

Systematic Theology for the Local Church
#58—Pneumatology—Part XII¹
The Work of the Holy Spirit in Sanctification Part V:
Sign Gifts

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Helpful for all the studies on spiritual gifts are Ryrie, *The Holy Spirit*, 83-92, and House, sections 38-40.

Today we are seeing a situation remarkably like what existed in the first century in the church at Corinth. Certain spiritual gifts were valued over others and were used in ways that contributed to divisions in the church. This problem led to a strong and extensive correction (three whole chapters in the Bible!). from the Apostle Paul. F. David Farnell describes the correspondence between Corinth and today²:

When Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, the first-century church was already embroiled in turmoil over the nature and practice of spiritual gifts. Misconceptions and abuse of the gifts were rampant in the Corinthian church. A three-man delegation (1 Cor. 7:1; 16:17) asked Paul to clarify how gifts such as prophecy, tongues, and knowledge should be exercised (13:8). The outcome of the turbulence in Corinth is unknown, but the second century exhibited the same confusion in the Montanist heresy. The tumult has emerged in the 20th century in and around Pentecostalism, Neopentecostalism, and movements variously labeled “Charismatic,” “Vineyard,” and “Signs and Wonders.”

Farnell also describes the spread and influence of the movement in our time³:

At first Pentecostal doctrine was confined mostly to the Pentecostal churches. However, in more recent times what is now known as the Neopentecostal or charismatic movement has swept across traditional denominational boundaries into mainline denominations such as Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Roman Catholic churches. The main distinction between the terms “Pentecostal” and “charismatic” is not necessarily theological. While the term “Pentecostal” most often refers to a denominational movement, “charismatic” is a broader term designating those of any denomination who define and accept what they claim to be special works of the Holy Spirit today. Perhaps the most recent emphasis on the practice of miraculous gifts like New Testament prophecy is in the Vineyard and the Signs and Wonders movements, which have developed in the 1980s. Those associated with this trend affirm the continuation of all miraculous gifts mentioned in the New Testament but then reject the label of “Pentecostal” or “charismatic.”

Orthodox Christianity has continuously emphasized the primacy of the Bible over rationalism, tradition and experience. At the heart of the charismatic movement is a position that puts experience ahead of Scripture. In describing John Wimber, one of the leaders of the Vineyard movement, Ken Sarles observes⁴:

At one point he concludes, “So God uses our experiences to show us more fully what he teaches in Scripture, many times toppling or altering elements of our theology and worldview.” This statement is true only insofar as theology is not based on Scripture. If theology is authentically biblical, God-ordained experience will enrich it, not alter it, because God cannot contradict Himself. Rather than

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² F. David Farnell, “Is the Gift of Prophecy for Today?” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, January-March, 1992, 278.

³ *Ibid*, 301.

⁴ Ken L. Sarles, “An Appraisal of the Signs and Wonders Movement,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, January-March, 1988, 70.

beginning with a valid interpretation of the Bible and then allowing the Scriptures to interpret his experience, Wimber seems to start with his own experience, which he then allows to inform his understanding of the biblical text.

This reminds me of the saying that many charismatics have repeated: “The person who has an experience is never at the mercy of the person who has a doctrine.”

Tom Edgar of Capital Seminary takes this evaluation a step farther⁵:

The tongues movement presupposes that communication with the spiritual realm is more direct when it is apart from the mind. Such a concept, though found in various religions, is contrary to biblical Christianity. This emphasis on a level of communication that bypasses the mind and is not direct communication from the believer to God is a dangerous teaching. This interest in “supernatural” events, not primarily as convincing signs but as the daily experience of believers that supposedly places them in contact with the supernatural, is dangerous. This middle-level, spirit realm, called the “excluded middle,” is an area of charismatic emphasis.

We must always put the Bible first in formulating what we believe and determining what we do. Unfortunately, some appear to be preoccupied with the Holy Spirit and His ministries through miraculous gifts. This has occurred especially where people have sought to make the gift of tongues and even the supposed utterance of prophecy standard experiences, even marks of spirituality, for believers during this age.

This study and the next form a unit. The purpose of these studies is to show that miraculous sign gifts that people claim they have today do not match the NT occurrences of miraculous sign gifts. The emphasis will be on tongues as the primary example, with attention also to prophecy, but the same principles apply to all the miraculous gifts.

