

Sermon Notes
Dec. 11, 2011
The Gift That Keeps on Giving
1 Cor. 12:4-11, 27-31
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Why does Paul speak of gifts (plural) of healings (plural)? Possibly because healing different types of physical ailments required different kinds of healing gifts. But also because more than miraculous physical healing is in view. Physical healing is included – but so are emotional, mental, and spiritual forms of healing. There are people who are very gifted at brining these other kinds of healing. They're able to bring peace and renewal to people who are broken and hurting. They're able to help others move towards the wholeness God intends. They're gifted as counselors and comforters. These kinds of healings are not as overtly supernatural, but they are still manifestations of the Spirit's power.

Paul also mentions another gift, the working of miracles. While this certainly overlaps with the more miraculous gifts of healings, it is listed as a distinct gift twice in this chapter. What kind of miracles are in view? Jesus did other kinds of miracles besides healings. He walked on water, calmed storms, performed exorcisms, etc. Mark 16 says the apostles will do signs, such as casting out demons, handling serpents, and drinking poison without being harmed. In Acts 28, Paul survives a viper bite. Are there miracle workers in the church today? These kinds of miracles were marks of the apostles (and the apostolic age). Generally speaking, we should not expect miracle workers in the church today, *though we should certainly not deny that God still works miracles for his people on occasion*. What are we to make of claims from church history of saints who have performed miracles? For example, the third century bishop Gregory of Thaumaturgus is reported to have done exorcisms, healings, causing stones to levitate on command, and even drying up a lake in order to settle a conflict between two brothers? Perhaps these things really happened and we have a postapostolic miracle worker. I will not say it is absolutely impossible. On the other hand, it is entirely possible we have historical facts encrusted by legend, especially since the events are not recorded until a century after his death. At the very least, it seems very clear cases of the gift of healing, such as Peter exercised in Acts 3:1-10, are extremely rare. Note that Peter doesn't even have to pray for the man; he simply commands the man to get up and walk (just as Jesus did with a lame man).

We must distinguish the gift of miracle-working from miracles. No faithful Christian can doubt that God still does miracles today, often in answer to the prayers of his people. But that is a distinct from claiming that there are people who have the ability to work miracles the way Jesus and the apostles did. A cessationist position does not mean God's miraculous activity has altogether ceased. There are certainly still

situation where Christians rightfully pray for a miracle....and sometimes God chooses to answer those prayers.

Many cessationists make the case for the cessation of revelation and the cessation of miracle-working stand or fall together. The reason is that miracle-working gifts seem to be given as a way of authenticating the office and message of the apostles (and their close associates).

While the NT does draw a close connection between special revelation and miraculous signs that confirmed that message (e.g., Heb. 2), I am not certain that the analogy totally holds. The cessation of special revelation is far more certain than the cessation of miracle-working gifts.

Miracles in the Bible seem to come at the start of new epochs and seem to be sped up version of things God will do in slower, more "ordinary" ways after the new epoch is inaugurated. Certainly this seems to be the case with the creation week. Or think of Jesus' first miracle: he turns water into wine instantaneously. But of course, water "naturally" turns into wine through natural processes over a long period of time, as rain is absorbed into grapes, the grapes are harvested, grape juice fermented, etc. The gift of tongues allowed first generation Christians to carry out their mission to the nations much, much faster than they could have otherwise. Today, we generally accomplish the same thing through a much slower process of Bible translation. Etc.

A little bibliography on these issues:

Perspectives on Pentecost by Richard Gaffin is a cessationist theology of the Holy Spirit full of helpful insights of exegesis.

The Holy Spirit by Sinclair Ferguson contains helpful material on Spiritual gifts from a Reformed, biblical-theological, cessationist perspective. See also Donald MacLeod's *The Spirit of Promise*.

The Corinthian Catastrophe by George Gardiner mainly deals with the cessation of special revelation. *The Final Word* by Palmer Robertson is not the best cessationist work, but still worthy of consultation. Likewise, Walter Chantry's *Signs of the Apostles*.

J. I. Packer's *Keep in the Step with the Spirit* is a helpful book. While leaning in a semi-charismatic direction, Packer presents a very balanced look at the Spirit's role in the Christian life.

B. B. Warfield's classic *Counterfeit Miracles* is an interesting, albeit, one-sided historical account of miraculous claims in church history.

John MacArthur is a very well known cessationist. While much of his argumentation is not all helpful, his *Charismatic Chaos* certainly exposes the problems with the more radical elements of the charismatic movement.

The works of Jack Deere provide a charismatic, non-cessationist position. Mark Driscoll, Gordon Fee, Sam Storms, and John Piper all represent a moderate, mature non-cessationist position. While I disagree with these theologians, I do not think their case can be lightly dismissed. Wayne Grudem's book *The Gift of Prophecy* makes the fullest case for a kind of fallible new covenant prophecy. While I remain unconvinced, there is much here to consider. See also Ken Gentry's *The Charismatic Gift of Prophecy*, which was written in response to Grudem. The book *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?* allows four authors to provide their own viewpoint and then engage with the others. Obviously, I most identify with Gaffin's sections of the book (though I don't think Gaffin does full justice to the typological significance of 30-70 AD as a transitional period, ending with the destruction of the temple).