spirit even before he had committed himself to Christ in Christian baptism? The answer is simple. Even though Jesus had commissioned His disciples to go unto all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature, a decade had elapsed and not a single Gentile had been evangelized. It was necessary that God dramatically demonstrated to the Jewish leaders of the church that Gentiles were proper candidates for baptism and admission to the body of Christ. Peter immediately came to this conclusion upon witnessing Cornelius and his household praising God in foreign languages. When the leadership of the church in Jerusalem heard of what happened to Cornelius, they too immediately reached the conclusion that Gentiles were from this point forward to be evangelized (Acts 11:18).

The old saying that the exception proves the rule is certainly applicable here. Cornelius received a baptism of the Holy Spirit directly from heaven before he became a Christian. This was an exception to the rule that men in the first century normally received special miraculous gifts of the Spirit after they became Christians through the laying on of the hands of the Apostles. New Testament Christians were never told to pray for miraculous gifts of the Spirit. Speaking in tongues is never said in the New Testament to be an evidence that one is a Christian or that one has the indwelling gift of the Spirit.

- H. But what about Ananias? (Acts 9:10-18)? It is sometimes alleged that Ananias, a Christian who lived in Damascus, transmitted to Saul of Tarsus the gift of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands. If this conclusion is valid, the thesis of this paper would be refuted. But what says the Scriptures? *And Ananias departed, and entered into the house; and laying his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, who appeared unto you in the way in which you came, has sent me, that you may receive your sight, and be filled with the Holy Spirit. 18 And straightway there fell from his eyes as it were scales, and he received his sight; and he arose and was baptized;* (Acts 9:17-18).

Here Ananias states two reasons for having come to Saul: (1) that he might have his sight restored; and (2) that he might be filled with the Holy Spirit. Ananias did two things

for Paul: (1) He laid his hands on him; and (2) he baptized him. Ananias must have been a leader in the early church who had received miraculous powers from the laying of the Apostles' hands. As a consequence, through the laying on of his hands, miraculous healings could take place. After the healing took place Ananias baptized Saul so that he might receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38) and thereby be filled with the Spirit. No miraculous signs (e.g., speaking in tongues) accompanied the laying on of hands by Ananias. The phrase *filled with the Holy Spirit* does not necessarily refer to the supernatural falling of the Spirit (Acts 8:16), but rather is a general term by which any measure of the influence of the Holy Spirit in one's life is indicated. Frequently, the filling of the Spirit is connected with boldness in proclaiming the Word of God (see Acts 2:4; 4:8, 31; 13:9).

#### IV. MODERN-DAY "MIRACLES"?

When people step forward and claim to possess miraculous gifts of the Spirit, they should immediately be asked what Apostle conferred this gift upon them. Much strange behavior today is attributed to the influence of the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit has indicated in the written word that genuine, God-given supernatural powers were communicated only through the hands of the Apostles. A Bible believing Christian who evaluates all religious claims in the light of the infallible word can only conclude that the strange manifestations being observed in some quarters today are (1) a delusion of the devil (see Rev. 13:14; 16:14; 19:20; 2 Thess 2:9); (2) a psychological delusion; or (3) a deliberate fabrication.

The question of course, is not what God can do, but what He has said He will do. God has made it plain to those who will study carefully the Word that miraculous gifts were to be transmitted through the laying on of the hands of the Apostles.

<b>TWO WAYS GOD HEALS</b>		
	<b>When God Heals <i>Miraculously</i></b>	<b>When God Heals <i>Providentially</i></b>
<b>1. Timing:</b>	<b>Instant</b>	<b>Gradual</b>
<b>2. Method:</b>	<b>Spoken Word/ Touch</b>	<b>Prayer</b>
<b>3. Result:</b>	<b>Always Successful</b>	<b>According to God's Will</b>
<b>4. Purpose:</b>	<b>To Authenticate a Message or Messenger</b>	<b>To Show God's Mercy and Concern</b>