I. Defining the issue

This is the issue: **Are any or all of the miraculous gifts supposedly present in the Church today part of God’s plan?** Those say that they are not are called *cessationists*. Those that say they are present are called *non-cessationists* or *continualists*. The latter deny that any of the spiritual gifts given to the Church have disappeared. Most importantly, they see tongues and prophecy as being active in the will of God as they were during the first century.

I appreciate Tom Edgar’s description of the core issue⁶:

The “charismatic gifts” of today are not similar to the New Testament phenomena either in general perspective or in the details. There is no evidence to conclude that they are the same; there is every reason to conclude that they are not. The historical fact that the New Testament gifts ceased long ago and the fact that there is no historical link whatever between the charismatic phenomena and the New Testament gifts require the same conclusion. The only remaining possibility for giving credence to the modern charismatic claims would be to produce direct statements of Scripture that the apostolic phenomena will always be present in the church, or that they will specifically be in the modern church despite their cessation through most of church history. Even if this were produced, there must also be evidence that the charismatic phenomena are somehow the same phenomena referred to in the passages. However, there is no specific biblical evidence such as this.

⁵ Thomas R. Edgar, “The Cessation of the Sign Gifts,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, October-December, 1988, 385.

⁶ *Ibid*, 380.

The charismatic movement in all its forms rests not on exegetical evidence that the gifts will continue, but on the assumption contrary to history that since they occurred in the apostolic age they should also occur today. The foundation for this assumption is nonexistent.

An examination of the New Testament reveals that the modern charismatic phenomena are not sufficiently similar to those of the apostolic age. Where are the tongues of fire and the rushing of a mighty wind as on the day of Pentecost? Do missionaries blind their opponents as Paul did? Do church leaders discern hypocrisy and pronounce the immediate death of members as in Acts 5:1-11? Do evangelists amaze an entire city with miracles as did Philip (8:5-8)? Are they then taken to another place of ministry by the Holy Spirit (vv. 39-40)? Are entire multitudes healed by merely being in the shadow of the healer (5:15)? Do prophets give specific prophecies which come to pass soon after (11:27-28)?

II. The nature of miracles and signs

In biblical history we see concentrations of *sign miracles* in four periods: 1) Moses and the Exodus, 2) Elijah and Elisha, 3) the Gospels, and 4) the time of the Apostles and in the book of Acts. There are other miracles throughout the Bible that are not designed as signs.

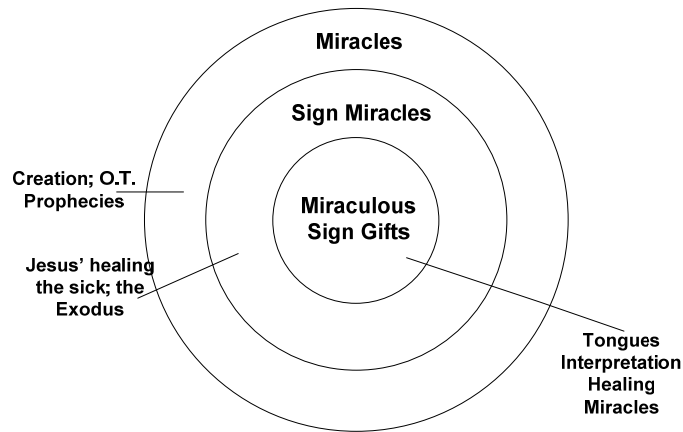
Sign miracles are designed to attest the message and messenger and to get people's attention. The ability to perform sign miracles is not given to all of God's people in a given era, nor are sign miracles for universal application. For example, Jesus did not heal everyone.

Hebrews 2:3-4 shows the attesting effect of *sign gifts*. These are spiritual gifts that act as signs.

² We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. ² For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, ³ how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. ⁴ God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

Notice that vv. 3-4 provide the purpose of "signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit": to testify to the message of the gospel. When people saw these phenomena, they were supposed to trust those who gave them information. The sign gifts were pointers to the veracity of messages and their bearers.

Not all miracles in the Bible are the result of sign gifts, although some are. I thus place sign gifts in the category of sign miracles:



In a certain sense all spiritual gifts are miraculous, since they involve enablement from a supernatural source. But those spiritual gifts that seem to be designed by God as sign miracles, that is, they attest the message and messenger, are:

- Tongues
- Interpretation of tongues
- Healing
- Working of miracles

Some gifts were designed by God to attest new revelation and those giving it. If God has ceased giving new revelation, such gifts are not needed.

The gift of prophecy in the NT is miraculous in that it provides information from God that cannot be obtained by natural means, but it is not a sign gift in the same sense as tongues is. It is one of the miraculous gifts.

