

Chapter 53

Gifts of the Holy Spirit: (Part 2) Specific Gifts

How should we understand and use specific spiritual gifts?

EXPLANATION AND SCRIPTURAL BASIS

In this chapter we will build on the general discussion about spiritual gifts in the previous chapter and examine several specific gifts in more detail. We will not consider every gift mentioned in the New Testament, but will focus on several gifts that are not well understood or whose use has aroused some controversy today. Therefore we will not examine gifts whose meaning and use are self-evident from the term involved (such as serving, encouraging, contributing, showing leadership, or showing mercy), but will rather concentrate on those in the following list, primarily taken from 1 Corinthians 12:28 and 12:8–10:

1. prophecy
2. teaching
3. miracles
4. healing
5. tongues and interpretation
6. word of wisdom/ word of knowledge
7. distinguishing between spirits

A. Prophecy

Although several definitions have been given for the gift of prophecy, a fresh examination of the New Testament teaching on this gift will show that it should be defined not as “predicting the future,” nor as “proclaiming a word from the Lord,” nor as “powerful preaching—but rather as “*telling something that God has spontaneously brought to mind.*” The first four points in the following material support this conclusion; the remaining points deal with other considerations regarding this gift.¹

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1. For a more extensive development of all of the following points about the gift of prophecy, see Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians* and Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*. (The first book is more technical, with much more interaction with the scholarly literature.)

1. The New Testament Counterparts to Old Testament. Prophets Are New Testament Apostles. Old Testament prophets had an amazing responsibility—they were able to speak and write words that had absolute divine authority. They could say, “Thus says the Lord,” and the words that followed were the very words of God. The Old Testament prophets wrote their words as God’s words in Scripture for all time (see Num. 22:38; Deut. 18:18–20; Jer. 1:9; Ezek. 2:7; et al.). Therefore, to disbelieve or disobey a prophet’s words was to disbelieve or disobey God (see Deut. 18:19; 1 Sam. 8:7; 1 Kings 20:36; and many other passages).

In the New Testament there were also people who spoke and wrote God’s very words and had them recorded in Scripture, but we may be surprised to find that Jesus no longer calls them “prophets” but uses a new term, “apostles.” The apostles are the New Testament counterpart to the Old Testament prophets (see 1 Cor. 2:13; 2 Cor. 13:3; Gal. 1:8–9; 11–12; 1 Thess. 2:13; 4:8, 15; 2 Peter 3:2). It is the apostles, not the prophets, who have authority to write the words of New Testament Scripture.

When the apostles want to establish their unique authority they never appeal to the title “prophet” but rather call themselves “apostles” (Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1; 9:1–2; 2 Cor. 1:1; 11:12–13; 12:11–12; Gal. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; 1 Peter 1:1; 2 Peter 1:1; 3:2; et al.).

2. The Meaning of the Word *Prophet* in the Time of the New Testament. Why did Jesus choose the new term *apostle* to designate those who had the authority to write Scripture? It was probably because the Greek word προφήτης (G4737, “prophet”) at the time of the New Testament had a very broad range of meanings. It generally did not have the sense “one who speaks God’s very words” but rather “one who speaks on the basis of some external influence” (often a spiritual influence of some kind). Titus 1:12 uses the word in this sense, where Paul quotes the pagan Greek poet Epimenides: “One of themselves, a *prophet* of their own, said, “Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.” The soldiers who mock Jesus also seem to use the word *prophecy* in this way, when they blindfold Jesus and cruelly demand, “Prophecy! Who is it that struck you?” (Luke 22:64). They do not mean, “Speak words of absolute divine authority,” but, “Tell us something that has been revealed to you” (cf. John 4:19).

Many writings outside the Bible use the word *prophet* (Gk. προφήτης, G4737) in this way, without signifying any divine authority in the words of one called a “prophet.” In fact, by the time of the New Testament the term *prophet* in everyday use often simply meant “one who has supernatural knowledge” or “one who predicts the future—or even just “spokesman” (without any connotations of divine authority).

Much of the following material on prophecy is adapted from my article, “Why Christians Can Still Prophecy,” in *CT* (Sept. 16, 1988), pp. 29–35, and is used by permission; see also my articles, “What Should Be the Relationship Between Prophet and Pastor?” in *Equipping the Saints* (Fall 1990), pp. 7–9, 21–22; and “Does God Still Give Revelation Today?” in *Charisma* (Sept. 1992), pp. 38–42.

Several writers have differed with my understanding of the gift of prophecy. For alternative views to the position presented in this chapter, see Richard Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost*: (Gaffin is primarily responding to an unpublished version of my 1982 book), and the bibliography entries at the end of the chapter under Victor Budgen, F. David Farnell, Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., Robert Saucy, Robert L. Thomas, and R. Fowler White. On the other hand, the studies listed in the bibliography by D.A. Carson, Roy Clements, Graham Houston, Charles Hummel, and M.M.B. Turner, along with several book reviews, have expressed substantial agreement with the position I advocated in my 1982 and 1988 books.

Several examples near the time of the New Testament are given in Helmut Kramer's article in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*:²

A philosopher is called "a *prophet* of immortal nature" (Dio Chrysostom, A.D. 40–120)

A teacher (Diogenes) wants to be "a *prophet* of truth and candor" (Lucian of Samosata, A.D. 120–180)

Those who advocate Epicurean philosophy are called "*prophets* of Epicurus" (Plutarch, A.D. 50–120)

Written history is called "the *prophetess* of truth" (Diodorus Siculus, wrote c. 60–30 B.C.)

A "specialist" in botany is called a "*prophet*" (Dioscurides of Cilicia, first century A.D.)

A "quack" in medicine is called a "*prophet*" (Galen of Pergamum, A.D. 129–199)

Kramer concludes that the Greek word for "prophet" (προφήτης, G4737) "simply expresses the formal function of declaring, proclaiming, making known." Yet, because "every prophet declares something which is not his own," the Greek word for "herald" (κηρυξ, G3061) "is the closest synonym."³

Of course, the words *prophet* and *prophecy* were sometimes used of the apostles in contexts that emphasized the external spiritual influence (from the Holy Spirit) under which they spoke (so Rev. 1:3; 22:7; and Eph. 2:20; 3:5),⁴ but this was not the ordinary terminology used for the apostles, nor did the terms *prophet* and *prophecy* in themselves imply divine authority for their speech or writing. Much more commonly, the words *prophet* and *prophecy* were used of ordinary Christians who spoke not with absolute divine authority, but simply to report something that God had laid on their hearts or brought to their minds. There are many indications in the New Testament that this ordinary gift of prophecy had authority less than that of the Bible, and even

² 2. The following examples are taken from *TDNT* 6, p. 794.

³ 3. *Ibid.*, p. 795.

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4. I have a long discussion of Eph. 2:20 in *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* pp. 45–63, in which I argue that Paul says that the church is "built up on the foundation of the apostle-prophets" (or "apostles who are also prophets"). This is a grammatically acceptable translation of the phrase τῶν ἀποστόλων καὶ προφητῶν. As such, the passage refers to the apostles, to whom the mystery of Gentile inclusion in the church was revealed (see Eph. 3:5, which specifies that this mystery "has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets [or "apostle-prophets" or, "apostles who are also prophets"] by the Spirit").

I do not think that Eph. 2:20 has much relevance to the entire discussion of the nature of the gift of prophecy. Whether we see one group here as I do (apostle-prophets) or two groups, as Richard Gaffin and several others do (apostles and prophets), we all agree that *these* prophets are ones who provided the foundation of the church, and therefore these are prophets who spoke infallible words of God. Where we disagree is on the question of whether this verse describes the character of *all who had the gift of prophecy* in the New Testament churches. I see no convincing evidence that it describes all who prophesied in the early church. Rather, the context clearly indicates a very limited group of prophets who were (a) part of the very foundation of the church, (b) closely connected with the apostles, and (c) recipients of the revelation from God that the Gentiles were equal members with Jews in the church (Eph. 3:5). Whether we say this group was only the apostles, or was a small group of prophets closely associated with the apostles who spoke Scripture-quality words, we are still left with a picture of a very small and unique group of people who provide this foundation for the church universal.

less than that of recognized Bible teaching in the early church, as is evident from the following section.

3. Indications That “Prophets” Did Not Speak With Authority Equal to the Words of Scripture.

a. Acts 21:4: In Acts 21:4, we read of the disciples at Tyre: “Through the Spirit they told Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.” This seems to be a reference to prophecy directed towards Paul, but Paul disobeyed it! He never would have done this if this prophecy contained God’s very words and had authority equal to Scripture.

b. Acts 21:10–11: Then in Acts 21:10–11, Agabus prophesied that the Jews at Jerusalem would bind Paul and “deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles,” a prediction that was nearly correct but not quite: the Romans, not the Jews, bound Paul (v. 33; also 22:29),⁵ and the Jews, rather than delivering him voluntarily, tried to kill him and he had to be rescued by force (21:32).⁶ The prediction was not far off, but it had inaccuracies in detail that would have called into question the validity of any Old Testament prophet. On the other hand, this text could be perfectly well explained by supposing that Agabus had had a vision of Paul as a prisoner of the Romans in Jerusalem, surrounded by an angry mob of Jews. His own interpretation of such a “vision” or “revelation” from the Holy Spirit would be that the Jews had bound Paul and handed him over to the Romans, and that is what Agabus would (somewhat erroneously) prophesy. This is exactly the kind of fallible prophecy that would fit the definition of New Testament congregational prophecy proposed above—reporting in one’s own words something that God has spontaneously brought to mind.

One objection to this view is to say that Agabus’ prophecy was in fact fulfilled, and that Paul even reports that in Acts 28:17: “I was delivered prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans.”⁷

But the verse itself will not support that interpretation. The Greek text of Acts 28:17 explicitly refers to Paul’s transfer *out of* Jerusalem as *a prisoner*.⁸ Therefore Paul’s statement describes his transfer out of the Jewish judicial system (the Jews were seeking to bring him again to be examined by the Sanhedrin in Acts 23:15, 20) and *into* the Roman judicial system at Caesarea (Acts 23:23–35). Therefore Paul correctly says in Acts 28:18 that the same Romans into whose hands he had been delivered as a prisoner (v. 17) were the ones who (Gk. οἴτινες, from ὅστις, G4015, v. 18), “When they had examined me...wished to set me at liberty, because there was no

⁵ 5. In both verses Luke uses the same Greek verb (δέω, G1313) that Agabus had used to predict that the Jews would bind Paul.

⁶ 6. The verb that Agabus used (παραδίδωμι, G4140, “to deliver, hand over”) requires the sense of voluntarily, consciously, deliberately giving over or handing over something to someone else. That is the sense it has in all 119 other instances of the word in the New Testament. But that sense is not true with respect to the treatment of Paul by the Jews: they did not voluntarily hand Paul over to the Romans!

⁷ 7. This is the view of Gaffin, *Perspectives* pp. 65–66, and F. David Farnell, “The Gift of Prophecy in the Old and New Testaments,” *BibSac* 149:596 (Oct.-Dec. 1992), p. 395, both of whom refer to Acts 28:17 for support.

⁸ 8. The NIV translation, “I was arrested *in* Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans,” completely misses the idea (which the Greek text requires) of being delivered *out of* (ἐκ (from ἐκ, G1666) Jerusalem, and removes the idea that he was delivered as a prisoner (Gk. δέσμιος, G1300), adding rather the idea that he was arrested in Jerusalem, an event that is not mentioned in the Greek text of this verse.

reason for the death penalty in my case” (Acts 28:18; cf. 23:29; also 25:11, 18–19; 26:31–32). Then Paul adds that when the Jews objected he was compelled “to appeal to Caesar” (Acts 28:19; cf. 25:11). This whole narrative in Acts 28:17–19 refers to Paul’s transfer out of Jerusalem to Caesarea in Acts 23:12–35, and explains to the Jews in Rome why Paul is in Roman custody. The narrative does not refer to Acts 21:27–36 and the mob scene near the Jerusalem temple at all. So this objection is not persuasive. The verse does not point to a fulfillment of either half of Agabus’ prophecy: it does not mention any binding by the Jews, nor does it mention that the Jews handed Paul over to the Romans. In fact, in the scene it refers to (Acts 23:12–35), once again Paul had just been taken from the Jews “by force” (Acts 23:10), and, far from seeking to hand him over to the Romans, they were waiting in an ambush to kill him (Acts 23:13–15).

