

A Biblical View of Spiritual Gifts
For The Common Good
Chapter 5
The Sign Gifts

The time has come in our study to closely examine by far the most controversial of the three categories of the grace gifts. The sign gifts were intended by God to be used to prove the validity of the gospel message by miraculous signs. Everywhere that Jesus went He preached the message of the kingdom of heaven, and then He proved His authority by performing miracles. He healed the sick, raised the dead, caused the blind to see and the deaf to hear, as well as, turning water to wine and walking on water (just to mention a few)! When Jesus would teach and then backup His teaching by performing miracles, the people could truly see that a man of God was among them, though even that did not always motivate them to follow Him.

Jesus promised His disciples that after He had returned to His Father they too would be given the power to perform great miraculous signs (**John 14:12**). True to His promise, after Jesus had ascended to heaven the disciples had gathered together on the day of Pentecost (the Jewish feast to celebrate the wheat harvest) when the Holy Spirit descended upon the place and the church age began in miraculous power (**Acts 2**). The disciples began to "speak in tongues", as a miraculous sign that God was with them. Though the gift of tongues (*glossa* in the Greek) is often misunderstood in our day and age, the *Biblical* explanation is far more practical and understandable.

What *actually* occurred during Pentecost was when the Jews from other countries who spoke in foreign languages were assembled together with the Jews from Israel, Peter stood up to preach the gospel to the entire crowd. The words he spoke in his native Aramaic language were supernaturally translated in every language that was represented. In short, Peter preached in his own native tongue, but the listeners heard his words in their own languages! It was a sign from God that the message was valid. What God had done at the Tower of Babel (**Genesis 11**) to confound sinful man's efforts to reach into the heavens, He undid at Pentecost when He sent heaven down to rescue sinful men. The language barrier was breached, and the good news was preached to all who would hear. **"For God so loved THE WORLD, that He gave His only begotten Son" (John 3:16)**. The gospel message was going out with power.

The Apostles were also given the ability to heal and perform various other miraculous signs. These incredible spiritual gifts were given specifically to enable people who were hearing the brand new message of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ to be convinced of its validity. There was a purpose for the miracles; to convince the lost to come to Christ. The miracles were never intended to be used to glorify the disciples, nor was God in the business of entertainment. God's sole purpose in sending the miraculous signs was for the unbelieving to see and believe. It is interesting to note that Jesus did not always perform miracles. The Pharisees demanded a miraculous "sign" from Jesus and He refused (**Mark 8:10**). Why? Because they refused to believe in Him. They had been given ample truths in order to recognize Him as the Messiah. They had tremendous knowledge of the Old Testament scriptures and should have recognized Him at once. So why didn't they? They didn't want to give up their power, that's why. Jesus knew their hearts and refused to accommodate their request that He do "tricks" for them.

We as Christians should take note of this. God is not in the habit of performing miracles for His people's entertainment. In a room filled with people who already believe in Jesus, why is there a need for a miracle? Sadly, I believe that many churches have tried to turn their "worship services" into theatrical productions. They want a God who will show up and perform for them, rather than to hear the word of God and repent of their sin. We don't need a "magic show" in our churches. What we desperately need is to be convicted of our sins by the firm and unapologetic preaching of God's Holy Word. We don't need a sign from God to help us believe. We have been given enough faith to believe already. What we need is a lesson in obedience.

Though the scriptures leave no doubt that sign gifts were an integral part of the early church's arsenal for reaching a lost world, much debate exists today in whether or not these particular gifts are

made available to us as Christians today. There are two main schools of belief on the subject. The first are called *Continuationists*. Continuationists believe that the sign gifts are still prevalent in the church today, but only become accessible to a believer who is "baptized in the Holy Spirit" (a term that is not found in scripture). This "second" baptism is believed to somehow "unlock" these previously unattainable spiritual gifts. So, the now more "*fully spiritual*" believer is enabled to miraculously heal, speak in tongues, and perform miraculous signs. This particular doctrine can be commonly found in the Church of God and other so called charismatic denominations.

