



A Bible Study on Spiritual Gifts
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All Scripture quotations are taken from The New International Version (NIV).



Lesson 9: What are the Sign Gifts?

The last four spiritual gifts to be considered in this study are called the sign gifts - tongues, interpretation of tongues, healing, and miracles. These gifts are commonly associated with what today is called the Charismatic Movement.

In looking at the sign gifts one dare not forget that they are four in a long list of gifts (parts of the body). What has been said in general about the other gifts applies to these gifts. It is extremely important to remember, for example, that these gifts are given to believers for use in the body of Christ, the Church.

Spend some time reading about the gift of tongues and interpretation of tongues as Paul deals with them in 1 Corinthians 14.

Here are the definitions of these four sign gifts:

TONGUES (in the 1 Corinthians 12 gift lists)

The special attribute given by the Holy Spirit to certain members of the body of Christ (church) to speak to God in a language they have never learned and, or to receive and communicate an immediate message of God to His People through a divinely-anointed utterance in a language they have never learned.

INTERPRETATION OF TONGUES (in the 1 Corinthians 12 gift lists)

The special attribute given by the Holy Spirit to certain members of the body of Christ (church) to make known in the vernacular the message of one who speaks in tongues.

HEALING (in the 1 Corinthians 12 gift lists)

The special attribute given by the Holy Spirit to certain members of the body of Christ (church) to serve as human intermediaries through whom it pleases God to cure illness and restore health apart from the use of natural means.

MIRACLES (in the 1 Corinthians 12 gift lists)

The special attribute given by the Holy Spirit to certain members of the body of Christ (church) to serve as human intermediaries through whom it pleases God to perform powerful acts that are perceived by observers to have altered the ordinary course of nature.

While there are literally hundreds of books devoting themselves to the study of the sign gifts, two booklets prepared by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod provide valuable information on these gifts from a Lutheran perspective. The following quotes help the student understand these spiritual gifts.

1. St. Paul, who himself possessed the gift of tongues (I Cor. 14:18), believed that it could be an authentic gift of the Spirit. He did not forbid its use –for self-edification, or, when interpreted, for the edification of others (I Cor. 14:5, 39). However, it should be carefully noted that the apostle in 1 Corinthians 12 to 14 is not discussing the gift of tongues for the purpose of encouraging or assisting the Corinthians in acquiring this gift. His purpose is rather to point out dangers and abuses that have resulted from its misuse and to encourage the use of other spiritual gifts, especially prophecy.
2. Tongues-speaking can be useful in the church only if it is supplemented with the gift of interpretation (vs. 5), for only then will it edify the church. Without interpretation no one will know what is being said, and it will be as if one speaks into the air (vs. 9). Therefore he who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret in order to edify (vs. 13). Paul thanks God that he has spoken in tongues more than all of them (v. 18); nevertheless, he concludes: “I would rather speak five words with my mind, in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue” (vs. 19). In full accord with this expressed principle, we have no record of Paul ever speaking to his churches except in understandable language.
3. 3-Accenting the gift of tongues out of proportion to other gifts is a sign of immaturity. In I Cor. 14:20-25 the apostle therefore challenges the Corinthians to “grow up” in their thinking. They should consider the effect that speaking in tongues might have on the church’s program of evangelism. At an assembly of the church the effect of speaking on tongues on “outsiders” and “unbelievers” maybe adverse, for it may lead them to think Christians are mad (v. 23). In verse 21 the apostle inserts an Old Testament quotation (Is. 28:11-12) into the discussion, emphasizing that the effect of tongues on an unbeliever will be to harden rather than soften his heart. Thus the use of strange tongues in the Corinthian congregation might not serve to convert the sinner but instead could cause him to blaspheme.
4. Each believer is to consider himself a vital and responsible participant in the life of the congregation. In a church service everything should be done in an orderly fashion. Although Paul does not forbid speaking in tongues in their worship services (v. 39) he makes three important stipulations : (a) not more than three should speak in tongues in any one service; (b) these three should take turns and not speak all at once; © there should always be an interpreter present. Without an interpreter “let each of them keep silence in church and speak to himself and to God” (Vv27-28).
5. Christians will remember, of course, that the Scriptures record numerous examples of miraculous healings in both the Old and the New Testaments. It is clear from the gospels that healing the sick was an important and integral part of the ministry of Jesus; and when the Savior sent forth His twelve apostles into the cities of Galilee, He gave them specific instructions that they were “to preach the kingdom of God and to heal” (Luke 9:2). Soon thereafter, when He appointed seventy others and sent them ahead of Him. He told them also to “heal the sick . . . and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you’” (Luke 10:8-9). According to the Book of Acts the miracles of healing in the early church continued at least for a time even after the Savior’s ascension into heaven.
6. It will also be granted that God can choose to perform mighty works in and through His church even today. Miracles of healing are not inherently impossible or absurd. The church must not

deny the supernatural nor reject the possibility that God can intervene in the course of natural things as He did in apostolic times.

7. To be sure, God may still give His gifts of healing to the church today. Moreover, the church will continue to engage in healing ministries as part of its effort to show love and compassion to all men. But the church's primary responsibility is to seek the salvation of the sinner through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Even the healing miracles performed by the apostles after Pentecost were not the result of an explicit directive of Jesus. Their purpose was not only to gain a hearing for the Gospel at a time when the church was being established but to demonstrate that the new age had dawned in Jesus Christ. In the Book of Acts the pattern is that miraculous healings decreased in number as time passed, while the proclamation of the Gospel came more and more into the foreground of apostolic activity.
8. The child of God is also aware that he is not yet in the realm of glory where sin and pain will disappear. Instead, he recognizes that according to the good and gracious will of God he is in a world where sin, sickness, and death are still very evident. He knows that the kingdom of God has been inaugurated, and in this he rejoices, but the final victory has not yet been consummated. Christ has atoned for sin, but its earthly consequences still remain. For the Christian these are chastenings, and he takes seriously the Bible exhortation: "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor lose courage when you are punished by Him. For the Lord disciplines him whom He loves and chastises every son whom He receives" (Heb. 12:5-6). We do not assume that it is the will of God that even in this life we must be free of all anguish and physical distress, for pain and suffering can also be a blessing from God. (Cf. Rom. 8:28)

For further reading on the sign gifts see:

The Charismatic Movement and Lutheran Theology

A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, January 1972.

The Lutheran Church And the Charismatic Movement

Guidelines for Congregations and Pastors, A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, April 1977.

NOTE: both of these publications can be found in PDF format on the following web sites:

www.nowlcms.org or www.lcms.org