Another objection to my understanding of Acts 21:10–11 is to say that the Jews did not really have to bind Paul and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles for the prophecy of Agabus to be true, because the Jews were *responsible* for these activities even if they did not carry them out. Robert Thomas says, “It is common to speak of the responsible party or parties as performing an act even though he or they may not have been the immediate agent(s).”⁹ Thomas cites similar examples from Acts 2:23 (where Peter says that the Jews crucified Christ, whereas the Romans actually did it) and John 19:1 (we read that Pilate scourged Jesus, whereas his soldiers no doubt carried out the action). Thomas concludes, therefore, “the Jews were the ones who put Paul in chains just as Agabus predicted.”¹⁰

In response, I agree that Scripture can speak of someone as doing an act that is carried out by that person’s agent. But *in every case* the person who is said to do the action both *wills* the act to be done and *gives directions* to others to do it. Pilate directed his soldiers to scourge Jesus. The Jews actively demanded that the Romans would crucify Christ. By contrast, in the situation of Paul’s capture in Jerusalem, there is no such parallel. The Jews did not order him to be bound but the Roman tribune did it: “Then the tribune came up and arrested him, and ordered him to be bound with two chains” (Acts 21:33). And in fact the parallel form of speech is found here, because, although the tribune *ordered* Paul to be bound, later we read that “the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that *he had bound him*” (Acts 22:29). So this narrative does speak of the binding as done either by the responsible agent or by the people who carried it out, but in both cases these are Romans, not Jews. In summary, this objection says that the Jews put Paul in chains. But Acts says twice that the Romans bound him. This objection says that the Jews turned Paul over to the Gentiles. But Acts says that they violently refused to turn him over, so that he had to be taken from them by force. The objection does not fit the words of the text.¹¹

cf cf.—compare

⁹9. Robert L. Thomas, “Prophecy Rediscovered? A Review of The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today,” *BibSac* 149:593 (Jan.—. 1992), p. 91. The same argument is made by Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr. *The Charismatic Gift of Prophecy: A Reformed Response to Wayne Grudem* 2d ed. (Memphis, Tenn.: Footstool Publications, 1989), p. 43.

¹⁰10. Thomas, “Prophecy Rediscovered?,” p. 91.

¹¹11. See below, p. 1056, on the question of Agabus’ introductory phrase, “Thus says the Holy Spirit.”

c. 1 Thessalonians 5:19–21: Paul tells the Thessalonians, “do not despise prophesying, but test everything; hold fast what is good” (1 Thess. 5:20–21). If the Thessalonians had thought that prophecy equaled God’s Word in authority, he would never have had to tell the Thessalonians not to despise it—they “received” and “accepted” God’s Word “with joy from the Holy Spirit” (1 Thess. 1:6; 2:13; cf. 4:15). But when Paul tells them to “test everything” it must include at least the prophecies he mentioned in the previous phrase. He implies that prophecies contain some things that are good and some things that are not good when he encourages them to “hold fast *what is good*.” This is something that could never have been said of the words of an Old Testament prophet, or the authoritative teachings of a New Testament apostle.

d. 1 Corinthians 14:29–38: More extensive evidence on New Testament prophecy is found in 1 Corinthians 14. When Paul says, “Let two or three prophets speak, and *let the others weigh what is said*” (1 Cor. 14:29), he suggests that they should listen carefully and sift the good from the bad, accepting some and rejecting the rest (for this is the implication of the Greek word διακρίνω (G1359) here translated “weigh what is said”). We cannot imagine that an Old Testament prophet like Isaiah would have said, “Listen to what I say and weigh what is said—sort the good from the bad, what you accept from what you should not accept”! If prophecy had absolute divine authority, it would be sin to do this. But here Paul commands that it be done, suggesting that New Testament prophecy did not have the authority of God’s very words.¹²

In 1 Corinthians 14:30, Paul allows one prophet to interrupt another one: “If a revelation is made to another sitting by, let the first be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one.” Again, if prophets had been speaking God’s very words, equal in value to Scripture, it is hard to imagine that Paul would say they should be interrupted and not be allowed to finish their message. But that is what Paul commands.

Paul suggests that no one at Corinth, a church that had much prophecy, was able to speak God’s very words. He says in 1 Corinthians 14:36, “What! *Did the word of God come forth from you* or are you the only ones it has reached?” (author’s translation).¹³

Then in verses 37 and 38, in he claims authority far greater than any prophet at Corinth: “If any one thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord. If any one does not recognize this, he is not recognized.”

All these passages indicate that the common idea that prophets spoke “words of the Lord” when the apostles were not present in the early churches is simply incorrect.

e. Apostolic Preparations for Their Absence: In addition to the verses we have considered so far, one other type of evidence suggests that New Testament

¹² 12. Paul’s instructions are different from those in the early Christian document known as the *Didache* which tells people, “Do not test or examine any prophet who is speaking in a spirit (or: in the Spirit)” (chapter 11). But the *Didache* says several things that are contrary to New Testament doctrine (see W. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* pp. 106–8; also p. 67, above).

¹³ 13. The RSV translates, “Did the word of God *originate* with you?” but there is no need to make the Greek verb here (the aorist of ἐξέρχομαι, G2002, “to go out”) speak so specifically of the origin of the gospel message: Paul does not say, “Did the word of God *first* go forth from you?” but simply, “Did the word of God go forth from you?” He realizes they must admit that the Word of God *has not* come forth from them—therefore, their prophets cannot have been speaking words of God equal to Scripture in authority.

congregational prophets spoke with less authority than New Testament apostles or Scripture: the problem of successors to the apostles is solved not by encouraging Christians to listen to the *prophets* (even though there were prophets around) but by pointing to the *Scriptures*.¹⁴

So Paul, at the end of his life, emphasizes “rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15), and the “God-breathed” character of “scripture” for “teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). Jude urges his readers to “contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Peter, at the end of his life, encourages his readers to “pay attention” to Scripture, which is like “a lamp shining in a dark place” (2 Peter 1:19–20), and reminds them of the teaching of the apostle Paul “in all his letters” (2 Peter 3:16). In no case do we read exhortations to “give heed to the prophets in your churches” or to “obey the words of the Lord through your prophets,” etc. Yet there certainly were prophets prophesying in many local congregations after the death of the apostles. It seems that they did not have authority equal to the apostles, and the authors of Scripture knew that. The conclusion is that prophecies today are not “the words of God” either.

4. How Should We Speak About the Authority of Prophecy Today? So prophecies in the church today should be considered merely human words, not God’s words, and not equal to God’s words in authority. But does this conclusion conflict with current charismatic teaching or practice? I think it conflicts with much charismatic practice, but not with most charismatic teaching.

Most charismatic teachers today would agree that contemporary prophecy is not equal to Scripture in authority. Though some will speak of prophecy as being the “word of God” for today, there is almost uniform testimony from all sections of the charismatic movement that prophecy is imperfect and impure, and will contain elements that are not to be obeyed or trusted. For example, Bruce Yocum, the author of a widely used charismatic book on prophecy, writes, “Prophecy can be impure—our own thoughts or ideas can get mixed into the message we receive—whether we receive the words directly or only receive a sense of the message.”¹⁵

But it must be said that in actual practice much confusion results from the habit of prefacing prophecies with the common Old Testament phrase, “Thus says the Lord” (a phrase nowhere spoken in the New Testament by any prophets in New Testament churches). This is unfortunate, because it gives the impression that the words that follow are God’s very words, whereas the New Testament does not justify that position and, when pressed, most responsible charismatic spokesmen would not want to claim it for every part of their prophecies anyway. So there would be much gain and no loss if that introductory phrase were dropped.

Now it is true that Agabus uses a similar phrase (“Thus says the Holy Spirit”) in Acts 21:11, but the same words (Gk. τὰδε λέγει) are used by Christian writers just after the time of the New Testament to introduce very general paraphrases or greatly expanded interpretations of what is being reported (so Ignatius, *Epistle to the Philadelphians* 7:1–2 [about A.D. 108] and *Epistle of Barnabas* 6:8; 9:2, 5 [A.D. 70–100]). The phrase can apparently mean, “This is generally (or approximately) what the Holy Spirit is saying to us.”

¹⁴ 14. I have taken this idea from the very helpful booklet by Roy Clements, *Word and Spirit: The Bible and the Gift of Prophecy Today* (Leicester: UCCF Booklets, 1986), p. 24; cf. D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit* p. 96.

¹⁵ 15. See *Prophecy* (Ann Arbor: Word of Life, 1976), p. 79.

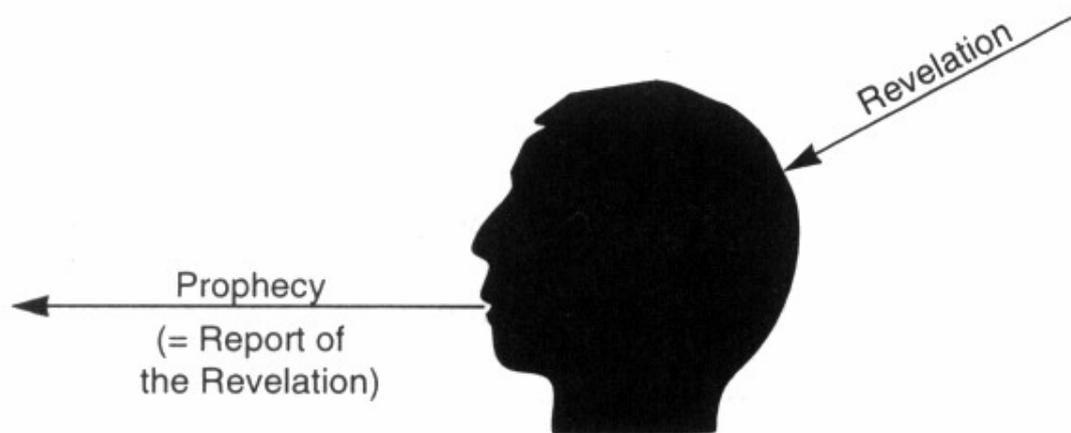
If someone really does think God is bringing something to mind which should be reported in the congregation, there is nothing wrong with saying, “*I think* the Lord is putting on my mind that...” or “*It seems to me that* the Lord is showing us...” or some similar expression. Of course that does not sound as “forceful” as “Thus says the Lord,” but if the message is really from God, the Holy Spirit will cause it to speak with great power to the hearts of those who need to hear.

5. A Spontaneous “Revelation” Made Prophecy Different From Other Gifts. If prophecy does not contain God’s very words, then what is it? In what sense is it from God?

Paul indicates that God could bring something spontaneously to mind so that the person prophesying would report it in his or her own words. Paul calls this a “revelation”: “If a revelation is made to another sitting by, let the first be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged” (1 Cor. 14:30–31). Here he uses the word *revelation* in a broader sense than the technical way theologians have used it to speak of the words of Scripture—but the New Testament elsewhere uses the terms *reveal* and *revelation* in this broader sense of communication from God that does not result in written Scripture or words equal to written Scripture in authority (see Phil. 3:15; Rom. 1:18; Eph. 1:17; Matt. 11:27).

Paul is simply referring to something that God may suddenly bring to mind, or something that God may impress on someone’s consciousness in such a way that the person has a sense that it is from God. It may be that the thought brought to mind is surprisingly distinct from the person’s own train of thought, or that it is accompanied by a sense of vividness or urgency or persistence, or in some other way gives the person a rather clear sense that it is from the Lord.¹⁶

Figure 53.1 illustrates the idea of a revelation from God that is reported in the prophet’s own (merely human) words.



¹⁶ 16. Although we argued above that the *authority* of prophecy in the New Testament church is far different from the authority of Old Testament canonical prophecy, this does not mean that everything about New Testament prophecy has to be different. With respect to *the form in which the revelation comes* to the prophet, there may be not only words or ideas that come to mind, but also mental pictures (or “visions,” Acts 2:17) and dreams (Acts 2:17) as well.

Figure 53.1: Prophecy Occurs When a Revelation from God Is Reported in the Prophet's Own (Merely) Human Words

Thus, if a stranger comes in and all prophesy, “the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you” (1 Cor. 14:25). I have heard a report of this happening in a clearly noncharismatic Baptist church in America. A missionary speaker paused in the middle of his message and said something like this: “I didn’t plan to say this, but it seems the Lord is indicating that someone in this church has just walked out on his wife and family. If that is so, let me tell you that God wants you to return to them and learn to follow God’s pattern for family life.” The missionary did not know it, but in the unlit balcony sat a man who had entered the church moments before for the first time in his life. The description fitted him exactly, and he made himself known, acknowledged his sin, and began to seek after God.

In this way, prophecy serves as a “sign” for believers (1 Cor. 14:22)—it is a clear demonstration that God is definitely at work in their midst, a “sign” of God’s hand of blessing on the congregation. And since it will work for the conversion of unbelievers as well, Paul encourages this gift to be used when “unbelievers or outsiders enter” (1 Cor. 14:23).

Many Christians in all periods of the church have experienced or heard of similar events—for example, an unplanned but urgent request may have been given to pray for certain missionaries in Nigeria. Then much later those who prayed discovered that just at that time the missionaries had been in an auto accident or at a point of intense spiritual conflict, and had needed those prayers. Paul would call the sense or intuition of those things a “revelation,” and the report to the assembled church of that prompting from God would be called a “prophecy.” It may have elements of the speaker’s own understanding or interpretation in it and it certainly needs evaluation and testing, yet it has a valuable function in the church nonetheless.¹⁷

6. The Difference Between Prophecy and Teaching. As far as we can tell, all New Testament “prophecy” was based on this kind of spontaneous prompting from the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 11:28; 21:4, 10–11; and note the ideas of prophecy represented in Luke 7:39; 22:63–64; John 4:19; 11:51). Unless a person receives a spontaneous “revelation” from God, there is no prophecy.

