

## ON SPEAKING IN TONGUES

I used to think that glossalalia, or speaking in tongues, in the New Testament indicated speaking in a language unknown to the person speaking but known to some or all listeners. Now I no longer believe that to be true of all New Testament passages that refer to glossalalia.<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon is mentioned only once in the Gospels, in Mark 16.17, with the phrase, “they will speak in new tongues” (NRSV; *glossais lalesousin kainais*). Apart from the textual problem with the ending of Mark, perhaps this is to be understood in light of Mark 7.33, 35, the only other occurrences of *glossa* in Mark. In this passage, Jesus is in the region of the Decapolis that is inhabited predominantly by Gentiles. Here he heals a deaf man “who had an impediment in his speech.” After Jesus touched his “tongue” (*glosses*), his ears were opened and his “tongue” (*glosses*) was loosened or released. And, this is the important point, the people were amazed or astounded beyond measure and were telling others about Jesus and were preaching (“proclaiming” in NRSV, from *ekerusson*), “He has done everything well.” Similarly, the speaking in new tongues of Mark 16.17 is one of the “signs” (*semeia*) that will “accompany” (NRSV; *parakolouthesei*; NKJV, “follow”; Lattimore’s *New Testament*, “go with”) those who believe the proclamation of the good news about Jesus and are baptized. Like the deaf man of Decapolis, the tongues of those who call on the name of Jesus (“by using my name,” NRSV; *en to onomati mou*) will be loosed to tell others that everything he does is good.

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<sup>1</sup>Anthony C. Thiselton, *A Shorter Guide to the Holy Spirit: Bible, Doctrine, Experience* (Eerdmans, 2016), 41-43, identifies six meanings of tongues in the New Testament: “angelic speech, power to speak known foreign languages; the use of archaic liturgical speech; tongues as ‘ecstatic speech’; the release of praise and longings buried in the unconscious or subconscious; and such language released in the ‘sighs too deep for words’ in Romans 8.26.”

Concerning Acts, chapter 2, Luke possibly has indicated his direction on this with his use of *glossa* in his gospel (Luke 1.64; cf. 16.24). When old Zechariah defers to Elizabeth and confirms the name “John” for his newborn baby, Luke tells us, “Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God.” This remarkable convergence of events brought “fear” (from *phobos*, perhaps to indicate wonder) to the extended family, so that “all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea.” This seems to be Luke’s intent in Acts, chapter 2, that the Holy Spirit, as foretold by Joel, now has opened the mouths of his people to proclaim “God’s deeds of power” (vv. 8-11) to Jews from the Diaspora, who had gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost. This brought about wonder, or amazement, and a sense of confusion, something that had to be explained by Peter and the other apostles. Of course, these could have been “languages” unlearned by the apostles, even though the word that Luke uses in verses 4 and 11 is *glossa* (cf. v. 26, in its emphasis on David’s prophecy) that is translated either “tongue” (KJV, NKJB, RSV, NASB, NEB, REB, ESV, TNIV, Tyndale) or “language” (NRSV, NCV, NET, RNJB, Phillips, Lattimore). Interestingly, Alexander Campbell in his *Living Oracles* used “languages” in verse 4 and “tongues” in verse 11 (cf. Moffatt’s *New Translation*, “tongues” in verse 4 and “languages” in verse 11). At any rate, I think the brief comment at Acts 2.4 in the *Revised New Jerusalem Bible: Study Edition* has it right, “This is akin to the ecstatic speaking in tongues experienced by Cornelius, Acts 10.46, and at Corinth, 1 Corinthians 14, and Acts 19.6, except that here the speech is intelligible. It reverses the confusion of Babel, Genesis 11.7. Although the crowds are all Jews or converts to Judaism, the list of exotic places, verses 9-11, foreshadows the spread of the gospel to all nations.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Henry Wansbrough, *The Revised New Jerusalem Bible: Study Edition* (Image Random House, 2019), 2069.

