

# Modern Miracles?

**Introduction.** Pentecostals often remain in Pentecostalism despite many misgivings for one simple reason: the healings. They may admit that many of the practices and teachings are unbiblical. They may confess that there is rampant abuse and manipulation. But they shake off the doubts because they have seen so many “supernatural” events — people stand up out of wheelchairs, back pain healed, etc. And so they wonder, “If this is really so bad, why are so many people being healed? Isn’t it all worth it if sick people are being restored to health?”

But, as it turns out, it is surprisingly easy to fake healings, even to hold entire healing services in which people appear to be “healed” and yet no one is really cured. How is this accomplished? That is what I want to show you today.

In order to truly understand the phenomena of miracles, we will look at some of the most common “healing” tricks in the Pentecostal experience and then contrast them with the characteristics of New Testament miracles. A lesson like this is critical because, according to the Bible, these people are being deceived and robbed of the true gospel. We want to kindly expose “the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders” (2 Thessalonians 2:9).

## ***I. Common Healing Tricks***

### **A. Mythical sightings.**

1. Perhaps the largest category of fake healings are mythical healings; all that is known about them is that somebody else swears that they saw them and that they are real. Most often, the preacher relates stories of healings that occurred somewhere else. When these “healings” are described in detail to excited crowds, people forget that they never actually witnessed the event and have no reason to believe that it actually occurred. When retelling the story, people often relate the healing as though they witnessed it themselves. It is only after careful questioning that the truth emerges: nobody actually saw it; it was just a story told to the group.
2. Faith healer David Hogan often uses this technique. Every time he speaks to groups, he claims to have raised over 400 people from the dead and performed many amazing miracles. Although he relates many incredible stories, he never actually performs miracles at his meetings; he just talks about all the miracles that he supposedly performed somewhere else. When his fans are directly asked, they admit that they have never actually seen Hogan do any miracles.

B. Outright fakes.

1. Occasionally, "healings" are fakes, plain and simple. Many faith healers believe that seeing people apparently get healed raises the level of faith of the attendees which opens the door for real healings. They use this as an excuse to orchestrate healing shows that are planned in advance simply to shock and amaze the crowd.
2. It is difficult to say how often this technique is used, because the people who employ it are usually quite careful to cover their tracks. However, scandals occasionally allow a glimpse inside such misdealings. One of the best known examples of the intentional use of fake healings involved cult leader Jim Jones. Jones began his career as a Pentecostal healer. One of his favorite techniques involved healing people of "cancer" by apparently removing chunks of foul-smelling material from their bodies that he claimed was cancerous tissue. People's Temple insiders later confessed that the "cancer" was actually rotten chicken livers, produced at the appropriate time during the church service with a little sleight of hand.

C. Mostly disabled or all disabled?

1. One of the most obvious and most popular techniques used by faith healers is based on a misunderstanding of disabilities. When someone is in a wheelchair, people tend to assume that the person cannot walk at all. This is rarely the case. Most people in wheelchairs can stand and even walk a little, just not far and not well. Likewise, when a person is said to be blind or deaf, people tend to assume that the person cannot see or hear at all. Again, this is rarely the case.
  - a) This explains why many "miracles" that occur in faith-healing services appear to be only partial healings. A healer may tell someone in a wheelchair to stand and walk. The person shakily stands and limps painfully across the stage. The crowd cheers, because they think that the person is on his or her way to a full recovery.
  - b) Likewise, many healers will test a healing of a blind person by holding up a handkerchief and asking the person to grab it. When the blind person is able to take hold of the handkerchief, the crowd is amazed, not realizing that there is nothing remarkable about a partially blind person being able to see a large white object held only inches from his or her face.
2. One of the best known examples is Peter Popoff, who used a few trusted colleagues to scout for healing candidates among the crowds that came to his healing services. Popoff's scouts always asked people in wheelchairs if they could walk a little. Any that

could walk a little were called up to the front for “healing” during the subsequent service. The technique was exposed by skeptic James Randi who placed actors in the audience to claim that they had disabilities. Randi’s actors were interviewed by Popoff’s scouts, and the information transmitted to Popoff via a radio transmitter. Randi intercepted and recorded the transmissions, which fed Popoff information on which of the audience members would make good “healing” candidates.

