

**THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT,
AND THE NEW COVENANT PEOPLE OF GOD**

Part 1

1. Early in his ministry, Jesus is baptized by John, and the Holy Spirit descends upon him. Subsequently he ministered “full of the Spirit”, “led by the Spirit,” “in the power of the Spirit” and “anointed” by the Spirit (Lk 3:21-22; 4:1, 14, 18). Such was Jesus’ power in ministry that Jewish legend and the Talmud, critically, refer to Jesus as a “magician” (*Shabbath* 104b).

John prophesied that Jesus would in turn baptize his disciples “with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Mt 3:11). After his resurrection, Jesus instructed them to stay in Jerusalem to be “baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:5).

Read Acts 2:1-21, 37-47. What did this baptism entail? What were the marks in the community of the disciples afterward, especially compared to what you know of the disciples from the Gospels?

2. The transformation of those in the early church is seen both in their character and in the miracles God worked in and through them.

In character, they established a name for themselves in charity, honesty, and generally, the fruit of the Spirit. The early church became well known for its ministry to the unwanted—e.g. in forbidding infanticide and abortion—and the sick : “Christian values of love and charity had, from the beginning, been translated into norms of social service and community solidarity.”¹ Famously, Pliny the Younger, governor of Pontus and Bithynia, in seeking advice from Emperor Trajan, mentions their only offenses as stubbornness and superstition, saying they gathered to worship, to eat a sacred meal and “to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so.” (And this he learned by torturing deaconesses.)

There are also indications in the NT that the “signs and wonders” of Acts 2:43 were not a transitory phenomenon, and continued in the first-century church; e.g.: 1 Cor 12:8-11,

To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.

and Gal 3:5, “Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?”

In the second century Justin Martyr describes the active ministry of outreach through exorcisms:²

¹ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, p. 74.

² This isn’t to say that the early church was without fault or stain. If there were conflicts and missteps in Acts, there were surely more in the sub-apostolic church. This is demonstrated by 2 Clement 13, where Clement exhorts the church toward greater purity to improve its witness to unbelievers.

Though the demons will not yield to exorcism in the name of other men, every demon, when exorcised in the name of this true Son of God, who is the first-born of every creature, who became man by the Virgin, who suffered and was crucified under Pontius Pilate, who rose again from the dead and ascended into heaven, is overcome and subdued. (2 *Apology*, 6)

In the words of Michael Green, “The power of the name of Jesus was more effective than any charm, and the Christians were careful to distinguish its effect from magic. There was nothing secretive about it, nothing of mystic gestures, special potions and closely guarded formulae.”³

Peter, in his speech at Pentecost, speaks of the outpouring of the Spirit, as demonstrated in dreams, visions, prophecy and other signs, as a feature of the end times—the new-covenant era (Acts 2:17-21, quoting Joel 2:28+). However, over the centuries signs and wonders become less a part of the life of the Church. In the fourth century, e.g., Augustine (354-540) declares, as does John Chrysostom in the East, that *glossolalia* has ceased, but still reports numerous divine healings. To quote Michael Green,

Granted that prophecy declined as episcopacy grew in power (so much so that the bishop eventually claimed to absorb the prophetic function!), and as the canon of the NT increasingly made it less necessary, it continued well into the third century and made a great impression on ordinary people.⁴

Gifts such as prophecy and tongues all but disappeared until the Azusa Street revival in the 20th century.⁵ Coming out of the Holiness movement, this revival bore some of the features of the original Pentecost, including interracial unity and egalitarian participation (esp. in the inclusion of women). The subsequent charismatic renewal movement saw the spread of these gifts across class barriers to the mainline denominations, and the more recent “Third-Wave” movement has seen the incorporation of a less traditionally “Pentecostal” worship style.

Currently the Pentecostal church is the fastest growing denomination, especially eclipsing other traditions in South America and Africa.

- a. Given this brief history, why do you think gifts such as healing, visions, etc. have waxed and waned—especially given their normalcy during the NT period?
 - b. Some have argued from 1 Cor 13 (“But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away”) that the Holy Spirit no longer uses these gifts today. Evaluate this argument.⁶
3. The gift of tongues (*glossolalia*) is first seen at Pentecost, where it apparently involves speaking in languages previously unknown to the speaker. It serves here as a sign of God’s presence, as well as an evangelical tool. Elsewhere, the same word is used to describe a gift which requires interpretation (1 Cor 12:10) and is unintelligible even to the speaker (1 Cor 14:9).

³ *Evangelism in the Early Church*, 178-193.

⁴ *Evangelism*, 200-201.

⁵ “...from the death of Montanism until the turn of the present century, such phenomena were never part of a major movement. In each instance, the group involved was small and generally on the fringe of Christianity”—Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 166.

⁶ N.B., the official CRC position is that these gifts are still active today, but are not to be abused.

These apparently divergent uses of the term “tongues” may be reconciled by suggesting that the gift can encompass speaking in a language not identified with an ethnic group (perhaps the “tongues of angels” from 1 Cor 13:1, or the “groans” by which the Spirit intercedes in Rom 8:22), and (rarely), a human language as in Acts 2.⁷

Despite some Pentecostal assertions, tongues is not a universal sign of the baptism in the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:30).⁸

The personal use of the gift of tongues has been described as being valuable for starting in prayer when one has no appetite for it; for aiding in praise of God; and when engaged in spiritual warfare.”⁹

Read the interviews with Mark, Wendy and Phil from the “Tongues Survey.”

- a. How do their experiences compare with patterns described in the NT?
- b. What impact do the gifts of the Spirit have on their lives?
- c. What is your reaction as you read these descriptions? Is this a gift you would like to have?

⁷ See D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, ch. 3, for an excellent defense of there being one type of tongues (though of “men and angels,” not all human language), and exegesis 1 Cor 12-14, including controversial verses like 14:5, “I would like you all to speak in tongues, but...”

⁸ Though the argument is sometimes also made that the non-ethnic-language meaning comes in two flavors: prophetic tongues, and a “prayer language” meant only to edify the user, and that Paul is referring to the former here. This distinction is not seen directly in the text, and must be brought to it by experience.

⁹ Gordon Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence* (Hendrickson) 1994, 867.