

# The Sign Gifts of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit gives gifts of service for meeting human needs inside and outside the church. In the preceding article we took a look at eight **speaking** gifts and six **servicing** gifts. In addition, the Holy Spirit gives **sign** gifts for confirming the truth of the Gospel in its pioneering break-throughs into new territories. The passage in Hebrews 2:3-4 speaks of the early apostles and says that God bore them witness by confirming their word with signs and wonders and miracles. In the message this time we want to look more carefully at the sign gifts—miracles, healings, and tongues. These are among the most controversial issues facing our churches today.

## 1. The Gift of Miracles

The word “miracle” is often used loosely to speak of any unusual happening or any strange set of circumstances. For example, some use the word “miracle” to refer to a scientific achievement like an astronaut landing on the moon, or to describe a person who emerges unhurt from an automobile that was smashed against a tree. In a more biblical sense, a miracle is a work wrought by a supernatural power—by a means which is beyond the reach of man. Every newborn child, for example, is a miracle. In other words, our heavenly Father is performing multitudes of miracles (of various kinds) every day.

The “gift of miracles” (mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:28) is the Spirit-given power that enables a servant of God (a human being) to perform an act which is contrary to natural laws in order to prove the reality of his message. Hebrews 2 describes the work of the apostles in the New Testament church, and then in verse 4 says in essence that God bore them witness with signs and wonders and miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit. In other words, the apostles were enabled to perform miracles in order to help the Gospel message get established in the pagan Roman world.

The performing of miracles helped to authenticate the early apostles, but when the New Testament was completed, the need for such guarantees diminished. When the Spirit does manifest such miracles today, they usually occur on mission fields where the situation is much like that of the early church. We received a letter at **Bible Helps** from a remote province of Zambia which told about a man who was deaf since 1939 (when machine guns during a war burst his eardrums), but now he could hear perfectly again. At the same meeting, a lady who had big tumors on her body, watched them melt away as she believed in Jesus and promised to obey His Word. The man who wrote does not claim to have the gift of miracles, but in lands steeped in pagan darkness, biblical miracles occur with more frequency, I think, to show God’s power over heathen idols. And even in places where the Gospel has already made deep inroads, God occasionally dips down His mighty hand and performs a unique miracle—to reassure His people. On the other hand, the age in which we live, is not an age of abundant miracles.

Christians are often troubled by the fact that miraculous gifts (which occurred fairly often in the times of the apostles) are not seen very much in our age. Many say that if our faith were greater, we would see the same frequency of supernatural power at work again in our age. Surely, they say, the power of God has not changed.

A study of biblical miracles shows that miracles clustered around certain critical periods in human history. They were unusually evident in the days of Moses and Joshua, and Elijah and Elisha, and the time of the prophet Daniel, and the period of Christ and the apostles. These were four periods when miracles were pronounced. However, miracles were the exception rather than the rule during much of Bible history. Many centuries passed during Old Testament times without any evidence of special miracles.

When God delivered the Israelites out of Egypt, He performed unusual supernatural signs in the days of Moses and Joshua. Aaron's rod turned into a serpent; the Red Sea parted and the Israelites crossed on dry ground; manna was provided in the wilderness; the sun stood still in Joshua's day. There were lots of miracles. But then outstanding miracles ceased for many centuries, only to become more common again during the ministries of Elijah and Elisha.

And then many hundreds of years passed again until the days of the prophet Daniel. Daniel was protected in a den of lions; the three Hebrew Children survived a burning fiery furnace; Nebuchadnezzar was condemned to eat grass like an animal. And then miracles dropped out of sight again, only to reappear during the ministry of Jesus and the apostles. Jesus walked on the water; He raised people from the dead; He multiplied food to feed the 5,000; Paul was bitten by a serpent without experiencing harm; Peter was released from prison and loosed from his chains. These kinds of experiences dotted all through the book of Acts, but by the time the Epistles were written, the era of miracles once again declined. And the age in which we live now is not an age of abundant supernatural signs. Observe the following conclusions about miracles:

**a) Many of God's servants were never used to perform miracles.** Great men of God such as Abraham and David and John the Baptist, did not perform miracles, and yet the absence of the gift of miracles in their ministries was not due to a lack of faith. Notice what God's Word says in John 10:41. Remember that John the Baptist was declared to be "the greatest among those born of women," and Matthew 11:11 says that "there has not risen a greater than John the Baptist"—yet John 10:41 says that "John did no miracle." John was a great human being, but God never worked a miracle through him!

When we say that the gift of miracles has appeared frequently only in certain periods of time, and that God gives a gift in one generation, and withholds it in the next—this does not mean that God's power is lessened. It only indicates a change in His program and purpose. You see, if it were God's plan that the same kinds of miracles were to be repeated over and over and over again—in every time and every place—then miracles would lose their unique sign value because they would be taken for granted. God has wisely protected the significance of miracles by the rarity of their occurrence!