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17. We must caution people, however, that the mere fact of a “revelation” that seems supernatural (and that even may contain some surprisingly accurate information) does not guarantee that a message is a true prophecy from God, for false prophets can “prophesy” under demonic influence. (See chap. 20, pp. 415–16, on the fact that demons can know about hidden activities or private conversations in our lives, even though they cannot know the future or read our thoughts.)

John warns that “many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1), and he gives tests of true doctrine to discern them (vv. 1–6), and says “The world listens to them” (v. 5). Other marks of false prophets can be found in 2 John 7–9 (denying the incarnation and not abiding in the doctrine of Christ); Matt. 7:15–20 (“You will know them by their fruits,” v. 16); Matt. 24:11 (leading many astray); and Matt. 24:24 (showing signs and wonders for the purpose of leading astray the elect). On the other hand, 1 Cor. 12:3 seems to tell us that we should not think that genuine Christians will be false prophets, speaking by the power of demons (see the discussion of 1 Cor. 12:3 on p. 1077, and 1 John 4:4 reassures Christians that “he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.”)

By contrast, no human speech act that is called a “teaching” or done by a “teacher,” or described by the verb “teach,” is ever said to be based on a “revelation” in the New Testament. Rather, “teaching” is often simply an explanation or application of Scripture (Acts 15:35; 11:11, 25; Rom. 2:21; 15:4; Col. 3:16; Heb. 5:12) or a repetition and explanation of apostolic instructions (Rom. 16:17; 2 Tim. 2:2; 3:10; et al.). It is what we would call “Bible teaching” or “preaching” today.

So prophecy has less authority than “teaching,” and prophecies in the church are always to be subject to the authoritative teaching of Scripture. Timothy was not told to *prophesy* Paul’s instructions in the church; he was to *teach* them (1 Tim. 4:11; 6:2). Paul did not *prophesy* his lifestyle in Christ in every church; he *taught* it (1 Cor. 4:17). The Thessalonians were not told to hold firm to the traditions that were “prophesied” to them but to the traditions that they were “taught” by Paul (2 Thess. 2:15). Contrary to some views, it was teachers, not prophets, who gave leadership and direction to the early churches.

Among the elders, therefore, were “those who labor in preaching and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17), and an elder was to be “an apt teacher” (1 Tim. 3:2; cf. Titus 1:9)—but nothing is said about any elders whose work was prophesying, nor is it ever said that an elder has to be “an apt prophet” or that elders should be “holding firm to sound prophecies.” In his leadership function Timothy was to take heed to himself and to his “teaching” (1 Tim. 4:16), but he is never told to take heed to his prophesying. James warned that those who teach, not those who prophesy, will be judged with greater strictness (James 3:1).

The task of interpreting and applying Scripture, then, is called “teaching” in the New Testament. Although a few people have claimed that the prophets in New Testament churches gave “charismatically inspired” interpretations of Old Testament Scripture, that claim has hardly been persuasive, primarily because it is hard to find in the New Testament any convincing examples where the “prophet” word group is used to refer to someone engaged in this kind of activity.

So the distinction is quite clear: if a message is the result of conscious reflection on the text of Scripture, containing interpretation of the text and application to life, then it is (in New Testament terms) a teaching. But if a message is the report of something God brings suddenly to mind, then it is a prophecy. And of course, even prepared teachings can be interrupted by unplanned additional material that the Bible teacher suddenly felt God was bringing to his mind—in that case, it would be a “teaching” with an element of prophecy mixed in.

7. Objection: This Makes Prophecy “Too Subjective.” At this point some have objected that waiting for such “promptings” from God is “just too subjective” a process. But in response, it may be said that, for the health of the church, it is often the people who make this objection who need this subjective process most in their own Christian lives! This gift requires waiting on the Lord, listening for him, hearing his prompting in our hearts. For Christians who are completely evangelical, doctrinally sound, intellectual, and “objective,” probably what is needed most is the strong balancing influence of a more vital “subjective” relationship with the Lord in everyday life. And these people are also those who have the least likelihood of being led into error, for they already place great emphasis on solid grounding in the Word of God.

Yet there is an opposite danger of excessive reliance on subjective impressions for guidance, and that must be clearly guarded against. People who continually seek

cf cf.—compare

subjective “messages” from God to guide their lives must be cautioned that subjective personal guidance is not a primary function of New Testament prophecy. They need to place much more emphasis on Scripture and seeking God’s sure wisdom written there.

Many charismatic writers would agree with this caution, as the following quotations indicate:

Michael Harper (Anglican charismatic pastor):

Prophecies which tell other people what they are to do—are to be regarded with great suspicion.¹⁸

Donald Gee (Assemblies of God):

Many of our errors where spiritual gifts are concerned arise when we want the extraordinary and exceptional to be made the frequent and habitual. Let all who develop excessive desire for “messages” through the gifts take warning from the wreckage of past generations as well as of contemporaries....The Holy Scriptures are a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path.¹⁹

Donald Bridge (British charismatic pastor):

The illuminist constantly finds that “God tells him” to do things....Illuminists are often very sincere, very dedicated, and possessed of a commitment to obey God that shames more cautious Christians. Nevertheless they are treading a dangerous path. Their ancestors have trodden it before, and always with disastrous results in the long run. Inner feelings and special promptings are by their very nature subjective. The Bible provides our objective guide.²⁰

8. Prophecies Could Include Any Edifying Content. The examples of prophecies in the New Testament mentioned above show that the idea of prophecy as only “predicting the future” is certainly wrong. There were some predictions (Acts 11:28; 21:11), but there was also the disclosure of sins (1 Cor. 14:25). In fact, anything that edified could have been included, for Paul says, “He who prophesies speaks to men *for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation*” (1 Cor. 14:3). Another indication of the value of prophecy was that it could speak to the needs of people’s hearts in a spontaneous, direct way.

9. Many People in the Congregation Can Prophecy. Another great benefit of prophecy is that it provides opportunity for participation by everyone in the congregation, not just those who are skilled speakers or who have gifts of teaching. Paul says that he wants “all” the Corinthians to prophesy (1 Cor. 14:5), and he says, “You can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged” (1 Cor. 14:31).²¹ This does not mean that every believer will actually be able to prophesy, for Paul says, “Not all are prophets, are they?” (1 Cor. 12:29, author’s translation). But it does mean that anyone who receives a “revelation” from God has permission to prophesy (within Paul’s guidelines), and it suggests that many will.²² Because of this, greater openness to the gift of prophecy could help overcome the situation where many who attend our churches are merely spectators and not

¹⁸ 18. *Prophecy: A Gift for the Body of Christ* (Plainfield, N.J.: Logos, 1964), p. 26.

¹⁹ 19. *Spiritual Gifts in the Work of Ministry Today* (Springfield, Mo.: Gospel Publishing House, 1963), pp. 51–52.

²⁰ 20. *Signs and Wonders Today* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), p. 183.

²¹ 21. Here Paul’s meaning is that all who receive a revelation in the sense just mentioned in v. 29 will be able to take turns and prophesy one at a time. He does not mean that every single Christian at Corinth had the gift of prophecy.

²² 22. In a large church, only few would be able to speak when the whole church assembled, for Paul says, “Let two or three prophets speak” (1 Cor. 14:29). But many more would find opportunities to prophesy in smaller gatherings in homes.

participants. Perhaps we are contributing to the problem of “spectator Christianity” by quenching the work of the spirit in this area.

10. We Should “Earnestly Desire” Prophecy. Paul valued this gift so highly that he told the Corinthians, “Make love your aim, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts *especially that you may prophecy*” (1 Cor. 14:1). Then at the end of his discussion of spiritual gifts he said again, “So, my brethren, *earnestly desire to prophecy*” (1 Cor. 14:39). And he said, “He who prophesies edifies the church” (1 Cor. 14:4).

If Paul was eager for the gift of prophecy to function at Corinth, troubled as the church was by immaturity, selfishness, divisions, and other problems, then should we not also actively seek this valuable gift in our congregations today? We evangelicals who profess to believe and obey all that Scripture says, should we not also believe and obey this? And might a greater openness to the gift of prophecy perhaps help to correct a dangerous imbalance in church life, an imbalance that comes because we are too exclusively intellectual, objective, and narrowly doctrinal?

11. Encouraging and Regulating Prophecy in the Local Church. Finally, if a church begins to encourage the use of prophecy where it has not been used before, what should it do? How can it encourage this gift without falling into abuse?

For all Christians, and especially for pastors and others who have teaching responsibilities in the church, several steps would be both appropriate and pastorally wise: (1) Pray seriously for the Lord’s wisdom on how and when to approach this subject in the church. (2) There should be teaching on this subject in the regular Bible teaching times the church already provides. (3) The church should be patient and proceed slowly—church leaders should not be “domineering” (or “pushy”) (1 Peter 5:3), and a patient approach will avoid frightening people away or alienating them unnecessarily. (4) The church should recognize and encourage the gift of prophecy in ways it has already been functioning in the church—at church prayer meetings, for example, when someone has felt unusually “led” by the Holy Spirit to pray for something, or when it has seemed that the Holy Spirit was bringing to mind a hymn or Scripture passage, or when giving a common sense of the tone or the specific focus of a time of group worship or prayer. Even Christians in churches not open to the gift of prophecy can at least be sensitive to promptings from the Holy Spirit regarding what to pray for in church prayer meetings, and can then express those promptings in the form of a prayer (what might be called a “prophetic prayer”) to the Lord.

(5) If the first four steps have been followed, and if the congregation and its leadership will accept it, some opportunities for the gift of prophecy to be used might be made in the less formal worship services of the church, or in smaller home groups. If this is allowed, those who prophesy should be kept within scriptural guidelines (1 Cor. 14:29–36), should genuinely seek the edification of the church and not their own prestige (1 Cor. 14:12, 26), and should not dominate the meeting or be overly dramatic or emotional in their speech (and thus attract attention to themselves rather than to the Lord). Prophecies should certainly be evaluated according to the teachings of Scripture (1 Cor. 14:29–36; 1 Thess. 5:19–21).

(6) If the gift of prophecy begins to be used in a church, the church should place even more emphasis on the vastly superior value of Scripture as the source to which Christians can always go to hear the voice of the living God. Prophecy is a valuable gift, as are many other gifts, but it is in Scripture that God and only God speaks to us his very words, even today, and throughout our lives. Rather than hoping at every worship service that the highlight would be some word of prophecy, those who use the gift of prophecy need to be reminded that we should find our focus of joy, our expectation, and our delight in God himself as he speaks to us through the Bible.

There we have a treasure of infinite worth: the actual words of our Creator speaking to us in language we can understand. And rather than seeking frequent guidance through prophecy, we should emphasize that it is in Scripture that we are to find guidance for our lives. In Scripture is our source of direction, our focus when seeking God's will, our sufficient and completely reliable standard. It is of God's words in Scripture that we can with confidence say, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps. 119:105).

B. Teaching

The gift of teaching in the New Testament is *the ability to explain Scripture and apply it to people's lives*. This is evident from a number of passages. In Acts 15:35, Paul and Barnabas and "many others" are in Antioch "*teaching and preaching the word of the Lord.*" At Corinth, Paul stayed one and a half years "*teaching the word of God among them*" (Acts 18:11). And the readers of the epistle to the Hebrews, though they ought to have been teachers, needed rather to have someone to teach them again "the first principles of God's word" (Heb. 5:12). Paul tells the Romans that the words of the Old Testament Scriptures "were written for our instruction (or "teaching," Gk. διδασκαλία, G1436)" (Rom. 15:4), and writes to Timothy that "all scripture" is "profitable for teaching [διδασκαλία]" (2 Tim. 3:16).

Of course, if "teaching" in the early church was so often based on Old Testament Scripture, it is not surprising that it could also be based on something equal to Scripture in authority, namely, a received body of apostolic instructions. So Timothy was to take the teaching he had received from Paul and commit it to faithful men who would be able to "teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2). And the Thessalonians were to "hold firm to the traditions" they were "taught" by Paul (2 Thess. 2:15). Far from being based on a spontaneous revelation that came during the worship service of the church (as prophecy was), this kind of "teaching" was the repetition and explanation of authentic apostolic teaching. To teach contrary to Paul's instructions was to teach different or heretical doctrine (ἑτεροδιδασκαλέω, G2281) and to fail to give heed to "the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the *teaching* that accords with godliness" (1 Tim. 6:3). In fact, Paul said that Timothy was to remind the Corinthians of Paul's ways "as I *teach* them everywhere in every church" (1 Cor. 4:17). Similarly, Timothy was to "command and teach" (1 Tim. 4:11) and to "teach and urge" (1 Tim. 6:2) Paul's instructions to the Ephesian church. Thus it was not prophecy but teaching which in a primary sense (from the apostles) first provided the doctrinal and ethical norms by which the church was regulated. And as those who learned from the apostles also taught, their teaching guided and directed the local churches.²³

So teaching in terms of the New Testament epistles consisted of repeating and explaining the words of Scripture (or the equally authoritative teachings of Jesus and of the apostles) and applying them to the hearers. In the New Testament epistles, "teaching" is something very much like what is described by our phrase "Bible teaching" today.