Luke's references to glossalalia in Acts 10.46 and 19.6 are so terse that little can be adduced from the text itself to decide whether the speaking in tongues, by Cornelius and other Gentiles and the disciples of John at Ephesus, was intelligible (i.e., a known language) or unintelligible (i.e., an unknown language). But Paul's excursus on tongues to the Corinthians is another matter because of its length. The following points make me think that glossalalia could be ecstatic speech, that is, a language not known by humans.<sup>3</sup> From Paul in 1 Corinthians 14 (ESV used here), we learn that the one who speaks in a tongue "speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit" (verse 2). We also learn that "the one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself" (verse 4). Then Paul emphasizes, "The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up" (verse 5). Paul is saying that glossalalia is a private phenomenon and not beneficial for the public assembly unless someone interprets. The contrast between prophecy and tongues seems to be that of what is intelligible versus what is not intelligible. In verse 9, Paul explains, "If with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air." See too the example in verses 10-11 about "sounds" (NRSV; from Greek *phone*, "voice," not "language" as in ESV).<sup>4</sup>

Another indication that tongues, in 1 Corinthians 14, are unintelligible is Paul's reference to his own ability to speak in tongues in verses 18-19: "I thank God that I speak in tongues [unintelligible] more than all of you. Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others [intelligible speech], than ten thousand words in a

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<sup>3</sup>Frederick Danker's *Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (University of Chicago, 2009), 80, defines *glossa* for these passages as "an unusual ecstatic utterance, tongue."

<sup>4</sup>Granted, how one perceives tongues may influence the translation of the various terms that Paul uses in verses 10-11.

tongue [unintelligible speech].” However, the statement of Paul that follows, in verses 21-25, could be interpreted either way. Paul’s emphasis is that tongues are a sign for believers not unbelievers. But the idea, that unbelievers who visit the Christian assembly might think that believers “are out of [their] minds” if everyone spoke in tongues, could weigh toward tongues as unintelligible speech. Then, Paul’s instruction in verses 26-33 to “interpret” tongues (from Greek *diemeneuo*, “make something clear or intelligible, translate, interpret”)<sup>5</sup> also can go either way. Does Paul mean “interpret” speech that is unintelligible, or does he mean “translate” speech that is intelligible? And Paul’s concluding remarks in chapter 14, in verses 36-40, have little to offer for tongues as either intelligible or unintelligible, but Paul does stress to the Corinthians, “earnestly desire to prophesy [the greater gift, because it is intelligible to all], and do not forbid speaking in tongues [the lesser gift, because it is unintelligible to all, but a gift of the Holy Spirit nevertheless].”

These considerations from a careful look at the text indicate that tongues are or can be speech that is unintelligible to humans. This is probably what Paul means when he mentions “tongues of men [intelligible] and of angels [unintelligible]” in 1 Corinthians 13.1 (ESV). And maybe in some way this can be linked to Paul’s visions and revelations that he received of the Lord when he was “caught up to the third heaven . . . into paradise . . . and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter” (2 Corinthians 12.1ff.).

I think the bigger problem, though, in the matter of spiritual gifts such as glossalalia comes from the post-Enlightenment imposition of a miraculous versus non-miraculous, or supernatural versus natural, dichotomy on the biblical worldview (*Weltanschauung*). No such distinctions are made in either the Old Testament or the New Testament. Simply put, people of

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<sup>5</sup>Danker, *Concise Greek-English Lexicon*, 96.

biblical times would not have understood the distinctions that we agonize over. In this sense, tongue speaking is neither miraculous or supernatural. Was it a sign? Yes, it was. Did it cause wonder? Yes, it did. Was it a power, or powerful deed, of the Almighty? Yes, it was. It is best to stick to the biblical language in this regard and talk about the “powers” (from *dunamis*), the “wonders” (from *teras*), and the “signs” (from *seimeion*). See Acts 2.22; 2 Corinthians 12.12; Hebrews 2.4. The English word “miracle,” which many Bible translations unfortunately use for the Greek word *dunamis* in various places, labors under the dichotomy mentioned above, has an infinite semantic range in its meanings in modern usage, and causes more confusion than clarity.<sup>6</sup> Besides, use of the English word “miracle” is not needed, since the text indicates by other language that something out of the ordinary is happening. For Acts 2, the people who heard and saw the apostles speaking in tongues “were bewildered . . . were amazed and astonished . . . were amazed and perplexed.”

