

Signs and Wonders and Spiritual Gifts

Introduction

I want to write about what seems to me to be the singlemost cause of division in the evangelical church today. What do you think it is? Is it church government? Well, such an issue does split the church, but it's not the greatest cause by any means. Is it baptism, maybe? No. Arminianism versus Calvinism? No. How about worship? Maybe. Important as these issues are, I suggest to you that the singlemost cause of division in the evangelical church today is whether we believe the "*spiritual gifts*" are for believers today or not.

There have been so many articles written on the subject, from both sides of the divide, that you could ask of me, why should I write another one? Surely, am I not just adding fuel to the fire, as it were? Well, for years I thought the same way. Surely I don't need to write on this subject, because too many have done so before. But, in all the articles I have read so far, there has always been some kind of confusion between the "*spiritual gifts*" and the "*signs and wonders*." Both are treated as being the same thing, which I argue they are not.

Both sides of the argument agree that the miracles that Jesus wrought, such as physical healing, cleansing lepers, casting out demons, raising the dead, feeding five thousand with five loaves and two fish and so on, were real miracles, which are otherwise described in the Scripture as "*signs and wonders*." That is not the issue. Both sides would be totally against modern liberal theology, which denies the miracles of the Bible completely. The issue at stake however, is that, on the one hand, many people genuinely believe that all these miracles, or "*signs and wonders*," are available for believers to perform today in the church. On the other hand, many other people can't see any of these things happening today, and so are quick to tell us that the "*spiritual gifts*" are not for today, and that they died out with the apostles on the completion of the canon of Scripture. How do we know which one of these irreconcilable factions is right? Well, actually, I suggest that both of them are wrong.

The problem is that the "*signs and wonders*" and the "*spiritual gifts*" are always lumped together as being the same thing. My major argument in this article is to try to show that the two things are completely different. "*Signs and wonders*" are nowhere mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12-14, the main passage on "*spiritual gifts*."

Signs and Wonders in the Old Testament

God is in control of all things through His providence. All things are arranged and ordained in this world for His own glory. Nothing ever happens "by chance." Providence is miraculous in and of itself, but normally, as God works, He never breaks any of the laws of nature that He has set up, i.e. He always ordinarily uses means.

Occasionally in history He has done things against or outside of means, to seal His testimony to the truth, i.e. to "*confirm the word*" (Mark 16:20). These are what we call "*miracles*," or "*signs and wonders*." There are three periods of time in history when these have been particularly (though not exclusively) prevalent:

(1.) The time of Moses and the Exodus,

- (2.) The time of Elijah and Elisha,
- (3.) The time of Christ and the apostles.

Notice that, most of the time, this sort of miracle is not the normal way God operates. Normally, God works only through the miracle of Providence. So, Christ coming along with miracles of this nature were unusual in its day.

John 9:32

Since the world began was it not heard that any man opened the eyes of one that was born blind.

The Old Testament has many references to “*signs and wonders*,” and they nearly all refer to judgment. Most of these references refer to the Exodus and the plagues that God sent on Egypt (hardly a “healing ministry”), but other miraculous events are referred to as well. A few examples will suffice:

Deuteronomy 6:22

And the LORD shewed signs and wonders, great and sore, upon Egypt, upon Pharaoh, and upon all his household, before our eyes.

Deuteronomy 28:46

Moreover all these curses shall come upon thee, and shall pursue thee, and overtake thee, till thou be destroyed; because thou hearkenedst not unto the voice of the LORD thy God, to keep his commandments and his statutes which he commanded thee: and they shall be upon thee for a sign and for a wonder, and upon thy seed for ever.

Nehemiah 9:10

And shewedst signs and wonders upon Pharaoh, and on all his servants, and on all the people of his land: for thou knewest that they dealt proudly against them. So didst thou get thee a name, as it is this day.

Jeremiah 32:20

Which hast set signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, even unto this day, and in Israel, and among other men; and hast made thee a name, as at this day.

Daniel 4:2

I thought it good to shew the signs and wonders that the high God hath wrought toward me.

Daniel 6:27

He delivereth and rescueth, and he worketh signs and wonders in heaven and in earth, who hath delivered Daniel from the power of the lions.

In every case, the phrase “*signs and wonders*” refers to miraculous occurrences that God performed to display His power in the world and to seal His testimony to the truth.

An interesting example is given in Isaiah, where his being told by God to go about naked is called a “*sign and wonder*”:

Isaiah 20:2-4

At the same time spake the LORD by Isaiah the son of Amoz, saying, Go and loose the sackcloth from off thy loins, and put off thy shoe from thy foot. And he did so, walking

naked and barefoot. And the LORD said, Like as my servant Isaiah hath walked naked and barefoot three years for a sign and wonder upon Egypt and upon Ethiopia; so shall the king of Assyria lead away the Egyptians prisoners, and the Ethiopians captives, young and old, naked and barefoot, even with their buttocks uncovered, to the shame of Egypt.

This, in and of itself, was not a “*miracle*” as such, but it was at least an unusual commandment of the Lord to Isaiah (God would not normally ask anyone to do this), and it was a sign of the judgment that was to come on the nations round about.

Another prophecy in the Old Testament is that of Joel:

Joel 2:28-32

And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions: and also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my spirit. And I will shew wonders in the heavens and in the earth, blood, and fire, and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and the terrible day of the LORD come. And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the LORD shall be delivered: for in mount Zion and in Jerusalem shall be deliverance, as the LORD hath said, and in the remnant whom the LORD shall call.

Here, we have “*prophecy*,” “*dreaming dreams*,” and “*seeing visions*” mentioned. We also have a description of blood, fire and smoke, the sun being turned into darkness, the moon into blood and the terrible day of the Lord coming. How do we explain all this? Well, for a start, “*dreaming dreams*,” and “*seeing visions*,” whatever they may be exactly, are the marks of a prophet:

Numbers 12:6

And he said, Hear now my words: If there be a prophet among you, I the LORD will make myself known unto him in a vision, and will speak unto him in a dream.

We also have a Scriptural commentary on this passage in Acts chapter 2, which we’ll look at later.

Signs and Wonders in the Gospels

In the New Testament, “*signs and wonders*” are no different. They refer to the real miracles performed by Christ and the apostles. These were given to “*confirm the word*,” i.e. the testimony that Christ was indeed the Messiah whom God had promised in the Old Testament to send into the world:

Mark 16:20

And they went forth, and preached every where, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following.

The “*signs and wonders*” were not the primary reason for Christ’s coming, but only served as a pointer to the fact that he was the true Messiah, through whom the world would be judged:

Acts 10:42

And he commanded us to preach unto the people, and to testify that it is he which was ordained of God to be the Judge of quick and dead.

The people, in the main, didn't see that, and were not really interested in His teaching, but just wanted more miracles, now:

John 6:26

Jesus answered them and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled.

"Signs and wonders," were primarily performed by Christ during His ministry:

John 20:30,31

And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.

Acts 2:22

Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know.

Nobody, in evangelical circles anyway, is disputing the fact that Christ performed real miracles, so that's not the focus of our attention here. Rather, we go on to note that power to perform "*signs and wonders*" was on occasions given by Christ to others:

Matthew 10:1

And when he had called unto him his twelve disciples, he gave them power against unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all manner of sickness and all manner of disease.

Notice here that all twelve of the disciples were given this power for this particular evangelistic campaign.... including Judas Iscariot. So we see that "*signs and wonders*" are not the same as "*spiritual gifts*," which gifts are only given to believers. Judas could never have had them, as he was never regenerated by the Holy Ghost.

Notice also the list of "*signs and wonders*" in v.8:

Matthew 10:8

Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give.

So, the "*signs and wonders*" Christ gave the disciples to perform were as follows:

*Healing the sick,
cleansing the lepers,
raising the dead, and
casting out devils.*

This is completely different from any of the lists of "*spiritual gifts*" we will come across later.

And notice that the disciples didn't normally have power to do these things except when they had been given the power to do so by Christ:

Matthew 17:19-21

Then came the disciples to Jesus apart, and said, Why could not we cast him out? And Jesus said unto them, Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you. Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.

There was also another campaign later, when seventy were sent out with at least some power to perform such "signs and wonders":

Luke 10:9

And heal the sick that are therein, and say unto them, The kingdom of God is come nigh unto you.

Luke 10:17-20

And the seventy returned again with joy, saying, Lord, even the devils are subject unto us through thy name. And he said unto them, I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven. Behold, I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you. Notwithstanding in this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you; but rather rejoice, because your names are written in heaven.

The seventy didn't seem to have as much power as the disciples earlier, as all we are told they could do was to "heal the sick" and "tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy." The latter may not even have meant treading on literal serpents and scorpions, but could refer to having been given spiritual power over the devil and his angels, as such activity could be described as having power "over all the power of the enemy." Note here also that Christ rebukes them when they start boasting in the power to perform the "signs and wonders" that they had been given, and tells them not to rejoice in that, but rather to rejoice because their names are written in heaven.

