

Understanding the Sign Gifts

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 16 July 2018

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

- [0 : 0 0] Welcome back. Today's question is, what is your view of the miraculous gifts like prophecy and the gifts of tongues in the New Testament period? Did these discontinue with the closing of the New Testament canon or maybe take on a new form after this?
- And how did the scriptures relate to the work of the prophets in the New Testament? It's a very good question and I think there are a few considerations that can help us to answer it. First of all, within scripture there are clusters of miracles and special gifts that we have. These things are not something that we find evenly spread out throughout the biblical record. So there's a cluster at the time of the Exodus and the whole period of the Exodus. There are a number of miraculous events within there and a number of signs. There is a cluster in the stories of Elijah and Elisha. There's a cluster around Daniel, a smaller cluster.
- And then there's, in the New Testament, around the ministry of Christ and the apostles. So the question is, does this represent, this New Testament period, represent the ushering in of a new age where this will become the norm?
- [1 : 1 5] Or is it something that has the same sort of pattern that we see within the Old Testament, where these things cluster at specific significant points and then peter out or become less significant, retreat into the background?
- A further thing to bear in mind is that these things are often inaugurating events. So, for instance, if you go to Numbers chapter 11, the spirit of Moses is taken and placed upon the 70 elders and they prophesy.
- And this is seen as a special sign type gift that is expressed. Presumably some sort of ecstatic speech, maybe similar to the gift of tongues. And the resemblance between this event and the event of Pentecost shouldn't be hard to see.
- The spirit of Moses taken and placed upon the elders. The spirit of Christ taken and placed upon the apostles and his disciples. Now, after that event, it says that they prophesied, but they did not do so again.
- The significance of the prophecy in that event was a sign of what had happened, that they had received the spirit. It was not something that was supposed to be a continuous thing for the life of those elders.
- [2 : 3 2] It was something that they had the spirit and through that spirit, they would be able to judge more effectively to exercise their role. But that special gift of prophecy, in its more pronounced sense, they would not exercise again.
- So that's a striking example from the Old Testament that shows that sign gifts can often just have an inaugurating purpose. Likewise, in the New Testament, we see the gift of tongues is associated with Pentecost.
- And with those events that are the sort of aftershocks of Pentecost, such as at the House of Cornelius. And so these events are not necessarily things that would provide the norm from that point forward.

Rather, they are a sign that God has given his spirit to his church. And so that isn't something that's supposed to be a norm from that point out. Another thing is that these are pioneering situations in many cases.

Not only are they inaugurating some new era of redemptive history, they're also pioneering situations often. And so there's this testimony of God to his work, to the truth of the gospel.

[3 : 48] And it's a sort of scaffolding. These sign gifts can often be like scaffolding around the church in its earlier stage. And that scaffolding can be removed.

Not because of some great higher principle that they must be removed, but because at a certain point you just don't need scaffolding much anymore. And so there might be certain points where it appears again, but it's not prominent within the life of the church.

It's not needed in the same way. Because these gifts serve a particular purpose. And that's a crucial thing to bear in mind. The gifts exist for a purpose. They're not just there as spiritual pyrotechnics.

They're not just there to give a sign to us whenever we want one. Rather, God gives his signs at specific moments and for specific purposes.

There are times when God does not give signs. When it's not appropriate to give a sign. And so sign gifts, again, have a particular purpose, have a particular time.

[4 : 50] And I do not believe that we should just expect these to continue without reference to the particular time that we exist at. The fact that now, for instance, we have the complete word of God in Old and New Testaments.

The canon has been completed. And so the church is not in the same position as it was, where you have a church without the New Testament books. A church that's trying to read the Old Testament and see Christ within it, trying to find direction for the early years.

In that church, you would need a lot of scaffolding. You would need a lot of prophetic speech. You would need people with that gift to be able to direct the church for its activity.

Now, this wouldn't just be spiritual wisdom. Often it would be God speaking more directly through people. In giving people within his church a sense of where they were in history and of what his word to them was.

Now, some of these things were very specific statements about things that would take place. Like the famine in Jerusalem that Agabus the prophet talked about. Or other events of that kind.

[6 : 03] On other occasions, it would be words of exhortation, encouragement, of judgment. And it's important to bear in mind that prophecy covers a large number of different things.

