

THE WEIRDNESS OF GOD

What the Bible Says About God's Character, How to Discern
Manifestations, and Why the Church Has Attempted to
Squash the Holy Spirit's Creativity

MERRILL G. GREENE

Copyright © by Merrill G. Greene

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, or through any information browsing, storage, or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

First Printing, 2022.

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-77789670-5 (Paperback)

ISBN: 978-1-77759671-2 (Hardcover)

ISBN: 978-1-77759672-9 (Digital)

Weird God Publishing

www.WeirdGod.com



WEIRD GOD

EXPLORING THE ENDLESS
CREATIVITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
Setting the Stage	4
The Spirit and The Scriptures	8
The Spirit of Subjectivity	10
Doctrines of Demons	11
The Task ahead	14
Closing Remarks	15
CHAPTER 1: THE OTHERNESS OF GOD	19
Distinguishing Marks of a Holy/Other God	21
God is Humble	24
God is Weird	27
An Invitation	29
CHAPTER 2: THE WEIRDNESS OF YAHWEH	31
Burning Questions	33
Murder Mystery	36
God's Broken Telephone	38
The Writing is on the Wall: Literally and Metaphorically	41
God's Mercy amid Doubt	44
God's "Contractual" Miracles	47
A Magician and His Donkey	50
Yahweh: A Strange God for Normal People	52

CHAPTER 3: THE WEIRDNESS OF JESUS CHRIST **55**

Messy Messiahship	56
The Unorthodox Exorcist	58
Jesus, MD	61
Chef Jesus	65
I Will Make You Fishers of Money	67
The Strange Words of Jesus	68
Miracle Working Jesus: A Divisive Topic	72
The Strange Deeds of Others	75
Something Fishy: Offending Jesus with Discernment	77
The Curse of Doubt	78
Like Father Like Son	81

CHAPTER 4: THE WEIRDNESS OF THE HOLY GHOST **83**

Speaking in Mysteries	86
Death Notes	88
Lead Us (Not) into Temptation	89
The Ecstasy of Loving God	92
How to Blaspheme the Holy Spirit	94
The Weirdness and Mercy of the Trinity	96

CHAPTER 5: THE WEIRDNESS OF DISCERNMENT **97**

Discerning Dreams	100
Discerning Visions	103
Discerning Prophets and Prophecies	105
Discerning Physical Manifestations	108
Discerning Spirits:A Marian Perspective	111

Discerning Leaders: Guilt by Association	115
Discerning Healing Miracles	117
Discerning Intuition: Imprecise Language and Grace	120
Discerning Discernment Ministries	121
Discernment and Pastoral Ministry	122
CHAPTER 6: THE WEIRDNESS OF THE CHURCH	125
<hr/>	
Drunk in the Spirit	126
A Not-So-Common Common Life	128
Suffering Silliness	130
“Great is Jesus of the Ephesians!”	134
Babbling with Dabblers	135
The Honour and Shame of Weirdness	136
God’s Courtroom	141
The Weirdness of Goodness	144
The Mystery of the Church	147
CONCLUSION	149
<hr/>	

For Solomon & Joel

“But that [weirdness] can be seen in the Bible in those seldom preached upon passages in Ezekiel, or Job, or even the Psalms. In those places we see all sorts of weird, uncanny things. And the weirdest being of all is God. He is Wholly Other and utterly weird. This is the God of the whirlwind, who dwells in thick darkness, who is so radioactive you drop dead just by getting too close. He is so overwhelming he is as crushing as Niagara Falls, only more so—infinately more.”

– C.R. WILEY

Acknowledgments

A book of this nature takes considerable editorial work to allow for a neutral and edifying experience for such a wide audience of Christians. I want to extend thanks to Grant Fawcett, Bert & Carol Keuhner, Mark Hanson, Ben Bedeck, Nick Metivier, Perry Edwards, Neal Whitman, Emily Goodwin, Matthew McGuire, Andrew Arden, Dan Lirette, Travis Duke, Aaron Doucette, Kameron & Marcus Cook, and anyone I am forgetting who read the various drafts of this book and offered many helpful suggestions to improve the premise, structure, and overall content of this book. Thanks to my parents for the continuous support they have given me; I could not have done it without them. You helped me become the person I am today, and I am forever grateful for that – I love you both. Finally, a special thanks to my friends Joel and Solomon, who introduced me to a supernatural Christianity and made life far less boring.

INTRODUCTION

“...for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.”

(HEB 5:12-14)

When you think of the God of the Bible, the first word that comes to mind to describe Him is not typically *weird*. We might be prone to describe Him as loving, just, powerful, or perhaps even wrathful. During a Church gathering, many of us would find it quite startling to hear the pastor get up on stage and call Him weird or strange. Yet, one of the most common characteristics attributed to God in the Bible is that He is *holy*. When we hear the word holy, our minds can sometimes drift towards ideas of moral perfection, righteousness, or perhaps even a deistic perception of God as utterly transcendent, beyond the grasp of mortal minds, untouchable.¹ In this book, however, I would like to suggest that one of the ways we understand God’s holiness is that it means He is, from our perspective, extraordinarily weird.

