

THE SIGN GIFTS

Grace Covenant Church
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SUMMARY

Sign Gifts: Primarily tongues, healings and prophecy. Other sign gifts might be argued for, but all the sign gifts rise or fall together. What is done with one must be done with all. Therefore, we will limit the analysis to these clear ones.

The sign gifts were given in the Apostolic years for the purpose of validating the new message of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus. As the message was validated, the sign gifts diminished and eventually disappeared.

Nowhere does the Bible preclude the possibility of the sign gifts reappearing for the original purpose of validating the message in areas where the gospel is not established.

Therefore, while we cannot preclude the possibility of the sign gifts being used by God in a new area, it also seems likely that the gifts are not intended for use in the established church.

Therefore:

- Sign gifts are not practiced in any services of Grace Covenant.
- Grace does not believe a personal prayer language is normative for Christians.
- For those who hold to a different position, fellowship and membership is offered, though we ask that no one practice, teach or champion the cause of sign gifts in the church.
- Teachers at Grace must agree not to teach any position contrary to this.
- Elders and pastors must agree that sign gifts are not normative for the established church, nor is a prayer language normative for the Christian.

PREFACE

Sign gifts are experiencing a resurgence into the spotlight in evangelical circles. Previously, the sign gifts were confined to the charismatic/pentecostal movement. Then in the 60s they moved into the Catholic church and mainline Protestant denominations. Now, the sign gifts are coming into evangelical and independent Bible churches, and are requiring our attention.

A recent conflict over this issue resulted in three faculty members from Dallas Theological Seminary either being dismissed or not having their annual contracts renewed. In addition, several authors (most notably John White) who have been mainline evangelical writers are now writing in support of sign gifts. A leader in this resurgence is John Wimber, who leads the Vineyard, a charismatic renewal movement and a new denomination made up of mostly smaller, youth oriented churches, though some of the Vineyard churches are large.

Recently an article in Christianity Today said:

"Middle class, suburban, and evangelical, the Vineyard is both a charismatic renewal movement and a new denomination. Its relaxed, low-key style appeals to educated people. Led by John Wimber, it emphasizes lay faith healing and worshiping through the singing of choruses. The Vineyard aims to offer more than a new flavoring to evangelicalism, however; it seeks to convert.

As Clark Pinnock puts it in his forward to Charles Kraft's book (Christianity with Power), "This book requires that we decide which camp [pro or anti Pentecostal] we belong to."

Because this resurgence of support for sign gifts is coming from "within the camp," and because it seeks to convert, we can no longer be passive about its presence. We must decide, as Pinnock wrote, whether we will support it or not."

BIBLICAL SUMMARY

Purpose of Spiritual Gifts

The purpose of spiritual gifts is to unite the body before the Lord, and to bring about mutual edification to grow the whole church to unity in Christ. Anything which results in disunity is working at cross purposes to the intent of spiritual gifts. (Eph. 4)

Purpose of Sign Gifts

The sign gifts seemed to have a well defined purpose in the New Testament... that of validating the new message of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus. It is easy to understand the need for sign gifts when a completely new message of salvation is being presented.

Hebrews 2:1-4 speaks of the new message of salvation by grace through faith in Christ which "was first spoken through the Lord, (and) 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."

This is the clearest statement linking the miraculous gifts to the validation of a new message.

Paul's ministry began later than some of the other apostles, but was marked by similar miracles, and he notes in Romans 15, that he went only where the message had not been previously established by the ministry of another Apostle. This supports the thesis that the purpose of the gifts was to validate the message in a new area.

"For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed, in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit; so that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ. And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, that I might not build upon another man's foundation..." (Rom. 15:18-20)

The Occurrence of Sign Gifts

Another reality that must be reckoned with is the historic disappearance of sign gifts. Acts is a transitional book, and many of the things in Acts are not normative for the established period of the church. Tongues, for example, taper off in the book of Acts. The last occurrence of being filled with the Spirit and speaking in tongues is Acts chapter 19, which is the last recorded Gentile Pentecost. There is no mention of tongues in any of the epistles which were written after the time of Acts 19. When we read the early church fathers', there is no mention of tongues. It seems inescapable that, historically, tongues ceased after the book of Acts.

That being the case, two things seem unavoidable. First, tongues are not part of the normative

Christian experience. And, second, if in fact they are for the purpose of validating the message of the Gospel into a new area, it would explain why they disappeared. Tongues and the other sign gifts would have diminished gradually as the establishment of the Gospel increased gradually.

The Basis of Tongues

To begin, we must bring in another term, "glossolalia," which is the Latin word for "tongues." We must use this term, because there are many examples of so called "speaking in tongues" which have nothing to do with the spiritual gift. Therefore, we will use the broad term unless specifically referring to the gift of tongues.

