

Questions and Answers



about Healing, Tongues, and Prophecy

What the Bible really says about miraculous sign gifts

Joel James

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What the Bible really says about the miraculous sign gifts.

by

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Introduction

I remember when I started to ask questions about sign gifts. It was after some friends invited me to their church during my first year at university. It was a large church that was well known for its emphasis on the miraculous gifts, especially speaking in tongues. I hadn't grown up in a charismatic church, so I was curious to see what it would be like. The service concluded with the preacher calling everyone to the front to be "filled with the Spirit and speak in tongues." In response, a large group gathered at the front of the church and began to speak in tongues all at the same time.

Something seemed wrong. Opening my Bible, I began to page through 1 Corinthians 12-14, a section I knew dealt with spiritual gifts. Eventually my eyes fell on these words in 1 Corinthians 14:27, "If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and one must interpret." Claiming to be filled with the Spirit, these well-intentioned believers were, in fact, violating all three of the Spirit's instructions: a lot more than three people were speaking in tongues all at the same time with no interpretation. I was amazed that a church claiming to have the gift of tongues would so blatantly ignore the Spirit's instruction about the use of that gift.

Actually, ignoring the Spirit's instruction about spiritual gifts (especially the miraculous sign gifts) is a problem almost as old as the gifts themselves.

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware.

(1 Cor 12:1)

The Corinthians believed they were well informed about spiritual gifts. They spoke in tongues more than any other New Testament church. They were blessed with genuine prophets who received messages from God, and Paul probably healed during the eighteen months he spent planting the church. Made confident by their experiences, the Corinthians thought they were experts. They were completely wrong. "I do not want you to be unaware," wrote Paul. The translators have been kind to the Corinthians: the Greek word translated "unaware" is the word *agnoien*, "without knowledge." Paul actually said he didn't want them to be *ignorant*.

What a shock! Although they were *the* spiritual-gifts church, Paul said the Corinthians were ignorant of the Spirit's instruction about gifts. I believe that first century Corinthian problem still exists today: enthusiasm for sign gifts often conceals a basic lack of knowledge about those gifts. The church I mentioned in the first paragraph was an unfortunate example of that. Their enthusiasm for tongues was unquestionable. Their violation of the Spirit's rules regarding them was inexcusable.

Where do we go for answers?

Everyone has his own ideas about spiritual gifts. Who's right? God is. But we might be divided on how to discover God's "ideas" about spiritual gifts. The Bible seems the obvious place. As the sun is the earth's source of light and warmth, so the Bible is the Christian's source of truth and wisdom. But many today reject this. I know of "prophets" in Pretoria who bellow, "You need to throw away your Bible and start listening to what the Spirit is saying today." That's an extraordinarily high view of being led by the Spirit. Such people say (maybe you've said it yourself), "I'm led by the Spirit to practice the gifts; therefore I don't have to be concerned with what the Bible says."

There's nothing new under the sun. That argument was also used by the Corinthians. Those who were "spiritual" thought they were above God's rules for the gifts. But being spiritual doesn't mean you make your own rules; it means you gladly submit to God's.

Paul dealt with the "I'm Spirit-led" argument by shooting a bullet of divine authority right through its heart. In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul listed God's rules regarding tongues and prophecy. He knew that rejoicing would probably not break out in Corinth when the church heard those rules. Some of their favourite practices were being outlawed! They wanted to keep doing things their way, "as the Spirit led them." They were ready to go eyeball-to-eyeball with Paul in a defiant stare of refusal. Paul told them they better blink.

If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment. But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized.

(1 Cor 14:37-38)

"If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual..." Paul knew the argument that would be used against him: "We're Spirit-led. We have a fresh word. You can't tell us what to do." Actually, he could. Paul was an apostle and had Christ's authority. What he wrote in the Scripture was "the Lord's commandment" about spiritual gifts, nothing less. Paul mocked the idea that they, the Corinthians, should be the ones to establish the rules guiding spiritual gifts: "Was it from you that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only?" (v. 36). Christ appointed the apostles to establish the doctrine and practice of the church, not the Corinthians (nor any believers today, for that matter).

Those who claim they are Spirit-led and thus above the biblical rules governing spiritual gifts, are sailing a big boat in shallow water. Paul said if you don't recognise God's biblical instruction regarding the gifts, then God doesn't recognise you (14:38). Paul shot the "I'm Spirit-led" argument in the head: don't use an argument Paul killed.

But it happened to me!

Can we trust experiences—it happened to me—for truth about spiritual gifts? The Corinthians are proof you can't. They experienced sign gifts every week in their church, and it hadn't helped them *at all*. Paul said they were *ignorant*. We'll have to go to the Bible, not experience, to answer our questions about sign gifts.

In this booklet we're going to handle some hot questions about tongues, healing, Spirit baptism, whether some gifts have stopped or not, and so on. That's a forest fire of controversy. We'll put on a fireman's hat and stride right in. At times you might be tempted to burst into flames because you disagree with me. Don't. Stay cool, listen to the Scripture, and let God's word fill in the gaps, if any, of your knowledge. In the end, if you discover truths about sign gifts that you didn't know, be brave enough to admit it and change.

What are spiritual gifts?

Spiritual gifts aren't mere talents or abilities like singing or a flair for public speaking. Pavorotti sings beautifully and Cicero spoke eloquently, but only Christians can have spiritual gifts. Spiritual gifts are a God-given, Spirit-empowered ability to serve others in the church (1 Cor 12:4-6, 7, 11).¹

What are *sign* gifts?

Not all the gifts were visibly miraculous. For example, there is nothing outwardly miraculous about the gifts of administration, helps, teaching, or giving. However, gifts such as prophecy, tongues, and healing were different. By their very nature they were evident miracles. They were exciting. They drew a crowd so the gospel could be preached to many. They were like a signboard advertising the truth and power of Christianity.

The term "sign gifts" comes from 1 Corinthians 14:22 where tongues and prophecy are called "signs" (Greek: *semeion*). The word *semeion* referred to miracles that confirmed a preacher was God's messenger. For example, Peter called Jesus "a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs [*semeion*]..." (Acts 2:22). The apostles were proven to be God's messengers the same way: God confirmed them "by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit" (Heb 2:4). Which gifts acted as divine signboards, testifying that the first preachers of the gospel were God's men? Not administration, helps, and giving, but the evidently miraculous gifts like prophecy, tongues, and healing—the sign gifts.

No one debates whether gifts like administration, helps, teaching, giving, or leadership are present in the church today. They are and they play important roles. The furore centres on the miraculous

¹ Lists of spiritual gifts are found in four places in the New Testament: Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 28; Ephesians 4:11; and 1 Peter 4:10-11.

sign gifts. What are they? Are they present today or not? Let's find some biblical answers. We'll start with the gift of healing.

Questions about Healing

We have a man in our church who used to attend one of the large signs-and-wonders churches in Johannesburg. At one of their healing services, he went forward to be healed of his poor eyesight. When his turn came, the pastor prayed over him, removed his glasses, threw them in a trash can, and asked him if he could read the "EXIT" sign over the door at the side of the stage. Since the sign was large and brightly lighted, he could read it even without his glasses. With a dramatic flourish, and to the cheering of the crowd, the pastor pronounced him healed.

My friend had been taught that you have to have faith for your healing to take effect, so even though his eyesight hadn't improved at all, he spent the next several months pretending that his vision was perfect. In the end, like so many others today, he left the church disillusioned, frustrated, and disappointed (and made an appointment to get a new pair of glasses). If that's the gift of healing, it needs an ambulance.

What are the characteristics of the New Testament "gift of healings" (1 Cor 12:28)?

The first example of the gift of healing in action is Peter's healing of the lame man in Acts 3.

And a man who had been lame from his mother's womb was being carried along, whom they used to set down every day at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, in order to beg alms of those who were entering the temple...But Peter said, "I do not possess silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene—walk!" And seizing him by the right hand, he raised him up; and immediately his feet and his ankles were strengthened. With a leap he stood upright and began to walk; and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.

(Acts 3:2-8)

According to this example, the post-Pentecost, New Testament gift of healing had a number of characteristics:

- 1)** It was *unassisted*. No medical intervention, medication, or surgeries were required for full healing to take place.
- 2)** It was *instantaneous*. There were no lengthy, repeated prayer sessions. The man's legs didn't strengthen over weeks or months. Peter said, "Walk!" and "immediately his feet and his ankles were strengthened."²

² In Jesus' healing ministry, there was a delay in full healing three times. In each case the delay was minutes only. There is no record in Acts of delay in any of the healings done with the gift of healing.