III. The Principle of temporary gifts

There is no specific biblical statement regarding temporary versus permanent gifts. (Neither are there any statements regarding the Trinity, yet we hold to the doctrine of the Trinity as being biblical.) However, is there scriptural evidence for a distinction? Yes: Heb. 2:3-4. Here the writer to the Hebrews indicates that the generation before him, those who saw and heard Jesus in person, attested the message with sign gifts (v. 4). This argues for a diminishing of miraculous gifts by the time Hebrews was written, around 65 AD.

Ephesians 2:19-20 speaks of “the foundation that consists of the apostles and prophets.” Once a foundation is laid, it does not need to be laid again. Those two gifts, then, were foundational for the early stage of the church and hence were temporary. Therefore, not all gifts need be present at every point in this Church Age. The gift of apostle is temporary: there cannot be anyone today with that qualification. This argues that at least some gifts are temporary.

Some claim that for the Church to be complete it must have all the gifts at every stage in its history. However, not all gifts need be for every age. A gift given to any age of the church is, by extension, given to the whole Body. For example, you and I profit from the gift of apostle, even though it is not present today.

IV. Predictions of the cessation of certain gifts

Paul addresses the issue of the cessation of gifts in 1 Cor. 13:8. Concerning prophecy he says, “they shall be abolished.” Concerning tongues he says, “they will stop (apparently by themselves).” Finally, knowledge

“will be abolished.” I believe that this verse is not exegetically decisive. In other words, it’s not clear enough to help us decide when tongues might have ceased.

However, the arrival of ‘what is perfect’ in 1 Cor. 13:10 is best associated with the completion of biblical revelation. This is supported by the description of sign gifts in Heb. 2:3-4 as attesting new information from God.

V. Historical evidence of the cessation of miraculous gifts

Many historical studies have been made that show that the miraculous gifts had become non-existent or, if they occurred, were viewed as suspect by the early part of the second century. Thus, the testimony of history confirms the temporary nature of some gifts. There is no sure evidence of miraculous gifts from the first century until the present. Gifts claimed to exist from the end of the 19th century to the present time do not match the gifts found in the first century. The following quote from Farnell is concerned primarily with the gift of prophecy, but his conclusion is valid for all the miraculous gifts⁷:

From the demise of Montanism [latter part of the second century] until the turn of the present century, prophetic phenomena were never a part of a major movement in Christianity. Instead, focus began to shift to apostolic doctrine and study of the Scriptures as the source of Christian doctrine and knowledge. By the time of Chrysostom (ca. A.D. 347-407) the prophetic gift was considered a past phenomenon. Chrysostom stated the following concerning the subject of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:1-2 specifically, and chapters 12-14 in general: “This whole place is very obscure: but the obscurity is produced by our ignorance of the facts referred to and by their cessation, being such as then used to occur but now no longer take place. And why do they not happen now? Why look now, the cause too of the obscurity has produced us again another question; namely, why did they then happen, and now do so no more?” Here is a clear statement by a leader of the church in the fourth century that miraculous gifts, like prophecy and tongues, had ceased. Because Chrysostom was well traveled and would most likely have known the general status of the church, he signaled a widespread absence of such gifts in his day.

Today’s proponent of miraculous gifts must deal with the question of why such gifts were not present from the first through the 19th centuries. This is a significant weakness in the charismatic position.

VI. Claims for similar phenomena in other spiritual systems

It is significant that many spiritual systems around the world claim and have claimed to have experiences like those claimed by charismatics today. Tom Edgar points out⁸:

The movement crosses all theological boundaries. Speaking in tongues is present in non-Christian religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, and in cults such as Mormonism. Healing, miracles, and exorcisms are also common in non-Christian religions. In conventional Christian circles the charismatic movement includes Protestants and Roman Catholics, liberals and conservatives, and individuals in many denominations. Those who believe in the inspiration of the Bible, justification by faith, and many other doctrines—as well as those who do not—are also involved.

This undermines the charismatic’s claim that such experiences are from the God of the Bible.

⁷ Farnell.

⁸ Edgar, 384.

