

Spiritual Gifts

Much excitement, confusion, argument, and division have arisen in recent years within Christendom concerning spiritual gifts. Many have excitedly claimed to have received the gift of tongues, or healing, or prophecy, or miracles. Others seek such gifts and pray for them, only to be disappointed. It is vitally important that we know clearly what the Word of God says about spiritual gifts. [Some churches refer to these gifts as miraculous gifts, charismatic gifts, sign gifts, or pentecostal gifts.] This lesson will focus on the gifts listed in I Corinthians 12. These include: the word of wisdom, the word of knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, tongues, and interpretation of tongues.

Sign Gifts

Some churches teach that spiritual gifts are very important in our worship and in spiritual living. However, there is not very much space devoted to these gifts in the Bible. The *only* passage in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John that seems to speak of spiritual gifts is Mark 16:17-20. This passage in Mark, however, does not use the word "gifts." Instead, the word "signs" is used (thus the designation "sign gifts"). The "signs" mentioned are: casting out devils, speaking with new tongues, taking up serpents without being harmed, drinking poison without being harmed, and healing the sick. Mark does not describe or define any of these "signs" beyond just the mention of them.

Obviously we must understand the use of the word "signs" in the Bible. The first signs performed by man in the Bible were signs that Moses was to do in the midst of *Israel* (Exodus 4:8-9). Signs were important to Israel throughout its history. "And the LORD said unto Moses, How long will this people provoke me? and how long will it be ere they believe me, for all the *signs* which I have shewed *among them*? (Numbers 14:11). God showed the signs to *Israel* and not to any other nation. Israel was taken out of Egypt "by signs" (Deuteronomy 4:34; 6:22). I Corinthians 1:22 says, "For the Jews require a sign." God is not giving signs to the Church, the Body of Christ. The signs listed in Mark 16:17-20 were given to *Jewish* disciples. They were given to confirm the gospel that Israel was to preach to the world. "And they went forth, and preached every where, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. Amen" (Mark 16:20). From the Scriptures that we studied in Lessons 19-25, we know that Mark 16:17-20 is not *our* commission. That commission (and its attending sign gifts) was given to Israel. We must rightly divide the Word of truth (II Timothy 2:15). Signs were given to *Israel*, not to the Church, the Body of Christ.

What are "tongues"?

Possibly the most popular and controversial spiritual gift is the gift of speaking with tongues. Therefore, it is important to give special attention to this gift in our study of spiritual gifts. When studying the gifts, we must make *the Bible*, not our experiences, the final authority. Paul warns in II Timothy 4:3-4 that people will turn away from sound Bible doctrine and will instead believe fables (stories, testimonies, experiences, novels, etc.).

Many in Charismatic and Pentecostal churches claim that tongues are ecstatic languages or heavenly languages. To the uninitiated these "tongues" sound like gibberish (rapid unintelligible speech). It should be noted that most of the Corinthian believers had worshiped "dumb idols" before they were saved (I Corinthians 12:2). It is known that the heathen in Corinth (and many today, such as Hindus) commonly used gibberish---unknown words revealed by spirits. They believed that they could communicate more effectively with the gods by speaking in the language of the gods. [We should note here that when Jesus Christ was on earth, He did not speak in a special heavenly language. Even when speaking to the Father, Christ spoke in the language commonly used in Israel then.]

I Corinthians 13:1 mentions "the tongues of men and of angels." There are some who teach that "the tongues of angels" refers to special languages of the angels. Limited space does not allow a detailed discussion of this verse. We will only point out that in the Bible angels always spoke in a language commonly spoken and understood on earth. The word "tongues" in the Bible always refers to *a known language spoken on this earth*.

What is the purpose of the gift of speaking with tongues?

"In the law it is written, With men of other tongues and other lips will I speak unto this people; and yet for all that will they not hear me, saith the Lord" (I Corinthians 14:21).

Spiritual gifts are not given for entertainment or to bring exhilaration to the one who possesses them (I Corinthians 12:7). I Corinthians 14:21 is a very important, but often neglected, verse concerning the gift of tongues. It is surprising to find Paul quoting from the book of Isaiah when writing about the gift of tongues. Most Christians think of tongues as a New Testament gift given to the church. Why, then, is Paul saying that tongues were written about in Isaiah 28:11-12?

An examination of these verses in Isaiah 28 shows that God is warning Israel about a time when they will be spoken to in a Gentile language. This will be a sign of God's judgment upon them. (It should, again, be observed that "tongues" are human languages spoken on this earth. Specifically the Assyrian language is in view here.)

After quoting from Isaiah in I Corinthians 14:21, Paul begins verse 22 with the word "Wherefore." Clearly, the reference to tongues in Isaiah has a connection to Paul's teaching about tongues in Corinth. I Corinthians 14:22 is a direct statement concerning the purpose of the gift of tongues. "Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not: but prophesying serveth not for them that believe not, but for them which believe." Tongues are "for a sign." A sign to whom? The quotation from Isaiah shows that they were a sign *to Israel*. Paul is correcting the mistaken idea of the Corinthians that tongues were given for personal edification.