The second camp is that of the *Cessationists*. The Cessationists believe that the sign gifts were no longer necessary after the early church became established, and its message of the gospel began to take hold around the world. In short, people were believing in the name of Jesus in such a way that miracles were no longer needed to convince them. So, the sign gifts simply ceased to be. Both sides of this argument are passionate in the defense of their beliefs. Personally, I believe that God cannot be put into a category, and therefore, I believe if God saw fit to give one of His children the ability to speak in tongues or perform a miracle in order to reach a lost soul, then He is more than capable of doing so. I do know of one lady personally who went on a mission trip to Brazil and prayed for another woman who lived there. My friend speaks absolutely no Portuguese, so she simply prayed in English. The young lady for whom she prayed spoke no English and after the prayer was finished, she complemented my friend that her Portuguese was flawless and asked her where she had learned to speak it so well! My point is intended as a word of warning to those who will listen: Don't presume to put Almighty God in a box. He is fully capable of doing as He pleases, and He isn't required to fit neatly in any of your self imposed categories of theology! **He is God.**

That being said, I definitely do not subscribe to the "dog and pony show" that is often found within the walls of the so called "Charismatic Movement", where God is supposedly in the habit of performing the supernatural at the frivolous whims of those who claim that the spirit causes them to lose control of themselves in some bizarre manifestation, such as speaking in garbled and indiscernible tongues or being "slain in the spirit". *The Bible* teaches us that the fruit of the spirit is SELF CONTROL (**Galatians 5:23**). Therefore, NO Christian will manifest the Holy Spirit by doing just the opposite. But I digress. No matter within which of these theological encampments you currently find yourself entrenched, the purpose of this study is to examine the spiritual gifts and explain how they are used. So, with this in mind, let us now further explore the sign gifts of healing, miraculous powers, speaking in tongues and the interpretation of tongues.

Healing

Virtually every Christian believes in God's miraculous ability to heal. We pray for the sick in our churches regularly, and very often see God work His power by granting healing. The spiritual gift of healing is somewhat different however. The Christian who possesses this gift has the ability to lay hands upon those who are sick and heal them just as Christ Himself did when He walked upon this earth. The Apostle Paul was so strongly blessed with this gift that the Bible says people were healed simply by touching one of the handkerchiefs that he carried (**Acts 19:12**). Peter and James healed the lame man who was begging in front of the Temple (**Acts**) simply by taking his hand and lifting him to his feet. The gift of healing was an endorsement upon the message being brought by these men, and as a result, souls were healed from the terminal disease of sin in addition to their physical healing.

I have met many people in my lifetime who "claim" that they possess the gift of healing, but then I have met many people who claim a lot of things. Sadly, I've never met someone who I thought genuinely possessed this particular gift. Quite frankly, I do not believe it is necessary. I agree with the book of James when it commands the elders of the church to pray for those who are sick (**James 5:13-16**). God hears the prayers of His people. Therefore, if they collectively pray for one another, then I believe we will have all the healing we need. I've seen it work this way time and time again. As a church, we already believe in Jesus, therefore we do not need a designated "healer" in our midst in order to believe. We just need to live in the faith that we have already been given.

Remember, Jesus didn't heal every sick person who ever lived. He instead, healed for the purpose of convincing them that He was indeed the Son of God. The spiritual gift of healing was intended as proof of the gospel message. In places where that message has already been believed and accepted, healing should simply be requested as a matter of faith and prayer. That being said, do I believe that God could miraculously equip someone with this particular gift in order to reach a lost soul in a region of the world where no one has ever heard the gospel? Of course I do! I guess that makes me a cessationist with the option to believe in the exception to the rule! Do I believe that church in America where the gospel is preached on every media outlet imaginable, and where there is a church building on virtually every corner in this nation, that someone has the spiritual gift of healing? No, I don't believe that. I do not believe that our God is wasteful with His resources. We all can pray for healing, and therefore have little need of a *healer* in our midst. Jesus Himself is our Great Physician, and He lives within each one of us who truly believe.