D. The placebo effect.

1. Many so-called “healings” are extremely subjective. People are most often “healed” of vague conditions that are not visible, such as chronic back pain. A person who suffers from this condition may get caught up in the excitement of the healing service and may even experience a lesser degree of pain for a while, due to his or her earnest desire to be healed which can, for a while, lead them to believe that a healing has taken place. However, the pain often returns shortly after the healing service ends.
2. The HBO documentary “Question of a Miracle” follows several people who were supposedly healed by Benny Hinn. One of these cases involved a man who suffered from severe pain in his hip joints and needed surgery. The man claimed that during the healing service he was totally healed and free from pain. He even did exercises on-stage at Hinn’s direction — squatting, bending, etc., all while claiming to feel no pain at all. However, the pain returned shortly after the healing service ended, and the man still suffers the exact same condition and still needs surgery.

E. The rain dance.

1. A surprising number of “healings” are actually simply a matter of people taking credit for natural events, as though they were supernatural phenomena. How many people have you met who claim to be healed of the common cold? And yet, recovering from a cold is something that everyone does dozens of times in their lifetime — there is nothing supernatural about a recovery from such a condition. Similarly, many cancer “healings” are actually the result of extensive medical treatment that has resulted in remission. Furthermore, health situations that are somewhat more complex are just as likely to result in spontaneous improvement or medically-assisted recovery.
2. Has anyone heard of one case of someone being healed of Down Syndrome? To my knowledge, Pentecostals never pray for healing for someone with Down Syndrome, and so, by avoiding these cases, they acknowledge that they did not really think it likely that someone with a truly permanent condition would be “healed”.

Pentecostals legitimately want to see healings so badly that they claim every recovery is a "healing" — a sprained ankle, a headache, a backache, etc. When they pray to God for healing, and the pain stops the next day, they can claim it had been healed.

## ***II. Characteristics Of True Miracles***

- A. They were undeniable.
  - 1. Open-minded individuals could clearly see the hand of God at work (John 3:1-2). Even the enemies of truth were forced to acknowledge the reality of these signs.
  - 2. This was evident when Jesus healed the blind man (John 9:16), when He raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11:46-47), and also when Peter and John healed the lame man (Acts 4:14-16).
- B. They were instantaneous.
  - 1. The miraculous healing of blindness (Matthew 20:30-34; Mark 10:46-52; Luke 18:35-43), deformity (Luke 13:11-13), leprosy (Matthew 8:1-3; Mark 1:40-42; Luke 5:12-13), hemorrhaging (Matthew 9:20-22; Mark 5:25-29; Luke 8:40-47), lameness/paralysis (Luke 5:17-25; John 5:1-9), sickness (Luke 4:38-39), and death (Mark 5:35-42; Luke 8:49-55) all followed a pattern.
  - 2. The pattern was that they did not require time for nature to take its course; rather, the effects were instantaneous. In contrast, modern-day faith healers often say, "You should expect gradual recovery."
- C. They were complete.
  - 1. Whatever the malady, no matter how serious the illness or infirmity, the person that was healed was made whole (Matthew 12:9-13; Acts 3:6-10, 16).
  - 2. Those who are "healed" today often manifest only a slight momentary improvement, and frequently experience serious relapses. Ernest Angley, a faith healer from Akron, Ohio, was a dramatic, flamboyant actor. On one occasion, Angley was trying to heal a man who was hard of hearing. He stuck his fingers in the man's ears, twisted them around a few times, and then prayed that the man's hearing might be restored. When Ernest was finished, the man's wife whispered, "Honey?" into one of his ears. The man said, "Yes." Then she whispered in his other ear, "Baby?" Once again, the man replied, "Yes." Filled with amazement and bliss, Ernest Angley lifted his eyes toward heaven, and cried with a loud voice, "Hallelujah!" The man then looked at Ernest with a quizzical expression and replied, "Not bad, How are you?"
- D. They were diverse.
  - 1. In the New Testament, all kinds of miracles were performed (Matthew 4:24; 8:16; 9:35; 15:30). Jesus and the apostles healed

those who were blind, deaf, and mute. They cured deformity, paralysis, lameness, leprosy, diseases and even death. Jesus demonstrated His power over every sphere of nature (Matthew 8:23-27; 14:22-33; Luke 5:1-11).