VII. Special experiences and confusion with Spirit Baptism

Preoccupation with tongues has often gone hand in hand with another error of biblical interpretation, namely, the assertion that one must undergo an experience of the ‘baptism’ of the Spirit in order to arrive at a higher plane in the Christian life. This demonstrates confusion concerning baptism as the foundational work of the Spirit toward believers during this age. Baptism places a person in the Body of Christ, identifies him with the crosswork of Christ, is entirely unseen and unfelt, cannot and need not be sought and happens only once. Even the worldly and divided Corinthian believers had been baptized by the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13). They did not need a new ‘experience of the Spirit,’ but needed to practice simple obedience and adherence to Scripture. The Bible does not give warrant for looking for a second blessing, a baptism, a spiritual experience. And that kind of error is especially misleading when associated with unbiblical ideas concerning tongues and the believer today.

Tom Edgar shows that this error assumes a special relationship with God⁹:

In Pentecostalism the doctrine of Christian perfectionism assumed a specific form in the inaccurate concept of a postconversion crisis experience, a “second blessing.” This teaching with its concept of an effusion of power from the Holy Spirit resulted in the expectancy of and search to obtain overt “power” as described in Acts.

The concept of the “second blessing” or “baptism or fullness of the Spirit” presupposes that while Jesus’ death on the cross paid for sin, it is insufficient to empower for service, to enable one to be spiritual, or to give effectiveness in prayer. This differs drastically from the teaching of the New Testament. The view that only those who speak in tongues have real communication with God is contrary to the biblical teaching that all believers have full access to God. Romans 8:26 states that all believers are helped in prayer by the Spirit with inaudible, nonuttered, internal groanings.

In the next study we will look in detail at 1 Corinthians and the gifts of tongues and prophecy found there. We will also summarize our teaching on the miraculous gifts.

⁹ Edgar, 384-85.

Appendix

Some other valuable resources:

R. Fowler White, “Gaffin and Grudem on 1 Cor 13:10: A Comparison of Cessationist and Noncessationist Argumentation” in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, John H. Armstrong, General Editor: Moody Press, Chicago, 1996.

A valuable Web site: <http://www.greatmenoffaith.com/id12.html>

Study questions

1. Where does the charismatic movement appear today?
2. From the standpoint of study of the Bible, what is the heart of the issue concerning gifts today? What is Tom Edgar’s approach to this?
3. What are sign miracles? How are they different from sign gifts?
4. What are the contributions of Heb . 2:1-4 and Eph. 2:20 to the issue of miraculous gifts?
5. What are the two main evidences for the cessation of miraculous gifts?
6. Why are reports of tongues among world religions significant?
7. What is the nature of the charismatic error concerning Spirit Baptism? What is Spirit Baptism?

Running compilation of key definitions

1. Systematic theology: The organized presentation of all that the Bible teaches about God and His works.
2. Exegesis: The actual practice of studying or interpreting a document or other message to determine its meaning.
3. Context: Context in a document or utterance is the surroundings of a portion of a word, a word, or a group of words.
4. Bibliology: The doctrinal study of the nature of the Bible.
5. Biblical authority: The quality inherent in Scripture by virtue of which human beings are completely answerable to its content.
6. Revelation: The information about Himself given by God to human beings.
7. General revelation: God's disclosure of Himself, available directly to everyone, given through means other than dreams, visions, direct words and Christ Himself.
8. Special revelation: The disclosure of information from God that is not available directly to all human beings.
9. Inspiration: A term applied to the Bible denoting that it is the product of God's creative activity, figuratively breathed out from Him (2 Tim. 3:16); applies to the process of recording Scripture, not specifically to the people involved; actually, *expiration* would be a better term to reflect the concept of 2 Tim. 3:16; the result is *inerrancy*.
10. Textual criticism: The science and art of attempting to discover the original text of a literary work for which the original document does not exist. It is especially important for biblical studies, and the foundational endeavor to all subsequent investigation of the Scriptures.
11. Canon: Transliterated from a Greek Word meaning 'standard'; as used of the Bible, it refers to books authenticated as possessing divine origin and therefore authoritative; the Jewish canon consists of thirty-nine books, the Protestant of sixty-six and the Catholic of eighty (including apocryphal books).
12. Inerrancy is a term applied to the Bible, although not specifically found in it; it denotes that the Bible, as originally written, possessed no humanly induced deviations from the message God intended to be recorded and that it is true in every respect; 2 Tim. 3:16; 1 Cor. 2:13; 1 Pet. 2:19.
13. Infallibility: Although some assert that this term has a different meaning from inerrancy, the two terms are, for purposes of biblical study, synonymous; the Bible is infallible because inerrant, and inerrant because infallible.
14. Illumination is the teaching ministry of the Spirit of God that imparts understanding of the message of Scripture to the believer; not to be confused with inspiration, which in the Bible is used of the work of God in giving Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16); 1 Jn. 2:20; Jn. 16:13.
15. Spirituality: God is not physical, but immaterial, incorporeal, invisible and alive.
16. Self-existence/Aseity: God exists independently of anything else. He is self-existent.
17. Immensity: God is infinite in relation to space.
18. Eternality: God is infinite with regard to time.
19. Simplicity: God is not a plurality and cannot be looked at as divisible into parts.
20. Pure actuality: There is nothing about God that is potential. He is not unfinished in any way.
21. Necessity: God is uncaused and exists because he must exist.
22. Immutability: God is unchanging and unchangeable.
23. Impassibility: God is incapable of being changed or disturbed by what he experiences and is incapable of suffering.
24. Transcendence: God and the world are distinct; he is not part of the world, and the world is not part of him.
25. Immanence: God is present in the world.
26. Infinity: There are no limits to God's person and his perfections.
27. Omnipotence: God can do whatever he wills.
28. Omniscience: God knows everything there is to know.
29. Omnipresence: God is present everywhere in his creation
30. Holiness: God is morally pure and separated from all moral evil and sin.

