

The Purpose of Miraculous Gifts:

A Clarification of CBC's Doctrinal Position

The doctrinal confession of CBC includes the following statement concerning the miraculous gifts or what are often identified as sign gifts:

We believe the sign gifts, including tongues, healings, and miracles, have served their primary purpose and, though God is free to do all things, are no longer normative for the church today.

We believe it is important to provide a clarifying explanation, a biblical rationale for this position, and our reasons for including this in our confessional statement, especially since there is great potential for misunderstanding and because there are many differing views on this subject.

The debate about the cessation or continuation of certain gifts is ongoing among many faithful followers of Christ; and, though we have determined that it is important enough to clarify our view in our statement, we do not believe it is necessarily an issue over which gospel-preaching churches should divide. Though there are many under the umbrella of "Evangelical" whose views have crossed the lines of orthodoxy in respect to the operations of the Holy Spirit and the exercises of spiritual power, many have not.

However, some doctrines will serve to shape the culture and practices of a church community more than others. Views concerning the timing of Christ's return are not likely to change the order of a Sunday morning service or influence the way a small group prays together, but a person's view of tongues may. Since beliefs and convictions concerning the exercise of spiritual gifts are likely to show up in corporate practice, we believe it important to set boundaries for CBC in this area in accordance with what we believe the Scriptures teach.

To clarify our statement, it may be helpful to first say what we do **not** mean. We are not saying that God does not perform miracles or that He does not heal people. We believe that He can and does. We would say that the greatest example of this is the resurrection of dead sinners to life in Christ which is both a miracle and a healing done every day by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is not to say that we do not believe that God heals *physical* ailments; we believe He does, but physical healings and other miracles are temporary reversals to the inevitable ravages of sin and death. The healings God performs on sick souls are eternal and should be of greater concern to us.

What we **do** mean to say is that the *gifts* of miracles, healings, and tongues, that is the special abilities given by the Holy Spirit to effect these things, are no longer normative or to be expected in the church. In other words, God is free to do all that He desires, including healing people, but we do not look for Him to do these things through specially appointed people who are given to the church for the exercise of these gifts. It is helpful to remember that this is not a question of healing or miracles in general but a question of whether God intends for individuals to regularly exercise these gifts within the contexts of a church community, including within the gathered assembly. To accept the continuation of these gifts is to expect them to be active among us.

Our rationale for our statement is grounded in a biblical theology regarding the function and purpose of these gifts in God's plan for the Church. We believe that we can discover these things through passages like Acts 2:43 where the wonders and signs "were taking place *through the apostles*". Acts 5:12 says, "*At the hands of the apostles* many signs and wonders were taking place among the people." Though the apostles were not always the ones performing these wonders and signs directly, it was through their authority and under their oversight that these things were being done. In fact, these were things done for the very purpose of confirming the authority of apostolic teaching. This is Paul's meaning in 2 Corinthians 12:12, "The *signs* of a true apostle were performed among you...by signs and wonders and miracles." Paul validates his own authority as a minister of the gospel by pointing to "the power of signs and wonders" (Romans 15:18-19).

These things are made even more clear by Hebrews 1:1-2 which is picked up by the writer in 2:1-4 where he writes, "After it [the word] was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was *confirmed to us* by those who heard, *God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit* according to His own will (Heb. 2:3-4). These believers did not have the completed New Testament whereby they could validate teaching, so God bore the Apostles' and their teaching witness by various miracles and gifts that we now call "sign" gifts.

The function of miracles as signs of authority was not new with the Apostles. The "works" that Jesus did also served this purpose. In John 10:25, Jesus says, "I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father's name, *these bear witness of Me.*" He goes on to say, "If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, *believe the works...*" (10:37-38). The works of healing and miracles done by Jesus attested Jesus' identity and authority. This is what Peter means when he said in his Pentecost sermon, "Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, *a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs* which God performed through Him in your midst..." (Acts 2:22).

Just as Jesus' works were used to attest His authority while He walked the earth, so similar works were used to attest the authority of the Apostles' teaching while they preached and wrote. Upon the completion of their foundational ministry (cf. Ephesians 2:20) and the recognition of their writings as the authoritative Word of God, the need for attestation disappears. We believe that the authority of the Bible stands on its own apart from the need for signs and wonders. We no longer see a biblical reason for the continuation of these confirmatory signs that were meant to validate the Word of Christ.

History is clearly not authoritative in determining our theology; but, in this respect, it is helpful to note that the history of the church does at least bear witness to this understanding. It is widely acknowledged that the sign gifts very quickly died out with the passing of the Apostles and the transmission of the New Testament. There has only been a resurgence of these things in the last 100 years or so. Even those currently practicing these gifts acknowledge this to be the case, and they identify this resurgence as an "awakening" and often associate it with an outpouring of the Holy Spirit expected near the end of times.

The connection between the exercise of these miraculous gifts and apostolic authority has also been widely recognized by many in the Pentecostal movement. Most prominently, C. Peter Wagner, founder of Global Harvest Ministries and author of many books, has called the movement the "New Apostolic Reformation" (NAR), a title that both agrees with our assessment of the functionality of sign gifts as Apostolic and that acknowledges the resurgence of these gifts (New). Wagner has played a personal role in the appointment of many modern-day apostles who are supposedly marked by miraculous gifts. Yet his teaching and the teaching of these apostles is nothing like the true Apostles but is contrary to the gospel (cf. Galatians 1:8-9).

To be clear, there are many who believe in the continuation of the sign gifts who have clearly dissociated themselves with movements like the NAR and other unorthodox practitioners, and we do not want to imply that a continuationist view is necessarily linked or will lead to a link with such people. However, these movements do point both to the need to provide an explanation of the near absence of these gifts in the history of the Church and the need to identify a biblical rationale for the functional purpose of these gifts in the life of our local church communities today.

Why are prophets needed when we have "everything pertaining to life and godliness" through the knowledge of God's "precious and magnificent promises" (2 Peter 1:3-4) given to us in the Bible? What does the Bible say about the purpose of these gifts, apart from their testimonial role that we have identified, that is relevant to

the daily function of the church community today? How do these gifts, some of which are revelatory in nature, harmonize with our strongly held view of *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture Alone)?

These and other questions must be answered with a consistent biblical theology and not simply from historical descriptions of the New Testament church's practices found in Acts or from Paul's corrections with respect to the harmful practices of one of those churches (Corinth). This is not to say that Luke's historical accounting of the formation of the Church or Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 14 do not have implications for us today. But it is to say that these things must be harmonized with all of Scripture.

We would also say that, given the clarity we are provided with respect to the purpose of these gifts in the passages referenced earlier, we would expect to find similar instruction as to their ongoing purpose if God intended their continuation; and, outside of 1 Corinthians, we find no instruction at all in the Epistles with respect to the purpose or practice of the sign gifts. We find this silence surprising if God, indeed, intended for individuals to continue exercising them. We are left to conclude that the one clearly stated purpose explained above is the *only* purpose; and, therefore, no longer applicable to the church today.

In short, we take the position we have stated because we believe that it best fits the biblical evidence we find on the subject. The absence of the practice of these gifts throughout most of the church's history only serves as a fallible witness to this view. That the current practice of these gifts is overwhelmingly found in churches where the gospel is being seriously distorted also adds a cautionary voice of agreement. But in the end, it must be Scripture that governs.

We hope you find this helpful.