

What About Charismatic Gifts Today?

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1. Question: Does the Spirit Still Give Miracle-Gifts?

WE refer to "charismatic gifts" because the Apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 12, speaks of the charismata (Greek, plural of charisma, meaning a gift [freely and graciously given], a favor bestowed, derived from the Greek word charis, "grace") given by the Holy Spirit. Some of these charismata are listed by Paul in 1 Cor.12:8-10 and 28-30. These are miracle-gifts; that is, they are not naturally possessed by any normal human being apart from the Spirit's giving them. "Charismatic" Christians (and Pentecostals, the earlier variety) claim that they receive and use the charismatic gifts. Other Christians believe that the Holy Spirit stopped giving miracle-gifts after the apostles and that modern "charismatics" are wrong (and what they claim to be gifts from God are psychological in origin, or demonic in some cases, or blatantly phony in others).

Obviously when Paul was writing to the Corinthians the Spirit was giving these gifts. Is there any biblical reason to believe He stopped giving those gifts and has not started again in our century?

2. Church History

Historically, there can be no question that the charismatic gifts passed out of the life of the church after the age of the apostles. One group in the ancient church who claimed to have the gifts were heretical (the Montanists). From time to time, down the centuries, groups here and there came along claiming power to prophesy and work miracles - all of them promoting false, unbiblical teachings of one sort or another. The modern Pentecostal movement (which gave birth to the Charismatic movement) began in the last century among Arminian perfectionists (off-shoots of Methodist revivalism), another heretical group. According to our Lord (John 14:17, 15:26, 16:13), the Holy Spirit is the "Spirit of truth"; so it seems odd that the people through whom He favored the world with the return of miracle-gifts would be people who teach doctrines contrary to the Bible which He inspired as God's Word of truth.

We may not, however, just point to the heresies of Pentecostals and charismatics. We need to grasp the historical nature of God's unfolding plan of salvation and of the Bible which reveals it, in order to see the place of the true charismata and understand why they are no longer given to the church.

3. The Miracle-Gifts in the History of Redemption: Christ and the Spirit

The Bible and the salvation it proclaims is fundamentally historical. God did not do all that had to be done to make himself known and to save sinners when he spoke to Adam or to Noah or to Abraham, or even to Moses and the later prophets. God spoke to each of these and he acted mightily in and through them, each time adding to what had gone before and preparing for the what was coming: the full revelation of Himself and the full accomplishment of salvation in the coming and work of Jesus Christ, God the Son who came from heaven to earth to redeem us from our sins and bring us to know God. The Bible is a progressive revelation culminating in Jesus Christ.

The coming of Christ, God's Son, from heaven fulfills the promises, types and foreshadowings of all those centuries of preparation that went before. He is what all the Law and the Prophets were pointing forward to. "God, after he spoke to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in [the] Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom also he made the world, who is the radiance of his glory and the exact representation of his nature, who upholds all things by the word of his power ..." (Heb.1:1-3). The Son has come in all his greatness and he has spoken. What could be greater or surpass that? All that we sinners need for our salvation we find in Christ. After he brings us to new life in Christ, all that we need to know and do God's will we receive from Christ. Paul makes this same point in Colossians, for example, "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. For in him all the fulness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in him you have been made complete ..." (2:8-10).

The gift of the Holy Spirit (not the "gifts", referring to many gifts, but the one gift which is the Spirit working and dwelling in saved people) is not something in addition to Christ. It's not that God worked for centuries in the age of types and shadows, then the Son came as Jesus and did his atoning work, and now the Spirit occupies the center stage in God's work. When Christ finished his work on earth and ascended into heaven to be enthroned at the Father's right hand, He came to his church in the gift of His Spirit. In John 14, Jesus said to his disciples, "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you" (v.18) ... "In that day you shall know that I am in My Father and you in Me, and I in you" (v.20) -- all of this by the giving of the Holy Spirit: "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever, the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you" (vv.16,17). In John 16, our Lord says that "when He, the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but

whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. He shall glorify Me; for He shall take of Mine and shall disclose it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said, that He [the Spirit] takes of Mine and will disclose it to you" (vv.13-15).

