

The Miraculous Gifts

A follow-up to the Holy Spirit sermon series by Pastor Rickey Primrose

When asked about the right way to do theology, Saint Augustine once responded, “This way is first humility, second humility, third humility, and however often you should ask me I would say the same.” Augustine saw humility as a primary virtue in theological discussions, which is a helpful reminder as we approach a discussion regarding spiritual gifts. The spiritual gifts listed primarily in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, which have come to be known as the “miraculous gifts,” have been the topic of much Christian discussion, debate, and unfortunately, at times, division. It’s one of those sections in the Bible many Christians today struggle to understand, much less apply with any relevance to their own lives.

While every spiritual gift is by definition *supernatural* (i.e. a manifestation of the Holy Spirit operating in your life), only some gifts are rightly defined as *miraculous*. For example, the ability to speak in a language you previously did not know is not only divinely empowered, it is a miracle. The spiritual gifts that are generally accepted as miraculous would include the gifts of tongues, healing, the working of miracles, the ability to distinguish between spirits, and the interpretation of tongues. In addition, the gifts of prophecy and words of wisdom/knowledge can at times operate in a miraculous way.

Space does not allow for a full explanation of each of these gifts here. My goal here will be to help you understand the spectrum of views on these gifts and why I believe these gifts remain available today, as well as give a few words of encouragement and caution related to this conversation.

Before we launch into those topics, however, let’s make sure we understand what type of doctrine we are dealing with here. The conversation about miraculous gifts is not a first order doctrine. By *first order* I simply mean doctrines that are essential to the gospel and function as boundary markers between orthodox Christianity and heresy. A denial of a first order doctrine is a denial of the essence of the Christian faith itself (e.g. the divinity of Christ). This discussion is not a matter of orthodoxy versus heresy.

While aspects of this discussion do fall into the category of second order doctrines, generally these are third order discussions. *Second order* doctrines are doctrines that are not essential to the gospel, but are significant enough that disagreement would make partnership within the same local church very difficult (e.g. whether or not infants should be baptized). *Third order* doctrines are doctrines where Christians even within the same church may disagree and still function and live in harmony one with another.

It is important to maintain a spirit of humility and graciousness within this conversation. We should avoid the danger of “doctrinal sectarianism,” which says that if you do not believe exactly like me on every issue, we cannot partner or learn from one another. This mindset produces unnecessary division within the body of Christ. We must be as zealous to maintain the unity of the body as we are to defend our position. We should practice careful listening, a willingness to learn, and openness to receiving new information or adjusting our perspective. The old adage of John Wesley is helpful: “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity.”

The Spectrum of Views

Cessationism

Cessationism is the belief that the miraculous gifts ceased when the Bible was completed in the first century or with the close of the apostolic age. These gifts would therefore no longer be available today. Cessationists vary to some degree in their openness to the possibility of miraculous gifts today. *Hard Cessationism* believes the Bible explicitly teaches that the miraculous gifts would stop (appealing to 1 Corinthians 13:10, for example) and therefore are not open to the possibility of miraculous gifts today.

Soft Cessationism, on the other hand, does not claim there is firm biblical support that the miraculous gifts would definitely cease. However, a soft cessationist would say the Bible gives no indication that the miraculous gifts would be normative throughout the church age and that Christians should feel no responsibility to pursue these gifts today. Further, church history would suggest that these gifts are, to a large degree, no longer operative in the church today. Given the way these gifts are abused in certain modern churches and movements, Christians should exercise a high degree of caution in regard to these gifts, even if remaining open theoretically to the possibility that they have not ceased altogether.

It should be noted that Cessationism does affirm that God continues to do miraculous activity today such as miraculous healing. Most cessationists, however, believe the miraculous gifts served a specific purpose in the first century (usually defined as confirming the apostolic message) and therefore are no longer needed in the church today.

Continuationism

This view believes that not only is there no biblical support that the miraculous gifts ceased, it actually teaches that they will not cease until Christ returns.

Therefore, according to Continuationism, the miraculous gifts will continue throughout the church age.

Furthermore, this view believes the Bible exhorts Christians to “earnestly desire” the gifts that build up the church, specifically the gift of prophecy (1 Cor. 12:31, 14:1, 12-13, 39). If the miraculous gifts are manifested in the corporate gathering, Continuationism would say that biblical order should always be maintained according to the precepts laid out especially in 1 Corinthians 12-14.

