

## Spiritual Gifts

During the time of Jesus' ministry, and especially in the beginning of the early church, some individuals were given spiritual abilities or gifts. These abilities were clearly beyond normal talents that people may have. For many years, and especially today, there is a great deal of confusion concerning spiritual gifts. What were the spiritual gifts? To whom were they given? Why were they given? Do they exist today?

The purpose of this article is to attempt to answer these questions. The only source used for this is the Word of God. The references will come from the New King James Version, but any reliable translation can be used to verify my conclusions.

### What were the spiritual gifts?

1. During Jesus ministry, He sent out the disciples under a limited commission and He gave them certain powers. Matthew 10:1 *"And when He had called His twelve disciples to Him, He gave them power over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease."* Luke 10:1 tells that Jesus later sent out 70 and they were given the power to heal the sick. So, the first description of powers included casting out unclean spirits, healing of sickness and healing of disease.

2. The next account occurs in Acts 2:1-4 where the 12 disciples were in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. *"When the Day of Pentecost had 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 it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance."* Josephus wrote that large rooms were located around the Temple Courtyard, and the Apostles may have been sitting in one of those rooms.

There was clearly a loud sound that everyone could hear: Acts 2:5-8 states, *"And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language. Then they were all amazed and marveled, saying to one another, 'Look, are not all these who speak Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born?'"*

So, two things are described here. (1) The coming of the Holy Spirit was a physical event that was heard by the disciples and all people that were nearby. (2) The gift of tongues described here was that the disciples, now Apostles, could speak to the crowd in different native languages that they had not known before. From the Biblical account there is no way to know if each Apostle spoke in a single language, or if the Apostles spoke and the people heard their words in their own languages.

This event also did much more. The disciples had seen the risen Christ. There was no question concerning their belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. However, they were not yet qualified to go out and carry the Good News, "The Gospel", to others. Their understanding was imperfect, and their memories were as unpredictable as any normal person. In Acts 1, Jesus instructed the disciples to remain in Jerusalem until they were given the necessary abilities and powers to serve as the inspired messengers of God's Message of Salvation in Jesus Christ.

Acts 1:4-8, *“And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, ‘which,’ He said, ‘you have heard from Me; for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.’ Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, ‘Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’ And He said to them, ‘It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.’”*

The coming of the Holy Spirit on these 12 disciples was given to them so they could be witnesses of Jesus Christ. Now their understanding of God’s Will was complete. Now their memories of the previous years with Jesus were sharp and clear. Now they could perceive the great tapestry of God’s Plan, and now they were given the power to be able to proclaim that plan.

There is only one other recorded instance that the Holy Spirit was poured out on others in a similar way, and that was with the Roman Centurion, Cornelius, and his household. They also began to speak in tongues and glorify God. The word used in Acts 10 is identical to the one used in Acts 2 and the context was the same. The purpose in Acts 10 was to clearly demonstrate that the Gospel was to be proclaimed to the Gentiles as well as the Jews. Before that, the message had only been delivered to the Jews.

There is no other example in the New Testament of the Holy Spirit coming upon individuals in this manner.

3. From the Book of Acts, it is clear that the transfer of certain spiritual gifts was done by the Apostles. In Acts 8, Philip went to Samaria and preached the Gospel. Starting with verse 5, *“Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them. <sup>6</sup> And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. <sup>7</sup> For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed. <sup>8</sup> And there was great joy in that city.”* Although he possessed those powers, Philip could not transfer those same powers to other people. That did not happen until the Apostles Peter and John arrived in Samaria.

4. As the early Christians travelled to other places, they no longer had the benefit of listening directly to the Apostles. Plus, the only inspired word at that time was the Old Testament. The New Testament is silent as to the work of most of the original 12 apostles. During the early decades of the church, Paul travelled the most to other places within the Roman Empire. He actively preached the Good News of Jesus Christ, and congregations of the Church began to be established.