"Signs and wonders," were also seemingly done by others outside of Christ and His immediate followers, but how much of this was just mimicking Christ and His disciples and not real power we can't tell:

Mark 9:38-40

And John answered him, saying, Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name, and he followeth not us: and we forbid him, because he followeth not us. But Jesus said, Forbid him not: for there is no man which shall do a miracle in my name, that can lightly speak evil of me. For he that is not against us is on our part.

However, what we do see is that false "signs and wonders" can be done by the unregenerate wicked:

Deuteronomy 13:1-3

If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and giveth thee a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder come to pass, whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them; thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams: for the LORD your God

proveth you, to know whether ye love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

Matthew 24:24

For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.

Mark 13:22

For false Christs and false prophets shall rise, and shall shew signs and wonders, to seduce, if it were possible, even the elect.

2 Thessalonians 2:9,10

Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, and with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved.

The wicked love to see “*signs and wonders*,” they find them exciting:

John 4:48

Then said Jesus unto him, Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe.

The wicked can at least convince themselves that they have done “*signs and wonders*,” even when they have never had the real power to do the real “*signs and wonders*” from Christ at all:

Matthew 7:22,23

Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

“Greater Works” in John

On two occasions, in John’s gospel, Christ mentions that “*greater works*,” even than the “*signs and wonders*” He performed, will be done by His followers in the future. What a marvellous promise! What can be these “*greater works*”? Well a far greater miracle than all the “*signs and wonders*” put together is the conversion of a soul, which only the Lord can do:

John 5:19-21

Then answered Jesus and said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise. For the Father loveth the Son, and sheweth him all things that himself doeth: and he will shew him greater works than these, that ye may marvel. For as the Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them; even so the Son quickeneth whom he will.

“*Greater works*” can also mean any answers to prayer that a believer may receive:

John 14:11-14

Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me: or else believe me for the very works’ sake. Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall

he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father. And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it.

All true believers will be able to do these “*greater works.*” Answers to prayer are most definitely with us today, and are far more important than a few measly little “*signs and wonders*” done in Christ’s day. All right, someone is physically healed, a leper is cleansed, the dead is raised, a demon is cast out. These things are temporary. All such people to whom these things have happened would die again one day anyway, and then it would be permanent. Eternal things, such as the preaching of the gospel, the conversion of souls, and answers to prayer, are far more important for all of us, although a lot less visible and outwardly exciting to the natural senses.

Christ’s Instructions Before His Ascension

What instruction did Christ leave the eleven apostles before His ascension? We have two passages to consider:

Matthew 28:18-20

And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

Here the eleven remaining disciples are given “*teaching*” and “*baptising*” to do. No “*signs and wonders*” are mentioned here at all. This “*great commission*” is primarily an instruction to the apostles, but it is possible to apply these instructions to ourselves, because “*teaching*” and “*baptising*” is also the ongoing work of the church in all ages.

Mark 16:15-20

And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God. And they went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. Amen.

Here, again, we have “*preaching*” and “*baptising*” as the main work for the apostles to do, but there is also here a reference to “*signs*” which “*shall follow.*” These signs are that they shall “*cast out devils,*” “*speak with new tongues,*” “*take up serpents,*” “*drink any deadly thing and it will not hurt them,*” “*lay hands on the sick and they shall recover.*” Now, don’t try this at home. These could only be performed by the apostles for a short time to “*confirm the word.*” The “*preaching*” and “*baptising*” were far more important than a few miraculous signs given by the Lord to confirm that what they were saying was the truth. “*Signs*” followed for a time with the apostles and a few others close to them, and then they disappeared. We know this because, in the last inspired letter that Paul wrote, shortly before his death, he said:

2 Timothy 4:20

Trophimus have I left at Miletum sick.

The power to miraculously heal had gone from him by this time.

But is not to “*speak with new tongues*” in this list of “*signs following*”? Surely this is a “*spiritual gift*,” not a “*sign*,” and is with us today? Well, not necessarily. In Mark 16 the sign to “*speak with new tongues*” refers to one specific event, described in the Acts of the Apostles as occurring on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). It may also refer to two other events in the book of Acts, but we’ll look at all these more closely later.

Signs and Wonders in the Acts of the Apostles

After Christ’s ascension, the apostles were given the power to do “*signs and wonders*.” Often, the following verse is used to prove this:

Acts 1:8

But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

However, all the verse actually states is that the apostles would receive “*power*” and that they “*shall be witnesses*.” All this could mean is that they are given the power to be Christ’s witnesses. No miracles, or “*signs and wonders*” are actually mentioned here.

But, the apostles were uniquely given the power to do these things directly from Christ. In Scripture, such miracles are denoted specifically as “*the signs of an apostle*”:

2 Corinthians 12:12

Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds.

This was to “*confirm the word*”:

Mark 16:20

And they went forth, and preached every where, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. Amen.

So power to perform such miracles was not given generally to all believers, but only to the “*apostles*,” and one or two others close to them.

We have many examples of such “*signs and wonders*” being performed by the apostles, particularly in the first half of the Acts of the Apostles:

Acts 2:43

And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles.

Acts 4:16

What shall we do to these men? for that indeed a notable miracle hath been done by them is manifest to all them that dwell in Jerusalem; and we cannot deny it.

Acts 4:22

For the man was above forty years old, on whom this miracle of healing was shewed.

Acts 4:30

By stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus.

Acts 5:12

And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people; (and they were all with one accord in Solomon's porch....)

Acts 14:3

Long time therefore abode they speaking boldly in the Lord, which gave testimony unto the word of his grace, and granted signs and wonders to be done by their hands.

Romans 15:19

...through mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God; so that from Jerusalem, and round about unto Illyricum, I have fully preached the gospel of Christ.

Hebrews 2:3,4

How shall we escape, if we neglect 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 divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will?

We also see that "signs and wonders," were done by some others, as well as the twelve apostles:

Stephen:

Acts 6:8

And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.

Philip*:

Acts 8:6,7

And the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. For unclean spirits, crying with loud voice, came out of many that were possessed with them: and many taken with palsies, and that were lame, were healed.

Acts 8:13

Then Simon himself believed also: and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip, and wondered, beholding the miracles and signs which were done.

*We assume this is the Philip of Acts 6:5 and not Philip the apostle, because we are told:

Acts 8:1

And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles.

But it could have been Philip the apostle. Peter and John come to Samaria in Acts 8:14, so the apostles are not completely confined to Jerusalem. They just continue to make their base there, whereas everybody else was scattered. Having said that, this Philip then goes on to Caesarea.

Barnabas:

Acts 15:12

Then all the multitude kept silence, and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul, declaring what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them.

We have to ask at this point whether there were more than just twelve apostles, as more than the twelve performed the “*signs of an apostle*”?

Barnabas is actually denoted an “*apostle*” in Scripture:

Acts 14:14

When the apostles, Barnabas and Paul, heard of, they rent their clothes, and ran in among the people, crying out....

But Barnabas refers to the apostles (the twelve) as a third party:

Acts 9:27

But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles....

Others are also denoted apostles, which simply means “sent ones”:

2 Corinthians 8:23

*Whether any do enquire of Titus, he is my partner and fellowhelper concerning you: or our brethren be enquired of, they are the **messengers** (apostolos) of the churches, and the glory of Christ.*

Philippians 2:25

*Yet I supposed it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother, and companion in labour, and fellowsoldier, but your **messenger** (apostolos), and he that ministered to my wants.*

Christ Himself is also denoted an “*apostle*”:

Hebrews 3:1

Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus.

All the word “*apostle*” really means is “sent one.” So Christ is sent from God, and the apostles were sent by God after Christ’s ascension to do their particular work, given to them by the Lord to “*confirm the word.*”

There are such things as false apostles:

Revelation 2:2

....thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars.

But if we can designate the word “*apostle*” to others apart from the twelve, we also have to maintain a distinction between the twelve and these others. We see indeed in Scripture that there is a distinction between the “*twelve*” and “*all the apostles*”:

1 Corinthians 15:5,7

And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve.... After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles.

It seems that we can use the word “*apostle*” for all those who could perform the “*signs of an apostle*,” which would include Barnabas, Philip and Stephen for example (and Christ for that matter, too), but the “*twelve apostles*” (to include Matthias who replaced Judas Iscariot) are uniquely the primary witnesses and the foundation of the church:

Revelation 21:4

And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

There are no apostles today. We know that, because an apostle is defined as someone who had been with Christ throughout His ministry, as we see from the requirements needed for Judas’ replacement:

Acts 1:21,22

Wherefore of these men which have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, Beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection.

Paul is the only exception to this, who was:

1 Corinthians 15:8

....as of one born out of due time.

None of these people are alive today, therefore there are no apostles today.

Speaking in Tongues in Acts

To understand “*tongues*” a bit more, we first of all need to look at what happened on the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2.

