



As we move into the final portion of our half-hour study series, we come to topics that won't come up in studies with everybody but might come up in studies with somebody. The first of these topics is spiritual gifts. Many of you may well have had, as I have had, the experience of talking Bible with somebody who believes that the miraculous spiritual gifts of the first century continue today.

Let me be honest with you, brethren. It is difficult to find success in studies with such people. Though it's not obvious, these problems stem from a disagreement over spiritual authority. In everything we say, we appeal to the authority of the Scriptures. People like this, though, generally place the authority of their own experiences over the authority of the word. They are more concerned with what they have seen and felt than with what the text says.

Of course, "difficult" is not the same thing as "impossible". I know people who have come out of Pentecostalism to become faithful disciples, and there are certainly honest hearts in any group. To equip us to help such people, then, let's consider miraculous spiritual gifts.

The first problem with claims of modern-day gifts has to do with the first-century origin of such gifts. In the time of the early church, believers received gifts in two ways. The first was THE BAPTISM OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. Look at Acts 10:44-47. In

this story, we see the Gentile household of Cornelius receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit and begin to speak in tongues.

This is in fulfillment of a prophecy made in Joel 2, in which God promises that He will pour out His Spirit on all mankind. Even though the passage we're considering doesn't mention this prophecy, it describes both halves of its fulfillment. The first took place on the day of Pentecost. It's what Peter is referring to when he says that "we"—that is, we Jewish believers—received the Holy Spirit. In Acts 10, the Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit in the same way.

After this event, we never see another occurrence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures, and it makes sense that we wouldn't. After all, God promised to pour out His Spirit on all mankind. He poured it out on the Jewish portion of mankind on Pentecost, and He poured it out on the Gentiles of the household of Cornelius. As a result, all of mankind received the baptism of the Holy Spirit in the first century. God has kept His promise, so we have no reason to look for more Holy Spirit baptism today.

Second, believers could receive spiritual gifts through THE LAYING ON OF THE APOSTLES' HANDS. Consider the evidence of Acts 8:14-18. In this text, the phrase "the laying on of the apostles' hands" is extremely significant. At this point in Acts, the gospel has just come to Samaria through the preaching of Philip the evangelist. Philip is one of the seven from Acts 6, but he is not an apostle. He has spiritual gifts himself, but he does not have the ability to communicate those spiritual gifts to others.

As a result, the new Christians in Samaria were without spiritual gifts. They did not receive them until the church in Jerusalem sent the apostles Peter and John to lay hands on brethren so they could receive them. Only apostles had the ability to do this.

This poses a serious problem for people who claim to have these gifts today. Where did they get them? They can't get them from the baptism of the Holy Spirit because the promise of the Spirit has been completely fulfilled. They can't get them from the apostles because all of the apostles are dead, and you can't become an apostle unless you are an eyewitness to the resurrection of Jesus. The Scriptures lead us to the conclusion, then, that Christians today should not expect to receive miraculous spiritual gifts, and those who believe they possess them merely are deceiving themselves.

This conviction is further strengthened when we consider THE NATURE of first-century miraculous gifts. For example, look at Acts 2:6-11. This passage is important because it gives us more evidence than any other about what the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues was like. Today, there are millions who claim to have the gift of tongues, but they say that they are speaking in a prayer language or in the language of angels. However, that's not what the first-century gift of tongues was.

Instead, we see from this text that the gift of tongues gave the apostles the ability to speak foreign languages they had not studied.

Back when I was getting my religious-studies degree, I did some research into the origins of Pentecostalism in the early part of the last century. The earliest Pentecostals claimed to have the ability, like the Christians of Acts 2, to speak foreign languages.

However, they quickly retreated from that claim because it is falsifiable and was falsified. If you claim that you have the spiritual gift of speaking Russian, all I have to do to determine whether you are telling the truth is find somebody who has learned Russian and have him listen to you. If he says, "Yep, that's Russian", like the audience in Acts 2 did, then you have proved that you have a gift. If, however, he says, "That's not Russian," he has proved you are mistaken. People who claim to speak in a prayer language make that claim because it isn't falsifiable, but what they claim to have is not the true gift of tongues.

Finally, we must ponder THE DURATION of gifts. Let's read from 1 Corinthians 13:8-13. Everybody agrees that this passage says that spiritual gifts will come to an end. However, there is disagreement about when this will occur. Brethren traditionally have argued that "the perfect" is the completed revelation of the Scriptures. Pentecostals, on the other hand, generally contend that the text is saying that gifts will come to an end in heaven.

However, there is a serious problem with that interpretation. In contrast with the spiritual gifts that will pass away, Paul says that three things will abide: faith, hope, and love. That doesn't fit with heaven at all. Faith won't abide in heaven. It will have become sight. Hope won't abide in heaven. It will have been fulfilled. Only love will remain.

Paul has to be talking, then, about a time on earth when we will still have faith and hope but won't have gifts. From this, we must conclude that "the perfect" is the complete written word. Because we have it, we no longer should expect to have miraculous spiritual gifts.

M. W. Bassford