

## **Miracle-Working among African Seventh-day Adventists: Biblical Phenomenon?**

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*ABSTRACT—African SDA church has been skeptical of anything Pentecostal, especially miracle-working. Her attitude to miracle has been a suspicious one due to the fact that it is a frequent characterization of Pentecostalism. Belief in the impact of the supernatural on one's life is still alive among Africans and that they tend to seek spiritual protection from evil forces. This tradition-religious milieu should make African SDAs more prepared to appreciate and activate the victory of Jesus over the devil and his cohorts in their daily encounter of the evil one. However, this is not the case because she shares a doctrinal stance of prejudice against miracle-working of Pentecostals. It is mainly a question of identity versus biblical faith. Miracle-working is a biblical phenomenon and should be treated with religious sincerity.*

*Keywords: miracle-working, Pentecostalism, SDA*

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## I. Background to the Study

Miracle-working is one of the notable features of Pentecostalism (Bernard, 1999, p. 152; Pentecostalism, Wikipedia, 2010). As a Charismatic movement in Christianity, Pentecostalism is characterized by the personal experience of God through the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Bernard, 1999, pp. 22,64; Scarone, n.d., p. 8; Pentecostalism, Wikipedia, 2010). I am aware that as a religious movement, Pentecostalism is essentially different from Charismatic but certain faith elements are shared by both. It is believed that the infilling of the Spirit enables believers to exhibit the gift(s) of the Spirit. It is maintained that miracle-working is a gift of the Spirit and that not all believers can experience it (Pentecostalism, Wikipedia, 2010). This belief system has generally been well received by major Christian communities, namely, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Catholics and Methodist (ibid.). Geographically, Pentecostalism has been successful in Africa, Latin America and most part of Asia (Bernard, 1999, pp. 319-26; Scarone, n.d., pp. 11-12; Gitre, 2000). According to United Nation's report, it thrives among the poor (Gitre, 2000). Its membership, as well as theological beliefs, is surging in these areas, of which Africa is no exception. The Seventh-day Adventist (hereafter referred to as SDA) church does not openly exhibit any form of Pentecostalism influence, especially the belief in the baptism of the Spirit. In fact, on the issue of Speaking in tongues practiced by Charismatic movement, the SDA church, at large, has been skeptical (Pentecostalism, 2009; Morgan, 2003).

The SDA church actually expresses belief in spiritual gifts and their validity today ("Seventh-day Adventists believe" . . ., 2005, pp. 237-45). This means that miracle-working may be considered as such. In the *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, it sounds a caution:

While Seventh-day Adventists recognize the presence of spiritual gifts in the church as dispensed by the Holy Spirit for the advancement of the gospel throughout the world, guidance through the prophetic gift given to Ellen White has led them to be cautious about accepting a gift as 'genuine'. They understand that Satan has the power to produce and work through counterfeit gifts. Therefore, the position of the church is to examine closely each claim to a gift, testing it by God's word to determine whether the gift is from the Holy Spirit and

whether it produces the fruit of the Spirit” (Raoul, ed. 2000, p. 644. See also Neufeld, ed., 1966, vol. 10, pp. 675-676).

The SDA Encyclopedia adds that “Seventh-day Adventists do not believe the claims of the popular ‘faith healers’ are valid or that their methods are worthy of the name Christian or in harmony with the principles of faith healing set forth in Scripture. In view of the scriptural warning against (2 Thess. 2:9,10; Rev. 13:13,14), it is always well to test presumed cases of healing closely by the principles concerning faith healing set forth in Scripture” (Neufeld, ed., 1966, vol. 10, p. 676). This statement has to be balanced with the belief in the validity of faith healing today when coupled with sound Christ-like attitude. Also, in some ordinary instances, God does not use any supernatural means to tackle what human beings themselves can accomplish by natural means (ibid.). The reason for the caution may be that miracle-working has been the trademark of Pentecostal/Charismatic movement and the church does not want to be characterized as such (ibid). She wants to be distinct.

However, in 2005 the delegates of the SDA church at the General Conference session accepted the twenty-eighth fundamental belief “Growing in Christ”:

By His death on the cross Jesus triumphed over the forces of evil. He who subjugated the demonic spirits during His earthly ministry has broken their power and made certain their ultimate doom. Jesus’ victory gives us victory over the evil forces that still seek to control us, as we walk with Him in peace, joy, and assurance of His love. Now the Holy Spirit dwells within us and empowers us. Continually committed to Jesus as our Saviour and Lord, we are set free from the burden of our past deeds. No longer do we live in the darkness, fear of evil powers, ignorance, and meaninglessness of our former way of life. In this new freedom in Jesus, we are called to grow into the likeness of His character, communing with Him daily in prayer, feeding on His Word, meditating on it and on His providence, singing His praises, gathering together for worship, and participating in the mission of the church. As we give ourselves in loving service to those around us and in witnessing to His salvation, His constant presence with us through the Spirit transforms every moment and every task into a spiritual experience (Ps. 1:1, 2; 23:4; 77:11, 12; Col.

1:13, 14; 2:6, 14, 15; Luke 10:17-20; Eph. 5:19, 20; 6:12-18; 1 Thess. 5:23; 2 Peter 2:9; 3:18; 2 Cor. 3:17, 18; Phil. 3:7-14; 1 Thess. 5:16-18; Matt. 20:25-28; John 20:21; Gal. 5:22-25; Rom. 8:38, 39; 1 John 4:4; Heb 10:25) (Seventh-day Adventist Believe . . ., 2005, pp. 149-150).

