

MIRACLES: SOME PROPOSITIONS¹

February, 1994

Introduction

The propositions about miracles in this brief essay are the result of my reflections after reading Abraham Kuyper's *You Can Do Greater Things than Christ*. You can find that book itself and its history at the same address as this essay—see footnote 1 below. Suffice it to say that I translated this document for your edification. That book is scheduled to appear on the Kuyperiana page of this website. As to this essay itself, for its background see this footnote.²

This file contains three items. The first is introduced in the above paragraph. The second item is an expanded version of this article. The third are two letters from my friend Dr. Timothy Palmer of the Theological College of Northern Nigeria (TCNN) in which he quite sharply disagrees with my propositions. I reproduce them here to help you consider my two essays.

The Propositions

Below follow some propositions about miracles that represent my *current* views on the subject. I share them with you and request constructive criticism so that I can continue my reflections on the subject and correct any problems these propositions may contain.

1. The power to perform miracles and other works beyond science in its present stage comes from the original creation order and can thus be considered normal. They are part of the equipment given us to fulfil our original calling: the Cultural Mandate.
2. Due to the fall, many creation powers waned, fell into disuse, but were retained by small minorities in all cultures. Sometimes they are used for the good of mankind; often they have become distorted and thus used for purposes of deceit, oppression and private gain.

¹This essay has previously been published and can be accessed *free of charge* at this address:
<http://www.lulu.com/shop/abraham-kuyper-and-jan-h-boer/faith-science-miracles-islamfour-kuyperian-essays/ebook/product-20929893.html>.

²Originally published in *AlumNews* of Calvin Theological Seminary, vol. 1, no. 1, Spring 1994. For its history/background see our *Every Square Inch*, vol. 2, pp. 397-398, 403.

3. Eventually, due to the influence of the Holy Spirit through centuries of exposure to Biblical teaching, it dawned on the Christian community that they ought not to fear nature but control it, harness it. This became the initial impetus to modern science. The writings of early Christian pioneers in modern science testify to this spiritual foundation to modern science. The fact that science, or, rather, many of its practitioners, today see little connection between Christianity and science, does not negate its objective history. Thus science is the dominant way in which Christ's promise in John 14:12 was fulfilled in modern times.
4. Science appeared so successful and compelling that in time people tended to reject any kind of knowledge that did not result from science or is beyond its pale. The fact that many of the powers in point 1 above were more highly developed in the global south made it easy for Westerners, including missionaries, to dismiss them as mere superstition, fake and devilish. Hence missionaries ridiculed them and the new Christian communities officially adopted the same attitude, even though in reality and practice that worldview and its consequences continued to operate powerfully in their lives. This resulted in tensions within the mission churches. This development also led to emphasis on biomedicine, while all traditional African healing was relegated to the official domain of the devil and ignorance.³
5. These non-or pre-scientific powers have been real from the beginning, then waned and became distorted through sin, marginalized by a scientific civilization, but now are coming into their own once again. This is due to an increasing recognition of the limitation of science as well as to the charismatic movement. It is due also to an increasing insistence by people in the global south, including Christians, that their traditional powers can no longer be rejected as mere superstition and evil. In Christ, these powers can be and are being restored but in a positive way and now used for healing rather than control, for liberation rather than suppression.
6. The spiritual powers of which charismatics have been talking for so long are natural powers, restored and reformed through Christ. The miracles of both the OT and NT are expressions of human powers restored by God (OT), Christ and the Holy Spirit (NT). Christ and His Spirit have not brought something new to creation, but They restored what was there to begin with.
7. Thus the so-called supernatural gifts are natural abilities that needed the touch of the Spirit for renewal and revival. The *supernatural* aspect lies in this renewal, not in the ability itself.

³For documents dealing with this area of concern, please go to the sub-section Wholistic Health Care on this page.

8. Science is no threat to the idea of miracles. An event experienced as a miracle or described (in the Bible) as one may very well be amenable to scientific investigation. That does not make it less of a miracle. The Bible describes some of the most common acts of God as wonderful and miraculous--eg. His providential care over nature from moment to moment. It is that very nature that constitutes the target of science. The spiritual and the empirical are merely different aspects of the one reality.