As they were established, individuals within those congregations received special abilities, or gifts. Unfortunately, problems began to arise, and Paul addressed this problem in his first letter to Corinth. Apparently, some felt that they were more important than others, and some thought their gift was the most important. In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul stressed that it did not matter what talents or gifts that different members had. They were all one body.

Beginning in 1 Corinthians 12:4, Paul wrote, *“<sup>4</sup> There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. <sup>5</sup> There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. <sup>6</sup> And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. <sup>7</sup> But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all: <sup>8</sup> for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the*

*word of knowledge through the same Spirit,<sup>9</sup> to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit,<sup>10</sup> to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another different kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.<sup>11</sup> But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills.”*

Several gifts are listed in this passage.

(1) The word of wisdom. This was the ability to clearly and accurately communicate the doctrine of the New Testament through inspiration with no errors.

(2) The word of knowledge. This was the ability to clearly see and understand the threads of God’s great plan of salvation. The complexities that frustrated Jewish scholars of old were clear to them.

(3) Faith. All Christians MUST have faith, but this ability must have gone beyond that. Jesus had said that faith could move mountains. One writer said, “It has a special meaning here. It must mean a faith that has special, visible results, a faith that enables one to do miracles.”

(4) Gifts of healings. This gave the ability to cure various diseases. [The claims of faith healers today will be addressed later.]

(5) The working of miracles. Since this is a separate gift, it must have gone beyond healing of diseases. This may have included the casting out of unclean spirits and other abilities.

(6) Prophecy. This would have included the ability to see, or foretell, events that would occur in the future. Acts 2:27-28, “*And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar.*”

Later, in Acts 21:8-11, “*On the next day we who were Paul’s companions departed and came to Caesarea, and entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. Now this man had four virgin daughters who prophesied. And as we stayed many days, a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. When he had come to us, he took Paul’s belt, bound his own hands and feet, and said, “Thus says the Holy Spirit, ‘So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.’”*

(7) Discerning of spirits. This would have been the ability to identify and expose false teachers. As Christianity spread, the conditions were ripe for false teachers to try to corrupt the Gospel and pull the faithful away. In fact, several of Paul’s letters, and letters from Peter and John warned of that very thing.

(8) Different kinds of tongues. The word that Paul uses here is the same word used by Luke in the Books of Acts concerning different languages. [This will be addressed in more detail later.]

(9) The interpretation of tongues. If a person thought of what he would say to a group, but when he spoke, he spoke in Italian but did not understand Italian, then another person may have had the ability to interpret what was said. Like today, there was a diversity of languages within the Roman Empire and in areas outside the empire.

Later in 1 Corinthians 12, Paul included another list in verses 27-31, *“Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way.”*

Paul acknowledged that people did have gifts, but others had natural talents that were helpful in establishing a strong, healthy congregation. Notice in the passage above, that Paul was going to describe a more excellent way. 1 Corinthians 13 begins with the passage on love. In other words, the more excellent way was Christian Love!

1 Corinthians 13:1-3 states, *“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.”*

### What was the Purpose for the Spiritual Gifts?

During Jesus ministry, He performed miracles that fulfilled prophecy, and confirmed who He was – The Christ, the Son of the Living God. Later, the Apostles and others would heal and cast out demons. The purpose for this was to confirm the WORDS that were spoken concerning the Gospel (The Good News) of Jesus Christ.

Before the New Testament was written and completed, certain gifts were given to some individual Christians. Clearly some specific gifts were provided to ensure that what was being taught was accurate and according to God’s Will.

Other gifts were given to confirm the word that was being taught. On the Day of Pentecost, the people were confused and amazed. They marveled that they were hearing the disciples speak to them in their own languages. But the miraculous sign did not convert them. All the speaking in different languages did was to draw their attention. Some even dismissed it by saying the disciples were drunk!

Once the crowd’s attention was on the Apostles, Peter began to speak. The miraculous speaking did gain their attention. But THE WORDS, the Good News of Jesus Christ was what pierced them in their hearts and caused them to cry out, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” And that day, 3000 souls were baptized!

