

## THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT

"God also bearing witness with...gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to his own will." Hebrews 2:4

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The inauguration of the Christian Church at Pentecost and its progress during the next few decades was accompanied by manifestations of Divine power giving ability to the Apostles and others to perform works of healing and miracles, speak with strange tongues, and in other ways give evidence of their possession of supernatural powers. These operations of the Holy Spirit on the minds and lives of these early Christians are usually referred to as the "gifts of

the Spirit" and it is commonly understood that the purpose of their conferment was So to inspire and vivify the first ambassadors of Christ that they might discharge their commission in a manner impossible without such help. Despite the disciples' association with Jesus and all they had learned from him, they were still "ignorant and unlearned men", {Acts 4:13} unfitted by nature and background to speak and teach in the convincing manner needed to spread the Christian gospel over the Roman world. Jesus had already told them they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them after his ascension, that they would be his witnesses to the uttermost parts of the earth. {Acts 1:8} The bestowal of the "gifts of the Spirit" was the fulfillment of that promise.

It is perhaps natural that the more outwardly spectacular "gifts" - miracles, healing, tongues - should come first to mind when the subject is mentioned, but in fact there were others of a more intellectual nature, of great importance, which had their place. The complete list of these "gifts" is given only in 1 Corinthians 12:4- 11. That their purpose was to act as an essential aid to the missionary work of Apostles and others is made plain in Hebrews 2:4 which speaks of *A So great salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him; God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to his own will.*"

The descent of the Holy Spirit upon the waiting believers in the upper room on the day of Pentecost was marked by the bestowal of these gifts. They found themselves miraculously possessed of the power to speak in languages not their own "as the Spirit gave them utterance". {Acts 2:4} They proceeded immediately to use this power to preach Christ to the multitudes visiting Jerusalem for the feast from all parts of the known world, and the hearers expressed their amazement, *Are not all these which speak Galileans? How hear we every man in our own tongue wherein we were born?....We do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God.*" Not only so, but miracles of healing, of demon exorcism, and So on, followed, together with a clear-sighted understanding of the Divine Plan and the ability to expound it such that the ecclesiastical rulers of the day *Amazed....and could say nothing against it.*" Thus was fulfilled the prediction of Jesus that the coming of the Holy Spirit would convince the world of sin, righteousness and judgment; {John 15:7- 11} the power of the Father behind the apostles rendered them adequate to their task and invincible.

The "gifts" as listed in 1 Corinthians 12 are nine in number. They are, in order of appearance, the word of wisdom; the word of knowledge; faith; gifts of healing; working of miracles; prophecy; discerning of spirits; kinds of tongues; interpretation of tongues. It would appear that Paul listed them in the order of their relative importance. Qualities of the mind and intellect came first, healing and miracles afterwards and tongues last of all. In 1 Corinthians 12 these conferred attributes are called "manifestations" of the Spirit, and this may be a more accurate description of these special powers than "gifts."

The "word of wisdom" was the first and most important of the "gifts." In the ordinary way wisdom comes with experience; this is true in the things of God as with mundane matters. But these men had no experience and the work to be done could not wait for the years of painstaking effort which is normally the prelude to the acquiring of that experience by the Christian. The Holy Spirit supplied the deficiency. Jesus had already promised that. *"I will give you a mouth and wisdom"* He had said *Which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay or resist*".{# Luke 21:15} The narratives of Acts 4 and 5 are examples

of the fulfillment of that promise. The Sanhedrin, trying Stephen, *"were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake"*. {# Acts 6:10}

The "word of knowledge" comes next. The acquirement of knowledge is a work of time; it cannot be accumulated in an instant. These early believers had a sound knowledge of the Old Testament, the "Law and the prophets" but that needed supplementing by an equally sound understanding of the Divine Plan as it was now developing in this new Christian era. The conviction with which the Apostles preached "Jesus and the resurrection" attests the fact of a supernatural infusion of knowledge. In after times Paul constantly invoked this same gift upon his own converts, that the Roman believers might be "filled with all knowledge," the Corinthians "enriched in all utterance and knowledge," the Philippians "abound more and more in knowledge". {Romans 15:14 1 Corinthians 1:5 Philippians 1:9} Later on, as they began to learn the truths of the faith in study, and discussion they had no further need of the gift, but for the present it was vital.