This ‘new’ belief of the SDA church seems to partly serve as a prerequisite to sensitizing the church on the efficacy of the redemption experienced in Christ (Rodríguez, 2007). The belief indicates that Christ has not only saved humanity from the chains of sin but also the power of the demonic world. By this statement, “a life of spiritual warfare” is meant (Seventh-day Adventist Believe . . ., 2005, p.160). Having embraced themselves with well-tested armor, as prescribed by Paul in Eph 6:13-18, the believers can “grow in spiritual valor and win the warfare in which we are engaged” (p. 161). The first two lines of the doctrinal statement seem to underline the ever-miraculous potency of Jesus’ ministry that subjugated demonic spirits which are still militating against us. However, the exposition of the doctrinal statement seems to lack articulation with reference to how the Holy Spirit now empowers us to subjugate demonic forces. In his theological reflection on the statement, Angel Rodríguez observes that the operation of the gift of miracle-working is implied. He opines that the manifestation of the gift of miracle-working is in the context of the gospel proclamation (Rodriguez, 2007; so also Nyaundi, 2007). As the church realizes, believers have been skeptical of whether the early church’s primitive belief in the redemption from sin and demonic control is reasonable or not. The church actually believes and teaches spiritual gifts (Rice, p. 644; Rodriguez, 2007). But miracle-working, as one of the gifts, has been treated with suspicion.

The SDA Church in Africa finds herself in a society where belief in the supernatural is strong and a personal experience of the power of God becomes necessary (Olanrewaju, 2011, pp. 113-145; Ekem, 2009, pp. 31-42; Doss, 2009, pp. 81-90). There is a belief in supernatural dualism, namely, evil and good forces (traditio-religious milieu [Ekem, 2009, p. 39]). Nehemiah M. Nyaundi’s survey research conducted in the University of Eastern Africa in Kenya in 2007, of which the respondents, who were trainee SDA pastors, were asked to indicate their knowledge of church members who seek help from African traditional diviners. The study indicated that 87 percent sought the services of African traditional oracles such as diviners,

soothsayers or magicians to cope with daily life (2007). In his final analysis, he sees the challenge of African traditional religion militating against Africans growing in Christ (ibid.).

Pentecostalism/charismatic movement is well ingrained in Africa, hence, fertile spot to contextualize the power of God (good force) over the devil (evil force) in all spheres of life. In Pentecostalism, the African traditio-religious milieu finds its identity in Christianity as Jesus triumphs over Satan (see Nyaundi, 2007; Bernard, 1999, pp. 239-240). Having been delivered from the power of sin and the devil's control, African SDA is in an inevitable position to know in graphic terms who the opposing force is (Seventh-day Adventist Believe . . . , 2005, p.160). She is ever conscious of her enemy. The question is: if she believes in spiritual gifts, what religious importance does she ascribe to miracle-working in her existence in Africa? Considering the African traditio-religious milieu, what is her attitude towards miracle-working? Does she reflect the attitude of her worldwide church toward miracle-working among the Charismatic movement/Pentecostalism in Africa? Or does she contextualize herself in her milieu? Is miracle-working a Pentecostal or biblical phenomenon? This study intends to determine (1) whether miracle-working is a Pentecostal or biblical phenomenon and (2) the possible religious milieu that impacts the African SDAs' attitude toward miracle-working. To address these and other related issues, the study employs a missiological approach. This involves a presentation of the concept of miracle-working in both the OT and the NT in context and relating its understanding to the attitude of the African SDA church in her traditio-religious milieu.

## **II. Miracle-working in OT**

In the OT, YHWH reveals Himself in words and deeds as He relates to humans. The creation account (Gen 1:1-2:25), protection of Noah's ark on the water for 150 days (8:3), birth of Isaac (18:14), providing a ram for Abraham's sacrifice (22:13), sending fire and hail on Sodom and Gomorrah (19:24), parting the red sea (Exod 14:21), the dead body that resurrected after touching Elijah's bones (2 Kings 13:21), just to name a few, are conceptual reference points (Zakovitch, 1992, pp. 4:845-56). It only takes the supernatural to effect such acts. Lexically, several Hebrew words אֹת "sign," "mark," מוֹפֵת "wonder," "sign," פֶּלֶא "wonder," "marvel," תְּמִימָה (Aramaic) "wonder," "surprise,"

אָי (Aramaic) “sign” are usually used in reference to the miraculous works of God on behalf of Israel or symbolic representation of the covenantal terms (Exod 3:20; 4:21; 7:3; 11:9f; 15:11; Deut 4:34; 6:22; 7:19; 26:8; 34:11; Josh 3:5; 1 Chr 16:12; Neh 9:10, 17; Job 9:10; Ps 77:11, 14; 78:11, 43; 88:10, 12; 89:5; 96:3; 105:5, 27; 106:7; 107:24; 135:9; 136:4; Isa 8:18; Jer 32:20f; Dan 4:2f; 6:27; 12:6; Joel 2:30.). Of significance to this study are the use of אָי “sign,” “mark,” מוֹפֵת “wonder,” “sign,” אֲפָלָא “wonder,” “marvel,” in the context of YHWH’s miraculous deliverance of Israel from Egypt to Canaan (Exod 3:20; 4:21; 7:3; 11:9f; 15:11; Deut 4:34; 6:22; 7:19; 26:8; 34:11; Josh 3:5; 1 Chr 16:12; Neh 9:10, 17; Ps 77:11, 14; 78:11, 43; 88:10, 12; 89:5; 96:3; 105:5, 27; 106:7; 107:24; 135:9; 136:4; Isa 8:18; Jer 32:20f; Dan 4:2f; 6:27; 12:6.). מוֹפֵת and אָי are used in Dan 4:2,3 in reference to the mysteries God revealed to king Nebuchadnezzar in a dream.

