

A Brief Look at Sign Gifts, Faith Healing & Tongues

Written by Mike Gowens

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The last century brought a significant change to the religious landscape of the West. With the upsurge of Pentecostalism in the early 1900's and the Charismatic Movement it spawned, the configuration of the Christian community was significantly altered. No longer was Christianity defined by the two traditional categories of emphasis—Evangelicals and Catholics. The growing influence of a third but more amorphous influence—the Charismatics—proved “a force to be reckoned with”. By the close of the twentieth century, popular writers regularly grouped professing Christians into three, not two, schools of thought—Evangelicals, Catholics, and Charismatics. Within a mere one hundred years, charismatic influence surged from the fringes of Christian culture to center stage. No longer is it merely an exception to the rule of traditional Christian emphasis. The movement's remarkable growth and widespread influence argues that it is here to stay.

Historical Analysis

The Charismatic movement rose to prominence as a reaction to the apparent deadness and formalism of traditional Christianity. In the wake of the growing secular influence of “Higher Criticism” (a ‘scientific’ emphasis within academic circles that approached the Bible from a strictly naturalistic bias), a climate of skepticism prevailed in traditional Christian circles. This anti-supernatural climate was fertile soil for a Charismatic reformation.

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Emphasizing “the baptism of the Spirit” as a normative experience in the Christian life, the Charismatics attempted to recover Christian faith from the perceived malaise of cold orthodoxy, dead ritualism, and the secular assaults of proud scholastics. Some leading figures in the Christian community (like the late Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones) were initially sympathetic and cautiously optimistic to the momentum of the charismatic movement. Through the years, other respected voices (like Dr. J. I. Packer) have been careful to acknowledge the sincerity of charismatic believers and hesitant to dogmatically denounce the movement as spurious. The general reaction from evangelical leaders has been (in other words) respectfully tolerant.

Midway through the twentieth century, however, various extremes and excesses began to emerge—i.e., faith-healing, ecstatic utterances in heavenly tongues, signs and wonders, the word-faith teaching (“name and claim your blessing”), and “holy laughter”—as the defining characteristics of charismatic emphasis. The “sign gifts” (charismata) are central to charismatic teaching.

Biblical Response

In the spirit of 1 Thessalonians 5:21, “Prove all things and hold fast to that which is good”, it is important to analyze and evaluate the truth claims of the charismatic movement. What are we to make of “signs and wonders”, “speaking in tongues”, and “faith-healing”? Are tongues, miracles, and healings happening today just as they were in the first century? Does God want every Christian to be rich? Is physical healing always God’s will? Should all Christians aspire to speak in tongues? Are the apostolic gifts of direct revelation from God and miracles still operating today?

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In the following survey, we will offer a brief, Biblical overview of three primary areas of charismatic emphasis: Miracles, Signs & Wonders; Speaking in Tongues; and Faith-Healing. My purpose in offering this analysis is not to denigrate any charismatic believer, but to instruct those who desire to know Biblical answers to the issues raised by the charismatic movement.

I. Miracles, Signs & Wonders (*Does God still work miracles through human agents?*)

A. This is not a question of God's "ability", but of God's "program"

1. All things are possible with God (Mt. 19:26). He can still heal the sick apart from natural means or medical intervention. He still operates on a supernatural level.

2. But, Scripture teaches that His plan does not include the use of human agents as miracle-workers in every age

(a). A distinction between *immediate* miracles...(the global flood; Confusion

at Babel – Gen. 11; destruction of Sodom/Gomorrah; Sennacherib's

defeat – 2 Kings 19:35-36; Hezekiah's healing - 2 Kings 20; Daniel & the

3 Hebrews, etc.)

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(b). ...and *mediate* miracles (e. g. Moses commanding the 10 plagues; Elijah

raising the widow's son to life; Peter raising Dorcas to life)

B. A Biblical Response – *The signs and wonders that characterized the apostolic age was unique, not normative for subsequent eras*

1. Argument #1: Three Miraculous Periods, each accompanying a new era of Biblical revelation

(a). Age of Moses/Joshua (400 yrs of Divine silence in Egypt was followed by a brief period of mediate miracles)

(1) Moses = 10 plagues upon Egypt (Ex. 7-12); the Dividing of the Red Sea (Ex. 14); the water from the rock (Ex. 17)

(2) Joshua = walls of Jericho fall flat; sun stands still

(b). Age of Elijah/Elisha (~600 years passed without further miracles; then, a second era of miracles introduced the age of the prophets)

(1) Elijah = multiplied the widow's oil/meal; raised the widow's son; called fire and rain from heaven

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(2) Elisha = raised the Shunamite's son, purified a pot of poisonous stew, healed Naaman of leprosy, and made an axe-head float

(c). Age of Jesus/Apostles (at close of OT, another 400 yr parenthesis of silence, followed by the third period of miracles – even John the Baptist did no miracle –

Jno.