Acts 2:1-21

And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven. Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language. And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilaeans? And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born? Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judaea, and Cappadocia, in

Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians, we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God. And they were all amazed, and were in doubt, saying one to another, What meaneth this? Others mocking said, These men are full of new wine. But Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice, and said unto them, Ye men of Judaea, and all ye that dwell at Jerusalem, be this known unto you, and hearken to my words: for these are not drunken, as ye suppose, seeing it is but the third hour of the day. But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel; And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams: And on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy: And I will shew wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath; blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke: The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before that great and notable day of the Lord come: And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Firstly, we see that “*all with one accord*” were “*in one place*” (v.1). We are not told how many people were there. We assume there was a lot of people, and that they all spake with tongues, but nowhere is it mentioned how many were affected. I would suggest that only the twelve apostles were affected by the cloven tongues of fire and able to speak in tongues. The rest who came later remarked that they were all Galileans who could do this (v.7). In fact only eleven apart from Peter are ever mentioned in the passage (v.14). Having said that, 16 different people groups and languages are mentioned, but it could be that some of the twelve spoke more than one language.

They “*began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.*” (v.4). They were given the gift of speaking in other languages fluently and immediately from the Holy Spirit. They did not have to learn the languages as people would normally do. This is the fundamental difference between this particular unique occasion and the “*spiritual gift*” of tongues.

We must here note that these “*tongues*” were other intelligible languages because we see the Jews “*out of every nation under heaven*” (v.5) remarking, “*And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born?*” (v.8). And furthermore, they understood what was said: “*we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God*” (v.11).

Often the following verse is used to try to convince people that “*tongues*” are unknown languages:

1 Corinthians 13:1

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.

But read on in the next couple of verses:

1 Corinthians 13:2,3

And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.

This is a list of impossible things to do. All these are given in order to make the point that even if we did have them (which nobody has), if we have not charity, we are nothing. We can't use a text from a list consisting of impossible things, to try to pretend that we have the ability to perform any of them.

We also must note that it was what the apostles were saying that was the most important thing, not the languages they were miraculously speaking. They spoke "*in our tongues the wonderful works of God.*" (v.11). This is prophecy. They were prophesying in other languages apart from Hebrew. Up to this time, the outward visible church had been confined to the nation of the Jews. Now, after Christ's ascension, it is to go into all the world:

Matthew 28:19,20

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

Mark 16:15

Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.

So the fact that different languages were being spoken here, was a "*sign*" that the period of time when the church was confined to the Jews was over, and now the church would be worldwide. This was a unique occasion of the immediate giving of languages to the apostles as a "*sign.*"

We seem to have two other examples of immediate languages being given in the Acts of the Apostles:

Acts 10:44-47

While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word. And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost. For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God. Then answered Peter, Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?

Note again that to "*speak with tongues and magnify God*" means languages and prophecy. But Peter is speaking to a group of Gentiles, who would already know other languages. So this is probably not an example of immediate languages being given at all. They already know the languages. The marvellous thing is that they are using their own languages to "*magnify God.*" This was unheard of before in Gentiles.

The third possible example of immediate tongues seemingly being given is:

Acts 19:6

And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them; and they spake with tongues, and prophesied.

These were disciples in Ephesus. There were about twelve of them (v.7), so we are again not talking large numbers. Although we are not told, they are probably Gentiles, and so would know their own languages already. So again, the marvellous thing here is that they

“*prophesied*” after the Holy Ghost had come upon them, not the fact they spoke with other languages.

All three cases above seem similar – tongues and prophecy are given after the Holy Ghost has fallen upon them. But the only one where immediate tongues were given, is the first one on the Day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2, and then it was only confined to the apostles for a “*sign*.”

This passage in Acts chapter 2 also states that the prophecy of Joel has been fulfilled in this event at Pentecost (v.16). But where are the literal “*prophecy*,” “*visions*” and “*dreams*”? Let alone the blood, fire and vapour of smoke, the sun being turned to darkness, the moon into blood, and the terrible day of the Lord coming? We should take heed of this inspired, Scriptural interpretation of Joel’s prophecy, and be very careful how we interpret other prophecies of Scripture in the light of this. What we can say is that this is the language of judgment, and that now, “*the notable day of the Lord*” has come, because Christ has come; and from now on we have this message to send to the ends of the earth:

Acts 2:21

...whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Let’s not try to imagine that we now have a world full of people seeing visions and dreaming dreams and doing other exciting things, when there is a gospel to proclaim and a judgment to come. This prophecy has been fulfilled, so let’s get beyond it.

The Decline of Signs and Wonders in Acts

Acts 2:42,43

And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles.

Notice here that the ordinary believers continued in “*the apostles’ doctrine, and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.*” Not in doing any “*signs and wonders.*” In fact it states here quite clearly that “*many wonders and signs were done by the apostles,*” but not anyone else.

But the real decline even in the apostles performing any “*signs and wonders*” comes after an incident in Acts 14:

Acts 14:8-18

And there sat a certain man at Lystra, impotent in his feet, being a cripple from his mother’s womb, who never had walked: he same heard Paul speak: who stedfastly beholding him, and perceiving that he had faith to be healed, said with a loud voice, Stand upright on thy feet. And he leaped and walked. And when the people saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in the speech of Lycaonia, The gods are come down to us in the likeness of men. And they called Barnabas, Jupiter; and Paul, Mercurius, because he was the chief speaker. Then the priest of Jupiter, which was before their city, brought oxen and garlands unto the gates, and would have done sacrifice with the people. Which when the apostles, Barnabas and Paul, heard of, they rent their clothes, and ran in among the people, crying out, and saying, Sirs, why do ye these things? We also are men of like passions with you, and preach unto you that ye should turn from these vanities unto

the living God, which made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein: who in times past suffered all nations to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless he left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness. And with these sayings scarce restrained they the people, that they had not done sacrifice unto them.

Here, Paul miraculously healed a man, but the people saw the miracle and thought that Barnabas and Paul were gods. Even when they cried to them not to sacrifice to them, they scarce restrained the people from doing so. This shocked Barnabas and Paul, and we see a notable decline in any “*signs and wonders*” being performed by any of the apostles after this incident. It seems that God used this incident as the means by which He slowly withdrew the “*signs and wonders*” completely.

Let us take a look at a few passages in the book of Acts after this event:

Acts 15:32

And Judas and Silas, being prophets also themselves, exhorted the brethren with many words, and confirmed them.

In the past, “*confirming the word*” was with “*signs following*” (Mark 16:20), but here we have no mention of “*signs*” at all. The confirmation of the churches was done by speaking and communicating verbally with them. No “*signs and wonders*” any more.

Acts 15:41

And he went through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the churches.

Here we have a similar confirmation of the churches going on. If we say that Judas and Silas in the first example were not apostles (although Judas probably was the apostle Judas (not Iscariot)), then here we have no doubt about it, because it is the apostle Paul himself, no longer confirming the churches with “*signs following*.”

Acts 19:11,12

And God wrought special miracles by the hands of Paul: so that from his body were brought unto the sick handkerchiefs or aprons, and the diseases departed from them, and the evil spirits went out of them.

Here we see that Paul’s miracles at this time are denoted “*special miracles*,” as though in the past they were more common, and that he was not normally doing them any more, but this was a special case.

Acts 19:13-17

Then certain of the vagabond Jews, exorcists, took upon them to call over them which had evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, We adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preacheth. And there were seven sons of one Sceva, a Jew, and chief of the priests, which did so. And the evil spirit answered and said, Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are ye? And the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, and overcame them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. And this was known to all the Jews and Greeks also dwelling at Ephesus; and fear fell on them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified.

This has nothing to do with the “*signs and wonders*” of the apostles. This shows a few examples of false prophets (“*certain of the vagabond Jews*,” “*exorcists*,” and the “*seven*”

sons of one Sceva”) doing false miracles supposedly in Jesus’ name. It shows how dangerous this activity is. It has nothing to do with the real “*signs and wonders*” that had in the past been performed by the apostles.

Acts 20:9,10

And there sat in a window a certain young man named Eutychus, being fallen into a deep sleep: and as Paul was long preaching, he sunk down with sleep, and fell down from the third loft, and was taken up dead. And Paul went down, and fell on him, and embracing him said, Trouble not yourselves; for his life is in him.

This is often given as an example of Paul raising the dead, but it is nothing of the kind. No miracle occurs here whatsoever. Eutychus falls out of the window, they take him up, convinced he is dead, but Paul has a closer inspection of him and sees that his life is still in him. No miracle at all here, other than the fall didn’t kill him.

Acts 21:4

And finding disciples, we tarried there seven days: who said to Paul through the Spirit, that he should not go up to Jerusalem.

Acts 21:10,11

And as we tarried there many days, there came down from Judaea a certain prophet, named Agabus. And when he was come unto us, he took Paul’s girdle, and bound his own hands and feet, and said, Thus saith the Holy Ghost, So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owneth this girdle, and shall deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.

These are two examples of firstly disciples, and secondly Agabus the prophet, prophesying that Paul would find persecution if he went to Jerusalem – which indeed he did. Such people were discerners of the times, and this is no more than the “*spiritual gifts*” of “*discernment*” and “*prophecy*.” Of course, both were wrong in actually advising Paul not to go up to Jerusalem, when Paul himself had determined (in the Lord’s guidance to him personally) to do so, despite the probable persecution he would find there.