It also covers a number of different types of levels of speech. So we have the sort of prophecy that someone like Moses represents. It's a very different thing from the sort of prophecy that a lower level seer might represent.

So God, when he talks to Moses, Aaron and Miriam in Numbers 12, the chapter after the chapter I mentioned, talks about these different forms of prophecy.

Someone who might have a dark dream or vision that it's unclear. They're trying to work out what it might mean. Or someone who might have some other sort of prophetic type occurrence or vision or something of that kind.

But when God reveals himself to Moses, he reveals himself far more directly. In a way that's not open to the same sort of doubt and uncertainty.

[7 : 10] God speaks very clearly to him. And so there are differences between types of prophecy and types of speech. A further thing to bear in mind is that a lot of people want the sign gifts because they are, as I mentioned earlier, the sort of spiritual pyrotechnics.

And there are occasions when we will see events that are quite striking, psychological events, whether that's what people would call speaking in tongues or whether it's someone falling over, whatever it is.

These sorts of things can often be epiphenomena of a very strong encounter with the Spirit of God. That is not the same thing as saying that these are signs of the Spirit of God that are produced by the Spirit of God and that we should seek those signs themselves directly.

Rather, we should seek the encounter with God's Spirit. We should seek his truth. And if those things happen on the side, well, we can understand and deal with those things.

But yet pursuing those phenomena is often a problem. It often leads us distracted from the real thing that we should be pursuing. Not these pyrotechnics, but holiness.

[8 : 26] This presence of God in our midst. This fellowship with God. And so often, movements that are built around the phenomena of the Spirit are built around these things that can happen to people when they have a pronounced psychological experience.

And there are many ways to produce those that do not have anything to do with the Spirit of God. It's easy to replicate these just using hypnotic technique or something like that.

People are suggestible, particularly in large crowds. And so I think a lot of what is seen within contemporary churches is largely psychological effect.

And so I would strongly counsel against pursuing those things as ends in themselves. Rather, we should pursue God's truth, God's presence and personal holiness.

And holiness as the whole church. When we're talking about prophecy and the gift of tongues, I think also we often focus very much upon the pyrotechnics.

[9 : 35] Prophecy, I think, in many cases in the New Testament, is not something that would have been very much out of the ordinary in the way that it appeared. It would be something quite normal.

It would be someone interpreting Scripture with spiritual insight, in some cases, perhaps. Prophecy is something that we hear spoken of on numerous occasions in the New Testament.

It's not a rare thing. It's one of the most common forms of Christian speech within the New Testament that's described. Now, I think a lot of that is fairly closely adjacent to what we talk about as a very spiritually powerful sermon or something along those lines.

Sometimes it would be a shorter form of utterance. Sometimes it might be an ecstatic utterance. But that's not always the norm. And so the idea that the gift of prophecy is about these ecstatic utterances.

No, it's not. There are many different types of utterances that could fall under the class of prophecy. How does this relate to the work of the prophets? How do the Scriptures relate to the work of the prophets in the New Testament?

[10 : 47] Well, I think a lot of the work of the prophets in the New Testament would be drawing out of the Old Testament Scripture principles and truths that were relevant for the people of God in that point in time.

Speaking the word of God in a way that looked the current church directly in the eye and addressed those words to them in that particular situation.

Now, I think part of this would be spiritual wisdom, exegetical insight. But I think a lot of it was the gift of the spirit of prophecy. The ability to see that text, to hear what God was saying and to address that powerfully to people.

And so I think that the work of the New Testament, what we see in the New Testament epistles and the Gospels and other New Testament literature, is something of this, something of that gift of prophecy in a more pronounced sense often.

The use of Old Testament scripture in a way that illuminates the work of Christ. Now, this sort of prophecy is not just the sort of utterances that you'd find on the regular Lord's Day meeting within Corinth or something like that.

[12 : 04] This is a form of prophecy that is a higher form of prophecy, much in the same way as the prophetic relationship that Moses had with God was very different from the sort of relationship that someone like Miriam or Aaron had or some of the other prophets and seers of that day.

Moses has a very close relationship with God's word in that it is something that he has deeper and clearer insight into. And we see this throughout the Old Testament.

There are forms of prophecy that are higher forms. There are forms of prophecy that seem to be very much just ecstatic utterances with psychological phenomena attached. So, for instance, when Saul prophesies among the prophets, that seems to be an ecstatic utterance associated with music in some cases.