While on earth, Jesus, though God, was filled by the Spirit as a man, beginning at his baptism. The Spirit led and empowered him through all his earthly ministry. The Father raised his Son from the dead by the power of the Spirit (Rom.8:11), and now from heaven Christ has poured out the Holy Spirit on His church (Acts 2:33). The Bible over and over speaks of believers being "in Christ" and of Christ dwelling in us; this is by the Spirit. "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col.1:27) is the Spirit dwelling in you (Rom.8:9f), uniting you to Christ who is in heaven.

The book of Acts focuses on the human ministry of the apostles; but Luke begins his history with these words: "The former treatise, O Theophilus, I wrote concerning all that Jesus began to do and to teach, until the day that he was taken up ..." (1:1,2). Acts is the record of what Jesus has continued to do and teach from heaven by the Holy Spirit.

The point of all of this is that no separation can be made between Christ and the Spirit in the life of Christians and the church. Sometimes we are told, "You believed in Jesus to be saved; now you need to go further and receive the Spirit." The impression is given (1) that, while being saved by believing in Jesus is necessary if you want to go to heaven, the really great experiences of the Christian life come after you get the Spirit, and (2) that getting the Spirit is different and later than receiving Christ in salvation. People who believe this speak of the baptism of the Spirit as a "second blessing" or second work of grace which moves Christians from just being saved to really knowing and living in the power of God. But Paul refutes this heresy when he says, "By one Spirit we were ALL baptized into one body" (1 Cor.12:13). There is no "elite" group of super-Christians or "spiritual" Christians who have been baptized by the Spirit, while others are weak and ordinary. Everyone who is truly a Christian ("born again by the Spirit" - John 3:5-8, Titus 3:5) has been baptized by the Spirit ("all") and is indwelt, led and empowered by the Spirit (Rom.8:9-14,5).

It is true that in the book of Acts we find some groups of people who did receive the baptism of the Spirit (1:4,5) after they believed in Christ. Jesus' own disciples believed in Him and followed him by God's saving power (Jesus to Peter, "Flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven," Matt.16:17, cf.11:25-27), before they were baptized by the Spirit on Pentecost (Acts 2). The baptism of the Spirit is one of the great new covenant gifts that Old Testament saints looked forward to by promise (e.g. Isaiah 44:3f, Ezek.36:25-27). But the indwelling Spirit was not to be given until after Jesus finished his atoning work and rose from the dead (John 7:37-39). To his disciples before his death

and resurrection, Jesus said of the Holy Spirit, "you know Him because He is with you; He shall be in you" (John 14:17). Jesus' disciples were on a bridge between two great ages. They got on the bridge in the Old Covenant era, believing in Jesus by the power of the Spirit who did not yet dwell in them in Pentecostal fullness. On the day of Pentecost they fully crossed into the New Covenant era by the baptism of the Spirit. Other groups crossed over that bridge in two stages also: the Samaritans (Acts 8:12-17), half-Jewish heretics despised by all Jews but prepared by Christ himself to hear the gospel (John 4:39-42), and the disciples of John the Baptist met by Paul in Acts 19:1-6. In the case of the former, God delayed their reception of the Spirit with visible signs until the apostles came and laid hands on them, and in the case of the latter, they were "believers" through John's ministry ("Behold, the Lamb of God") who had not yet heard the full story of Christ's saving work, resurrection and ascension, and giving of the Spirit on Pentecost. So they, too, crossed over the bridge from Old Covenant to New Covenant in two steps. But with the old age gone forever and the new age fully here, the work of the Spirit that brings lost sinners from death in sin and unbelief to life and faith IS the baptism of the Spirit. Every born-again believer in Christ has all of Christ and all of the Holy Spirit.

What about the charismatic gifts of the Spirit?