### **A. Miracle-working in Pre-Patriarchal Period**

In the pre-patriarchal period, the creation account and the flood story are characterized by supernatural influence. According to Genesis account, God created both heavenly and earthly elements by calling them into existence, with the exception of human beings (Gen 1-2). This calling may be seen as supernatural and miraculous. Of interest is the creation of human. God created both male and female from the dust and fashioned them in His own image. They became living beings (2:21-22; 3:19). This account appears miraculous. Biblically speaking, human existence could be realized through a supernatural act.

God used a flood to destroy wicked people (Gen 6:7; 7:4). The intent of the flood was to destroy. Nevertheless, He preserved the lives of Noah and his family and other living creatures with an ark (6:8, 18-19; 7:18). It took a miraculous deed of God to save the righteous.

### **B. Miracle-Working in Patriarchal and Exodus Periods**

God established a covenant with Abram (later Abraham) to give him and descendants the land of the Canaanites (Gen 12:5-7). He continued this promise with Isaac and Jacob (17:19; 35:12; Exod 6:4). He also promised to increase their descendants (Gen 17:6-7; 28:3; 35:11). According to the narrative, Abraham and Sarah, his wife, were too old to give birth to make this promise a reality (17:17). To fulfill

His promise to Abraham, God made Sarah give birth to Isaac (21:2-3; so also 25:21). It is worthy to note that when Sarah doubted God's promise, He said to Abraham, "Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the time appointed I will return unto thee, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son" (18:14, KJV). The promise of a son to a barren woman is one of the notable supernatural acts experienced by the patriarchs. This act made God establish His identity and confirm His commitment to the covenant.

Israel's faith in YHWH was a response to His miraculous deeds. He introduced Himself to Moses through a burning bush, yet not consumed (Exod 3:1-4). This form of introduction probably made Moses acknowledge and obey YHWH's voice as God of Israel. In response to Moses' doubt about Israel's acceptance of him, YHWH performed signs (תִּמְּוֹתָיו) to affirm His proposition that His words/promises were true (4:1-9). The children of Israel believed Moses' words after all the signs had been done (vv. 28-30). It seems that the ten plagues unleashed on the Egyptians were partly to strengthen Israel's faith in YHWH as her deliverer (see 10:1; Num 14:11; Deut 4:34; 6:22; Josh 24:17; Neh 9:10 [Equally important is the fact that the plagues were to teach the Egyptians who YHWH was (Exod 7:5)]). As He initiates a relationship with her, He employs signs/miracle so as to establish His identity and strength to protect.

After she had experienced miraculous deliverance, YHWH continued to affirm His identity and protection to her through signs/miracles. Upon request, He performed a sign/miracle to affirm His identity to Gideon (Judg 6:12-22; cf. 1 Kgs 13:2-7). On her way to Canaan, it was YHWH who defeated her enemies in miraculous ways. For example, YHWH dried up the waters of Jordan for Israel's safe passage to Canaan (Josh 5:1). When the Philistines captured the ark of God and placed it in the house of Dagon, it caused the fall of Dagon the next day (1 Sam 5:1).

### **C. Miracle-Working by Sorcerers**

Miracle-working was not only attributed to God but also to wise men and the sorcerers in ancient times. Pharaoh's sorcerers challenged Moses by turning their rods into serpents, as Moses did (Exod 7:11-12). King Saul spoke with the dead Samuel, when he consulted a woman with familiar spirits, which he had put away as

YHWH had commanded (1 Sam 28:1-25; cf. Lev 20:27; 2 Chr 33:6; Isa 29:4). In the ancient world, kings generally had wise men who could perform signs/miracles or reveal hidden/coded messages (cf. Gen 41:8; Dan 2:12-24). This suggests that miraculous acts were not limited to Israel's religious narrative. From Israel's perspective, any miracle whose source is not YHWH is false.

In sum, three points can be established. The OT story about God's dealing with humanity can hardly be told without full consideration of its miraculous flavor. The creation of the world and the flood event depict the miraculous deeds of God. YHWH initiates miraculous work (I am aware that Abram did not respond to God's call on the basis of any miracle experience, rather by faith [Gen 12:1-4; 15:1-6] ) to inspire faith/trustworthiness in apparently a new relationship and to confirm His commitment to His covenant with His people.. Upon request, He can demonstrate signs/miracle to establish His identity. Lastly, wise men and sorcerers perform counterfeit signs/miracles to show their power. With this miracle-working picture briefly painted in the OT, the study looks at the concept in the NT's perspective.

