

Can We Know for Sure That Spiritual Gifts Still Exist?

“The gospel is absurd and the life of Jesus meaningless unless we know that He lived, died and rose with but one purpose in mind: Pentecost, to pour out the Holy Spirit upon the church. Not to make nicer people with better morals, but brand-new creations, a community of prophets and professional lovers, men and women who would surrender to the mystery of the fire of the Spirit that burns within.” – Brennan Manning

When the Holy Spirit was poured out upon believers on the day of Pentecost, the apostles marveled at the gifts they had been given, which had been foretold by the prophet Joel: the ability to speak in other languages, the power to heal, the spiritual talents of prophecy and teaching and service, and many others. Understanding and developing one’s spiritual gifts is critical to the Christian’s spiritual life—the gifts are bestowed upon believers by God so that each member of the body of Christ can perform a specific, divinely appointed role within the church.

While the importance of spiritual gifts is agreed upon by most Christians, opinions about the specifics differ greatly. In particular, the continuity of these spiritual gifts since the Apostolic Age has frequently been debated. Some Christians believe that the “charismatic” or “miraculous” gifts, such as speaking in tongues and prophecy, are still poured out to believers, while others believe that they no longer exist in modernity. There also exists a wide middle ground of belief—that the charismatic gifts remain available to believers in some manner, though their appearance and use vary.

On the matter of spiritual gifts: Most Christians, even cessationists, believe in the real outpouring of spiritual

gifts to Christians, which continues in the present age. These gifts, known as charismata, were first given to the church upon Pentecost. The charismata, however, are not to be confused with the “charismatic gifts,” also known as the “sign gifts”: These include the words of wisdom and knowledge, the gifts of speaking in and interpreting tongues, the gift of healing, the gift of prophecy and the discernment of spirits. These miraculous gifts are viewed as acts empowered by the Spirit that extend beyond “natural” human abilities. Those who do not believe the miraculous gifts continue into modernity are known as cessationists, while those who believe they are still present in modern Christendom and available to Christians are known as continuationists.

Because there is a great deal of nuance between cessationism and continuationism (and in the middle ground that separates the two beliefs), we will look at the matter of spiritual gifts in broad terms to understand the differences that arise among believers.

Cessationist Beliefs

In general, cessationists believe that the miraculous spiritual gifts ended after the apostolic age; that is, with the closure of the New Testament canon. To evidence this belief, many point to Paul’s words in the book of 1 Corinthians 13:8-10: “But if there are prophecies, they shall fail; if there are tongues, they shall cease; and if there is knowledge, it shall vanish. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect comes, then that which is imperfect shall pass away.” They also point to the apparent lack of evidence among Christians writing from the second century onward.

There is disagreement among cessationists regarding the exact nature of the cessation of gifts. Some believe that miracles do still occur, so long as they don’t add doctrine to Christianity. Others believe that all miracles have ceased in

the modern age. Similarly, some cessationists believe that the miraculous gifts will return either in the forerunning to Christ's return or upon His return.

Continuationist Beliefs

Continuationism is the belief that all of the spiritual gifts described in the New Testament are available to believers today. This includes the gifts of speaking in tongues, prophecy, healing and so on. The reason these gifts are often referred to as "sign gifts" is because they would have served as signs to nonbelievers that the apostles were truly indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Continuationists cite the words of early Christians such as Justin Martyr, Novatian and Augustine as evidence that miraculous gifts continued even after the deaths of all the original apostles.

As with cessationists, there exist disagreements among continuationists on how the miraculous gifts operate in the modern world. The exact definition of a "prophet," for instance, is often disputed, with some believing there are two distinct senses in which the gift of prophecy operates. The gift of tongues and the interpretation of tongues is understood as both the ability to speak spontaneously in other human languages (*xenolalia*) or in a divine language (*glossolalia*).

Other Views

Many "third" opinions exist that borrow partially from cessationism and continuationism, or constitute a wholly different view altogether. For instance, some Christians believe that the "miraculous gifts" are still bestowed to Christians, but only under certain circumstances rather than apparently "at will." Some believe that miraculous gifts are more likely to appear in less-developed nations than the incredulous first world. Others believe that most spiritual gifts, not merely the sign gifts, have ceased in the modern

world. As alluded to above, still others differ on the precise definitions of gifts like the gift of faith, the gift of prophecy or the gift of discernment of spirits.

Because of the relative lack of clarity in Scripture and the disparate opinions of genuine believers, it's easy to get caught up in the disagreements. If Christians can't settle the nature of the spiritual gifts, how can we be sure about their importance? What can we know for sure?

Why it Matters

First, it's important to note that differing views on the matter of spiritual gifts are biblically valid. Just because there are disagreements over what some of the gifts are and how they work, historically or contemporarily, doesn't mean that the disagreements ought to cause division. Indeed, there is a great deal to be learned by various expressions of the faiths that operate under different beliefs but still maintain the faith's core doctrine.

Furthermore, while there exists a variety of opinions on the topic, Christians are nearly universal in the belief that spiritual gifts are still bestowed upon believers by the Holy Spirit, and these spiritual gifts are extremely powerful when used in faith. The gift of mercy, for example, is characterized by compassion for the poor and the ailing. Some are blessed with the gift of leadership and provide strong planning and administration talents within the church. The gifts of teaching, service and evangelism each play a unique and critical role within a body of believers.

While some Christians differ in their understanding of the spiritual gifts, there is little argument that the gifts described in the Bible served a powerful role in the historic church, and that believers have a strong imperative to discover and put to use their spiritual gifts in the modern era. The power poured out at Pentecost is not only accessible

to today's Christians: Believers are supernaturally suffused with that power, having been indwelt with the Holy Spirit promised by Christ, who empowers and compels believers to enact the Lord's commands and fulfill His Great Commission. As Christians, accessing the power of Pentecost allows us to participate with Christ in His renewal of all creation and the salvation of mankind. May the Holy Spirit leave an indelible mark on our hearts to use our spiritual gifts for His service.

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To read more about spiritual gifts, check out the e-book Understanding Your Spiritual Gifts, available here for only \$.

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