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Numerous religious groups commonly claim the assistance of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Famed religious television personalities boldly announce the active influence of the Holy Spirit even as they speak. Supposedly, the Holy Spirit talks to them personally, heals viewers instantaneously, and enables them to babble uncontrollably in an “unknown tongue.” All of this, then, is claimed to be “proof positive” of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Do miracles still happen? Can people speak in tongues today? Does God, in the twenty-first century, supernaturally countermand the laws of nature and heal people miraculously?

“Come now, and let us reason together,” Isaiah said (1:18). It is absolutely imperative that we examine **Scripture**—not our feelings, not what someone else says happened to them, and not our own experience. The only sure and certain approach is to ask: What does the Bible teach? The reader must ask: “Do I honestly believe the Bible to be the Word of God?” One must be honest, and willing to go where the evidence takes him. If you had to choose between what you genuinely think you have **experienced** or seen firsthand, and what the Bible **actually says**, which would you choose? You must ask yourself: “Will I honestly accept God’s written Word on the matter of miracles?” If you will, I invite you to join me in an examination of what the Bible teaches pertaining to miracles.

THE DEFINITION OF MIRACLES

First of all, what exactly is a “miracle”? How does **the Bible** use the word? The three central terms used in the Bible to designate a supernatural (as contrasted with

a natural) manifestation are: (1) “miracle” (*dunamis*); (2) “sign” (*semeion*); and (3) “wonder” (*teras*). All three terms occur together in Acts 2:22, Hebrews 2:4, and 2 Corinthians 12:12. Related terms include “work” (*ergon*) and “mighty deed” (*kratos*). The occurrence of a miracle in the Bible meant that God worked **outside** the laws of nature. W.E. Vine, whose Greek scholarship, according to F.F. Bruce, was “wide, accurate and up-to-date” (Vine, 1952, Foreword), stated that the word “miracle” (*dunamis*) is used in the New Testament of “works of a **supernatural** origin and character, such as could not be produced by **natural** agents and means” (1952, p. 75, emp. added). Otfried Hofius noted that a “sign” (*semeion*) “contradicts the **natural** course of things” (1976, 2:626, emp. added) and, similarly, “wonder” (*teras*) was used to refer to events that “contradict the ordered unity of **nature**” (2:633, emp. added).

Thus, a miracle in the Bible was not just an event that was astonishing, incredible, extraordinary, or unusual (e.g., the birth of a baby or the narrow avoidance of an accident). A miracle in the Bible was a **supernatural** act. It was an event that was contrary to the usual course of nature (Arndt and Gingrich, 1957, p. 755). The miraculous must not be confused with the **providential**, where God operates **in harmony with** the usual course of nature.

THE DESIGN OF MIRACLES

Second, it is absolutely imperative that one recognizes the **purpose** of the miraculous. Miracles in the New Testament served the singular function of **confirmation**. When an inspired speaker stepped forward to declare God’s Word, God **val-**

idated or **endorsed** the speaker’s remarks by empowering the speaker to perform a miracle. Many New Testament passages articulate this fact quite plainly. For example, the apostles “went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and **confirming** the word by the **signs** that followed” (Mark 16:20, emp. added). The writer of Hebrews asked:

[H]ow shall we escape, if we neglect so great a salvation; which having at the first been **spoken** through the Lord, was **confirmed** unto us by them that heard; God also **bearing witness** with them, both by **signs and wonders**, and by manifold powers, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 2:3-4, emp. added).

Referring to the initial offering of the Gospel to the Samaritan people, Luke stated: “[A]nd the multitudes gave heed with one accord unto **the things that were spoken** by Philip when they heard and saw the **signs** which he did” (Acts 8:6, emp. added).