### What Does “Speaking in tongues mean?”

Clearly the “speaking in tongues” that occurred in Jerusalem in Acts 2 referred to different languages. The crowd heard the Apostles speaking to them in their own languages. In Paul’s writing, he used the same word to describe tongues when he was writing to the Corinthian Church.

Today, many people believe that the tongues described in 1 Corinthians were ecstatic, or heavenly, languages. One passage that has been used in articles to support this position is Romans 8:26 *“Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with **groanings***

*which cannot be uttered.*” However, this is used to describe personal prayer where a person may be so overcome in grief or despair, that words cannot express the emotions and cry for help. In that case, the Spirit can indeed intercede to speak those prayers before the Throne of God.

In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul specifically addresses the issue of tongues. Chapter 14:1-5 states, *“Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands him; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries. But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification.”*

First, Paul urged his readers to pursue love, which is the more excellent way; and prophesy. Then he turns to the speaking in tongues. If a person has the ability to speak in a language that he does not know, then his thoughts and prayers to God would be edifying for him, but his words would not be understood by others, and would edify no one there.

Apparently, some could speak in a language but not actually understand the words of that language. That would be like someone speaking in Spanish when no one understood Spanish. Paul did not discourage speaking in tongues, because it could draw the attention of unbelievers, so they could hear the WORDS.

Paul specifically wrote that tongues were not as important as proclaiming the word. In verses 9-12 he continued his discussion about tongues. *“So likewise you, unless you utter by the tongue words easy to understand, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air. There are, it may be, so many kinds of languages in the world, and none of them is without significance. Therefore, if I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be a foreigner to him who speaks, and he who speaks will be a foreigner to me. Even so you, since you are zealous for spiritual gifts, let it be for the edification of the church that you seek to excel.”*

Some could speak and interpret the words spoken. In other cases, one would speak in a different language and another was able to interpret the words. In both cases, the hearers would be edified by the words spoken. Paul continued in verses 13-17, *“Therefore let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful. What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding. Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say “Amen” at your giving of thanks, since he does not understand what you say? For you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not edified.”* Some insist that this must be ecstatic speaking, but there is nothing in these passages to support that position.

Paul then wrote, *“I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all; yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.”* Paul was an educated man and would have learned some languages growing up, and as an Apostle, that ability would have been enhanced by the Spirit of God. But the point is that he wanted to speak words that were understandable to his audience.

Then, in verses 22-25, Paul concluded with these words, *“Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophesying is not for unbelievers but for those who believe. Therefore if the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those who are uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are <sup>f</sup>out of your mind? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all. And thus the secrets of his heart are revealed; and so, falling down on his face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you.”*

### Problems with Ecstatic Utterances

1. The speaking in tongues was for the unbeliever and not the believer! That person would be more inclined to hear what someone had to say about Jesus Christ if he heard it in his own language, but the speaking in a tongue did NOT edify that person. The most crucial point was the imparting of the WORDS and Will of God. All of this points to tongues referring to languages and not some “heavenly” utterance.

2. According to those that support this position, someone speaks sounds that no one understands, and then either that person interprets the words, or another person interprets the words. This would NOT have been unusual in the Ancient World. Not far from Corinth was located temple of the Oracle of Delphi and a temple dedicated to Apollos.

The Oracle of Delphi was famous throughout the Ancient World. The Greeks believed that Delphi was the center of the world, and references were made to Delphi as far back as 700 BC. The oracle would either speak out in ecstatic utterances and then interpret them or would hear the sounds coming from a gorge in the earth and interpret the sounds.

The Oracle of Delphi was one of the most powerful people in Greece and the empire. Any similar “gift” would have been seen as a cheap imitation to the world known oracle. That would be especially true in the nearby city of Corinth! Plus, numerous instances have been recorded in different places in the Ancient World where people spoke in ecstatic utterances and then interpret the words. No, the gift of tongues, as described in the New Testament, would have had to be totally different to gain people’s attention.

