

Prayer Papers and Power Encounters

Paul's miracles and the handkerchief mailing scam.

"And God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were even carried from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out." Acts 19:11-12, NASB

A mass mailing sent out by Saint Matthew's Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, tells recipients:

God tells Ministers to send out Handkerchiefs to people's homes, so that blessings will start in their lives. Use this Bible Handkerchief soaked with prayer, tonight, and return it in the morning. [1]

To receive a blessing, one must take the anointed prayer-handkerchief included in the mailing, write his/her name on it, place the inscribed paper handkerchief in a Bible, believe God for whatever miracle is needed or wanted, sleep near the handkerchief and Bible overnight, and mail it back to Saint Matthew's Church first thing in the morning, preferably with a financial contribution enclosed. What blessings will persons receive if they follow these steps? The letter from Saint Matthew's Church is filled with anonymous testimonies like the following: "USED THE BIBLE HANDKERCHIEF . . . Blessed With \$6,000.00 . . . FLORIDA--I put the Handkerchief in the Bible . . . and sent it back to you. I received a check for \$3,500 . . . I received a check for \$2,500 . . ." Other deliverances testified to in the Saint Matthew's prayer letter include individuals who saw their son released from jail, their son-in-law delivered from alcohol and drug abuse, their financial debt eliminated, their physical and mental illness cured, and other big financial blessings come upon them.

At the face of it, this whole business appears to be a blatant religious scam, except for the fact that it claims to have biblical precedent and authority behind it. Support supposedly is found from the book of Acts where Luke recorded: **"And God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were even carried from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out"** (Acts 19:11-12). What, we ask, was going on at Ephesus during Paul's ministry in that city? Does the book of Acts support the idea that ministers are to mail out prayer handkerchiefs to help people with their personal, health, and financial problems? To answer these questions, issues pertinent to the passage need to be addressed and understood.

First, the "handkerchiefs or aprons" were sweat-bands and work-aprons worn by Paul while he pursued his leatherworking trade at Ephesus. The word for "**handkerchief**" is the same word translated "**face-cloth**" that was used to cover the face of a corpse (See John 20:7; 11:44.). Even faintly, eight and one-half by eleven inch sheets of paper do not resemble the "sweat-bands" and "work-aprons" that Paul's helpers used as points of contact for the apostle's miracles.

Second, the "handkerchiefs-aprons" were hand delivered to the needy, not distributed via a bulk mailing. They were personally "**carried**" by apostolic helpers to individuals who were sick and demonically possessed. The "**handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick**" (Italics added, Acts 19:12, NIV). Unlike the pastors of Saint Matthew's Church, the apostolic helpers made personal "house calls"!

Third, there was no legalistic and abracadabra formula (signing the paper handkerchief, putting it in a Bible, sleeping near it, mailing it back the next morning with a contribution, etc.) to be followed in order to be healed and delivered. Rather, like some of Jesus' healings, simple contact with the apostle's articles of clothing was all that was needed (See Matthew 9:21; 14:26.). "**Truly the signs of an apostle**" were being worked by Paul at Ephesus (See 2 Corinthians 12:12.).

Finally, as regards the occurrence of miracles, the Acts narrative is descriptive, not prescriptive. The Acts passage is not a "how-to" healing formula, or a ministerial mandate to send out "Handkerchiefs to people's homes." Rather, the account is a historical record of how the apostle's miracles wrought by God trumped the false and demonic exorcisms performed by magicians and occultists like the seven sons of Sceva (See Acts 19:14.).

Of this incident, one commentator writes: "These healings did occur, but to imitate them--as some media evangelists have been wont to do with 'prayer cloths' or other 'prayed-over' trinkets sent through the mail--is to reduce miracle to magic, or impersonal manipulation . . ." [2]

ENDNOTES

[1] Church Pastors, "Prayer By Letters" (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Saint Matthew's Church, 2007).

[2] William J. Larkin Jr., *Acts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995): 276.