These passages, and many others (e.g., Acts 4:29-30; 13:12; 14:3; 15:12; Romans 15:18-19; 1 Corinthians 2:4; 1 Thessalonians 1:5; cf. Exodus 4:30), show that the purpose of miracles was to **authenticate** the oral/spoken word as God’s Word. Miracles **legitimized** and **verified** the teachings of God’s messengers, as over against the many false teachers (like Simon in Acts 8:9, or Pharaoh’s magicians in Exodus 7:11) who attempted to mislead the people. Greek lexicographer Joseph Thayer noted that “sign” (*semeion*) was used in the New Testament “of miracles and wonders by which God authenticates the men sent by him, or by which men prove that the cause they are pleading is God’s” (1901, p. 573). Even the miracles that Jesus performed were designed

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to back up His claim (i.e., spoken words) to be deity (John 3:2; 14:10-11)—a pattern that is repeated in the New Testament many times over (e.g., John 2:23; 5:36; 6:14; 7:31; 10:37-38, 41-42; 20:30-31; Acts 2:22). In other words, Jesus performed signs and miracles to prove His divine identity and thereby authenticate His message. His message, in turn, generated faith in those who chose to believe His teachings (cf. Romans 10:17). Here is the consistent sequence presented in Scripture: **signs** → **Word** → **faith**. (1) Signs confirmed the Word; (2) the Word was presented to hearers; and (3) faith was created (by the Word) in those who received it.

An excellent demonstration of this process was provided by Luke in his report of the conversion of the Roman proconsul, Sergius Paulus. Elymas the sorcerer tried to thwart Paul's effort to teach Sergius the Gospel. So Paul performed a miracle and struck Elymas blind. Luke next recorded: "Then the proconsul, when he saw what was done, believed, being astonished at the **teaching** of the Lord" (Acts 13:12, emp. added). One might well expect the text to have said that Sergius was astonished at the **miracle** that Paul performed. But Luke was careful to report the situation with precision. The miracle that Paul performed captured Sergius' attention, causing him to recognize the divine origin of Paul's Gospel message. The Gospel message, in turn, generated faith in the proconsul—in harmony with Paul's later affirmation to Christians in Rome that faith comes by hearing the Word of God (Romans 10:17). Over and over again in the New Testament, a close correlation is seen between the performance of miracles and the preaching of the Word of God (cf. Mark 6:12-13; Luke 9:2,6).

But some maintain that there are other reasons for instances of divine healing and tongue-speaking. Tongue-speaking is said to be a sign that the tongue-speaker is super-spiritual. Others say that miraculous healing serves the purpose of making the believer well—a simple act of mercy to relieve his pain and suffering. They say God does not want us to suffer, and so He will heal us just to ease our pain in this life because we are His children.

Regarding the first claim, Paul insisted that the person who possessed the ability to speak in tongues **was not spiritually superior** to the one who had no such ability (1 Corinthians 14:6,9,12,19). Tongue-speaking was simply one miraculous capability among many bestowed by God without regard to a member's spiritual status, let alone his spiritual **superiority** over another member (1 Corinthians 12:7-11,28-30).

Regarding the second claim, certainly, the compassion of God was evident when people received miraculous healing in New Testament times. And, surely, relief from suffering would have been a side effect of being healed. But the Bible teaches that **relieving suffering was not the purpose of miracles**. Such a purpose would contradict—even thwart—the divine intent of this created Earth as a place where hardship exists to prepare us for eternity (see Warren, 1972). Death and sin entered the world due to human choice. God allows the circumstances caused by human decisions to take their course. He does not interfere with the natural order of things to show partiality to some over others. The Christian is subject to the same diseases, tragedies, and physical death that befall non-Christians: "...for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Genesis 3:19). Christians can **expect** all sorts of hardship and suffering (e.g., 1 Corinthians 10:13; 2 Timothy 3:12; 1 Peter 4:12-17). Commenting on the purpose of miracles, J.W. McGarvey wrote:

[T]o say that they were wrought for the single purpose of showing divine compassion toward the sick, and those oppressed by the devil, would be to ignore a purpose which is easily discerned, which is openly avowed by Christ himself, and which is of much greater importance (1910, p. 354).

That purpose was "to support his proclamation...a necessary proof of the claim of Jesus" (pp. 355-356).

