

. ACTS , THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT, AND THE NEW COVENANT PEOPLE OF GOD

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

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

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.

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. 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.⁵
3. 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].⁶

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

⁴ *Evangelism*, 200-201.

⁵ N.B., the official CRC position is that these gifts are still active today, but are not to be abused.

⁶ *Evangelism*, *ibid.*

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).

The prophecies given to the seven churches of Asia Minor in Revelation seem to be characteristic 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 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...⁷

- a. What continuity or discontinuity do you see between OT, NT and modern prophecy?
 - 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?
4. 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).

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 a an ethnic group (perhaps the

⁷ Nancey Murphy, *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning* (Cornell U. Press, Ithaca), 1990, 156-157.

“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 2.⁸

Despite some Pentecostal assertions, tongues is not a universal sign of the baptism in the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:30).⁹

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.”¹⁰

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?
5. 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 is 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

⁸ 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...”

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Gordon Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence* (Hendrickson) 1994, 867.

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. When I lead someone to Christ these days I lay my hands on his or her head and pray that the Spirit of God will deeply and fully baptize the new believer into Christ. We need Christians like that today; full-blooded Christians, not ecclesiastical ghosts. Baptism in the Spirit is the common lot of all Christians. Nowhere in the NT are Christians told to wait for it, or to seek it, or to receive it.¹¹

Discuss.

6. 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).¹²

- 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 these impediments?



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

¹¹ Michael Green, *Thirty Years that Changed the World* (Eerdmans) 2002, 255-257.

¹² *Streams of Living Water* (HarperSanFrancisco) 1998, 131-132.