

Spiritual Gifts and the Church Today

The Holy Spirit unites all Christians, because all true followers of Jesus are indwelt by the same Spirit (**Eph. 4:3-6**). However, in practice the topic of the Holy Spirit tends to be a cause of division and disagreement.

A) Who is the Holy Spirit?

The Holy Spirit, as the third member of the Trinity, is a divine Person. He is God (see **Ac. 5:3-5**) but distinct from the Father and the Son (**Mt. 28:19**). He is not an impersonal force but is a Person who can, for instance, be grieved (**Eph. 4:29**) or lied to (**Ac. 5:3-5**).

Whilst focus on the Holy Spirit is generally dominated by our interest in spiritual gifts, the Bible presents a far broader ministry. Even though there is less biblical material concerning the Spirit than the Father or Son, a quick survey of Scripture highlights at least the following as activities of the Holy Spirit:

- Creation and the sustaining of creation (**Gen. 1:2, Ps. 104:30**)
- Redemption (**Is. 63:10-14, Rom. 8:2, Eph. 1:13**)
- Author of Scripture (**2 Tim. 3:16, 2 Pt. 1:20-21**)
- Ministry of Christ (**Lk. 1-4, Jn. 14-16**)
- Giver of gifts (**1 Co. 12**) and fruit (**Gal. 5:22-23**)

It is worth pausing for thought to consider whether our knowledge of the Holy Spirit sufficiently captures the breadth of His ministry. As holy God He is worthy of our worship and adoration, and we cannot do this if we reduce His ministry to only what arouses our fascination.

B) What are the gifts of the Spirit?

References to individuals receiving specific gifts from the Holy Spirit occur far earlier than the book of **Acts**. In **Exodus 31** God speaks of the gifts of the Spirit given to Bezalel and Oholiab, so that they are equipped with the craftsmanship skills required to construct the tabernacle (**Ex. 31:4**). Judges like Samson, and kings like Saul and David, are also endued with a “rushing” of the Spirit so as to be empowered for specific acts (e.g. **Jdg. 14:6, 1 Sam. 11:6**). In the New Testament we learn that Jesus and the Apostles carry out

their miracles in the power of the Holy Spirit ([Ac. 2:22](#), [Heb. 2:4](#)). Then there are several lists of gifts/ministries that appear in the letters that are assumed to be present within the local churches ([Rom. 12:6-8](#); [1 Co. 12:4-11, 28](#); [Eph. 4:11](#); [1 Pt. 4:10-11](#)).

Gifts given by the Holy Spirit clearly cover a very broad set of phenomena. It is unlikely that the Bible's lists are exhaustive, but merely illustrative. In general the gifts come in two categories: speaking gifts (including preaching, teaching, wisdom, as well as prophecy and tongues) and serving gifts (including mercy, administration, as well as healings). There are many different skills that could fit within these categories.

An important debate that pertains to the matter of spiritual gifts is whether certain gifts ("miraculous" gifts) are expected to cease after the New Testament has been completed. This is a complex debate with respected teachers on either side. In favour of a ceasing of the gifts, some point to the purpose of the gifts as being primarily for confirming the ministry of Jesus and the Apostles as those speaking on God's behalf ([Ac. 2:22](#), [2 Co. 12:12](#)). It is argued that after the death of the Apostles there was no further need for this ministry of confirmation and hence the gifts have ceased. However, this would only be true if the gifts did not serve other functions.

Others argue that since the miraculous gifts feature prominently in the New Testament church (see [Rom. 12:6](#), [1 Co. 12-14](#), [Gal. 3:5](#), [1 Th. 5:20](#)), and since the New Testament is the best picture we have of how the church should look, then there is no reason to suppose that they will have ceased. After all, the Bible doesn't say explicitly that they will. However, this fails to account for the fact that the Bible must be read as a story with a certain trajectory. There is no explicit statement to say that the Apostles would cease or that the New Testament would be completed, but these are nonetheless true.