Whatever various churches may claim about the purpose of the gift of tongues, the Scriptures are clear. Tongues "are for a sign," i.e., for the purpose of being a sign. Furthermore, we are

specifically told that they are a sign *not* to believers, "but to them that believe not." Again, verse 22 follows the quotation from Isaiah in verse 21 that speaks of tongues being spoken to "this people." The phrase "this people" can only refer to the Jewish people when taken in its context. When we combine these Biblical facts, we can conclude that *tongues are specifically for the purpose of being a sign of judgment upon unbelieving Jews.*

There are several Biblical examples to support this conclusion. "Lo, I will bring a nation upon you from far, O house of Israel, saith the Lord: it is a mighty nation, it is an ancient nation, *a nation whose language thou knowest not*, neither understandest what they say" (Jeremiah 5:15). The tongues spoken on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2, also, served as a warning sign to Israel. Peter's warning to Israel was confirmed by the miraculous ability to speak in tongues (see Acts 2:34-36). The unbelieving Jews recognized this instant ability to speak in foreign languages as a miraculous sign from God. Meaningless gibberish would not have had such an effect. Pagan worshipers, madmen, and drunkards commonly speak in such a manner. This would not have impressed the Jews as a sign from God.

The Hebrew people knew that being spoken to in a Gentile tongue was a sign of God's judgment upon them. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, Israel had recently fallen (Romans 11:11-12,15). God was speaking to Israel in various ways to tell them that they had fallen. One way in which God spoke to unbelieving Israel at that time was through tongues. The Corinthian believers met in a house right next to a synagogue (Acts 18:7). Tongues spoken in the Corinthian church were a sign to the Jews next door. God is not dealing with the nation of Israel today. Therefore, God is no longer giving the gift of tongues for a sign to unbelieving Jews.

Should we speak with tongues today?

We will now give our attention to I Corinthians 13:8-13. We know that the sign gifts listed in I Corinthians 12:8-10 were still functioning when Paul wrote to the Corinthians. However, Paul made it clear that the gifts of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge would pass away. "Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away" (I Corinthians 13:8). The question is: *When* will they pass away?

The context in I Corinthians 13:9-12 is one of *knowledge*. ("For we *know* in part"--verse nine; "I understood as a child"--verse eleven; "now I know in part"--verse twelve) When Paul wrote I Corinthians he did not have the complete revelation of the mystery. He only knew in part (had partial knowledge). However, he knew that the "perfect" would come. "But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away" (I Corinthians 13:10). Many teach that the word "perfect" in this verse refers to Christ at His Second Coming. However: 1) There is nothing in the context to lead us to conclude that Paul is talking about the Second Coming. The context is *knowledge*; 2) Prophecy does not stop, but revives at the time of the Second Coming (Acts 2:16-18).

When the "perfect" (full, complete, mature) knowledge comes, that which is "in part" (the sign gifts) will be done away (verse 10). Verse 11 is an illustration of this teaching. "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I

put away childish things" (I Corinthians 13:11). The "child" is the church in its infancy. When the church becomes a "man," the childish things (sign gifts) will be put away.

"For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (I Corinthians 13:12). Verse 12 is not talking about seeing Christ at His Second Coming as many teach. Paul is still on the same subject. Seeing "through a glass darkly" is equivalent to the infant church that had only partial knowledge. "Face to face" is like looking in a clear mirror and symbolizes seeing the mystery clearly and in its fullness.

When studied carefully, I Corinthians 13:8-13 clearly teaches us that the gifts of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge ceased when Paul had received the full knowledge of the mystery. When Paul's epistles were completed, these gifts no longer functioned. Though there are many stories and testimonies, no one today truly has these spiritual gifts.

Review Questions

True or False

1. Spiritual gifts have been used by God in recent times to bring unity and peace within Christendom.
2. In the midst of *Israel*, Moses performed the first signs done by man in the Bible.
3. The Bible teaches that tongues are ecstatic languages or heavenly languages.
4. Spiritual gifts are given for the enjoyment and personal edification of the one who possesses the gift.

Multiple Choice

5. Paul quotes from Isaiah 28:11-12 to:
 - a. prove that we must keep the law.
 - b. show the purpose of the gift of tongues.
 - c. prove that God was using the gift of tongues to speak to the Gentiles.
 - d. show that water baptism is a sign of our faith.
6. When Jeremiah 5:15 mentions "*a nation whose language thou knowest not*," it refers to:
 - a. the blessings that Gentile nations will bring to Israel.
 - b. a nation of angels.
 - c. the importance of learning foreign languages in missionary work.
 - d. a foreign tongue spoken to Israel to show God's judgment upon them.
7. When Paul wrote the book of I Corinthians:

- a. the sign gifts were still functioning.
- b. the sign gifts had already ceased.
- c. no one was speaking in tongues.
- d. he taught the believers how to speak in tongues.

Fill in the Blanks

8. In I Corinthians 13 Paul taught that when the _____ knowledge came, that which is "in part" (the sign gifts) would cease.

9. I Corinthians 13:8-13 teaches us that the gifts of prophecy, _____ tongues, and knowledge when Paul had received the _____ full knowledge of the mystery.

10. The *only* passage in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John that seems to speak of spiritual gifts is _____.

For Further Study

Additional teaching about tongues and the other spiritual gifts is included in the section on lesson 30 in the Leader's Guide and Answer Key. We highly recommend that this section be studied along with lesson 30.

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