If God's intention was to exempt individual Christians from sickness and disease, He certainly has fallen down on the job, since the vast majority of Christians throughout the last 2,000 years have experienced the exact same afflictions suffered by unbelievers. If miracles in the first century had as their object the improvement of the health of the recipient, then Jesus and the apostles were dismal failures, because they left untouched a lot of sick folk! Jesus healed a **minority** of the sick people of Palestine, and healed **none** outside of that tiny geographical region (an exception being the Canaanite woman's daughter). In fact, one would be forced to conclude that God's compassion did not extend to **everybody**. But the Bible affirms that **God loves the entire world of humanity** (John 3:16; Romans 5:8). Hence, miracles did not have as their central purpose to show God's compassion, nor to ease pain and suffering. McGarvey noted:

[U]nlike these modern advocates of "divine healing," the apostles were never known to go about exhorting people to come forward for the healing

of the body. They effected miraculous cures in a few instances, “as a sign to the unbelievers,” but they never proclaimed, either to saints or sinners, that the healing of all diseases was a part of the gospel which they were sent to preach. These so-called faith-cure churches, therefore, and the preachers who officiate in them as “divine healers,” or what not, are not modeled after the apostolic type, but are misleading the people by humbuggery (p. 351).

The usual rebuttal to these observations is that the reason some people do not receive a miracle is because “they do not have sufficient faith.” But this objection is likewise unscriptural. It is true that some individuals in the New Testament were commended for the faith that they possessed **prior** to being the recipient of a miracle (e.g., Mark 5:34). It does not automatically follow, however, that faith was a **necessary** prerequisite to miraculous reception. Many people were **not** required to have faith. For example, **all** individuals who were raised from the dead obviously were not in a position to “have faith” (e.g., John 11:44). Nor did those possessed by demons, since they were not in their right mind (e.g., Luke 9:42; 11:14). The man who was blind from birth actually showed uncertainty regarding the identity of Jesus (John 9:11-12, 17, 25, 35-36). The man who was healed by Jesus as he laid beside a pool of water, in fact, did not even know who healed him (John 5:13). On one occasion, Jesus healed a paralytic after observing, not **his** faith, but the faith of **his companions** (Mark 2:5). Additional texts indicate that many who received the benefits of miracles were not required to have faith (Luke 13:12; 14:4; Acts 3:1-10).

The opposite was true as well. There were individuals who possessed faith, and yet were not healed of their ailments. Timothy was a faithful and effective servant of the Lord. He had “frequent illnesses” and stomach trouble of such severity as to warrant Paul referring to it by inspiration. But rather than simply healing him, or telling him to “pray for healing,” Paul told him to use “a little wine” as a tonic (1 Timothy 5:23).

Actually, John settled this question for the unbiased inquirer when he wrote that “many other **signs** therefore did Jesus in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, **that ye may believe** that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in His name” (John 20:30-31, emp. added). John said that belief occurs **after** the miracle—not before, in order to receive a miracle! The New Testament teaches the very opposite of those who claim that miracles occur today. They say a person must

have faith **before** he or she can receive a miracle. The New Testament teaches that miracles were performed to authenticate the divine origin of the speaker’s message and/or identity. The message, in turn, generated faith in the hearer (cf. Romans 10:17). Hence, **miracles preceded faith**.

THE DURATION OF MIRACLES

These observations bring us to a third extremely critical realization: once God revealed the entirety of the information that He wished to make available to mankind (later contained in what we call the New Testament), the need for miraculous confirmation of the oral Word came to an end. Now, people can sit down with a New Testament and, with honest and diligent study, conclude that it is God’s Word. Since the purpose of miracles has once and forever been achieved, the miracles, themselves, have ceased. I repeat: **the Bible teaches that miracles are no longer necessary**. Spiritual maturity is now within the grasp of every single individual who chooses to access the means to maturity—the written Word of God.

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul argued that love is a more excellent attribute than miraculous gifts. After all, miraculous gifts (i.e., prophecy, tongue-speaking, supernatural knowledge, etc.) were going to fail, vanish, cease, and be done away (13:8). These gifts are identified in the text with the expression “in part” (13:9-10). The “in part,” or miraculous, would cease when the “perfect” had come. But to what does the “perfect” refer?

