

# Key Bible Doctrines

## Part 7: The Gifts of the Holy Spirit

### The Gifts of the Holy Spirit

Exactly fifty days after the resurrection of Christ a remarkable event occurred that would signal a dramatic change in the way God would henceforth deal with mankind. The disciples were gathered together to celebrate the Jewish festival of Pentecost when “Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them” (Acts 2:2-4). The sound had attracted a crowd of people of the Jewish faith from many different nations, but each person in the crowd was able to hear the disciples preach the gospel to them in their own language (Acts 2:5-12). This event, called *Pentecost* by Christians, marked the start of the church age.<sup>1</sup> Peter explained to the astonished crowd that “this is what was spoken of by the prophet Joel:

‘In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.  
Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.  
Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.  
I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke.  
The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.  
And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’” (Acts 2:16-21; cf. Joel 2:28-32).

Pentecost signalled that the “last days” of God’s plan of salvation had begun, and that they would be the domain of the church. It also showed that the church would be characterised by the power of God at work in the world through ordinary men and women of faith by means of *spiritual gifts*.

### The Spiritual Gifts

*A spiritual gift is any ability that is empowered by the Holy Spirit and used in any ministry of the church.*

The ability of the disciples at Pentecost to speak in foreign languages was the first example of a spiritual gift given to the believers by the Holy Spirit. Prior to this, God had given spiritual gifts to certain individuals, such as Moses, Elijah, Elisha, Samuel, David, and the twelve disciples of Jesus (e.g., Luke 10:17, 21), but now he would give them to *everyone* who believes in him.

Immediately before his ascension, Jesus had promised the disciples, “I am going to send you what my Father promised; but stay in [Jerusalem] until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49). He also told them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name

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<sup>1</sup> Pentecost is a Greek word meaning “the fiftieth day”, and was the day after the seven weeks of harvest following the Passover ceremony of “firstfruits” as described in Leviticus 23:9-14. The day of firstfruits was the 16<sup>th</sup> of Nisan, and was the same day that the risen Christ presented himself to the Father (John 20:17). On the day of Pentecost, the Jews celebrated the Feast of Weeks, as described in Leviticus 23:15-22 and Deuteronomy 16:9-12, to give thanks to God for his blessings during the harvest. It also coincided with the exact time of the year when the law was given from Sinai as recorded in Exodus.

of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20). To this he added, “And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well” (Mark 16:17-18; cf. Luke 10:19; John 14:12-13).

In his teaching on the spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12, Paul explains that “to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All of these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines” (vv. 7-11). He goes on to conclude, “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues” (vv. 27-28). Evidently, these are just some of the many “different kinds of gifts” given by the Spirit (v. 4).

In Ephesians 4, Paul says, “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (vv. 11-13). And in Romans 12, he says, “Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully” (vv. 4-8). From these teachings we can reason that even the natural gifts common to mankind, such as the ability to sing, or play an instrument, or to speak in public, could be considered to be spiritual gifts if they are used in the service of the church and to the glory of God.

It is clear from the passages just quoted that the main purpose of the spiritual gifts is to build up and strengthen the church. Paul encouraged the believers to “Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy”, because “everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort” (1 Corinthians 14:1, 3). Similarly, Peter instructed that “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 4:10-11).

But the spiritual gifts also serve to strengthen the faith of individual believers. Paul said, “We have different gifts, according to the grace given us” and that we should exercise these gifts “in proportion to [our] faith” (Romans 12:6). This suggests that gifts can be more or less strongly developed in different individuals, or in the same individual over a period of time. Therefore, he reminds Timothy, “Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you” (1 Timothy 4:14).

We can conclude from these scriptures that:

- There are many different kinds of spiritual gifts, but all are given by the Holy Spirit

according to the will and grace of God.

- Everyone in the church is given at least one spiritual gift to be used for the common good.
- Every gift can be strengthened through regular use and increasing faith.
- The spiritual gifts are given to build up and edify the church until Christ returns (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:8-10).
- Some gifts are greater (i.e., more valuable to the church) than others, and as Christians we should “eagerly desire the greater gifts” (1 Corinthians 12:31).

While the range of spiritual gifts varies widely from the spectacular, such as the working of miracles, healing the sick, or casting out of demons, to the ordinary, such as providing encouragement, showing mercy, or helping others, yet each one is critical to achieving a well-balanced and healthy church. Even if some Christians have more powerful gifts than others, yet “those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour” (1 Corinthians 12:22-23). Whatever gift God has given us we should value it and look to develop it fully so that we can complete the work that he has for us to do, and so that we can bring glory to him who has brought us “from death to life” (Romans 6:13).