Miraculous Power

This sign gift enabled the believer to perform miracles. A miracle is simply defined as an act that defies the natural laws of the universe. Jesus' resurrection was a miracle. The Apostle Paul told the Church at Ephesus that the same mighty power that enabled Christ to rise from the dead was also within every believer (***Ephesians 1:19-20***)! Think about that for a moment. We, as believers, are "plugged into" the same power source that raised Jesus from the dead. We should not be surprised then to learn that believers in the early church were enabled to do mighty works in Jesus name in order for the message of the gospel be verified. Paul himself raised a young man from the dead after the lad fell from a window while listening to Paul preach (***Acts 20:9***). I've often wondered if Paul was getting a little long winded with his sermon causing the poor kid to fall asleep, but thank goodness he had the power to resurrect him after he fell to his death!

The miraculous was quite common in the *New Testament*. Peter was miraculously delivered from prison because of the church's prayers (***Acts 12:5-19***). Paul and Silas sang down an earthquake while they were in prison (***Acts 16:16-28***). In fact the Acts of The Apostles (the proper name for the book of Acts) is filled with stories of miracle after miracle performed by these faithful church leaders, as they endeavored to spread the good news of the gospel of Christ. God gave them miraculous power in order to draw attention to, as well as give validity to, their message.

Do Christians today possess the spiritual gift of miraculous power. I personally do not believe so. I do, however, still believe that God is very much in the miracle business. As I am writing this, I can't help but think of my younger brother and his wife who very late in life had a new baby girl. Due to complications of the pregnancy, the child was severely under weight. The doctors decided to take the baby seven weeks before the due date in order to give the child adequate nourishment to increase her body weight. After careful examination they informed the anxious parents that the baby's weight was approximately two and three quarter pounds. My younger brother is also a minister, and he began calling members of his church to pray for the child due to her severe underweight condition. He then called and ask that I have members of my church to pray as well.

The next day the child was delivered and weighed a full pound more than the doctors had said the day before. She was also further developed than they had originally thought and was in the eighty-ninth percentile for premature babies, giving her an excellent prognosis for health. Do I believe that the doctors misdiagnosed the little girl's condition (her name is Allifair by the way)? Or, do I believe that God answered the prayers of His people and helped her to gain a full pound overnight, as well as further develop her tiny body in order to help her survive? Personally I believe it was a miracle. Plain and simple. And, by the way, so did the doctors! ***Our God is able to do much more than we could ever ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20)***. Why? Because He is the source of the very same power that raised Christ from the dead! We, as His children, have been granted access to that power.

Do we need people with the gift of miraculous power in our churches today? I am convinced that this gift is also no longer necessary. For when the church body comes together to pray for a miracle, they are in fact, by faith accessing the very power of God. I am convinced that our Lord is pleased when we

come together as one to ask for what only He can accomplish. Could God give someone the gift of miraculous power if necessary? Of course, but if the church works together as the body of Christ it will have all the power it needs simply by praying together in faith. God is still very much in the miracle business even today!

Speaking in Tongues and Interpretation of Tongues

Arguably the most controversial of all the spiritual gifts is the sign gift of speaking in tongues. As we have previously discussed, the gift of tongues is *not* some indiscernible gibberish that supposedly only God understands. The word for tongues in the Greek text is *glossa* and means "*foreign language*". The ability to speak in tongues in the New Testament church enabled foreigners to understand a simple fisherman like Peter when he spoke in his own native tongue. Peter was an uneducated man, and yet he preached with the fire of the Holy Spirit. Everyone who heard him preach could miraculously understand his words, even if they didn't speak Aramaic, Peter's own dialect.