Wouldn't we say that the work of the Holy Spirit, poured out for all flesh (i.e., Jews and Gentiles) during these last days (i.e., the days of the Christian age in which we still live), is both miraculous and supernatural? Yes, I think we would. But in many churches we have tried without end, and have not been very successful, to distinguish the miraculous versus the non-miraculous, or supernatural versus the natural, work of the Holy Spirit, particularly concerning the gifts of God's Holy Spirit. This view of cessationism apparently arose out of the reaction of the Reformers to excesses in the Roman Catholic church (e.g., its emphasis on bogus miracles). Although I have not researched this much, I would not be surprised to find that the Reformers were working from a pre-Enlightenment (i.e., Renaissance) type of thinking as a foundation. The

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<sup>6</sup>See my section on “Miracle” in “Linguistic Mush: Semantic Squabbles About A Few ‘Religious’ Words” (Fall 2021), 16-21, online at: [www.davidwfletcher.com/religion-files---doctrine-and-practice.php](http://www.davidwfletcher.com/religion-files---doctrine-and-practice.php). Also appended to this paper.

modern debate over cessation versus continuation of so-called extraordinary gifts has fallen along the Pentecostal, and neo-Pentecostal, versus non-Pentecostal lines. I, for one, do not see much use in the debate, since I now believe that much of the language used is skewed and does not reflect what the text of the Bible says.<sup>7</sup> All things are of God; he is sovereign. I prefer to let God be God. I agree with Jesus that in matters of the work of God's Holy Spirit, "The Spirit breathes where he pleases, and you hear the report of him, but know not whence he comes, or whither he goes; so is every one who is born of the Spirit" (*The Living Oracles*; John 3.8).<sup>8</sup>

To conclude, have I ever spoken in tongues? Only the English language, a little biblical Hebrew, koine Greek, German, and perhaps a smattering of French and Spanish, but nothing ecstatic or "of angels" that I am aware of. Have I ever heard ecstatic, unintelligible tongue speaking? No, I have not, unless that occurred when I was a student at Freed-Hardeman College during a visit to a Pentecostal church in Jacks Creek in West Tennessee. Two or three of us preaching students went to the church one Sunday evening. I do remember congregants standing with hands raised and shouting to the Lord, but I do not remember if any were speaking in tongues on that occasion. Am I aware of anyone who has spoken in tongues in this fashion? My wife assures me that our youngest son told her about his recent experience of ecstatic tongue speaking. This came out of his experience of a nasty fall that caused a concussion with nerve damage and his recovery and healing from that. I also talked recently with a brother from Murfreesboro, Tennessee, who said that he has spoken in tongues, not publicly but privately in his prayer language to God.

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<sup>7</sup>See my section "On Spiritual Gifts" in "Some Thoughts About the Holy Spirit" (August 2021), 5-7, online at: <[www.davidwfletcher.com/religion-files---doctrine-and-practice.php](http://www.davidwfletcher.com/religion-files---doctrine-and-practice.php)>. Also appended to this paper.

<sup>8</sup>Alexander Campbell, *The Living Oracles* (1826; reprint, Gospel Advocate, 2001), 194.

Have I agonized in prayer over matters (e.g., “we do not know what to pray for as we ought”), so much so that the Spirit had to intercede “with groanings too deep for words” (Romans 8.26). Certainly! Have I tossed and turned on my bed fighting, perhaps demons perhaps my own psychological uncertainties (I don’t know which), and murmuring incoherent things that cannot be understood. Yes, I have. Can I explain it? No, I cannot. But like those I mentioned above, I cannot deny the reality of what I experienced. Like Paul, I do not know whether this was “in the body or out of the body” (2 Corinthians 12.3). Above all, I wish to follow Paul’s guideline, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast to what is good. Abstain from every form of evil” (ESV; 1 Thessalonians 5.16-22). In our narrow-minded, materialistic world, it is easier to put out the fire of God’s Holy Spirit. I would rather try my best to be receptive to the marvelous work of our God in all of his creation and among all his creatures.