### **III. Miracle-Working in the NT**

The NT is full of miracle stories. The gospels of Matthew and Luke begin with the conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit, a miraculous story (Matt 1:18; Luke 1:35). After three days in the tomb, Jesus resurrected (Matt 28:6-7; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:34; John 10:17; 21:14; Acts 17:3; Rom 8:34; 1 Cor 15:13-20; see Metzger, 2003, pp. 150-54). Three Greek words σημειον "sign," "miracle" (for example, see Mark 6:52; 9:39; Luke 23:8; John 4:54; 6:14; 10:41; 12:18; Acts 4:16, 22; 2 Thess 2:9; 3:17), τερας "wonder" (Matt 24:24; Mark 13:22; John 4:48; Acts 2:19, 22, 43; 4:30; 5:12; 6:8; 7:36; 14:3; 15:12; Rom 15:19; 2 Cor 12:12; 2 Thess 2:9; Heb 2:4), and δυναμις "power," "miracle" (See Matt 7:22; Mark 5:30; Luke 1:17, 35; Acts 1:8; Rom 1:4, 1 Cor 14:11; Gal 3:5; Eph 1:19, 21; Phil 3:10; Col 1:11, 29; 1 Thess 1:5; 2 Thess 1:7, 11; 2 Tim 1:7f; 3:5; Heb 7:16; 1 Pet 1:5; 2 Pet 1:3, Rev 17:13) are usually used to depict the miracles Jesus and the early church performed in their ministries.

## A. Miracle-Working in Jesus' Ministry

According to John, Jesus' first miracle in Cana of Galilee was that he turned water into wine (2:1-11). Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead (11:4,43-44). This miracle was done chiefly to affirm Jesus' identity, authenticate His ministry and ultimately inspire faith in the people (see also Grudem, 1994, pp. 358-59). This is confirmed by the council of the religious leaders that His miracle performance was attracting the common people (v. 48). Through signs and wonders, many of Jesus' audience believed in Him (4:48). In addressing the Jews in Acts 2:22, Peter indicates that God approved Jesus to them through miraculous deeds. Jesus performed signs to initiate rabbi-disciple relationship with some of the disciples (Luke 5:3-8; John 1:35-36, 46-51; 3:25). It is difficult to appreciate Jesus' ministry without miracle stories. If these stories are divorced from His ministry, there is little meaning of the ministry. Bruce M. Metzger observes that “. . . miracles are not mere addendum to the messianic work of Jesus, but are an integral part of it. They attest the beginning of the era of salvation in which, according to Old Testament prophecy (Isa. 35:3-6), illness and misery are to cease and liberation from sin is to become a reality” (Metzger, 2003, p. 156). Whenever a supernatural intervenes in human history, it is a miracle. Miracle betrays Jesus' mission. Exorcizing the demon possessed and healing the sick are an evangelistic way of stamping His authority and the kingdom of God over the kingdom of darkness (Luke 4:18, 31-43; Warren, 2002, p. 324; Grudem, 1994, p. 360). Out of compassion, Jesus healed the sick (Matt 20:30, 34) and fed the hungry multitude (Matt 14:14; Luke 7:13). This shows Jesus as compassionate and one who understands the situation of those in need.

In healing some of the sick, He addressed the evil spirits that had inflicted a particular sickness on the sick (Matt 12:22; Mark 9:25). This phenomenon suggests that certain sicknesses were evil inflicted ones. This may have called for such drastic approach in healing the sick. However, the ones of natural cause were treated without being exorcised (Matt 8:14; Luke 8:44f). This means that while some sicknesses were of natural cause, others were evil inflicted ones.

In ordaining the Twelve to stay with Him and preach the word, Jesus assured them of the power to heal and cast out demons (Mark 3:14-15). He gave them power over unclean spirits (Mark 6:7); they indeed cast out demons (v. 13). It should be mentioned that this power was given in the context of the proclamation of the gospel of the

kingdom of God. At one point, the disciples failed to cast out demons because they lacked faith (Mark 9:18-19; cf. Matt 17:18). Not only faith is prized, but also prayer and fasting are vital in dealing with certain spiritual cases, says Jesus (Mark 9:28). This suggests that miracle-working has its source. The disciples are just instruments through which God works to establish His kingdom.

### **B. Miracle-Working in Apostolic Period**

After the Pentecost experience, the apostles continued to preach the gospel, demonstrating the power in the name of Jesus. Peter and John commanded the lame to stand and walk “in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth” (Acts 3:6; see also 4:6,22). Like Jesus, Peter and John had compassion on the lame and healed him (see Matt 20:30,34). The context indicates that they were going to the temple to pray, not necessarily being in the state of preaching the gospel. Once a disciple of Jesus, the commission to proclaim the gospel becomes one’s spiritual lifestyle, and not necessarily limited to a structured, programmed, temporal and spatial matrix. The healing of the lame’s story indicates that the Spirit was with Peter and John irrespective of their present engagement. The story continues that the miracle created an opportunity for the people to praise God and the gospel of Jesus Christ was preached (Acts 3:7-4:22). The apostles *prayed* for the boldness to preach the word and do *signs* and *wonders* in the name of Jesus (4:29-30; italics mine). Paul cast out a demon in the name of Jesus Christ (16:18). By touching Paul’s handkerchief or apron, the sick were healed and the demon-possessed were set free. It was God’s doing (19:10-11). When Paul cast out evil spirits, the name of Jesus was magnified and the Gospel grew mightily (19:17-19). James even urges his intended audience the church to practice ‘faith-healing’ ministry in the name of Jesus (5:14). The SDA church believes and practices ‘faith-healing’ ministry when necessary (Neufeld, ed., 1966, vol. 10., p. 676).

