

# Critical Issues Commentary

A Biblically based commentary on current issues that impact you

## New Age Miracles

Written by Bob DeWaay

*“For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. . . . For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen”*  
**(Romans 1:20,21,25)**

## The New Paganism

The pagans rejected the Creator and chose to worship the creature. We now live in days of revived paganism and its confusion of the Creator - created distinction. This distinction means that the triune God existed from all eternity with all His divine attributes, having no beginning, and no external dependencies or causes. The creation exists because of Him and is perpetually dependant upon Him for its orderly and purposeful existence. The created never was nor never can be the Creator.

The pagans of Paul's day believed in many gods but their so called deities lacked the “invisible attributes, eternal power and divine nature” of which Paul spoke. The problem with pagan religion is that its gods are man made objects, mythological demigods with less than divine attributes or demonic spiritual beings that are created and fallen. The Old Testament prophets derided idolaters for worshipping something they could make out of a tree or a piece of metal (**Isaiah 44:12-17**). The New Testament teaches that idol worshippers who make sacrifices to idols do so to demons (**1Corinthians 10:19,20**).

That pagan religiosity is a major issue in America is somewhat ironic. Only a few decades ago secular humanism which had no place for spirituality or the miraculous was the main source of opposition to the faith. The world and mankind were explained by a cold, dead, materialistic naturalism that recognized no reality but the atoms, molecules and the energy forces of physics. Accordingly, the thoughts, acts, and passions that characterize human beings were deemed explicable through chemical and neurological process that are quite natural. This view of life has rightly been labeled “reductionistic.” Many have rejected it because it cannot explain many obvious facts such as rationality -- that we can contemplate these matters and care about what they mean.

This older “modern” view (called “modernism”) has quite rapidly lost most of its adherents, even in the secular world. That the world now admits to something beyond the visible, material world is shown by the spiritual themes that are common in popular movies (such as “Ghost”) and the fascination with the spiritual realm that permeates the written media. Most people believe in some type of spiritual reality even if they still believe in naturalistic evolution and reject the faith and morals of the Bible. Miracles are now to be “expected” (if truth is found on bumper stickers).

A major problem with the new spirituality (often called the New Age) is that it does not embrace the Biblical Creator - created distinction. In this article I will seek to show that this failure to acknowledge the Creator causes a redefinition of the miraculous that while promising “miracles” defines the possibility of true miracles out of existence. I propose that if there is no independent Creator, anything that seems miraculous must be explicable by forces intrinsic to the universe. If the explanation for all events is to be found within the system of the universe, then those events can properly be called “natural,” since they are a part

of the whole.

## Postmodern Spirituality

David Ray Griffin is the founder of the Center for a Postmodern World and Executive Director of the Center for Process Studies at the School of Theology at Claremont. He describes what he calls the “postmodern” spirituality, “But perhaps the best way to get at it, as a summary term, would be *pan-en-theism*: the idea that the world is in God - God is something like the soul of the universe - and God is present in all things.”<sup>1</sup> He further elaborates upon his concept of “postmodern” spirituality:

One of the central features of the pan-en-theistic view is that the divine creative power of the universe is a persuasive, evocative power rather than a coercive power that works unilaterally. God influences us not by determining what we're going to do, or by external threats as depicted in traditional theism, but rather by seeking to *whet our appetites* for better ways of being . . . This is the one and only way that God works in the world, by persuading us. And we can generalize all the way down: we can think of all the individuals of nature - animals, cells, macromolecules, ordinary molecules, even atoms and subatomic particles - as beings, or series of events really, that have self determining power. This power is inherent in them. It cannot be overridden, even by God. It can only be persuaded.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, this view does not see God sovereignly in control of His own creation but limited by it.

What is “post” modern about it is that it gives lip service to God and the “divine creative power of the universe.” It also embraces an Eastern understanding of spirituality. A simplified summary is that the **pre**-modern view was the Judeo-Christian understanding of a supernatural Creator who has spoken truthfully and authoritatively to man, the **modern** view that humans must seek truth and meaning only through natural reason without recourse to a divinely authoritative Word and the **post**-modern view that there is no truth to be known other than that

which is relative to one's private consciousness -- "my" truth which need have no connection objective reality.<sup>3</sup> Spirituality becomes a matter of personal choice and personal choice and empowerment are what contemporary spirituality is all about.