Miracle (from “Linguistic Mush: Semantic Squabbles About A Few ‘Religious’ Words)

The final word from my list of linguistic mush is “miracle.” When I think about how freely and loosely the word “miracle” is used, I am reminded of the tune by the rock band Kansas, “Miracles Out of Nowhere.”<sup>9</sup> Also, I am reminded of the line in the movie *Shawshank Redemption* when Warden Norton discovers that Andy Dufresne has escaped, “Lord, it’s a miracle. The man up and vanished like a fart in the wind.”<sup>10</sup> But concerning the need for empirical proof about God’s work in our world, I caution myself with the dictum in Hebrews 11.3, “By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.” And there is this word of encouragement from the apostle Paul, “For we live by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5.7). There is no doubt in my mind that we miss much of the marvelous work of God simply because of our lack of faith. Jesus taught us, “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you” (Matthew 17.20; cf. Luke 17.6). So my effort here is not to downplay the ongoing work of God in our world today.<sup>11</sup> Instead, I wish to suggest that there are words in the English language besides “miracle” that may be less open to misunderstanding when talking about God’s activities today.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>From the album *Leftoverture*, produced by Jeff Glixman and released in 1976.

<sup>10</sup>Released by Castle Rock Entertainment in 1994. Norton was played by Bob Gunton, and Dufresne was played by Tim Robbins.

<sup>11</sup>See the excellent study by Craig S. Keener, *Miracles Today: The Supernatural Work of God in the Modern World* (BakerAcademic, 2021).

<sup>12</sup>Language describes the work that God is doing to get our attention and to rouse us out of complacency and monotony. Language is important. Such was true in the days of Jesus and his followers, and the phenomenal stories of the New Testament proclaim what is mysterious and unexplainable.



The etymology of the English word “miracle,” from the Latin *miraculum* (“object of wonder”) and the Old French *miracle* (“wonderful work of God”), highlights the out of the ordinary or the unusual character, as well as divine handiwork, in the happenings that are thereby described. These happenings cause us to marvel or to wonder, since we do not observe such occurrences on a day to day basis. The New Testament describes these events with a variety of Greek words such as *dunamis* or “power,” *teras* or “wonder,” and *semeion* or “sign” (see Acts 2.22; 2 Corinthians 12.12; Hebrews 2.4).<sup>13</sup> There are other ways the biblical text indicates things out of the ordinary. A good example is when Paul is bitten by a poisonous viper on the island of Malta, but “nothing unusual happened to him” (Greek, *meden atopon eis auton ginomenon*; Acts 28.6). The use of “miracle,” in its original sense, seems to be fine to describe these happenings, since it does not impose an entire set of unnecessary categories on the use of the word itself (i.e., what I would call linguistic cultural baggage). But, unfortunately, “miracle” does not convey to most moderns the simple idea of wonder, amazement, and awe.

In our post-Enlightenment world, a world of empirical science, we talk about nature and the ever present laws of nature.<sup>14</sup> These ideas were instilled into our psyches during the days of our youth and throughout our years of education. We believe them to be true; we live by them; we depend on them; we do not contradict nor deny them. But there is no true opposite for this idea of nature. Try finding antonyms for the word “nature” that are consistent in meaning. You cannot. Nature is all powerful and ever present. We cannot escape nature. Perhaps, though, we have been brainwashed by an Enlightenment mentality. This is a mentality that overlays or

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<sup>13</sup>On characteristics of New Testament signs, wonders, and powers, see Appendix.

<sup>14</sup>Of course, it is more complicated than this. The “Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy” indicates that “the Laws of Nature are to be distinguished both from Scientific Laws and from Natural Laws.” Norman Swartz, “Laws of Nature,” online at: [www.iep.utm.edu/lawofnat/](http://www.iep.utm.edu/lawofnat/).

superimposes the idea of the supernatural on the natural in order to have the divine, to have religion, to have wonder or “miracles.” Perhaps you understand my semantic squabbling now. The word “miracle” in Western cultures is wrapped up in endless discussion and argumentation about this dichotomy between the natural and the supernatural.<sup>15</sup>