4. The Miracle-Gifts in the History of Redemption: Christ and His Apostles

While our Lord was on earth, from his baptism by the Spirit until His sacrifice on the cross, His work consisted of two things, primarily: preaching and miracles. His miracles are called, by John, "signs" (John 2:11, 20:30,31). This is very significant. We might like a situation where we can have miracles to suit us, like turning on the TV when we wish to be entertained, or being able to see a perfect doctor (for free!) who cures us whenever we need it, or getting manna from heaven (checks in the mail) whenever we need money. But Jesus' miracles were first of all about him. They were signs given by God the Father in the power of the Spirit pointing to Jesus, and saying to all who had eyes to see it: "This is My beloved Son, listen to Him". A "sign" is not a thing in itself. When my wife was about to deliver our first daughter, we did not drive to the hospital sign and wait, we followed the hospital sign's pointer to the hospital itself. The miracle-signs were not the point; they were pointers to Jesus. They said, He is the One who has come from heaven to give living water and living bread and life itself: He is the resurrection and the life. Believe in Him and live. Jesus spoke this way of his miracles: "The works that I do, bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me. And the Father who sent Me, He has borne witness of Me." (John 5:37,38) This is how he answered the disciples of John the Baptist, who came from the Baptist in prison to ask Jesus, "Are you [really] the Expected One, or shall we look for another?" Jesus, before the eyes of those messengers, did miracles fulfilling God's promises concerning the Messiah in Isaiah (Matt.11:2-6 with cross references). The greatest miracle of all was the

"sign of Jonah": our Lord's resurrection from the dead, of which His apostles were eye-witnesses.

While on earth our Lord wrote no books, never left the area of Palestine, and organized no formal institutions. He came to save His people from their sin by dying on the cross and rising again. Everything was focused on that great act of salvation for sinners. But He did look beyond His ascension back to heaven and make preparation for the future. He said, "I will build My church" (Matt.16:18). From among the larger group of followers (disciples), he chose 12 in particular "whom he names apostles" (Luke 6:13, meaning "sent-ones", i.e., ambassadors), "that they might be with him" (Mk.3:14). He trained them to proclaim him after his ascension; he gave them the "Great Commission." And on Pentecost he empowered them with his Holy Spirit. And to them in particular he promised a special ministry of the Spirit that was distinctly theirs: "He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you" (John 14:25), and "He will bear witness of Me, and you will bear witness also, because you have been with Me from the beginning" (15:26f). Only the apostles were with Jesus from the beginning and had first-hand experience of his ministry to be brought to their remembrance. This is why, when it came time to replace Judas with another apostle, Peter said the replacement must be one had been with them from the beginning (Acts 1:21,22). Paul, the "thirteenth apostle" was dealt with in a special way: personally confronted by the risen Christ so as to be also an eye-witness of the resurrection (Acts 9:3-6), and personally taught by Christ so that his message was truly from Christ and not from men (Galatians 1:1,9-12, 1 Corinthians 15:8-10). The role of the Apostles was unique; they were the personal spokesmen for the risen Messiah, speaking and acting on earth for him enthroned in heaven who, through them, was laying the foundation for the building of his church (Ephesians 2:20, Matt.16:18).

Just as the Father certified the authority of Jesus as His Son by the miracles He did in the power of the Holy Spirit, so Christ certified that the apostles were His personal representatives by the miracles the Spirit enabled them to do in Christ's name. Jesus had promised them a special ministry of the Spirit. And after Pentecost the preaching of the apostles was accompanied by the miracle-working, showing that in them and through them Jesus was continuing His work. This is how Hebrews puts it: God's great salvation "was first spoken through the Lord and then confirmed by those who heard [apostles], God also bearing witness with them, by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will" (2:3,4).

In Acts we find others than apostles doing miracles. But the pattern in Acts is that these others received this power of the Spirit through the laying on of the hands of the apostles: Acts 8:13-18, 19:1-7. The church in Corinth, established through the ministry of

the Apostle Paul, received an abundance of these gifts of the Spirit. Later, when false teachers came to Corinth and attacked Paul (behind his back) in order to discredit his teaching, Paul had to defend himself in order to defend the true gospel. Part of his defense was to point to the spiritual gifts abounding in the Corinthian church (with a touch of sarcasm): "I have become foolish; you yourselves compelled me. Actually I should have been commended by you, for in no respect was I inferior to the most eminent apostles, even though I am a nobody. The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles. For in what respect were you treated as inferior to the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not become a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!" (2 Cor.12:11-13).

So bound up with the apostles are the miracle-gifts of the Spirit that Paul speaks of them as "the signs of a true apostle". Their presence in the church in Corinth is God's attestation that a true spokesman for Jesus Christ had preached to them and laid hands upon them.

The role of the apostles, we have already said, was historically unique. The Great Commission was first given to them, and they made a good start! Yet they did not finish the task which the church still carries on. Theirs was the vital and unrepeatable task of laying the foundation for the church to be built in all the coming centuries. "You have been built upon the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord ..." (Eph.2:20ff).