And there is a physical association of some psychological event that occurs to him as a result of that. And so these are examples, I think, of forms of prophecy that can occur within certain contexts.

Now, what should we be looking for? I think we should be looking for the end of building up the church. That's the whole point of the gifts. The gifts exist for the sake of edifying and raising up the church.

[13 : 24] Now, when the gifts become ends in themselves and everyone seeks to use their gift to build their own little tower in some corner, you have a mess. You don't have a built up church, a church that is being edified.

This is one of the problems that Paul was dealing with in Corinth. What you really need is the gifts subordinated to the purpose that they have been given for.

The gift of the Spirit has been given to the whole church. And that one gift of the Spirit is represented through numerous gifts of the Spirit given to each member.

And so we become part of God's giving process as we minister our gifts to the body. But those gifts are ministered so that the body might be knit together, made more united. It may grow up into the one who is its head, into Christ, and attain to its full stature.

And that is something that will mean that it outgrows certain things. And many of the earlier forms of prophecy, it will outgrow those. It grows into a more settled form of speech.

[14 : 30] A form of speech that is not unrelated to the gift of prophecy that we see within the New Testament. But within preaching and other forms of speech within the church, I believe that this is a maturer form of prophecy.

One that's no longer dependent upon prophetic utterances that bring to light things that we do not have an established text to teach us.

Rather increasingly, we have the text and we have spiritual insight to bring out what is within the text. Now this is continuous in certain respects with the gift of prophecy, I think, in the Old Testament and in the New Testament.

But I think it's a development out of that that is fitting to this particular stage of the church's life. Now when the church goes into a pioneer situation, a situation where the gospel has not reached a particular culture before, I do not think we should be surprised to see people having dreams and being converted through that sort of thing, or people having prophetic words, miraculous healings, things like that.

I don't think we should rule them out of our context either. But we should not be surprised if these are not the norm. These are not the things that we expect in the same way.

[15 : 46] Because after a certain point where something is established, you don't need constant signs. That early scaffolding stage is not foregrounded anymore.

You will have scaffolding on occasions, but that's not the norm. And so I think that's an important thing to bear in mind. Also, we need to think about what is the character of these gifts.

So is the gift of tongues some prophetic or some sort of general glossolalia that isn't intelligible speech?

Or is it speaking in foreign languages in a prophetic way? Now in the New Testament, it talks about the translation of tongues. And in the Day of Pentecost, we see again, the gift of tongues is presented as something, is speaking actual intelligible languages.

I don't believe that's what we see for the most, the overwhelming part of churches in the current context that talk about speaking in tongues.

[16 : 51] I don't think that's what we're generally seeing. I think what we're seeing in those cases is a sort of psychological phenomena, set of phenomena that are not wrong in themselves, but are not the gift of tongues.

I think what they are is an experience and an expression of a certain spiritual closeness or encounter, ideally.

And sometimes they're just a psychological effect that does not have such a spiritual cause. And so this is one of the reasons why I'm wary of pursuing the signs and pursuing pyrotechnics as ends in themselves.

The point of prophecy is to give the church the word of God. The point of tongues is to be a sign. Now, how is the church best to be built up by the word of God in the present?

Is it by lots of words of uncertain origin, of uncertain clarity? Or is it primarily through the preaching of scripture in a clear and spirit-empowered manner?

[18 : 00] I believe it's the latter. Now, there will be places where we will see people speak in a way that is a spirit-inspired utterance, that has insight into a particular person's situation or into the situations that face the church in a given trial or crisis.

That is not something we should rule out. But rather, we should recognise that the church is principally going to be built up by the word of scripture as it's preached and addressed to the body of Christians.

Now, that requires spiritual gifts. To actually understand scripture and to be able to have the wisdom to apply it well to people's lives, to see people and to see what word they need to hear.

Prophecy is very much about a relationship. It's about the relationship between the preacher of the word of God and the people that he is speaking to. Or about the relationship between someone who's speaking God's word into the situation of someone who needs exhortation or encouragement, or some degree of insight into a situation.

That is prophecy very much within those relational contexts. And I think there is a continuation of certain forms of prophecy within the current church.