It is claimed that man has the power within himself to change things for the better. If there are miracles, they are ones that we create by using our own spirituality and spiritual knowledge. Miracles happen through "self determining power" that is inherent in the creation. The key to miracles is not the supernatural action of God that depends only on His choice to act upon the creation in ways that are not explicable by any natural laws, but the knowledge humans can obtain about "spiritual laws" that can be manipulated to create miracles. If God cannot unilaterally work to supersede nature and natural processes from beyond and outside the creation, then Biblical miracles such as the resurrection of Jesus Christ are not possible.

What's "new" about all of this is really the old lie -- "And the serpent said to the woman, 'You surely shall not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good

and evil.'" (Genesis 3:4,5). The key is forbidden knowledge that if learned will unlock the door to one's destiny and grant control over life. We will not have to worry about eternal judgment if God's uniqueness is only in His knowledge. "You shall be like God" deludes people into thinking that the self can have ultimacy, that no creaturely dependence is necessary. The key to knowledge is no longer God's word but the individual's own experience of the forbidden, secret (the meaning of occult) knowledge.

The emphasis is on **you** - the self who will not die in judgement but be autonomous like God and have all knowledge. Ultimate reality and meaning are to be found in the self once God's authoritative revelation is doubted, rejected and disobeyed. David F. Wells discusses how the loss of objective theological truth has

reduced spirituality to the self:

Where the self circumscribes the significance of Christian faith, good and evil are reduced to a sense of well-being or its absence, God's place in the world is reduced to the domain of private consciousness, his external acts of redemption are trimmed to fit the experience of personal salvation, his providence in the world diminishes to whatever is necessary to ensure one's having a good day, his Word becomes intuition, and conviction fades into evanescent opinion. Theology becomes therapy and all the tell tale symptoms of the therapeutic model of faith begin to surface. The biblical interest in righteousness is replaced by a search for happiness, holiness by wholeness, truth by feeling, ethics by feeling good about one's self. The world shrinks to the range of personal circumstances; the community of faith shrinks to a circle of personal friends. The past recedes. The church recedes. The world recedes. All that remains is the self.<sup>4</sup>

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If the Creator and created are really not different in essence, we creatures are on equal footing with God if we can learn the secrets of deity. These, we are told, are locked within the psyche and consciousness waiting to be unleashed. Miracles, according to New Age thinking, depend on knowledge and technique. The correct information and the secrets of the craft are for sale to those "inquiring minds" who wish to enter the realm of the "miraculous." This understanding of the "supernatural" has many consequences that we need to explore. Sadly, it has also found its way into the church.

Many have so lost touch with the Biblical view of God and man that they

do not even see the irony of the commonly heard claims that one can learn to do miracles. By definition, a miracle is not something that one helps himself to at his own discretion. A miracle is an act of God that is not explicable or predictable based on anything that is part of or dependent on the natural - the created universe.

## Nature and Super-nature

"Super" nature is that which is above and beyond nature. God controls the supernatural since He created nature and all that is in it, including created spiritual beings. He alone has the power to act beyond the limitations that are innate to the creation.

To illustrate this let us consider the example of supernatural, Biblical prophecies compared to soothsaying or divination. ". . . *no prophecy [of Scripture] was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.*" (2Peter 1:21). The message of the Bible is supernatural in the sense that it does not have its ultimate source in anything that is created. The Creator inspired the Scriptures. One might say that Biblical miracles are "predictable" since future supernatural acts of God are prophesied in the Bible. This is true, but both the prediction **and** the miracle come from God, making them supernatural. Those who look to the created universe to make predictions (such as astrologers when they use their craft to analyze the stars) are using nature to predict nature, no matter how "spiritual" or occultic the endeavor may be.<sup>5</sup>

Biblical prophecies about the first and second advent of Christ are supernatural and the fulfillment of these prophecies is supernatural. When Christ returns to bring the consummation of His salvation to His people and judgment to those who reject Him, this act will be supernatural and not explicable through any natural processes. When a tarot card reader predicts something about a person and it comes true (as happens in some rare occasions) nothing supernatural has transpired. Both the source of the knowledge and its fulfillment have some explanation from within the creation. This is true even if the information has a demonic

source and the fulfillment had some involvement with spiritual forces of darkness. Remember that Satan, demons and all the hosts of spiritual wickedness are created beings. They are not supernatural in the sense that God is. That means they have limitations -- they are finite and under God's control.