The Greek word translated “perfect” is *teleios*. The term does not refer to “perfect” in the sense typically understood by the modern English reader, i.e., to be sinless. Following this faulty notion, some have concluded that the “perfect” refers to Jesus—since He has been the only perfect person. Other interpretations apply “perfect” to heaven (the only perfect place), or Christian maturity and perfect love (the perfect condition or quality). But, in context, Paul was not contrasting qualities or places. He was contrasting quantities, i.e., those things that were incomplete and partial (miraculous gifts) with that which would be total and complete (the fully revealed Word of God). The inaccuracy of these interpretations is seen further in the Greek definition of *teleios*. The word refers to totality, that which is whole, brought to its end, finished, and lacking nothing necessary to completeness (Delling, 1972, 8:73; Arndt and Gingrich, 1957, p. 816; Thayer, 1901, p. 618). Used in its neuter form, Paul was referring to a

thing—not a person—something that, when completed or finished, would replace the incomplete or partial, i.e., the miraculous gifts—which had only temporary significance. Commenting on the abolition of the miraculous gifts of prophecy and supernatural knowledge (mentioned in vss. 8 and 9), W.R. Nicoll correctly observed that “these charisms are **partial** in scope, and therefore temporary: the **fragmentary** gives place to the **complete**” (1900, 2:900, emp. added). Kenneth Wuest agreed: “In I Corinthians 13:10, the word means ‘complete,’ and is contrasted to that which is incomplete” (1943, pp. 117-118). The exegete is forced to conclude that Paul’s use of “perfect” referred to the completed revelation or totally revealed New Testament Scriptures. The revelation of God’s will was completed in its entirety when the final book of the New Testament, Revelation, was written by John prior to A.D. 100.

Paul offered a useful illustration to clarify his point. When the church possessed only small bits and pieces of God’s will, as revealed through scattered miraculous gifts and the gradual production, between approximately A.D. 57 and A.D. 95, of the written documents from the inspired writers of the New Testament, it could not achieve full spiritual maturity. It therefore was like a child (13:11). It lacked the necessary elements to reach spiritual adulthood. However, when the totality of God’s will, which became the New Testament, had been revealed, the church then had the means available to become “a man” (13:11). Once the church had access to all of God’s written Word, the means by which the Word was given (i.e., miraculous gifts) would be obsolete, useless, and therefore “put away” (13:11). Notice that Paul likened miracles to “childish things” (13:11). In other words, miracles were the spiritual equivalents of pacifiers that were necessary while the church was in a state of infancy. Since we now have access to “all truth” (John 16:13), the use of tongue-speaking and other miraculous enhancements in the church today would be comparable to an adult man or woman who continued to use a pacifier!

Paul then explained his point by comparing the initial necessity of miracles to reveal and confirm God’s Word, with the idea of looking through a clouded mirror (see Workman, 1983, p. 8). Once the entire contents of the New Testament had been revealed, the miraculous gifts no longer would be necessary. Having all of God’s revealed Word would enable one to be face to

face with that Word, rather than “looking through a clouded mirror,” i.e., having partial access. Paul wrote (13:11):

Now I know in part [i.e., my knowledge of God’s revelation is incomplete and partial due to limited access via the miraculous element—DM], but then [i.e., when all of God’s Word is finally revealed—DM] shall I know fully, even as also I was fully known [i.e., I shall be made to know or taught thoroughly (which is the figure of speech known as heterosis of the verb in which the intransitive is put for the transitive—see Bullinger, 1898, p. 512)—DM].

Paul made the same point to the Ephesians. Miracles—the “gifts” given by Christ (Ephesians 4:8)—were to last “till the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God” (Ephesians 4:13, emp. added). Two significant observations emerge from this latter verse. First, the word translated “till” (Middle English for “until”) is *mechri*, and was used as a conjunction to indicate the *terminus ad quem* [finishing point] of the miraculous offices (mentioned in vs. 11) bestowed as gifts by Christ. [For treatments of the use of *mechri* in this verse, see Thayer, 1977, p. 408; Arndt and Gingrich, 1957, p. 517; Moulton and Milligan, 1982, p. 407; Blass, et al., 1961, pp. 193-194; Robertson, 1934, pp. 974-975; Dana and Mantey, 1927, p. 281; see also the use of the term in Mark 13:30 and Galatians 4:19]. Nicoll observed:

The statement of the great object of Christ’s gifts and the provision made by Him for its fulfillment is now followed by a statement of the **time** this provision and the consequent service are to last (1900, 3:332, emp. in orig.).

Paul was “[s]pecifying the **time** up to which this ministry and impartation of gifts are to last” (Vincent, 1890, p. 390, emp. added).