### Have Some Gifts Ceased?

There has been some debate among Christians as to whether all of the gifts mentioned in the New Testament are still active today. Some would argue that the more miraculous gifts such as prophecy, tongues, casting out of demons, miracles, and even healing, were active only during the time of the apostles as signs to authenticate the early preaching of the gospel. However, there is nothing in the New Testament to suggest that some of the gifts would be temporary, while a straight-forward interpretation of the Scriptures indicates that the gifts will last until the end of the current age when Christ returns. For example, consider the following from the passages already discussed:

- At Pentecost Peter applied the words of the prophet Joel to a period called “the last days” which clearly must extend to the “last day” which is the day when Christ will return.
- Jesus promised the disciples that miraculous signs and demonstrations of God’s power would accompany the preaching of the gospel. Therefore, as long as there is a need to preach the gospel we should expect Jesus to fulfill this promise.
- Paul taught that the spiritual gifts are to be used “for the common good”, and “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we reach unity in the faith”, and for the “strengthening, encouragement and comfort” of the believers. Therefore, as long as there is a common good to be advanced and a people to be prepared for works of service, or to be brought to maturity in the faith, or to be strengthened or encouraged or comforted, then there is a need for the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Also, in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul says, “Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (vv. 8-12). Paul is here teaching that the spiritual gifts, such as prophecy, tongues and words of knowledge, will not pass away until what is perfect has come. This is a reference to the return of Christ at which time we will be made fully mature in him and, therefore, able to know completely the things that we can now only see in part.

To suggest that the gifts of the Holy Spirit were no longer required after the period of the apostles is tantamount to suggesting that the church after this time no longer required the help of the Holy Spirit! And who, apart from Satan, would dare to suggest such a thing?

One of the main reasons why people have argued for the cessation of the gifts is that they do not appear to be present, to any great extent, in the church today. However, it is much more likely that the reason for this is a lack of faith in the church rather than a lack of desire on the part of the Holy Spirit to give gifts to his children. Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it” (John 14:12-14). He also said, “Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:11-13).

Another reason why people have argued for the cessation of the gifts is a genuine concern that an over emphasis on the use of miraculous gifts may cause churches to neglect the more important things such as evangelism, sound doctrine, and moral purity. Indeed, Paul commended the church at Corinth for believing the gospel message and for their growth in the faith including experiencing the gifts of the Holy Spirit: “Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed” (1 Corinthians 1:7). And yet this church was one of the more wayward of the early churches that Paul had to deal with, lacking in moral purity, sound doctrine, and a Christian love for one another (1 and 2 Corinthians). However, to say that the use of miraculous gifts is dangerous is not in itself an adequate reason for disregarding the teaching of Scripture. Missionary work is dangerous. So also is driving to church! Instead, it is better to deal with the dangers by a proper understanding and application of the Scriptures.

### Discovering and Seeking Spiritual Gifts

If you are a new Christian and are wondering what your spiritual gifts might be, the first thing that you need to understand is that *every* member of the church will have at least one gift, and often more than one. In identifying what these are, you should start out by considering the natural abilities that God has given you to see how these might be used to serve the Lord. You should then pray for wisdom and direction in accordance with the instruction, “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him” (James 1:5). You should then have the elders of the church pray for you, with the laying on of hands and prophesy, in order to confirm God’s plan for your life.<sup>2</sup> The final step is to put into practice the gifts that you believe God has given you according to the extent of your faith. Be careful in the beginning not to overreach. For example, if you think that you have a gift of healing, do not start out by trying to raise a cripple out of his wheelchair, or heal someone with a fatal disease. Instead, leave this to people with more experience and greater faith while you develop your own faith by praying for, and expecting, smaller miracles of healing.

The role of the elders of the church in developing the spiritual gifts of their congregation is vital. Their responsibilities before God include: providing accurate teaching about the gifts; encouraging everyone in the church to “eagerly desire spiritual gifts” (1 Corinthians 14:1); and creating opportunities for the congregation to practice their gifts and to share testimonies, which have been tested by the elders, of what God has done so as to glorify him and strengthen the faith of the whole congregation. The elders are also responsible for guarding against the misuse of spiritual gifts, such as for self-glorification or self-gain, and ensuring that the members are not led astray by pride or an over emphasis on the exercise of the gifts to

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<sup>2</sup> It is a good idea to keep a record of all prophecies spoken over you, because sometimes it can be many years before they are brought to fruition, and in that time you might forget what the Lord has promised.

the exclusion of other important aspects of their faith.

