

**The Charismatic Gifts Debate: Are sign gifts for today or have they ceased? What is the purpose of the sign gifts, and if they are being practiced today, are they being practiced in a biblical manner?**

Today, there is much debate among evangelicals about whether the charismatic gifts are still relevant, needed, or even biblical. The vast majority of Christians believe in spiritual gifts. 1 Corinthians chapters 12 through 14 speak on these gifts. They are also mentioned in Ephesians and Romans. According to the New International Version of the Bible the gifts are listed and worded as: the message of wisdom, message of knowledge, faith, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits (or discerning), speaking in different types of tongues (the technical term is glossolalia), and interpretation of tongues. These “tongues” are considered to be of a heavenly language as opposed to a human language. These gifts are listed in chapter 12, verses 8-10. In verse 28, Paul lists more gifts as being gifts of apostle, prophet, teacher, healing, administration, helps. Ephesians 4:11 also mentions some gifts as being the roles of pastor and evangelist. However, the debate comes with the more ethereal or charismatic gifts. Some believe that the gifts of speaking in tongues, prophesying, and interpreting tongues are no longer needed, nor valid, today. I intend to dissect both sides of the debate.

The word charismatic comes from the Greek word *charisma*. According to the NIV Concordance, *charisma* means gracious.<sup>1</sup> The gifts listed in the first part of chapter 12 in 1 Corinthians are these charismatic gifts.

The two divided views are those of Continuationists and Cessationists. The former believes that all of the gifts listed above continue today. Cessationists believe that the charismatic gifts were only meant for the first century church. According to this view, “believers who *think* they are exercising these gifts are either deceiving themselves or are being deceived by demons.”<sup>2</sup>

One reason for this sharp divide is that many today view the gifts of speaking in tongues as a goal. Many Pentecostals today view speaking in tongues as evidence of having the Holy Ghost, even evidence of being saved. On the opposite side of the spectrum are the believers who think that speaking in tongues is based on over-emotionalism or, at worse, a symptom of demonic possession. As one witnesses a church service of each of the two camps one can see how each side has their own ways of worship. The Pentecostals typically have very lively music with much repetition in its music. The congregation will often become very active by praying loudly, dancing, jumping, or running around. The charismatic gifts will also manifest with the people speaking in tongues, interpreting, or prophesying. There are also other “gifts” not mentioned in the Bible that will be displayed during some of these services. In my youth group I have witnessed “laughing in the Spirit.” In many services some will start convulsing, sometimes

violently. Sometimes people will fall out either by themselves or after being prayed over. These services can be very unpredictable. While most services across the denominations begin with “praise and worship,” many charismatic churches may never get to the actual preaching of the word because of “Spirit’s moving.”

In the other church the worship service is more conservative. There may be singing with some clapping, but that is usually the extent of the excitement. Some denominations will stand while singing while others let the choir sing while the congregation sits. These services are usually more liturgical and predictable.

The charismatic church believes that it leaves itself open for the Holy Spirit to move. These services can often go well beyond their scheduled release times. The more conservative church usually sticks to a strict time limit. When the Holy Spirit moves in these services it is usually attributed to the pastor not preaching on what he had planned that week. It can be heard that the Spirit has laid a different message on his heart than the one he had ready. In charismatic churches the Spirit moves in very dramatic ways while in the more conservative churches it can be very subtle.

Charismatic churches usually defend their use of the more ecstatic gifts, namely glossolalia, based the initial filling of the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts. In chapter 2 the Spirit rushes in to the room where believers are gathered. After what appeared to be tongues of flames resting on their heads. They begin to speak in “other tongues.” What is not stated, however, is that these tongues are strictly spiritual in nature. Verses 5 and 6 state, “Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken.” This means that it wasn’t a heavenly spoken language, but native languages. “Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues.”(Acts 2:9-11 NIV)

Continuationists also believe all spiritual gifts are for this age because of what is said in Ephesians 4:11-13. The gifts are for “building up the body of Christ...to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. This meaning until the second coming of Christ when indeed all nations have been given the gospel. In 1 Peter 4 we are told to use whatever gifts we have received because “the end of all things is near.”

This is in contrast to the cessationist's view of spiritual gifts. Dr. John MacArthur believes gifts like speaking in tongues have ceased. He states, "Tongues were therefore a sign of transition between the Old and New Covenants. With the establishment of the church, a new day had dawned for the people of God. God would speak in all languages. But once the period of transition was past, the sign was no longer necessary." (<http://www.gty.org/resources/distinctives/dd06/the-gift-of-tongues>) In 1 Corinthians 13:8 we read that prophecies will cease, tongues will be stilled, and knowledge will pass away. The Apostle Paul here lists three specific gifts that will end at some point. The Greek word for *cease*, when it comes to prophecies is *katargeo* which could mean a complete stop or something that ceases temporarily. The word *stilled* in relation to tongues is *pauo*. It gives a stronger meaning of ending completely, never to be restarted. "Miracle gifts like tongues and healing are mentioned only in 1 Corinthians, an early epistle. Two later epistles, Ephesians and Romans, both discuss gifts of the Spirit at length—but no mention is made of the miraculous gifts. By that time miracles were already looked on as something in the past (Heb. 2:3-4)." Yet the question remains, when will they end? Or have they ended already?