A balanced perspective is to conclude that the gifts may continue, but are not normative for every church. Church history appears to confirm this.

C) Prophecy

What is it?

Prophecy is speaking on God's behalf. The Greek word used in the New Testament had a very broad range of meanings, and even today differences

between Christian groups may boil down to little more than semantic preference. The Bible reveals that God speaks through His Son ([Heb. 1:2](#)) and His Word (e.g. [Heb. 3:7](#)), but it also says that He speaks through creation ([Ps. 19:1](#)), conscience ([Rom. 2:15](#)) and conversion ([Mt. 11:27](#), [Gal. 1:16](#)). Since this revelation is ongoing there is no reason to reject prophecy today out of fear that it denies the Bible's sufficiency.

In the Bible

Prophecy is a significant factor during the time of Moses and the monarchy. God spoke through Moses directly ([Ex. 4:12](#)) and, since the prophets carried the message of God, they had authority to rebuke the king (e.g. Nathan with David, [2 Sam. 12](#); Elijah with Ahab, [1 Kgs. 17-18](#)). The prophetic ministry culminates with Christ who is the embodiment of the truth ([Jn. 14:6](#)), who exercises His authority through the prophetic ministry of the Apostles ([Eph. 2:20](#)).

Theological Implications

There are three broad categories of prophecy within the Bible.

Christotelic prophecy (from the Greek *telos* = goal) is the prophetic ministry that climaxed with Jesus. This is the prophecy of the likes of Moses, Elijah and Jeremiah who spoke "*thus says the LORD*". This type of prophecy does not exist today.

Universal New Covenant prophecy is the prophecy anticipated by Moses ([Num. 11:29](#)) and predicted by Joel ([Jl. 2:28-29](#)) and experienced from the Day of Pentecost onwards ([Ac. 2:16ff](#)). This gift is given to all members of the New Covenant.

Unique New Covenant prophecy is a particular gift that is given to some only (see [1 Co. 12-14](#)). It is a speaking gift that leads to great conviction amongst unbelievers ([1 Co. 14:24-25](#)).

Practical Considerations

The Bible must never be removed from its place of prominence within the church. If we wish to hear the voice of God then we look to His Word. No-one today may bind the conscience of another unless it is on the basis of Scripture.

All Christians have a prophetic role to play in speaking God's truth to each other and the society around them.

D) Tongues

What is it?

The word "tongues" would be more helpfully translated "languages". This gift involves the speaking of an unlearned language.

In the Bible

Tongues only features in certain narrative portions within Acts (Ac. 2:4, 10:46, 19:6) and in the complex instructions of Paul to a wayward church (1 Co. 12-14). A first complexity is how to compare the experiences in the two books. Although the same terminology is used, there are nonetheless differences. It is thus best to conclude that, as with prophecy, the gift of tongues is not uniform but can appear in a variety of forms.

Part of the reason for the variety in tongues is the variety of purposes: tongues are used for proclamation (Ac. 2:11), praise and prayer (Ac. 10:46, 1 Co. 14:17), edification (1 Co. 14:4) and as a sign (1 Co. 14:22).

Theological Implications

The genuine gift of tongues involves the individual speaking a language that is unknown to them. It is not gibberish, even though no-one might understand them (1 Co. 14:2, 10). It is a gift that comes at the direction of the Holy Spirit (Ac. 10:44), not through learned behaviour. If it is not interpreted, it has no place in the public gathering but should be retained for private use (1 Co. 14:28).

Practical Considerations

A healthy church will place a strong emphasis on the priorities of prayer and a hunger after God. The contemporary obsession with the likes of tongues could be a reaction against a perceived cold formalism within the church. We must be passionate for God.

Those who believe they have the genuine gift of tongues should be discerning, since its counterfeit is easy to learn. As with all gifts, it is wise to seek the advice of other Christians for confirmation of the gifts.