

“The Seeking, But Cautious Approach” to Spiritual Gifts A Position Paper

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In the early church, after conversion and the laying on of the apostles hands, a significant number of Christians in the Bible were able to exercise miraculous spiritual gifts, such as speaking in foreign tongues, interpreting tongues, healing, and predicting the future (1 Corinthians 12–14). These miraculous gifts helped establish and confirm the Christian faith. When unbelievers saw miraculous healings, or heard some suddenly speak about the things of God in a foreign language which they had not previously known, it drew attention to the validity of the Christian message. Signs and wonders of this type caused many to become Christians. Yet once Christianity was established and the apostles died out, these types of gifts became less and less common, as historical research confirms (Hebrews 2:3-4).¹

In the Bible there was also a clear link between these miraculous gifts, the unique first century ministry of the apostles and those people upon which the apostles laid their hands (Romans 15:15-19; 2 Corinthians 12:12).² Because of this linkage, many believe that these gifts were not given to the church for all time – they were just given to Christians in the first century.³ There is currently a hot debate about this among Christians because others believe that the miraculous gifts are for the church of today and are available.⁴

Factually, as stated above, miraculous gifts have been uncommon in the ancient, pre-modern world and throughout history in mainstream Christianity, which has emphasized objective biblical doctrine.⁵ And too often claims about miraculous gifts have been proven to be false and too often they have been associated with heresy.

But there is no Biblical basis by which we can rule them out or categorically deny the experience of these gifts as being available in our day.⁶ Countless Christians claim to be richly blessed by them – if not through public experience, through private personal prayer time. And contrary to what some say, there is nothing in the Bible that says God will stop giving people these miraculous abilities.⁷ We must be careful not to restrict God or lack faith in his miraculous abilities. On the contrary, we need to seek all that God is willing to give us when it comes to experiences of God’s Spirit.

Yet again, given what has been learned in history and from the abuses in the Pentecostal, Charismatic, or Third Wave movements in our day, it is also wise to be cautious in these matters.⁸ Too many people attribute things to God that may not be from God. We want to be seeking, but cautious and carefully examine all practices in the light of what the Bible teaches. We want to make sure it is truly God’s Spirit enabling us to speak in tongues, prophecy, and the like, not demons and not our own minds.

The following four points summarize a “Seeking, but Cautious” approach to this topic which encourages us to seek God, to be objective, grounded in the lessons of history, and open, all at the same time.⁹

1. *Seek God and be open to Him moving in unique ways.* Christians should not just seek God with a rational and cognitive approach, but with a desire to experience his fullness in whatever personal levels of the Spirit that exist. We should seek to be close to God in all things. Some Christians have denied the emotional and intuitive parts of the Christian life. We need all that God wants to give us, and as we seek him, we should be open to how he might be present with us to help us in fresh ways, while maintaining a balance with biblical and rational thinking.¹⁰

2. *A Christ-centered and Christ-like life - not speaking in tongues - is the strongest validation of the Holy Spirit in a person's life.* The Bible makes it clear that character and sacrificial love are the clearest validations of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 13:1-4; 2 Corinthians 3:16-17; Galatians 5:16-25). All other experiential manifestations of the Spirit – including the miraculous ability to speak in tongues, prophecy, and healing - should be understood as peripheral issues, compared to how we trust Christ, live, and love in our daily lives (Matthew 7:21-23).

3. *Test everything by the objective teachings of the Bible and rational thought.* The study of miraculous gifts should be done with the leaders of a local congregation. In this way the leaders can ensure that there can be a careful examination of the scriptural basis of all things (2 Timothy 3:16-17). For example, according to Biblical teaching, if someone believes he or she can speak in tongues, it should not be allowed in a church setting unless there is an interpreter (1 Corinthians 14: 27-28). No one should be coaxed and explicitly coached to “try to speak in tongues” because such a practice is contrary to the examples and Spirit of the New Testament. The initial experience of tongues, for people in the Bible, was a surprising, unexpected thing (Acts 2:1-12; Acts 8; Acts 19). And prophecy is to be tested and evaluated by scripture and Christian leaders before being accepted (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21; 1 John 4:1; and 1 Corinthians 14: 29). Consequently, people should be allow personal freedom in their homes or private setting, but in the meetings of the church, leaders should insist upon Biblical criteria.

4. *Pursue God from and for your heart.* We must encourage all Christians to pursue a deep, personal, and abiding intimacy with God. Our yearning should be for God's presence and the habits of prayer, Bible study, fasting, meditation, etc., We should seek to be in touch with God through his Holy Spirit on a daily basis.

A good way to think about miraculous gifts, then, is to pursue the fullness of the spiritual life and be open to all that the Spirit of God is doing, while being grounded in scripture, history, and critical evaluation. This approach does not answer every question. On the one hand it subjects all spiritual experiences to a careful evaluation – and yet, on the other hand, it encourages us to be open to and seek surprising new movements of God in our lives every day. The “Seeking, But Cautious Approach” seeks to avoid extremes.

¹ There is a debate about the exact details on this point, but my own historical investigation of primary sources (especially in the first four centuries) has convinced me that the belief and the practice of miraculous gifts is rare after the apostles die, but that there are some attestations on the frontiers of the faith. It is important to note, however, that this is not the case when it comes to God's answer to prayer and exorcism – which are both very prominent features in early post-apostolic Christianity. For the two sides of the debate, see John MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1992) and Ronald Kydd, *Charismatic Gifts in the Early Church* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1984).

² D.A. Carson, "The Purpose of Signs and Wonders in the New Testament," in *Power Religion*, edited by Michael Scott Horton (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), pp. 89 -118.

³ In addition to the previous reference to John MacArthur, see Anthony Hoekema, *What About Tongue-Speaking?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1966), and Thomas R. Edgar, "The Cessation of the Sign Gifts," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (Oct.–Dec., 1988): 371–386. For more technical work in this regard consult John F. Walvoord, "The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (April–June, 1986): 109–122; and, Ken L. Sarles, "An Appraisal of the Signs and Wonders Movement," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (Jan. – Mar., 1988): 57–82.

⁴ See Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1993) and Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1988).

⁵ See Fredrick Dale Bruner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit*.

⁶ Four different approaches to this issue are presented in a book edited by Wayne Grudem, *Are Miraculous Gifts For Today?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996).

⁷ Carroll D. Osborn, "That Which Is Perfect," *Abilene Christian College Lectures* (1978).

⁸ Max Turner presents the most cogent case I have found for the present miraculous ministry of the Holy Spirit. He does it very sensibly, but there are still major problems with it all, see *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts* (1997).

⁹ The best detailed summary of the position described here is by Robert Saucy, "Open, But Cautious" in Wayne Grudem, *Are Miraculous Gifts For Today?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996).

¹⁰ Psychologist James Dobson has an especially good chapter on this in his book, *Emotions: Can You Trust Them?* The chapter is entitled, "Interpretation of Impressions" (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1980).