In the following sections four of the more controversial gifts are discussed. These are the gifts of prophecy, teaching, healing, and tongues and interpretation.

### Prophecy

*The gift of prophecy is the ability to proclaim publicly something that God has brought to mind.*

In Old Testament times God spoke to his people through prophets. These were men and women chosen by God to proclaim his messages, which he had given to them in a dream or vision or by inspiration, to whomever he sent them. Peter said that “no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:20-21; cf. Numbers 12:6; Judges 4:1-16; Isaiah 6). The words of the Old Testament prophets were largely aimed at increasing the faithfulness and obedience of God’s people, Israel, or comforting them with promises of future blessings.

The Old Testament prophecies contained numerous predictions about future events, most of which have already been fulfilled. These oracles serve three key purposes. Firstly, the accurate fulfilment of prophecy points to the reality of God, since he alone knows the future (Isaiah 41:22-23; 43:9; 44:7-8; 45:21). Secondly, it provides proof that a particular prophet was truly sent by God: “If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him” (Deuteronomy 18:22; cf. Jeremiah 28:9). And thirdly, many of the Old Testament prophecies point to the coming of Jesus Christ, both his first appearing as the servant Messiah and his return at the end of the current age as the King.

Jesus was himself the great Prophet whom God, speaking through Moses, promised Israel: “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account” (Deuteronomy 18:18-19). But Jesus himself replaced the role of the Old Testament prophet as the spokesperson for God with that of the apostle. Initially, he chose twelve men to be his apostles although one of them, Judas Iscariot, was a traitor and false apostle (Mark 3:13-19). He appointed the twelve “that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons” (vv. 14-15). After Pentecost other apostles were added to help build up the early church.<sup>3</sup> This change in God’s mode of operation from the prophets to the apostles reflects the change in his plan of salvation from working with a chosen nation, Israel, to a chosen people “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9). This “chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God” (1 Peter 2:9), is the church established by the apostles under the direction of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:5-11).

The ministry of the prophet has by no means disappeared with the coming of the church age, but certainly is of a lesser authority than it was in the Old Testament age: “And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets ...” (1 Corinthians 12:28). A prophet in the church continues to exhort and encourage believers to greater faithfulness and holiness by means of words of knowledge from the Holy Spirit: “... everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort” (1 Corinthians 14:3).

Occasionally, a prophet may provide a prediction of a future event affecting someone in their church, as when Paul was warned not to go to Jerusalem because he would be bound by the

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<sup>3</sup> There are eight others mentioned by name in the New Testament: Matthias, who replaced Judas (Acts 1:15-26), Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14:14), Andronicus and Junias (Romans 16:7), James the brother of Jesus (Galatians 1:19), and Silas and Timothy (1 Thessalonians 1:1, 7). But there were certainly many more (Ephesians 4:11-13).

Jews and handed over to the Romans (Acts 21:10-11; cf. v. 4). Paul chose not to heed this warning saying to his fellow believers, “I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus” (v. 13). This shows that the modern prophets do not speak with the same authority as those of the Old Testament. It is also interesting that the prophecy was not entirely accurate. It was the Romans who bound Paul, not the Jews. In fact, the Jews, rather than delivering him voluntarily, tried to kill him, and the Romans rescued him by force (vv. 30-33).

Paul instructed believers, “Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good” (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21). This testing of prophecies was also required of the Old Testament prophets, but in this case a false prophet was to be put to death: “But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death” (Deuteronomy 18:20). The New Testament prophet is not subject to such a severe judgment because the gifts of the Holy Spirit come by grace and not by merit. Nevertheless, the gift of prophecy in particular should be exercised with caution: “We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith” (Romans 12:6).<sup>4</sup>

Paul also warned that the words of a church prophet should never usurp or countermand the words of Scripture: “If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command. If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored” (1 Corinthians 14:37-38). Nor should anyone think to add anything to Scripture or to take anything away from it. In this regard, John’s warning at the end of the book of Revelation can be considered to apply to all Scripture: “I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book” (vv. 22:18-19).

### Teaching

*The gift of teaching is the ability to explain Scripture and apply it to people’s lives.*

Jesus’ ministry on earth was first and foremost one of teaching: “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people” (Matthew 4:23). His healing ministry was secondary and intended mainly to provide evidence that he was the Son of God (John 10:24-26). Jesus taught with such authority that the people were amazed: “When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law” (Matthew 7:28-29). Even the Pharisees, who hated Jesus, acknowledged this: “Teacher, ... we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are” (Matthew 22:16). In contrast, Jesus criticised the religious leaders of the day for replacing God’s Word with their own teachings: “Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: ‘These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’” (Matthew 15:6-9).