Pentecostalism

The primary theological difference between this view and Continuationism is that Pentecostalism typically teaches the *doctrine of subsequence*. This doctrine says that baptism of the Holy Spirit occurs subsequent to conversion and is usually evidenced by speaking in tongues. Therefore, a Christian has not experienced the baptism of the Holy Spirit unless they have spoken in tongues.

Why I Believe The Miraculous Gifts Are Still Available

There are at least three major reasons I affirm Continuationism. These beliefs are my own and do not necessarily represent the views of all other Pastors at MacArthur Blvd.

1. **What the Bible does not say:** The Bible simply does not teach that *any* of the spiritual gifts will cease. This is not an argument from silence because the Bible is anything but silent on these gifts. The Bible indicates that miraculous gifts were at least somewhat widespread throughout the early church. Christians in Rome (Rom. 12), Corinth (1 Cor. 12-14), Samaria (Acts 8), Caesarea (Acts 10), Ephesus (Acts 19), Thessalonica (1 Thess. 5), and Galatia (Gal. 3) all experienced the miraculous gifts. The most common passage to which cessationists appeal for biblical support that the miraculous gifts have ceased is 1 Corinthians 13:8-12, which, as I'll attempt to demonstrate in the next point, actually teaches the opposite.
2. **What the Bible does say:** Not only does the Bible not teach that the miraculous gifts will cease, it actually teaches that they will continue until the return of Christ. Three passages of Scripture lead me to this conclusion:

1 Corinthians 13:8-12: 8 Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. **9** For we know in part and we prophesy in part, **10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. 11** When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. **12** For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. (Emphasis added)

This passage explicitly states that the gifts of tongues and prophecy will not “cease” or “pass away” until “the perfect comes.” “The perfect” is best interpreted as the Second Coming of Christ (rather than the completion of the Bible) given what Paul says will happen when this occurs in verse 12: We will see “face to face” and we will “know fully.” We will neither see Christ face to face nor have full knowledge prior to the Second Coming.

Ephesians 4:7-13: *7 But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. 8 Therefore it says, “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.” 9 (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? 10 He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) 11 And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ...* (Emphasis added)

This passage also explicitly tells us the duration of the gifts; they will be required “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God... to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” Therefore, the purpose for which the gifts were given, the edification of the church, will not be completed until Christ returns.

1 Corinthians 1:4-8: *4 I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, 5 that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— 6 even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— 7 so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, 8 who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.* (Emphasis added)

While this third passage is not as explicit as the previous two, it nevertheless implies that all the spiritual gifts will be active up until the “revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

I conclude from these texts that the Bible teaches all the spiritual gifts will continue until the return of Christ.

3. **The nature of the kingdom age:** The Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit indwelling and manifesting gifts in all of God’s people will characterize the age of the kingdom (not merely the age of the apostles). When the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the believers at Pentecost, which was manifested in that instance by the gift of tongues, Peter quotes the prophet Joel in order to explain to the crowd what was happening. Acts 2:16-18 contains Peter’s explanation:

16 *But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: 17 “And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; 18 even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.”*

According to Joel's prophecy, the "last days" will be marked by the Spirit of God being poured out on "all flesh" as opposed to only a few leaders within the people of God. This outpouring of the Spirit will be manifested, in some cases, by miraculous gifts (Joel specifically mentions the gift of prophecy). Peter applies Joel's prophecy to what is happening at Pentecost (where the miraculous gift of tongues was being manifested). Thus, the dawn of the New Testament church marks the inauguration of the "last days." As long as we are living in the "last days," which is the entire church age, we should expect to see demonstrations of God's Spirit being poured out on all believers. This does not mean that every Christian or individual church will demonstrate every gift; it does, however, leave us with the expectation that spiritual gifts, including the miraculous gifts, will be operative throughout the church age.

To build upon this point, consider the theology of the kingdom of God in the Bible. In Luke 7, John the Baptist sends messengers to ask if Jesus was "the one." John was asking if Jesus was in fact the coming Messiah, the anointed King of Israel, whom the Old Testament prophesied would come to establish His kingdom on earth. To answer John's question, it says that Jesus, "*healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight*" (vs. 21). He then tells the messengers to go back and tell John what they saw and quoted from the prophet Isaiah who said that in the day the Messiah comes, miraculous occurrences would be seen: "*the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them*" (vs. 22). Throughout His ministry, Jesus both declared and displayed the kingdom of God.