**b) The Lord encourages faith in His Word, not dependence upon signs.** Jesus spoke frequently about a faith that does not need signs. The Apostle Paul says that the true Christian walks by faith and not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). The craving to look for the miraculous is really a sign of an unhealthy spiritual condition. In Matthew 12:38 the Pharisees said to Jesus, "Master, we would see a sign." And Jesus responded by saying, "An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign." In John 4:48, Jesus reprimanded the nobleman who wanted Him to heal his son, by saying, "Except ye see signs and

wonders, ye will not believe.” But notice the difference when the Virgin Mary was told by an angel that she would be the mother of the Messiah. Mary said, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word” (Luke 1:38). Mary did not ask for a sign.

Our Lord wants a faith—not resting on signs and wonders—but a faith that rests on the certainty of the Word of God. The Lord prefers that we walk by faith and not by signs. We don’t need the confirming testimony of miracles. We have the sure Word of God, and that should be good enough.

**c) The last days of the age will be marked by a new surge of miracles.** Jesus says that in the last days, miracles will once again be quite evident, not miracles performed by God nor by His true disciples, but miracles produced by the devil and those whom he deceives. Jesus describes the end times in Matthew 24:24, and says, “For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.” Paul speaks of the Antichrist in 2 Thessalonians 2:9-10, and says that his coming is “after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders.” John describes the end-time religious leader by saying “And he doeth great wonders . . . and deceiveth them that dwell on the earth by means of those miracles which he had power to do” (Revelation 13: 13-14).

And so, my friends, let us be on our guard! There are miracles and signs counterfeited by Satan, and in the days just before the coming of our Lord, these false miracles will become more and more numerous. Only prayerful submission to God’s Spirit, and determined obedience to the Word of God, can save us from error in these last days.

## **2. The Gift of Healings**

The “gift of healing” (1 Corinthians 12:9) is the ability to intervene in a supernatural way, as an instrument for the curing of illness and the restoration of health. Jesus healed in all the cities and villages round about (Matthew 9:35). The Apostle Peter was instrumental in healing a lame man (Acts 3:6-8). Paul was used of God to heal an aged man on the island of Melita (Acts 28:8-9). Healing, like miracles in general, is a gift not as prominent now as it had been in some previous eras, but occasionally again, God dips in and performs a supernatural healing to confirm our faith. Concerning the gift of healing, there are several conclusions derived from a study of the Scriptures:

**a) God does not promise to heal every illness.** If the gift of healing could be exercised to heal absolutely every illness, then some persons (with enough faith) conceivably could live forever. Yet we know that disease will eventually do its work, and barring the return of Christ, all of us will face death.

The gift of healing did not function in every case, even in New Testament times. At Ephesus, Paul wrought special miracles by the hand of God, insomuch that handkerchiefs were carried from Paul’s body to those who were sick, “and the diseases departed from them” (Acts 19:12). But later, Paul could not help his close friend Epaphroditus who was so sick that he nearly died (Philippians 2:25-27). And Paul did not use the gift to heal Timothy’s chronic stomach condition (1 Timothy 5:23). And near the close of his life, Paul left Trophimus at Miletus because he was sick (2 Timothy 4:20). In fact, Paul himself

was not in good health during much of his ministry (2 Corinthians 11:30;12:5-10; Galatians 4:13). Paul was not delivered from the “thorn in the flesh” even though he prayed for deliverance three times.

Even Jesus did not make every sick person well. The account in John 5 tells how Jesus passed by a great multitude of sick people who were gathered around the Pool of Bethesda, and selected only one person for healing. Jesus healed that one person, and left all the others sick. In other words, it is not always God’s will to heal every person who is sick.

**b) Healing does not usually depend on the sick person’s faith.** It is a cruel hoax to tell people that if they had enough faith, they would be healed. Many of God’s choicest saints have been sick and shut-ins for years-and there was no evidence of unconfessed sin, nor of a lack of faith in God’s power.

Jesus healed the man at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:7-9), but not because of his faith! The man at the Pool displayed no faith at all. In fact, he didn’t even know who Jesus was (John 5:13). Healing must be exercised, not on the basis of the patient’s faith, but on the basis of the will of God. And God is always sovereign in His dealings with us. He will choose health and strength and length of days for some, and He will choose the opposite for others. We must learn to be submissive to God’s will, and to thank Him even when He says “No” to our prayers. The choice is made by the Lord, who in His wisdom knows what will bring Him the most glory.