C. Miracles

Just after apostles, prophets and teachers, Paul says "then miracles" (1 Cor. 12:28). Although many of the miracles seen in the New Testament were specifically miracles of healing, Paul here lists healing as a separate gift. Therefore in this context he must have something other than physical healing in view.

²³ 23. See also the discussion in section A.6 above, p. 1058, on the differences between prophecy and teaching.

We should realize that the English word *miracles* may not give a very close approximation to what Paul intended, since the Greek word is simply the plural form of the word δύνάμις (G1539) “power.”²⁴ This means that the term may refer to any kind of activity where God’s mighty power is evident. It may include answers to prayer for deliverance from physical danger (as in the deliverance of the apostles from prison in Acts 5:19–20 or 12:6–11), or powerful works of judgment on the enemies of the gospel or those who require discipline within the church (see Acts 5:1–11; 13:9–12), or miraculous deliverance from injury (as with Paul and the viper in Acts 28:3–6). But such acts of spiritual power may also include power to triumph over demonic opposition (as in Acts 16:18; cf. Luke 10:17).

Since Paul does not define “works of miracles” any more specifically than this, we can say that the gift of miracles may include the working of divine power in deliverance from danger, in intervention to meet special needs in the physical world (as in the case of Elijah in 1 Kings 17:1–16), in judgment on those who irrationally and violently oppose the gospel message, in vanquishing the demonic forces that wage war against the church, and in any other way in which God’s power is manifested in an evident way to further God’s purposes in a situation. All of these would be works of “power” in which the church would be helped and God’s glory would be made evident. (See also the discussion of miracles in chapter 17.)

D. Healing

1. Introduction: Sickness and Health in the History of Redemption. We must realize at the outset that physical sickness came as a result of the fall of Adam, and illness and disease are simply part of the outworking of the curse after the fall, and will eventually lead toward physical death. However, Christ redeemed us from that curse when he died on the cross: “Surely *he took up our infirmities* and carried our sorrows...*by his wounds we are healed*” (Isa. 53:4–5 NIV). This passage refers to both physical and spiritual healing that Christ purchased for us, for Peter quotes it to refer to our salvation: “He himself *bore our sins* in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. *By his wounds you have been healed*” (1 Peter 2:24).

But Matthew quotes the same passage from Isaiah with reference to the physical healings Jesus performed: “and he cast out the spirits with a word, and *healed all who were sick*. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah, “*He took our infirmities and bore our diseases*”” (Matt. 8:16–17).

All Christians would probably agree that in the atonement Christ has purchased for us not only complete freedom from sin but also complete freedom from physical weakness and infirmity in his work of redemption (see chapter 42 on glorification). And all Christians would also no doubt agree that our full and complete possession of all the benefits that Christ earned for us will not come until Christ returns: it is only “at his coming” (1 Cor. 15:23) that we receive our perfect resurrection bodies. So it is with physical healing and redemption from the physical sickness that came as a result of the curse in Genesis 3: our complete possession of redemption from physical illness will not be ours until Christ returns and we receive resurrection bodies.²⁵

But the question that confronts us with respect to the gift of healing is whether God may from time to time grant us a foretaste or a down payment of the physical

²⁴ 24. The NIV translates this word “miraculous powers” at 1 Cor. 12:10, and the NASB mg. translates “works of power” in both places.

²⁵ 25. When people say that complete healing is “in the atonement,” the statement is true in an ultimate sense, but it really does not tell us anything about when we will receive “complete healing” (or any part of it).

healing which he will grant us fully in the future.²⁶ The healing miracles of Jesus certainly demonstrate that at times God is willing to grant a partial foretaste of the perfect health that will be ours for eternity. And the ministry of healing seen in the lives of the apostles and others in the early church also indicates that this was part of the ministry of the new covenant age. As such, it fits the larger pattern of blessings in the new covenant, many or all of which give partial foretastes of the blessings that will be ours when Christ returns. We “already” possess some of the blessings of the kingdom, but those blessings are “not yet” fully ours.

2. The Purposes of Healing. As with other spiritual gifts, healing has several purposes. Certainly it functions as a “sign” to authenticate the gospel message, and show that the kingdom of God has come. Then also healing brings comfort and health to those who are ill, and thereby demonstrates God’s attribute of mercy toward those in distress. Third, healing equips people for service, as physical impediments to ministry are removed. Fourth, healing provides opportunity for God to be glorified as people see physical evidence of his goodness, love, power, wisdom, and presence.

3. What About the Use of Medicine? What is the relationship between prayer for healing and the use of medicine and the skill of a physician? Certainly we should use medicine if it is available because God has also created substances in the earth that can be made into medicine with healing properties. Medicines thus should be considered part of the whole creation that God considered “very good” (Gen. 1:31). We should willingly use medicine with thankfulness to the Lord, for “The earth is the LORD’s and the fulness thereof” (Ps. 24:1). In fact, when medicine is available and we refuse to use it (in cases where it would put ourselves or others in danger), then it seems that we are wrongly “forcing a test” on the Lord our God (cf. Luke 4:12): this is similar to the case of Satan tempting Jesus to jump from the temple rather than walking down the steps. Where ordinary means of getting down from the temple (the steps) are available, it is “forcing a test” on God to jump and thereby demand that he perform a miracle at that exact moment. To refuse to use effective medicine, insisting that God perform a miracle of healing instead of healing through the medicine, is very similar to this.

Of course, it is wrong to rely on doctors or medicine *instead* of relying on the Lord, a mistake tragically made by King Asa:

In the thirty-ninth year of his reign Asa was diseased in his feet, and his disease became severe; yet even in his disease he did not seek the LORD, but sought help from physicians. And Asa slept with his fathers, dying in the forty-first year of his reign. (2 Chron. 16:12–13)

But if medicine is used in connection with prayer, then we should expect God to bless and often multiply the effectiveness of the medicine.²⁷ Even when Isaiah had received from the Lord a promise of healing for King Hezekiah, he told Hezekiah’s servants to bring a cake of figs and apply it (as a medical remedy) to a boil that

²⁶ 26. For two very helpful treatments of this question, and of the gift of healing in general, see John Wimber, with Kevin Springer, *Power Healing* and Ken Blue, *Authority to Heal* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1987). See also the excellent discussion in Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Power of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993). Several scholarly defenses of a ministry of healing today are found in Gary Greig and Kevin Springer, eds., *The Kingdom and the Power* (Ventura, Calif.: Gospel Light, 1993).

²⁷ 27. Note Paul’s recommendation of a use of wine for health purposes in 1 Tim. 5:23: “No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.”

Hezekiah suffered from: “And Isaiah said, “Bring a cake of figs. And let them take and lay it on the boil, that he may recover”” (2 Kings 20:7).

However, sometimes there is no appropriate medicine available, or the medicine does not work. Certainly we must remember that God can heal where doctors and medicine cannot heal (and it may amaze us to realize how frequently doctors cannot heal, even in the most medically advanced countries). Moreover, there may be many times when an illness is not putting us or others in immediate danger, and we decide to ask God to heal our sickness without the use of medicine, simply because we wish for another opportunity to exercise our faith and give him glory, and perhaps because we wish to avoid spending the time or money to use medical means, or we wish to avoid the side-effects that some medicines have. In all of these cases, it is simply a matter of personal choice and would not seem to be “forcing a test” on God. (However, a decision not to use medicine in these cases should be a personal choice and not one that is forced on others.)

We see Jesus healing explicitly where medical means have failed, when “a woman who had had a flow of blood for twelve years and *could not be healed by any one*” then “came up behind him, and touched the fringe of his garment; and immediately her flow of blood ceased” (Luke 8:43–44). There were no doubt many people beyond the help of physicians who came whenever Jesus was teaching and healing, yet we read that “*all* those who had *any* that were sick with various diseases brought them to him; and he laid his hands on *every one of them* and healed them” (Luke 4:40). There was no disease that Jesus was unable to heal.

4. Does the New Testament Show Common Methods Used in Healing? The methods used by Jesus and the disciples to bring healing varied from case to case, but most frequently they included laying on of hands.²⁸ In the verse just quoted, Jesus no doubt could have spoken a powerful word of command and healed everyone in the large crowd instantly, but instead, “*he laid his hands on every one of them* and healed them” (Luke 4:40). Laying on of hands seems to have been the primary means Jesus used to heal, because when people came and asked him for healing they did not simply ask for prayer but said, for example, “come and lay your hand on her, and she will live” (Matt. 9:18).²⁹

Another physical symbol of the Holy Spirit’s power coming for healing was anointing with oil. Jesus’ disciples “*anointed with oil* many that were sick and healed them” (Mark 6:13). And James tells the elders of the church to anoint the sick person with oil when they pray: “Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, *anointing him with oil* in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven” (James 5:14–15).³⁰

²⁸ 28. See the discussion of laying on of hands in chapter 48, pp. 959–61.

²⁹ 29. See also Luke 5:13; 13:13; Acts 28:8; also Mark 6:2, and several other verses in the gospels that mention laying on of hands. Jesus did not always heal in this way, however.

³⁰ 30. The anointing with oil in James 5:14 should be understood as a symbol of the power of the Holy Spirit, not simply as medicinal, because oil would not be appropriate as a medicine for all diseases. Moreover, if its use were just medicinal, it is hard to see why only the elders should apply it. Oil is frequently a symbol of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament (see Ex. 29:7; 1 Sam. 16:13; cf. Ps. 45:7), and this seems to be the case here as well. (See the thorough discussion in Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* pp. 177–81.)

The New Testament often emphasizes the role of faith in the healing process—sometimes the faith of the sick person (Luke 8:48; 17:19), but at other times the faith of others who bring the sick person for healing. In James 5:15 it is the elders who pray, and James says it is “the prayer of faith” that saves the sick person—this then must be the faith of the elders praying,³¹ not the faith of the one who is sick. When the four men let down a paralytic through a hole in the roof where Jesus was preaching, we read, “And when Jesus saw *their* faith...” (Mark 2:5). At other times Jesus mentions the faith of the Canaanite woman regarding the healing of her daughter (Matt. 15:28), or of the centurion for the healing of his servant (Matt. 8:10, 13).³²

5. How Then Should We Pray for Healing? How then should we pray regarding physical illness? Certainly it is right to ask God for healing, for Jesus tells us to pray, “Deliver us from evil” (Matt. 6:13), and the apostle John writes to Gaius, “I pray that all may go well with you and *that you may be in health*” (3 John 2). Moreover, Jesus frequently healed *all* who were brought to him, and he never sent people away, telling them it would be good for them to remain ill for a longer time! In addition to this, whenever we take any kind of medicine or seek any medical help for an illness, *by those actions we admit that we think it to be God’s will that we seek to be well*. If we thought that God wanted us to continue in our illness, we would never seek medical means for healing! So when we pray it seems right that our first assumption, unless we have specific reason to think otherwise, should be that God would be pleased to heal the person we are praying for—as far as we can tell from Scripture, this is God’s revealed will.³³

Ken Blue has a helpful observation here. He argues that if we want to understand God’s attitude toward physical healing we should look at Jesus’ life and ministry. Blue says, “If Jesus truly reveals the character of God to us, then we may cease speculating about and arguing over God’s will in sickness and healing. Jesus healed people because he loved them. Very simply, he had compassion for them; he was on their side; he wanted to solve their problems.”³⁴ This is a strong argument, especially when coupled with the realization that Jesus came to inaugurate the presence of the kingdom of God among us and to show us what the kingdom of God would be like.

How then should we pray? Certainly it is right to ask God for healing, and we should go to him with the simple request that he give physical healing in time of need. James warns us that simple unbelief can lead to prayerlessness and failure to receive

³¹ 31. We may wonder why it is the elders who are called to come and pray for healing in James 5:14–15. Although James does not give a reason, it may be because they had responsibilities for pastoral care, maturity and wisdom in dealing with the possible sin involved (see vv. 15–16), and a measure of spiritual authority that accompanied their office. They would certainly be able to bring others with gifts of healing if they wished. Moreover, James broadens his directions to include all Christians in v. 16: “Therefore confess your sins to one another, and *pray for one another, that you may be healed.*”

³² 32. By contrast, we can note that when the disciples could not cast out a demon, Jesus says it was “because of your little faith” (Matt. 17:20).

³³ 33. See discussion in chapter 13, pp. 213–16, on the secret and revealed will of God. Of course we realize that God’s *secret* will, unknown to us in any specifics, is that not all will be healed, just as it is his secret will that not all will be saved. But in both situations we should pray for what we see in Scripture to be God’s revealed will: to save sinners and to heal those who are ill.