When the kingdom of God comes, the effects of the curse are reversed. We know that when God's kingdom comes in its fullness at the end of time, the entire created order will be physically, relational, and spiritually restored and made whole: "*He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away*" (Rev. 21:4). However, the New Testament says that there is a sense in which the kingdom of God has come already, in an inaugurated manner, with Christ's first coming. As a result, in the church age, we see manifestations of God's kingdom through physical, relational, and spiritual restoration as a foretaste of the future kingdom of God. Healing (physical and spiritual) and deliverance from demonic oppression are all demonstrations of God's kingdom coming to earth.

Jesus commanded His disciples to pray: "Your kingdom come" (Luke 11:2). Praying for God's kingdom to come is not only a prayer that God would quickly usher in His 'end of time' kingdom, but also for God's kingdom to come as a foretaste today—that people would be redeemed from sin,

delivered from demonic oppression, restored to a right relationship with God and each other, and even be made physically whole.

Thus, when certain gifts of the Spirit are manifested, like the gift of healing, it is a demonstration of the kingdom of God breaking into the present era. As Christians we should long to see the kingdom come and are commanded to pray for God's kingdom to come. The miraculous gifts are among the signs that the kingdom of God has come.

Final Encouragements and Cautions

While I'm sure I have not answered all the questions you probably have about the miraculous gifts, I do want to leave you with some final words of encouragement and caution about this topic.

Be careful not to allow fear dictate your belief or ministry practice.

Whether it is the fear of emotionalism, the unfamiliar, rejection, accusation, or of releasing control, fear should never be in the driver's seat of faith formation. This is not to suggest that those who deny Continuationism always do so out of fear. Nevertheless, the label "charismatic" has become such a negative byword in some circles today, particularly Baptist circles, that there is always the temptation to allow the fear of receiving this label to control our views.

We should discern what the Bible actually says about the spiritual gifts and surrender ourselves accordingly. We must not fall prey to the eleventh commandment of evangelicalism: "Thou shalt not do at all what others do poorly." We should strive to align ourselves under the word of God, seek to be filled with the Spirit of God, and do all things to exalt the Son of God.

Seek the Spirit, not the spectacular.

We are not seeking spectacular experiences but we are seeking all that the Spirit has for our church. The only way we will accomplish our mission and be built up into mature manhood as a church is if we receive whatever spiritual gifts the Holy Spirit chooses to manifest in our church. If we approach church life and missional engagement resisting certain gifts or manifestations of the Spirit, it could potentially be detrimental to the health of our church and to our effectiveness in the mission of God.

That said, the Holy Spirit is sovereign. "The wind blows where it wishes..." (John 3:8a). The Spirit may sovereignly choose not to manifest certain gifts within MacArthur Blvd. He is free to gift us according to His sovereign will, and He is wise to know what spiritual gifts are needed within our body so that we would be healthy and fruitful in ministry. The gift of tongues, for example, does not

currently operate in the corporate gatherings of our church. We do not see this reality as a spiritual deficiency but rather we trust the Spirit's sovereign will. Rather than pursuing specific or spectacular experiences, we should simply pursue the person and work of the Spirit.

We should seek biblical order in our gatherings according to the instructions of Scripture so that the focus remains on Christ.

I use the phrase "*biblical* order" because biblical order does not preclude vibrant expression in worship such as loud singing, clapping and dancing. Nevertheless, we should acknowledge that God is a God of order, not chaos. If God shows up, it may result in many things, but chaos is not one of them. Scripture provides several guidelines for exercising spiritual gifts in the corporate gathering, which we cannot ignore. If our primary aim is to seek the Spirit and to exalt Christ, then the result will be orderly worship where the Son of God is exalted, the presence of God is enjoyed, and the kingdom of God is advanced.

We should not divide over differing views on the spiritual gifts.

I will conclude in the same way I began—there is room in this conversation for brothers and sisters in Christ to disagree and yet maintain deep affection and gospel partnership with one another. These are difficult questions. Even after studying this topic over the course of several years, there are many questions I still do not know the answer to and probably will not know this side of Heaven. As you engage in this discussion, be humble, and be as passionate about the unity of the body as you are about defending your position. It is pride that insists that everybody agree with you on every issue. We are made one by the gospel of Jesus Christ not by uniformity on every question of the Christian faith. Submit to God's word; depend on God's Spirit, and be of one heart and mind to the glory of God.