**c) The gift of healing is not given widely to many people.** Even in New Testament times, the gift of healing was restricted to only a few persons—mostly to the leading apostles (see Acts 15:12). Most of God’s servants have never had the gift of healing, but many frauds over the years have been perpetuated in the name of divine healing. Some of the religious magazines promote healing and success and prosperity to all who have a “faith” big enough to please God. They claim that the Lord does not want His people to be sick. Impressive testimonies of spectacular healings are given wide publicity. And then, especially in parts of Europe and Asia, there are famous shrines that are supposed to have healing power. Millions of people pass through grottos every year to search for good health and the vigor of youth. But careful follow-up surveys indicate that very few healings have ever occurred.

Illness and sickness and the matter of healing touches every one of us. All of us know something about the pain of sickness. In the book of James we are told what to do when serious illness comes. We are to call for the elders of the church; they are to anoint with oil, lay hands on the one who is sick, and appeal to God for healing—all in accord with His will. God can and often does choose to heal. Sometimes He chooses to keep us from sickness in the first place, so that there is no need for healing. Nevertheless, I am convinced that in this life, sickness and pain and death will not be completely eliminated. Suffering is a part of the experience of life. Over in heaven we will look at pain and sickness as one of “the former things” (Revelation 21:4).

### **3. The Gift of Tongues**

Speaking “in tongues” is the gift which enables a person to speak in a natural language even though he never previously learned it. Three examples of “tongues” are given in the book of Acts, and in each case, the Spirit gave men the ability to speak in languages that were unknown to them (Acts 2:1-

13;10:46;19:6). The only place in the Epistles where tongues are mentioned is in 1 Corinthians 14, and there Paul was seeking to correct a wrong use of tongues; he is not exhorting them to exercise the gift.

At Corinth there were some who apparently claimed to be talking with God in a kind of trance. They spoke in a kind of ecstatic heavenly language. Paul says that such activity is of little value to the church (verses 6,9,11,16,17,19), and it is of still less value for the unconverted (verse 23). It may have some value for personal edification (verses 2,4). The word “unknown” (in 1 Corinthians 14) is not in the original Greek; it is in italics in the King James Version. The word “glossa” (translated “tongues”) means “speaking in a language not previously learned.” And so if I met a Polish-speaking man with a hungry heart, and God gave me the power to preach the Gospel to him in his own language (even though I never learned it before)—this would be the true gift of speaking in tongues. Note the following observations:

**a) Much tongues-speaking today is mere babbling, giving out ecstatic utterances without known words or language.** All that such practitioners have to do to prove that their babbling language is genuine tongues-speaking, is to submit one of their speeches to honest investigation. For example, a given instance of speaking in tongues could be put on tape and played separately to several persons who claim to have the gift of interpretation, and if the translations of two or more interpreters proved to be identical, then we would have a demonstration of genuine God-ordained tongues. But never once in the history of tongues-speaking people has anyone agreed to that kind of test.

**b) Our Lord Jesus, and His twelve special disciples, and John the Baptist, none of these ever exercised the gift of tongues.** Jesus was baptized with water (Luke 3:21). He was filled with the Holy Spirit (Luke 4:1). He is to be our example but He never spoke in tongues. Many great men of God never spoke in tongues. These include John the Baptist, Augustine, Calvin, Luther, John Bunyan, George Muller, Hudson Taylor, Charles Spurgeon, etc. None of these men ever spoke in tongues.

**c) The practice of speaking in tongues is not a proof of deep spirituality and of vital Christian growth.** The church at Corinth seems to have been most active in the practice of ecstatic tongues, yet it was the least spiritual of all the New Testament churches to which Paul wrote. The people at Corinth caused more heartaches for Paul than did any other church in New Testament times. Wherever the babbling tongues phenomenon has appeared, it has proved hurtful and divisive. Many times strong churches have been torn apart by this practice. Some people who have one time been clear lighthouses for Christ have been destroyed by this doctrine.

Some on occasion ask why the disciples at Pentecost were enabled to speak or hear in languages they had never learned, and yet today that kind of miracle seldom happens in our churches. One key factor related to the answer is this: If the occasion demands it, God will manifest these signs in congregations of obedient and vibrant Christian people today. But God is not in the show business; He is not trying to put on a display. If He wills it He can perform it. Paul and the early apostles did not make a display of the signs promised in Mark 16:17, but when the occasion demanded it (in Acts 28:1-6), God performed a miracle and clearly manifested His presence.

There have been some genuine cases of miracles, healings, and tongues manifested down through the years, but in many cases, the signs that one hears about are being performed not by the power of the Holy Spirit, but in the energy of the flesh. May the Lord help each of us to remain open to what originates with Him, and if on occasion He chooses to perform a spectacular sign gift through us, it is my prayer that the experience might be used to glorify Christ and not to exalt our own goodness or our own abilities.

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