3) It was *complete*. The healing of the lame man was not partial or temporary. He didn't take a few faltering steps. He jumped up, leaped about, and never returned to his previous, crippled state.

4) It *healed visible, verifiable diseases*. Peter didn't heal only back pain, headaches, or invisible internal conditions. Peter healed a man whose legs were visibly deformed. One second they were twisted and misshaped; the next they were straight, whole, and strong.

5) Its healings were *undeniable*. So irrefutable was the miracle of Acts 3, the Jewish religious authorities (no friends of Peter, to say the least!) said this about the healing: "The fact that a noteworthy miracle has taken place through them is apparent to all who live in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it" (Acts 4:16).

6) It *never failed, regardless of the faith of the recipient*. The lame man in Acts 3 didn't even know that Peter intended to heal him; all he was hoping for was a handful of coins. He had no faith, but this didn't hinder Peter's ability to heal.

Luke's report in Acts 5 about the apostles' healing ministry reveals several more characteristics of the New Testament gift of healing.

At the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people... The people from the cities in the vicinity of Jerusalem were coming together, bringing people who were sick or afflicted with unclean spirits, and *they were all being healed*.

(Acts 5:12, 16, emphasis added)

7) *No one left unhealed*. Every single person who came to the apostles to be healed, was healed.

8) The gift of healing was used *to heal unbelievers, not believers*. This might surprise you, but there is no clear example in the book of Acts or the New Testament epistles of a Christian healing another Christian.³

Peter healed an unbeliever in Acts 3. In Acts 5, the people of Judea brought their sick to be healed. Philip the evangelist healed unbelievers when he evangelised in Samaria (Acts 8), and Paul healed during his missionary journeys (Acts 14). However, the New Testament never gives an example of a Christian healing another Christian. In other words, healing was a sign gift: it was used to heal unbelievers to prove that the gospel message was true and to promote evangelism.

"Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; get up and make your bed.' Immediately he got up. And all who lived at Lydda and Sharon saw him, *and they turned to the Lord*" (Acts 9:34-35, emphasis added).

9) Healing was done *without preliminaries or special meetings*. Peter healed in the temple and on the street in impromptu situations, as did Paul (Acts 14:8-9).

³ This excludes believers being raised from the dead (Acts 9 and 20), which can hardly be classified as healings.

Those are the characteristics of New Testament healing. It was unassisted, instantaneous, complete, and healed visible deformities and diseases. Its healings were so obvious that they were undeniable, even by the enemies of Christianity. The New Testament gift of healing never failed regardless of the faith of the recipient. Everyone who came to be healed was healed. It wasn't used in the church to heal other believers. Instead, it was a sign gift used to promote evangelism among the unsaved. Finally, it was impromptu: it didn't require the controlled environment of a special meeting.

Was the gift of healing given so Christians could heal other Christians?

There is no evidence that healings took place within the church. In fact, when Paul wrote to Timothy he mentioned Timothy's stomach problems and "frequent ailments" (1 Tim 5:23). Paul's advice to Timothy wasn't, "Find someone with the gift of healing." It was, "Take some wine as a medicinal treatment." Paul didn't expect Timothy's chronic stomach illness to be healed by a church member with the gift of healing. That wasn't the purpose of the gift.

Other examples of sickness in the New Testament support this. According to 2 Timothy 4:20, Paul had to leave Trophimus, a valued companion, behind during one of his journeys because Trophimus was too sick to travel. James said that if someone was sick, he was to call the elders for prayer (James 5:14ff.), not someone with the gift of healing. In other words, there is no evidence that the early church dealt with physical sickness among its members by employing the gift of healing.

We prayed for several weeks for a member of our congregation who had cancer, and the cancer has gone into remission. Is that evidence of the gift of healing at work?

No. The gift of healing was not merely an answer to prayer. Healing was a Spirit-given, supernatural ability to heal someone directly, immediately, and miraculously. When Peter healed the lame man in Acts 3, he didn't get everyone in a circle to pray over the man. He didn't organise a prayer chain. Peter healed the man directly and instantly: that was the gift of healing. Answers to prayer for healing are wonderful, but they are distinct from the *gift* of healing—the power to heal directly, immediately, and miraculously.

Can God still do miracles⁴ of healing today?

God can do miracles of healing at any time. But the gift of healing is not simply *God's* healing; it is *men* healing by *God's* power. There is a significant difference.

⁴ A miracle is a work of God that can't be explained by His usual means of working in this world (the predictable patterns we call the "laws of nature").

Let me illustrate the confusion over this distinction. Jack Deere is a prominent theologian in the charismatic movement, and has written a number of well-known books promoting signs and wonders. In one of those books he reports a discussion about miracles that he had with one of his students.⁵ The student suggested that, with few exceptions, miracles have been restricted to three periods of biblical history: the time of the Exodus when Moses did many miracles, the era of Elijah and Elisha (1 & 2 Kings), and the time of Christ and the apostles.

Deere chided the student for forgetting that God did a stunning array of miracles at creation. God caused the sun to stand still for Joshua. In Daniel's day, He rescued three young men from a furnace of fire, and so on. God does miracles all the time, said Deere.

Who was right, the student or Deere, the professor of theology? The student, actually. All of Deere's examples were miracles that God did *without a human agent*. The student was talking about miracles that God did *through* a human agent. This is an important distinction. *God* can do miracles anytime He chooses. Biblical history shows that He does them rarely, but He certainly can do them. That's not the gift of healing. The gift of healing is a divine miracle done *through a person*.

Is the gift of healing present today?

I don't believe that the gift of healing is present in the church today, if for no other reason than the fact that today's "healings" bear no resemblance to the New Testament gift of healing.⁶

Today's "healings" often require medical assistance (surgery, prescription drugs, and other treatments) to be successful. They require weeks or months to take effect rather than being instantaneous. They are incomplete: the cripple walks, but only with staggering, painful steps. They are temporary: the heart condition returns two months after it has supposedly been banished.

Today's "healings" are successful only with ailments invisible to the watching eye. Because they are invisible, today's healings are highly deniable. No healer today can say that *all* who apply to him are healed. Today's healings require special meetings at which the mood is carefully orchestrated and the people to be "healed" are cautiously screened. In other words, the New Testament gift of healing is not operating in the church today.

Isn't the gift of healing today *different* than the New Testament gift of healing?

Some say that comparing today's healings with those of the New Testament is unfair because the working of the Spirit is different, less powerful today. But where does the Bible teach that the gift of healing will itself become sick? Has the Holy Spirit become ill, a pale shadow of His old self,

⁵ Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993, p. 49ff.

⁶ For further study, I highly recommend Richard Mayhue's, *The Healing Promise*, Harvest House Publishers, 1994.

unable to heal as He did in the past? The Bible never says that the gift of healing would vanish only to reappear nineteen centuries later, itself blind, crippled, and limping.

This argument sounds especially suspicious coming from those who are fond of quoting Jesus' words, "Greater works than these [you] will do" (John 14:12). It is silly to say that today's healings are greater than Jesus' *and* are of a pathetically lesser quality than Jesus' at the same time.⁷

⁷ Since not even the apostles did miracles as great as Jesus', John 14:12 is either false or refers to the miracle of salvation. Certainly the apostles saw many more come to salvation than Jesus did in His earthly ministry; therefore, the "greater works" of John 14:12 probably refer to the miracle of salvation, not healings.

Questions about Prophecy

Was the gift of prophecy a revelatory gift or did it refer merely to Spirit-helped preaching?

Prophets weren't merely preachers. Ephesians 3 makes that clear.

When you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations *was not made known* to the sons of men, *as it has now been revealed* to His holy apostles and *prophets* in the Spirit.

(Eph 3:4-5, emphasis added)

Prophets were believers to whom God revealed new doctrine, men like Paul himself. Sometimes God also revealed future events to them: Agabus in Acts 11 and 21, Paul in Acts 18 and 27. Sometimes He preached sermons through them (1 Cor 14:3) as He did with the OT prophets. However, the gift of prophecy was different than the gift of teaching (the two are distinguished in 1 Cor 12:28). What made a prophet a *prophet* was the fact that God sometimes gave him direct revelation.