Faith; the third gift. One might wonder in what way faith can be a gift; it is So personal an attribute, derived from one's own experience of God in Christ. But these early believers had not had that experience. Faith in the God of Israel, faith in Jesus Christ whom they knew and had seen risen from the dead, but no foundation yet for faith in this new phenomenon, this insight into spiritual things conferred by the Spirit; So different from all that they knew of the work of the Spirit of God in Old Testament days. They needed time to become accustomed to this new power in their lives, to be sure that it was truly and altogether of God, and there was not time. Later on the writer to the Hebrews was to define faith as the conviction of things unseen but at this moment of time that conviction was still immature- until the inflowing energy of the Spirit possessed their minds and gave them assurance- faith. Their faith in the risen Jesus was complete and unshaken, but that was on the basis of experience and things known. Now they faced the unknown future. They had enthusiasm for their mission; what they needed was faith that it would be accomplished and the Spirit gave them the faith to sustain them until they could develop their own.

From gifts for the mind Paul passes to gifts for the hand. Power to heal the sick, cast out demons, give sight to the blind, even raise the dead, all as Jesus had done; this was theirs. The object was to demonstrate in the sight of all men that they were indeed the accredited associates of that Jesus who had done these things in life and, now risen from the dead, continued to do them through his followers. The Book of Acts records some instances where this healing power was exerted by Peter, Philip and Paul; doubtless many more cases at the hands of other apostles and disciples remain unrecorded. But this was all for the evangelizing and the benefit of the unbeliever; when Trophimus lay sick at Miletus and Epaphroditus at Rome no miracles of healing were performed upon them and Timothy's chronic infirmities were alleviated only by the medical advice of the day. The gift was not for personal use, not even for Paul's own "thorn in the flesh."

Closely associated with this gift was the parallel one of the working of miracles- better understood as "mighty works," which is the meaning of the Greek word- examples of Divine power exerted through Apostles and others in unusual or unheard- of ways. Intended to constitute a continuation of the mighty works done by Jesus, the narratives are singularly reticent as to detail. The raising of Dorcas by Peter and the incidents of Elymas and the Pythoness slavegirl {Acts 9:36- 43 13:6- 17 16:16- 18} are about the only ones recorded with four of five instance where Paul, Philip, and others are stated to have

"wrought signs and wonders." The restraint shown by the New testament in respect to such miracles stands in sharp contrast to other extant Early Church writings in which cases of miracles or alleged miracles appear in profusion. The logical conclusion is that from the Scriptural point of view this particular gift of the Spirit was intended to establish connection between the ministry of Jesus and that of his Apostles in the eyes of the world, but no more, and logically would cease when that purpose had been achieved.

The "gift of prophecy" was that of public expounding of the faith as distinct from the work of evangelists. The evangelist preached Christ to the unconverted; the "prophet" explained the doctrinal and dispensational features of the faith to the converted. The work of the prophet was thus entirely within the Church. In the list of Divine appointments in Ephesians 4:11 the prophet comes next in importance to the apostles and superior to the evangelist. The necessity for such a "gift" at the time is obvious; none of the necessarily immature believers, apart from the Apostles, had yet gained by reading and study and discussion that detailed understanding which was necessary to fulfil the office of expositor, yet the necessity was pressing. Hence, for the time then subsisting, chosen men received that knowledge by power of the Holy Spirit and retained it until in the lapse of years they had themselves become sufficiently mature in Christ to need it no longer. Judas, Silas, Agabus, and the four daughters of Philip are named as some upon whom this gift was bestowed and most of the Christian communities appear to have included prophets in their midst.

"Discernment of spirit" is not likely to have anything to do with the celestial creation, whether good angels or evil angels. It is more likely to have been the faculty of quick and accurate discernment of men's minds, their sincerity or insincerity, in matters concerning their conversion or profession of faith. Paul at Lystra perceived that the lame man "had faith to be healed"; {Acts 14:9} Peter in the case of Ananias and Sapphira, and of Simon the Sorcerer, manifested this power of discerning the inward thoughts and condition of mind. When John exhorted his readers to "try" (test, examine, scrutinise) the spirits, whether they be of God {1 John 4:1} he may have been thinking of this particular gift.

The "gift of tongues" is mentioned three times in the Book of Acts and again in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14. In each of the Acts instances it is clear that the expression indicates the instantly bestowed ability to speak a variety of foreign languages. This is evident from the account of the day of Pentecost, when the Apostles found themselves addressing the multitudes of pilgrims from overseas lands in their own languages. There is no doubt about this. *How hear we every man in our own tongue wherein we were born....we hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God.*" There was an imperative necessity for this miraculous gift. The Apostles were Galileans; their native tongue was Aramaic, the language of the peasantry and fishermen of Galilee. In the cities and by the upper classes generally, Greek was usual although in the main the people were bi-lingual. It is unlikely that any of the Apostles, while understanding and reading Greek, could converse fluently in that language or at least sufficiently so to speak publicly. Here at Jerusalem they were faced with people from places as far apart as Italy and Iraq, Roman Asia and Arabia, speaking at least twenty and probably more mutually incomprehensible tongues. It was the Divine intention that the message to be preached this day should be carried at once to all these lands by the returning pilgrims; that this intention was accomplished is evidenced by the almost immediate appearance of the Christian message in so many countries remote from Judea long before any Apostolic missionaries visited them. The facts of history demand that this message was indeed so preached at that Feast of Pentecost; the only way in which it could have been