31. Goodness: A quality that describes or includes his love, benevolence, mercy and grace
32. Truth: God's person, actions, knowledge and revelations correspond to reality
33. Love: God's continual communication of himself to his creatures.
34. Benevolence: God's goodness toward his creatures.
35. Mercy: God's goodness toward those who are helpless.
36. Grace: God's goodness toward sinners.
37. Glory: The greatness of God's perfections.
38. Trinity: There is only one true God, existing as a single Being comprised of three Persons who are equal in every way, yet distinct in their tasks and relations to humanity.
39. God's decree: The decree of God is his plan for the universe that includes all things and is certain to come to pass.
40. Providence: God's care for and upholding of his creation.
41. Sovereignty: God's control over his universe.
42. Christology: The study of the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.
43. Incarnation: The joining of deity and humanity in one person forever. The word is based on the Latin word for flesh: the Lord Jesus Christ is God joined with human flesh.
44. Pre-existence: Used of the Son, it means that he existed before Bethlehem.
45. Theophany: An appearance of God.
46. Christophany: An appearance of Christ.
47. Priesthood: The system that God established to remedy the problem of alienation between a holy God and sinful human beings.
48. Son of God: A name for Jesus that describes his deity and his approval by the Father at the resurrection.
49. Son of Man: A messianic name for Jesus that emphasizes his humanity backed by deity and his role of taking humans to God through suffering and humiliation.
50. Messiah: A transliteration of a Hebrew word meaning 'anointed one'; used of the expected national deliverer of Israel; the linguistic equivalent of Greek *christos*, 'Christ'.
51. Efficacious grace: Efficacious grace is the working of God in an individual that cannot be thwarted and that leads that person to faith in Christ. It is also described as effective calling and irresistible grace.
52. Regeneration: Regeneration is the unseen and unfelt work of the Holy Spirit that overcomes depravity and brings spiritual life and the capacity to please God and exercise faith.
53. Spirit baptism is the nonphysical act of the Spirit of God that places a believer in the Body of Christ and makes him a partaker, along with all other believers, of the work and merits of Christ; should be distinguished from filling, sealing, and indwelling; cannot be felt or noticed, and hence must be appropriated by faith; there is no warrant in Scripture for assuming a second act of God for power, a 'baptism,' after salvation.
54. Sealing is a guarantee that the believer will persevere in Christ all the way to entrance into heaven, when God completes his work of purchasing the individual. It begins at the moment of salvation when the Father places the Holy Spirit in the believer for permanent indwelling. It is unseen and unfelt and should result in praise and obedience to the Spirit.
55. Indwelling is the spiritual presence of the Holy Spirit in every individual who has placed personal trust in Christ as Savior. Described in Jn. 14:17, this is the basis of His other ministries to the believer, such as sealing, anointing and filling and establishes the believer as a part of the spiritual temple that God is building today.
56. The filling of the Spirit is 1) A constant characteristic of a believer's life that consists of regular control by the Spirit that produces Christlikeness through Scripture; 2) A special enablement at particular times for service during the first century.
57. A spiritual gift is a God-given ability for service.
58. A cessationist (with regard to spiritual gifts) is a person who holds that the miraculous gifts are not present in the Church today as part of God's plan.
59. A continualist (with regard to spiritual gifts) is a person who holds that the miraculous gifts are present in the Church today as part of God's plan.