Acts 28:3-5

And when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks, and laid them on the fire, there came a viper out of the heat, and fastened on his hand. And when the barbarians saw the venomous beast hang on his hand, they said among themselves, No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he hath escaped the sea, yet vengeance suffereth not to live. And he shook off the beast into the fire, and felt no harm.

Here we have a supposed miracle, but firstly we see that Paul didn’t do anything. He didn’t perform any miracle at all. Secondly, we see that God is in control of all things. He it was that did not let the viper harm Paul. We have such providential control of all things by the Lord in our world today, and we should be thankful for all His providential dealings with us. It was the barbarians here who had a superstitious idea about such an event.

Acts 28:8,9

And it came to pass, that the father of Publius lay sick of a fever and of a bloody flux: to whom Paul entered in, and prayed, and laid his hands on him, and healed him. So when this was done, others also, which had diseases in the island, came, and were healed.

This is the final miracle of the Bible. Maybe the Lord gave Paul a “*special miracle*” as in Acts 19:11, but notice the major difference. This time Paul **prayed**. This is the way we

operate today. No-one can perform miracles today. But we do know a God who can heal. We pray. Of course, the Lord may not answer our prayer in the way we would like, but prayer is the ordinary means the Lord has given us for healing and receiving everything else we need from Him today. He will always give us what He wants us to have, and we should be eternally thankful for whatever we receive from Him.

Spiritual Gifts

In Hebrews 2:3,4 we have an interesting passage:

Hebrews 2:3,4

How shall we escape, if we neglect 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 divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will?

Here we see that “*signs and wonders*” and “*divers miracles*” were God’s bearing witness to the message of Christ and the apostles. But the “*gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to His own will*” are mentioned in this verse also. Does this mean that the “*spiritual gifts*” were the same as the “*signs and wonders*,” seeing they performed the same function and are grouped together here? Well, the word “*both*” must refer to two things. It can’t refer to three things. So it can’t refer to “*signs and wonders*,” “*divers miracles*,” and the “*gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to His own will*.” All three cannot be denoted by the word “*both*.” The word “*both*” must refer on the one hand to “*signs and wonders and divers miracles*,” and on the other hand to “*gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to His own will*.” These are two completely separate, distinct and different things, but both performing the same function of confirming the truth given by God to men.

“*Spiritual gifts*,” then, are given to all truly born-again believers as the Lord distributes. Not all gifts are given to all believers, neither should any of us boast in the ones we’ve been given, if indeed we have been given any of them at all. This message is the thrust of the passage in 1 Corinthians 12-14, which we shall look at shortly.

“*Spiritual gifts*” are given as the Lord distributes, to the end that we may be established in the faith:

Romans 1:11,12

For I long to see you, that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end ye may be established; that is, that I may be comforted together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me.

We note here that Paul, as an apostle, was given the ability to impart spiritual gifts to people, but only as the Lord directed him.

With regards “*spiritual gifts*”:

– They are NOT “*signs and wonders*” or “*miracles*.” Such things died out within the lifetime of the apostles.

– They are NOT magic, nor direct revelation apart from Scripture, but are gifts given by the Lord, as He wills, to His true people, for the building up of the church.

– They are NOT temporary, as “*signs and wonders*” were. God giving them to His people will continue until Christ comes again:

Psalm 68:18

Thou hast ascended on high, thou hast led captivity captive: thou hast received gifts for men.

Ephesians 4:8

Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men.

Different “*spiritual gifts*” are given to different believers:

Romans 12:4-8

For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; or ministry, let us wait on our ministering: or he that teacheth, on teaching; or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness.

In this passage, we have listed amongst the “*spiritual gifts*”:

*prophecy,
ministry,
teaching,
exhortation,
ruling, and
shewing mercy.*

Ephesians 4:11-12

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.

In this passage, we see that

*apostles,
prophets,
evangelists,
pastors,” and
teachers*
all perform the functions of
*ministry and
edification.*

Notice that there is no similarity whatsoever between the “*spiritual gifts*” in these lists here and the list of “*signs and wonders*” we have in Matthew 10:8. They are completely different.

1 Corinthians 12

12:1 *Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I would not have you ignorant.*

In 1 Corinthians 12 to 14, we have the major passage in Scripture that talks about “*spiritual gifts*.” Paul here tells his readers that it is important that we are not ignorant about them, how they work and how they should be used. So they must still be around today, otherwise there is no point of having this passage in the Bible.

12:2 *Ye know that ye were Gentiles, carried away unto these dumb idols, even as ye were led.*

The Corinthians were Gentiles, not Jews. This shows us that this passage is particularly directed to the Gentiles as to how to use the “*spiritual gifts*” properly. Did the Jews have “*spiritual gifts*” in the Old Testament? Well, they had the Holy Spirit:

Psalm 51:11

Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me.

Isaiah 63:10

But they rebelled, and vexed his holy Spirit: therefore he was turned to be their enemy, and he fought against them. Then he remembered the days of old, Moses, and his people, saying, Where is he that brought them up out of the sea with the shepherd of his flock? where is he that put his holy Spirit within him?

So, true believers in Old Testament times must also have had “*spiritual gifts*” as the Lord pleased to distribute them. But here, now, in the days of the apostles, the Holy Spirit was being poured out on all nations, not just primarily amongst the Jews, as it had been in times past. The “*spiritual gifts*” are here being introduced to the Gentile world for the first time, and Paul gives instruction on how to use them properly.

12:3 *Wherefore I give you to understand, that no man speaking by the Spirit of God calleth Jesus accursed: and that no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost.*

In chapter 12, Paul’s main message is to show that all true believers (i.e. all those who have had a new heart given them by the Lord) have the Holy Spirit within them, but that there is a diversity of gifts, distributed as the Lord sees fit. Believers do not all have the same gifts. So we should not despise fellow true believers who do not have the same gift as we do, or hate people who seem to have a greater gift than we do. This is important, because these things are happening in the church today.

So Paul’s first message is to make clear that anyone who truly has the Holy Spirit within them, can’t call Jesus accursed. It is impossible. They can’t bring themselves to utter such words, because they love the Lord, and the Holy Spirit within them prevents them from doing so. No matter how different true believers are from each other outwardly, we must accept all of them as our brethren in Christ.

Paul also has a second foundational message to give, and that is that “*No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost.*” Does this mean that anyone who says the words “*Jesus is Lord*” is a true believer, and has the Holy Ghost? Of course not. Anyone

can form these words with their mouths and tongues. Christ, quoting the prophet Isaiah, warns us against this:

Mark 7:6

He answered and said unto them, Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.

So, we should not get taken in by anyone who can merely mouth these words. Rather, Paul is saying that everyone who truly has the Holy Spirit within them, also has Jesus as Lord of their life. It has been argued that some people are second class Christians, in that they have Jesus as Saviour but have somehow not yet received Him as Lord. This cannot be. All those who have been truly born-again in the heart, have the Holy Spirit within them, and at the same time have Jesus as Lord of their lives. They may not follow Him very well, because of indwelling sin in their own hearts, but He is there, He is Lord, they will grow in the faith as He guides them, and we should not despise such people or look down upon them as being second-rate in any way. They are true believers, even though they are not quite like us.

This is an important foundation that Paul is laying here, for the rest of the chapter, because the problem in the Corinthian church was that cliques and factions were forming:

1 Corinthians 1:12

Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ.

This was mainly due to the fact that we can't see each other's heart. We must realise that even though we can't see many outward signs in other people of them being true believers, we must accept them as such if they affirm that Jesus is the Lord and if they love Him truly, and therefore cannot say that "*Jesus is accursed.*" Only in cases where their lack of outward fruit clearly gives them away as not being true believers, can we reject them as being such:

Matthew 7:15-20

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.

12:4-6 Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all.

Here we come to the main point of this chapter. Paul is trying to show that there is a diversity of gifts – a greater diversity than the believers in Corinth realised – but only one Spirit who gives them. To make his point he repeats what he says three times. He says that there are a diversity of "*gifts,*" or "*administrations*" or "*operations,*" but only one "*Spirit,*" or "*Lord,*" or "*God.*" The Corinthians needed to know this. Because the whole church was splitting into factions, people were only seeing what little diversity there was within their own particular faction, and not seeing the whole picture, namely, that there were true

believers (who all had the same one Spirit) in the other factions, who also had spiritual gifts and should be recognised as true believers.

We have exactly this problem in the church today. Some churches believe that if you don't "speak in tongues" (in the way they interpret this to mean), then you are a second class Christian, or not a Christian at all. Others believe that if you don't have all your doctrine exactly correct (as their particular faction teaches it), then you are a second class Christian, or not a Christian at all. Others believe that if you are not going out aggressively evangelising, then you are a second class Christian. We all need to repent of any such behaviour in our lives. We can't tell from the outside who truly has had a new heart put within them; but we should accept far more people as true believers than we can see around us in our own cosy little narrow denomination.

12:7 But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal.