³⁴ 34. *Authority to Heal* pp. 72, 78.

answers from God: “You do not have, because you do not ask” (James 4:2). But when we pray for healing we should remember that we must pray for God to be glorified in the situation, whether he chooses to heal or not. And we also ought to pray out of the same compassion of heart that Jesus felt for those whom he healed. When we pray this way, God will sometimes—and perhaps often—grant answers to our prayers.

Someone may object at this point that, from a pastoral standpoint, much harm is done when people are encouraged to believe that a miracle of healing will occur and then nothing happens—disappointment with the church and anger at God may result. Those who pray for people to be healed today need to hear this objection and use wisdom in what they tell people who are ill.

But we also need to realize that there is more than one kind of mistake to make: (1) *Not praying for healing at all* is not a correct solution, for it involves disobedience to James 5. (2) Telling people that *God seldom heals today* and that they should expect nothing to happen is not a correct solution either, for it does not provide an atmosphere conducive to faith and is inconsistent with the pattern we see in the ministry of Jesus and the early church in the New Testament. (3) Telling people that *God always heals today* if we have enough faith is a cruel teaching not supported by Scripture (see section 6 below).

The pastorally wise solution, it seems, lies between (2) and (3) above. We can tell people that God frequently heals today (if we believe that is true), and that it is very possible that they will be healed,³⁵ but that we are still living in an age when the kingdom of God is “already” here but “not yet” fully here. Therefore Christians in this life will experience healing (and many other answers to prayer), but they will also experience continuing illness and eventual death. In each individual case it is God’s sovereign wisdom that decides the outcome, and our role is simply to ask him and wait for him to answer (whether “yes” or “no” or “keep praying and wait”).

Those with “gifts of healings” (a literal translation of the plurals in 1 Cor. 12:9, 28) will be those people who find that their prayers for healing are answered more frequently and more thoroughly than others. When that becomes evident, a church would be wise to encourage them in this ministry and give them more opportunities to pray for others who are ill. We should also realize that gifts of healing could include ministry not only in terms of physical healing, but also in terms of emotional healing. And it may at times include the ability to set people free from demonic attack, for this is also called “healing” sometimes in Scripture (see Luke 6:18; Acts 10:38). Perhaps the gifts of being able to pray effectively in different kinds of situations and for different kinds of needs are what Paul referred to when he used the plural expression, “*gifts of healings.*”

6. But What If God Does Not Heal? Nonetheless, we must realize that not all prayers for healing will be answered in this age. Sometimes God will not grant the special “faith” (James 5:15) that healing will occur, and at times God will choose not to heal, because of his own sovereign purposes. In these cases we must remember that

³⁵ 35. Sometimes God may grant a strong subjective assurance of faith, something like what James calls “the prayer of faith” (James 5:15), and Heb. 11:1 calls “the assurance of things hoped for,” and Mark 11:24 calls believing “that you have received it.” In those cases the person praying may feel confidence to say that it is probable or even very likely that someone will be healed. But I do not think that God gives anyone warrant to promise or “guarantee” healing in this age, for his written Word makes no such guarantee, and our subjective sense of his will is always subject to some degree of uncertainty and some measure of error in this life.

Romans 8:28 is still true: though we experience the “sufferings of this present time,” and though we “groan inwardly as we wait for...the redemption of our bodies” (Rom. 8:18, 23), nonetheless, “we know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). This includes working in our circumstances of suffering and illness as well.

Whatever Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” was (and centuries of work by Bible-believing interpreters have failed to turn up a definitive answer), Paul realized that God allowed it to remain with him “to keep me from being too elated” (2 Cor. 12:7), that is, to keep Paul humble before the Lord.³⁶ So the Lord told him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). There are indications in the early church that even in the presence of the apostles not all people were healed. Paul recognized that “our outer nature is wasting away” (2 Cor. 4:16), and sometimes disease and illness will not be healed. When Epaphroditus came to visit Paul, he had an illness that brought him “near to death” (Phil. 2:27). Paul indicates in the narrative of Philippians 2 that it appeared as though Epaphroditus were going to die—that God did not heal him immediately when he became ill. But eventually God did heal (Phil. 2:27) in answer to prayer. Paul told Timothy that he should drink a little wine “for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments” (1 Tim. 5:23). He said, “Trophimus I left *ill* at Miletus” (2 Tim. 4:20). And both Peter (1 Peter 1:6–7; 4:19) and James (James 1:2–4) have words of encouragement and counsel for those who are suffering trials of various kinds:³⁷

³⁶ 36. After some study of 2 Cor. 12:7, my own conclusion at this point is that there is not enough information in the text to decide what Paul’s thorn in the flesh was. There are reasons that can be given in support of all three main possibilities: (1) a physical ailment of some kind; (2) a demon that was harassing him; or (3) Jewish persecutors. The fact that we are unable to decide conclusively has some benefits, however: it means that we can apply this text to all of these kinds of situations in our own lives, when the Lord in his sovereign wisdom decides not to remove them from us.

³⁷

37. Some have attempted to establish a difference between sickness and other kinds of suffering, and to say that the passages in Scripture tell Christians that they should expect to suffer have to do with *other* kinds of suffering, such as persecution, but do not include physical sickness.

This argument seems unconvincing to me for two reasons: first, Scripture talks about “*various* trials” (James 1:2; also 1 Peter 1:6), and the intention of the authors in both cases seems to be to speak of *all* the kinds of trials that we experience in this life, including physical illness and affliction. Did James and Peter *not* want Christians who were ill to apply those passages to their own situations? This is hardly likely. (These are both general epistles written to thousands of Christians.)

Second, unless the Lord returns, we will all know the progressive aging and deterioration of our physical bodies, and eventually we will die. Paul says, “Our outer nature is wasting away” (2 Cor. 4:16). Almost inevitably this aging process includes various kinds of physical ailments.

It seems best to conclude that the sufferings which God allows us to experience from time to time in this life may at times include physical illness, which God in his sovereign wisdom decides not to heal. There may in fact be many cases when, for various reasons, we do not feel freedom to ask in faith for God to heal. Yet even in these cases the heart of faith will take God’s Word as true and believe that this also

Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2–4)

When God chooses not to heal, even though we ask him for it, then it is right that we “give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thess. 5:18) and realize that God can use sickness to draw us closer to himself and to increase in us obedience to his will. So the psalmist can say, “*It is good for me that I was afflicted* that I might learn your statutes” (Ps. 119:71), and, “Before I was afflicted I went astray; but now I keep your word” (Ps. 119:67).

Therefore God can bring increased sanctification to us through illness and suffering—just as he can bring sanctification and growth in faith through miraculous healing. But the emphasis of the New Testament, both in Jesus’ ministry and in the ministry of the disciples in Acts, seems to be one that encourages us in most cases eagerly and earnestly to seek God for healing, and then to continue to trust him to bring good out of the situation, whether he grants the physical healing or not. The point is that in everything God should receive glory and our joy and trust in him should increase.

E. Tongues and Interpretation

It should be said at the outset that the Greek word γλῶσσα (G1185) translated “tongue,” is used not only to mean the physical tongue in a person’s mouth, but also to mean “language.” In the New Testament passages where speaking in tongues is discussed, the meaning “languages” is certainly in view. It is unfortunate, therefore, that English translations have continued to use the phrase “speaking in tongues,” which is an expression not otherwise used in ordinary English and which gives the impression of a strange experience, something completely foreign to ordinary human life. But if English translations were to use the expression “speaking in languages,” it would not seem nearly as strange, and would give the reader a sense much closer to what first century Greek speaking readers would have heard in the phrase when they read it in Acts or 1 Corinthians.³⁸ However, because current usage of the phrase “speaking in tongues” is so widely established, we will continue to use it in this discussion.

1. Tongues in the History of Redemption. The phenomenon of speaking in tongues is unique to the new covenant age. Before Adam and Eve fell into sin, there was no need to speak in other languages, because they spoke the *same language* and were *united in service of God* and in fellowship with him. After the fall people spoke the *same language* but eventually became *united in opposition to God* and “the wickedness of man was great in the earth” and “every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5). This unified language used in rebellion against God culminated in the building of the tower of Babel at a time when “the whole earth had one language and few words” (Gen. 11:1). In order to stop this united rebellion against him, God at Babel “confused the language of all the earth” and scattered people abroad over the face of the earth (Gen. 11:9).

When God called Abraham to himself (Gen. 12:1), he promised to make of Abraham a “great nation” (Gen. 12:2), and the nation of Israel that resulted from this

has come into our lives “for good” (Rom. 8:28), and that God will bring good to us from it.

³⁸ 38. The NIV margin does translate “or *languages*” or “*other languages*” in Acts 2:4, 11; 10:46; 19:6, and throughout 1 Cor. 12–14. This is a preferable translation, for reasons mentioned above.

call had one language that God wanted them to use in service for him. Yet this language was not spoken by the rest of the nations of the world, and they remained outside the reach of God's plan of redemption. So the situation was improved somewhat, for *one language out of all the languages of the world was used in service of God* whereas in Genesis 11 God was not praised with any language.

Now if we pass over the age of the New Testament church and look at eternity future, we see that once again unity of language will be restored, but this time everyone will once again speak the *same language in service of God* and in praise to him (Rev. 7:9–12; cf. Zeph. 3:9; 1 Cor. 13:8; perhaps Isa. 19:18).

In the New Testament church, there is something of a foretaste of the unity of language that will exist in heaven, but it is given only at some times, and only in a partial way. At Pentecost, which was the point at which the gospel began to go to all nations, it was appropriate that the disciples gathered in Jerusalem “began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:4).³⁹ The result was that Jewish visitors to Jerusalem from various nations all heard in their own languages a proclamation of “the mighty works of God” (Acts 2:11). This was a remarkable symbol of the fact that the gospel message was about to go forth to all the nations of the world.⁴⁰ Such a symbolic action would have been inappropriate in the Old Testament, for there the evangelistic message was one of inviting people from other nations to come and join themselves to the Jewish people and become Jews, and thereby worship God. But here the message is about to go to each nation in its own language, inviting people in every place to turn to Christ and be saved.⁴¹

Moreover, within the context of the worship service of the church, speaking in tongues plus interpretation gives further indication of a promise that one day the differences in languages that originated at Babel will be overcome. If this gift is operating in a church, no matter what language a word of prayer or praise is given in, once there is an interpretation, everyone can understand it. This is, of course, a two-step process that is “imperfect,” as are all gifts in this age (1 Cor. 13:9), but it is still an improvement on the situation from Babel to Pentecost when there was no provision to enable people to understand a message in a language they did not know.

Finally, prayer in tongues in a private setting is another form of prayer to God. Paul says, “If I pray in a tongue, *my spirit prays* but my mind is unfruitful” (1 Cor. 14:14). In the overall context of the history of redemption, this also may be seen as one more partial solution to the results of the fall, whereby we were cut off from fellowship with God. Of course, this does not mean that people's spirits can *only* have fellowship with God when they speak in tongues—for Paul affirms that he prays and sings both in tongues and in his own language (1 Cor. 14:15). However, Paul does see prayer in tongues as an additional means of fellowship directly with God in prayer

³⁹ 39. This verse shows that the miracle was one of speaking, not of hearing. The disciples “began to *speak* in other tongues (or languages).”

⁴⁰ 40. The speaking in tongues at Pentecost was unusual in that it was accompanied by “tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them” (Acts 2:3). Since fire in Scripture is often a symbol of God's purifying judgment, the presence of fire here may be a symbol of the fact that God was purifying language for use in his service.

⁴¹ 41. It is true that the first hearers of this message were still only Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 2:5), not Gentiles, but the symbolism of the gospel being proclaimed in many languages did give an indication of the worldwide evangelistic effort that would soon follow.

and worship. Once again, this aspect of the gift of speaking in tongues was not operative, so far as we know, before the new covenant age.

2. What Is Speaking in Tongues? We may define this gift as follows: *Speaking in tongues is prayer or praise spoken in syllables not understood by the speaker.*

a. Words of Prayer or Praise Spoken to God: This definition indicates that speaking in tongues is primarily speech directed toward God (that is, prayer or praise). Therefore it is unlike the gift of prophecy, which frequently consists of messages directed *from* God toward people in the church. Paul says, “one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but *to God*” (1 Cor. 14:2), and if there is no interpreter present at the church service, Paul says that someone who has a gift of speaking in tongues should “keep silence in church and speak to himself and *to God*” (1 Cor. 14:28).