This may strike you as irreverent, or perhaps even blasphemous! However, I truly believe that the Scriptures demand we view God this

way, at least at the beginning of our journey. This book is not only about God's nature, but about the process of Christian discernment. On the surface, these two things may appear unrelated. Yet, I contend that they are inextricably linked. Among some denominations and movements, it has become fashionable to discern God's involvement in something by determining whether the manifestation, miracle, or movement is weird or strange, or different. On these grounds, some Christians conclude that if something is weird, it cannot be from God. I refer to this process throughout the book as the use of the *criterion of weirdness*.² My goal is to dismantle this system of thought and explain why it is problematic.

In truth, this book serves as a sustained elaboration of the American revivalist Jonathan Edwards' (1703-1758) work *Distinguishing Marks of the Work of the Spirit of God*, specifically of his following statement: "Nothing can be certainly concluded from this, that a work is carried on in a way very unusual and extraordinary; provided the variety or difference be such, as may still be comprehended within the limits of scripture rules. What the church has been used to, is not a rule by which we are to judge; because there may be new and extraordinary works of God, and he has heretofore evidently wrought in an extraordinary manner. He has brought to pass new things, strange works; and has wrought in such a manner as to surprise both men and angels. And as God has done thus in times past, so we have no reason to think but that he will do so still." In other words, according to Edwards, whether or not a manifestation looks weird to us tells us nothing of its origins or how to discern it.

I begin by exploring what the Bible says about God's holiness. I argue that holiness is a way of expressing God's otherness, that unique feature

of Him to be distinct from His creation. This idea of otherness is part of what drives the biblical narrative of the Scriptures. God is expressive and infinitely creative (in fact, He is the author and source of all human creativity). By His very nature, He invites us to embrace and emulate His weirdness in an unbelieving world. Throughout this book, I highlight narratives and concepts found in the Old and New Testaments that demonstrate the beautifully bizarre ways God interacts with humanity and how we ought to discern and love the way God chooses to reveal His nature and character to us.

This book concludes that God's weirdness is an attribute we ascribe to Him in the beginning stages of our faith or in our immaturity to elevate human wisdom above God's. God's weirdness is our introduction to seeking God's face, but it is not the end. We must come to a place where the weirdness of God becomes our normal. The ultimate litmus test of a manifestation or miracle is not necessarily a robust understanding of various theological concepts, but a meaningful relationship with God.

My hope in writing is not that you can use the things written here to tear down or criticize those in a particular theological camp. Rather, I pray that we would be self-reflective and ask ourselves what limitations or mistaken ideas we have attributed to God. Further, I want us to explore how we can be open and ready for change, embrace a God full of surprises, and love Him for all of His so-called quirks. Additionally, it is not my objective for readers to attain new or special knowledge that will help them in their academic pursuits or armchair theological discussions with friends, family, and spiritual brothers and sisters. Rather, I desire readers to learn that to love God is to trust him with our hearts, not simply our minds.

Setting the Stage

A book of this nature requires some preliminary discussion on the scope of the subject at hand as well as the tools at our disposal for rightly dividing truth. This is a book about miracles, movements, and manifestations of God. In other words, this is a book about supernatural things.³ To some, the idea of supernatural phenomena conjures pictures of Ouija boards, ghosts, mediums, and other occult specialists. For others, they might think of the medieval period where miracles and magic were commonplace (often perceived by some as the product of ignorance and superstition). Still others may think of the miracles of the Bible in the distant past where God operated through amazing feats at select times.

In our modern world, humanity's belief in the supernatural is still very much alive.⁴ The growth of New Age movements, media representation of magic, and the general thrust of the post-modernist movement have all facilitated renewed discussion about humanity's intrinsic belief in powers beyond themselves. In the midst of this, the Church has been divided about what to make of certain supernatural phenomena happening within the body of Christ.

In this book, I am not interested in modern anecdotes or tales of how the Holy Spirit has moved in Church history but only what the Bible, God's word, has to say about how we are to understand what God is like and *what* He likes. If you have come to this book hoping to be entertained by fantastical stories of medieval saints and mystics, you will be disappointed. This is also not a book about whether or not certain gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as prophecy, healing, and tongues, are for today. Many other books have been written on that subject and I invite readers to look elsewhere for such arguments.⁵ If, however, you have come to

this book thirsty to learn more about a creative, unusual, and completely unexpected God - a God who is the same today as He was long ago - then you have hopefully picked up the right book.

God touches the earth through what are typically referred to in some Christian circles as *manifestations*. The English word “manifestation” is a translation of the Greek word φανέρωσις / *phanerōsis*.⁶ The verbal form of the word φανερόω / *phaneroō* means “reveal” or “make clear” or even to “expose publicly”. A manifestation is a tangible experience of God in the natural world. They can include visual, auditory, or other sense-perceptive experiences. At various times in the Hebrew Bible, for example, God “manifests his Holiness,” which is another way of expressing that He is somehow perceptible to human beings (Lev 10:3; Num 20:13; Ezek 20:41, 28:22, 25, 36:23, 38:16, 39:27; Isa 5:16). The gifts of the Holy Spirit are likewise referred to as manifestations: “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7). A common criticism against some of these manifestations is that they appear quite strange on the surface. However, nowhere in Scripture are we to discern whether a manifestation is from God or not based on how odd it looks to us. If it contradicts Scripture, of course we reject it. But we must take great care when attempting to discern a move of the Spirit.

