

Acts

Acts 5:12-42 - Has the Holy Spirit changed?

In **Acts 5:12**, "The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders," which has often raised the question, "Does God still do signs and wonders today, and if not, why not?" Well, the rest of Acts Chapter 5 offers clues that may help answer that question.

The first clue is in **verse 13**, that "No one else dared join them" - "them" being the "believers meeting together in Solomon's Colonnade" (verse 12). But people weren't scared off because the believers were weird or religious kooks.

Quite the opposite; the believers were "**highly regarded**" (verse 13) - which tells us how extraordinary they appeared to people, and how refreshingly different they were to the prevailing culture. And the apostles really stood out as people to be reckoned with too, with their amazing power to do miracles - and their ability to expose pretenders and fakes like Ananias and Sapphira, with devastating consequences (verses 3 and 10).

Our first clue, then, is that **the Holy Spirit is all for making the church stand out and command respect**. And when there are believers who actually believe that - beautifully displayed in the believers' prayer in the previous chapter (4:24-30) - it led to "more and more men and women believing in the (resurrected) Lord," **verse 14**, adding many thousands more to the "five thousand" in Acts 4:4.

So in asking the question, "Does God still do those kinds of signs and wonders today, and if not, why not?" - could the "why not" be explained by the church today not cottoning on from Acts 4 and 5 **what the Holy Spirit could make us into, if we believed it?**

Or has the Holy Spirit changed, and wants us blending in with the culture now, to be acceptable - rather than us being **held in high regard and commanding deep respect** for being refreshingly different and unafraid of cultural peer pressure, as well as powerful in both miracles of healing and insight into fakes and pretenders? Do we even scare people a bit, like the people who didn't "dare join" the believers in verse 13, as they see how easily we can see right through the culture, we aren't taken in by it, and we'll readily stand up against it - just as the church did in Acts 4?

I read Acts 4 and 5 in the context of what the Holy Spirit does in a church with “believers” in it - believers, that is, who believe what Jesus gave the Holy Spirit to the church for. Jesus wants the church to give visible witness to him being alive and continuing his ministry of power and healing, to reveal his heart and mind. Because what that does is **draw more people to him for healing**, as we see in **Acts 5:15-16**.

In **verse 16**, “Crowds gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed.” Some even laid out their sick in the streets, believing that Peter’s shadow passing over them would be enough to heal them (verse 15). It doesn’t say if such “shadow healing” actually happened, but it does tell us the kind of impact the church was having, and was meant to have.

So in answering why the church isn’t experiencing miracles like it did in the first century, is it because we don’t expect or believe the Holy Spirit works that way today as well? **But Jesus said it would**. He predicted in Acts 1:8 that the same power displayed by the apostles in Jerusalem would go “to the ends of the earth” as well - and for exactly the same purpose, to witness to Jesus’ continuing ministry of miraculously healing people.

So why should we expect less of the Holy Spirit today? Is it because people aren’t being healed physically like they were in Jesus’ day? Well, that’s hardly an excuse, because Jesus said we’d be doing “**greater**” miracles than he did. And what he meant by that soon became apparent right after the Holy Spirit came, when Peter said in **Acts 2:40**, “**Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.**” Meaning that from now on people had the power to break free of all the nutty and rotten attitudes in the prevailing culture that destroy lives and relationships. So instead of endlessly trying to deal with the **symptoms** of mental illness and stress, like the world does, we can get right at the **causes** and totally eliminate them. And has that changed? No, the Spirit is always at work doing that, so that in heart and mind we humans become more and more like Jesus (2 Corinthians 3:18).

And have we not experienced that miracle in our own lives too? If not, why not? Is it because of ignorance or unbelief? Is it because we’ve never actually realized what the Holy Spirit has been given to us for, or is it because we don’t believe the Holy Spirit is the same today as he was in the first century? And I ask myself that too, because Jesus’ biggest problem with his disciples was getting them to believe. In **Mark 16:14** he even had to “rebuke them for their lack of faith and stubborn refusal to believe,” but how thrilled he was in **John 16:31**, when he was able to say to them, “You believe at last!”