What were the rules governing the gift of prophecy?

Paul wrote these Spirit-inspired rules for the church.

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment. But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, the first one must keep silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; for God is not a God of confusion but of peace.

(1 Cor 14:29-33a)

First, at the most three prophets were to speak in a church service. Second, the others (presumably the other prophets) were to pass judgement on each prophecy. This was a built in safety measure to avoid made-up, human, pseudo-prophecies.

Third, the prophets had to take turns. The Corinthians were like a bunch of thirsty school children at a water fountain—pushing and shoving, struggling to be first. If another prophet in the congregation received a message, the one speaking had to allow the second prophet an opportunity to speak.

In verse 32, Paul gave the reason this patient, restrained taking of turns was possible: "The spirits of prophets are subject to prophets." Here's the scene: a member of the Corinthian church stood up and blurted out a prophecy while someone else was preaching. His excuse? "I couldn't stop myself. The Spirit was moving."

The same argument is used today by those who burst out in tongues, bark, pogo (jump in place), fall on the floor, and even vomit "in the Spirit." However weird, rude, or gross, it's all blamed on God's Spirit. The-Holy-Spirit-made-me-do-it excuse has an ancient lineage: the Corinthians used it to defend their worship atrocities, too.

Paul rejected the excuse that the moving of God's Spirit led to uncontrolled outbursts: "The spirits of prophets are subject to prophets." In pagan prophecy, uncontrollable babbling, physical gyrations, and strange behaviour were common. But when God's Spirit was working, the prophet was in complete control of his "spirit" or inner man. As confirmation, Paul said, "The spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; for God is not a God of confusion but of peace" (vv. 32-33a). When God's Spirit works, there is peace and harmony in the worship service, not disorder, rudeness, and bizarre behaviour.

Were women allowed to prophesy?

Yes, but not in the worship service. First Corinthians 11:5 speaks of women prophesying. Acts 21:9 says Philip the evangelist had four daughters who were prophetesses. However, 1 Corinthians 14:34 makes it clear that women were not to prophesy in the worship service: "The women are to keep silent in the churches." Presumably this was because there were men present, and women were not allowed to teach men (1 Timothy 2:12).

Is the New Testament *gift* of prophecy different than Old Testament prophecy? In other words, can someone with the New Testament gift give a wrong or unfulfilled prophecy?

No.⁸ The Old Testament demanded one hundred percent accuracy in doctrine and prediction from God's prophets (Deut 13:1-5; 18:20-22). Notice especially Deuteronomy 18.

But the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.' You may say in your heart, 'How will we know the word which the Lord has not spoken?' When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.

(Deut 18:20-22)

The standard of one hundred percent accuracy in prediction was repeatedly affirmed in the Old Testament (1 Samuel 3:19-20; 9:6; Jeremiah 28:9). Nowhere in the New Testament did the

⁸ I have dealt with it at length in my booklet, *Testing Today's Prophecy*.

apostles teach or imply that the standard had changed. If it had, the apostles would have said so, otherwise Jewish converts would have rejected all the new, fallible prophets out of hand.

The apostles said nothing about a change in the trustworthiness of prophecy because they didn't have to. Prophets whose prophecies failed were still false prophets. God summed up the whole matter perfectly in Jeremiah.

Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are prophesying to you. They are leading you into futility; they speak a vision of their own imagination, not from the mouth of the Lord.

(Jeremiah 23:16)

Don't the messages of the gift of prophecy come as inner impressions, making misinterpretation by the prophet possible?

No. Again, let's set the Old Testament background. The Old Testament prophets said, "Thus saith the Lord," not, "Here's an impression I have in my spirit." They spoke God's very words.

Then the Lord stretched out His hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me, "Behold, I have put My words in your mouth."

(Jeremiah 1:9; see also Deut 18:18; Zech 7:12)

How about the New Testament era? All Bible-believing Christians agree that the authors of Scripture received God's very words when they wrote the New Testament. Peter said, "But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Peter 1:20-21).

But did God use a *different*, less accurate method with those who had only the *gift* of prophecy? No. The examples of the gift of prophecy in the New Testament make it clear that the prophets received God's very words. Consider Agabus' prophecy that Paul would be bound and turned over to the Romans in Jerusalem.

And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, "*This is what the Holy Spirit says: 'In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'*"

(Acts 21:11, emphasis added)

Agabus didn't receive vague impressions in his spirit, something easily misinterpreted. Agabus received words straight from the Holy Spirit. Paul's gift of prophecy was the same. Notice what Paul told his fellow passengers after they had given up hope of surviving the great storm buffeting their ship.

Therefore, keep up your courage, men, for I believe God that it will turn out *exactly* as I have been told.

(Acts 27:25, emphasis added)

Paul had the confidence of a prophet who received words directly from God, not one fishing about in the puddle of his inner impressions for a slippery, easily misinterpreted scrap of divine information.

The idea of a prophet misinterpreting or garbling a message from God also ignores Revelation 22:6. There God is called, "the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets." God is sovereign over the human spirit of the prophet. God didn't give a prophet a message, and then wring His hands, hoping it would get through the prophet's human spirit intact. God is the God of the spirits of the prophets: errors aren't allowed when He gives the message.

Were prophecies to be tested for accuracy?

Yes. Because of the constant danger of false prophets (Matt 7:15), each prophecy—and by implication the prophet who gave it—was to be tested: "Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgement" (1 Cor 14:29). Pagan prophets could say whatever they wanted in the name of their gods since those gods were only "mute idols" (1 Cor 12:2). Christianity was different. The Christian God spoke—He even named His Son, *the Word*. And when He spoke, He spoke truth. His prophets couldn't say anything they jolly well pleased when speaking in His name: "No one speaking by the Spirit of God says, 'Jesus is accursed'" (1 Cor 12:3).

Testing was imperative: "Do not despise prophetic utterances, but examine everything carefully" (1 Thess 5:20-21). "Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1).

Weeding out the false from the true seems to have been the role of the spiritual gift called "distinguishing of spirits" in 1 Corinthians 12:10. Two things suggest this. First, Paul listed it immediately after the gift of prophecy. Second, the word "distinguish" or "discern" is the same word used (in its verb form) in 14:29, "Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others *pass judgement*." Those with this gift could determine whether a prophecy was from God's Spirit or some other spirit (1 John 4:1). There is no evidence that the gift of discerning spirits was the ability to discover secret information about demons as some today suggest.

But what's the harm of letting someone speak "a word from God," even if it's not really the New Testament gift of prophecy?

First, it's an insult to the God of truth for someone to claim to speak a "word" from Him, and then spout doctrinal error or predictions that don't come true. Second, Jesus warned us, "Beware of false prophets" (Matt 7:15), inaccuracy always being a key identifying feature. Third, God warned

Jeremiah, "You will no longer remember the oracle [divine announcement] of the Lord, because every man's own word will become the oracle..." (Jer 23:36). While Christians are busy with each other's "fresh words" that are errant, fallible, and the result of imagination, they aren't paying attention to the true, infallible, eternal word of God, the Bible. That's serious.

Does 1 Corinthians 13:8-10 tell us when the gift of prophecy will cease?

Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.

(1 Cor 13:8-10)

Paul said tongues would dry up like a seasonal stream in a sun-scorched desert. Prophecy and knowledge (both revelational gifts) would be shut off like the flow of water when you close a tap. Nothing is said here about when tongues will dry up. Prophecy, however, will be done away with when "the perfect" comes. What Paul meant by "the perfect" is obscure. It could refer to the completion of the New Testament (based on James 1:25, "the perfect law"). However, Paul never used the Greek word *teleion* of the Scriptures.

A second option is the return of Christ. A third—the most likely in my mind—makes "the perfect" the eternal state (i.e., heaven). This makes sense of verse 11: what's good for one time period (childhood or this world) is not good for another (adulthood or heaven). It also fits the face-to-face, complete knowledge of verse 12—surely too strong a description for even the completed New Testament. This also allows the two witnesses in Revelation 11:3 to be genuine prophets.

Does that mean that prophecy could still be around today? Potentially, but don't hold your breath waiting for it. The leaders of the prophecy movement admit that their prophecies are regularly wrong and often go unfulfilled ("I guess God wasn't in that one," they joke). What's going on today is not the biblical gift of prophecy; it is a sad, God-rejected pretender.