done was by the miraculous impartation of ability to speak such languages. It has often been debated whether the speakers understood the words they were saying or were merely vehicles of the Spirit having no consciousness of the meaning of the sounds they uttered, but there is no reason to add mystery to plain statement. An ordinary man becomes multi-lingual by studying and practicing languages for a term perhaps of years; these men become multi-lingual in a moment of time, for the rest of their lives remaining able to understand and talk in those languages whenever the need arose. Although the majority of the listeners in Jerusalem at that time were Jews of the Dispersion, they would mostly only understand and speak the language of their native land; comparatively few would understand Aramaic even as many Jews returning to Israel today are quite ignorant of Hebrew.

This miracle was repeated twice, once at the conversion of Cornelius and his household, the first Gentile to be accepted into the faith {Acts 10:46} and again some fifteen years later upon the occasion of Paul's contact with the John the Baptist community at Ephesus, which led to the establishment of the Ephesus Church and the vigorous evangelization of Roman Asia spearheaded by the Church. {Acts 19:6} It is evident however that the gift was conferred upon others at other times - it was definitely possessed in the church at Corinth, but the extent and nature of the gift apart from the three historical instances in Acts can only be inferred by Paul's remarks in 1 Corinthians 14.

From the sentiments and admonitions of the chapter it would seem that the church at Corinth had been guilty of misuse of the gifts in their midst, or at least of placing undue stress upon those of lesser importance. In the main the Apostle seems concerned with correcting their attitude towards this particular gift, the gift of tongues. It should be noted that he is discussing the use of the gifts only in the church meeting, not in outside evangelism, and so naturally starts off by saying that prophecy, public expounding of the faith, is more important than tongues - the reason being, as he says later on in vs. 22, that *"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 that believe."* Whilst he does not forbid or disparage the use of tongues in the church meetings he does stress that unless someone is present who can "interpret" - translate - the exercise is a waste of time. So, he says in vs. 2, *"he that speaketh in a tongue"* (in the meeting) *"speaketh not unto men but unto God, for no man listens"* ("understandeth" here should be rendered hears or listens). Obviously in a meeting where all habitually spoke Greek an extempore address delivered in, say, Arabian, would attract no listeners; only God would understand it. That is Paul's meaning. Such a man only edifies himself (vs. 4) but the one who "prophesies" - expounds the faith - edifies the church. The whole of the chapter stresses this principle, that the gift of tongues should only be exercised in church meetings if one is available to translate what is said; Paul himself, master of more languages than any of them, would rather speak five words in a tongue his hearers' understood than ten thousand in one they did not.

Some reference might be made at this point to the impression prevalent among many that the "tongues" consisted, not of spoken languages, but of unintelligible, even incoherent and frenzied, utterances having no real significance to the hearers but a very real significance between the speaker and the Lord. The assumption here is that the one possessing this gift is transported into a condition of ecstasy in which he utters intensely, passionately, emotionally, sounds bearing no relation to the laws of ordinary language but in the power of which the believer feels himself in tune with his Lord and speaking the very language of heaven. It is easy to see how the hearers, if in sympathy

with him, would react, and perhaps the whole congregation be swept up in a wave of emotional feeling which might be interpreted by them as a profound religious experience. The almost invariable use of the term "unknown tongues" in the relevant passages has contributed to the idea, but in fact the word "unknown" was added by the ".V. translators in all cases and does not appear at all in the original text. The extent to which such an ecstatic outpouring of meaningless emotions could be made to impress non-believers as a "sign" of the truth of Christianity would be problematical in the First Century, and even more so today, and in any case is open to one very serious objection. In that day this kind of behavior was the hallmark of the priestesses and sometimes the priests of the pagan religions, and of the ministrants at the "oracles" who professed to foretell future events; it was also characteristic of demon obsession. The "damsel possessed with a spirit of Python" whom Paul cured at Philippi {Acts 16} would have habitually acted thus. It cannot be accepted that the reasoned and reasonable gospel of Jesus Christ had to be commended to the unconverted by practices reminiscent of an idol temple. It is true that there is scope in Christian worship for the expression of the emotions in varied ways often to the spiritual benefit of the participants; a great deal depends upon the cultural background or the racial origin of the believers concerned, but this is derived from the national temperament and is in no sense a gift of the Spirit. The gift of tongues in the First Century was given to facilitate the rapid propagation of the Gospel, throughout all nations and that was achieved, not by reproducing pagan ecstasies with which most people were already familiar anyway, but by making it possible for the first Galilean missionaries to speak to all people in their native tongue.

