

Are Miraculous Spiritual Gifts for Today?

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Definitions:

Providence – God’s continual involvement in the normal and natural affairs of life, working all things according to His will for His glory and our good (Eph. 1:11, Romans 8:28, Genesis 50:20)

Miracle – An extraordinary work of God that involves His immediate and unmistakable intervention in the physical realm in a way that contravenes natural processes [including signs and wonders and supernatural new revelation] - ex: Acts 2:19-20, Revelation 4-22

Miraculous Gifts – God working through human beings that He has gifted as “miracle-workers” with supernatural powers for ongoing exercise of miracles and their gift (as defined above, including apostles, those with the gift of healing as well as revelatory gifts such as tongues, gift of prophecy that predicts or gives a new revelation from God, etc.).

Cessationist – Belief that miraculous gifts (as done by the N.T. apostles and their associates) and miracle-workers have ceased in early church history, but that *God* has not ceased working in His providence (constantly) or miracles (whenever God wills).

Continuationist – Also known as “Non-Cessationist”: Belief that most¹ or all of the N.T. spiritual gifts were always to continue in the church, including human healers, miracle-workers, tongue-speakers, interpreters of tongues, prophets, and other signs and wonders and supernatural experiences in Acts that can be experienced today.

- Pentecostal movement (1901; ex: Assemblies of God, Church of God in Christ)
- Charismatic movement (1960’s; cross-denominational)
- “Third Wave” (1980’s; ex: Vineyard Churches)
- “Open but Cautious” (other non-cessationists who would not comfortably or completely identify themselves with one of the above three movements)
- Non-evangelical groups: Mormons, Catholics (some Charismatic), some cults

Preliminary Observations

1. The primary passage in the N.T. on spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12-14) has at its center the greatest passage on love in the Bible (chapter 13). Christians can debate the meaning of parts of all 3 chapters as well as the phrases in 13:8-13 but we should not miss the point of 13:1-7 – without agape love, all gifts are meaningless
2. It is not unloving to question or examine the doctrine or practices of other believers or movements, or our church (Acts 17:11, 1 Thess. 5:18-21, 1 John 4:1).
3. Cessationists may be right about miraculous gifts ceasing, but can still learn from their non-cessationist brethren, enjoy fellowship with them, and rejoice where true renewal and salvations take place in the broader body (Phil. 1:18, cf. Lk 10:20)
4. Continuationists should not be caricatured or lumped together with Word-Faith preachers or “healing crusades” or prominent (and problematic theologically) teachers on Christian TV. Many, in fact, reject unbiblical Charismatic abuses, and conservative continuationists include responsible evangelical / reformed scholars.
5. The Scripture is full of warnings against false prophets and teachers, and that Scripture alone is sufficient and should be our focus rather than experiences. The Scripture also warns against a dead, orthodox, intellectual, emotion-less faith.

¹A small number of Christians believe the gift of apostleship has continued, but the vast majority believe N.T. apostles as a gift and office did not continue (Mormons and Catholics hold to apostolic succession).

Broad Scriptural Considerations

1. Miracles were never continuously manifested across thousands or even hundreds of years of redemptive history, and miracle-workers / miraculous gifts are very rare even in Bible times. The primary human miracle-workers are as follows:
 - a. Moses and Joshua
 - b. The prophets (mainly Elijah and Elisha)
 - c. Christ and His Apostles (and those directly commissioned by them)
2. Each of the above times are periods of less than 100 years and were periods where Scripture was being written. It is interesting that Moses and Elijah (who often and the prophets) are representatives of the entire Old Testament (ex: Luke 16:31) and Christ represents God's final revelation (9:29-36, Rev. 1:1, 22:18-21, Heb. 1:1-2)
3. The purpose of miracles was a *sign* to authenticate God's true prophets and apostles and God's new revelation (Heb. 2:1-4, Acts 7:36-39). If God were still working this way today, we would expect it with the true prophets and preachers.
4. Jesus rebuked those who seek after and demand signs (Matt 12:39, see Lk 16:31)
5. Most continuationists do not believe the apostles continue, or that apostolic experiences can be expected by all believers (Mk 16:18, Acts 1:26-2:3, 1 Cor. 12:29). Some would admit that modern practices are not "apostolic-quality" gifts.
6. Key Question: Are the gifts being practiced today the same as we see in the N.T.?

The Gift or Office of Apostleship

1. 1 Cor. 12:28-29 lists apostles with the other gifts and Eph 4:8-11 mentions "gifts" God gave as including apostles (the terms in v. 8 can also refer to offices as well)
2. The Apostles were unique and the foundational layer of the church (Eph. 2:20):
 - a. Had to be eyewitnesses of the risen Christ (Acts 1:22, 10:39-41, 1 Cor 9:1)
 - b. Had to be directly appointed by Christ (Mk 3:14, Lk 6:13, Acts 1:2, 24, 10:41, Gal. 1:1)
 - c. Had to be able to confirm their message and mission by miraculous signs (Acts 2:43, 4:33, 5:12, 8:14; 2 Cor. 12:12)
3. The Twelve Apostles have their names written at the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:14)
4. Paul appears to refer to himself as the last eyewitness and apostle (1 Cor. 15:5-9) and to recognize the gift as no longer available to be sought (12:28-31, 14:1)
5. The cessation of Apostles is a critical problem for non-cessationists
6. Key question: Do modern "gifts" match up with those of the apostolic era?