I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy falsely in My name, saying, 'I had a dream, I had a dream!' How long? Is there anything in the hearts of the prophets who prophesy falsehood, even these prophets of the deception of their own heart...?

...I am against the prophets," declares the Lord, "who use their tongues and declare, 'The Lord declares.' Behold, I am against those who have prophesied false dreams...I did not send them or command them, nor do they furnish this people the slightest benefit."

(Jeremiah 23:25-26, 31-32)

Why would anyone want fallible prophecies anyway?

I have no idea. After all, what good is a prophecy you know has about a fifty percent chance of not coming true? Talk about false assurance!

Actually there is a very good reason why today's "prophets" urgently want the gift of prophecy to include fallible prophecies: *their* prophecies are so often wrong. They want to lower the bar to allow fallible prophecy, not because God's word suggests they should, but because if they don't, they'll have to admit that their gift of prophecy isn't the true gift at all.

Prophecies that go unfulfilled or are partially wrong are not a *Christian* event. They remind one of the pagan prophecies of the Greek oracles or the prophets of Baal in the Old Testament. They are not a divinely empowered gift of the Spirit.

Questions about Spirit Baptism

What is Spirit baptism?

It is an internal, spiritual event by which the Holy Spirit places a believer into the body of Christ. "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (1 Cor 12:13a).

What is the purpose of Spirit baptism?

For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

(1 Cor 12:13)

The purpose of Spirit baptism is unity. The ethnic and social diversity (Jew/Greek, slave/free) of Christianity is no barrier to unity because we all share one Spirit, and are placed into one body by Spirit baptism.

Some Christians teach that this Spirit baptism can happen months or years after a person turns to Christ. However, since the purpose of Spirit baptism is to *unite* Christians, this cannot be true. If Spirit baptism sometimes happens long after salvation, then some true Christians are not yet (perhaps never!) in the body of Christ. This is theologically impossible. There is no such thing as a Christian who is not in the body of Christ. It also creates a two-tier Christianity, the *haves* and the *have-nots*. To avoid having a sorry few who have truly believed but are excluded from the body of Christ, Spirit baptism must happen at salvation.

Don't the examples of Spirit baptism in Acts prove that it comes after salvation?

Using Acts to prove the normal process of Spirit baptism is dangerous. In Acts 2, there were hurricane-like noises and tongues of fire—events that never occurred again in the New Testament. In Acts 8, the coming of the Spirit was delayed because the apostles were not there. In Acts 10, the Spirit was given immediately at conversion without prayer or laying on of hands. In Acts 19, the Spirit was given at conversion, but only after Paul had baptised the new converts in water and laid hands on them. Since all four events were different, which one was *normal*? What should we expect today?

It's not as complicated as it might sound. The events of Acts 2 were obviously unique. We don't expect them to happen today. In Acts 8, the gift of the Spirit was delayed so that the unifying purpose of Spirit baptism could be achieved. The Samaritans, traditional enemies of the Jews, had believed in Christ, but the apostles were not there to validate their conversion. To make sure that there wouldn't be two separate, conflicting churches (one Jewish, one Samaritan), God delayed the gift of the Spirit until Peter and John arrived.

In Acts 10, when Gentiles were converted, unity didn't require delay because Peter, an apostle, was there. When sceptical Jewish believers in Jerusalem questioned the place of Gentiles in the body of Christ, Peter assured them that Cornelius' household had received the Spirit just as he and the other apostles had at Pentecost (Acts 10:47; 11:15-18; 15:8). Unity was preserved by Spirit baptism. In Acts 19, true understanding led to the coming of the Spirit.

In other words, Acts 8 is the exception, the only instance where the coming of the Spirit was truly delayed. That delay was to make sure the unifying purpose of Spirit baptism was achieved. Today there is no need for such a delay.

Is Spirit baptism evidenced by speaking in tongues?

No. Focusing only on Acts might lead you to that conclusion, but 1 Corinthians tells us otherwise. Paul told the Corinthians, "By one Spirit we were all baptised into one body" (12:13). Paul specifically said that *all* the Corinthians *had been* baptised in the Spirit. Did all the Corinthians speak in tongues? No. In 1 Corinthians 12:30 Paul asked, "All do not speak with tongues, do they?" The grammar of the original Greek requires a negative answer. Since *all* the Corinthian believers had been baptised in the Spirit, but *not all* spoke in tongues, it is obvious that Spirit baptism is not evidenced by speaking in tongues.

Are there two different events: baptism *in* the Spirit at salvation and a later, second blessing called baptism *by* the Spirit?

No. The idea of a second baptism *by* the Spirit is a popular notion (often assumed to be the key to reaching a higher spiritual life). However, the New Testament never tells believers to seek such an experience. In fact, although modern translations sometimes use *in* and other times *by* when referring to Spirit baptism, the Greek word is the same in every case.⁹ Since all the New Testament passages use exactly the same word, it is impossible to argue that they refer to two different events, a baptism *in* that happens at salvation and a baptism *by* that happens later.

Is there a difference between Spirit baptism and Spirit filling?

Yes. According to 1 Corinthians 12:13, Spirit baptism is an internal event by which the Holy Spirit places a convert into the universal body of Christ at salvation. Spirit filling is different. In fact, there are *two* different Greek words for "filling" in the New Testament. The word *pleroo* was used of a Spirit filling that led to godly living. This was the word used in Ephesians 5:18, the results of which are similar to the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23. It was also used in Acts 6:3 to summarise the godly character required of church leaders.

⁹ The passages which use the phrase, "baptism in the Spirit" are 1 Cor 12:13; Matt 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33; Acts 1:5; and 11:18. All use one Greek preposition, *en*.

A second Greek word, *pimplemi*, was used for a different filling. *Pimplemi* referred to an act of empowerment by the Spirit—usually courage to speak God's word in the face of opposition. Luke used the word in Acts 4:8 of Peter being given courage to speak before the Jewish religious leaders: "Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, 'Rulers and elders of the people...'" Later, the whole Jerusalem church was filled in this manner.

"Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence"...And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness."

(Acts 4:29, 31)

In other words, the New Testament speaks of Spirit baptism, a one-time, non-repeatable event that happens at salvation (1 Cor 12:13). It speaks of a Spirit filling that is a continual work of the Spirit that produces godly character (Eph 5:18). It also speaks of a Spirit filling that is an occasional, repeatable empowerment to speak God's word with boldness (Acts 4:8, 31).¹⁰ The three must not be confused.

¹⁰ The apostles experienced both the first and third of these at Pentecost—baptism in the Spirit in Acts 2:2-3, and the filling that produces bold speaking in 2:4. They were not the same thing even though in this case, they happened at virtually the same time.

Questions about Tongues

When I was at varsity a Christian friend came up to me one day and told me with great enthusiasm that he was learning to speak in tongues. His church believed every Christian should speak in tongues, and since he hadn't, he was told he needed to learn. The procedure he was given was simple: he was to sit in his room at night with all the lights off, and repeat out loud the vowel sounds (a, e, i, o, and u). Eventually the sounds would start to flow by themselves, and he would have learned to speak in tongues.

That's bizarre. Were the apostles practicing their vowel sounds on the day of Pentecost before they spoke in tongues? Not likely. Paul said that the Spirit gives gifts to each believer *as He wills* (1 Cor 12:11). You don't "learn" your way into a spiritual gift. But that's how it is with tongues today. It's a come-as-you-are, do-what-you-want affair, very much like the church of Corinth. What does the Bible *really* say about tongues? You would hate to discover on the day of judgement that you were doing something *you* called tongues, but not something *God* called tongues.

Acts 2 is the first mention of tongues in the New Testament church. What does it say about speaking in tongues?

And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance.

(Acts 2:4)

What were the apostles' tongues? Luke says that the pilgrims gathered for the Passover feast from all over the Roman Empire¹¹ were "bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language" (v. 6). The word "language" was the Greek word, *dialectos* (English: *dialect*). The crowd repeated its astonishment in Acts 2:8, "How is it that we each hear them in our own language [dialect] to which we were born?"

In 2:11, the crowds made another exclamation of surprise, this time using the word *glossa* (tongues) as a reference to their own mother tongues: "We hear them in our own tongues speaking the mighty deeds of God." The Jews present who didn't speak those foreign languages thought the apostles were drunk (v. 13), but those who did speak them knew differently: "We hear them in our own tongues."

