

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

Part 2

1. Green writes about NT prophecy,

Frequently referred to in modern literature on the subject as ‘ecstatic’, prophecy cannot properly be so described. The prophet was not filled with a compulsive urge: and he was in control of his mind (*nous*) in contrast to the speaker in ‘tongues’, whose mind remained uninformed (1 Cor 14:3, 32). Prophecy, accordingly, was coherent speech [e.g. Agabus’ prophecy of Paul’s troubles in Rome; Acts 21:11], under the direct domination of the Holy Spirit [2 Pet 1:20-21].¹

Paul speaks highly of this gift: “Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy” (1 Cor 14:1). And similar to OT prophecy, it consisted of both foretelling (e.g. Agabus’ prophecy of the famine during Claudius’ reign; Acts 11:28) and “forthtelling” (Acts 13:1-2). Based on esp. 1 Cor 14:29-30, Grudem proposes this biblical definition of prophecy: “the reception and subsequent transmission of spontaneous, divinely originating revelation.”²

The prophecies given to the seven churches of Asia Minor in Revelation seem to be of the latter type. That these continued after the NT period is demonstrated by a famous passage in which the second-century Jewish writer Celsus complains about Christian prophets:

It is an ordinary and common custom for each one to say, ‘I am God (or a son of God, or a divine Spirit). And I have come. Already the world is being destroyed. And you, O men, are to perish because of your iniquities. But I wish to save you. And you shall see me returning again with heavenly power. Blessing is he who has worshipped me now. But I will case everlasting fire upon all the rest, both on cities and on country places.’

The prophets apparently at times continued by speaking in tongues, which Celsus disdainfully describes as follows: “Having brandished these threats they then go on to add incomprehensible, incoherent and utterly obscure utterances, the meaning of which no intelligent person could discover...”

While Celsus describes these negatively, W. L. Knox points out Celsus is intentionally parodying “a perfectly good ante-Nicene preaching of a rather enthusiastic type” [Green, *Evangelism* again].

Below is a more modern prophecy from a 1977 Ecumenical Conference on Charismatic Renewal:

Mourn and weep, for the body of my Son is broken... Come before me with sackcloth and ashes, come before me with tears and mourning, for the body of my Son is broken. I would have made you a light on a mountaintop, a city glorious and spendorous that all

¹ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*.

² Wayne A. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians* (Washington, D.C., U. Press of America, 1982), 139-43.

the world would have seen, but the body of my Son is broken. Turn from the sins of your fathers. Walk in the ways of my Son. Return to the plan of your Father, return to the purpose of your God...³

- a. What continuity or discontinuity do you see between OT, NT and modern prophecy?⁴
 - b. How could the NT or modern prophecy be used to “encourage and strengthen” the church (Acts 15:32)?
 - c. In what ways is this similar to, or different from, preaching?
2. Paul instructs the Corinthian Christians to “Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy” (1 Cor 14:1, NRSV). This verse immediately follows ch. 13’s discussion of “a still more excellent way” (12:31). As Carson points out,

This importance of love does not mean it should be pursued at the expense of spiritual gifts: they too are to be eagerly desired. We have already noticed... that there is no clash between this encouragement and Paul’s insistence that the spiritual gifts are sovereignly distributed. Here the apostle immediately becomes more specific. Eagerly desire spiritual gifts, he says, especially the gift of prophecy. [*Showing the Spirit*, p. 101]⁵

Carson helpfully adds that *prophecy* may not be the purview of only charismatics:

One begins to suspect, then, that prophecy may occur more often than is recognized in noncharismatic circles, and less often than is recognized in charismatic circles. We may happily agree that preaching cannot be identified with prophecy, but what preacher has not had the experience, after detailed preparation for public ministry, of being interrupted in the full flow of his delivery with a new thought, fresh and powerful, interrupting him and insinuating it into his message—only to find after the service that the insertion was the very bit that seemed to touch the most people, and meet their needs? Most charismatics would label the same experience a “prophecy.” [SS, 168-9]

³ Nancey Murphy, *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning* (Cornell U. Press, Ithaca), 1990, 156-157.

⁴ SPOILER ALERT: Some ideas from Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 94-98: (a) In the OT, the people were required to follow an approved and tested prophet; (b) If an OT prophet was found to be speaking wrongly in the name of God, the punishment was death; (c) Once a prophet was approved, there is no indication his or her prophecies *each* required testing (cf. 1 Cor 14:29; 1 Thess 5:19-21); (d) There is no hint in the NT that if one prophesies and the prophecy, once tested, is found to be wrong, that the prophet is to be even excommunicated; (e) Paul places prophetic authority below his authority as an apostle in 1 Cor 14:37-38).

⁵ Carson continues, “Similar things could be said for many of the other ‘charismatic’ gifts. Healing is not restricted to charismatic circles. (I could mention some remarkable answers to prayers for healing among other groups.) I have myself experienced what would in other circles be called ‘the gift of faith,’ in which I was given utter assurance that certain things would take place, even though the prospect flew in the face of normal prognostications and stood removed from the kinds of promises normally associated with the gospel and its demand for faith. The wife of a Baptist minister, a close friend who serves in a noncharismatic environment, has been praying in tongues in her private devotions for years—ever since as a teen-ager she found herself able to do so, without any contact with (what was then) Pentecostalism. With little effort, I could provide many interesting examples of the utilization of ‘charismatic’ gifts in decidedly noncharismatic groups.” [SS, 169]

Imagine a younger Christian comes to you for advice on how to pursue the gift of prophecy for the good of the body of believers. Given what you've learned this year about the practice and pitfalls of discernment, how would you answer?⁶