In all true believers, the Spirit manifests Himself in different ways, by giving such a diversity of gifts. Not everyone has every gift. In fact, most people only have one or maybe two. But the Spirit has given some gifts to every believer, "*to profit withal,*" i.e. for their own benefit, and for the benefit of the true church.

12:8-10 For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; to another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues.

Here we have our first major list of "*spiritual gifts.*" It is not an exhaustive list, but just a few examples. We have mentioned here:

*the word of wisdom,
the word of knowledge,
faith,
the gifts of healing,
the working of miracles,
prophecy,
discerning of spirits,
divers kinds of tongues, and
the interpretation of tongues.*

Again, all these are completely different from the list of "*signs and wonders*" we have in Matthew 10:8. Only "*the gifts of healing*" and "*the working of miracles*" can be possibly said to be similar to "*healing the sick.*" And I suggest they are not the same at all really.

What are each of these "*spiritual gifts*" then? Well, let's look at them in turn:

The Word of Wisdom and The Word of Knowledge

We get all our knowledge, or at least all that we need to know, from the Bible. Some people have a lot more spiritual insight into the Word of God than others. This is the spiritual gift of knowledge and should not be despised, as ignorant people and new

believers so easily tend to do. We need to respect people with such a gift and learn from them, not ridicule them. Note that this gift – as indeed all the others – does not come magically to a person, without effort. God gives the recipient such a gift, but he still has to study his Bible. What God gives him is the ability to learn and discern the truth from the Scriptures, better than others.

Wisdom is the practical application of knowledge. It is possible to have the gift of knowledge but be hopeless at practically applying it. The gift of wisdom is this practical application. It certainly is not “*worldly wisdom*” but the wisdom that only the Spirit of God can reveal to us:

1 Corinthians 2:6-10

Howbeit we speak wisdom among them that are perfect: yet not the wisdom of this world, nor of the princes of this world, that come to nought: but we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory: which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God.

We are all actually encouraged to seek after this gift:

James 1:5

If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.

After all,

Proverbs 9:10

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding.

Faith

All true believers have faith, but we see here that some have more faith than others. This is a spiritual gift from the Lord:

Luke 7:9

When Jesus heard these things, he marvelled at him, and turned him about, and said unto the people that followed him, I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel.

Matthew 14:31

And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?

The Gifts of Healing

This is not a special gift given to people who can say, “Be healed, in the name of Jesus!” as a result of which a physical healing would miraculously take place. That really happened with Christ and the apostles, as they performed “*signs and wonders*,” but this is not what we are talking about here.

This is a “*spiritual gift*” given to some people who really do have a gift of being able to speak healing words to people in need. Not just being able to help people in need of physical healing, but also being able to heal relationship problems, or divisions of any kind. Some people have the gift of knowing exactly the right thing to say at the right time in order to defuse a volatile, or awkward situation.

For example, maybe a wayward son has become a drunkard, or a daughter has become a drug addict or something similar. But someone with the gift of “*healing*” can come alongside such people, relate to them and help them. Of course it is the Lord that truly changes the situation, but he chooses to do it through someone with the gift of “*healing*.” What a wonderful gift!

Note that the “*gifts of healing*” are plural, so there are many types. Note also that such a gift also has to be learned through time, it is not given to anyone without them learning through experience.

The Working of Miracles

This also is not a special gift given to people today so they can perform the physical miracles that Jesus and the apostles could do.

Galatians 3:5

He therefore that ministereth to you the Spirit, and worketh miracles among you, doeth he it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?

In this verse, “*the working of miracles*” is directly connected to the preaching of the gospel and the conversion of sinners. The one who “*ministereth to you the Spirit*” is said to be the one who “*worketh miracles*.” Preaching the gospel is the ordinary means the Lord uses to convert sinners:

1 Corinthians 1:21

For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.

And so “*the working of miracles*” in this sense can be said to be the work of the preacher whenever someone is converted, although of course it’s the Lord Himself who actually changes the heart. This is the same as the “*greater works*” Christ talked about, and which we briefly looked at earlier:

John 5:20,21

For the Father loveth the Son, and sheweth him all things that himself doeth: and he will shew him greater works than these, that ye may marvel. For as the Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them; even so the Son quickeneth whom he will.

An important point needs to be made here. The word “*miracles*” occurs three times in chapter 12 here, referring to the spiritual gift. On every occasion, it is the Greek word

“*dunamis*,” which is the usual word for “*power*.” When the “*signs and wonders*” are spoken about in the gospels and book of Acts, on most occasions the Greek word translated “miracle” is “*saymion*,” which is the usual word for “*sign*.” Sometimes the word “*dunamis*” is used, but on every occasion when that occurs, it is in conjunction with the phrase “*miracles and signs*,” where the word “*sign*” has already been translated from the word “*saymion*.”

Prophecy

We need to know exactly what prophecy is, because 1 Corinthians 14 tells us that it is the greatest of all the gifts. Most people believe that it means the supernatural ability to predict the future. That is not true. No-one can “predict” the future. The future is in the Lord’s hands, and He can reveal it to whomsoever He chooses. This is not “prediction.” Some of the Old Testament prophets came in judgment and told the people what God would do to them, and they were right, but we don’t have such an ability today, because God doesn’t use these means to speak to His people any more. So, we have to be very careful of trying to compare ourselves to the Old Testament prophets. We cannot say, “*Thus saith the Lord*,” like they could. That type of prophet has ceased:

Hebrews 1:1,2

God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son.

Matthew 11:13

For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John.

Daniel 9:24

*Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city, to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and **to seal up the vision and prophecy**, and to anoint the most Holy.*

But the spiritual gift of prophecy is spoken of in 1 Corinthians 14 as the greatest gift available today, so we need to know what it involves, as much as we can.

The first mention of a “*prophet*” in Scripture is that of Abraham. The Lord told Abimelech, king of Gerar, to restore Sarah to him:

Genesis 20:7

Now therefore restore the man his wife; for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live: and if thou restore her not, know thou that thou shalt surely die, thou, and all that are thine.

We see that the Lord tells Abimelech that Abraham will pray for him, and warn him that if he does not repent, certain consequences will follow. This is the work of a “*prophet*.”

We next encounter a “*prophet*” when it refers to Aaron:

Exodus 7:1

And the LORD said unto Moses, See, I have made thee a god to Pharaoh: and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet.

Here, Aaron is the “*prophet*,” because he is God’s mouthpiece to Pharaoh.

Next, we see that the seventy elders, who were set apart to help Moses, “*prophesied*”:

Numbers 11:25

And the LORD came down in a cloud, and spake unto him, and took of the spirit that was upon him, and gave it unto the seventy elders: and it came to pass, that, when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied, and did not cease.

What is this but praising the Lord? Here they have no specific message to give, but they are all given the Holy Spirit and so are genuine prophets, who declare the beauty and attributes of the Lord to the people.

Sometimes prophecy involved singing the praises of God:

1 Samuel 10:5

After that thou shalt come to the hill of God, where is the garrison of the Philistines: and it shall come to pass, when thou art come thither to the city, that thou shalt meet a company of prophets coming down from the high place with a psaltery, and a tabret, and a pipe, and a harp, before them; and they shall prophesy.

Women can prophesy:

“*Prophetesses*” in Scripture include Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Deborah (Judges 4:4), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14 and 2 Chronicles 34:22), Isaiah’s wife (Isaiah 8:3) and Anna (Luke 2:36).

Acts 21:9

And the same man had four daughters, virgins, which did prophesy.

1 Corinthians 11:5

But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven.

Note also there are two false prophetesses mentioned in Scripture, Naadiah (Nehemiah 6:14) and Jezabel (Revelation 2:20).

Sometimes, prophecy involves declaring how God wants the people to behave:

Proverbs 31:1

The words of king Lemuel, the prophecy that his mother taught him.

Sometimes, prophecy involves declaring judgment on the people if they do not repent:

2 Chronicles 15:8

And when Asa heard these words, and the prophecy of Oded the prophet, he took courage, and put away the abominable idols out of all the land of Judah and Benjamin, and out of the cities which he had taken from mount Ephraim, and renewed the altar of the LORD, that was before the porch of the LORD.

Sometimes, prophecy is exhorting and confirming the brethren:

Acts 15:32

And Judas and Silas, being prophets also themselves, exhorted the brethren with many words, and confirmed them.

All of Scripture is prophecy, and no prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation:

2 Peter 1:19-21

We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts: knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.

Zechariah was filled with the Holy Ghost and prophesied:

Luke 1:67,68

And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Ghost, and prophesied, saying, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel.

[Note that it is not said that Mary prophesied in her speech earlier in the chapter.]

Prophecy is “blessing” God, i.e. declaring His glory, i.e. His attributes and greatness.

Prophecy is given in proportion to the prophet’s faith:

Romans 12:6

Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith.

Prophecy is the testimony of Jesus:

Revelation 19:10

The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.