Cessationists and Continuationists believe they will end "when perfection comes" (1 Cor. 13:10). Perfection for the cessationist is the completion of scripture. We no longer have need for some of these gifts now that scripture is complete. Other gifts like teaching, preaching, giving, and administration are still in use and needed today because it is how the Body of Christ has to operate in the church age. For the continuationist the "perfect" is when the return of Jesus occurs or the glorification of believers when they get to heaven. I must admit that I am inclined to think it is when we are made "perfect" in heaven. Even in Revelation 11:3 the two witnesses are said to prophesy.

There are a few very important things to remember. One is that the Bible tells us that not everyone will possess the same gifts. Those who teach that all Christians must speak in tongues are neglecting what Paul said in the latter part of 1 Corinthians 12. We must also remember that if someone is "speaking in tongues" but no one is around to interpret then there is no edification of those that hear (1 Corinthians 14:6-17). However, those who believe in glossolalia today would argue that it is also a private matter; a prayer language. It is mentioned that the great theologian John Calvin even experienced it. (<http://www.holyspiritmiracles.com/2010/04/did-john-calvin-speak-in-tongues.html>) Yet again, we should be reminded that the first instance of speaking in tongues mentioned in the Bible was actually believers speaking in other human languages that they had not known. The tongues that Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians could possibly be something more heavenly. Some believe that speaking in tongues was and is a purely pagan practice. Outside of the Corinthian epistles and the book of Acts, there are no mentions in

the New Testament of speaking in tongues. Brad Reynolds states, “Corinth was an area where pagan religious belief included ecstatic utterances [tongues], and the Corinthian believers were guilty of bringing such cultish beliefs into the church.” (<http://guardian-ministries.blogspot.com/2006/11/i-agree-with-john-calvin-on-tongues.html>)

Prophesying is also a term that we must be certain we are using in a biblical manner. When the Bible speaks of prophesying it is using a word that means basically to proclaim or encourage obedience to God. It does not always mean to speak some futuristic or unknown truth. God even called Abraham a prophet (Genesis 20:7)

A couple of years ago, I went to a special youth program at a local Church of God in Christ, a denomination known as being purely Pentecostal. As the praise team sang, the familiar repetition of drums commenced. Then, what is known as “catching the Holy Ghost” began. Bodies started seizing, sometimes literally throwing the person from their chair on to the floor. People began speaking in tongues (with no one to interpret). Others began to fall out, also known as “being slain in the Spirit”. After a person would fall out he or she might get up and start dancing or running around in circles. For many Pentecostal churches, the Spirit did not move if such a scene as the one described did not happen. And for churches where it never happens then they are described as a spiritually dead church.

Sadly what was described above has no biblical merit as I see it. There is no biblical mention of being “slain in the Spirit.” Matt Slick says, “This display is unfortunate since it is unverifiable, ostentatious, and could very well be nothing more than the overcoming power of emotions of a person.” (<http://carm.org/questions/about-church/what-does-it-mean-be-slain-spirit>) Sometimes it happens when the person is by themselves. Mostly it happens after someone has laid hands on the person usually as a transference of Spiritual power. As for the dancing, we are told in scripture David danced when the ark was brought home. And there is absolutely no scriptural precedence for the bodily convulsions that occur. The only convulsing or seizures mentioned in the Bible are of demonic influence.

However, we must not limit God. There are countless churches all over the globe that experience these gifts. Yet, as with the Corinthian churches I believe there is an abuse of the gifts. I even believe that some of these experiences are human in nature, namely emotional and not spiritual. I believe God can and does use people to speak in heavenly languages but he will also provide an interpreter in accordance with scripture. I believe God will also gift people with the ability to speak in other native languages when they’ve never studied them for the furtherance of the Gospel. I believe God will gift people to prophesy over someone else’s life,

either to bring out unknown truths or to speak future events over them or to just say what “thus sayeth the Lord.” I believe God works still through healing miracles by the hands of His believers. But, I believe most of what we see today is a mockery and/or a misunderstanding of the charismatic gifts.

1 Goodrick E., Kohlenberger J., *The Strongest NIV Exhaustive Concordance* (Zondervan; Grand Rapids, MI 1990) 1602

2 Boyd, G., Eddy, P., *Across the Spectrum: 2nd Ed* (Baker Academic; Grand Rapids, MI 2009) 238