

# The Apostles and the Gifts

The 20th century witnessed the widespread growth of what many claim to be the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit. After about 1800 years of silence among biblical Christianity, the apostolic gifts have supposedly returned. This phenomenon has so moved into the mainstream of current religious thought that some may be surprised to learn that anyone would dare question the validity of these present claims. We challenge all serious Christians to take another look at these issues in the light of the Scriptures and be honest enough to ask, "Have the miraculous gifts of the apostles truly returned?" For our answer, we must look to the Holy Scriptures which are the final authority.

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First of all, we find three lists of gifts in the New Testament, as follows:

<u>Rom. 12:6-8</u>	<u>1Cor. 12:28-30</u>	<u>Eph. 4:11</u>
<b>prophecy</b>	<b>apostles</b>	<b>apostles</b>
ministry	<b>prophets</b>	<b>prophets</b>
teaching	teachers	evangelists
exhortation	<b>miracles</b>	pastor/teachers
giving	<b>healing</b>	
ruling	helps	
showing mercy	governments	
	<b>tongues</b>	
	<b>interpretation</b>	

As we examine these lists, we find that some gifts fall under the category of miraculous or extraordinary (which appear above in bold type), and some are non-miraculous or ordinary. It is our purpose to deal with the miraculous ones. We will divide these into four parts.

## I. Apostles

**1. Who they were.** The term "apostles" literally means messengers, sent ones or delegates. Not just anyone could be an apostle at will; they had to be personally chosen by the Lord Jesus Christ for that office. *And when it was day, he called unto him his disciples: and of them he chose twelve, whom also he named apostles* (Lk. 6:13). They were all males; no women were apostles.

According to Acts 1:21-22, an apostle had to be a personal eyewitness of Christ during the entirety of His public ministry including after His resurrection.

The early church was allowed to appoint deacons (Acts 6:5) and elders (Acts 14:23), but they could not appoint apostles. Such appointment came directly from Christ alone. Even in Acts 1, the final decision of a replacement for Judas Iscariot was left in the hands of the Lord. *And they prayed, and said, Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men, show whether of these two thou hast chosen* (Acts 1:24).

In the New Testament, we also find the same Greek word "apostolos" is used to designate men whom the churches chose to relay information or aid from one church or party to another. (See 2Cor. 8:23; Php. 2:25; Acts 14:14.) These however, should not be confused with the hand-picked twelve chosen by Christ as His apostles.

Paul enjoyed a unique apostleship. Though he had not followed Christ during His public ministry, he did see the risen Christ, and was specially appointed by Him, as he states in Gal. 1:1, *Paul, an apostle, (not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ...)*. Again Paul explains, *And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time* (1Cor. 15:8). Christ called Paul even though the age of apostle-calling was past. Note that Paul was the *last of all* on earth to see the Lord in a visible manner as an eyewitness of His resurrection. No one has seen Christ in that way since Paul. Thus, Peter could assume that none of his readers had seen the Lord: *Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory* (1Pet. 1:8).

None of today's so-called apostles meet these biblical qualifications.

**2. Their purpose.** According to Eph. 2:20, the apostles played a special foundational role in the early development of the New Testament church: *And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone*. This role included at least three functions. First, these men were indisputable witnesses of Christ's resurrection, since they had all personally seen him in His resurrected body. Second, to them was revealed the mystery of the New Covenant economy—the church, composed of Jew and Gentile alike (Eph. 3:1-10.) The apostles were the first to see this truth, and they taught it to others. Third, they were inspired to write infallible Holy Scripture, which all succeeding generations might read. Every New Testament book was written by an apostle or by someone directly associated with an apostle. Shortly before his death, the last surviving apostle tells us that this aspect of their work was completed once and for ever (Rev. 22:18-19). Since that time there have been no genuine, inspired revelations.

**3. Their duration.** The office of apostle was of limited duration because their work was limited to the foundational period of the church. The foundation need be laid only once, and thereafter we build upon it; we do not repeatedly and endlessly lay a foundation. There is no place for apostles today, because that foundation has long since been completed. Biblical Christianity has built upon that foundation for nearly 2000 years. It is utter folly and shameless arrogance to dare to place oneself on a par with Peter and Paul and assume the title of apostle today.

## II. Prophets

**1. Who they were.** The New Testament gives us no qualifications for this office, but prophets are mentioned several times in connection with apostles: *I will send them prophets and apostles* (Lk. 11:49). *And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets...* (Eph. 2:20). *...It is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit* (Eph. 3:5).

**2. Their purpose.** The above texts show that prophets shared in the foundational structure of the church along with the apostles. They taught divinely revealed truth. However, they were not instrumental in writing the Scripture.

**3. Their duration.** Being foundational like the apostles, their office ceased along with that of the apostles, once the foundation was successfully completed.

Virtually every modern day cult was started by some self-appointed prophet or apostle. If we believe in ongoing prophecy, we have no sure method by which to refute their blatant heresies. After all, how can you argue with a prophet!

## III. Tongues and Interpretation of Tongues

**1. What they were.** The biblical gift of tongues was a miraculous ability to speak a language or dialect formerly unknown to the speaker, but known to some ethnic group on the earth at that time. There was real content and meaning to the words spoken, not mere gibberish. On the day of Pentecost, *every man heard them speak in his own language* [literally, dialect] (Acts 2:6). Furthermore, as Peter explains this miracle to the multitude, he equates the gift of tongues with prophecy, quoting from Joel: *And on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy* (v. 18). Again, 1Cor. 14:5 equates the gifts of prophecy and tongues if the tongues are interpreted: *for greater is he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues, except he interpret, that the church may receive edifying*.