After Pentecost the apostles travelled throughout the Roman empire teaching the Word of God (e.g., Acts 15:35; 18:11). In regard to the Old Testament, Paul said to the church at

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<sup>4</sup> For example, one should never begin a word of prophecy with “This is the Word of the Lord” or similar, because it might not be true! Rather, it is better to say something like, “I believe that the Lord is saying ...” Also, if someone believes that they have a word of prophesy for another person, the prophet should first ask that person if they in fact would like to hear the word, because they might not!

Rome, “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4). And to Timothy he said, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Such was the authority of the apostles that their teachings were also accepted as God’s word, eventually forming part of the New Testament. Thus, Paul instructed the believers at Thessalonica to “stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter” (2 Thessalonians 2:15). He also warned the Galatians that if anyone “or even an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!” (Galatians 1:8).

But it was not just the apostles that were given the gift of teaching. From the very beginning of the church many men have been called to be teachers and preachers of the Word of God in the manner of Jesus and the apostles. Paul instructed Timothy, “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable man who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Timothy 2:2). Conversely, the writer of Hebrews rebuked his readers because, “though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil” (Hebrews 5:12-14).

It is normally the elders or overseers of a church who are the teachers for that church, but the laity might also preach and teach from time to time so as to test and develop their teaching gift. In regard to the elders, Paul taught, “Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money” (1 Timothy 3:2-3). In addition, those who teach must be familiar with the Scriptures and wise in the ways of God so that they can “teach what is in accord with sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1). Peter warned that those who teach false doctrines will bring “swift destruction on themselves” (2 Peter 2:1).

Paul makes it abundantly clear that women are not to teach: “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner” (1 Timothy 2:11-14).<sup>5</sup> However, older women who are “reverent in the way they live ... can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no-one will malign the word of God” (Titus 2:3-5).

## Healing

*The gift of healing is the ability to bring various kinds of healing to others through prayer and the laying on of hands.*

Physical, emotional and spiritual sicknesses entered the world as a result of the fall of Adam and Eve. Illness and disease are part of the outworking of the curse that God put upon the creation after the fall, and they eventually lead to physical death. However, Christ redeemed us from this curse when he died on the cross. The prophet Isaiah was referring to the coming Messiah when he said, “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows ... by his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:4-5). Peter quoted this prophecy in reference to spiritual healing: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24). But Matthew

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<sup>5</sup> It is astonishing how many churches today directly defy this clear command of God. It would seem that the church has become beguiled by the spirit of feminism in the world.

quoted the same passage with reference to the physical healings performed by Jesus: “When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: ‘He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases.’” (Matthew 8:16-17).

It is clear from these and other scriptures that, in the atonement, Christ has obtained for us a complete healing from all our human weaknesses and infirmities, and that this complete healing will be received at the end of the age when Christ returns. But the Scriptures also indicate that through the prayer of faith believers can receive healings of every kind in their current lives. This was demonstrated by the healing ministry of Christ, and is the very purpose of the gifts of healings referred to by Paul. As well as bringing comfort and health to those affected by sickness, miraculous healings demonstrate God’s great mercy and love for his children, and serve to build up the faith of his church. They also provide an opportunity for God to be glorified among both believers and unbelievers.

In the New Testament, healing was most commonly administered by the laying on of hands (e.g., Matthew 9:18; Luke 4:40). It was also a common practice to anoint the sick person with oil. For example, the disciples of Jesus “went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them” (Mark 6:12-13). Also, James instructed the believers: “Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective” (James 5:14-16). In some circumstances it may be possible to bring healing to someone by the issuing of a command in the name of Jesus (e.g., Matthew 8:5-13). This might be necessary, for example, if the sick person cannot be reached or is some distance away. Also, the issuing of a command appears to be the most common method for driving out demons (e.g., Mark 9:38-40; Acts 16:16-18).

While prayer is the essential element in any healing, Christians should not hesitate to utilise modern medical remedies if available. It is God who has provided to mankind medical knowledge, skilled physicians, advances in medical science, and the substances in the earth that can be made into medicines with healing properties: “For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer” (1 Timothy 4:4-5). In fact, when medical remedies are available and Christians refuse to use them because they want God to provide a miraculous healing, they are effectively putting God to the test (cf. Luke 4:12). However, like everything in the world, medical practices can be corrupted by Satan, and therefore the prayer of faith is still required to ensure that the believer receives the best possible treatment and care. Even those who have the gift of healing should remain open to the possibility that God may want to heal the person that they are praying for by the use of modern medicines or medical procedures (cf. Isaiah 20:7).