This miracle had a powerful effect on the foreigners that came to Jerusalem, not to mention it was a sign from God that salvation had come to the Gentiles, as well as, the Jews. What a thrill it must have been for pagan Gentiles who had longed to know the one true God to finally hear the message of forgiveness and redemption as the Holy Spirit miraculously spoke to them in their own language through these Jewish preachers of the gospel!

The gift of tongues truly proved that God so loved the *world*, for they enabled all the world to hear the message. To take this wonderful miracle that was intended as a sign to unknowing, un-expecting unbelievers and twist it into a perverted sense of self righteous pretense is in short, blasphemous. God never gave anyone a spiritual gift for the purpose of proudly displaying their own "spiritual prowess". Spiritual gifts are always intended for the common good. If that offends my charismatic brethren, then I guess I'll just have to live with that, but I would much rather they carefully consider the true purpose of spiritual gifts. The truth is still the truth, and will always remain as such. no matter how bluntly it may sometimes need to be communicated.

The Corinthians, much like the modern day Pentecostal movement, had also elevated the use of this particular gift above the more important speaking gifts because showing it off made them feel superior. Pagan worship in the time of the Corinthian church often involved consuming large quantities of alcohol, and then uttering nonsensical babbling until the "worshippers" eventually fell into a stupor. Christ Himself preached against this pagan behavior in **Matthew 6:7**. Paul was more than likely alluding to this practice as well in **1 Corinthians 14:11** when he says, "**If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me**". The NIV translation for the word "foreigner" in the text should actually be translated "barbarian" as Paul warns the Corinthians that their self-serving misuse of tongues is reminiscent of pagan worship.

What Paul was saying to the Corinthians is still true for us today. If someone were to disrupt a worship service to speak in a tongue that is not understood by anyone else, then the one who has spoken in this manner is worshiping like the pagans do, self impressed and deceived that their own foolish babbling will bring them favor from God. When in truth, God is pleased with the very opposite, speaking in plain understandable truths in order for all who hear to be edified. The very purpose of the gift of tongues was so that ***all*** would be able to understand what was being said. Tongues were used not to bring glory the speaker, but so that by understanding, the hearer would be built up. God sent His only Son into the world, not so believers would have bragging rights, but so that believers could share the gospel message and thereby make more believers.

Paul insisted that if someone were to speak in a foreign language then someone with the gift of interpretation of tongues must come forward and interpret the message for the congregation. In short, the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues enabled a believer to speak in a foreign tongue, while the believer with the gift of interpretation was able to translate a foreign language so all would understand. The bottom line is plain and simple. God does not wish for anyone to be left in the dark. To do so is to thwart the very

purpose of the gospel message. Tongues, then, was a sign gift intended for the purpose of reaching the unbelieving (**1 Corinthians 14:22**).

Final Thoughts

The Apostle Paul ALWAYS concluded every teaching on spiritual gifts by teaching about love. Read **Romans 12**, **1 Corinthians 13**, and **Ephesians 4**. Each time the apostle concludes his "Spiritual Gift Message", he then closes with his "Love Message." Why? Because when spiritual gifts are used as an expression of love, then they will never be used in the flesh. If the church is the Body of Christ, then love is the "skin" that holds it together! This is why Paul says in **Ephesians 4:16**, **"From Him (Christ) the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in LOVE, as each part does its work."**

Just think how this would revolutionize the church today if people were to get a solid grasp on this simple truth! Nothing can be done effectively in the body, unless it is done in love; preaching and teaching in love, serving in love, imparting wisdom and knowledge in love, giving in love, healing in love and sharing every good gift with the love of Christ shining through in every circumstance. **"Let nothing be done in strife or vain glory, but in lowliness of mind, let each esteem others better than themselves" (Philippians 2:3)**. This concludes our study on the spiritual gifts. It is my sincere desire that this study has helped you to not only discover your own gifting, but to recognize the gifts of your fellow believers as well, and most importantly, to fully comprehend how those gifts were always intended to be used, FOR THE COMMON GOOD! And all God's people said, "Amen!"

Truth!