Taking all of these cases, we conclude that prophecy is the declaring of God’s glory, the blessing and praising of God. This involves anything from simply worshipping the true and living God, to declaring a message from the Lord to the current generation. Again, note that this gift is also only acquired through learning. The prophet would be one who stays close to the Word of God and studies it carefully.

Discerning of Spirits

The “*discerning of spirits*” is the gift of being able to discern whether a particular spirit is from God:

1 John 4:1-6

Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: and every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of

antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world. Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world. They are of the world: therefore speak they of the world, and the world heareth them. We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error.

It also includes the gift of being able to understand and discern the times, similar to that of the children of Issachar:

1 Chronicles 12:32

And of the children of Issachar, which were men that had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do.

Again, these people would have to stick close to Scripture to have this gift.

Divers Kinds of Tongues

The “*spiritual gift*” of tongues we have today is not immediate in the same way as in Acts 2. Rather, it is the supernatural ability to learn a language more quickly than would naturally be the case, or at least the ability to be able to communicate with people of another language more easily than most would be able to. The obvious case in which the Lord would need to give this gift, is if the person was going onto the mission field, but other situations could exist whereby they would need to learn a language or communicate with someone. Some people have the gift of being able to learn languages quickly, and have the gift of communication generally, and this is a precious thing.

All the “*spiritual gifts*” are, on the one hand, gifts from God, but on the other, all of them involve the recipient still needing to learn, the gift being a better than usual ability to be able to do this, than normally would be the case.

The Interpretation of Tongues

When one thinks of the gift of the “*interpretation of tongues*,” one immediately thinks of the translation from one language into another. Whereas this could be a possible meaning to the word “*interpretation*,” it is not the only one.

But surely, interpretation means more than merely translating. It also means getting the target audience, who can’t speak the original language, to understand what is being said. A wooden literal translation may still be not understood, or at least misunderstood, in the target language to the target audience, because languages differ such a lot. 1 Corinthians 14 speaks about the importance of the target audience understanding what is being said:

1 Corinthians 14:5

I would that ye all spake with tongues, but rather that ye prophesied: for greater is he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues, except he interpret, that the church may receive edifying.

These “*spiritual gifts*” are only a representative sample of the many gifts God gives to His people, but we see that there is an explanation for each one of them, which involves

supernatural power being given by the Holy Spirit, but does not involve the miracle working of the “*signs and wonders*” to explain them.

Now, we might object that these “*gifts*” are really no more than glorified natural gifts. What is spiritual about learning a language, or being able to speak the right words of healing to somebody, or having a gift of knowledge? If we have to make an effort to learn and improve them, does that not mean that these are just natural gifts, not spiritual? No, they are spiritual in the sense that they are given by the Holy Spirit.

Either people who didn’t have these gifts naturally before, are given them by the Spirit, or, maybe they did have some natural gift for languages, or knowledge etc. before, and these are enhanced by the Spirit. Either way, the Holy Spirit helps the recipient to improve and use these gifts properly.

We do have to make an effort to learn how to improve our use of these gifts properly, but the Spirit will give us the ability to do that. Spiritual gifts are given by the Holy Spirit for spiritual ends. It is the difference between, for example, preparing and preaching a sermon by our own efforts – which could be doctrinally correct if we have stuck close to Scripture – or preparing and preaching it in the power of the Holy Spirit, giving us what the Holy Spirit wants us to preach, not just a dry doctrinal sermon we have concocted ourselves. Both involve learning and Bible study, but one is spiritual and the other isn’t.

12:11 *But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will.*

Again, Paul emphasises that these gifts are divided to every believer severally as the Lord wills. Any one of us normally has only one or two “*spiritual gifts*,” but we should not despise or judge others who have other different gifts, or who have a lot more than we have been given. A gift is just that, a gift. It can be given and it can be taken away again. It can be given in a large or small measure. The Lord knows what He is doing, and we should be thankful for any gifts we have been given and the measure of them. We should never boast in any of them, but use all that we have been given to God’s glory.

12:12 *For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ.*

As our physical bodies are one unit but with many members, so is Christ’s spiritual body, i.e. the church. He is the Head and we are the different members of the body:

Colossians 1:18

And he is the head of the body, the church.

Colossians 2:19

....the Head, from which all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God.

12:13 *For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.*

On the one hand, all those who have been born-again of the Spirit of God, who have had a new heart put within them, who have become a new creature in Christ, are all, by the one Holy Spirit joined into one body, Christ's body. It doesn't matter what we are outwardly, whether Jews or Gentiles, bond or free, we have all become a part, a member, of Christ's one body. We should be aware of this when we come across other believers. They may not have anything like the same gifts as we have, but they should still be respected and regarded as members of the one body of Christ.

12:14 For the body is not one member, but many.

On the other hand, all those who have been born-again of the Spirit of God do not all have the same function. We all have different functions as the Lord pleases to distribute to us.

12:15-18 If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him.

Here, Paul uses the example of the physical human body to try to get his readers to understand the truth about the "spiritual gifts." Just as the human body is made up of different kinds of members, ears, eyes, feet etc., so the body of Christ is made up of those with different kinds of "spiritual gifts."

As it is ridiculous to talk about members of the human body complaining about why they were not made something else – an ear complaining about why he was not made an eye, for example – so it ought to be ridiculous for members of Christ's body to complain about the way the Lord has made them, and the gifts He has given them.

Paul is saying that we are all born-again by the one Spirit of God, but we are all different, we have been given different gifts, and we should realise and recognise that fact.

12:19-20 And if they were all one member, where were the body? But now are they many members, yet but one body.

Here, Paul shows how ridiculous it is to think that every member of a physical body should try to be or pretend to be the same member. If we were all one member, a preacher for example, where is the body? The body no longer exists, it is all an ear, or eye, or foot. The fact is that there is one body of Christ, namely all those truly born-again of the Spirit of God, but we are all different members and perform different functions.

12:21 And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.

And indeed we are all interdependent on one another. We need each other in our different capacities, with our different "spiritual gifts."

12:22,23 Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary: and those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness.

In fact, the parts of our body that do not appear outwardly to be of much worth, are actually more necessary for the functioning of the whole body. Similarly, those parts of the spiritual body that more outwardly worthy members tend to despise and look down on, are actually more necessary, and truly more honourable and more comely. We so much need to learn this lesson, as so many Christians today look down on other fellow Christians. This is a disgrace, and should not be.

12:24 For our comely parts have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked:

The parts that appear outwardly to men to be more comely, the great eloquent preachers, the great evangelists and so on, seem to have no need of the rest of us simple people who are expected to just blindly follow them (and keep giving them money). But in actual fact, God has ordained everything to be such that the parts that do not appear outwardly to be very comely or important, have more abundant honour in His sight.

12:25 that there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another.

The reason that the Lord has given all the gifts in the way He has done, is that there should be no schism in the body, and that the members should have the same care one for another.

We should not know any man after the flesh any more, but we should judge righteous judgment:

2 Corinthians 5:16,17

Wherefore henceforth know we no man after the flesh: yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we him no more. Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

John 7:24

Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment.

12:26 And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it.

This is how we ought to behave. When one member suffers, we all suffer. When one member is honoured, we should all rejoice with him. How far removed is this from the way the church operates today! How important it is therefore for us to realise that there are such a variety of gifts, but only ever the one Spirit who unites all those who have truly had a new heart put within them.

12:27 *Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.*

So we should humble ourselves. All those who have been born-again of the Spirit of God, are the body of Christ. This is an invisible body, we cannot tell who belongs to it fully. Certainly all those that profess to be a Christian are not necessarily so, and can deceive:

Matthew 7:21-23

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

But we can also know true believers to some degree by their fruits:

Matthew 7:15-20

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.

12:28 *And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.*

Here we have an important list because it shows a hierarchy of gifts. Some gifts are greater than others. We see that the best gift of all is to be an *apostle*. As we have already established, this is no longer available to any of us today, as all the apostles have died out.

The second best gift, and the best gift available today, is to be a *prophet*.

1 Corinthians 14:5

I would that ye all spake with tongues, but rather that ye prophesied.

Prophecy is greater than speaking in tongues, indeed we should covet, or long to be a prophet:

1 Corinthians 14:39

Wherefore, brethren, covet to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues.

Failing this, the third best gift is that of being a *teacher*.

The rest of the gifts mentioned here are all on the same level, the bottom level. The next one mentioned is "*miracles*," followed by the word "*then*," which could imply that the gift of "*miracles*" is of a higher rank than the rest, but this is not a necessary conclusion.

The other gifts mentioned here are:

*gifts of healings,
helps,
governments,
diversities of tongues.*

Notice the gift of “governments” is on the lowest level. So elders, know your place!

*12:29,30 Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles?
Have all the gifts of healing? do all speak with tongues? do all interpret?*

The rhetorical answer here is, no, not all do have all the gifts. All true believers may have at best, is one or two of them. So we should never boast in any “*spiritual gifts*” that we have been given by the Lord, and neither should we be jealous of anyone else’s gifts that they have and we don’t.

12:31 But covet earnestly the best gifts: and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way.