9. The difference between my view and that of charismatics is that I relate all these powers to nature and creation. In this way I can account for the fact that these powers are available in all cultures and religions. I can account for the difference between Moses' miracles and those of the magicians and recognize the latter as genuine, though distorted and used in the service of oppression. Charismatics, in cutting all these phenomena from nature and creation and insisting on their purely spiritual nature, are in danger of trivializing the Gospel and of becoming downright silly. They cannot account for the world-wide phenomena in a satisfactory way. It simply will not do to relegate all this to the devil and deceit. In brief, it is their basic dualism that makes their views untenable. However, I am grateful that they have forced the rest of us to take miracles seriously.

MIRACLES: AN EXPANDED EXPOSITION

February, 1996

Below follow some propositions about miracles that represent my present views on the subject. These are culled from a course I presented to CRCN pastors in Hausa. The propositions themselves are an expanded version of the above and are accompanied by expanded comments.

For some years I have been puzzled by the words of Jesus:

John 14:12 – I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.

The reason for my being puzzled is that I saw so little in the Christian community that reflected these words. Most commentators argue their way out of its difficulties and in so doing take the power out of this verse, render it meaningless. Nevertheless, I continued my search.

It should be noted here that I am talking about miracles performed by humans. What follows does not apply to God's miracles of creation, every step of which presents a new miracle that precedes nature as we know it. Each new step here has no necessary precedent in the previous steps.

A presentation on miracles to an academic forum demands a definition of the term "miracle." Since I have not completed my pilgrimage on the subject, I have not yet come to a satisfactory definition. However, I offer a few definitions or descriptions of the term produced by scholars greater than yours truly. It is, unfortunately, also an arbitrarily incomplete list, since the list of those who have written on the subject is endless. And, it is important to point out, the list includes a range of opinions that does not fully represent mine.

Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430): Miracle is that "whatever appears that is difficult or unusual above the hope and power of those who wonder" (Brown, pp. 7, 95). "What we call miracles are in fact part of God's creation. The difference between a miracle and an ordinary event lies ultimately in the rarity of the former. Both, in fact are wonders and both are ultimately the work of God" (p. 9).

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274): Only God performs miracles. "Whatever is done by the power of any creature cannot be called a miracle properly, even though it may be astonishing to one who does not comprehend the power of this creature." God's miracles – and there are no others – constitute a suspension of natural processes (Brown, 12).

Martin Luther (1483-1546): Apparently he did not produce a definition. His emphasis, however, is that miracles are divine acts, not human, including those of Christ. Luther apparently played down their significance (Brown, pp. 13-15).

John/Jean Calvin (1509-1564): His emphasis is on the divine nature of miracles, incl. those of Christ. The difference between Christ's and those of His disciples is that Christ

did them in His own power, whereas that of His disciples was power derived from Him (Brown, pp. 15-18).

John Donne (1570–1631): He “saw no radical difference between the miracles that we see every day in nature and those unusual occurrences for which the name ‘miracle’ is normally reserved.” “There is nothing that God hath established in a constant course of nature, and which therefore is done every day, but would seem a miracle and exercise our admiration, if it were done but once. Nay, the ordinary things in Nature, would be greater miracles than the extraordinary, which we admire most, if they were done but once ... and only the daily doing takes off the admiration (Brown, p. 28).

Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677): “Miracles are either figments of the uneducated imagination or events that we cannot yet explain” (Brown, pp. 30-34).

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679): “A miracle is a work of God (besides His operation by the way of nature, ordained in the Creation) done for the making manifest to His elect the mission of an extraordinary minister for their salvation.” It “is the effect of the immediate hand of God ... without using the prophet therein as a subordinate cause.” “No devil, angel, or created spirit can do a miracle” (Brown, pp. 34-36).

John Locke (1632-1704): “A miracle, then, I take to be a sensible operation, which, being above the comprehension of the spectator, and in his opinion contrary to the established course of nature, is taken by him to be divine” (Brown, pp. 42-46).