Christians can be divided into three main categories in terms of their beliefs about the supernatural work of God in present times. The first group are known as Cessationists. Cessationists are those Christians who believe that some of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (usually prophecy, the gift(s) of healing, and speaking in tongues) ceased sometime in the apostolic age or early Church period when the Bible was completed or the apostles died. Most Cessationists believe that God does still do

miracles today, but that specific miracles were only used to authenticate the message of the apostles or first Christians. Thus, when the Bible was completed or when the apostles died, the need for such authenticating signs were eliminated.⁷

The second group of Christians are called Continuationists. Continuationists believe the opposite of Cessationists – that all of the gifts of the Holy Spirit are still for today. Continuationists may or may not pursue such spiritual gifts, but they do not deny their existence.⁸

The third group of Christians are called Charismatics. Charismatics can be differentiated from Continuationists insofar as a Charismatic is a practitioner of those spiritual gifts that Cessationists view as having ceased in earlier times.⁹ Thus, all Charismatics are Continuationists, but not all Continuationists are Charismatics.¹⁰

It is not my goal to parse through the nuances of these three positions and their biblical justifications. Yet, I think it is important to establish that whatever position you hold, no one should deny the necessity of discernment in the life of the Church. While Charismatics are open to strange manifestations, mainline Continuationists and Cessationists take significant issue with some manifestations. The following chapters are not meant to target any specific group of Christians, whether Cessationist, Continuationist, or Charismatic. There is error and truth in all three streams of the debate. Thus, I have focused primarily on biblical texts that discuss God's nature and character as they relate to supernatural phenomena and our relationship with Him.

Readers of various theological positions will naturally come to this book with presuppositions about certain terms, concepts, and criteria of discernment. In an effort to avoid ambiguity and confusion, I deal here with my own presuppositions concerning the nature of scripture and the Holy Spirit's role in discernment.

Early rabbis refer to the necessity of making “a fence for the Torah,” which has commonly been interpreted as the need to take the more stringent interpretation of a passage so as not to unwittingly disobey its meaning.¹¹ Similarly, the intent of this book is not to allow for a theological free-for-all or to evoke the sense that there are no clear rules about how to discern manifestations and miracles of the Holy Spirit. I uphold Scripture as the basis for which criteria can be constructed to determine the veracity of an extrabiblical event.

As an evangelical, I affirm the unique authority of the Scriptures. They are the foundational framework for learning about God’s character. I believe that the narratives in the Hebrew Bible can serve as instructive analogies in our pursuit for discerning God’s character and ways, but I am not interested in demythologizing or allegorizing the accounts.¹² As far as possible, I have tried to allow the texts to speak for themselves by contextualizing the accounts within their ancient cultural and religious milieu.¹³ Since manifestations are not the “main point” of any given story (the main point is God), I have attempted to highlight the human-divine relationship within these narratives in order to shed light on how we might discern authentic moves of God.

Further, the Holy Spirit reveals nuances of the biblical text for our edification and instruction. Thus, while reading Scripture itself will facilitate a cognitive grasp of its basic content, its application to our everyday life and by extension our discernment processes will depend on our submission and earnest desire to seek the Holy Spirit’s guidance. This does *not* mean that those who disagree with the findings in this book simply have not been “enlightened” or are somehow rebellious or immature. Rather, it points towards how God’s Spirit interacts with us in various ways and challenges us in different stages and moments in our spiritual journey with Him.¹⁴

The Spirit and The Scriptures

Discerning manifestations using Scripture is of utmost importance: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17).¹⁵ This assumes, however, that we are actually using scripture properly when teaching, reproofing, correcting, and training. It is easy to point to Paul’s words here to dismiss certain interpretations of alleged movements of God. In the following chapters I have attempted to show that some of the common ways we have read narratives in the Bible may be problematic or lacking nuance. Thus, when we consider using scripture to discern whether or not a manifestation is from God, we must be willing to consider that our presuppositions may be faulty.

Scriptural interpretation requires the truth of God’s word to be imparted to us through the Holy Spirit. It is He who “will teach you all things” (John 14:26) and “guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13). In the same way the Psalmist asks for God to “Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law” (Ps 119:18), we ought to submit to God’s revelatory powers to illuminate the meaning behind what the Bible is trying to communicate. This does not necessarily require years of intense academic study: “The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple” (Ps 119:30), though scholarly pursuits are surely of value (Acts 17:11). Some things, however, are simply not for us to know: “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law” (Deut 29:29).

2 Peter 1:3 states that “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence.” This passage does not actually say anything about the Bible itself, rather it draws attention to God’s ability to give us everything we need to walk through our daily Christian lives. When we talk about the Scriptures having “authority” or being “sufficient” we ultimately mean that God is our sufficient authority: “to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever” (Jude 25). While the scriptures are sufficient and authoritative, our interpretations, including my own, are not (2 Cor 3:5-6).