11:41

)

(1) Jesus = turned water to wine, unstopped deaf ears, cleansed lepers, restored sight to blind, raised the dead, cast out demons, etc.

(2) Apostles = healed the lame (Acts 3:3-11; 5:15-16), spoke in tongues, raise the dead (Acts 9:36

-42; 20:6-12), immune to venomous serpents (Acts 28:1

-6), etc.

Point: Signs & wonders were not sheer Divine exhibitions. The primary purpose of signs/wonders was **to validate the miracle-worker as an authentic spokesman for God**

(1 Kings

17:23

-24; Jno. 3:2; Jno.

10:24

-25; Acts

2:22

). God gave men the power to work miracles whenever He introduced a new era of special revelation (Acts

7:36

-38; 14:3; Mr. 16:20; Heb. 2:3-4)

2. Argument #2: Sign Gifts Intended to be Temporary

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(a). Signs & Wonders were given to confirm the apostolic teaching until New Testament revelation was complete – 1 Cor. 13:8, 13

(b). As the age of revelation came to a close, the sign gifts ceased also. The church of the second century existed in a changed world. Note that as after the gospel went to the Gentiles in Acts 13, references to miracles are increasingly rare – cf.

1 Tim.

5:23

; 2 Tim.

4:20

3. Argument #3: Apostolic Uniqueness

(A). Apostles were special men selected for a special role in a special era – Eph. 2:20; they have no successors

(1) Apostles were eyewitnesses of the resurrected Christ – 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:7-8

(2) Apostles were chosen personally by Christ, as His personal representatives; consequently, they spoke with complete authority

– Mt. 10:1-4; Jude

17

(B). The gift of miracles was peculiar to the apostles and those directly commissioned by the apostles; it was not given to the average Christian – Mt.

10:1; Acts

2:43

; Acts

5:12

; Acts

15:12

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; 2 Cor.

12:12

(if ordinary believers possessed the sign gifts, Paul's reference to the miracles he performed as evidence of his apostleship would be meaningless

)

4. Argument #4: Apostolic Miracles Contrasted to Modern Miracle Claims

(A). NT miracles were performed publicly, with crowds of unbelievers watching (Acts 4:16); Modern, alleged miracles typically occur in the controlled environment of a private or in a religious meeting.

[\[1\]](#)

(B). NT miracles were obvious, verifiable events (healing of organic diseases, like blindness, leprosy, lameness [palsy, withered arms, etc.], and raising the dead). Modern, alleged miracles frequently concern non-verifiable maladies or psychosomatic illnesses (i.e. a heart murmur, stomach ulcers, etc.).

(C). NT miracles were always successful; The apostles never experienced a failure, but healed everyone (Acts

5:16

), instantaneously (Mt.

8:13

; Mr. 5:29; Jno. 5:9;

Acts

9:34

) and totally (Lk.

4:39

; Acts 3:2-8; see also Acts

10:38

). They could use

their gifts at will; but Modern miracle-workers cannot heal at will and tend to blame failures on the individual's lack of faith.

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II. **Faith-Healing** (*The first of two sign-gifts that characterize the charismatic emphasis*) [\[2\]](#)

A. The basic tenets of the Charismatic view of health and healing

1. Sickness and disease is from the devil, but health and healing are from God. [\[3\]](#)
2. For the believer, the use of medical science is suspect because it demonstrates a lack of faith.
3. Divine healing was purchased in Christ's atoning death and is, therefore, God's will for all true believers. (Is. 53:3-6; 1 Pet. 2:24)
4. The individual's lack of faith is the reason for the failure to be healed.
 - (a). may spawn guilt and disillusionment [\[4\]](#)
 - (b). consider the argument in light of Mr. 2:5 and Mr. 9:24

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B. The Biblical view of health and healing

1. Sickness and disease may come from directly from God (Ex. 4:11, sometimes for purposes known only to Him—Jno. 9:1-3, or sometimes as a chastisement—Deut. 28:22; Ex.

15:26

), or the devil (Lk.

13:11

-13), but most often is simply the natural consequence of living in a world under the curse of sin. If the Lord Jesus tarries, Ecclesiastes 12, if nothing else, awaits us all.

2. Scripture does not forbid, but implies encouragement of, the appropriate use of medical science (Is. 38:21; Mt. 9:12; Acts 28:8-9 [two different Greek words translated “healed”]; cf. also the “creation mandate” in Gen. 1:28, the basis of true scientific pursuits).