Gordon Spykman (1926-1993):

At this point I turn to Gordon Spykman, a **Reformational** writer on the subject, an orientation pioneered by John Calvin above and re-invigorated by Abraham Kuyper, a Christian orientation with which I identify myself most closely and whose insights penetrate and shape all the books, articles and other documents on this website—except, I should hasten to admit, the most extravagant or wild. Here, then, Spykman:

“God and the world are not competing forces. ...In what we call miracles God does not eliminate the instrumental agency of His creatures. They remain His servants responding to the commanding power of His World. These mighty acts of God, therefore, neither contravene nor supersede His dynamic yet stable order for creation. The potential for miraculous deeds is given from the beginning...for our life in His world. Miracles are therefore not super natural ‘breakthroughs’ over and beyond the creation ordinances. ... God does not withdraw His providential care, or set it aside, or bypass it, or hold it in abeyance, or cancel its impact. The will of God revealed in such awesome signs and wonders resides in the very impinging power of His Word itself. There is nothing arbitrary or capricious about them. From our perspective they may appear as surprising, unexpected, extraordinary interventions of God’s hand in history. For God, however, miracles are not miracles as we perceive them. They are rather the outworkings of His will in other ways, ways which to us appear unusual and exceptional, ways which are, however, consistently at God’s command.

“All creational possibilities are God’s servants. Miracles therefore do not contradict, but rather open up in dramatic ways the...power of God’s Word in creation. That Word includes stunning potentials of which we are barely aware, which often escape our attention, and to which we are largely insensitive.

“The deepest and fullest meaning of God’s special providence, which we call miracles, is indeed shrouded in mystery. But this is true of His general providence, too. No aspect of created reality, no event in history, is rationally transparent. Rationalism is a proud pretence. The mysterious depth-dimensional meaning of miracles is...more to be reverentially adored than intellectually fathomed.

“It is difficult to draw a clear line of demarcation between regular providence and miracles as God’s ‘other way’ of dealing with creation.

“All God’s acts have a mysteriously miraculous depth-meaning.”

“Miracles are therefore not abnormal or unnatural happenings. Such notions presupposes the normalcy of ‘natural law.’” Rather, they are reaffirmations of the normativity of the good creation order, of God’s abiding faithfulness to His covenant promises. Miracles are signs and wonders of God’s intended shalom, now shattered, but restored in Christ, a shalom whose final restoration is held up before us as an eschatological hope. They represent manifestations of the future kingdom within present reality. They are forceful reminders of the ‘already’ dimension of the coming kingdom.

But the amazement they conjure up among us is also an emphatic reminder of the ‘not yet’ dimension of the kingdom. Nevertheless, their seemingly exceptional occurrence should not mislead us into thinking that they are ‘detours,’ excursions into some ‘never, never land.’ Miracles are rather kingdom signposts, firmly planted along that christologically reopened way which ushers in the renewal of that good earth in which perfect righteousness dwells (Spykman, pp. 287-291).

On these same pages, Spykman refers to other Reformational writers like Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, Herman Hoeksema, Jan H. Diemer, Lewis Smedes, Gerrit Berkouwer and Jean Calvin himself, all of which advocate a similar approach to miracles. As to Kuyper, please refer to *You Can Do Greater Things than Christ*, my translation of a discussion of miracles by Kuyper in his *Pro Rege*. It is found above on this page of this website as well as on www.ccel.org.

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From here on I share with you my current insights and request constructive criticism so that I can continue my reflections on the subject and correct any problems hidden in these propositions. They are not meant to be final or definitive.

1. The power to perform miracles and other works beyond science in its present stage comes from the original creation order and can thus be considered normal. They are part of the equipment given us to fulfill our original calling: the Cultural Mandate.
2. Due to the fall, many creation powers waned, fell into **disuse**, but were retained by small minorities in all cultures. Evidence for various kinds of miracles are found in literature about almost all cultures.
3. Sometimes these powers are used for the good of man; often they have become distorted and thus used for purposes of oppression and private gain. It all depends on whether they are evoked by the Spirit of God or by that of satan.