### **C. Suspicion of Miracle-Working in Jesus’ Ministry and Early Church**

To attribute the miracle-working of the Holy Spirit to Beelzebul is an unpardonable sin, according to Jesus (Matt 12:24). If demons are cast out by the Spirit of God, the Kingdom of God is established (v. 28). The Jewish religious leaders questioned the power by which

Jesus cast out demons (vv. 24-25). Based on Jesus' argumentation, it appears that the religious leaders knew that demons were cast out by the Spirit of God (v. 27), because evil spirit does not cast out evil spirits (v. 26). With this knowledge, if they attribute the Spirit by which Jesus cast out demons to Satan, they have committed unpardonable sin. Paul is right when He says that miracle-working is a gift of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:9). It is the Spirit that works these miracles through God's people (Heb 2:3-4).

Some followers of Jesus can be categorized among the false prophets even though they perform miracles in His name (Matt 7:22). These are not counterfeit miracle-workers, like the sorcerers of Pharaoh, rather followers of Christ. Probably, they led hidden lifestyles from their fellow believers but known to Jesus. Jesus forewarns the disciples to be careful of them by observing the fruits they bear (vv. 15-19). The fact that one performs miracles does not guarantee one's entrance into the kingdom of God with certainty. They must do the will of the Father, which is obeying the sayings of Jesus in 5:1-7:27 (it should be noted that the admonition to the false prophets appears in the context of Jesus' teaching on the Mount. Chapters five to seven constitute this teaching on the Mount [5:1; 7:28; 8:1]. This suggests that the identification of the 'will of God' here may be primarily determined in this context not outside of it).

There will be false christs and prophets in the last days (Matt 24:11). Jesus forewarns His followers that these people will do miracles to deceive many believers. Believers should avoid looking for Jesus in a particular location on earth (v. 26). His appearance in the sky with the accompanying signs is what believers should look for (v. 27). Rev 13:13, 14 affirm that in the last days Satan will perform great miracles to deceive many. This miracle is coupled with 'false gospel' that blasphemes God's name (vv. 5-6). In other words, any miracle which is wrought in the matrix of false gospel may be false (see also Grudem, 1994, p. 369).

The disciples forbade someone casting out demons in the name of Jesus because that person was not part of the literal disciples of Jesus (Mark 9:38). In response, Jesus said that if the person did not speak evil of Him, they should not forbid the person (v. 39). Verse 40 makes clear that such a person was on their part even though he/she was not literally part of the disciples. Wayne Grudem (1994) says,

“. . . If we see miracles being worked by those who make a genuine profession of faith (1Cor 12:3), who believe in the

incarnation and deity of Christ (1 John 4:2), and who show the fruit of the Holy Spirit in their lives and bear fruit in their ministry (Matt. 7:20; cf. John 15:5; Gal. 5:22-23), we should not be suspicious that they are false miracles but should be thankful to God that the Holy Spirit is working, even in those who may not hold exactly the same convictions that we do on every point of doctrine. Indeed, if God waited to work miracles only through those who were perfect in both doctrine and conduct of life, no miracles would be worked until Christ returns” (p. 369).

Certain conditions discouraged miracle-working in both Jesus and the early church’s ministries. When Herod asked Jesus to perform miracle to entertain him, Jesus refused (Luke 23:8). When the skeptics asked Jesus to work miracles, He said, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of Jonah . . .” (Matt 16:4). Simon the magician wanted to secure the power by which the apostles worked miracles in order to magnify self (Acts 8:18-19). Peter said to him, “You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart” (Remus, 1992, vol. 4. p. 869).

In sum, several points are noted. First, Jesus used miracles/signs to betray His identity, inspire and nurture faith in the people, as He initiated new relationships. Second, He endowed His disciples with the power to heal and cast out demons. Third, faith, prayer and fasting are sometimes needed to tackle certain demonic forces. Fourth, God continued to work miracles through the apostles after Jesus’ ascension to magnify the name of Jesus. Fifth, to ascribe the power, by which demons are cast out, to Satan is a sin against the Holy Spirit. Sixth, the early church prayed for signs and miracles in the name of Jesus. Seventh, with compassion, Jesus and the early church healed the sick. Eighth, false prophets, who perform miracles, are known by their fruits. Ninth, to entertain or celebrate oneself with miracle-working does not have a place in the NT. Lastly, though not part of the ‘core followers’ of Jesus, anyone who performs miracles in His name and does not speak evil of Him is on His part. In a word, miracle-working had an important place in the ministry of Jesus and early church. Granted, the attitude of African SDA church to miracle-working in her traditio-religious milieu is treated in the next section.

#### **IV. Miracle-Working and African Seventh-day Adventists**

From the period of enlightenment to the present, the West has been skeptical of anything supernatural (Hatchett, 2002, pp. 201-203). Secularism has taken a firm root in the West and almost every phenomenon can scientifically be explained. Generally, miracle is a mirage to the Western mind (see also Rodríguez, 2007). Belief in miracle is a belief in primitivism. Harold E. Remus (1992) notes that to disregard miracle-working in Scripture is to attack the ‘God-factor,’ that is, supernatural intervention in human history (4:869. So also Bernard, 1990, vol. 4, pp. 167-179, 240).