3. While Luke describes believers as being “filled” with the Holy Spirit multiple times for encouragement and empowerment for ministry, believers are “baptized” into the Holy Spirit only once, at which point they are indwelt by the Spirit. At the same time, charismatics describe a distinct experience of the Spirit sometimes separated from baptism. About this, Green writes,

A great many Christians do have a notable second milestone in their lives, when they experience the reality of Jesus, the power of love of his Spirit, and receive one or more spiritual gifts in an entirely new way. It is often so real and exuberant that it makes any previous Christian experience seem grey or positively unreal. It is this sudden turning on of the lights in a twilight room that has encouraged some to regard ‘baptism in the Spirit’ as a second stage of Christian initiation. And that is very understandable. It does not help in the least if those who have no such passion for Christ seek to pour cold water on the Pentecostals’ biblical exegesis; we need to hear the Pentecostals when they expect to see radical change in Christian lives, passionate courage in spreading the word, burning love and self sacrifice, and faith that God will act naturally and supernaturally as his people venture out in evangelism, deliverance ministry and healing.

Normal Christian birth does embrace the baptism in water, the repentance and faith, and the powerful and discernable presence of the gift of the Spirit. But it is true, is it not, that our faith is often so dim, our expectancy so low, our ignorance about the Spirit so great, our fear of committing ourselves to anything challenging so strong, that many of us have had a sub-normal Christian birth, and an anemic Christian experience? And it may be that what we need is a major injection of the HS into those bloodless lives of ours. I believe that with all my heart. This breaking out of the Spirit in our life, this irrigation of our dry desert with his water is a paramount necessity in many parts of the church. But let us not make the mistake of allowing the change from subnormal to normal Christian living to create a doctrine of initiation in two stages. Sometimes it comes in two stages. But such need not be the case.⁷

⁶ *Regarding context*, 1 Corinthians is well known to be written to a church divided: “This is seen not only in the party labels reported at 1:12..., but also in a style of argumentation that pervades much of chapters 7-12. It might be called the ‘yes—but’ form of argument. If people in the church take different sides of an issue, Paul’s aim is not only to present his apostolic judgment on the matter but also to reconcile the warring factions. To do this, he tips his head to each faction in turn, and says in effect, ‘Yes, yes, you have something of the truth on your side, I largely agree with you—but...’ ...Not every ‘but’ in 1 Cor is traceable to Paul’s concern to unite warring factions... Nevertheless the feature is common enough that we must ask what stands behind it when it occurs. ‘I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy...’ Are there also hints in these chapters of those who do *not* speak in tongues? ...At the end of his discussion, Paul can write, ‘Do not forbid speaking in tongues’ (14:39)—which surely suggests that is what some would have preferred... Again, in the metaphor of chapter 12, some seem to be threatened by the gifts of others, and are therefore withdrawing in some form (12:14ff).” [SS, 17-18] This argument suggests that Paul isn’t just writing to a community of wild tongues-speakers, redirecting them to the more constructive gift of prophecy. Some of his audience apparently rejected even the practice of tongues.

⁷ Michael Green, *Thirty Years that Changed the World* (Eerdmans) 2002, 255-257.

Discuss.

4. Richard Foster suggests that those who would like to know more about the charismatic tradition should “Draw near to those who have some history and experience in this area of life and learn from them.” He further suggests:

Rest easy with your fears that some aspect of what you are doing is in the flesh. I can guarantee you there will be flesh in it! We will not be totally free from that problem until heaven. But God can still use us in our fumbling, bumbling ways. To be sure, we never want to manipulate others or be manipulated by others. But we should not be afraid to step out and exercise the gifts that we feel God has given us. God will receive us, flesh and all, and teach us how to walk more and more in the power of the Spirit.

Follow your leadings without fear of being misled. If your spirit is teachable, God will show you the way. Press in where you feel the need for more, especially in the area of spiritual gifts. Have a kind of dissatisfied satisfaction—glad for all the good God has given you and yet longing for more. More love. More power. More grace. More gifting. Paul himself urges us to ‘strive for the greater gift’ (1 Cor 12:31a). Perhaps you feel drawings to pray for someone. Or to prophesy, or to bring a healing touch. If so, step out confidently knowing that God is with you and will be your strength.

Regularly test your leadings and experiences in the Spirit with those you trust. Allow their spiritual discernment to encourage, correct and refine you. And you them. In this way we will fulfill the words of the great Apostle of the Spirit: ‘Since you are eager for spiritual gifts, strive to excel in them for building up the church’ (1 Cor 14:12).⁸

- a. What gift would you love God to grant you, for the encouragement and spreading of the church?
 - b. What impediments might keep you from pursuing these gifts? How might you overcome them?
5. Over the past year we have engaged in exercises to develop a sensitivity to the Spirit, including the identification of “close moments,” and meditation on our new identity in Christ and on the indwelling of the Spirit. Have these or other practices increased your awareness of or sensitivity to the Spirit? Discuss.



Fun fact: There is evidence, from a worried letter he subsequently sent to Beza, that Calvin spoke in tongues on at least one occasion.⁹

⁸ *Streams of Living Water* (Harpersanfrancisco) 1998, 131-132.

⁹ <http://blog.beliefnet.com/bibleandculture/2009/07/john-calvin-is-old-and-not-looking-a-day-over-500.html>: Quent Warford, “Calvin Speaks Unknown Tongue,” *The Paper: Student Paper of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary* 1.6 (March 24, 1975): 6.