4. Eventually, due to the influence of the Holy Spirit through centuries of exposure to Biblical teaching, it dawned on the Christian community that they ought not to fear nature but control it, harness it. This became the initial impetus to modern science. The writings of early Christian pioneers in modern science testify to this spiritual foundation to modern science. The fact that science, or, rather, many of its practitioners, today see little connection between Christianity and science, does not negate its objective history. Thus science is the dominant way in which Christ's promise in John 14:12 is being fulfilled in modern times.

5. Science appeared so successful and compelling that in time people tended to reject any kind of knowledge that did not result from science or is beyond its pale. The fact that many of the powers in point 1 above were more highly developed in 3rd world cultures made it easy for Westerners, including missionaries, to poohoo them as mere superstition, fake and devilish. Hence missionaries ridiculed them and the new Christian communities officially adopted the same attitude, even though in reality and practice that worldview and its consequences continued to operate powerfully in their lives. This resulted in tensions within the mission churches, as we see in Yamsat's publication. This development also led to official emphasis on biomedicine in its hospitals and clinics, while all traditional African healing was relegated to the official domain(s) of the devil and ignorance.

6. It must be understood that modern, western, secular, "scientific" rejection of the miraculous is not the result of research, but an expression of a secular worldview that, by definition, excludes the non-empirical. With respect to Hume, a major Scottish philosopher (1711-1776), for example, Brown writes:

Hume opted for a frame of reference that excluded the supernatural, because his experience of the world in the present excluded the supernatural. His understanding of science posited only natural explanations for things encountered in the present. Given such a worldview, nothing is allowed to count decisively against it (p. 99).

7. These non- or pre-scientific powers have been real from the beginning, then waned and became distorted through sin, marginalized by a scientific civilization, but now are coming into their own once again. This is due to an increasing recognition of the limitation of science as well as to the charismatic movement. It is due also to an increasing insistence by 3rd world people, including Christians, that their traditional powers can no longer be rejected as mere superstition and evil. In Christ, these powers can be and are being restored but in a positive way to be used for healing rather than control, for liberation rather than suppression.

8. The spiritual powers of which charismatics have been talking for so long are natural powers, i.e., they are no strangers to creation. They are restored and reformed through Christ and His Spirit. Many miracles of both the OT and NT are expressions of human powers restored by God (OT) and Christ (NT). Christ has not brought something new to creation, but He restored, regenerated what was there to begin with but had either waned or become distorted.

9. Thus the so-called supernatural gifts are natural abilities. Even Christ performed His miracles as a human being. In the case of the rest of us, that power or ability needed the touch of the Spirit for renewal and revival. The **supernatural** aspect lies in this renewal, not in the ability itself.

10. Science is no threat to the idea of miracles. An event experienced as a miracle or described in the Bible as one may very well be amendable to scientific investigation. That does not make it less of a miracle. The Bible describes some of the most common acts of God as wonderful and miraculous – eg. His providential care over nature from moment to moment. It is that very nature

that constitutes the target of science. The spiritual/miraculous and the empirical are merely different aspects of the one reality.

11. The difference between my view and that of charismatics is that I relate all these powers to nature and creation. In this way I can account for the fact that these powers are available in all cultures and religions. I can account for the difference between Moses' miracles and those of the magicians and recognize the latter as genuine, though distorted and used in the service of oppression. Charismatics, in their cutting all these phenomena from nature and creation and insisting on their being purely spiritual are in danger of trivializing the Gospel and of becoming downright silly. They cannot account for the world-wide phenomena in a satisfactory way. It simply will not do to relegate all this to the devil and deceit. In brief, it is their basic dualism that makes their views untenable. However, I **am** grateful that they have forced the rest of us to take miracles seriously.

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The above propositions are based on a number of theological assumptions. These assumptions, in brief, include the following:

1. A rejection of Thomistic or Scholastic dualism as I have explained it in other publications of mine – 1979, pp. 237 *ff*, 346 *ff*, 449 *ff*; 1984, pp. 132 *ff*; 1989, pp. 11-13. This dualism can be historically traced as to its beginnings and subsequent developments and role in Western culture. In other words, there is nothing natural about it or common sensical. It only seems natural or common sensical because it has been so ingrained in Western culture that it is almost impossible for people to think in other terms or to realize that it is a cultural, philosophical construct that is legitimately rejected by ATR and Islam – as well as by a strand of Reformed theology to which I adhere.