1Cor. 12:30 disproves the popular notion that every believer spoke in tongues. Even in Corinth, Paul could ask, *Do all speak with tongues? do all interpret?*

The modern idea that there is another type of tongues-gift, a “heavenly language”, is simply foreign to Scripture and must be rejected. Today’s gibberish is not the true biblical gift of tongues.

**2. Their purpose.** One purpose of tongues was to be a sign to the Jews that God’s judgment was upon them as a nation. *Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not* (1Cor. 14:22). Since the time of Abraham, God had spoken to them in Hebrew; but now, after Christ, God was speaking to them in other languages—Gentile languages—to show the Jews that their national privileges were coming to an end; the Gentiles would be partakers of the covenant of grace. The end of the Jewish nation came to pass fully in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. At that point the sign of national judgment, namely tongues, was no longer relevant nor necessary.

Another purpose of tongues, when accompanied by the gift of interpretation, was to edify believers in the local assembly. Interpreted tongues, as well as prophecy, served as direct means of receiving a part of the truth. *For we know in part, and we prophesy in part* (1Cor. 13:9). God gave these temporary measures as baby food for the early stage of the church. They were replaced with the perfect revelation of the whole truth when the New Testament books were completed. *But when that which is perfect [literally, mature or full-grown] is come, then that which is in part shall be done away* (v. 10). God’s written Word is the perfectly-balanced diet for Christians now. Today’s tongues-speaking would confine us to a perpetual babyhood.

**3. Their duration.** Since interpreted tongues function in the same way as prophecy, and since prophecy ceased along with the apostles, the gift of tongues has likewise ceased. This is precisely what Paul told the Corinthians would happen: *whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away* (1Cor. 13:8). Tongues were a block in the foundation which was completely laid in the apostolic times. Or to use Paul’s other analogy, these miraculous gifts belonged to the infancy stage of the church, but God never intended that we remain infantile! *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* (v. 11).

The fact that 1Cor. 14 provides guidelines for the use of this gift in the assembly in no way argues for its permanence. Furthermore, these guidelines are rarely followed by professing tongues-speakers today. Only males were permitted to use this gift, and that only if there was an interpreter, and not more than three per service, and not simultaneously but in order one after another.

## IV. Miracles and Healing

**1. Who did them.** A careful reading of the New Testament reveals that usually the apostles

exercised these particular gifts. For example, *Many wonders and signs were done by the apostles* (Acts 2:43). *And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people* (Acts 5:12). Paul could say to the Corinthians, *Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds* (2Cor. 12:12).

**2. Their purpose.** The primary purpose of these miracles was to validate the authority of the apostles as messengers truly sent by God. In Hebrews 2:3-4 we read that the truth of salvation taught by Christ *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.* As in the days of Moses, so in the days of Christ and the apostles, *the Jews require a sign* (1Cor. 1:22) as proof of authenticity, and God provided such proof.

**3. Their duration.** Acts 8 indicates that only the apostles had the power to transfer a miraculous gift to another person, and that person could not transfer it to anyone else. Philip the evangelist could do miracles in Samaria (v.6-7), but it was not until two apostles came from Jerusalem that gifts could be imparted to the new believers in Samaria (v.14-19).

The gift of miracles ceased with the generation following the apostles.

### Further Observations

Miracle-working of itself is no guarantee of spiritual soundness. Pharaoh's magicians seemed to copy the miracles wrought through Moses. The man of sin in 2Th. 2:9-10 is described as *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.* Our Lord taught that many at the day of judgment who claim to be Christ's prophets and exorcists would be denied entrance into heaven because they are actually workers of iniquity (Mat. 7:22-23).

It is quite curious that those who profess to possess apostolic gifts today seldom speak of certain hazardous miracles like taking up serpents and drinking deadly poison (see Mark 16:18). Their silence on these issues is deafening.

You might ask, "But don't the gifts have to be in operation today because Jesus is always the same?" The answer is that His essential character is unchangeable, but that does not mean that He is bound to do exactly the same things in each generation on earth. For example, we no longer offer animal sacrifices as did the Old Testament saints.

To those who might argue, "I had my experience, and I don't care what the Bible or anyone else says," we answer in the words of Isaiah 8:20, *To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.* Scripture is the standard by which we measure our experience, not vice versa.

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Have the miraculous gifts of the apostles truly returned? No. There are no apostles nor apostolic gifts today. As the foundation for the church was laid, the New Testament completed and the Jewish nation dissolved, the need for unique offices and miraculous gifts ended. Certainly God can do miracles today, but the gift of miracle-working is not given to any person today.

Positively, the Scripture does have something for believers today which is *more excellent* than extraordinary gifts which ceased, and that is ordinary graces—such as *faith, hope* and *charity*, which *now abide* (1Cor. 12:31; 13:8, 13). Though "ordinary", these graces are nonetheless supernatural, and

God puts a premium on them. Without holiness no man shall see the Lord (Heb. 12:14). It is our duty today to covet and cultivate these graces.