When a stance must be taken, a decision made, or a moral dispute brought up, nearly every faithful Christian has asked this question: *is it biblical?* What people usually mean when they ask this question is whether or not we can find some example in the Bible to justify or denounce a particular belief or activity. When we ask the question “is it biblical?” we need to be sure we know what we are asking. If God wants to do something, and it does not match up with *our* understanding of the Bible, it does not follow that we should automatically try and deny God’s involvement. Naturally, there are irresponsible ways to handling the text of scripture. We have, however, sometimes constructed ideas about what God is like and have bound Him in them. Jonathan Edwards once said that “We ought not to limit God where He has not limited Himself”. Edwards’ words have been used to justify both extremes, permitting abhorrent behavior *or* denying God’s supernatural involvement in the world. God has certainly “bound” Himself in the sense that He has revealed His character to us in the Bible, but our presuppositions about

what God has said about Himself in the Bible can sometimes be swayed by popular theologians, cliché, and self-deceit.

Thus, above all else, I see the Bible as the primary tool for interpreting and discerning manifestations and miracles. Yet, emphasis must be placed on reading the Scriptures as a supernatural book filled with supernatural events and, most importantly, a supernatural God. Whether or not we find exact parallels between ancient and modern miracle accounts is not how we should go about deciding whether or not something is from God. If a miracle is antithetical to the teachings of Scripture, we reject it. If, however, a miracle is atypical or unparalleled, we cannot simply deny its legitimacy based on outward appearances.

The Spirit of Subjectivity

As Christians we ought to value objectivity. Yet, sometimes this need for objectivity can lead us into an unhealthy form of skepticism. If we cannot “chapter and verse” an idea or phenomenon, we are quick to dismiss it. Yet, lots of things in the Bible and our Christian lives are subjective.¹⁶ Take for example these two proverbs: “Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself” (Prov 26:4) and “Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes” (Prov 26:5). These proverbs, situated next to each other in the Bible, seem to contradict one another. Should we, or should we not, answer a fool in their folly? The answer is: it depends on the situation. Which proverb you are going to follow will be contingent on subjective factors such as your relationship to the person, the nature of their folly, etc. In fact, most of the proverbs and concepts found in the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible are like this. They give us principles and frameworks about how to make

good decisions, but they cannot always tell you *when* to use each piece of wisdom and how best to implement it.

Our own conscience is subjective too. Paul warns the Corinthians that some people have weak consciences (1 Cor 8:7). When this is the case, doing certain things, like eating food sacrificed to idols, may cause those people to stumble. People's subjective understandings of their freedom in Christ are varied, but we are called to humble ourselves for the sake of our brothers and sisters: "Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ" (1 Cor 8:12).

Finally, subjective experiences are simply part of the Bible as a book. The writers all encountered or interacted with God in some way, but we do not have a way to go back and objectively prove all of what they have claimed. Why, for example, should we believe the subjective experience of John when recounting his vision in Revelation? We simply believe John was inspired by God to write such things. This is not a very "objective" way of determining the veracity of something, at least by natural standards.

Thus, while some Christians are opposed to subjective experiences found in certain Churches, it is important for everyone to reflect on what they mean when they use the words subjective and objective. The most important and objective reality in the world, the Holy Spirit's confirmation that we are God's children, is also a subjective experience.¹⁷

Doctrines of Demons

There are a number of relevant passages that are brought up when discussing the topic of discernment. A common one is this statement by

Paul: “But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons” (1 Tim 4:1; NASB). Based on this verse, believers tend to deduce that these demonic teachings have to do with false manifestations, heretical sects, or occult influences infiltrating the Church. Yet, Paul does not leave us in the dark as to what these “doctrines of demons” actually are. The two false teachings he identifies are those that “forbid marriage” and “require abstinence from foods” (1 Tim 4:3).

People are often surprised when they read Paul’s idea of what constitutes demonic teachings. Extreme asceticism and denying the things that “God created to be received with thanksgiving” (1 Tim 4:3) are considered problematic because they are based on a false idea of who God is. In fact, elsewhere Paul connects following arbitrarily determined ascetic rules as submitting to evil spirits.¹⁸ The rules of these evil spirits are summarized by Paul as “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” (Col 2:21). The influence of this teaching is dangerous insofar as it falsely leads people to conclude that they will be sanctified by their own efforts: “These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh” (Col 2:23).

Paul refers to the people who follow and spread these demonic teachings as those whose “consciences are seared” (1 Tim 4:2). The word translated here as “seared” comes from the Greek word *καυστηριάζω* / *kaustériazó* and appears only once in the New Testament. It is used elsewhere in Greek literature to refer to the branding of slaves and criminals.¹⁹ The idea that Paul is communicating is that these people have been marked with an invisible sign that demonstrates their faulty

understanding of God's goodness. This mark becomes visible, however, through their apparent "hypocrisy" (1 Tim 4:2; NASB).