3. Another issue is that these supposed gifts can be faked today. Over the years, popular faith healers and speakers in tongues have gained huge following and huge buildings. And then everything was brought down by scandals over money and/or immorality. The demonstration of these gifts is being performed for members of congregations that follow that teaching. Yet, according to the inspired writing of Paul, tongues and healing were for unbelievers and not believers.

Services have become major productions designed to excite emotions with the anticipation that “something” will happen. The great preacher, or pastor, commands and God delivers! And the people attending such shows began to develop a form of emotional addiction. The audience is built up to an emotional state, and then, on cue, the healing and/or tongues occur. People leave emotionally satisfied, but there is no real understanding of God’s Word. “In order for me to believe, I have to get my periodic “dose” of miracles.”

The New Testament specifically states that Christians must grow in their knowledge on the WORD and apply those principles to their lives. Paul warned the 1 Corinthians 14:20 *“Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature.”*

## Do the Gifts Still Exist Today?

People today claim that they can perform miracles of healing, or they have heard prophecies from God outside of His written Word or speak in ecstatic utterances. But Paul's words refute that in 1 Corinthians 13:8-10, *"Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away."*

The gifts were always intended as a temporary measure. They were needed in the first stages of the church, but Paul clearly wrote, *"But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away."* What is the perfect? Many people try to use this to justify what is clearly not in the inspired scriptures. The perfect is the completed WRITTEN words of the New Testament. The combination of the inspired writing of the Old and New Testaments make up the COMPLETE revelation of God.

Anyone that teaches something contrary to the New Testament is teaching a false doctrine and must be avoided.

Those "teachers" and "preachers" would do well to heed the warnings of Paul and Peter.

Galatians 1:6-9, *"I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed."*

In 2 Peter 2, Peter speaks to false doctrines and the fate of those that teach such thing. *"<sup>1</sup>But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. <sup>2</sup>And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. <sup>3</sup>By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber.*

*<sup>4</sup>For if God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment; <sup>5</sup>and did not spare the ancient world, but saved Noah, one of eight people, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood on the world of the ungodly; <sup>6</sup>and turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, condemned them to destruction, making them an example to those who afterward would live ungodly; <sup>7</sup>and delivered righteous Lot, who was oppressed by the filthy conduct of the wicked <sup>8</sup>(for that righteous man, dwelling among them, tormented his righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds)— <sup>9</sup>then the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment, <sup>10</sup>and especially those who walk according to the flesh in the lust of uncleanness and despise authority. They are presumptuous, self-willed. They are not afraid to speak evil of <sup>11</sup>dignitaries, <sup>11</sup> whereas angels, who are greater in power and might, do not bring a reviling accusation against them before the Lord.*

<sup>12</sup> But these, like natural brute beasts made to be caught and destroyed, speak evil of the things they do not understand, and will utterly perish in their own corruption, <sup>13</sup> and will receive the wages of unrighteousness, as those who count it pleasure to carouse in the daytime. They are spots and blemishes, <sup>14</sup> carousing in their own deceptions while they feast with you, <sup>14</sup> having eyes full of <sup>15</sup> adultery and that cannot cease from sin, enticing unstable souls. They have a heart trained in covetous practices, and are accursed children. <sup>15</sup> They have forsaken the right way and gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; <sup>16</sup> but he was rebuked for his iniquity: a dumb donkey speaking with a man's voice restrained the madness of the prophet.

<sup>17</sup> These are wells without water, clouds carried by a tempest, for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever.

<sup>18</sup> For when they speak great swelling words of emptiness, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through lewdness, the ones who have actually escaped from those who live in error.

<sup>19</sup> While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage. <sup>20</sup> For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning.

<sup>21</sup> For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. <sup>22</sup> But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: "A dog returns to his own vomit," and, "a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire."