

## GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT: A CAREFUL EXAMINATION

*“Be filled with the Spirit; speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; giving thanks always.” — Ephesians 5:18-20*

The early Church clearly benefited from the *gifts of the Spirit* that were bestowed upon them — speaking in tongues, healings, etc. These *gifts* were a miraculous *sign* for unbelievers, and an evidence that these early Christian disciples were truly the emissaries of God. But at this time, the far end of the Gospel Age, is the Lord still using these methods to establish his Church? Are *gifts* still a mark of one’s spirituality and a validation of one’s acceptance by God? This subject is one that is worthy of careful examination.

### Speaking in Tongues

At the time of Jesus’ ministry, believers lived primarily in Judea and surrounding areas. This was because, during Jesus’ ministry, he had instructed his disciples to send forth his message of salvation only to the Jews. *“These twelve [Apostles] Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying, Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”* (Matthew 10:5, 6) However, the Apostles were later instructed, *“Go ye therefore, and teach all nations... [not just the Jews].”* (Matthew 28:19) How could this be accomplished by *“unlearned men”* who spoke the Aramaic language? God’s answer was to provide the *gift* of His holy Spirit which would allow Jesus’ followers to speak in foreign languages for the purpose of teaching salvation through Christ. *Vine’s Expository Dictionary* explains that *speaking in tongues* was: *“The supernatural gift of speaking in another language without its having been learned.”*

On the Day of Pentecost, ten days after Jesus’ ascension, Jews gathered to Jerusalem from many surrounding nations for the purpose of keeping their holy day. At this same time, Jesus’ followers, Jews who had accepted Christ, were assembled together according to his command that they *“should not*



*depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father... John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the holy Ghost [Spirit] not many days hence.”* (Acts 1:4,5) As promised, the waiting disciples were baptized with the holy Spirit. *“And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind... And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they... began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.... Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language. And they*

*were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilaeans? And how hear we every man **in our own tongue, wherein we were born?**”* (Acts 2:1-8) This significant event was indelibly marked in history by the miracle of tongues which accompanied the receiving of the holy Spirit. As a result, the Jews from many foreign lands who gathered at Jerusalem for the holy days, heard the Gospel preached in their own language or *tongue*.

### Gifts Validated Gentiles as True Converts

As stated, Jesus limited his preaching to the Jews only, until three and a half years after his death, the opportunity to receive the holy Spirit was opened to the Gentiles. The term *Gentile* refers to any individual other than a Jew — typically heathens who worshipped many gods. It would reasonably require greater evidence to gain their confidence in the one true God. Therefore, God blessed the early Christians with the ability to speak in the many languages of the surrounding Gentile nations that they might be a witness to them of the Gospel message of salvation through Christ.

Another valuable purpose of this miraculous *sign* of *tongues* was that Jewish converts saw indisputable evidence that the way to the high calling was now open to these Gentile converts. “While Peter yet spake these words, the holy Ghost [Spirit] fell on all them which heard the word. And they of the circumcision which believed [Jewish converts] were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the holy Ghost [Spirit].” Acts 10:44-46

### Spiritual Gifts: A Foundation for the Early Church

In Romans 1:11, the Apostle Paul stated clearly the purpose of *spiritual gifts* given to the early Church: “That I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end ye may be established.” Note the phrase “to the end ye may be established.” Miraculous gifts were necessary at this critical juncture to establish the faith of the early Church, described by the Apostle Paul as a *child*: “Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. (1 Corinthians 13:8-11) As a *child*, the infant Church required special gifts for the purpose of witnessing the Gospel message beyond the immediate region of Jerusalem.

Keep in mind that the New Testament as we have it today had not yet been given, but when the Apostles left their inspired writings to be shared with all of the congregations, *these* became sufficient to establish faith, “that the man of God may be thoroughly furnished unto all good works.” (2 Timothy 3:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:27) Thus, when the canon of New Testament Scripture became available to the growing Church, there was no longer a need for special gifts.