3. Perfect physical health is a blessing promised as part of the glory of the next world (Rev. 21:4), not the present life (Phi. 2:27; 1 Tim. 5:23; 2 Tim. 4:20; 2 Cor. 12:7-9). The “healing” referenced in Is. 53 & 1 Pet. 2:24 is primarily a spiritual, not physical, healing – healing from the plague of sin and the sickness of our souls (cf. Ps. 103:3; Ps. 147:3; Jer.

17:14

).

[\[5\]](#)

4. The exercise of “faith” is not a “name it and claim it” dynamic, but a humble confidence in God that both believes His promise and bows to His sovereign will. To pray “thy will be done” is not unbelief, but a proper humility.

III. Speaking in Tongues

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A. Preliminary Considerations

1. Three Biblical books mention “tongues”: Mr. 16:17 (as an apostolic sign); Acts 2, 10, 19 (narratives of occasions in which this miracle occurred in the early church); 1 Cor 12-14 (Paul’s correction of the misuse of tongues in the Corinthian Church)
2. “Tongues” = Gr. *glossa*, a word that may refer either to the physical organ or to a language.

B. Four basic explanations of the “**other tongues**” in Acts 2

1. The Ecstatic Utterance or “heavenly language” interpretation – This is the most popular explanation within the charismatic movement. It claims that tongues is a supernatural expression of unintelligible sounds as a display of Spirit-baptism. The phrase “tongues...of angels” in 1 Cor. 13:1 is used to support this explanation that the gift of tongues is a private prayer language or some kind of celestial form of communication between the individual and God.

[6]

The problem with this view is that Acts 2 clearly defines the “other tongues” as native languages of the crowd

2. A Hearing miracle – This is the idea that the apostles spoke in their native language but the people heard in their native languages. *The problem with this view is that it redefines the miracle in terms of the person hearing, not the person speaking*. The Bible, on the contrary, defines the gift of tongues as something that concerns the one who is speaking.

3. The Language/Miracle interpretation – This is the most popular viewpoint of non-charismatic Bible students. It claims that the apostles supernaturally spoke languages they had never learned.

The problem with this view is that it assumes that the Jewish crowd described in Acts 2:1-13 spoke different native languages, but the passage makes no reference to specific languages

. Rather it refers to geographical locations and people groups.

[7]

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In fact, linguistic scholars agree that Judeans in the first century spoke Aramaic and Greek as their native tongues, and Hebrew as the formal or liturgical language of worship.

4. The Diglossia interpretation – This is a very possible explanation of the Acts 2 passage. It argues that Jewish culture had both an informal language for ordinary life—Aramaic & Greek—and a formal or high language for worship—Hebrew (the *leshon ho-kodesh*, or “holy tongue”). In other words, Jewish culture was socially and religiously bilingual—one language for the home/street, another for the temple. At the feast of Pentecost, the Jewish people would have expected these religious teachers to employ the official language of the liturgy. When they spoke about divine things, therefore, in the ordinary vernacular of daily life, the crowd was surprised.

[\[8\]](#)

According to this view, the “other” tongues of Acts 2:4 does not mean “languages other than what they normally spoke” but “languages other than the Hebrew, the formal and holy language of Jewish worship”. To replace the sacred tongue with a profane would have necessarily elicited both “amazement” and “ridicule” from the crowd

The problem with this explanation is that it defines the reference to “tongues” in terms of a mere social phenomenon, discounting the fact that Mr. 16:17 clearly lists “tongues” as a miraculous sign-gift that would mark the apostolic witness

C. Analysis of the “**unknown tongues**” at Corinth – 1 Cor. 14 [\[9\]](#)

1. What was happening at Corinth? Some of the Corinthian believers were evidently counterfeiting the true gift of languages with a kind of ecstatic speech in its place.

(a.) Notice the way Paul uses both the singular and the plural forms of *glossa*. When he refers to this anomaly of ecstatic utterance, he uses the singular form (vs. 2, 4, 13, 14, 19). Interestingly, it is only where the singular form of the word is used that the adjective “unknown” is supplied.

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(b.) When he refers to the authentic gift of languages, he employs the plural form (vs. 5, 6, 18, 22)

2. Paul proceeds to correct these abuses by certain guidelines

(a.) The gift of tongues should work in conjunction with the gift of interpretation – vs. 13, 27, 28. This provision argues that tongues were actual languages, not ecstatic babblings, for unintelligible sounds cannot be translated.

(b.) The true gift of tongues was intended as a sign to unbelievers – v. 22

(c.) The goal of all spiritual gifts is the edification of the church, not the showcasing of individual talents or the enhancement of personal communion with God (vs. 2-6, 12, 26; cf. 1 Pet. 4:10). [\[10\]](#) In verse 2, Paul criticizes the Corinthians for using the “gift of tongues” to speak to God instead of speaking to men. Spiritual gifts are not to be used to show off, to gratify one’s own ego, or to compete for status.