There is not enough knowledge in the entire created universe, even if forbidden, occultic, spiritual knowledge is accounted for, to give anyone the power to do a true miracle. People may perform deceptive signs and wonders, but they are only working with created powers of one sort or the other. God's power transcends the creation and is not limited by the creation. God can act and no one can stop Him, nor can anyone force Him. It was God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead and everything about this resurrection was miraculous. The "powers" that exist in this creation could not stop it. C.S. Lewis calls the Incarnation which culminates in the resurrection, "The Grand Miracle," saying, "The central miracle asserted by Christians is the Incarnation. They say that God became Man. Every other miracle prepares for this, or exhibits this, or results from this."<sup>6</sup>

New Age "miracles" are a rejection of the truly miraculous because they involve a rejection of the uniqueness and deity of Christ. Anyone with the right knowledge can perform these self-induced wonders because the spirit of the New Age "christ" is supposedly tied up in the consciousness of the whole creation. Christ's works proved that He is God the Creator (see **Colossians 1:16**, **Hebrews 1:2**, **John 1:3**). What He did only God can do, so those who witnessed His Incarnate life were not afraid to worship Him and acknowledge His deity (see, for example, **John 20:28**). The Incarnation and resurrection of Christ are unique. No one could duplicate them even if he had all of the knowledge and spiritual powers of the created universe.

Even the ultimate purveyor of false miracles, operating with all the fallen spiritual powers of this creation at his direction will fall short.

*And then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance*

*of His coming; that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.*

**(2Thessalonians 2:8-10)**

The Creator will show that the creation, including its spiritual aspects, is His and that the vain attempt to manipulate the cosmos to the final glory of man will be brought to nothing through the supernatural, miraculous intervention of God.

What confuses many people in distinguishing what is miraculous are the assumptions that what is "natural" only includes the material realm, that naturalism can safely be equated with materialism and that any kind of belief in god or gods that are of a different order of being is a belief in the supernatural. The word can be used in this way, but it then loses its ability to describe the Biblical view of the supernatural. C. S. Lewis discusses this:

I propose for the rest of this book to treat only that form of Supernaturalism which believes in one God; partly because polytheism is not likely to be a live issue for most of my readers, and partly because those who believed in many gods very seldom, in fact, regarded their gods as creators of the universe and as self-existent. The gods of Greece were not really supernatural in the strict sense which I am giving to the word. They were products of the total system of things and included within it.<sup>7</sup>

Since the 1940's (when Lewis made this statement) polytheism has become a live issue for many more English speaking people, as has pantheism. The important point is that any gods or metaphysical beings that do not eternally exist in a transcendent relationship to the created order are not supernatural in the sense that the term needs to be used to be descriptive of what Christianity means by **supernatural** miracles.

C.S. Lewis explains further, The difference between Naturalism and Supernaturalism is not exactly the same as the difference between belief in a God and disbelief. Naturalism, without ceasing to be itself,

could admit a certain kind of God. The great interlocking event called Nature might be such as to produce at some stage a greater cosmic consciousness, an indwelling "God" arising from the whole process as human mind arises (according to Naturalists) from human organisms . . . Such a God would not stand outside Nature or the total system, would not be existing "on his own." . . . What Naturalism cannot accept is the idea of a God who stands outside Nature and made it.<sup>8</sup>

This distinction is crucial now that New Age thinking is so popular. If anything that can be attributed to a spiritual source is "miraculous," then miracles can be done by anyone who can manipulate (or unwittingly be manipulated by) the powers of this age (see **Ephesians 6:12**). God stands over and above all that is created and cannot be manipulated to produce the desired effects for those with knowledge or money (as Simon the sorcerer hoped - **Acts 10:24**). Magic is an art, miracles are supernatural acts of God. Magic works **with** the things of the creation, even if sometimes those "things" are evil spirits who grant power and experience for a price.

When what seems supernatural is learnable (in the sense of technique), repeatable, and predictable, it is not supernatural. Dr. Norman Geisler writes about the difference between magic and miracles:

Miracles are unique. A truly supernatural event is under God's control . . . [Hebrews 2:4 & 1 Corinthians 12:11 are referenced] Magical tricks, by contrast, are totally in the hands of the magician. He is in control and can do tricks at his will. Neither can miracles be repeated at will. They are naturally unrepeatable singularities. . . They do not occur regularly. If they did, they would not be miracles.<sup>9</sup>

The difference is who is in control - fallen man or God as the Creator and Ruler of the universe. A supernatural act is done by God, not man.