Consider again the statement: “*tongues shall cease.*” While Christ walked among them, the Apostles and seventy chosen men were provided miraculous powers, but these men were not given the ability to pass these gifts on to others. (Luke 10:1-20) At the time of Pentecost, however, after Jesus had died and was raised again from the dead, there was a change in the operation of the holy Spirit. Only the eleven faithful Apostles, Judas having been lost, were given the special ability to pass these miraculous gifts on to others. Thus, with the death of the Apostles, including Paul as Judas’ replacement, this ability to impart gifts passed away.

### “Speaking into the Air”

The Apostle Paul started to see the need to warn some in the Corinthian Church against prideful behavior in the use of their *gifts*. Paul reminded them that the purpose of tongues

was to witness the Gospel to unbelievers, and not to bring glory or attention to oneself: “...except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? for ye shall **speak into the air**... Therefore if I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian... in the Church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue. Brethren, be not children in understanding... Wherefore tongues are for a **sign**, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not...

(1 Corinthians 14:9-22) Note here the word *sign*. The Apostle was pointing out that speaking with tongues was merely for a *sign*, so that the attention of unbelievers might be drawn to their message. Again, when the Apostles *fell asleep* in death, and Churches began to be established on the solid ground of their writings, there was no more need for a *sign* to lead men to Christ.

This temptation on the part of the Corinthian Church to misuse the spiritual gifts led to spiritual pride, confusion and a poor witness. Thus, the Apostle Paul had to lay down strict guidelines in the use of tongues. “If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two, or at the most by three, and that by course; and let one interpret. But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the Church...” (1 Corinthians 14:27, 28) Paul was

emphasizing that the use of gifts was not a sign to *believers*, but used as a witness to *unbelievers* from foreign countries so that they might *hear* the Word of God spoken clearly in their own native language. If not for this purpose, it was best to keep silent.

### The Gift of Healing

There were other gifts of the Spirit, and these, too, were used to illustrate the miraculous power of God and His holy influence upon the Gospel Church. One such gift was that of healing the sick. This gift was used upon unbelievers and rarely were there instances in the New Testament where a believer would be healed of diseases. In fact, the opposite is true. Paul did not heal the disciple Trophimus, but *left him behind at Miletum, because he was sick.* (2 Timothy 4:20) Timothy was like a son to the Apostle Paul, yet, rather than healing Timothy’s chronic illness, Paul said, “*Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach’s sake and thine often infirmities.*” (1 Timothy 5:23) Epaphroditus, a faithful helper of the Apostle Paul was dangerously ill, but divine power, so far as we are informed, was neither invoked nor exercised on his behalf. It was of divine mercy and not of miraculous healing that his recovery took place. Philippians 2:27

The prayers of the faithful are for spiritual strength to endure under any hardness, just as their Master prayed, “*O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done.*” (Matthew 26:42) And in the case of the



Apostle Paul, he entreated the Lord *three times* that his *thorn in the flesh* depart from him. But, Paul learned valuable lessons by his physical infirmities, and he shared our Lord's answer to his prayers so that we might not be disappointed when our pleas for health seem not to be heard: "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness." And so Paul concludes, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong." 2 Corinthians 12:8-10

There is certainly nothing wrong with asking the Lord for His grace in whatever form that may take, but expecting to be healed of our physical infirmities might be cause for great disappointment when it does not occur. We must keep in mind that there is great strength of character to be developed in bearing faithfully under the stress of trials. The Apostle Peter encouraged his Christian brethren who were suffering with these words: "...the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ." Yes, Peter did not pray that all cause for distress be removed from the life of a Christian. He prayed for stronger faith to be developed from the trial. As one mature Christian expressed it: "It is when the clouds are the darkest and the tempest the highest that the Lord's presence is most keenly felt through a realization of his tender, personal love. His grace to sustain and his presence to cheer amid life's deepest afflictions becomes memory's most hallowed resting places."

But, one may inquire, are we not told that "the prayer of faith shall save the sick"? (James 5:15) Yes, but this word *sick* refers not to illness of a physical sort. The Greek word *kamno* implies a weariness of spirit and is translated as *faint, sicken, be wearied*. Note how the passage ends: "...and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him." Thus, this sickness is *sin-sickness*, which, if the spiritually sick avails himself of God's grace through prayer, he shall be forgiven and strengthened in faith.