In order to have "good doctrine," Timothy is commanded to avoid "irreverent" and "silly myths" (1 Tim 4:7). The word "irreverent" (Greek: βέβηλος / *bébēlos*) can also be translated as "frivolous" or "pointless." Similarly, the phrase "silly myths" is a translation of the Greek word γραῶδης / *graōdēs*, which the King James Version renders "old wives' fables". This phrase was used often in ancient philosophical discourse to refer to someone who believes things with an unfortunately speedy credulity. In our context, we might compare such people to those who wholeheartedly and uncritically accept conspiracy theories or sensational stories and news articles without question.

Having a proper understanding of what the doctrines of demons are in 1 Tim 4:1 is important for discerning manifestations of the Holy Spirit. If the message being communicated by a manifestation, for example, is to engage in painstaking asceticism, it is likely not from God. Additionally, believing wild theories about the origins of certain manifestations and their perceived relationship to the occult or other religious traditions is equally unbiblical. There is obvious merit in being able to see similarities and differences between certain Christian activities and those that appear in other parts of the world. No one ought to discount the academic discipline of comparative religious studies. Yet, more often than not, believers avoid the time and effort that is required to parse these similarities and differences. Thus, in an attempt to shield people from potential false teaching, what can subtly happen is that genuine movements of the Holy Spirit are denied or viewed with zealous suspicion.

Elsewhere, Paul warns Timothy to avoid those "having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power" (2 Tim 3:5). These same people are

described as those who continue to learn but are “never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim 3:7). By analogy, many in the Church today are concerned primarily with attaining a sophisticated theological framework more than pursuing God. It is not that these things are incompatible, but that primary focus has been on knowledge rather than the knowledge giver. A robust systematic theology and encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible might be impressive from the outside, but it can just as easily be an indicator that someone is denying the power of God in exchange for this knowledge. Legalism and the art of self-improvement are built upon the assumption that God is not good. This is why humans create rules to govern themselves, rather than letting God rule over them. Thus, while the appearance of godliness may convince some that they have the ability to discern true and false movements of the Holy Spirit, in actuality it makes them the least qualified.

The “doctrines of demons” are, therefore, not an all-purpose verse to be used against anything we disagree with. Paul had a specific context in mind and it was one that is not that foreign to ours. Paul was not talking about how to discern strange manifestations or miracles, but rather about God’s nature and human opposition to his goodness by means of asceticism and self-regulation.

The Task ahead

This book covers a wide range of narratives and concepts from the Bible, but they are unified in that they all serve to form a cohesive picture of God’s character and how discernment is intrinsically intertwined with it. Chapter 1 introduces readers to the biblical concept of divine otherness, while chapters 2-4 examine how the three persons of the trinity interact

in the human-divine relationship. Chapter 5 consists of an examination of various supernatural phenomena and how we ought to think about discerning them based on God's character. Finally, chapter 6 touches on how modern Christians can express God's otherness in their daily life.

Closing Remarks

While I have tried to write in a neutral way, certain chapters presume an acceptance of basic ideas to be of particular applicable use. Thus, while the chapters dealing with God's character will hopefully be of universal help to everyday Christians of various doctrinal persuasions, some of the later chapters may only be of help to those who hold to certain theological presuppositions about the nature of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Yet, I do think there is value for all three groups of Christians listed above (Cessationists, Continuationists, and Charismatics). Firstly, I think that any conversation about God's activities and His methods can tell us something about God's character, which itself is of personal and devotional value. Secondly, I hope that by discussing certain supernatural phenomena and the biblical criteria for discerning such phenomena it will help Christians of differing opinions to be aware of the complexities involved in such processes and that this would allow for grace in such situations. Finally, many Christians are still unaware of what the Bible says about certain supernatural phenomena in general. Thus, this book in part seeks to expand this pool of knowledge.

For those who are unfamiliar with certain terms and concepts, I have tried to briefly explain these in endnotes. Part of engaging in theological conversations can involve quite a learning curve for some who are confronted with long and loaded new words. Since I suspect this book will

be picked up by readers from a number of diverse disciplines and reading levels, I have likewise relegated detailed references to the endnotes for those interested in pursuing any particular topic further. As with most books, it is impossible to be exhaustive. The things discussed here ought to be viewed as a kind of overview of an historically complicated series of topics.

I should say a short word about myself and some of the methodology of this book. Who am I that I should write a book of this nature? My academic training is in Second Temple Judaism, and as a result, I have attempted to contextualize the New Testament stories within this framework. This means that I sometimes refer to extra-biblical sources that most Christians have perhaps never had exposure to. As a Protestant, I draw on these sources to help deepen the appreciation for the Jewish nature of the Scriptures and allow the reader to glimpse into the worldview of Jesus' day. My approach can be described as somewhat apophatic since I am trying to explain what we *can* say about discerning manifestations based, in part, on what we *cannot* say.

Additionally, I am a Charismatic Christian who was formerly an ardent Cessationist. Part of the reason I have chosen to write this book is to dispel myths on both sides of the theological spectrum. Most importantly, I am a lover of Jesus and His Word. I am *sola scriptura* and a missionary in Canada. I should also add that I do not think I am saying anything particularly *new* in this book. Rather, I have simply collected the relevant information on this topic and synthesized it here for the sake of the reader to address the topic of discernment better.