(d.) Prophecy (i.e. speaking God’s word intelligibly) is superior to tongues, for the goal of all spiritual gifts is to edify “the church” not “oneself” -- vs. 2-6, 39

(e.) The misuse of tongues complicate rather than clarify communication – vs. 16-17

(f.) Any confusion or disorder in the public assembly indicates that the source of the confusion did not originate with God – v. 33

Summary:

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1. “tongues” = actual languages, not ecstatic utterances. The purpose of the gift was to overcome language barriers so that the gospel may be communicated without the need of a translator. Like the other “sign gifts”, tongues “ceased” when God’s revelation was inscripturized (1 Cor. 13:8-13). By the end of the first century, every NT epistle had been written and was circulating among the churches. Corinthians was one of Paul’s earliest epistles. He wrote at least eleven epistles after it and never again made any reference to “tongues”. Neither Peter, or John, or James, or Jude make a single reference to tongues.

[\[11\]](#)

The contemporary church no longer needs inspiration in men, for she possess Divine inspiration in God's word.

[\[1\]](#) John MacArthur asks some very pertinent questions: “Why do we seldom hear of the gift of healing being used in hospital hallways? Why aren’t more healers using their gift on the streets in India and Bangladesh? Why aren’t they in the leper colonies and AIDS hospices where masses of people are racked by disease? ...Where are the healings of shattered bones? When have we heard of a faith healer taking someone who had been in a car accident and straightening out a lacerated face or a shattered skull? ...Where are the restored limbs for amputees, or former quadriplegics who now function normally? ...People who tout the gift of healing today do not spend much time in funeral parlors, funeral processions, or cemeteries. The reason is obvious.”

[\[2\]](#) Confession: If I, as a Christian pastor, could possess one of the sign-gifts, I would want the gift of healing because of the terrible pain and misery that disease brings on the people to whom I attempt to minister. Reality: But, the reality is that sickness, injury, or some kind of infirmity has ultimately conquered every human being in death, except for Enoch and Elijah. No one—not even those who claim the gift of healing—is exempt.

[\[3\]](#) Popular “Word Faith” teacher Charles Capps warns against negative confession: “We have programmed our vocabulary with the devil’s language. We have brought sickness and disease into our vocabulary, and even death. The main word so many people use to express themselves is the word ‘death’—‘I’m just dying to do that.’ They will say, ‘I’m going to die if I don’t. That just tickled me to death.’ Now that, my friend, is perverse speech. That is contrary to God’s word. Death is of the devil...”

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[4] J. I. Packer writes, “The charismatic supposition [i.e. that perfect health is God’s will for all believers] creates appalling possibilities of distress when on the basis of it a person seeks healing, fails to find it, and then perhaps is told that the reason lies not in God’s unwillingness or inability to heal, but in his own lack of faith.”

[5] Packer, again, says, “That total healing for the body with total sinless perfection are ‘in the atonement’ in the sense that entire personal renewal in Christ’s image flows from the cross (cf. Rom. 8:23; Phi. 3:20f) is true, but it is a potentially disastrous mistake to expect on earth what will only be given in heaven.”

[6] There is no evidence in Scripture that angels communicate in anything but normal human language – Is. 6:3; Lk. 2:8-14; Rev. 5:11-12; 14:6-10.

[7] The Greek word *dialektos* (from which we derive the English ‘dialect’) in Acts 2:6, 8, however, may be the best answer to this problem, for dialect is a subcategory of language. Webster defines “dialect” as “a regional variety of a language.” That definition certainly fits this context. Yes, first-century Jews spoke Aramaic and Greek as primary languages, but the various people-groups mentioned here spoke a variety of dialects within the broader category of those languages.

[8] Robert Zerhusan writes, “If a diglossia existed among first-century Judeans, we may have a major clue about the interpretation of the phrase ‘other tongues’ in Acts 2:4. Among first-century Judeans, the religious language— *leshon ho-kodesh*—Hebrew, was the language that both Palestinian and Diaspora Judeans expected to hear in the Temple liturgy during the feast of Pentecost.”

[9] There is no reason to assume that the use of the adjective “unknown” refers to a language that is other-worldly. It is not necessarily a language that is unknown *to everybody*, but a language that is unknown *to the one who speaks it* in the sense that he had never been taught to speak it.

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[10] John MacArthur writes: “Paul’s point was that no one profits from such an exhibition except the person speaking in tongues—and the chief value he gets out of it is the building of his own ego.”

[11] Chrysostom, writing in the fourth century, said concerning the gift of tongues: “The obscurity is produced by our ignorance of the facts referred to and by their cessation, being such as then used to occur but now no longer take place.”