What kind of speech is this that is directed toward God? Paul says, “If I *pray* in a tongue, *my spirit prays* but my mind is unfruitful” (1 Cor. 14:14; cf. vv. 14–17, where Paul categorizes speech in tongues as praying and giving thanks, and v. 28). Therefore speaking in tongues apparently is prayer or praise directed to God, and it comes from the “spirit” of the person who is speaking. This is not inconsistent with the narrative in Acts 2, because the crowd said, “we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God” (Acts 2:11), a description that certainly could mean that the disciples were all glorifying God and proclaiming his mighty works in worship, and the crowd began to listen to this as it occurred in various languages. In fact, there is no indication that the disciples themselves were speaking to the crowd until Acts 2:14, when Peter then stands and addresses the crowd directly, presumably in Greek.⁴²

b. Not Understood by the Speaker: Paul says that “one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; *for no one understands him* but he utters mysteries in the Spirit” (1 Cor. 14:2). Similarly, he says that if there is speaking in tongues without interpretation no meaning will be communicated: “I shall be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me” (1 Cor. 14:11). Moreover, the entire paragraph of 1 Corinthians 14:13–19 assumes that speech in tongues in the congregation, when it is not accompanied by interpretation, is not understood by those who hear:

Therefore, he who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. What am I to do? I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also. Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how can any one in the position of an outsider say the “Amen” to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying? For you may give thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified. I thank God that I speak in tongues

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42. In Acts 10:46 the people at Cornelius’ household began “speaking in tongues and extolling God.” Again, this either means that the speech consisted of praise to God or was very closely connected with it—grammatically one cannot tell from the text itself.

I do not want to rule out the possibility that speaking in tongues could sometimes include speech directed to people, not to God, because it is just possible that Paul’s statement in 1 Cor. 14:2 is a generalization that is not intended to cover every instance, and, in any case, the main point of the verse is that only God can *understand* uninterpreted tongues, not that God is the only one to whom speech in tongues can be addressed. In fact, speech to men might be what is happening in Acts 2. Nevertheless, the evidence that we do have in 1 Cor. 14 indicates speech directed toward God, and it seems safe to say that that is generally what speaking in tongues will be.

more than you all; nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind, *in order to instruct others* than ten thousand words in a tongue.

Now at Pentecost speech in tongues was in known languages that were understood by those who heard: “each one heard them speaking *in his own language*” (Acts 2:6). But once again the speech was not understood by the speakers, for what caused the amazement was that Galileans were speaking all these different languages (v. 7). It seems, therefore, that *at times* speaking in tongues may involve speech in actual human languages, sometimes even languages that are understood by some of those who hear. But at other times—and Paul assumes that this will ordinarily be the case—the speech will be in a language that “no one understands” (1 Cor. 14:2).

Some have objected that speaking in tongues must always consist of speech in *known* human languages, since that is what happened at Pentecost. But the fact that speaking in tongues occurred in known human languages *once* in Scripture does not require that it *always* happen with known languages, especially when another description of speaking in tongues (1 Cor. 14) indicates exactly the opposite. Paul does not say that foreign visitors to Corinth will understand the speaker, but he says that when someone speaks in tongues “*no one*” will understand and the outsider will not know what the person is saying (1 Cor. 14:2, 16).⁴³ In fact, Paul explicitly says that quite the opposite of the phenomenon at Pentecost will happen in the ordinary conduct of church life: if “all speak in tongues” and “outsiders or unbelievers enter,” far from understanding the message, they will say “that you are mad” (1 Cor. 14:23). Moreover, we must realize that 1 Corinthians 14 is Paul’s general instruction based on a wide experience of tongues-speaking in many different churches, whereas Acts 2 simply describes one unique event at a significant turning point in the history of redemption (Acts 2 is historical narrative while 1 Cor. 14 is doctrinal instruction). Therefore it would seem appropriate to take 1 Corinthians 14 as the passage that most closely describes the ordinary experience of New Testament churches, and to take Paul’s instructions there as the standard by which God intends churches to regulate the use of this gift.⁴⁴

Are tongues known human languages then? Sometimes this gift may result in speaking in a human language that the speaker has not learned, but ordinarily it seems that it will involve speech in a language that no one understands, whether that be a human language or not.⁴⁵

⁴³ 43. Robertson and Plummer note that 1 Cor. 14:18, “I thank God that I speak in tongues more than you all,” is “strong evidence that Tongues are not foreign languages” (A. Robertson and A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* ICC [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1914], p. 314). If they were known foreign languages that foreigners could understand, as at Pentecost, why would Paul speak more than all the Corinthians in private, where no one would understand, rather than in church where foreign visitors could understand?

⁴⁴ 44. Note that at Pentecost this speaking in tongues had another characteristic that was not shared by any later speech in tongues: there were tongues of fire appearing over the heads of those who spoke (Acts 2:3). But this is not a paradigm for all later experiences of speaking in tongues, not even for those found later in Acts.

⁴⁵ 45. Paul does say, “If I speak in the tongues of men *and of angels*” (1 Cor. 13:1), suggesting that he sees the possibility that speaking in tongues may include more than merely human speech. Whether he thinks this is only a hypothetical possibility or a

c. Prayer With the Spirit, Not With the Mind: Paul says: “If I pray in a tongue, *my spirit prays* but my *mind is unfruitful*. What am I to do? I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also” (1 Cor. 14:14–15).

Paul is not here talking about the Holy Spirit praying through us. The contrast between “my spirit” and “my mind” in verse 14 indicates that it is Paul’s own human spirit that he is talking about, the nonmaterial aspect of his being. As he uses this gift, his spirit speaks directly to God, even though his mind does not have to formulate words and sentences and decide what to pray for.⁴⁶ Paul sees this kind of prayer as an activity that occurs in the spiritual realm, whereby our spirits speak directly to God but our mind is somehow bypassed and does not understand what we are praying.

We may wonder why God would give the church a gift that operates in the unseen, spiritual realm and that is not understood by our minds. One reason may be to keep us humble, and to help prevent intellectual pride. Another reason may be to remind us that God is greater than our understanding and that he works in ways that transcend our understanding. Finally, it is characteristic of much that God does in the new covenant age that it is done in the unseen, spiritual realm: regeneration, genuine prayer, worship “in spirit and in truth,” the spiritual blessings that come through the Lord’s Supper, spiritual warfare, laying up treasures in heaven, setting our minds on things above, where Christ is—all these and many more elements of the Christian life

real one is difficult to say, but we certainly cannot rule out the idea that angelic languages would be involved with this speech as well.

Some have objected that since γλῶσσα (G1185) elsewhere in Greek (outside the New Testament) refers to *known* human languages, it must refer to known languages in the New Testament as well. But this objection is not convincing, since there was no other word in Greek better suited to refer to this phenomenon, even if it involved talking to God in languages that were not human languages or not fully developed languages of any sort, so long as some content or information was conveyed by the speech.

I am not here arguing that speaking in tongues in Acts 2 was a different phenomenon from the speaking in tongues that Paul discusses in 1 Cor. 14. I am simply saying that the phrase “speaking in tongues” in Acts 2 and 1 Cor. 14 refers to speech in syllables not understood by the speaker but understood by God, to whom this speech is directed. In Acts 2 this happened to be speech in known human languages that had not been learned by the speakers, whereas in 1 Cor. 14 the speech may have been in unknown human languages, or in angelic languages, or in some specialized kind of language given by the Holy Spirit to various speakers individually. The expression is broad enough to include a wide variety of phenomena.

⁴⁶ 46. The phrase “pray in the Holy Spirit” in Jude 20 is not the same expression, since it is specifically the “Holy Spirit” who is designated. Jude is simply saying that Christians should pray in conformity to the character and leading of the Holy Spirit, and that may certainly include prayer in tongues, but it would include any other kind of prayer in an understandable language as well. Similarly, “Pray at all times *in the Spirit* with all prayer and supplication” (Eph. 6:18) is specifically a statement that claims to cover all prayer that is made at all times. It refers to prayer in conformity to the character of the Holy Spirit and sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit, but it should not be restricted to speaking in tongues. Once again, it may include speaking in tongues, but should include all other types of prayer as well. (See the discussion of activities done “in the Holy Spirit” in chapter 30, pp. 651–52.)

involve activities that occur in the unseen, spiritual realm, activities that we do not see or fully understand. In that light, speaking in tongues is simply another activity that occurs in the unseen spiritual realm, an activity we believe is effective because Scripture tells us it is, not because we can comprehend it with our minds (cf. 1 Cor. 14:5).

d. Not Ecstatic but Self-controlled: The New English Bible translated the phrase “speaking in tongues” as “ecstatic speech,” thus giving further support to the idea that those who speak in tongues lose awareness of their surroundings or lose self-control or are forced to speak against their will. Moreover, some of the extreme elements in the Pentecostal movement have allowed frenzied and disorderly conduct at worship services, and this has, in the minds of some, perpetuated the notion that speaking in tongues is a kind of ecstatic speech.

But this is not the picture given in the New Testament. Even when the Holy Spirit came with overwhelming power at Pentecost, the disciples were able to stop speaking in tongues so that Peter could give his sermon to the assembled crowd. More explicitly, Paul says:

If any speak in a tongue, let there be *only two or at most three, and each in turn*; and let one interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silence in church and speak to himself and to God. (1 Cor. 14:27–28)

Here Paul requires that those who speak in tongues take turns, and he limits the number to three, indicating clearly that those who spoke in tongues were aware of what was going on around them, and were able to control themselves so as to speak only when it was their turn, and when no one else was speaking. If there was no one to interpret, they were easily able to keep silence and not speak. All of these factors indicate a high degree of self-control and give no support to the idea that Paul thought of tongues as ecstatic speech of some kind.

e. Tongues Without Interpretation: If no one known to have the gift of interpretation is present in the assembly, the passage just quoted indicates that speaking in tongues should be in private. No speech in tongues without interpretation should be given in the church service.⁴⁷

Paul speaks of praying in tongues and singing in tongues when he says, “I will *pray with the spirit* and I will pray with the mind also; I will *sing with the spirit* and I will sing with the mind also” (1 Cor. 14:15). This gives further confirmation to the definition given above in which we viewed tongues as something primarily directed toward God in prayer and praise. It also gives legitimacy to the practice of singing in tongues, whether publicly or privately. Yet the same rules apply for singing as for speaking: if there is no interpreter, it should only be done in private.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ 47. It is troubling that, in some churches today where speaking in tongues is allowed, those who do *not* give a message publicly (perhaps because it is not the appropriate time in the service or perhaps because they do not know if someone will interpret) will still sometimes speak in tongues not “silently” but so that four or five people nearby can hear their speech in tongues. This is simply disobedience to Paul’s directive, and is not acting in love toward others in the church. Paul says to “keep *silence* in church” if one is not giving a public message in tongues. (Many who have spoken in tongues today say that it can easily be done in an inaudible whisper, so that no one else will hear, and Paul’s directions will be obeyed.)

⁴⁸ 48. Many churches today, however, practice what is sometimes called “singing in the Spirit,” in which many or all the congregation will simultaneously sing in tongues, individually improvising their melodies around a certain dominant musical chord.

In 1 Corinthians 14:20–25 Paul says that if believers speak in tongues without interpretation in church, they will be acting and thinking like “children” (1 Cor. 14:20). He first quotes a prophecy of judgment from Isaiah 28:11–12: “In the law it is written, “By men of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord”” (1 Cor. 14:21). In the context of Isaiah 28, God is warning the rebellious people of Israel that the next words they heard from him would be words of foreigners that they could not understand—the Assyrian army would come on them as agents of God’s judgment. Now Paul is about to take this as a general principle—when God speaks to people in language they cannot understand, it is quite evidently a sign of God’s judgment.

Paul rightly applies that to the situation of speaking in tongues without interpretation in the church service. He calls it a sign (that is, a sign of judgment) on unbelievers:

Thus, *tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers*. If, therefore, the whole church assembles and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad? (1 Cor. 14:22–23)

Here Paul uses the word “sign” to mean “*sign of God’s attitude*” (whether positive or negative). Tongues that are not understood by outsiders are certainly a *negative* sign—a sign of judgment. Therefore Paul cautions the Corinthians not to give such a sign to outsiders who come in. He tells them if an outsider comes in and hears only unintelligible speech, he will certainly not be saved but will conclude that the Corinthians are mad, and the uninterpreted tongues will in his case function as a sign of God’s judgment.

By contrast, Paul says that prophecy is a sign of God’s attitude as well, but here a *positive* sign of God’s blessing. This is why he can say that prophecy is a sign “for believers” (v. 22). And this is why he concludes his section by saying, “If all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you” (vv. 24–25). When this happens, believers will certainly realize that God is active among them to bring blessing, and prophecy will regularly function as a sign *for believers* of God’s positive attitude for them.⁴⁹

While many people will testify that there is beauty and spiritual power in such occurrences, once again we must object that it is directly contrary to Paul’s instructions in 1 Cor. 14:27–28, where those who speak in tongues are to take turns, and there are to be at most three in a worship service, and interpretation is to follow. Though this practice may sound beautiful to those who are familiar with it, and though God may at times graciously use it as a means of winning an unbeliever, Paul explicitly says that the expected result generally will be that unbelievers will say “that you are mad” (1 Cor. 14:23). An alternative to this practice, and one that would both be consistent with Scripture and follow the path of love toward outsiders, would be for everyone to sing in this way, not in tongues, but in an understandable language (whether English or whatever language is commonly understood in the area where the church assembles).