On the contrary, generally, Africans are more inclined to appeal to the supernatural to explain phenomena (see Nyaundi, 2007). Belief in the supernatural world is still strong in Africans. Despite our intellectual contacts with the West, we usually maintain our connection with our traditional belief in the supernatural (see Ekem, 2009, pp. 38-42). Evil spirits can harm the life and retard the progress of one’s life. To an African, these spirits do exist. A denial of them may be unfortunate and naïve. In his/her traditio-religious belief, generally an African seeks daily blessings and protection from the good spirits against the evil ones (Nyaundi, 2007; Ekem, 2009, pp. 38-40). In this case, African SDA is no exception. This suggests that she is aware of her traditio-religious world view. It then presupposes that the SDA Christian message/gospel preached may be done in dialogue with the primal understanding of African traditio-religious world view (see a similar discussion in Ekem, 2009, pp. 174-203). This approach may strike a religious chord with African SDA to appreciate the place of Jesus Christ in his/her traditio-religious world view. This may then require a practical doctrinal emphasis that is clearly articulated and sensitive to African context. That the Holy Spirit dwells and empowers us can be seen in people’s daily life as was seen in the early church’s life in subjugating evils that militated against it.

It should be mentioned that while the worldwide church of SDA allows for individual cultures to exhibit their unique identities in some religious practices such as music and worship, doctrines and teachings that give the church’s distinctiveness are binding irrespective of culture (Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . . , 2005; Nelson, 1983, pp. 8-13). The church is one when it comes to doctrinal teachings. The worldwide church occasionally provides members with certain materials that consistently serve as doctrinal and practical

reminder of her beliefs. These may include “Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . .,” “Seventh-day Adventists Church manual, Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal, Sabbath School Lesson of the Seventh-day Adventist, just to name a few (Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . ., 2005, 2d. ed.; Seventh-day Adventists Church Manual, 2010; Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal, 1985; Sabbath School Lesson of the Seventh-day Adventist, 2011). These regulate the life and culture of the church. However, the identity and oneness is preserved to some degree. For example, the introduction to the hymnal is insightful. In publishing *The Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*, the General Conference Music Committee “prized music that would be attractive both to old and young worshipers, and texts that recognized the diversity of cultures among the English-speaking church members who will be using the hymnal” (The Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal, 1985 [eighth printing, 1993], p. 6). African SDA church is expected to adapt this hymnal during church service and worship. It follows that “more than three thousand ministers in North America and Australia were asked to rate each hymn in the 1914 *Church Hymnal* according to whether they would retain or delete it” (p. 6). Though African SDA church had no input, the hymnal is used because it is ‘one’ church. All these materials are tailor-made to keep the worldwide church united on doctrines and practices. While the church is one, cultural distinctiveness should be prized in doctrinal formulation and practice. Simply put, African SDA church is on the same page with the world church in doctrinal formulation and practice.

### **A. Miracle-Working in African Traditio-Religious Milieu**

From Christians’ point of view, Africa also needs the gospel of Jesus Christ. One of the reasons why Pentecostalism is surging in Africa is that it contextualizes the gospel (Pentecostalism, BBC). It gives hope to the demon possessed, an unscientifically explained ailment that Jesus has atrophied its dominance. The spiritually saved must be physically saved. It emphasizes a personal experience of the power of the Holy Spirit (Pentecostalism, BBC). By this, I do not mean that the continent of Africa is the fertile spot for evil forces and unscientifically explained ailments. Debra Gainer Nelson (1983) writes that research done at Loma Linda Hospital of the psychiatric department in the United States of America revealed that many cases of the seemingly mentally retarded persons could not be scientifically explained. Upon praying for the sick, evil spirits engaged the prayer

‘warriors’ in a conversation and after an intensive prayer the demon possessed were set free (pp. 8-13). In other words, the SDA in the West is no different from African SDA. While African SDA church shares the belief that the Spirit is still at work, she is critical of the miracles performed by the charismatic movement (Haynes, n.d., pp. 33-38). George R. Knight is aware of this attitude when he says,

if I were the devil, I would make Adventists fearful of the Holy Spirit. Too many of us fear Pentecostalism when we think of the topic of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, we need to remember the Bible’s teaching about the necessity of the Spirit in Christian work . . . Adventists don’t really believe the 27 fundamental beliefs, especially the one about spiritual gifts. We believe in spiritual gift rather than gifts. . . What would it be like if suddenly today in the pulpit I got the gift of tongues, a true gift? I might be carried off. What if I got a true gift of prophecy? There would most likely be a massive committee to study the situation for the next 10 years. Now, I have to admit that even talking about such things makes me nervous, because the Spirit is impossible to control (2000).

The primitive faith-based Christianity of the early church may find life in this charismatic movement.

Prejudicial stance towards Pentecostalism downplays the significance of miracle-working ministry in the proclamation of the gospel. It is often taught that Satan will employ miracles to deceive many in the last days (Rev 13:11-14; Neufeld, ed., 1966, vol. 10., pp. 675-76). It may also be noted that Satan attempts to establish his rule (vv. 4-8). Should Christ’s followers stop preaching the gospel/kingdom of God because Satan is preaching the counterfeit? In the last days, who deserves the worship of humans may define the destiny of the cosmic conflict (vv. 4,8,15; 14:6,11; 15:4; 19:10). Therefore, a constant and consistent preaching of the gospel with its attendant signs may be uncontested.

