

Week 5 - Acts 3

A Theological Primer on the Spiritual Gifts

To set up the scene in Acts 3, the crippled man due to his physical ailment is not allowed to enter the temple, to do so would be breaking Mosaic law (Lev 21:18-19) and would risk defiling the temple. The crippled man, who is spiritually, socially, and economically marginalized, sits outside the temple in hopes that devout Jews would uphold Mosaic law by showing financial generosity (Deut 15:8). In dramatic irony though, the crippled man asks for money but Peter and John have something better in mind. He is instead physically healed. The healed man now walks into the temple (jumping no less!), thus removing his spiritual and social marginalization. In the Gospels, similar stories of the spiritual/social outcast experience restoration through Jesus,¹ thus, we're meant to see Peter and John mimicking what they saw Jesus do. Naturally, this causes quite a stir among the temple crowd. The crowd wonders, "Who are these men? What makes them so special?" But Peter and John, sensing this, are quick to get the spotlight off of them. They are simply witnesses (Acts 1:8). Thus the healing, empowered by the Holy Spirit, is meant to testify to the power and message of Jesus who has conquered death and now rules overall. This scene in Acts, along with other unique demonstrations of the Spirit such as speaking in tongues (as seen in Acts 2), becomes a point of discussion among Christians. Specifically, are the same spiritual gifts demonstrated in Acts made available to us?² Before answering this, two things must first be understood regarding the nature of the Spirit and His gifts.

1. The Holy Spirit empowers the Church to make Jesus known.

Because of Jesus' ascension, the Holy Spirit is now unleashed so that Jesus' followers can fulfill the Great Commission (Acts 1:8, Matt 28:20). God's personal power and presence now dwells and seals us.

2. The Holy Spirit equips individuals with spiritual gifts, upon the profession of faith in Jesus, as we're on mission together.

Followers of Jesus are sealed with the Holy Spirit upon initial repentance and faith (Eph 1:13).³ This same Spirit now equips His people to become witnesses. Such spiritual gifts, though likely not exhaustive, are mentioned in Romans 12:6-8, 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 28-30, Ephesians 4:11, and 1 Peter 4:11. In 1 Corinthians 12-14, Paul makes clear that the gifts ought to unite not divide as though some gifts have more superiority than others.

Now with these two points in mind, what are we to make of the miraculous gifts today?

3. There is a spectrum in theological opinion as to which gifts are made available today.

The following positions fall in line with a healthy/orthodox understanding of Scripture. While these are broad strokes of each position, footnotes are made available for those that want to further research and nuance each position.⁴

¹ In Luke alone there are 13 accounts of Jesus physically healing people - Luke 4:31-37; 4:38-44; 5:12-16; 5:17-26; 7:1-10; 7:11-17; 7:21; 8:26-39; 8:40-56; 9:37-45; 13:10-17; 17:11-19; and; 18:35-43

² Before addressing this topic, the global/historic Church has recognized that this theological discussion is not of first importance. It's an open-handed theological discussion. Nevertheless, our call as faithful followers of Jesus is to wrestle with these challenging passages as we seek to learn the different theological viewpoints with charity and understanding.

³ This is to differentiate from some traditions that say one must be "baptized in the Holy Spirit" or experience a second baptism/experience to receive the Holy Spirit. Acts 8:15-17 and Acts 10:44-46

⁴ Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* is a great entry-level resource on this topic, specifically chapter 17 "Miracles," chapter 30 "The Work of the Holy Spirit," chapter 39 "Baptism in and Filling with the Spirit," chapters 52-53 "Gifts of the Holy Spirit."

Cessationist - As the name of this position implies, a cessationist views some of the spiritual gifts having “ceased” by the end of the writing of the New Testament. According to cessationist theologian Robert Rothwell: When God delivers new special revelation, He employs extraordinary methods such as prophecy and tongues to deliver that revelation and extraordinary signs such as miracles to confirm those whom we should receive (prophets and Apostles) as His inspired deliverers of that revelation. Consequently, when God is not delivering new special revelation, He does not use extraordinary methods and signs; rather, He works in and through the exposition of His special revelation (Scripture) by gifted teachers and duly appointed church elders.⁵

To sum up Rothwell, the Spirit doing miraculous signs such as tongues and healing was to create a sort of “shock and awe effect” to authenticate the Gospel whenever the apostles carried out the message to a new place. Because we have no apostles today, (that is, those who were eye-witnesses to Jesus and commissioned by Him) the miraculous gifts of tongues and healing are no longer available. According to this view, this “ceasing” of the miraculous explains why we see less and less of it as the Church continues to expand in the New Testament. Even still, the spiritual gifts that are available today are completely sufficient to carry out and complete God’s mission.

Continuationist - In contrast with the cessationist position, a continuationist holds that all the spiritual gifts are made available today and that some individuals will be gifted with the miraculous gifts at some times. According to continuationist theologian Sam Storms interacting with the cessationist argument he says:

No one denies there was an era or period in the early church that we might call “apostolic.” We must acknowledge the significance of the personal, physical presence of the apostles and their unique role in laying the foundation for the early church. But nowhere does the NT ever suggest that certain spiritual gifts were uniquely and exclusively tied to them or that the gifts passed with their passing.⁶

Storms agrees that while we see less miraculous evidence as the New Testament continues, this does not mean that such gifts are no longer available. Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:8-10 seems to imply all the spiritual gifts will continue until Christ returns and His mission is complete. Not to mention, Storms and others who hold to a continuationist position have seen first-hand the miraculous being faithfully practices. Some have colloquially called this position “charismatic with a seatbelt” - saying that while one can be open to the miraculous, one should still embrace whatever Spirit-empowered gift they have been given to serve the church lest our spiritual gifts create division and/or confusion (1 Corinthians 12-14).

Charismatic - In the charismatic tradition, *all* spiritual gifts are made available today and all individuals are called to step into *all* the gifts including the miraculous ones, (in contrast with the continuationist who says all individuals are called to step into *some* of the gifts). While certainly miraculous gifts can be abused, charismatics cite Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:1: if the goal of the Church is to make Jesus known, then we should earnestly desire all the spiritual gifts.⁷

While the role of the Spirit’s giftings theologically-speaking varies, whatever the position one takes, the goal is unity in Spirit as we are on mission to make Jesus known. As mentioned in the previous week with speaking in tongues, the Church has historically understood this as an open-handed issue that ought not to divide Christians. Because this is a secondary (or perhaps even a tertiary) issue,⁸ we are open-handed and value the diversity these theological streams of interpretation bring to our church family.

⁵ <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2020/04/cessationism/>

⁶ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/continuationist/>

⁷ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/seatbelt-good-gifts/>

⁸ For more on differentiating between primary, secondary and tertiary doctrine see *Finding the Right Hills to Die On* by Gavin Ortlund or the article, “The Call for Theological Triage and Christian Maturity” by Albert Mohler - <https://albertmohler.com/2005/07/12/a-call-for-theological-triage-and-christian-maturity>