In other words, the apostles were not speaking unknown "heavenly" languages or babbling sounds without meaning. The gift of tongues in Acts 2 was a miraculous ability to speak a dialect or language one had never learned.

¹¹ Sixteen different geographic or linguistic regions are mentioned in 2:9-11.

The tongues of Acts 2 were Spirit-given, not learned, or imitated. They were a public event associated with evangelism. A crowd formed due to the combined sounds of the rushing wind and the tongues. Once their attention had been attracted by the sign gift, Peter preached in Greek, a language everyone knew.

What does Acts 10 reveal about speaking in tongues?

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, "Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?"

(Acts 10:44-47)

Peter said the members of Cornelius' household received the Spirit, "just as we did." This means their tongues must have been the same as the apostles' in Acts 2—human languages that the speakers had never learned, spoken in a public, evangelistic setting.

What does Acts 19 reveal about tongues?

Acts 19:1-7 is the third and final mention of tongues in the book of Acts. Luke says that the followers of John the Baptist in Ephesus spoke in tongues when the Spirit came upon them. Since Luke gave no explanation of these tongues, we must assume they were the same as those in Acts 2 and Acts 10. If they were different Luke would have said so.

Were the tongues of Acts different than those in Corinth?

We can't answer this question fully until we look at 1 Corinthians 12-14. However, we can give this initial answer: *chronologically* and *geographically* it is very unlikely that the tongues in Corinth and the tongues of Acts were different. Why? Chronologically, the events of Acts 19 took place only two years before Paul wrote the letter of 1 Corinthians. Did speaking in tongues change during the two years between Acts 19 and the writing of 1 Corinthians? Unlikely.

Geography is also important. Ephesus and Corinth were major sea ports only a few days apart by boat. Paul planted both churches. There was regular interaction between the two churches: Apollos preached in both; Aquilla and Priscilla attended both; there was a constant coming and going between the congregations (1 Corinthians 1:11; 16:8, 10, 17). In spite of this, are we to believe that the tongues in Ephesus (Acts 19) were different than those spoken in Corinth? It is both chronologically and geographically unlikely.

Can speaking in tongues be learned or taught?

One and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually
just as He wills.

(1 Cor 12:11, emphasis added)

As in the book of Acts, the tongues in Corinth were a Spirit-produced miracle. They were not learned, taught, or imitated. If you "learned" to speak in tongues by listening to other Christians speak in tongues and imitating them, you aren't speaking biblical tongues.

Does the New Testament teach that *all* Christians are to speak in tongues?

Pentecostals say *yes*, but the biblical answer is *no*. Even in Corinth not all the believers spoke in tongues. More precisely, not all the *Spirit-baptised* believers spoke in tongues. For by one Spirit *we were all baptised* into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Cor 12:13, emphasis added)

Having said that *all* the Corinthian believers *had been* baptised in the Spirit, Paul then asked this at the end of the chapter: "All do not speak with tongues, do they?" (1 Cor 12:30). In Greek (the language in which Paul wrote) there was a way of indicating that a question had to receive a negative answer.¹² Paul used it here. The grammatically required answer to, "All do not speak with tongues, do they?" was, "No, not all speak in tongues." Even though they had *all* been baptised in the Spirit, Paul made it clear that not all of the Corinthian believers would or should speak in tongues.

Was biblical speaking in tongues designed to impact believers or unbelievers?

Most Christians assume biblical tongues were given for believers to edify themselves because that's how today's tongues are used. It might surprise you to discover that biblical tongues were designed by God to impact *unbelievers*, not believers.

Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature. In the Law it is written, "By men of strange tongues and by the lips of strangers I will speak to this people, and even so they will not listen to Me," says the Lord. So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers.

(1 Cor 14:20-22a)

Paul said in 14:20 that the Corinthians were being childish or immature in their thinking about tongues. How were they being childish? By thinking that tongues were designed to impact believers: "So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers..." (1 Cor

¹² Rhetorical questions with the negative particle, *me*.

14:22a). Unlike prophecy, tongues speaking was designed by God's Spirit for impacting *unbelievers*. Paul said that to think otherwise was immature and childish.

Why did Paul consider it "immature" to use tongues to impact believers?

Using biblical tongues on believers was a tragic *under-use* of the gift. Tongues were a sign gift (Gk., *semeion*), a miracle designed to confirm that a preacher was God's messenger. That is how Peter used the word when he called Jesus "a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs [*semeion*]..." (Acts 2:22). The apostles were also proven to be God's messengers by the many miracles they did.

The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles.

(2 Cor 12:12)

Sign gifts confirmed that the miracle worker was God's messenger. They did something else as well: they drew a crowd. In Acts 3 Peter healed the lame man. What happened? A crowd gathered and Peter preached. The same thing happened in Acts 8 when Philip did miracles in Samaria (Acts 8:6). What happened when the apostles spoke in tongues at Pentecost? A crowd gathered and Peter preached. That was the double purpose of the sign gifts: they confirmed the preacher and gathered a crowd for evangelism. To use them for any other purpose was a sad under-use of the gift.

Why don't we see tongues being used that way in the church today?

That's a good question for today's tongues speakers to ask themselves: Why don't I use my tongues the biblical way? Frankly, it's because there is nothing miraculous about today's tongues. Unbelievers won't think you are God's messenger because you babble sounds neither you nor they understand. Repeating a few basic sounds over and over is not a crowd-drawing miracle. Could it be that today's tongues speakers don't use tongues in the *biblical* way simply because they don't have the *biblical* gift of tongues?

Were biblical tongues used in the church worship service?

Paul strongly preferred that tongues *not* be used in the church worship service. Only with reluctance did he allow that practice (a gross under-use of the gift) to continue, calling it childish and immature.

In the church I desire to speak five words with my mind so that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue.

(1 Cor 14:18-19)

Five words in the language of the worshipers was 9,995 times better than something in tongues. Paul didn't think much of using tongues in church.

Did Paul give any rules to restrain the [mis]use of tongues in the church service?

If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and one must interpret; but if there is no interpreter, he must keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God... The women are to keep silent in the churches.

(1 Cor 14:27-28, 34)

- 1) Two, at the most three, could speak in tongues during a given worship service.
- 2) They were to speak in turn, i.e., never at the same time.
- 3) If there was no one with the gift of interpretation present, tongues were not to be used.
- 4) Women were not allowed to speak in tongues in the church service.

Were the tongues of Corinth angelic or heavenly languages?

No. In 1 Corinthians 13:1 Paul said, "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." Did that mean Paul thought tongues were angelic languages, not the human languages of Acts 2?

In 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 Paul argued for the superiority of love over spiritual gifts. He did that by means of five hypothetical, *if* statements.¹³

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

(1 Cor 13:1-3, emphasis added)

Notice that Paul used exaggeration to make his point. He wasn't saying that he or anyone else had *all* knowledge, knew *all* mysteries, or had *all* faith. But even those imaginary super-gifts would be nothing without love. The same was true of the super-acts of 13:3.

Let's work our way backward through the five *if* statements. Verse 3: Paul had never surrendered his body to be burned; we have no record that he ever gave away all his possessions. Verse 2: Paul had never literally moved a hill or mountain; Paul didn't have *all* knowledge. Verse 1: Paul had never spoken in the tongues of angels.

¹³ Thomas Edgar exegetes this passage with great precision in *Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel Resources, 1996, p. 136ff.), and I want to acknowledge my debt to him.

Do you see the pattern? If Paul had not actually done the "super-acts" of verse 3 and didn't have the "super-gifts" of verse 2, if four of the five *if* statements of 13:1-3 were obviously exaggerations, then why conclude that the fifth wasn't? Paul had no more spoken in the tongues of angels than he had given his body to be burned or had literally moved a mountain. If the other four statements were exaggerations, the first must be as well.

Let's take this a step further. Consider the structure of 1 Corinthians 13:1-2.

<i>true gift</i>	<i>exaggerated super-gift</i>
If I speak with the tongues of men	and of angels
<i>true gift</i>	<i>exaggerated super-gifts</i>
If I have the gift of prophecy	and know all mysteries and all knowledge

In both verses, Paul actually did have the *first* gift. He had the gift of prophecy (v. 2), but not the exaggerated, made-up-for-the-sake-of-argument gift, all knowledge. Verse one follows the same pattern. Paul had the gift of speaking in tongues—the *tongues of men* (Acts 2, known human languages). Paul didn't have the exaggerated, made up, super-gift, the tongues of angels.