Finally, we have been tasked with the divine command to “love the LORD your God with all your heart” (Deut 6:5).²⁰ Loving God and

knowing things *about* God are not synonymous. When you love someone, you love the things they do and what they are like. You learn to love the things you cannot understand about them. Most importantly, to love God with all of our heart is to love Him exclusively. As the Song of Solomon says: “My beloved is mine, and I am his” (2:16). This also means that we love God more than we love our intellect. May we, therefore, be “sick with love” for the Lord (2:5), and may our emotions and affections, along with our minds, love the altogether lovely one. Jesus Himself is the pearl of great price, the desire of everyone who truly encounters Him. Let us abandon everything we have and are to grab hold of Him and despise any supposed treasure that would take his place.

“Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm,
for love is strong as death,
jealousy is fierce as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire,
the very flame of the LORD.
Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can floods drown it.
If a man offered for love
all the wealth of his house,
he would be utterly despised.”
(Song of Solomon 8:6-7)

Blessings,
MERRILL G. GREENE

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

- ¹ Deism is the belief that God abandoned the universe after its creation and allowed it to maintain itself without His interaction with the material world. Thus, deism intrinsically denies the existence of miracles or supernatural intervention. This theology took form especially in the 17th and 18th centuries among English theologians such as Herbert, Collins, Tindal, and Bolingbroke.
- ² Sam Storms mentioned in passing how weirdness cannot be used as a criterion for discernment in a podcast session with *The Remnant Radio*. I highly recommend this podcast to readers as it addresses many of the topics related to this book in great detail and lavished with love, grace, and academic propriety.
- ³ Eric Eve, *The Jewish Context of Jesus' Miracles* (JSNTSupp 231; London; New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 1-2 defines a miracle as “a strikingly surprising event, beyond what is regarded as humanly possible, in which God is believed to act, either directly or through an intermediary. All creation is thought to be under God’s control; a miracle occurs when God chooses to exercise that control in an unusual fashion.”
- ⁴ Jason Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (University of Chicago: University Press, 2017) argues that the perception that the scientific revolution and modernity is causing belief in the supernatural to decline is a mistake based on select readings of 19th and 20th century thinkers.
- ⁵ A great starting place is Stanley N. Gundry and Wayne A. Grudem, eds., *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 1996). See also Michael L. Brown, *Authentic Fire: A Response to John MacArthur's Strange Fire* (Lake Mary, FL: Creation House, 2015) and R.T. Kendall, *Holy Fire: A Balanced, Biblical Look at the Holy Spirit's Work in Our Lives* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2014). For a powerful testimony on changing theological systems on this topic, see Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit: A Former Dallas Seminary Professor Discovers that God Speaks and Heals Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 1996). For abuses of the spiritual gifts in the modern Church, see Michael L. Brown, *Playing with Holy Fire: A Wake-Up Call to the Pentecostal-Charismatic Church* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2018).

⁶ Some might argue that a “manifestation” is simply making known a truth *about* God in an internal or cognitive sense, rather than an outward demonstration that showcases God’s character or presence. According to one lexicon, for example, the meaning of this word, along with its cognates, shows “a shift from the sensory domain of seeing, causing to see, or giving light to, to the cognitive domain of making something fully known, evident, and clear.” Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 1:338, n. 9. Yet, Bultmann and Lührmann argue that this word “is the revelation imparted by the Spirit and consisting in the charismata listed... The revelation is not, then, theoretical instruction; it entails acts in which the Spirit manifests Himself. In 2 C. 4:2... Paul is describing true proclamation as a manifestation of the truth... in contrast to the craftiness of his adversaries, who falsify the Word of God.” Rudolf Bultmann and Dieter Lührmann, “Φαίνω, Φανερός, Φανερώω, Φανέρωσις, Φαντάζω, Φάντασμα, Ἐμφανίζω, Ἐπιφαίνο, Ἐπιφανής, Ἐπιφάνεια,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 9:6. Obviously, the spiritual gifts listed in 1 Corinthians were able to be witnessed through sense-perceptions of various kinds, as pointed out by Fitzmyer: “The main role of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians is described in its external “manifestation” or in the bestowal of *pneumatika*, “spiritual gifts” (12:1) for the good of the Christian church... The noun *phanerosis*, “manifestation,” is important, for Paul is not speaking only of the internal gifts of the Spirit but of the external signs of the presence and activity of the Spirit within the community” (Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *1 Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 32; Yale: University Press, 2008], 80, 446). The word used by Paul here is also connected with the adverb *φανερῶς*, which has the meaning of “publicly” or “openly,” suggesting these manifestations were readily observable (e.g., 2 Macc 3:28; Mark 1:45). This has caused some scholars to translate *φανέρωσις* as “public manifestation” (Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 936. In the Septuagint, the word *ἐπιφανεῖα* / *epiphaneia* is sometimes used in the same sense as *φανέρωσις* / *phanerōsis* (2 Macc 15:27; 3 Macc 5:8) for God’s manifest presence. See also Dieter Lührmann, *Die Offenbarungsverständnis bei Paulus und in paulinischen Gemeinden* (WMANT 16; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1965), 27 f.