Definitions of “miracle” fall in line with this post-Enlightenment mentality. Miracle is “an extraordinary event attributed to a supernatural power.”<sup>16</sup> Or, miracle is “an event or action that apparently contradicts known scientific laws.”<sup>17</sup> Craig Keener says, “Probably the most common definition of a miracle throughout history, from Augustine to Aquinas, has been a divine action that transcends the ordinary course of nature and so generates awe.”<sup>18</sup> And John Court defines, “A miracle is an extraordinary happening, something not easily explained by existing frames of reference; as a result it is interpreted as directly caused by God or supernatural agencies.”<sup>19</sup> Because of this infusion of the idea of nature into our thinking, we cannot get away from the notion of nature when we talk about miracles. This is unfortunate. And it also is unfortunate when English translations muddle the clear meaning of Greek words in the Bible with their use of the word “miracle.” For example, the NIV uses “miracle” or “miraculous” twenty-four times in the New Testament. Twenty-two of these translate *dunamis* (Matthew 7.22; 11.20, 21, 23; 13.54, 58; 14.2; Mark 6.2, 5, 14; 9.39; Luke 10.13; 19.37; Acts 2.22; 8.13; 19.11;

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<sup>15</sup>For an older but helpful work, see Colin Brown, *Miracles and the Critical Mind* (Eerdmans, 1984).

<sup>16</sup>*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Encyclopedia*, edited by Mark A. Stevens (Merriam-Webster, 2000), 1076.

<sup>17</sup>*Webster's New World Dictionary*, Fourth Edition, 413.

<sup>18</sup>Keener, *Miracles Today*, 3.

<sup>19</sup>John M. Court, *The Penguin Dictionary of the Bible* (Penguin Books, 2007), 232.

1 Corinthians 12.10, 28, 29; 2 Corinthians 12.12; Galatians 3.5; Hebrews 2.4). All of these could be translated “mighty works” or “powerful deeds.” In John 7.21, the NIV translates *hen ergon epoiesā kai pantes tuaumadzete* (literally, “one work I did and everyone marvels”<sup>20</sup>) as “I did one miracle, and you are all amazed.” In Acts 4.22, the NIV translates *eton gar en pleionon tessarakonta ho anthropos eph’ hon gegonei to semeion touto tes iaseos* (literally, “for of years was more than forty the man upon whom had happened this sign of healing”<sup>21</sup>) as “for the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old.” In these two passages, “miracle” is not needed, as “work” and “sign” convey the meaning of the text accurately. In all instances, the use of “miracle” by the NIV makes the text less understandable, since “miracle” typically is understood by moderns as a happening that is supernatural by way of contrast with what is natural.

For some time I have been thinking about and doubting more and more this common distinction, a post-Enlightenment one I believe, between what we label “natural” and “supernatural” or “ordinary” and “extraordinary” concerning the work of God in the world. The differentiation hardly seems defensible by a careful study of the Bible, both Old Testament and New Testament, and its overriding worldview. I agree with John Walton who pointedly states, “There is no concept of a ‘natural’ world in ancient Near East thinking. The dichotomy between natural and supernatural is a relatively recent one.” He goes on to suggest:

Deity pervaded the ancient world. Nothing happened independently of deity. The gods did not “intervene” because that would assume that there was a world of events outside of them that they could step into and out of. The Israelites, along with everyone else in the ancient world, believed instead that every event was the act of deity—that every

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<sup>20</sup>Robert K. Brown and Philip W. Comfort, translators, *The New Greek-English Interlinear New Testament*, editor, J. D. Douglas (Tyndale House Publishers, 1990), 347.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 423.

plant that grew, every baby born, every drop of rain and every climatic disaster was an act of God. No “natural” laws governed the cosmos; deity ran the cosmos or was inherent in it. There were no “miracles” (in the sense of events deviating from that which was “natural”), there were only signs of the deity’s activity (sometimes favorable, sometimes not). The idea that deity got things running then just stood back or engaged himself elsewhere (deism) would have been laughable in the ancient world because it was not even conceivable. As suggested by Richard Bube, if God were to unplug himself in that way from the cosmos, we and everything else in the cosmos would simply cease to exist. There is nothing “natural” about the world in biblical theology, nor should there be in ours. This does not suggest that God micromanages the world, only that he is thoroughly involved in the operations and functions of the world.