Christians should view their difficult experiences, including health issues, as permitted, not caused by God. Prayers for God's guidance and grace through these painful trials are always in order, and if, by God's permission, He allows for greater health, let us rejoice. But, if not, Christians fully devoted to God can rest assured that "...all things work together for good to them who are the called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28) We are also reassured by Paul: "...though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory..." 2 Corinthians 4:15-17

In times of painful trials, and when heart and flesh seem to fail, a Christian learns to develop an inner *joy* which is a beautiful *fruit of the Spirit*. Jesus, our example, possessed this inner joy: "Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross... and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds." Hebrews 12:2-3

### "Covet Earnestly The Best Gifts"

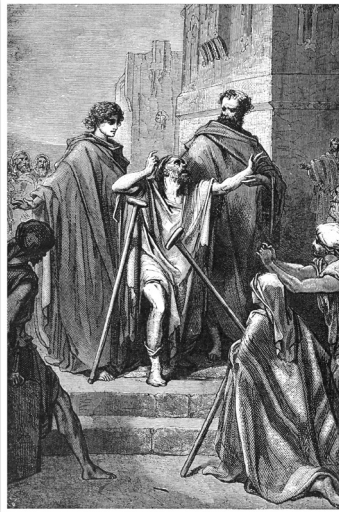
The *gifts of the Spirit*, therefore, which were highly esteemed in the early Church, were but a *stepping stone* to something far more valuable and lasting. The Apostle called this "a more excellent way." (1 Corinthians 12:31) He encouraged the Church to progress forward from these miraculous *gifts* of the Spirit toward developing the *fruits* of the Spirit by a knowledge and appreciation of God's character and plan.

All spiritual gifts were to be identified as of the holy influence of God, and the one true object of God's Spirit, His holy influence working in the life of the Christian, is to develop in each His beautiful character of *love*. This character attribute envelopes every fruit and grace of the Spirit. These *fruits of the Spirit* are designated by the Apostle to be "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance." (Galatians

5:22, 23) The word "*fruit*," it will be noticed, conveys a double thought — it is a *gift*, but of gradual development in maturity — the result of labor. These *fruits* grow in proportion as we come into harmony in thought, word and deed to God's will and plan as illustrated in His Word. The Christian's goal, therefore, should be to develop the fruits of the holy Spirit in likeness to God's dear Son.

Yes, the miraculous diversity of tongues and the incredible gift to heal the sick had the practical purpose of spreading the Gospel quickly and efficiently to peoples of other languages, but, as these gifts *ceased*, emphasis was then placed upon the development of a strong moral and ethical character (fruitage) built upon the knowledge of the truth. "And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; That ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ; Being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God." Philippians 1:9-11

Personally developed gifts, then, are to be esteemed more highly than *miraculously bestowed gifts* given only to the early Church. Hence, again, the Apostle declared: "I show unto you a more excellent way;" "follow after love and desire [cultivate] spiritual gifts..." (1 Corinthians 12:31; 14:1) The *fruits of the Spirit* are to be encouraged, to be cultivated more and more, that they may yield the full, perfect fruitage of love toward God, love toward each other, and a loving sympathy toward the world.



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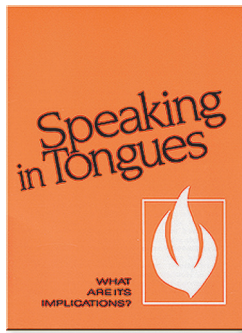
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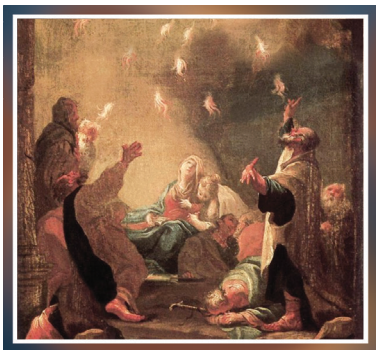
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