Far from teaching that tongues were angelic or heavenly languages, 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 shows that Paul believed the gift of tongues was the miraculous ability to speak in human languages you had never learned. The tongues of Corinth were the same as the tongues of Acts.

Were biblical tongues given as a "private prayer language"?

Can I shock you? The New Testament never mentions tongues being spoken in private. In Acts 2, 10, and 19, tongues were spoken in public evangelistic settings. The Corinthians misused the gift in the worship service, but that was also a public use. Using tongues in private prayer isn't mentioned. Two verses some use to argue against this are 1 Corinthians 14:2 and 28.

For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God; *for no one understands*, but in his spirit he speaks mysteries.

(1 Cor 14:2, emphasis added)

This doesn't describe private prayer. Paul said, "No one understands." This verse referred to a *public* prayer which other people heard but were unable to understand because it wasn't interpreted.

But if there is no interpreter, he must keep silent *in the church*; and let him speak to himself and to God.

(1 Cor 14:28, emphasis added)

This also has nothing to do with speaking tongues in private. It describes a public worship service where there was no interpreter. Mumbling to yourself was the final, undesirable option of *public* tongues speaking. In 14:16 Paul again spoke of praying in tongues. Was the setting public or private?

Otherwise if you bless in the spirit only, how will the one who fills the place of the ungifted say the "Amen" at your giving of thanks, since he does not know what you are saying?

(1 Cor 14:16)

This also describes a public service where other people could respond to a prayer with "Amen." In fact, the whole of 1 Corinthians 14 is about *public* worship. As shocking as it may seem to today's tongues speakers, the New Testament never mentions using tongues in private.

Many Christians feel more spiritual when they speak in tongues, more prepared to deal with life's problems. Isn't that a good reason to speak in tongues privately?

No. Although the New Testament has pages of teaching about trials, spiritual problems, and sin, not once does it suggest that speaking in tongues is the way to handle them. Moreover, the church of Corinth was enthralled with tongues, but it was also the New Testament's most selfish, immature, proud, and down-right ungodly church. It would be a mistake to think speaking in tongues boosts spirituality.

Doesn't Romans 8:26 promote praying in tongues?

In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings *too deep for words*.

(Romans 8:26, emphasis added)

Biblical tongues were words; they were understandable, interpretable language. Both Acts and 1 Corinthians agree on this. Whatever activity of the Holy Spirit Romans 8:26 refers to, it *isn't* speaking in tongues. It is something the Spirit does that is "too deep for words." Romans 8:26 doesn't refer to tongues.

Didn't Paul say, "Do not forbid to speak tongues"?

Yes. First Corinthians 14:39 says, "Therefore, my brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak in tongues." Apparently some believers in the Corinthian church were so frustrated by the uninterpreted, attention-seeking outbursts in tongues during the worship service, they were considering banning tongues all together. Paul said banning tongues wasn't the proper solution. Of course, when Paul said, "Do not forbid to speak in tongues," he meant *biblical*

tongues used the *biblical* way. If you speak biblical tongues, this command applies. If you don't, it doesn't.

Didn't Paul say that he spoke in tongues more than the Corinthians?

Yes. But let's allow Paul to tell you *where* he did that.

I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all; [*Where did he do that?*] however, in the church I desire to speak five words with my mind so that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue. [*Not in church. But where?*] Brethren, do not be children in your thinking... tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers.

(1 Cor 14:18-20a, 22a)

Today's tongues speakers assume Paul used tongues in private because that's where they use them, *not* because the New Testament mentions such a practice. It never occurred to Paul to use tongues in private. Why would you use a miraculous sign gift given to impact unbelievers *in private*?

Were tongues given so Christians can edify themselves?

No. In 1 Corinthians 14:4 Paul said, "One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself." Was this for-me-only, self-edification a *good* thing or a *bad* thing? It was a *bad* thing.

Concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware... To each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit *for the common good*.¹⁴

(1 Cor 12:1, 7, emphasis added)

Spiritual gifts were for the common good—yet one more truth the Corinthians were ignorant of. More than that, the whole point of chapter 13 is that love governs spiritual gifts. One of the primary characteristics of that love is, "It does not seek its own" (13:5). No less than six times in chapter 14 (vv. 4, 5, 6, 12, 17, 26), Paul emphasised that the gifts are given to edify others. Notice especially 14:12.

So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification of the church.

(1 Cor 14:12)

First Peter 4:10 says, "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving *one another*" (emphasis added). That's plenty of evidence telling us that the for-me-only, *self*-edification Paul described in 14:4 was a wrong way to use the gift of tongues.

¹⁴ Biblical tongues correctly used worked for the good of the church by drawing unbelievers to hear evangelistic preaching.

Here's what was really going on in 14:4. The Corinthians regularly spoke in tongues in the worship service *without interpretation*.¹⁵ When one of them burst out in tongues, the other believers didn't understand any more than I would understand if you recited the book of Romans in Japanese. Great message, wrong language. That's why Paul preferred prophecy over tongues, "...unless he interprets so that the church may receive edifying" (v. 5). If there was no translation of a tongues message, the church was left saying, "Huh?"

And "Huh?" isn't edifying. First Corinthians 14:4 wasn't permission to use tongues for-me-only. It was a rebuke for using them that way: love does not seek its own. Tongues used on oneself are tongues misused.

Doesn't praying in tongues help Christians pray better?

No. Both Paul and Jesus rejected praying prayers you don't understand.

Therefore let one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. What is the outcome then? *I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also.*

(1 Cor 14:13-15a, emphasis added)

Paul saw no value in praying a prayer his mind didn't understand. After all, in what way was it better for Paul to pray in Chinese—a language he didn't understand—than in a language he did understand? God could understand both. Why was it better if Paul *didn't* understand it? That's exactly the logic of those who pray in tongues today: a prayer is better if I don't have a clue what I'm saying. That's absurd. Paul said a Christian should pray with both his spirit *and* his mind.

Paul wasn't the only one who rejected praying prayers you don't understand. Jesus did, too.

And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do.

(Matthew 6:7)

The word translated "meaningless repetition" was the Greek word *battalogo*. It meant to babble or speak without thinking. It's a word that perfectly describes today's praying in tongues. Few people who speak in tongues today realise that Jesus instructed His followers not to pray with repetitious babbling sounds they don't understand. It's really quite simple: God doesn't want to be prayed to that way. That's shocking stuff for today's tongues speakers, but it drives home all the more Paul's words, "Concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be uninformed."

¹⁵ Paul detailed the uselessness of this in 14:7-11. Using tongues in the worship service was an under-use of the gift, but using them there without translation was both useless and rude.

A man testified in our Bible study once that someone visiting his aunt's church in England said that the pastor's wife prayed in Russian. Doesn't that prove that today's tongues are biblical tongues?

Such claims are inevitably third or fourth hand and impossible to confirm. Did it sound like Russian or was it Russian? Had the one speaking ever studied Russian? Was the visitor a Russian speaker, or was he just guessing? Did it really occur or was the story made up? (It happens.) We could argue all day about such accounts and never come to a conclusion. And even if it were true, it wouldn't confirm *your* tongues. Has any foreign language speaker ever heard your tongues, and gasped, "How is it that you speak my language?"

If today's tongues aren't from God's Spirit, then where are they from?

Today's tongues share no characteristics with biblical, Spirit-given tongues (except the name). If they are not from God's Spirit, we're left with three possible sources: *premeditated fakery*, *self-deceived fakery*, and *demonic counterfeit*.

Many who speak in tongues today do so knowing full well that they are faking it. Countless people who have left the charismatic movement will testify to this. The pressure to speak in tongues is great. Therefore, at prayer meetings you listen to your neighbour murmur in tongues, and imitate it. That's not a miracle gift from God's Spirit, that's *premeditated fakery*.

However, other Christians genuinely believe they are not faking it when they speak in tongues. For them tongues speaking has become so habitual it doesn't feel faked or self-produced. One prominent charismatic author says when he first spoke in tongues, the only thing he could think was, "You're faking it Merlin; you're just making up a bunch of gibberish. Then I realized that speaking in faith meant I couldn't rely on my own senses to measure the results. I decided to...not pay attention to what I thought."¹⁶

That's *self-deception*. First he faked it, and knowingly so. By turning off his mind (the opposite of Paul and Jesus' instruction), he built up a habit of speaking in tongues. Eventually it became so automatic to repeat his tongues sounds that he no longer felt as if he were faking it. In fact, this author counsels, "When you open your mouth and begin to speak in tongues by faith, you will probably be tempted to think just as I did, that you are faking it and making up the words. Don't let that thought fool you into giving up the practice."¹⁷ That's encouraging *other* Christians to embrace self-deception.