"The foundation of the apostles and prophets [associated with the apostles in giving revelation from Christ to His church]" is particularly the truth they received from God and proclaimed and taught (Romans 1:1-5, Eph.3:1-10). Churches today are "apostolic" to the extent that they are true to the message of the apostles (Gal.1:6-9). The Apostles and prophets preached the gospel and taught the church; and, led by the Spirit, they wrote down God's Word in the New Testament scriptures (2 Pet.1:20f, 3:15f). With the completion of the Bible and the passing away of the apostles, the foundation-era of the church came to an end, and with it the need for "signs of true apostles". The apostles did not add their words to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The apostles words were the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. We know Christ only through the gospel accounts, the letters, Acts, and Revelation, written down for us by the apostles and prophets. There is no greater revelation from God to add to His revelation in His Son. This is why the Bible ends with a warning (a curse!) from God not to add to or take from "this book", specifically referring to Revelation, but really encompassing the whole Bible.

5. Christ and the Spirit Still Work: Salvation and Sanctification by the Ordinary Means of Grace

The Holy Spirit still works! The risen Christ still works! Christ by the Spirit uses His Word to convert and save lost sinners (Jn.1:18, 1 Pet.1:23-25). The miracle-gifts, the charismata, attested the authority of the apostles to speak for Christ. But they are not signs of regeneration and saving faith. In the Old Testament God, the Spirit, gifted certain men and used them miraculously, not to show

they were saved personally but to carry forward His saving work for His people as a whole. King Saul provides a tragic yet amusing illustration of this. In open rebellion against the Lord and pursuing David to kill him, Saul was overwhelmed by the Spirit of God and joined a group of prophets led by Samuel in prophesying all day and night, thereby showing who was the True King. Saul was no saved man, yet the people said truly, "Is Saul among the prophets!" (1 Sam.19:23f). In the New Testament, our Lord warns, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness'" (Matthew 7:21-23).

God the Spirit does not need miracles to convince people of the truth of the gospel and bring them to saving faith. To Thomas, when he had seen and touched the wounds of our risen Savior and confessed, "My Lord and My God!", Jesus then said, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed" (John 20:28,29). His verbs are in the past tense, but He is speaking of us. The Spirit by the Word brings dead sinners to life and faith. That is the greatest of miracles.

The demonstration of the Spirit which we must seek and pray for is not the miracle-working charismata, but the regenerating and sanctifying work of the Spirit. Repentance for sin and faith in Christ are the saving gifts of God by the Spirit. Changed lives, no longer lived under the rule of sin in rebellion against God but now lived in the power of the Spirit in obedience to the Lord, demonstrate the saving and sanctifying presence and work of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:5-14). The "fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Galatians 5:22f).

The charisma of prophecy (the gift to receive a message directly from God the Spirit) may not be in the church today. But Christ by the Spirit enables men to understand and teach His Word, and the Spirit uses their preaching to convert unbelievers (1 Cor.1:18-25) and build and sanctify His church (Eph.4:11,12, 5:26). The charisma of healing (the gift given to a person enabling him to command healing, e.g., Acts 3:6,7, 5:15,16, etc.) may no longer be given in the church. But God still hears prayer and often answers in powerful ways we call "miracle" (James 5:14-16). God uses the "ordinary" means of grace (the Word and prayer) to do His amazing works.

Like the whole secular entertainment industry, the mania for the miraculous among "charismatics" has the effect of making God's promised means of grace look dull and uninteresting to many Christians. There is a great danger in this. If we despise what God does use in preference for dramatic "ministries" carried on and hyped up by the will and energy of man, we will get man-made "blessings" instead of God's real work. Paul warns that when the Man of Lawlessness is revealed, before the second coming of Christ, his coming will be "in accord with the activity of

Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved" (2 Thess.2:9,10). Churches today are being swept by a passion for experience and excitement that has more to do with dynamic personalities and hi-amp music than the careful and sound preaching and teaching of the Bible. We are setting ourselves up to crave the phony miracles the devil can give, but we won't recognize the deception because we are more and more ignoring the Word of God that is His light to our path. God grant us a passion to honor Christ in obedience to His Word, a love for His truth, a willingness to hear and study the Bible, and a hunger to be more and more like Christ in the fruit of the Holy Spirit.



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