2. Redemption does not introduce anything new into creation but restores or reforms what was either there to begin with in distorted fashion since the fall or had waned altogether. In other words, the relation of creation and redemption is basically one of restorative continuity. Their separation in our theoretical thinking is the result of scholastic dualism.

3. An integrated wholistic relationship between the spiritual and the physical as we see it in the Gospels and the early church, incl. Col. 1:15-20. The spiritual and physical are not separated into scholastic watertight compartments, but they mutually influence each other at every point. There is constant interplay between them.

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Just before running off this paper, I completed reading Yamsat's work. I am very grateful for it and largely affirm it. But I have a question about the relationship between miracles, Holy Spirit and creation. Yamsat emphasizes the spiritual powers, both divine and satanic, underlying miracles. He is silent about their creation basis. What is the reason for this silence?

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SOME BIBLICAL DATA RE MIRACLES

Emphasis here is on mysterious interplay God, nature, man, devils

TERMS: Signs, wonders, miracles, marvelous works

MIRACLES AND NATURE: Psalm 77:11-18, Psalm 78:43, Psalm 105:30-35, Psalm 107:23-26

MIRACLES AND POLITICS/MILITARY: Psalm 78:55 & 61-62, Psalm 79:1-5 (Actions of pagan nations are actions of God), Psalm 80:6-8, Psalm 135:10, Jeremiah 32:22-23

MYSTERIOUS INTERPLAY BETWEEN GOD AND MAN AND SATAN: Psalm 105:17-24, Psalm 136:3-4 & 15-25

MIRACLES BY DEVILS, FALSE PROPHETS AND MAGICIANS: Revelation 16:14, Revelation 19:20, Matthew 24:24; Egyptian magicians—Exodus 7-11.

An interesting Einstein quote: “Everything is a miracle; nothing is a miracle.”

Letter from Timothy Palmer to John Boer

6 February 1996

Dear John,

Thank you for your paper on miracles that you delivered last night. It was stimulating, although I am still in a state of shock because of it.

I think I am most disturbed by your thesis that miracles are part of the creational order. As you say in thesis 8, miracles “are expressions of human powers restored by God (OT), Christ (NT).” Or, these miracles are “natural powers” (thesis 8).

I suggest, John, that we have here a prime example of the problem of using reason to take us somewhere where Scripture does not take us. Although I respect general revelation, surely special revelation is clearer in its revelation.

The story of redemptive history found in the Bible suggests that there are four main periods of history in Biblical history when miracles happened. These areas are: the time of Moses; that of Elijah and Elisha; that of Jesus; and that of the early church. My college professor in Religion 101 at Calvin College suggested that God caused miracles to happen at these times in the history of God’s people because they were critical moments in God’s dealing with his people.

Clearly miracles were not natural, creational powers available to anyone who had faith. David, Solomon, Abraham, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, etc. did not have access to these natural powers, even though they were, for the most part, just as holy or spiritual as Elijah and Elisha, for example. Miracles happened when God chose to do them. They happened at periods when God chose to manifest his power.

Secondly, an examination of these miracles by and large support the views of the great theologians like Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, etc., that miracles are primarily the work of God. The topic of your paper – miracles performed by humans – are still acts of God. Only God can transcend and break laws of nature; man cannot do so by himself. (I suggest, since you do not define miracle, that a miracle is a transcending of the laws of nature.)

When Moses did his miracles, they were not natural powers available to him. A quick survey of the ten plagues in Exodus shows that God was doing the miracles; Moses was just the instrument of God. Each account of the ten plagues is introduced by the phrase: “And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Go, do this and this.’” (**WHAT ABOUT THE EGYPTIAN MAGICIANS?**) These are miracles “performed by humans,” to use your phrase on page 1; but they are miracles of God, and the human was just the instrument. Aquinas was right! Only God performs miracles; but he uses significant human mediators to perform them, in many cases.