As a result, we should not expect anything in the Bible or in the rest of the ancient Near East to engage in the discussion of how God’s level of creative activity relates to the “natural” world (i.e., what we call naturalistic process or the laws of nature). The categories of “natural” and “supernatural” have no meaning to them, let alone any interest (despite the fact that in our modern world such questions take center stage in the discussion).<sup>22</sup>

In other words, our common distinction between God’s work in and through nature and God’s work that overrides or supercedes nature simply would not make sense to the people of the Bible.<sup>23</sup>

Does this mean that the people of the Bible did not recognize the great or mighty deeds of the Lord that went above and beyond what usually could be expected in human experience? Such certainly is not true, because they would acknowledge the Lord’s control and guidance of infrequent or “irregular” events as well as his overriding handiwork in the “regular” or everyday

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<sup>22</sup>John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (InterVarsity, 2009), 18. Compare similar comments by Walton in his *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Second Edition; BakerAcademic, 2018), 47.

<sup>23</sup>In comments on 1 Corinthians 12.10, Thiselton, *A Shorter Guide to the Holy Spirit*, 39, observes in light of various English translations of *energemata dynameon*, “The paraphrase ‘miracles’ is not in the Greek at all. We have no right to impose onto Paul in the first century a ‘dualist’ or ‘two-story’ contrast between the ‘natural’ and ‘supernatural’ worlds, which only came to govern much of modern thought since the eighteenth century with deism and the Enlightenment. Paul regarded the one, single universe as firmly under the control of God, whether he governed by regular means or less usual means. Hence ‘effective deeds of power’ does not exclude ‘the miraculous,’ but leaves God’s sovereign acts unspecified.”

affairs without deprecation of the latter to any systematic, independent working of the cosmos itself (i.e., the “natural”). Luke Timothy Johnson, in his book *Miracles: God’s Presence and Power in Creation*, tries to get at this difficult shift in our thinking in his chapters on “The Problematic Category” and “Reframing the Discussion.”<sup>24</sup> C. John Collins, in his work *The God of Miracles: An Exegetical Examination of God’s Action in the World*, does not agree necessarily with this jettisoning of “nature” or “miracle,” but his careful study does show the difficulties and even contradictions set up by use of such post-Enlightenment ideology.<sup>25</sup> This problem needs more work.<sup>26</sup> It has been with us a long, long time. I think that use of words like “miracle” only prolong the problem and do little to solve the difficulties.

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<sup>24</sup>Luke Timothy Johnson, *Miracles: God’s Presence and Power in Creation*, Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church, Series Editor, Samuel E. Balentine (Westminster John Knox, 2018), 21ff., 45ff.

<sup>25</sup>See his brief section, “Biblical Vocabulary for ‘Nature’ and ‘Miracles’: Are There Technical Terms?” C. John Collins, *The God of Miracles: An Exegetical Examination of God’s Action in the World* (Crossway Books, 2000), 63-66.

<sup>26</sup>The book by Gerald R. McDermott, *Everyday Glory: The Revelation of God in All of Reality* (Baker Academic, 2018), is promising with his use of a typological hermeneutic, although he refines some of the classic categories like “nature” and “natural law.”

### On Spiritual Gifts (from “Some Thoughts About the Holy Spirit”)

It is important to distinguish between the gift of the Spirit himself and the power given to believers by the indwelling Spirit. The apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12.11, “All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.” He is instructing the Corinthian Christians on “spiritual gifts” (see 12.1). The phrase “to each one individually as he wills” (Greek *idia hekasto kathos bouletai*) indicates that the distinction in gifts comes as a result of the will or desire of the Spirit. This distinction is also seen in Acts 2.4, “And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.” On Pentecost, the apostles and those with them (see 1.15) first were filled with the Spirit. Then out of the fulness of the Spirit, they were empowered to speak in tongues (that is, “as the Spirit gave them utterance,” Greek *kathos to pneuma edidou apophtheggesthai autois*). By the baptism of the Spirit they were filled with the indwelling gift of the Spirit, and the Spirit so chose on this occasion to give them power to speak languages they never had learned or studied.

The idea that there are different “measures”<sup>27</sup> of the Spirit among believers does not seem to be correct according to the precise meaning of the biblical text. This approach usually makes a distinction between the “extraordinary” or “miraculous” (e.g., Holy Spirit baptismal measure) and the “ordinary” or “non-miraculous” (e.g., the indwelling measure).<sup>28</sup> I would prefer to see

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<sup>27</sup>See Lewis Foster, “In Step with the Holy Spirit,” *The Lookout* (July, August, September 1979); Gareth L. Reese, *New Testament History: Acts* (College Press, 1979).