### **B. Miracle Working in Ashanti-New Town Seventh-day Adventist Church: A Case in Point**

Ashanti-New Two Seventh-day Adventist church is one of the oldest churches established in Kumasi, Ghana. For the past twenty-two years, it has been known as ‘prayer house’ for its members and

non-SDAs. Prayers take place every Wednesday, from 8:30 am to 12:00 pm. On August 11, 2011, the researcher interviewed one of the founding members concerning the reason for such a ritual. According to the interviewee, twenty-two years ago, many of the SDA church members were visiting other non-SDA churches for prayers. Some members began to doubt if the Spirit of God was in the church. This made the pastors and elders of the church organize this weekly prayer session.

To the interviewee, the founding team members faced accusation and opposition from within the church. They were accused of using evil powers. However, he acknowledged that while those accusations were debilitating, they kept their conviction to uplift Christ.

According to him, all the church elders and pastors who lead this prayer session meet every Tuesday night for all-night prayers. This hour of prayer prepares them for the Wednesday prayer session. People in attendance are SDA members and non-SDA members, including Muslims. He happily expressed that at every meeting between thirty and fifty non-Adventists are converted, seeing the power of Jesus. The demon-possessed are set free and mad persons are healed. He maintained that none of the team exalts him or herself. It is Jesus Christ that they point people to. Even though they have been facing several difficulties, he believes that Jesus has triumphed.

When the eyes of the blind are opened, the sickness does not resurface. According to him, the Lord has been doing great things. A case in point is a lady that I knew to be epileptic. Her epilepsy used to occur twice in a month and usually at places with fire. Because of this situation, she was barred from going to kitchen. Like the woman having an issue of blood (Luke 8:43), she could not be healed by any Physician. However, at one Sabbath all-night prayer session, with one accord, the church prayed earnestly for her deliverance. She was healed at that moment. By the grace of God, for the past ten years she has been married and the epilepsy has never resurfaced.

If Satan could inflict serious and debilitating ailments on humans in Jesus' time, what prevents him from doing the same, if not worse, today (cf. Luke 13:16)? In this context that African SDA finds herself, the reality must be faced. The SDA church in general has been skeptical or suspicious of anything Pentecostal over the years. It has been a doctrinal emphasis not cultural, even though the church believes that the Holy Spirit still works today (Charismatic Adventism, Wikipedia). While it is true that we are no more living in the primitive age, primitive problems such as sin, not scientifically

explained sicknesses, demon possession, just to name a few, are still with us. In this case, primitive approach may be needed to tackle such primitive problems (see Taylor, 2009). If Christ has given us victory over sin, definitely He has given us the same victory over evil powers (cf. Rom 6:2-16; Col 1:13).

### **C. Miracle-Working in Early Adventism**

The Seventh-day Adventist church, at its beginnings, experienced miraculous healing. Several incidents, as reported in the written works of Ellen G. White and Adventist historians, underscore this experience.

On April 20, 1846, Otis Nickel wrote a letter to William Miller, acknowledging the gift of healing that Mrs. White possessed. He said,

The Spirit of God is with her and has been in a remarkable manner in healing the sick through the answer to her prayers; some cases are remarkable as any that are recorded in the New Testament. But prejudiced and unbelieving persons find it just as convenient to call it mesmerism and ascribe the power to the devil, as the unbelieving Pharisees did (Matt 10:25; 12:24). That power which is manifested in her, as far exceeds the power of mesmerism as Moses did the magicians of Egypt. The devil has as much power to imitate and counterfeit the work of God as he did in Moses' time, and the people can be deceived if they will" (A. White, 1981-86, pp. 76-77) .

It is clear from the statement that Mrs. White, from Nickel's perspective, possessed a true gift of healing as that of Moses. He was aware of the prejudiced persons ascribing the power, with which she was working, to the devil. Probably, there were false healers at his time.

Another incident occurred when some believers, including Mrs. White, gathered at the house of Stockbridge Howland in 1845. Frances Howland, the daughter of Howland, was seriously sick and under the care of the doctor. All the believers earnestly prayed to God in her behalf. She received miraculous healing and the believers acknowledged that it was the Lord's doing. She became baptized after experiencing this miraculous healing from the Lord (Ibid., pp. 74-75).

The early Adventists believed that the devil could inflict diseases on God's people. Mrs. White reports:

Then Satan came in another form. My husband was taken very sick. His symptoms were alarming. He cramped at intervals, and suffered excruciating pain. His feet and limbs were cold. I rubbed them until I had no strength to do so longer. Brother Harris was away some miles at his work. Sisters Harris and Bonfoey and my sister Sarah were the only ones present; and I was just gathering courage to dare believe in the promises of God. If ever I felt my weakness it was then. We knew that something must be done immediately. Every moment my husband's case was growing more critical. It was clearly a case of cholera. He asked us to pray, and we dared not refuse. In great weakness we bowed before the Lord. With a deep sense of my unworthiness, I laid my hands upon his head, and asked the Lord to reveal His power. A change came immediately. The natural color of his face returned, and the light of heaven beamed upon his countenance. We were all filled with gratitude unspeakable. Never had we witnessed a more remarkable answer to prayer (*Ibid.*, p. 137).