As a hypochondriac really believes he is sick, so the one speaking in tongues is convinced he is doing something from God. How can we be sure it isn't from God? It's not a miraculous ability to

¹⁶ Merlin Carothers, *Power in Praise*, (Escondido: Merlin R. Carothers, 1972), p. 54.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

speaking in a foreign language he never learned to gather a crowd for the sake of evangelism. That was biblical tongues.

There is a third option for the source of today's tongues. While much of today's tongues speaking is wittingly or unwittingly self-produced, some of it is certainly *demonic counterfeit*. Search hard enough for an experience, and Satan will be happy to counterfeit it for you.

Are the Sign Gifts for Today?

Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles? And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'

(Matthew 7:22-23, emphasis added)

Sadly, Jesus said many will discover on the day of judgement that their "confirming" sign gifts were frauds. If *theirs* weren't from God, what assurance do you have that *yours* are? To avoid deception, it's critical that Christians know the characteristics of the *biblical* sign gifts—as opposed to all pretenders. Unfortunately, we've seen that today's sign gifts don't measure up to the biblical standards. Might we be accepting what Jesus will reject?

Is it possible for gifts of the Spirit to stop?

Yes. We know for sure that at least one gift of the Spirit has ceased to function in the church: the gift of apostle (1 Cor 12:28). The apostles were a select group of men. They were chosen and appointed by Jesus (Acts 1:2). They received their instruction in Christian doctrine from Jesus personally (implied in Acts 1:21-22). They had seen Jesus in the forty days after He rose from the dead, thus becoming eyewitnesses of His resurrection (Acts 1:22). The term apostle was primarily reserved for the twelve although a few others like James, the brother of Jesus, were called apostles (Gal 1:19).

Later Paul was added to this select group when Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus (Acts 26:16; Gal 1:1). Because of that encounter, Paul became an eyewitness of Jesus' resurrection. Of course Paul had not been a follower of Jesus during His earthly ministry; therefore, his instruction in Christian doctrine was given by means of visions (Gal 1:11-12).

Here's our question: Does Jesus continue to appoint apostles today in the unique way He did Paul, perpetuating the gift of apostle? No. Paul told us so himself.

After that [Jesus] appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; then He appeared to James, then to *all* the apostles; and *last of all, as to one untimely born*, He appeared to me also.

(1 Cor 15:6-8, emphasis added)

"Last of all..." Paul said in plain language that he was the last apostle appointed. There have not been hundreds or thousands of others untimely born. Paul was unique. The gift of apostle, so critical in establishing the church (Eph 2:20), passed from the scene when Paul and the others died.

Will any gifts besides the gift of apostle cease?

Yes. Paul splashed cold water on the tongues-enflamed Corinthian church, warning them that their infatuation with tongues and revelatory gifts like prophecy was a love affair with temporary gifts.

Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away.

(1 Cor 13:8)

Does the Bible tell us *when* the sign gifts like tongues, healing, and prophecy would disappear?

No verse in the New Testament says exactly when the sign gifts would stop. However, two important verses suggest when it would happen. Those verses are 2 Corinthians 12:12 and Hebrews 2:3-4.

In the closing chapters of 2 Corinthians, Paul was busy with the distasteful job of defending his apostleship against the accusations of the Corinthian church. Some in the church claimed that they were apostles (*super*-apostles, in fact) and Paul wasn't. What did Paul think of those self-declared super-apostles? "Such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ" (2 Cor 11:13). They claimed they were true; Paul said they were false. Who was right? Was there a test by which the Corinthians could decide? Paul gave them a test in chapter twelve.

In no respect was I inferior to the most eminent apostles, even though I am a nobody.
[*The proof?*] The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles.

(2 Cor 12:11b-12)

There were many things that set a true apostle apart from pretenders. One of those was that true apostolic ministry was confirmed by signs, wonders, and miracles (real, undeniable miracles, not today's pseudo-miracles¹⁸).

Question: What would happen when there were no more apostles left to confirm? What would happen when Peter, James, John, Paul, and the others died? Would God continue to give the *signs of a true apostle*? That would be confusing, wouldn't it. One would naturally expect the gifts that proved apostles were apostles to cease when the apostles died (Paul being the last appointed).

¹⁸ Healings that involve no visible miracle, prophecies that are often wrong, and tongues that aren't unlearned foreign languages hardly qualify as *confirming* miracles.

What does Hebrews 2 say about sign gifts and when they would stop?

Only a fraction of those who became Christians in the New Testament era actually heard Jesus preach. If they hadn't heard Jesus personally, how had they come to know the good news of salvation?

After it [the gospel] was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard...

(Heb 2:3)

Who were "those who heard" the Lord Jesus preach? The apostles. They were the *eye*-witnesses of Jesus' resurrection and the *ear*-witnesses of His teaching. But with all the religious con men out there, how could people know the apostles were God's men? God confirmed them with sign gifts.

After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.

(Heb 2:3-4)

The New Testament doesn't say when the sign gifts would stop. However, the primary function of the sign gifts was to confirm the apostles as God's messengers. Therefore, it's reasonable to conclude that when the apostles died (Paul being the last appointed), the gifts confirming them would also die out. Our next question is, did that happen?

Is there any evidence from history that the sign gifts stopped when the Apostles died?

In fact, *all* the evidence of history suggests that the sign gifts stopped when the apostles died. Some charismatics try to argue that the sign gifts have continued in the church from the New Testament to today. That, however, simply isn't true. Let's review the history.¹⁹

In the two centuries after the New Testament era, speaking in tongues was mentioned only once in Christian writings (by Irenaeus). It's impossible to tell from his comment if he was speaking of his day or the book of Acts one hundred years before. That's the *only* mention of tongues in the two centuries following the apostles. Either tongues stopped or they were terribly unimportant to the post-apostolic church.

About 400 AD, two of the greatest figures in church history, the preacher John Chrysostom and the theologian Augustine, confirmed that the sign gifts of Acts were not occurring in the church. In fact, after the book of Acts, the next report of sign gifts occurring in biblical churches was in the early 1900s.

¹⁹ Thomas Edgar's *Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit* provides an excellent survey of the history. I am summarising his material.

Didn't some groups in church history prophesy and speak in tongues?

Yes. But those groups were heretical, theologically deviant groups. They fall under Matthew 7:21-23, those Christ will reject, those whose "sign gifts" were not from God's Spirit.

For example, in the 160s a man named Montanus claimed to have the gift of prophecy. He prophesied that the millennial kingdom was going to start in his lifetime in a village called Pepuza in modern Turkey. Montanus was embarrassingly wrong. He was a *false* prophet.

Skipping fifteen hundred years of silence (hardly proof for an *unbroken* continuation of sign gifts), some charismatic historians cite the Jansenists as a group that practiced sign gifts. The Jansenists lived in France in the 1700s. They were Roman Catholic and denied justification by faith. They weren't even Christians, teaching salvation by works.

Some of the radical Anabaptists of the Protestant Reformation were said to speak in tongues and prophesy. There is no clear evidence they spoke in tongues. However, one of their leaders, Melchior Hoffman did claim to be one of the two witnesses of Revelation 11, and tried to establish the millennial kingdom in Munster, Germany. Like Montanus before him, Hoffman's absurd claims were wrong. He was a false prophet.

The Shakers and Ranters were groups in England and America in the 1600s and 1700s that spoke in tongues and prophesied. However, they weren't *Christian* groups. The Shakers believed that their leader, Ann Lee, was a second incarnation of Jesus Christ. They also received messages from the dead and danced naked in their meetings. The Ranters spoke in "tongues" but were pantheistic (everything is God) in their theology. Whatever those groups experienced, it wasn't the gifts of the Spirit. In other words, the testimony of history agrees with what 2 Corinthians 12 and Hebrews 2 suggest: the sign gifts stopped when the apostles passed from the scene.

Didn't the sign gifts die out because Christians stopped believing in them, not because God didn't want to give them to the church?