<sup>28</sup>Besides the impossibility of getting any kind of definite meaning in today’s culture for what constitutes “miracle,” the “supernatural” versus “natural” (or “extraordinary” versus “ordinary”) dichotomy seems to be a post-Enlightenment phenomenon that generally is imposed on the biblical text. But there may be, however, textual grounds (i.e., from the wording of the biblical text) for seeing some things as “ordinary” (i.e., what happens frequently or routinely) and “out of the ordinary” (i.e., what happens occasionally or once in a while).

the distinctions as the result of the will of the Spirit, the same Spirit who dwells in all believers the same way, that is, by faith as a result of turning to God in baptism (as per Acts 2.38). So while the same Spirit dwells in all believers (both then and now) the same way, the same Spirit does not empower all believers (both then and now) the same way. The same gift of the Holy Spirit himself is received by all, thus the similar terminology (“promise,” “receive,” in Acts 2.33, 38-39). But the Spirit imparts particular gifts as he so wills.

My concern is not to rob baptism (i.e., what is labeled “water baptism”<sup>29</sup>) of its effectual power—the regenerating work of God’s Spirit. We could even say that the work of the Holy Spirit at baptism is supernatural and miraculous, but many would misunderstand this due to what I have indicated in the footnote above. Regardless, the work of the Spirit at baptism transcends the natural; it is a gift from God. The “baptism of the Holy Spirit”<sup>30</sup> may be that general outpouring of God’s Spirit, which the church received at Pentecost, whereby the Spirit became available for “all flesh” through God’s appointed means of faith, repentance, and baptism. But the New Testament consistently places the work of the Spirit and the role of baptism together, at the same time, except for the special cases of Pentecost, the Samaritans, and the Gentiles.<sup>31</sup> If I understand New Testament teaching correctly, the Holy Spirit is fully and completely active at Christian baptism to save the sinner and to empower appropriately the regenerated member of

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<sup>29</sup>The exact expression “water baptism” never occurs in the New Testament, but several passages connect “baptism” with “water” (Matthew 3.11; Mark 1.8; Luke 3.16; John 1.26, 33; Acts 1.5; 11.16; cf. 1 Peter 3.21).

<sup>30</sup>See Matthew 3.11; Mark 1.8; Luke 3.16; John 1.33; Acts 1.5; 11.16.

<sup>31</sup>See David W Fletcher, “The Design of Baptism in the New Testament,” *Baptism and the Remission of Sins: An Historical Perspective*, edited by David W Fletcher (College Press, 1990), 367ff.; also available online as “Baptism in the New Testament,” at: [www.davidwfletcher.com/religion-files.php](http://www.davidwfletcher.com/religion-files.php).

David W Fletcher, January 2022

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God's new creation (see 2 Corinthians 5.17). And this empowerment with spiritual gifts to believers brings about edification for the body of Christ, the church (see Ephesians 4.7ff.).



APPENDIX:  
CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SIGNS, POWERS, AND WONDERS IN THE GOSPELS<sup>32</sup>

1. The signs, powers, and wonders of Jesus are an inseparable part of the gospel narratives.
2. The recorded signs, powers, and wonders of Jesus contain nothing unreasonable or silly.
3. The recorded signs, powers, and wonders of Jesus show a measure of restraint.
4. The signs, powers, and wonders of Jesus do not become more frequent as time passes.
5. The signs, powers, and wonders of Jesus could be appraised by the physical senses.
6. The signs, powers, and wonders of Jesus were not done secretly; they were done publicly in the presence of many witnesses, even his enemies.
7. The recorded signs, powers, and wonders of Jesus have not been duplicated by modern science.
8. The results of the signs, powers, and wonders of Jesus seem to be achieved instantly.
9. In performing signs, powers, and wonders, Jesus had worthy objectives—to demonstrate the power of God’s kingdom on earth and to relieve those in need.
10. Jesus put great emphasis on his signs, powers, and wonders in order to evoke a proper response to God and to show that he had been sent by God, his Father.

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<sup>32</sup>These ideas came from an old printout I had on file titled, “Characteristics of Miracles in the Gospels.” It probably was adapted from an apologetics course or another source that I failed to note. I have made some modifications, especially the substitution of “signs, powers, and wonders” for the word “miracle,” as this to me makes better sense in light of my remarks in the text above.

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