This belief finds confirmation in scripture. The book of Job clearly demonstrates that Satan was behind the predicament of Job, a man of God (2:1-7). It is obvious from the quote that miraculous healing occurred at the prayer of the believers.

Their belief in the gift of miraculous healing had to be balanced with being responsible for their bodies. In 1863, Mrs. White had a vision about the importance of taking care of their physical health. Stewardship of the physical body was emphasized (Robinson, 1965, pp. 73, 203-204). With the emergence of health reform, Mrs. White encouraged the use of both faith and natural remedies in a healing process (E. G. White, 1905, pp. 213-232). In the context of medical missionary work, she wrote that:

The way in which Christ worked was to preach the word, and to relieve suffering by miraculous works of healing. But I am instructed that we cannot now work in this way; for Satan will exercise his power by working miracles. God's servants today could not work by means of miracles, because spurious works of healing, claiming to be divine,

will be wrought. For this reason the Lord has marked out a way in which His people are to carry forward a work of physical healing combined with the teaching of the word. Sanitariums are to be established, and with these institutions are to be connected workers who will carry forward genuine medical missionary work. Thus a guarding influence is thrown around those who come to the sanitariums for treatment. This is the provision the Lord has made whereby gospel medical missionary work is to be done for many souls. These institutions are to be established out of the cities, and in them educational work is to be intelligently carried forward (Ibid. p. 14).

It can be observed that, in their medical missionary work, physical ailment should be treated with the natural remedies. This may mean that if diseases are scientifically/naturally diagnosed, they should be treated as such. This statement may not point to cessation of miracle-working by the church. The instruction she received may refer to the vision she had on health reform in 1863. This vision discouraged the abuse of the human body. It emphasized natural remedies as God's great medicine (Robinson, 1965, pp. 73, 203-204). Elsewhere she comments that when believers become responsible for their health and subsequently ask God for the preservation of their health, the Lord will answer such prayers "if His name can be glorified" (E. G. White, 1905, pp. 13-14). She categorically states that ". . . let all understand that they have a work to do. God will not work in a miraculous manner to preserve the health of persons who are taking a sure course to make themselves sick, by their careless inattention to the laws of health" (Ibid.). It may be inferred that those whose health may be impaired, once they are health conscious, can pray for miraculous healing. The following statement further reinforces her attitude to miraculous healing:

Some have asked me, why should we have Sanitariums? Why should we not, like Christ, pray for the sick, that they may be healed miraculously? I have answered, 'suppose we were able to do this in all cases; how many would appreciate the healing? Would those who were healed become health reformers, or continue to be health destroyers? . . . You may say, "why not, then, take hold of work, and heal the sick as Christ did? I answer, You are not ready. Some have believed; some have been healed; but there are many who

make themselves sick by intemperate eating or indulging in other wrong habits. When they get sick, shall we pray for them to be raised up, that they may carry on the very same work again? There must be a reformation throughout our ranks; the people must reach a higher standard before we can expect the power of God to be manifested in a marked manner for the healing of the sick (Ibid.).

It may be surmised that Mrs. White was not against miracle-working *per se* but in the circumstance in which it is sought for. It should be reiterated that Mrs. White did not mention any treatment for sicknesses inflicted on God's people by Satan. Her focus had been on physical sicknesses that could be attended to at the Sanitariums.

In short, miracle-working magnifies Jesus and the kingdom of God. The first rule is if they do not do the will of God, they are false prophets. Second, even though they may not literally be with us, as long as they do not speak evil of Jesus, their miraculous deeds should not be downplayed. Third, great care may be taken to attribute the power by which miracles are done to Satan because it can amount to sinning against the Holy Spirit, knowing that Satan does not cast out Satan. Paul understands that miracle-working is a gift of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:10). With encouragement from the church, those with the gift of miracle-working can utilize it to magnify Jesus' name. Mrs. White recommends the combination of faith and natural remedies in a healing process. She also identifies sicknesses that are evil inflicted ones, and such sicknesses would need a different approach other than natural remedies. As Nickel remarks, Mrs. White used her gift of healing in accordance with NT's principles. The church says, "Believers who refuse to employ their spiritual gifts will not only find that their gifts atrophy but also that they are jeopardizing their eternal life" (Seventh-day Adventist Believe. . . 2005, p. 243).

## **V. Conclusion**

It seems appropriate to assert that miracle-working is biblical, Christian, but not essentially Pentecostal. It can be considered an integral part of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God. There are several ways to magnify the name of Jesus Christ and kingdom of God, of which miracle-working is one. God can demonstrate His power anytime and anywhere to magnify His name.

In our African context, belief in the supernatural makes us more quite adaptable to personally experience the miracle-working of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit works through those who believe. However, it appears that the church in Africa reflects the theological thinking of the worldwide church in her attitude towards miracle-working because it is one church in doctrine. Since miracle-working is usually identified as Pentecostal, African SDA church generally is suspicious of miracle-working. Being skeptical of Pentecostalism, with respect to miracle-working, naturally questions and atrophies the power of the Spirit to continue establishing the kingdom of God in the lives of both the physically and spiritually imprisoned. Prejudice affects our judgment and belief in the power of the Spirit today. Those with the gift of miracle may be encouraged to exhibit it to magnify the name of Jesus but not to gratify self.

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