Healing, whether by miraculous or ordinary means, requires faith. Jesus taught that with faith anything is possible (e.g., Matthew 17:20; 18:19; John 14:12-14; 16:24). In the New Testament it was sometimes the faith of the sick person that healed them (e.g., Luke 8:48; 17:19), while at other times it was the faith of those who sought healing for the sick person (e.g., Matthew 15:28; Mark 2:5), and sometimes it was the faith of those administering the healing that made the sick person well (e.g., Acts 3:1-8; cf. James 5:15). However, it is also by faith that some Christians must accept that it is not God’s will to heal them in this age (cf. Hebrews 11). Paul, who was himself afflicted by a painful sickness (2 Corinthians 12:7-10), told the believers, “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all” (2 Corinthians 4:16-17).

When God chooses not to heal us, our faith must rest in knowing that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans

8:28). And our attitude should be the same as that of James: “Consider it pure joy ... whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2). Peter also taught that hardships and trials are necessary to develop faith: “These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Peter 1:7). Therefore, those who have the gift of healing should not be discouraged if their prayers are not always answered, because the Lord may be doing a greater work in the people that they are praying for.

### Tongues and Interpretation

*The gift of speaking in tongues is the ability to pray to God and to praise him in a language that only he, and those to whom he has given the gift of the interpretation of tongues, can understand.*

When Paul refers to the gifts of “speaking in different kinds of tongues” and the “interpretation of tongues” in 1 Corinthians 12:10, he is describing the ability that some Christians have to speak in languages that only God can understand or those to whom he has given the ability to interpret those languages. The word *tongues* used in this way sounds strange to us today and it would be better translated as “languages” which is how the Greek-speaking readers of the time would have understood it. Whatever word is used, however, the gifts of tongues or languages remain the most mysterious and controversial of all the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The first appearance of the gifts of tongues was at Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2:1-13. At this time the Holy Spirit had come upon the disciples and they “were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them” (v. 4). When a crowd of “God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven” had gathered around them they were able to hear the disciples “declaring the wonders of God” in their own language (vv. 5-11). At a later time while Peter was preaching the gospel to some Gentiles, “the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gifts of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God” (Acts 10:44-46). Peter later recounted this to the believers in Jerusalem explaining that it was a sign that the Gentiles could also be saved: “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.’ So God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?” (Acts 11:15-17).

In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul gives instructions on the use of the gifts of tongues and prophecy. He notes that the gift of prophecy is better than the gift of tongues because “anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no-one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit. But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. I would like everyone of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified” (vv. 2-5). After further explaining that there is no value in speaking publicly in a language which others cannot understand, he says, “For this reason anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind” (vv 13-15).

Paul then instructs the believers, “If anyone speaks in a tongue, two – or at the most three – should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God” (vv. 27-28). He gives similar

instructions for the prophets (vv. 29-32) before concluding, “For God is not a God of disorder but of peace” (v. 33). He said this because the gifts of tongues and prophecy, in particular, can lead to disorderly conduct in the church.

From these passages we can draw the following conclusions about the gift of tongues:

- It is usually received when a believer also receives the anointing of the Holy Spirit.
- It is mainly intended for the personal and private worship of God and serves to edify the believer.
- It involves the spirit of the believer communicating directly with the Spirit of God without going through the human mind.
- It only has value for the church when the words spoken can be interpreted either by the speaker or by another believer.
- It must be exercised in a way that is orderly and honouring to God.

Because of the great personal benefit that comes from worshipping God, whether it is by the spirit or by the mind, Paul desired that every believer have this gift. However, in his extensive teaching on the gifts of the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12, he makes it clear that not all of the believers will receive all of the gifts (cf. vv. 29-30). Instead, the Holy Spirit distributes different gifts to each person so that the members of the church can learn to depend on each other and to have respect for one another (cf. vv. 21-27). If someone who has the gift of tongues were to think that he or she is more spiritual than those who do not have the gift, then that person would be wrong and in danger of committing the sin of pridefulness (cf. Proverbs 16:18; 1 Peter 5:5). Conversely, if someone were to criticise those who speak in tongues, that person could be guilty of criticizing the Holy Spirit and of disobeying the command of God given through the apostle Paul: “Therefore, ... be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (1 Corinthians 14:39-40).

## Acknowledgments

Bible quotations are from the New International Version, 1984 unless otherwise indicated. Other versions referred to from time to time are:

*Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible*, New American Standard Bible, 1977 (NASB).

*The Spirit Filled Life Bible*, New King James Version, 1991 (NKJV).