It's interesting, then, that before the disciples were called Christians they were called "**believers**," because they believed what Jesus said would happen in Acts 1:8, that the Holy Spirit would come in power and do really dramatic things. And here already it was happening, as thousands came to the church to be healed in Acts 5:16 - physically to begin with in these early stages of the church, but even **greater healing of mind and heart** was the ultimate intent.

And the church was so effective in healing people, that others, especially in the religious establishment, were "filled with jealousy," **Acts 5:17**. And there's our second clue as to the impact the church is meant to have. It really creates resistance, because the church is able to do what religion and the world can't do. Hurting, broken people - who can't find the help they so desperately need from anything the world or religion have to offer - find it in the one place on earth that promised such healing to anyone who asked, because that's what Jesus set up the church and the Holy Spirit for.

And has that changed since? No, because Revelation 21 and 22 tell us the Holy Spirit and Jesus' bride, the church, will still be offering healing to broken people, even in the new Jerusalem. Because God's goal is no more tears and sorrow and no more broken lives corrupted by evil, which he started with Jesus in the gospels and has continued through the Spirit-filled church ever since.

The only hindrance to that is the church, just like Jesus' original disciples, not believing it. "Ah but," we cry, "the world gets real nasty if we dare preach Jesus as the only solution to the world's ills. Our voice is stifled. We're scoffed at, isolated, picked on and accused falsely, and our family could turn on us too. We may even be thrown in jail, and what good can we do then?"

But jail, **verse 18**, is where the apostles ended up too - "But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out," so that, **verse 19**, "they could stand in the temple courts and tell the people the full message of this new life." Notice what the message was about? The "**new life in full**" that Jesus was making possible. A wonderful, miraculous new life being healed of the sorrow and tears caused by evil.

So "At daybreak," **verse 21**, the apostles "entered the temple courts, as they'd been told, and began to teach the people." Meanwhile, the entire Jewish religious establishment had gathered in hasty session, and when ready they sent officers to fetch the apostles. When the officers returned, however, they reported that "the jail was securely locked, with the guards still standing at the doors, but on opening the doors we found no one inside," **verse 23**.

Someone then reported having seen the apostles teaching people at the temple, but, amazingly, no one questioned how on earth they'd managed to escape from a locked and guarded jail cell unnoticed. Jealousy had so blinded the Jewish leaders that on summoning the apostles their only thought was to stop the apostles "filling Jerusalem with their teaching about Jesus," and blaming them, the elders of Israel, for Jesus' death (verses 27-28).

Peter replies: "But we must obey God rather than men," verse 29. And by "obeying God" Peter meant teaching that Jesus had been raised by God "to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour, that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel," verses 30-31. And among those in Israel who believed that, the Holy Spirit would begin their healing to make them witnesses to Jesus being raised by God too (verse 32). What incredibly good news: the removal of all guilt over Jesus' death, and a new life, shaped and transformed by none other than the Holy Spirit.

The religious establishment, however, was having none of it. But what that did was horribly twist their minds - into even wanting to murder (verse 33). Remarkably, there was one man, Gamaliel, "a Pharisee" of all people (verse 34), who managed to tone down their murderous intent by saying if God wasn't behind the apostles they'd end up dead like Theudas and Judas the Galilean who'd led revolts too, but "if it is from God you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God," verse 39.

There was **no stopping the Holy Spirit**, in other words, because this was HIS work and power in operation here, fulfilling what Jesus had given the Spirit to the church for. And the apostles believed that, so they weren't scared off or intimidated one bit by the thirty nine lash flogging they got in verse 40. And so completely did they believe it that they "rejoiced at being counted worthy of suffering and disgrace," and "they **never stopped** teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ" sent by God to heal and restore (verses 41-42).

Has any of this changed? No. It's still the same Spirit in the church today, fulfilling the same purpose. How the Spirit does it may differ, like freeing the apostles from a locked **physical** jail cell, or in our case, freeing us from a locked **mental** jail cell, like bitterness or worry, or from impatience and anger. But the purpose is still the same, to make believers into effective witnesses to Jesus being raised from the dead by obvious miracles in our lives. And so obvious are those miracles that people who know us **hold us in "high regard"** too - even to the point of being a little scared perhaps, just like they were in verse 13, because of how wonderfully and unflinchingly different in heart and mind we are to our prevailing culture and its whacky ideas.