Typically, people believe in tongues if they have experienced glossolalia, and do not believe in tongues if they have not experienced glossolalia. We all tend to interpret the Bible in light of our experience. We all do this to some degree from time to time. It is unavoidable. For example, when slavery in the United States was legal, most southern pastors were able to justify it from Scripture. Now no one does. We all tend to bring our experience. However, it is dangerous to do so, and should not knowingly be done. If a possible issue arises, we must check ourselves, and think it through.

The considerable disagreement over the legitimacy of sign gifts, focusing on tongues, forces us to rethink the issue. In doing so, however, it is not valid to appeal to an experience of glossolalia to support our position. We cannot say, "But I have spoken in tongues. Are you asking me to deny my experience?"

There are many non Christians who speak in tongues, and who experience the other "sign gifts," for that matter. Eskimos speak in tongues. Mormons speak in tongues. Hindus speak in tongues. Satan worshippers speak in tongues. The single most common example of tongues outside a religious context is in mental institutions. I am not saying that people who speak in tongues are crazy or in league with the devil. Nor am I saying that they are not Christians. I am merely saying that the occurrences of glossolalia are so varied that the experience alone cannot be submitted as evidence that people who speak in tongues are doing so because of a gift of God. These other religions also experience healings and prophecies, as does the New Age movement.

Therefore, we must go entirely on Scripture for our decision, and when we do that we get a picture of tongues being a sign gift for the purpose of validating the new message of the gospel. Tongues gradually diminished in the Bible, and disappeared historically in the early church. Therefore, it seems unavoidable that they are not normative for the Christian life today, and are not intended for use in an established church.

The Possibility of Tongues Today

The Bible does not conclusively state that tongues have permanently ceased. There are two passages which sometimes are used to try to demonstrate that tongues have permanently ceased, but they are not conclusive.

Jude 6 says, "earnestly contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints."

The argument says that since the "faith" was delivered once and for all, there can be no adding to it today. If you allow for tongues and interpretations of tongues, you are adding to the faith. Therefore, there can be no further manifestations of the gift of tongues.

This is a possible interpretation, but it is not an necessary interpretation. People might speak in tongues without adding to the body of "the faith," or additional revelation from God on a level with Scripture. Certainly, that verse is suggesting that there will be no more books of the Bible written, but it does not preclude the possibility of tongues.

The second verse used to close the book on tongues is 1 Corinthians 13:8-10:

“...if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge it will be done away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.”

This teaching suggests that “the perfect” is the Bible. Now that the Bible has come, tongues will be done away with. As with the earlier interpretation, it is possible, but not certain. Ryrie, for example, in his study Bible says that “the perfect” is the second coming of Christ.

We simply do not know for sure what the perfect is. It could be the Bible. It could be the second coming of Christ.

Conclusion

Therefore, the position which seems to be consistent with all this information is that tongues are not intended for use in areas where the gospel and the Scriptures are established, but that there is no irrefutable information from the Scripture to say that they could not legitimately reappear in new areas where the Scripture and the gospel are not established.

In addition, Grace Covenant Church does not understand the gift of tongues to be a personal prayer language, nor do we practice a personal prayer language.

One final comment: to say that the gifts of tongues and healings and prophecy are not spiritual gifts for the established church today is not to say that God cannot sovereignly perform miracles. God is free to do anything He chooses, assuming that He has not already gone on record saying that He will not do it. So, someone might pray for another person to be healed, and the person might be healed. The important distinction is, however, that the prayer does not have the “gift” of healing, meaning that he can do it regularly.

POLICY

Therefore, our policy statement for fellowship and membership is:

“Grace Covenant Church does not teach or encourage the manifestation of sign gifts (tongues, healing, prophecy), or any of the closely related manifestations. While we wish to respect and love our brothers and sisters who practice these gifts, we do not practice (encourage) them in our congregation. Those who may practice these gifts privately are not excluded from fellowship or membership. However, we require that no one practice these manifestations publicly, teach them, or champion their cause in our congregation. While we recognize the existence of the different interpretation of these issues, we also recognize that, practically, it is difficult for two to walk together unless they be agreed. Each church must ‘be persuaded in its own mind,’ and this is the historic position of Grace Covenant.”

Three different policies are in force regarding this and all other similar issues: one for fellowship and membership in the church, a second one for those who teach in any ministry of the church, and third for those who are pastors and elders.

- A position for teachers might be an addendum to the above statement which says:
“A teacher agrees that he/she will not teach any position contrary to the “Sign Gifts” statement.”
- Pastors and elders agree with the “Sign Gifts” statement, and concur that sign gifts and a prayer language are not intended for Grace Covenant Church.