⁴⁹ 49. For further discussion of this passage, see Wayne Grudem, “1 Corinthians 14:20–25: Prophecy and Tongues as Signs of God’s Attitude,” *WTJ* 41:2 (Spring 1979), pp. 381–96.

Nevertheless, however much Paul warns against using tongues without interpretation *in church* he certainly views it positively and encourages it in *private*. He says, “He who speaks in a tongue *edifies himself* but he who prophesies edifies the church” (1 Cor. 14:4). What is his conclusion? It is not (as some would argue) that Christians should decide not to use the gift or decide that it has no value when used privately. Rather he says, “What am I to do? I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also” (v. 15). And he says, “I thank God that I speak in tongues more than you all” (v. 18), and “Now *I want you all to speak in tongues* but even more to prophesy” (v. 5), and “Earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues” (v. 39). If our previous understanding of tongues as prayer or praise to God is correct, then we would certainly expect that edification would follow, even though the speaker’s mind does not understand what is being said, but his or her own human spirit is communicating directly with God. Just as prayer and worship in general edify us as we engage in them, so this kind of prayer and worship edifies us too, according to Paul.

f. Tongues With Interpretation: Edification for the Church: Paul says, “He who prophesies is greater than he who speaks in tongues, *unless someone interprets* so that the church may be edified” (1 Cor. 14:5). Once a message in tongues is interpreted, all can understand. In that case, Paul says that the message in tongues is *as valuable* to the church as prophecy. We should note that he does not say they have the same functions (for other passages indicate that prophecy is communication from God toward human beings, while tongues is generally communication from human beings to God). But Paul clearly says they have equal value in edifying the church. We may define the gift of interpretation as *reporting to the church the general meaning of something spoken in tongues*.

g. Not All Speak in Tongues: Just as not all Christians are apostles, and not all are prophets or teachers, and not all possess gifts of healing, so not all speak with tongues. Paul clearly implies this when he asks a series of questions, all of which expect the answer “no,” and includes the question “Do all speak with tongues?” (1 Cor. 12:30). The implied answer is no.⁵⁰ Some have argued that Paul here only means that not all speak with tongues *publicly* but that perhaps he would have admitted that all can speak in tongues privately. But this distinction seems foreign to the context and unconvincing. He does not specify that not all speak with tongues *publicly* or *in church* but simply says that not all speak with tongues. His next question is, “Do all interpret?” (v. 30). His previous two questions were, “Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing?” (vv. 29–30). Would we wish to make the same arguments about these gifts—that not all interpret tongues *publicly* but that all Christians are able to do it *privately*? Or that not all work miracles publicly, but that all are able to work miracles privately? Such a distinction seems unwarranted by the context in every case.

In actuality, the desire to say that every Christian can speak in tongues (even though Paul says that not all speak in tongues) is probably motivated in most cases by a prior doctrinal understanding that views baptism in the Holy Spirit as an experience subsequent to conversion,⁵¹ and sees speaking in tongues as an initial “sign” of

⁵⁰ 50. The Greek particle μή (G3590) which precedes this question, expects the answer “no” from the reader. The NASB captures this sense: “All do not speak with tongues, do they?”

⁵¹ 51. See chapter 39 for a discussion of baptism in the Holy Spirit.

receiving this baptism in the Holy Spirit.⁵² But there are serious questions that remain about this doctrinal position (as explained in chapter 39). It seems better to take 1 Corinthians 12:30 to mean just what it says: not all speak in tongues. The gift of tongues—just like every other gift—is not given by the Holy Spirit to every Christian who seeks it. He “apportions to each one individually as he wills” (1 Cor. 12:11).

However, there is nothing in Scripture that says that only a few will receive the gift of speaking in tongues, and, since it is a gift Paul views as edifying and useful in prayer and worship (on a personal level even if not in church), it would not be surprising if the Holy Spirit gave a very widespread distribution of this gift and many Christians in fact received it.⁵³

h. What About the Danger of Demonic Counterfeit? At times Christians have been afraid to speak in tongues, wondering if speaking something they do not understand might involve them in speaking blasphemy against God or speaking something that is prompted by a demon rather than by the Holy Spirit.

First, it must be said that this is not Paul’s concern, even in the city of Corinth where many had come from pagan temple worship, and where Paul had clearly said that “what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God” (1 Cor. 10:20). Nonetheless, Paul says, “I want you all to speak in tongues” (1 Cor. 14:5). He gives no warning that they should beware of demonic counterfeit or even think that this would be a possibility when they use this gift.

The theological reason underlying Paul’s encouragement at that point is the fact that the Holy Spirit is working powerfully within the lives of believers. Paul says, “I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says “Jesus be cursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3). Here Paul reassures the Corinthians that if they are speaking by the power of the Holy Spirit working within them, they will not say, “Jesus be cursed!”⁵⁴ Coming as it does

⁵² 52. This is still the official doctrinal position of the Assemblies of God, for example.

⁵³ 53. Mark 16:17 is sometimes used to claim that all Christians can speak in tongues: “And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues.” But in response to this verse it must be noted (1) that the verse probably was not originally part of Mark’s gospel, since many early and very reliable manuscripts do not include Mark 16:9–20, and its doubtful status means that it is a precarious basis upon which to build doctrine (see chapter 17, p. 365); (2) that even if it is not part of Scripture, it does of course bear witness to a very early tradition in the history of the church, but even in this case, it does not affirm that all believers will speak with tongues: the immediately following phrase says, “They will pick up serpents” (v. 18), something that no responsible interpreter would say should be true of every Christian; and (3) that no connection is made between speaking in tongues and baptism in the Holy Spirit in this passage.

⁵⁴ 54. It might be objected at this point that speaking in tongues is not speech empowered by the Holy Spirit, but is speech that comes from the speaker’s own human spirit. But Paul clearly views all these spiritual gifts as generally *empowered* by the Holy Spirit, even the ones in which human personality comes fully into play. This would be true of teachers and helpers and administrators, as well as those who speak with tongues. In each of these cases the active agent in performing the activity is the Christian who has the particular gift and uses it, but all these are nonetheless empowered by the Holy Spirit in their functioning, and that would also be true of the gift of tongues as well.

at the beginning of a discussion of spiritual gifts, 1 Corinthians 12:3 is intended to function as reassurance to the Corinthians who may have suspected some Christians who came from backgrounds of demon worship in the temples at Corinth. Might this demonic influence still affect their use of a spiritual gift? Paul lays down the ground rule that those who genuinely profess faith that “Jesus is Lord” are doing so by the Holy Spirit working within, and that no one speaking by the power of the Holy Spirit will ever speak blasphemy or curses against Jesus.⁵⁵ This fear, then, is not one that Paul seemed troubled by. He simply encouraged believers to pray in tongues and said that if they did so they would be edifying themselves.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ 55. Also relevant at this point is John’s reassurance to his readers, in the context of demonic spirits that had gone out into the world: “He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4).

⁵⁶

56. Some popular books have given anecdotal accounts of Christians who say they spoke in tongues for a time and then found that there was a demon within them who was empowering this speech, and the demon was cast out. (See, for example, C. Fred Dickason, *Demon Possession and the Christian* [Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1987], pp. 126–27; 188–91; 193–97.) But this is just another example of a case where experience is to be subject to Scripture and tested by Scripture, and the teaching of Scripture should not be subject to experience. We must be careful that we not let such reports of experiences cause us to adopt a different position than Scripture itself on this issue. Specifically, if 1 Cor. 12–14 views tongues as a good gift from the Holy Spirit that is valuable for edification and for the good of the church, and if Paul can say, “I want you all to speak in tongues” (1 Cor. 14:5), then interpretations of contemporary experiences that, in effect, say, “I want you all to be afraid of tongues,” go contrary to the emphasis of the New Testament. (Note Dickason’s quotation of Kurt Koch: “Seeking this gift for ourselves can be a very dangerous experience” [p. 127].) This is just not the perspective Paul has in the New Testament.

I realize that Dickason has a cessationist view with respect to speaking in tongues today (see p. 189: “I told her I doubted that there were any genuine tongues from God today in the New Testament sense”). Therefore, from his perspective, he is not making Scripture subject to experience, but sees these experiences as confirming his understanding of Scripture. (I have discussed the cessationist position in chapter 52, pp. 1031–46.)

There is the possibility of demonic counterfeit of every gift *in the lives of unbelievers* (see Matt. 7:22; also chapter 17, pp. 368–69, on false miracles). Therefore the fact that there is some kind of “speaking in tongues” in pagan religions should not surprise us or cause us to think that all speaking in tongues is false. But *in the lives of believers* especially when there is positive fruit in their lives and positive fruit from their gifts, 1 Cor. 12:3, 1 John 4:4, and Matt. 7:16–20 tell us that these are not counterfeit gifts but real gifts from God. We must remember that Satan and demons do not do good; they do evil; and they do not bring blessing; they bring destruction. (See also Jesus’ promise in Luke 11:11–13.)

(Neil T. Anderson, in *The Bondage Breaker* [Eugene, Oreg.: Harvest House, 1990], pp. 159–60, relates a story of a man who was apparently a Christian and who had a counterfeit gift of tongues. But Anderson notes that the gift was conferred on the man “by false teachers” [p. 159] and that this “gift” brought obviously destructive consequences in the man’s life. These factors, and not just the words of a demon as the only evidence, gave clear indication of the counterfeit nature of that supposed

i. Is Romans 8:26–27 Related to Speaking in Tongues? Paul writes in Romans 8:26–27:

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Paul does not mention speaking in tongues explicitly here, and the statement is a general one concerning the life of all Christians, so it does not seem correct to say that Paul here is referring to speaking in tongues. He is referring to a more general experience that occurs in the prayer life of every Christian.

But what exactly is he talking about? Some have thought that he is referring to an intercessory activity completely imperceptible to us, in which the Holy Spirit intercedes for us by making sighs and groans to the Father. On this view, such intercessory work of the Spirit goes on continually, but we have no idea that it is happening (except for the fact that Scripture tells us this). In this way it would be similar to the intercessory work of Christ mentioned in Romans 8:34 and Hebrews 7:25.

But this does not appear to be a satisfactory explanation of the passage, for several reasons: (1) It would not seem probable that Paul would say that the intercessory work of the Holy Spirit, who is the infinite, omnipotent, omniscient God, would be carried out in “wordless *groans*” (literal translation of στεναγμοῖς ἀλαλήτοις in Rom. 8:26), especially when we realize that “groans” refers to the intense sighs of fatigue that are appropriate to weary, burdened creatures in a fallen world.⁵⁷ (2) Within the larger context the groanings in view seem to be those due to the burden of living in this present evil age, particularly the groans associated with our suffering in this age (see vv. 17, 18, 23). (3) The verb “helps” in Romans 8:26 (“The Spirit *helps* us in our weakness”) does not refer to something the Holy Spirit does *apart from us and on our behalf* but rather something the Holy Spirit does *in cooperation with us*. The verb

“gift.” Unlike Dickason, Anderson affirms that he is not opposed to speaking in tongues; see p. 160.)

An alternative explanation for the stories given by Dickason is to say that the demons who *said* they were “tongues spirits,” and that they came in when some charismatics laid hands on the Christian in question, were lying. Satan “is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44), and he would love to have Christians afraid of as many of the Holy Spirit’s gifts as possible.

⁵⁷ 57. The word “groan” (στεναγμός, G5099) is elsewhere used in the New Testament only at Acts 7:34, of the groanings of Israel under oppression in Egypt. But the related verb στενάζω (G5100) is used several times, always of finite creatures groaning under the burden of this fallen creation. In the immediately previous context στενάζω refers to our groaning because our redemption is incomplete (Rom. 8:23; a related compound word is used in v. 22 of the creation itself). The verb is also used of finite creatures groaning under the burden of this creation in Mark 7:34 (Jesus as a man); 2 Cor. 5:2, 4 (believers who have a corruptible, earthly body); Heb. 13:17 (church leaders who may be tempted to groan under the burden of church leadership); and James 5:9 (a warning for Christians not to grumble or groan against one another). Though the verb was once used of Jesus who groaned while under the limitations of this human existence, it does not seem an appropriate term to use of the activity of the Holy Spirit, who would not experience a similar weakness because he never took on human nature.

Paul uses here (συναντιλαμβάνομαι, G5269) is also used in Luke 10:40, where Martha wants Jesus to tell Mary “to *help* me—certainly she does not want Mary to do the food preparation *instead* of her, but rather to come and take part *with* her in doing it.⁵⁸ Therefore Paul is not talking about something the Holy Spirit does completely apart from our participation, but something the Holy Spirit does in cooperation with our activity.