Eve, *The Jewish Context of Jesus’ Miracles*, 32-33 notes the following regarding Josephus’ terminology for miracles: “The other significant word in Josephus’s miracle terminology, though it is not nearly so frequent, is *ἐπιφάνεια*. Its use in connexion [*sic.*] with miracles is restricted to the *Antiquities*, but there it generally means a manifestation of God’s presence or of his saving power. The most notable occurrence of the latter is at *Ant.* 2.339, where the recoiling

of the Red Sea is described as a ‘clear manifestation of God’. It has a similar sense at 9.60, where following Elisha’s miraculous capture of the Syrian army, ‘Adados was amazed at the marvel and at the manifestation of the God of the Israelites and His power.’ These are the only two instances which fit the idea of saving power (unless one also counts the reference to the ἐμφανείας τοῦ θεοῦ at 15.425). Neither the ‘divine manifestation’ of fire falling from heaven to consume Solomon’s sacrifice (8.119) nor God’s ἐπιφάνεια in the unexpected rainfall that greets Petronius’s decision to defy Caligula (18.286) are exactly saving acts, but rather signs of God’s approval. Although Thackeray’s translation does not bring out the fact, Josephus may intend to imply that Isaac’s fortuitous meeting with Rebecca (1.255) was due to a divine ἐπιφάνεια, though this would be a low-grade miracle. It is a moot point whether ἐπιφάνεια at 3.310 should be translated ‘manifestation’ (meaning that the cloud above the tabernacle is a miracle produced by God) or ‘presence’ (meaning that the cloud symbolizes the presence of God).”

- 7 Cessationists interpret several passages as pointing to certain gifts ceasing. One such example is 1 Cor 13:8-10: “As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.” Cessationists often interpret the “perfect” in this passage as referring to the completion of the biblical canon. Likewise, they interpret Eph 2:20 and similar passages as detailing how certain signs were only foundational for the Church and are no longer necessary.
- 8 Continuationists reject the interpretation that the “perfect” in 1 Cor 13:8-10 is speaking about the completion of the Bible, but instead understand it as the second coming of Jesus. Part of the reason for this is because Paul later states that when the perfect comes we will see “face to face” which elsewhere is used of meetings with either God or another human being (e.g., Gen 32:30; Exod 33:11; 2 Cor 10:1).
- 9 Continuationists, especially of the reformed tradition, will often use the phrase that they are “charismatic with a seatbelt,” which means that while they are open to the supernatural working of the Holy Spirit, it is not a major element of their faith experience or local Church dynamic. See <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/how-not-to-welcome-the-holy-spirit> (Accessed: September, 14, 2021).
- 10 The term “Charismatic” comes from the Greek word for “gift” (χάρισμα / *charisma*). Thus, a Charismatic is someone who is identifiable by their use of supernatural gifts. Secular scholars refer to Jesus, for example, as a “Charismatic prophet” or “Charismatic religious figure,” which means that he was viewed by his contemporaries as a miracle-worker. Charismatic Christians purposefully seek out the gifts of the Holy Spirit based on the command of Paul in 1 Cor 14:1:

“Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.”

- ¹¹ “Moses received Torah at Sinai and handed it on to Joshua, Joshua to elders, and elders to prophets. And prophets handed it on to the men of the great assembly. They said three things: (1) “Be prudent in judgment. (2) “Raise up many disciples. (3) “Make a fence for the Torah” (*m. Avot* 1:1). Translations from the Mishnah are from Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah : A New Translation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).
- ¹² In the 1940s, the German scholar Rudolf Bultmann wrote an influential article entitled “Neues Testament und Mythologie” (New Testament and Mythology). Bultmann argued that the New Testament accounts were being misread by both conservative and liberal scholars alike, and that the true meaning of the text and its application could only be recovered by demythologizing the text. By “demythologizing,” Bultmann meant expunging the supernatural elements of the various biblical stories. Thus, the Bible in Bultmann’s view was not credible in the sense that it provided history, but that it offered a deeper spiritual (or existential) meaning. See Rudolf Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology,” in *Kerygma and Myth* (ed. Hans Bartsch; New York: Harper and Row, 1941), 1–44.
- ¹³ I make use of an historical-grammatical hermeneutic. A “hermeneutic” is a method or system of interpretation that is used to read a text. Christians throughout history have employed different kinds of hermeneutics to understand the meaning of the Bible. An “historical-grammatical” hermeneutic is a kind of interpretation that attempts to discover the original author’s meaning based on the historical, cultural, and linguistic context of a given passage. See Stanley E. Porter and Jason C. Robinson, *Hermeneutics: an Introduction to Interpretive Theory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2011).
- ¹⁴ I encourage readers to engage with Kevin L. Spawn and Archie T. Wright, eds., *Spirit and Scripture: Exploring a Pneumatic Hermeneutic* (York Road, London: T&T Clark International, 2012). This collection of academic essays addresses the way the Holy Spirit is thought to reveal the truth and application of scripture.
- ¹⁵ When Paul uses the word “Scripture” here he is referring to the Hebrew Bible: “from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim 3:15). For a detailed discussion on the canon of the Bible, see F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2008).
- ¹⁶ 1 Cor 14:29 is an excellent example: “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.” In this scenario, a prophet speaks in the Church and others judge whether or not it is accurate. You can already see the issue. How