The Gift of Healing

1. Biblical healers could heal by command (John 5:8, Acts 3:6) even out of their presence (Matt. 8:5-13; even in one's shadow – Acts 5:15) or by touch (Mk 5:25-34, Acts 28:8-9) or even merely by their clothes (Mt 9:20-22, Acts 19:11-12)
2. Their healings were instantaneous (Jn 5:8, Acts 3:2-8) and indisputable (4:13)
3. Their healings were total (Lk 4:39, Acts 9:34) and they could heal everyone (Lk 4:30, Acts 5:16) and every kind of disease (Matt. 4:23-25, Acts 28:9)
4. They healed those who from birth were blind or paralyzed (Jn 9, Acts 3), they restored body parts (Lk 22:50-51), and raised the dead (Jn 11, Acts 20)
5. Their healings were not dependent on the faith of those being healed (Jn 5:13)
6. Key question: Have any in church history demonstrated this same power and gift?

Additional Comments on Healing

1. Christ recognized doctors and medicine as normal means of healing (Mt 9:12, Lk 10:30-37) as did the other biblical writers (1 Tim. 5:23)
2. James 5:14-20 says when one is sick (or spiritually weak?) they are not to call a healer or go to a crusade but can ask elders to pray for *God* to heal as He wills.
3. Healings by God and the healing *gift* appear to diminish in recorded N.T. history:
 - a. Over 60 occasions are mentioned in the gospels and Acts 1-9, but only one or two occasions of healing are recorded in Acts 10-28 (with word “heal”)
 - b. Although the early epistle of 1 Corinthians mentions the gift of healing (ca. 54 A.D.), the other and later epistles do not mention healing at all.
 - c. Later in his ministry, Paul left Trophimus sick at Miletus (2 Tim. 4:20), did not heal his friend Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25-27), or his friend Timothy (1 Tim. 5:23) and Paul himself was ill (Gal. 4:13-15, 2 Cor. 12:7-10).
4. It appears that the healing *gift* was active at least from 30-60 A.D., but it soon disappears from the pages of N.T. and post-apostolic church history. *God* can and does heal in ordinary and extraordinary ways without a human healer, but it is not often or always His will to heal or a gauge of our level of faith or sin if He doesn’t

‘Healing is noticeable in the Old Testament (over 4,000 years), overwhelming in the Gospels (about three years), occasional in Acts (about 30 years), and negligible in the epistles (about forty years). The apostolic age ended, and miraculous healing by direct human intervention ceased. The subsequent alleged healings recorded by early church historians do not match the biblical record in regard to the miraculous quality of instant, total, and undeniable healing.’ -- Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Pattern for Divine Healing*, p. 19

The Gift of Tongues

1. “Tongues” is simply the old English word for “language” (carried over from 1611 KJV). The *gift of tongues* was the Spirit-given ability to speak human foreign languages that one had not learned (Acts 2:4-12, 10:44-47, 11:15-18, 19:7).
2. The 3 occasions in Acts (2, 10, 19) may relate to the 3 people / places in Acts 1:8?
3. Tongues only appears in 1 more passage (1 Cor 12-14) then disappears from N.T.
 - a. Real human languages, not gibberish (14:9-11; Acts 2:6 & 8 use root for *dialect*)
 - b. All believers can’t speak in tongues (12:30) but all are Spirit-baptized (v. 13).
 - c. Tongues was one of the lesser gifts (last in 12:28-31, 8-10; 14:1-4, 14:19, etc.)
 - d. Rather than a private prayer language to edify self, tongues and all the gifts must be used to edify the body (12:7, 25, 13:5, 14:4-17, 26; 1 Pet. 4:10-11, cf. Mt. 6:7)
 - e. Tongues could only be practiced when 1) an interpreter translated the foreign language so the congregation understands, 2) only one was speaking at a time, and 3) only a maximum of two or three could speak in a service (14:27-28).
 - f. 13:8 tells us some gifts were temporary (including “tongues, they will cease”)
 - g. Verse 10 speaks of “when the *perfect* comes,” which can be interpreted as “mature” (i.e., church no longer in infancy) or “complete” (NT revelation)
 - h. The purpose of tongues was a sign for unbelieving Jews of judgment (14:21-22).
 - i. After the judgment in 70 AD, tongues disappear from N.T. and church history?
4. Key Question: Is the 20th century tongues movement the same as what the N.T. shows?

For further reading: *Charismatic Chaos*, by John MacArthur
To Be Continued? Are the Miraculous Gifts for Today? By Sam Waldron