The final gift, the interpretation of tongues, was supplementary to this one. The word means translation. The function of the interpreter appears from 1 Corinthians 14 to have been chiefly in the church meetings and fits in well with Paul's insistence that although the real place for the gift of tongues was in evangelizing the foreign unconverted, there was good in using the gift at church meetings provided someone was available to translate what was said back into the "home" language for the benefit of the hearers. The whole chapter makes plain Paul's own feeling that whilst he did not disparage the use of "tongues" in the meetings of the church for worship and instruction, he did not feel it was to be specially commended.

To what extent did these gifts persist after the death of the Apostles and their contemporaries? This is a much debated point but when the purpose for which the gifts were bestowed is understood it should be clear that they would vanish when that purpose had been achieved. By the early part of the 2nd century Christian communities had been established in every part of the Roman world, and the written word- the Gospels and Epistles which now form our New Testament- was being circulated. The orderly development of Christian thought, experience and service could and did proceed without these special aids. The miraculous gifts of the Spirit were replaced by the guidance of the Spirit; the attainment of maturity in Christ is to be effected by the written word, the Scriptures, and the instruction of human instruments- apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers- raised up by the Lord for the purpose, as declared by Paul in Ephesians 4:11- 15. These are set for the perfecting of the saints, the work of the ministry, the edifying of the Church of Christ, he says. Writing to Timothy, he advised him to study the holy Scriptures, which were able to make him wise unto salvation, effective for doctrine and instruction in righteousness, and all that the Christian life demands. {1 Timothy 3:16- 17???} The whole purpose for which this present Age is set aside is the development in knowledge and experience of the body of consecrated believers, the Church of Christ, to be the Divine agents for the reconciliation to God of "whosoever will" among

mankind in the next. The qualifications for such honored position can only be attained by means of a life of gradual growth into the Divine likeness and of ever deepening understanding of the Divine Plan and Divine laws gained by continual consideration of, and mediation upon, the sacred Scriptures. There is therefore no reason to expect that any kind of miraculous power, intellectual or physical, is to be expected to aid the Christian's progress toward the "prize of the High Calling". {Philippians 3:14} Neither should we expect the manifestation of the outwardly spectacular>gifts' to bring the unconverted into the fold. The 20th century is not as was the First Century; there is now no need, as there was then, to present the credentials of the newly emergent Christian faith to a world that had never heard of it; we now have two thousand years of credentials with all the sayings and writings of godly men of all ages supplementing the Book which has gone to the world in its millions. Nevertheless it is claimed by many sincere Christians that the "gifts," especially those of miracles and tongues, have persisted throughout the Age and to the present day. This belief is based largely upon traditions of miracles at various times in church history which in most cases are gravely suspect. Most of the "Early Fathers" were emphatic that the "gifts" diminished after the death of the Apostles and had vanished by the middle of the 2nd century; a few such as Justin Martyr (A.D. 150) and Irenaeus (A.D. 178) allege that miracles did continue but without giving specific examples. The narratives of later centuries are unlike the miracles of Jesus and the Apostles, often puerile in the extreme, such as Bishop Germanus in A.D. 429 restoring a blind girl's sight by applying relics of the saints to her eyes. Augustine of Britain in A.D. 603 healing a blind man as proof that his own method of calculating the date of Easter was the correct one in God's sight, and St. Benedict in the 6th Century miraculously making whole his housekeeper's broken flour sieve because he wanted his dinner. That God can exert his mighty power to heal the sick or raise the dead, at any time in history including our own day, is undisputed; the real question is whether the miraculous cures so often reported by zealous men of God are due to Divine interposition, to auto-suggestion, to the influence of mind over matter- a subject which is now receiving a great deal of attention from scientific investigators- or to other unknown influences. And an

important factor in the answer to this question is that the mighty works and acts of healing by Jesus and his disciples were intended to foreshadow the work of the Millennial Age, the time of Christ's kingdom on earth, and when *"the eyes of the blind shall be opened...and the lame man leap as an hart"*. {# Isaiah 35} The coming Age, not this one, is the Age of miracles. The walk of the Church in this Age is by faith, not by sight, and the evidences of Divine acceptance are those which are discerned only by the Spirit-guided mind. In that fact, perhaps, resides the best reason for the gifts of the Spirit ceasing, as St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 said they would cease, back there in the days of the Apostles.

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