These reasons combine to indicate that Paul is not talking about a work of the Holy Spirit done apart from us and unknown by us, but about the inarticulate sighs and groans which we ourselves utter in prayer, which the Holy Spirit then makes into effective intercession before the throne of God. We could paraphrase, “The Holy Spirit assists our prayers when he intercedes (for us) by taking our wordless groans and making them into effective prayer.”⁵⁹

What is the relationship between this and speaking in tongues? There is some similarity because it is effective prayer which *we pray* even though we do not understand fully what we are praying. But there are some differences in that the sighs or groans that we utter in prayer very often relate to situations or hardships that we are very conscious of in our minds as we pray, so we know what we are praying about. But Paul says that we do not know how to pray for these situations as we ought to pray. Therefore the Holy Spirit helps us and intercedes in these situations “according to the will of God” (Rom. 8:27). There is no explicit mention of our spirit praying (though that may indeed be true as well), nor is there mention of our mind being unfruitful or lacking understanding (though that may at times be at least partially true). Nor do these sighs or groans come forth in anything that could be called “other tongues” or “other languages.” So there are several differences, even though Romans 8:26–27 talks about intercession that we make in sounds that are not fully understood by us, and therefore it is a phenomenon that has some similarities to speaking in tongues.

F. Word of Wisdom and Word of Knowledge

Paul writes, “For to one is given the *word of wisdom* through the Spirit, and to another the *word of knowledge* according to the same Spirit. (1 Cor. 12:8 NASB) At the beginning of this discussion it must be understood that these two gifts are mentioned nowhere else in Scripture,⁶⁰ and no other early Christian literature outside the Bible has been found to use these phrases of any spiritual gift either. This means that the *only* information we have about these gifts is contained in this verse: we have the words used to describe these two gifts, and we have the context in which the phrases occur. No interpreter anywhere has any more information than this to work with. This warns us that our conclusions will probably be somewhat tentative in any case.

The major alternatives for understanding these gifts are two: (1) These gifts are commonly thought to be the ability to receive a special revelation from the Holy Spirit

⁵⁸ 58. Though the word is not elsewhere used in the New Testament, its sense is also transparent from the σύν (G5250, “with”) prefix that Paul attaches to a very common word for “help.”

⁵⁹ 59. An alternative view is found in the helpful discussion by Douglas Moo, *Romans* 1–8 pp. 559–63, who (hesitantly) understands the groans to be not ours but the Holy Spirit’s.

NASB NASB—New American Standard Bible

⁶⁰ 60. At least no other place in Scripture calls something a “word of wisdom” or “word of knowledge” or uses those phrases in any other way.

and on that basis to speak words that give wisdom in a situation or give specific knowledge of a situation in the life of someone present in a congregation. In this interpretation these gifts would be more “miraculous,” in that they would call forth wonder and amazement from the people present since they would not be based on information ordinarily available to the person using the gift.

(2) The other interpretation of these gifts would see them as more “non-miraculous” or ordinary: the “word of wisdom” simply means the ability to speak a wise word in various situations, and “word of knowledge” is the ability to speak with knowledge about a situation. In both cases the knowledge and wisdom would not be based on a special revelation spontaneously given by the Holy Spirit, but would be based on wisdom acquired in the ordinary course of life, the knowledge and wisdom that would be characteristic of Bible teachers or elders and other mature Christians in a church, for example. These would be empowered by the Holy Spirit and thereby made effective when they were spoken. Examples of “words of wisdom” in this sense would be found in Acts 6:1–6 (the appointment of the first “deacons” or assistants to the apostles); Acts 6:10 (Stephen’s wisdom in proclaiming the gospel); Acts 15:19–29 (the decision of the Jerusalem council); and even in King Solomon’s statement, “Divide the living child in two, and give half to the one, and half to the other” (1 Kings 3:25; see also 1 Cor. 6:5–6).

In favor of the first interpretation, it might be argued that all the other seven gifts listed in 1 Corinthians 12:8–10 are in the “miraculous” category, and therefore these two gifts should be understood that way as well.

However, there are some weighty considerations against this view: (1) The words Paul uses for “word” (λόγος, G3364), “wisdom” (σοφία, G5053), and “knowledge” (γνῶσις, G1194) are not specialized or technical terms, but are extremely common words in the Greek New Testament. They are simply the ordinary words frequently used for “word” and “wisdom” and “knowledge.” Moreover, they are not ordinarily used to denote miraculous events (as are the words *revelation* and *prophecy* for example), but are simply the words used for human knowledge and wisdom. So from the meanings of the words themselves, no indication of a miraculous gift seems to be given.

(2) In the context of 1 Corinthians 12:8, Paul’s purpose in the argument seems to weigh against thinking of them as miraculous. Paul’s larger purpose in verses 8–10 is to demonstrate that *no matter what kind of gift a person has* he or she can be assured that that gift has been given by the Holy Spirit. He precedes the section by saying, “To *each* is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good,” and follows this immediate section by saying, “All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to *each one* individually as he wills” (vv. 7, 11). But if Paul’s purpose in this section is to show that *every Christian’s gift* is given by the Holy Spirit, then that purpose would not be well served by giving only examples of miraculous gifts. If he did that, those with non-miraculous gifts would feel left out of the argument and would not be persuaded that their gifts are included in Paul’s discussion. Even more importantly, those with miraculous gifts might look at this list and conclude that *only* those with miraculous gifts really had the Holy Spirit at work within them to empower those gifts. This would lead to a dangerous kind of elitism in the congregation. Therefore it seems necessary that Paul would include some *nonmiraculous* gifts in his list in 1 Corinthians 12:8–10.

But which are the nonmiraculous gifts in this list?

Word of wisdom

Word of knowledge

Faith
Gifts of healings
Miracles
Prophecy
Distinguishing between spirits
Tongues
Interpretation of tongues

All the other gifts seem to fall in the more “miraculous” category (with the possible exceptions of speaking in tongues and perhaps faith). But that would make it almost necessary that word of wisdom and word of knowledge be nonmiraculous to guarantee that there are *some* nonmiraculous gifts in the list. This would demonstrate Paul’s pastoral wisdom in selecting examples of different kinds of gifts being exercised in the actual congregation. So there must be some nonmiraculous gifts on the list—and if there are some, then these are very good candidates.⁶¹

(3) Probably the most decisive consideration is the fact that the New Testament already has a term to describe the action of receiving a special revelation from the Holy Spirit and reporting it in the congregation—this is what Paul calls “prophecy.” Since he discusses prophecy at some length, describing it and regulating it, we can know fairly clearly what prophecy was. But to say that these other gifts functioned in exactly the same way (perhaps differing only in content) does not seem justified by anything in the text other than a preconceived notion of what these gifts should be.⁶²

Therefore it would seem preferable to understand these in a “nonmiraculous” way, simply as the ability to speak with wisdom or with knowledge in various situations. What many people today call “word of wisdom” and “word of knowledge” in charismatic circles, it would seem better simply to refer to as “prophecy.”⁶³

G. Distinguishing Between Spirits and Spiritual Warfare

⁶¹ 61. Even if faith and tongues are considered nonmiraculous, then we have a list that is a mixture of miraculous and nonmiraculous gifts, and then there is no reason why word of wisdom and word of knowledge could not be considered non-miraculous as well, especially on the basis of the fact that the words used to describe them do not ordinarily denote miraculous events.

⁶²

62. In fact, everything that modern Pentecostal and charismatic Christians call “words of knowledge” and “words of wisdom” would fit exactly into the definition of prophecy as given by Paul, and should in fact be put under the general umbrella of prophecy. This would have the distinct advantage of making the use of this gift subject to Paul’s rules for understanding and regulating prophecy in the church.

Will any harm come from continuing the fairly common practice of thinking of words of wisdom and words of knowledge as miraculous gifts that depend on a special revelation from God? One immediate danger might be that, whereas what is actually happening would be called “prophecy” by Paul, in some cases it is now being called something different, and that tends to distance it from the regulations for prophecy that Paul gives in the New Testament. Whether that would lead to misuse of the gift at some point in the future is impossible to predict. But it does seem to be rather anomalous to have a miraculous gift that is quite widely used and that is only mentioned but never discussed or regulated at all in the New Testament.

⁶³ 63. For further discussion of these gifts, see Wayne Grudem, “What is the Real Meaning of a ‘Word of Wisdom’ and a ‘Word of Knowledge’?” in *Ministries Today* (Jan.—. 1993), pp. 60–65.

The gift of distinguishing between spirits is another gift that is mentioned only once in the New Testament (in the list at 1 Cor. 12:10), but the nature of this gift connects it with a number of other passages that describe the spiritual warfare that occurs between Christians and demonic spirits. We may define the gift of distinguishing between spirits as follows: *Distinguishing between spirits is a special ability to recognize the influence of the Holy Spirit or of demonic spirits in a person.*

In the perspective of the history of redemption, this gift also gives a foretaste of the age to come in that it is a foretaste of the ability to recognize Satan and his influence, which ability will be made perfect for us in heaven, when everything that is covered or hidden will be revealed and brought to the light (Matt. 10:26; cf. Rev. 20:11–15). This ability is probably also stronger than that possessed by most or all believers in the old covenant, where mentions of demonic activity are infrequent, and where demonic attacks against God’s people most often were embodied in military attacks by unbelieving nations against the people of Israel, or in overt temptations to go and serve pagan deities. Demonic activity was therefore perceived primarily through observation of outward physical events and circumstances in which Satan’s purpose was carried out, and which could be clearly seen.

This New Testament gift of distinguishing between spirits involves the ability to distinguish the presence of evil spirits from the presence of the work of the Holy Spirit in a person’s life. Paul knows that the Corinthians previously were “led astray to dumb idols” (1 Cor. 12:2), and John similarly realizes that there is a need for Christians to “test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1).

Beyond this, it is also possible that the gift would involve distinguishing between various *types* of evil spirits, such as a spirit of infirmity (Luke 13:11), a spirit of divination (Acts 16:16), a dumb and deaf spirit (Mark 9:25, 29), and a spirit of error (1 John 4:6). From a lexical and grammatical standpoint there is nothing that would prevent us from understanding the gift of “distinguishing between spirits” to include this kind of ability as well.⁶⁴

Of course, to some degree the presence of demonic activity is outwardly evident, sometimes from the blurring out of blatantly false doctrinal statements (see 1 Cor. 12:2–3; 1 John 4:1–6), and sometimes from violent and bizarre physical actions, especially in the face of Christian preaching (see Mark 1:24; 9:20; Matt. 8:29; etc.). Satan’s influence is characteristically destructive, and the person influenced by a demon will have a destructive influence on the church and others around him or her, and also a self-destructive influence that harms the life of the troubled individual himself or herself.

But in addition to these outward indications of demonic influence, there is probably also a more subjective perception that occurs at the spiritual and emotional level, whereby the presence of demonic activity is distinguished. When this is more highly developed, and is able to function for the benefit of the church as a whole, then Paul would no doubt call it a gift of distinguishing between spirits.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ 64. For a very extensive linguistic and grammatical analysis of this phrase, see Wayne Grudem, “A Response to Gerhard Dautzenberg on 1 Cor. 12:10,” in *Biblische Zeitschrift* N.F., 22:2 (1978), pp. 253–70.

⁶⁵ 65. Of course, no gift is perfect in any Christian in this age (1 Cor. 13:9–10), and we should not expect that this gift would be perfect, or that those who have it would never make mistakes. See chapter 52, pp. 1022–25, on the fact that spiritual gifts vary in strength.

In connection with the gift of distinguishing between spirits, the discussion of spiritual warfare given above in chapter 20 (on Satan and demons) is also relevant.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. Have you ever experienced a gift of prophecy as defined in this chapter? What have you called it? Has this gift (or something like it) functioned in your church? If so, what have been the benefits—and dangers? If not, do you think this gift might be of help to your church? (Why or why not?)
2. Does the gift of teaching function effectively in your church? Who uses this gift in addition to the pastor or elders? Do you think your church adequately appreciates sound Bible teaching? In what areas (if any) do you think your church needs to grow in its knowledge and love of the teachings of Scripture?
3. Of the other gifts discussed in this chapter, have you ever used any of them yourself? Are there any which you think your church needs but does not have at this time? What do you think would be best for you to do in response to this need?

SPECIAL TERMS

(This list applies to chapters 52 and 53.)

apostle
cessationist
distinguishing between spirits
gifts of the Holy Spirit
healing
interpretation of tongues
miracle
miraculous gifts
nonmiraculous gifts
office
prophecy
speaking in tongues
teaching
word of knowledge
word of wisdom

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(no explicit treatment)
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3. Baptist
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4. Dispensational
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(no explicit treatment)

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TrinJ TrinJ—Trinity Journal

EDT EDT—Evangelical Dictionary of Theology. Walter Elwell, ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984.

WTJ WTJ—Westminster Theological Journal

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SCRIPTURE MEMORY PASSAGE

1 Corinthians 12:7–11: *To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.*

HYMN

"COME, O COME THOU QUICKENING SPIRIT"

(A possible alternative tune is the tune for "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah.")
Come, O come, thou quick'ning Spirit, God from all eternity!