do we know if the prophet who spoke the prophecy is wrong *or* if the prophets *judging* the prophecy are wrong? In fact, there is no way to know except through subjective experiences such as the Holy Spirit confirming the words within the community to other individuals. There may be some objectively useful criteria used by those judging (e.g., scripture), but in the end the judgement is based on an internal, subjective, revelation from God and the use of wisdom. Christians who reject contemporary prophecy may not find such an example useful, but one would have had to ask these same questions in the early Church! Indeed, even in the Hebrew Bible, people would have had to use a number of apparently subjective criteria for assessing whether the prophet speaking to them was truly speaking the word of God, especially if the prophecy did not fall under the discernment rules in the Torah.

¹⁷ Note, however, that this subjective experience results in objective evidence such as living holy lives.

¹⁸ In Colossians, Paul refers to the στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου / *stoicheia tou kosmou*, often translated as “elemental spirits of the world.” στοιχεῖα / *stoicheia* is connected with philosophy and empty deceit in Col 2:8, which confuses whether the elemental spirits are meant to refer to human teachings or malevolent supernatural forces. Early Christian interpreters dealt with the term στοιχεῖα / *stoicheia* in both of these ways. Clement takes the term to refer to a human invention: “For Paul too, in the Epistles, plainly does not disparage philosophy; but deems it unworthy of the man who has attained to the elevation of the Gnostic... figuratively calling it “the rudiments of this world,” as being most rudimentary, and a preparatory training for the truth” (*Strom.*, 6.8; compare Tertullian, *adv. Marc.*, 5.19). It is possible that there is little differentiation between στοιχεῖα / *stoicheia* as human precepts and as demonic influence as E. Schweizer, “Slaves of the Elements and Worshipers of Angels: Gal 4.3, 9; Col 2.8, 18, 20,” *JBL* 107 (1988): 468 states: “it is difficult to draw a clear line between these views and a belief in personal demonic beings. James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1996), 149 draws this conclusion as well, stating that in the ancient world it was not uncommon to personify the elements, stars, and other cosmological features. στοιχεῖα / *stoicheia* is used to refer to demonic spirits explicitly in *T. Sol.* 8:2 “we are heavenly bodies [στοιχεῖα / *stoicheia*], rulers of this world of darkness,” and 18:1-2 “...all at once, with one voice they said, “we are thirty-six heavenly bodies [στοιχεῖα / *stoicheia*], the world rulers of the darkness of this age”,” though the dating of this work is contentious. Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 67-77 concludes in his work on the subject that the στοιχεῖα / *stoicheia* most probably refers to supernatural forces, especially if one reads the

term in the context of Gal 4:3, 9 and not 2 Pet 3:10-12 or Heb. 5:10 as Andrew J. Bandstra, *The Law and the Elements of the World: An Exegetical Study in Aspects of Paul's Teaching* (N.V. Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1964) proposes.

- ¹⁹ George W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1992), 189.
- ²⁰ Although our hearts can sometimes be filled with deceit (Jer 17:10), God has given Christians a new heart (Ezek 11:19) and it is those who have a pure heart that will see God (Matt 5:8). The Psalmist asks “who will ascend the hill of the LORD?” The answer is someone “who has clean hands and a pure heart” (Ps 24:3-4).

CHAPTER 1

- ²¹ The meaning of the word “holy” has been debated by scholars for centuries. In the 1800s, the German scholar Wolf Wilhelm Friedrich von Baudissin argued that the Hebrew term *qodesh* was derived from a root meaning “to cut” or “to separate” (see W.W. Baudissin, “Der Begriff der Heiligkeit im AT,” in *Studien zur semitischen Religionsgeschichte* [Leipzig: Grunow, 1878], 2:1–142). This etymological argument had been held for centuries, such as by the medieval Jewish scholar Rashi. Scholars who accept this etymological argument simultaneously attribute this separation as having to do with moral perfection and purity (Desmon T. Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*. 3rd ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012], 244). Others see the meaning of “holy” and “pure” as synonyms (Jacob Neusner, *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism: The Haskell Lectures, 1972–1973* [Leiden: Brill, 1973]). Still others think the idea of separation is an outdated view and based on an etymological fallacy (Philip P. Jensen, *Graded Holiness: A Key to the Priestly Conception of the World* [JSOT Supplement 106; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992], 48 n. 4). I have avoided use of the word “separate” as much as possible. The reason for this is because it unintentionally suggests that God is not involved with the world (i.e., deism).

Rudolf Otto argued against the meaning of holy as separation, instead describing it as a present force that is simultaneously “wholly other” (Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational* [Trans. J. W. Harvey; New York: Oxford University Press, 1958], 9–11, 88–89). This idea was shared by others who saw holiness as something above human perception that inspired awe (Nathan Söderblom, “Holiness (General and Primitive),” in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* [Ed. J. Hastings; New York: Scribner, 1914], 6:731–41). Divine