2. Can modern-day miracle workers calm the winds or walk on water? Can they feed 5,000 with 5 loaves and 2 fishes? Can they heal all types of sickness? Can they raise the dead? Lewis Grizzard, the well-known syndicated newspaper columnist, wrote an article titled "Miracles Are Few, But Laughs Are Many" in which he poked fun at today's faith healers. Grizzard said, "The first time I became suspicious of faith healers was when Brother Roy Dodd Hembree came to my hometown with his faith healing tent ministry. One year, Miss Inez Pickett, a school teacher who had been plagued with kidney problems her entire life, decided to see if Brother Roy Dodd could help her." "Brother Dodd grabbed Miss Inez, proceeded to beseech the Almighty to try and remove her malady. With a great, joyous cry he proclaimed Miss Inez healed, and she commenced to jump around on the platform in her new, healthy state. She became so excited, however, that she fell off the platform and broke her leg." "Somebody call an ambulance," said the first one to reach her. "No need for that," someone cried, "just get Brother Roy Dodd to heal her." However, Brother Dodd declined. "I don't do broken bones," he said, "Just vital organs."

E. They were unstaged.

1. The illness of the one healed was a matter of public record (Mark 5:25-29). They were well-known to the audience (Acts 3:2, 9-10). Today, the sick sometimes show up in town about the same time as the healers. If you pay close attention to some groups, you will find that some of those healed leave town with the healer. They travel with him to the next town, where the so-called "miracle" is repeated.
2. O. J. Willis of Groveton, Texas told the story of a faith healer who came to town, promising to raise the dead. At the front of the big tent, the "deceased" was stretched-out in a coffin, pale and gray, and looking bereft of life. Before the services, crowds passed by the coffin, quietly viewing the body, until the unexpected happened. As one young boy passed by the casket, he produced a long straight-pin, which he proceeded to poke in the side of the "lifeless" body. An uproar ensued as the man was prematurely, unexpectedly, and violently raised from the dead!

- F. They were open to investigation.
1. New Testament miracles were verifiable. Their legitimacy was confirmed and substantiated by the evidence. The effects were manifest to all.
  2. Today, faith healers will not submit to verification, certification, or testing. They refuse to submit their ministries to public scrutiny, and become indignant when questioned, examined, or interrogated. Jesus invited investigation (John 20:27; cp. Romans 16:17-19; 1 John 4:1). Furthermore, neither Jesus nor His apostles ever said it was impossible to perform a miracle because unbelievers were present. But this dodge is used by modern-day faith healers who know that critics are in the audience. Jesus was not swayed just because His opponents were watching (Mark 3:1-5).
- G. They supported truth, not error.
1. New Testament miracles advanced truth and confirmed God's revelation (Mark 16:17-20; Hebrews 2:1-4). Even the inspired message of the apostle Paul was compared to previously revealed truth (Acts 17:11). We must study (2 Timothy 2:15), examining everything carefully, holding fast to what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:21).
  2. In the Old Testament, if a prophet's message was false, he was to be rejected, despite his apparent miraculous power (Deuteronomy 13:1-5). New Testament saints are warned against the lying wonders of lawless men (2 Thessalonians 2:7-12). God would never empower false teachers who teach destructive heresies (2 Peter 2:1-2).
- H. They did not blame the victim for failure.
1. When modern-day faith healers are unsuccessful, they typically blame the sick person for not having enough faith. But in the New Testament, failure to perform a miracle demonstrated a lack of faith on the part of the healer (Matthew 17:14-21).
  2. Faith was often manifested by those who sought healing. In a few cases, it is specifically mentioned as playing a significant role (Matthew 9:20-22; Mark 10:51-52). Sometimes a lack of faith caused Jesus to limit His ministry in certain areas (Matthew 13:58; Mark 6:5). However, in other cases, the person healed demonstrated no faith at all. This is certainly true of the lame man whom Peter and John healed in the temple. It was the faith of Peter and John, not the lame man, that produced the miracle (Acts 3:16).

**Conclusion.** We do well to look at all Pentecostal and Charismatic healing claims through highly skeptical eyes. Pentecostal and Charismatic leaders have a compelling reason to lie and exaggerate their "healing"

claims: it gathers followers and increases financial support. Pentecostal and Charismatic churches are full of desperate people who want to see miracles and who are eager to believe every claim and to interpret every event supernaturally.

If Benny Hinn, David Hogan, or any other faith healer can really call down the power of God to heal a backache, they should be able to heal Down Syndrome, regrow amputated limbs, etc. If the faith healers cannot do this, it is time to ask yourself why. As badly as we want our loved ones to be healed, Paul said miraculous healing would end (1 Corinthians 13:8-13).