

Gifts of the Spirit

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This morning I want to continue an ad hoc series of messages talking about some Scriptures worth meditating on. Today I want to talk a little bit about the gifts of the Spirit and I want to do that for several reasons. One, as a church we believe Scripture teaches that God has given these gifts to his church for the building up of his people (1 Corinthians 14:5), and so that Jesus would be declared Lord (1 Corinthians 12:3). Two, I think it's important to talk about the gifts of the Spirit because quite a number of us grew up in churches that were either suspicious of or hostile to them? I certainly did. I grew up in a church that taught the gifts of the Spirit ceased with the death of the apostles. I led a multi-denominational Bible study at my high school and the Pentecostals made me nervous.

Three, I think it's important to talk about because the global explosion of pentecostal theology and practice is reshaping the church. The growth of pentecost, whether in Catholic, Presbyterian, Anglican, Wesleyan, or Arminian churches, began in the last quarter of the 20th century and has continued unabated into the 21st century. So, for instance, demographer John Allen estimates that Pentecostals represented about six percent of Christians in the world in the mid-1970's, but by the turn of the 20th century, they represented almost 20% of world Christians. And that number continues to grow. And those churches continue to grow, especially in the global south and Africa and even Asia, where persecution is common. And all of that has happened in the midst of declines in the church in Europe and North America. So this morning I want to begin by talking about why we believe these gifts are for today and not just for the early church and to do that, I want to talk about Pentecost itself, which birthed this movement. I want to begin by reading Numbers 11:24-30.

Eldad & Medad (Numbers 11:24-30)

24 So Moses went out and told the people what the Lord had said. He brought together seventy of their elders and had them stand around the Tent. 25 Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke with him, and he took of the Spirit that was on him and put the Spirit on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied, but they did not do so again. 26 However, two men, whose names were Eldad and Medad, had remained in the camp. They were listed among the elders, but did not go out to the Tent. Yet the Spirit also rested on them, and they prophesied in the camp. 27 A young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." 28 Joshua son of Nun, who had been Moses' aide since youth, spoke up and said, "Moses, my lord, stop them!" 29 But Moses replied, "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!" 30 Then Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

In Numbers 11:24-25 we see that Moses was close to breaking under the pressure of leading God's people to the promised land—people who never missed an opportunity to complain or rebel. And so, in response, God told Moses that he would take the Spirit that was "upon" him and put it "upon" the seventy Elders so that the Elders, with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, could help him with the demanding work of the ministry. And when God did that—when he took the Spirit that was upon Moses, and put it upon the Elders—the Bible says that the Elders began to prophesy.

So what does it mean when it says, "they prophesied?" The difficulty we have with that word is that when Scripture says, "they prophesied," we immediately think they began to predict the future. But prophecy was much more than telling future events because prophets were much more than shady fortune-tellers. Prophets spoke for God. Prophets then, who were under the control of the Holy Spirit, often gave prophetic utterances, or verbal outbursts, which were often accompanied by physical demonstrations as well as. And

that's precisely what we read about in verses 26 through 27.

Verses 26-27 tell us about two men named Eldad and Medad, who either didn't get the email that there was an Elder meeting, or they overslept. Whatever the case, they were in the camp with the people, not in the tent with the other elders and Moses, but when the Holy Spirit came upon the Elders it also came upon Eldad and Medad and these two men began to prophesy right where they were in the middle of the people. And everyone around them noticed that they were prophesying—they could tell by looking at and listening to them that the Holy Spirit had come upon these two Elders. Eldad and Medad looked and sounded like the prophet, Moses.

The same was true of Saul, who when the Spirit came upon him, 1 Samuel 19:24 says, "...stripped off his robes and also prophesied in Samuel's presence. He lay that way all that day and night. This is why people say, "Is Saul also among the prophets?" We don't encourage robe-stripping here, but it's clear that Saul was not acting like himself. What's more, people made the connection between the way Saul was acting and the way the other prophets acted.

Numbers 11:28-30 continues the story. It appears that Joshua was a union man because he was afraid that if Moses wasn't the only one prophesying, he might lose his job. But instead of grouching about it or forbidding it, Moses wished that God would pour out his Spirit on all of His people—not just himself, not just the Elders—every single one of His people. The problem was not that the Spirit had come upon too many people, but too few. Moses wish, or prayer, reverberates then throughout the pages of Scripture until it finds a home in the prophecy of Joel.

The Last Days (Joel 2:28-29)

Here's what the prophet Joel says. "28 And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. 29 Even on my servants, both men and

women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days."

There are two things in particular that I want us to notice about this passage in this context before we get to how the New Testament uses it. One, notice the connection between Moses' prayer and Joel's prophecy. God says through Joel that He will pour out his Spirit on all people, not just the prophets—not just the men, but the women too; not just the adults, but the children too. And that is precisely what Moses wished for.