Having said that, we are told to “*covet earnestly the best gifts.*” The best gifts being, as we have seen, “*prophecy*” and “*teaching.*” These are far greater than all the others.

Now the tenth commandment states that:

Exodus 20:17

Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour’s.

We are not to covet the best gifts in the sense that we want and crave for what other people have, and are jealous of them. That is sin, and a clear breaking of the tenth commandment. But we are to covet the best gifts in the sense that “*prophecy*” and “*teaching*” are greater than the rest. It is always good to desire the best for God, even if the Lord may see fit not to give us what we desire, for His own good and holy ends.

But above all this, even the greatest gifts pale in comparison with a more excellent way, which Paul tells us about in chapter 13. The best gifts are nothing compared to having the fruit of charity. God’s people should be pursuing the fruit of the Spirit, which all true believers have, and should be increasing in as they grow more and more in grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. These are far more important than even having the best of the gifts.

Galatians 5:22-26

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law. And they that are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. Let us not be desirous of vain glory, provoking one another, envying one another.

1 Corinthians 13

13:1-3 Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.

Here we clearly have a list of impossible things to do. Each item in the list is compared against the spiritual fruit of charity. Even if we could perform any of the things in the list of impossible gifts, it is nothing if we don't have the spiritual fruit of charity. In other words, the gifts of the Spirit are nothing if we don't have the fruits of the Spirit, which are far more important for us to nurture than any gift we may think we have.

No man on earth with the gift of tongues, can speak with the tongues of **all** men and angels. No man with the gift of prophecy, can understand **all** mysteries and all knowledge. No man with the gift of faith, can remove mountains. No man with the gift of helps, can bestow **all** his goods to feed the poor, because there are too many poor, and in any case our selfish nature stops us from doing so. No man can give his body voluntarily to be burned, because his natural instinct stops him. All these are impossible things for any of us to do in these limited bodies that we have, even with grace and a new heart put within us. But even if we could do any one of them, we are nothing without producing fruit. Producing fruit is the primary purpose of the Christian life, not arguing about, let alone boasting in, whatever gifts we have been given.

2 Corinthians 7:1

Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

Hebrews 12:14

Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.

13:4-7 Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

Charity is the spiritual fruit we should be growing in our hearts. It certainly is impossible for the natural man to produce it. The natural man can't love properly at all. Look at the list of spiritual fruit again. This is another impossible list for any of us to achieve by nature. We need the Holy Spirit to do any of these things in us. One of the fruits of the Spirit is "love," and the truly born-again believer can just begin to love, or show charity, properly, in the manner shown here. We are growing in grace all the time, and none of us shall achieve perfection while we are on this earth, but the pursuit of holiness must be our primary objective while we are here, and that which we should be following. We should not be hung up on gifts all the time.

2 Peter 3:18

But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever. Amen.

13:8-10 *Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.*

People who believe that neither “*signs and wonders*” nor “*spiritual gifts*” are with us today, have been known to interpret the phrase “*when that which is perfect is come*” to mean the completion of the Bible. Their argument is that now we have the Bible, which is perfect, therefore, we do not need any of the other gifts any more. I find this too strained an interpretation of the passage.

It is far more straightforward to understand the phrase “*when that which is perfect is come*” to mean when we get to heaven. But with this interpretation, it means that the “*spiritual gifts*” are still with us today, because the passage states clearly that “*prophecies,*” “*tongues,*” and “*knowledge*” shall cease only after “*that which is perfect is come.*” Now, if this is interpreted to mean the canon of Scripture, then we can safely say that all these gifts are now ceased. But I find it difficult to interpret the passage in that way. Perfection is not here. We have a complete Bible, to which nothing should be added or taken away, and every word of it is indeed perfect, but this is not what is being spoken about here. I’m not perfect yet, and I’ll only be perfect when I enter into the rest of my Lord, and this has not yet come, while I am still on this earth. Only then, in glory, will I not need “*spiritual gifts*” any more (or indeed a Bible).

13:11-12

When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

Our lives are here compared to the difference between being a child and being a man. As a child, we understand and think as a child, but when we grow up, we don’t think that way any more, because we can see a lot more clearly. Similarly, on this earth, we can only understand and think as a child. Only when we get to heaven will we see things as they clearly are. I find it difficult to interpret this passage to mean that before we got the complete canon of Scripture we thought as a child, but now we have the Bible, we think as men. It is a much greater contrast than that – the contrast indeed between our life here on earth, and what it shall be when we get to glory.

1 Corinthians 8:1-3

We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth. And if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know. But if any man love God, the same is known of him.

13:13

And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

“*Faith*” and “*charity*” are both fruits of the Spirit. “*Hope*” is a type of faith:

Romans 8:24-25

For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it.

Those who believe that there are no gifts for today see this verse, and say that now abideth only “*faith*,” “*hope*” and “*charity*,” and not the gifts mentioned, such as “*prophecy*,” “*tongues*” and “*knowledge*.” But this does not see the gifts as we have suggested they should be seen, i.e. not as miraculous “*signs and wonders*” but as rational, sober gifts given by God to whom He wills for His own holy purpose and ends.

1 Corinthians 14

14:1

Follow after charity, and desire spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophesy.

This chapter now goes on to speak of some gifts being better than others, and which of them we should “*covet*” or desire more than others. We are all agreed that we should “*follow after charity*.” That is a far “*more excellent way*” (1 Corinthians 12:31). But we should secondarily desire spiritual gifts. It is not wrong to desire spiritual gifts, as long as we realise that we will maybe only receive one or two of them, i.e. only those that the Lord wants us to have as individuals for His own purposes. However, if we are going to desire spiritual gifts, it is far better that we desire the best gift, namely “*prophecy*.” This is far greater than the others.

14:2,3

For he that speaketh in an unknown tongue speaketh not unto men, but unto God: for no man understandeth him; howbeit in the spirit he speaketh mysteries. But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort.

A person speaking in the church meeting in an unknown tongue, unknown to the hearers that is, is not speaking to the hearers at all, but to God. So we see that this “*unknown*” tongue is intelligible, but is not fruitful to the hearers because they don’t understand it. It only edifies the speaker, who does understand it, and God to whom the speech is directed. He speaks “*mysteries*,” i.e. things that are hidden at present, but will later be revealed (presumably when they get an interpreter). But one who prophesies in the church meeting, speaks in a language known to the hearers, so they can all be edified, exhorted and comforted. This is far more useful in a gathering of any kind, and therefore is the greater gift.

14:4 *He that speaketh in an unknown tongue edifieth himself; but he that prophesieth edifieth the church.*

The one speaking in the unknown tongue is edifying himself, he is not speaking nonsense, nor anything not understood by him. The problem is that it is not understood by anyone else in the meeting.

14:5 *I would that ye all spake with tongues, but rather that ye prophesied: for greater is he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues, except he interpret, that the church may receive edifying.*

It is good to speak with tongues, and one can be edified by it oneself (because oneself understands it), and indeed it is real communion with the Lord, which is always good and useful. But it is always better to be able to edify others in a meeting, so to have the gift of prophecy is always greater than the other gifts, because we are renewed and grow in grace by understanding, which acts on the mind. Once our minds have been renewed accordingly, our bodies will then follow. Speaking in tongues plus the interpretation of tongues in a meeting, is regarded here as the equivalent of prophecy. So we see how important doing all things unto edification really is.

Romans 12:2

....be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind....

Ephesians 4:23

And be renewed in the spirit of your mind.

14:6 *Now, brethren, if I come unto you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you, except I shall speak to you either by revelation, or by knowledge, or by prophesying, or by doctrine?*

The most important thing we need in the church meeting, is to do or say something profitable to the others around us. Such things therefore are the greater gifts:
revelation,
knowledge,
prophesyings, and
doctrine.

All of these come under the umbrella of “*prophecy.*”

14:7-9 *And even things without life giving sound, whether pipe or harp, except they give a distinction in the sounds, how shall it be known what is piped or harped? For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle? So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? for ye shall speak into the air.*

Here, speaking in tongues unknown to the hearers, without any interpretation, is likened to musical instruments which don't give a distinction in the sounds they make, and consequently no tune is discernible. It is a noise, a cacophony. Nobody is going to prepare himself for anything if such a sound comes into his ears, he is just going to ignore it. This is important, especially if it is the trumpets sounding that a battle is imminent. No-one is going to prepare himself for battle if the sound of the trumpet is not clear. Similarly, we must make sure that at all times, if we speak at all, we speak things easy to be understood by others, otherwise they will not understand, and our speaking will be meaningless and pointless.

14:10,11 *There are, it may be, so many kinds of voices in the world, and none of them is without signification. Therefore if I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian, and he that speaketh shall be a barbarian unto me.*

All languages mean something to someone, but if the people listening to us don't understand what is being said, then it is pointless speaking in their presence, we may as well be a foreigner speaking a foreign language, no hearer will be able to understand.

14:12 *Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church.*

If we say we are zealous of spiritual gifts, then that is a good thing, but we should make sure we seek to excel to the edifying of the church, not to seek to boast as to how many foreign languages we know.