[19 : 24] But it's not of the same dramatic form that people are looking for much of the time. And that dramatic form just can become an end in itself. And we need to be aware of that. Likewise with tongues.

Tongues were given as a sign for unbelievers. They were given as a sign for unbelieving Jews that God's word had gone to the other nations. It's a sign that they could not understand this word.

But yet this word of God was being the glorious works of God were being proclaimed in other tongues. It's a powerful claim of how God is bringing the nations together.

But it's also a claim, an expression of judgment upon Israel. Now within these utterances, it is the glorious works of God that are being proclaimed.

And as that is translated, it can be edifying for people. But as it is in itself, it is an edifying thing for, it is a challenging sign of what God is doing.

[20 : 25] Or particularly of what God was doing. In that particular juncture in history, as God was preparing a Jew and Gentile people, as God was reversing the order of Babel, as God was establishing his church with this prophetic speech, which represented the reception of his spirit.

And that spirit would not primarily be expressed with those powerful signs from that point forward. Once the spirit had been received, the spirit tends to work more through ordinary means.

And so we see, as in the case of Numbers 11, the church does not seem to have tongues at its heart in many parts of the New Testament. There are references to it in Corinth, and there are references to it in the early parts of Acts.

But for the most part, I suspect the church's life went on without an awful lot of tongue speaking. Now that had a position and a place and a significance for a period of time, but I believe that it is something that's largely petered out.

On certain occasions, I think we could expect certain forms of speech, glossolalia or whatever it is, that would be associated with an encounter with God's spirit.

[21 : 43] I think on other occasions, we might expect sign miracles surrounding speech in pioneer situations. Are these the gift of tongues? I'm not sure that they are.

I think that they might be related in a broader sense to it. But really, we need to think about God building his church, that church being built in various stages.

What happens after AD 70 is a different stage than what we see before AD 70, when the church is very much dealing with this Jew and Gentile issue. After AD 70, that's a bit more of a settled reality.

The destruction of Jerusalem really puts an end to the old covenant order, where you have one temple and then the new temple in competition with each other. Now it's clear that God is establishing this one temple of Jew and Gentile people being brought together.

And so the gift of tongues no longer has quite the same significance. It's no longer a sign of judgment, as in Paul's description of it in 1 Corinthians 14.

[22 : 46] It's no longer that significant statement of judgment upon Israel for their unbelief, because that judgment has already occurred in AD 70.

With the gift of prophecy, this testifies again to the word of God and to the gift of Christ's spirit.

But it is primarily there to build up the church in the revelation of God and to bring it to an edified full stature. And so at this point, I believe we should expect that it is not the norm for more miraculous and forms of prophecy that are out of the norm, out of the ordinary.

Things that break with the normal means by which God reveals his revelation through scripture, through preaching, through exhortation among brothers and sisters in Christ.

That is how we should expect what was once revealed in far more direct and miraculous ways. This is the ordinary form in which the spirit is building up the church.

[23 : 55] It's still the same spirit. The spirit doesn't have to have great pyrotechnics to be at work. It's one of the dangers that we have as Christians. If we're looking for these pyrotechnics, remember that God's glory was seen most fully in the event of the cross.

That's where Christ was glorified. And yet it does not look like that to us. We're not looking for pyrotechnics. What we want is spiritual insight into reality.

What we want is not spiritual pyrotechnics, things that look flashy and exciting, but we want God to build up his church and to build it up with his word.

And so I believe he gives us gifts for that today. Gifts that are related to the gifts of prophecy that we see within the New Testament, that continue from those, that would be classed as prophecy in some cases in the New Testament.

But yet they are not of the same. They take a slightly different form in this stage of the church's life. And so I hope that helps to give some insight and framework within which to think about these sign gifts well.

[25 : 06] It isn't an easy thing to think about. We shouldn't just condemn them outright. We shouldn't... I don't believe that we should just be outright cessationists. God is...

Rather, we should see things in terms of what God is doing. God is building up his church, and that requires different things in different places, different things at different times. And there's no reason why things must stop outright at a single point.

Rather, things peter out. Things rise up again at certain points and places when they're needed. And that's what we should expect. And so I'm not a cessationist, but I'm certainly not a typical continuationist either.

If you have any further questions that you want to ask, please leave them in my Curious Cat account. I'll put the link below. And hopefully see you again in the next day or so.