Two, notice what it says will happen in verse 28. Joel 2:28 says that when the Spirit of the Lord is poured out on his people, they will prophesy. Does that ring a bell? When the Spirit came upon the Elders in Numbers 11, they prophesied. Do you remember what Moses said to Joshua when Joshua wanted to make Eldad and Medad stop prophesying? Moses said, "I wish that all God's people were prophets." So how do we know that Moses and Joel are looking forward to the time when all God's people would be prophets by having the Holy Spirit poured out on them? Because that's exactly what Peter says in Acts 2:14-21. Let's go there now.

The Day Of Pentecost Explained (Acts 2:14-21)

Acts 2:4 says, "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them." It's hard to imagine the extent of the confusion Pentecost unleashed. The city of Jerusalem swelled with visitors celebrating the Day of Pentecost, which was held 50 days after Passover and celebrated the summer harvest (Leviticus 23). There were people from all over the known world who saw and heard this bizarre occurrence, and yet they understood everything that was being said. As a group of onlookers gathered, they began to search for an explanation, the best of which seemed to be too much drinking too early in the morning. Peter got up, and by the power of the Spirit, explained what was happening.

Acts 2:14-18 says, "14 Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in

Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. 15These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! 16No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 17““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. 18Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.”

There are four things, as briefly as possible, that I want you to consider from this passage. One, Peter explicitly claims that speaking in tongues is the fulfillment of Joel chapter 2, which is, therefore, the gift Jesus told his disciples to wait for (Acts 1:8). We can debate a lot of things, but what we cannot be debate is whether the phenomenon of speaking in tongues was the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy; Peter claims the two refer to the very same thing.

Two, the question of whether or not it is right to equate speaking in tongues with what the Old Testament calls “prophesying” is also answered in this passage. The Old Testament never uses the phrase speaking in tongues, but Peter identifies speaking in tongues as the fulfillment of what the Old Testament calls “prophesying.” That means that the gift of speaking in tongues, to use the language of Acts, is consistent with and an expansion of the work of the Spirit in the Old Testament.

Three, like Numbers 11 and Joel 2, Acts 2 has nothing to do with telling the future. Just as Moses didn't need help predicting the future, Jesus didn't need his disciples to be able to predict the future. Just as Moses needed help carrying out the mission God had given him, the disciples needed help carrying out the mission Jesus had given them. Going and making disciples of all nations is not something that the disciples could do without the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

Four, the sign that the Spirit had come upon the believers in Acts two was apparently the same sign as it was in Numbers 11—there was a verbal utterance that accompanied the outpouring of the Spirit. Although we don't have time to flesh it out, it's the same pattern we see in Acts 10:46 with Peter at the house of Cornelius and Acts 19:6 with Paul minis-

tering among the Ephesians. It's clearly implied in Acts 8 where Simon the Sorcerer can see that the gift of the Spirit is given by the laying on of hands.

Because of this, the Assemblies of God and other Pentecostal denominations have taught that speaking in tongues is the initial physical evidence of being baptized in the Spirit according to Acts 2:4. That is consistent with both the Old and New Testaments. What's more, that experience, we believe, leads us into other gifts of the Spirit that from an Old Testament perspective we might call prophetic in nature. Those would include the gifts described in 1Corinthians 12 and 14, which is what we'll talk about next week. So let me give you a few conclusions and invite you to read, study, and prayerfully meditate on these passages of Scripture.

Conclusions

One, the only question we ever really need to answer on this topic or any other is, “what does the Bible teach?” That's why I want to invite you to read, study, and meditate on these verses. Read the Book of Acts. Read 1Corinthians 12 and 14. What does God say about these gifts that he gave to his church? Try to forget everything else and simply ask, “what does Scripture seem to say?”

Two, in that regard, because of the continuity between the Old and New Testaments in terms of what happens when the Spirit comes upon someone, it's difficult to dismiss the Baptism in the Holy Spirit as a blip on the radar of the church. Typically, when people want to dismiss speaking in tongues they go to 1Corinthians 13:8-12, which says, “8Love 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. 9For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. 11When 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. 12Now 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.”

In this passage, Paul is talking about the end of all things. In the end of all things, love will continue and even be perfected. However, prophecies will cease and tongues will be stilled. Why? Because everything will have been perfected. Judgment will have been pronounced and carried out. Wrongs will have been made right. Wickedness will be destroyed and righteousness abound. We will communicate with the Lord face to face. What is fuzzy will be perfectly clear. Knowledge will pass away because it will be known. We won't need teachers because we will know what we need to know. Certainly we cannot think that we have attained perfection so that prophecy, tongues, or teaching are no longer necessary. That's just not what Paul is saying.

Three, if God desires these gifts for the encouragement of his church, who are we to turn his gifts away because they make us uncomfortable. What's more, if we really believe that God is good, then why would we not want a gift from God because we know it will be good? Again, I understand that fear. I understand the discomfort. I walked that road. But Scripture assures us that if we ask for bread, we can trust God not to give us a snake.

I think you know me well enough to know that I say none of this with any animus toward those who disagree with me. Many of the people who have invested the most in my life disagree with me on this point. My heart here is to explain what I truly believe Scripture says and encourage God's people to seek Him for everything He has for them. God is good and he gives good gifts to his people. He wants to bless and encourage and equip.

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