14:13,14 *Wherefore let him that speaketh in an unknown tongue pray that he may interpret. For if I pray in an unknown tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful.*

If we do speak in an unknown tongue, we must pray that we may interpret, so all around can understand what we say. If we don't interpret, we still pray in our spirit to the Lord, but our understanding is unfruitful to anyone else. We will understand, and it may indeed be fruitful to us personally, but no-one else around will know what we're talking about, and therefore what we say will not be fruitful to them at all.

14:15 *What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also.*

Therefore, whatever we do, whether we pray, or sing, the most important thing is that we do these things with the understanding, or rather, that others may understand us. Otherwise we ought to just keep quiet, and speak to the Lord alone ourselves. If we are to engage in the public worship at all – which involves praying and singing as its major elements – then we are only to engage in it if we can be understood by others. Coming out with some foreign song, foreign language or nonsense, is just not right, and is condemned.

14:16,17 *Else when thou shalt bless with the spirit, how shall he that occupieth the room of the unlearned say Amen at thy giving of thanks, seeing he understandeth not what thou sayest? For thou verily givest thanks well, but the other is not edified.*

If we bless, or give thanks, and the other people around us can't understand what we are saying, the Lord understands, and indeed you may be giving thanks well, but no-one else is edified, and so can't and shouldn't say "Amen" to what has been said.

14:18,19

I thank my God, I speak with tongues more than ye all: yet in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue.

Paul praises God for the gift of being able to communicate in different tongues more than anyone, but the gift is not given to any of us to boast about at all. It would be far better not to have such a gift at all, and rather speak five words to others that they can understand, than a great homily in a language unknown to them.

14:20 Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be men.

Understanding is the most important thing we should be concerned about. Do we understand what we hear and learn? When we communicate to others, do we communicate clearly so that they can understand what we're saying? These are the most important things in the life of the church. If we don't hold to this concept, then we're still children. It is in malice, i.e. the ways of the world, that we should be children, and we should flee from such things. In understanding the truth, we should be men, mature, able to help each other in growing up in the truth. This is how we all grow in the spiritual life.

14:21,22 In the law it is written, With men of other tongues and other lips will I speak unto this people; and yet for all that will they not hear me, saith the Lord. Wherefore 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 which believe.

This is an often misunderstood passage. People think that this passage is saying that speaking in tongues is a sign and witness given to believers, in order to bring unbelievers to the Lord, whereas prophesying is only a sign for believers to edify themselves. Nothing could be further from the truth. Later on in the passage we see in verses 24 and 25 that it is prophesying which brings unbelievers to the Lord, and the knowledge of the truth. So how do we explain the role of tongues? The quote in v.21 is from the prophet Isaiah. Here it is in full:

Isaiah 28:9-13

Whom shall he teach knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand doctrine? them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts. For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little: for with stammering lips and another tongue will he speak to this people. To whom he said, This is the rest wherewith ye may cause the weary to rest; and this is the refreshing: yet they would not hear. But the word of the LORD was unto them precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little; that they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken.

In this original context, the "sign" of God speaking to the people with "other tongues," is similar to the sign of God speaking to the people with "stammering lips," namely, a sign of judgment. God will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and Gentiles and babes will be brought into the church in their place:

Matthew 11:25

At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes.

Psalm 8:2

Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength because of thine enemies, that thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger.

1 Corinthians 1:19, 27-29

For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.... But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: that no flesh should glory in his presence.

Jeremiah 5:15

Lo, I will bring a nation upon you from far, O house of Israel, saith the LORD: it is a mighty nation, it is an ancient nation, a nation whose language thou knowest not, neither understandest what they say.

Hosea 2:23

And I will sow her unto me in the earth; and I will have mercy upon her that had not obtained mercy; and I will say to them which were not my people, Thou art my people; and they shall say, Thou art my God.

Romans 10:20,21

But Esaias is very bold, and saith, I was found of them that sought me not; I was made manifest unto them that asked not after me. But to Israel he saith, All day long I have stretched forth my hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people.

14:23 If therefore the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad?

Unbelievers or unlearned people who come into a church and witness many people speaking in foreign languages with no interpretation being given, so that no-one is being edified, will go away thinking that Christians are mad, and that Christianity is pointless and irrational. The witness, far from bringing them nearer to the Lord, drives them away, because the gospel is not preached, and nothing is edifying or rational at all in such a meeting.

14:24,25 But if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all: and thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth.

But, on the other hand, if an unbeliever or unlearned person comes into a meeting where all present are edifying each other in rational conversation, then he too can be convinced that Christianity is true, that he is a sinner in need of salvation, and indeed could be converted as a result.

In other words, to an outsider, people boasting of their gift of tongues with no rational intelligent discussion taking place, will drive people away, whereas prophecy, where rational edification is everyone's goal, can be a powerful means of their conversion.

14:26 How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying.

So, all things in the church ought to be done “*unto edifying*,” so that all present, believers and unbelievers alike, may profit from what has been said.

14:27,28 If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two, or at the most by three, and that by course; and let one interpret. But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church; and let him speak to himself, and to God.

Here we see that all things must be done by course, i.e. one at a time, no-one trying to interrupt and hog the discussion. And we see that speaking in tongues should be limited to at the most three people per meeting, and then only if what is said can be interpreted for the rest of the group to understand, otherwise the speaker should keep quiet.

14:29-31 Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge. If any thing be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace. For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted.

This concept is also to be extended to prophecy itself. People should speak one at a time, nobody rudely interrupting another, all judging what each other says, with no factions being formed, so that all may learn and be comforted. This should be the ultimate end of all church gatherings.

14:32,33 And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints.

Once an argument begins, with people interrupting others, butting in, loudly trying to proclaim their point of view, and so on, the Lord has left the meeting house. If people are truly prophets of the Lord, they will be subject to all the other prophets. God does not wish for confusion in a meeting, one person saying one thing, and another something else. We should try to live at peace with all men, even if that means our point of view (which indeed may be the correct one) is not heard properly. Each one of us is answerable to God as an individual, so we must keep what we believe in our hearts, even if we don't have the opportunity to share it with others because of louder, more aggressive men. They are answerable to God for themselves.

Romans 12:18

If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.

14:34,35 Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they

will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.

This is, sadly today, a controversial issue. It shouldn't be. By women keeping silence, is not meant absolute silence. They should be allowed to sing and pray, for example. They should also be allowed to speak in conversation before and after the meeting. But what we have here is what Paul spoke to Timothy about:

1 Timothy 2:11,12

Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.

In this passage it is clear that by "*silence*" is not meant complete silence, but that women should not "*usurp authority over the man.*" In other words, women should not be speaking officially, in a mixed church gathering; rather they should remain silent. As mentioned earlier, there will be plenty of men who will not be able to get their point of view across in a church gathering either, because of forceful, more aggressive men overwhelming the meeting. Just leave it with the Lord. At least the wife can speak to her husband afterwards about what she has on her mind, and they can pray together over any issues raised.

14:36 *What? came the word of God out from you? or came it unto you only?*

Does the word of God come from men, or, is it given to men, by God? Of course, the latter. Therefore we should not complain, or argue about any situation, but simply obey the Lord in all things.

14:37,38 *If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord. But if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant.*

So, you think you are a prophet, do you? Or at least, you think you are so spiritual, do you? If you truly are a prophet or a spiritual person, then acknowledge that what is written here is from the Lord and obey it. Don't boast in any gift of tongues you may have, or think you may have. Don't do or say anything in the church meeting, unless people would be edified by it. Women, keep silence in church. Men, if you can't get your message across properly because of circumstances in the meeting, leave it with the Lord. A true prophet, a truly spiritual person would acknowledge all these things.

14:39,40 *Wherefore, brethren, covet to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues. Let all things be done decently and in order.*

Here is the sum of the whole matter. If we would covet the best gift, it would be the gift of "*prophecy*," because that is the one by which most edification would ensue. However, we should not forbid the speaking in tongues altogether, as long as there is an interpretation available, because by all means we want everyone to be edified as a result. Above all, do everything one thing at a time, not all together in confusion, never trying to get your six-penneth in, thinking yourself to be so important. "*Let all things be done decently and in order.*"

Conclusion

We should stop trying to blur the lines and think that “*signs and wonders*” are the same as “*spiritual gifts*.” They are completely different. So many people in this world today want excitement. They want to have the magical ability to heal miraculously, like Christ had. They want to speak with the tongues of angels, to impress their friends. They want to be seen in the church as a great prophet, with direct communication from God, which no other person has, so they can be looked up to and can impress people and gather a following. No.

“*Signs and wonders*” were only available for a time to Christ and His apostles, to ratify His testimony. We don’t need them any more. We’ve been given something completely different (and far more useful), namely, the “*spiritual gifts*.” The true people of God (whoever they are, we can’t discern) have been given a variety of gifts in order to fulfil their own individual callings before God in the world. We must use these responsibly, realise that they are gifts that can be taken away at any time, and make sure that we use them to point to Christ, never to ourselves. Such a man is a true Christian.