## Spiritual Technology

Miracles can be taught **about**, but they cannot be taught. There is no valid "course on miracles" that can give humans the power to impose their will on

the creation without the agency of that which is available from within the creation. "How to" books proliferate because Americans assume that problems have technological solutions. Even the world of spirituality is being probed technologically. The unbounded faith that one sees in technology ignores the fact that the biggest human predicament is a **moral** one. The moral problem of mankind has not yielded in the least to technological solutions. "How to" books about altered states of consciousness and techniques to find and use spiritual power do nothing to bring moral changes.

The need for moral change is not something that commands a large market segment in today's world. People may **need** moral change but they **want** power to change just about anything else, particularly those things that make life uncomfortable. Miraculous power offers the possibility of escaping the nagging limitations that trouble us. Miracle working power could instantaneously alter all of the things we do not like about life if we had control over it.

To depend on God for power is dependency on His terms, including the cross. The "how to" approach puts us to work with tools and information we have at our disposal that will "work" even if God does not choose to act supernaturally when we would like Him to. That is why the theory that our problems are due to a lack of knowledge and technique is always popular. It gives marketers a product to sell and the audience hope of changing things without trusting fully in the Lord and accepting His will. The person who gets results through knowledge and technique has things under his control. Occultism offers miracles that are available to those with the right (secret) knowledge.

To help sell this idea to Christians, many have misused this passage: "My people are destroyed by lack of knowledge." The implication is that knowledge is the solution to whatever problem the spiritual technician purports to be able to solve. T.V. preachers proclaim, "If Christian people only knew how to . . . [fill in the blank with whatever "secret" the preacher peddling], they would not have all these problems." The Christian life is deemed a series of engineering problems and ministers technologists with professional solutions. Even miracles are supposedly done with regularity and predictability by specialists who have learned the secret or gained favored son status with

God.

The passage that is misused is **Hosea 4:6**: "*My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being My priest. Since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.*" The passage is not about **information**, but about **relationship**. Hosea makes clear what he means by "knowledge" in **Hosea 4:1-3a**:

*Listen to the word of the Lord, O sons of Israel, For the Lord has a case against the inhabitants of the land, Because there is no faithfulness or kindness Or knowledge of God in the land. There is swearing, deception, murder, stealing, and adultery. They employ violence, so that bloodshed follows bloodshed. Therefore the land mourns . . .*

The lack was in the knowledge of God, which involves a covenant relationship with God, not information about spiritual principles. This passage also has a moral aspect to it. At issue is murder, stealing, etc., not how to build a successful career or how to make more miracles happen or how to solve x-y-z problems. The people did not know the Lord and the whole creation felt the impact. They had rejected God and His law. The remedy is to know the Lord and his Word.

Seeking help and healing from the Lord must be found in a **relationship** of humble dependency on the Creator God. We ask God to intervene in prayer which is much different than summoning the forces of the cosmos and putting them to work through whatever technique "works." The prayer of faith is a prayer that confesses ultimate hope and trust in God. Paul prayed such a prayer and was able to accept God's answer when it involved not being delivered in the manner he hoped (**2Corinthians 12:7-9**). Do it yourself miracles imply that we know how things ought to be. If humans really did have the power to perform miracles at will, the situation probably would be much worse than it is because we have misused every type of power that has ever been at our disposal.

Miracles are God acting upon the creation in an supernatural way. Biblical miracles point us to God and His Messiah. The actions of God's representatives that were part of miraculous events (such as Elijah calling for the fire on the altar and the miracles done in the ministries of the apostles as recorded in Acts) do not indicate that miracles are on tap for those

who know the secrets. They only show that God chooses to use people and their prayers in the course of His intervention in human history. God is the doer of miracles. The apostles were witnesses who sometimes had active roles at key moments.

Miracles cannot be ruled out as long as we believe that God has all power and authority over His creation. Biblical prophesies point to particularly profound miraculous interventions of God at the end of the age. We should not allow the truly miraculous to be obscured by New Age "miracles" that are really manipulations of and by the created that teach the **lie** that the creature can be like God.

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#### End Notes

1. Alan AtKisson, "Redefining the Divine, an Interview with David Ray Griffin" In Context #24; The Context Institute, Bainbridge Is. Wa., Late Winter 1990; p. 20.
2. *ibid.* p. 21.
3. For a piercing discussion of post-modern thinking see: David F. Wells, No Place For Truth, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) pages 53-92.
4. *ibid.* p. 183.
5. see CIC Vol. 1 Issue 4, July 1992
6. C. S. Lewis, Miracles, (New York: Macmillan, 1947) p. 112.
7. *ibid.* p. 13.
8. *ibid.* p. 14.
9. Norman Geisler, Signs and Wonders, (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1988) p. 73.

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