This argument has been popularised by Jack Deere. It is wrong for a number of reasons. First, the New Testament emphasises that the Holy Spirit gives spiritual gifts based on *His will*, not whether Christians believe in them or not (1 Cor 12:7; Heb 2:4).

Second, unlike today's "healings," the miracles of the New Testament era were so clear, so undeniable, that even the enemies of Christianity had to admit they were true miracles (Acts 4:16). If Christians were regularly doing and seeing these profound, undeniable miracles, exactly how did they stop believing in them?

Third, while people in Western cultures today often deny the possibility of miracles, the people of the post-New Testament era (like everyone before the 1700s) believed unswervingly in the supernatural. Such people would never stop believing in the miraculous sign gifts.

If the sign gifts stopped at the end of the New Testament era, why is there a charismatic movement today?

Far from being a continuation of the signs and wonders of the book of Acts, today's "sign gifts" had their start in 1901. The birth place of the movement was a small Bible college in Kansas in the central United States. A group of students, pressed by their instructor, sought to speak in tongues for a class assignment. Eventually several experienced something that they believed was speaking in tongues.

The infant movement's first growth spurt came in 1906 in Los Angeles, California at a series of revival meetings called the Azusa Street revivals. Out of these meetings and their tongues (ecstatic babbling, not unlearned foreign languages), the Pentecostal movement was formed. Pentecostalism, however, remained a small splinter group with no broad acceptance in evangelical Christianity for the next sixty years.

It was not until the 1960s that tongues speaking (still ecstatic babbling, not unlearned foreign languages) found its way into mainline churches, and the charismatic movement of today was born. Interestingly, Roman Catholics were leaders in this new phenomenon.²⁰ At the same time that tongues started to spread into mainline evangelicalism, faith-healers began to popularise a new gift of "healing." Later prophecy became fashionable. From that point, the charismatic movement exploded into the world-wide movement it is today.

Their gifts, as we have seen, are at best pale shadows of the biblical gifts. The names are the same, but the characteristics are different—distinctly different. Some have been honest enough to admit this. Therefore, they claim that their experiences are a second outpouring of the Holy Spirit, not a continuation of the sign gifts.

Are today's signs and wonders a second work of God's Spirit (i.e., a fulfilment of the "latter rains" of Joel 2)?

In Joel 2:18-23 the prophet mentioned "early and latter rains." Some claim that the miracles of the book of Acts were the early rains of the Spirit, and today's experiences are the latter rains. Is this the correct interpretation of Joel's prophecy?

²⁰ Today's tongues are just as common among Catholics who practice salvation by works as they are among those who teach the biblical doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone. Is God's Spirit giving sign gifts to those who teach a doctrine of salvation that the New Testament says is "accursed" (Galatians 1:6-9)? That would be strange indeed.

No. Joel prophesied judgement on Israel about eight hundred years before Christ. The judgement was a locust plague combined with a drought. Joel 1:4 speaks of the gnawing, swarming, and creeping locusts that would devour Israel's fields. What the insatiable insects missed, the drought would wither.

The vine dries up and the fig tree fails; the pomegranate, the palm also, and the apple tree, all the trees of the field dry up. Indeed, rejoicing dries up from the sons of men.

(Joel 1:12)

No rain meant withered crops and withered joy. It also meant thirst and wild fires: "Even the beasts of the field pant for You; for the water brooks are dried up and fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness" (Joel 1:20). How would God restore the land? He would cause the winds to blow the locust armies into the Mediterranean Sea to the west and the Arabian desert to the east (2:20). He would provide a good harvest to fill the empty threshing floors and wine vats: "I am going to send you grain, new wine, and oil" (2:19). How does a land go from years of drought and famine to a rich, barn-bursting harvest? Rain.

So rejoice, O sons of Zion...He has poured down for you the rain, the early and latter rain as before.

(Joel 2:23)

The early and latter rains were a well-known weather phenomenon in Israel. The *Moody Atlas of Bible Lands* says this:

The season of rain included both the "early and late rain"... The former [early] rains, normally deposited throughout October, gently soaked the ground and prepared it for plowing and planting; the latter rains of April were important for the ripening of certain crops.²¹

The Prophet Joel's early and latter rains referred to God's removal of a physical drought by restoring Palestine's normal weather patterns. What does that have to do with a first and second outpouring of the Spirit? Absolutely nothing.

Some claim a connection based on Joel 2:28, "It will come about after this that I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind..." This, however, is a completely new section of Joel's prophecy. It is introduced by the prophetic formula, "It will come about *after this*..." As the italics note, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in 2:28 was an event that took place long after Joel's drought and locust plague. In short, the biblical evidence offered to prove that today's dubious signs and wonders are a second work of God's Spirit is no evidence at all.

²¹ Barry J. Beitzel, *The Moody Atlas of Bible Lands*, (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, 1985), pp. 52-53.

Even if today's healing, prophecy, and tongues are different than the biblical gifts, can't they be from God's Spirit?

Charismatics got their new gifts accepted in the church by claiming they were the *same* as those found in the New Testament. However, it has become clear that their healings aren't like biblical healings, their tongues aren't like biblical tongues, and their prophecies aren't like biblical prophecies.

When questioned, the same Christians now say, "But our gifts are different, of lesser quality than those of the New Testament." They can't have it both ways. The gifts can't both be the *same* as those in Acts, and clearly *different* than those in Acts at the same time. Either the gifts are the same or they are different.

If they are different (and they are), we must include Matthew 7:21-23 in our thinking. On the day of judgement Jesus will reject the self-proclaimed miracles of many professing Christians. Don't accept what Jesus will reject.

Fallible prophecies, babbling nonsense sounds, and invisible, non-miraculous healings aren't Christian events. They never have been, and shouldn't be considered so today. For example, one historian records this about Mormonism: "The Mormon church experienced much the same motor phenomena [physical movements] that characterized the...Pentecostals. Shouting, jerks, and dancing were common in their services, and Brigham Young [the founder of Mormonism] not only spoke in unknown tongues but interpreted his own messages to his hearers."²²

In Africa, witch doctors speak in uncontrolled gibberish, perform "healings" that aren't convincingly miraculous, and speak prophecies that fail. Those things are not *Christian* events. Today's sign gifts share the *same* characteristics. They resemble pagan experiences more than biblical miracles. Is this proof of the working of God's Spirit? It's proof no Christian should accept. The danger is not rejecting a work of God's Spirit; the danger is embracing something that bears none of the distinguishing marks of God's Spirit.

Now what?

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware.

(1 Cor 12:1)

How did you do? Aware or unaware? Informed or ignorant? A lot of people believe a lot of things about sign gifts—a lot of wrong things. If you believed some of those wrong things, I hope you'll change. Paul certainly gave you motivation:

²² Vinson Synan, *The Holiness Pentecostal Movement in the United States*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 25, as quoted in Edgar, p. 221.

If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment. But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized.

(1 Cor 14:37-38)

Perhaps you've practised sign gifts in the past, but now you're convinced that what you were doing wasn't the biblical gifts. I hope so. But don't use this booklet like a hand grenade to blow up your church or charismatic friends. Paul told Timothy that the Lord's bond servant is not quarrelsome; he or she corrects with *gentleness* (2 Timothy 2:24-25). Please share what you've learned with others. But speak the truth in love, in love, in love.

A final word

Many who practice today's tongues, healing, and prophecy are truly saved and love Christ. I rejoice in that. However, I fear that they have been distracted. The preoccupation of Jesus' followers isn't suspiciously sub-Christian signs and wonders. It is Christ and His word: "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine" (John 8:31).

Others today seem to love the gifts more than they love Christ. Take away the excitement of their healings, the mystery of their tongues, and the fortune-telling of their prophecy, and there wouldn't be much left to their Christianity. I hope you're not in that category. If you are, you'll be one of those on the final day shouting, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?" (Matt 7:22). You know what Jesus' answer will be.

Christianity is about trusting Jesus Christ and His death on the cross for salvation from God's just wrath over our sins. It's about loving Christ and obeying His word. Sign gifts were temporary decorations of that message; they weren't the message.

Further reading:

Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit, Thomas Edgar

Charismatic Chaos, John MacArthur

The Healing Promise, Richard Mayhue

Testing Today's Prophecy, Joel James

Identifying False Teachers: A Sheep's Guide to the Habits of Wolves, Joel James

A Survey of 1 Corinthians 12-14, Joel James. Available online at www.gracefellowship.co.za under Resources.