I suggest that the same thing is true of Elijah and Elisha. When Elisha healed the Shumanite woman’s son, according to I Kings 4:33 he went in and shut the door *and prayed to the Lord*. Then he lay on the boy and he was healed. Did Elisha heal the boy because of some natural, creational power that he discovered? No! This was a supernatural event. God intervened and reversed a law of nature and brought this boy back to life. This was an act of God, not a human miracle.

Surely, then, the miracles of Christ are because he was divine, not because he was human, as you suggest in thesis 9. Here was God in flesh! Something unprecedented in human—and divine—history was happening. He was the Messiah. How can we deny that it was because of his divinity that Jesus did all of these things? This Messiah was the suffering servant—he was a suffering Messiah, but he was the Messiah and he was God with us!

I don't support a nature-grace dualism. God forbid! Nature is good because it was created by God. But I do believe that God is outside of nature, God is above nature, and he is not contained in nature. The special, miraculous powers of God are not contained in nature. (By miraculous, I mean the ability to transcend the laws of nature.) I believe that there is a natural world order; and I believe that God is supernatural, and often God enters the world of nature and does miracles.

At key times in history, God performed miracles through humans – healing people, causing axe heads to float, causing water to turn into blood, raising people from the dead. The greatest quantity of these miracles took place when God became flesh. But in that important Upper Room discourse which talks at length about the sending of the Holy Spirit after Jesus goes to the Father, *there* Jesus says that we will do greater things than Jesus. Surely this is because of the supernatural gift of the Holy Spirit. Surely John Hunt is right in saying that John 5:20-21 best interprets John 14:12-13. Multitudes of miracles have been happening since the Holy Spirit was poured out on Pentecost. The Holy Spirit is changing the hearts of obstinate and rebellious people. Millions, billions of hearts have been changed. These are the miracles that Jesus is talking of. The Son is giving life to those whom he is pleased to give it (John 5:21). Every one of these conversions is a transcending of natural laws, an intervention in the normal processes of history, an act of God, a miracle of God.

We should not focus too much on these physical miracles. That is trivializing the Gospel. Which is easier: to say “Your sins are forgiven” or “Take your mat and walk” (Mark 2:9). It is obviously easier to heal a person. Only God can forgive sins. This is the supernatural miracle that the Gospels focus on – Jesus came to save us from our sins.

So John, I can't accept that miracles are natural powers available in creation. Miracles are supernatural events that God does. (Maybe Satan and his host do miracles too, but then they too are supernatural.) Miracles are when God intervenes in our natural world in a special way and does something new. I think that is what special revelation teaches us.

In Christ,

Tim Palmer

LETTER FROM TIM PALMER TO JOHN BOER

22 February 1996

Dear John,

This is just a report of our last denominational class which was held when you were in Takum. (You should really be careful about leaving your affairs in my hands, because all sorts of things could go wrong.)

We reflected on the question whether spiritual gifts are available to all people or only to believers.

An examination of the lists of spiritual gifts in Romans 12:6-8, Ephesians 4:11, I Corinthians 12:8-10, I Corinthians 12:28-30 and I Peter 4:10-11 suggests that these gifts are given to believers for the edification of the church. We suggest that spiritual gifts are those gifts that the Holy Spirit has given to believers for the building up of the church.

We include the work of Bezalel and Oholiab in Exodus 31 as an example of spiritual gifts in the Old Testament period.

But we do not consider farming as a spiritual gift (a *pneumatikon*). We consider farming as a natural gift of God but not a spiritual gift. The reason is that farming is a general gift given to all people and it is not being used directly for the building up of the church.

So we made a distinction between spiritual gifts and natural gifts. Spiritual gifts are used for the edification of the church; natural gifts can be used in creation and the Kingdom of God in general.

We were forced to this conclusion by an exegetical examination of the list of spiritual gifts in the New Testament passages above, and in particular the usage of *charismata* and *pneumatika*.

However, a few of your disciples were hesitant in going along with our conclusions all the way.

Sincerely yours,

Tim Palmer