Second, the phrase “the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God” often is misunderstood to refer to the eventual **unifying** of all believers in Christ. But this conclusion cannot be correct. Both Scripture and common sense dispel such a notion. Complete unity within Christendom will **never** occur. Those who profess affiliation with Christianity are in a hopeless state of disunity. Catholicism and Protestant denominationalism are fractured into a plethora of factions and splinter groups—literally thousands of divisions and disagreements. Nor will unity ever be achieved even within churches of Christ. Even **first-century** congregations did not attain complete internal unity.

In contrast with this interpretation, notice the use of the articles in the phrases: “**the** faith” and “**the** knowledge.” Contextually, Paul was referring to **the system of**

faith alluded to so often in the New Testament. Jude urged his readers to “contend earnestly for **the** faith” (Jude 3). Paul referred to himself when he quoted others as saying, “He that once persecuted us now preacheth **the** faith of which he once made havoc” (Galatians 1:23). Luke reported that “a great company of the priests were obedient to **the** faith” (Acts 6:7). Elymas the sorcerer sought to “turn aside the proconsul from **the** faith” (Acts 13:8). The early disciples were exhorted to “continue in **the** faith” (Acts 14:22). As a result of Paul’s repeat visits to Lycaonia, “the churches were strengthened in **the** faith” (Acts 16:5).

So “the faith” and “the knowledge” refer to the **completed body of information** that constitutes the Christian religion. Indeed, eight verses earlier (Ephesians 4:5), Paul already had referred to “the faith” as the summation and totality of Christian doctrine—now situated in the repository of the New Testament. An honest exegete is driven to conclude that once the precepts of New Testament Christianity had been revealed on Earth, the miraculous element no longer was necessary. Miracles lasted until “the faith” was completely revealed. They had served their purpose, in the same way that scaffolding is useful while a building is under construction. However, once construction is complete, the scaffolding is removed and discarded as unnecessary and superfluous paraphernalia.

THE DISPLAY AND DISPOSITION OF MIRACLES

Fourth, the actual exercise of miraculous gifts by Christians is addressed in 1 Corinthians 14. In this context, Paul used the term “gifts” (*charismata*, from *charisma*) in a technical sense (like *pneumatika*) to refer to miraculous abilities, designated by Thayer “**extraordinary** powers...by the Holy Spirit” (1901, p. 667, emp. added; cf. Arndt and Gingrich, 1957, p. 887). Hans Conzelmann stated that the term indicated that “[t]he operations are **supernatural**” and of “**supernatural** potency” (1974, 9:405, emp. added). [The word is so used in the Pauline corpus in ten of its sixteen occurrences (Romans 1:11; 12:6; 1 Corinthians 1:7; 12:4, 9, 28, 30, 31; 1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6). The only other occurrence of the word in the New Testament was Peter’s comparable use, i.e., to refer to supernatural ability (1 Peter 4:10)—see Moulton, et al., 1978, p. 1005]. Several relevant points occur in regard to the gift of tongue-speaking that help one to understand both the **temporary** nature of miracles, as well as their **irrelevance** to a contemporary pursuit and practice of New Testament Christianity.

Tongue-Speaking

First, the term “unknown” (in regard to tongues) is italicized in the KJV because it does not appear in the original Greek text (14:2, 4, 13, 14, 19, 27). By inserting this word into their translation, the translators were attempting to aid the English reader. They undoubtedly were hoping to convey the idea that the languages to which Paul referred were **unknown** to the speaker, i.e., the speaker had no prior training by which to learn or know the language. He spoke the language strictly by God’s miraculous empowerment. “Unknown” certainly was not intended to convey the thought that the tongues were unknown to **all humans** and, as such, were non-earthly languages.

Second, the events reported at the very beginning of the Christian religion (Acts 2) set the precedent for understanding that tongue-speaking entailed no more than the ability to speak a foreign human language (which the speaker had not studied) to people from a variety of geographical locales (e.g., Parthians, Medes, Arabians—Acts 2:9-11). The unbiased Bible student must conclude that what is described in some detail in Acts 2 is the same phenomenon alluded to in 1 Corinthians 14. All tongue-speaking in the Bible consisted of known human languages (ideally, known to the very audience being addressed) that were unknown (i.e., unstudied, unlearned) by the one who was speaking the language.

Third, there is simply no such thing as an “ecstatic utterance” in the New Testament. The tongue-speaking of 1 Corinthians 14 entailed **human language**—not incoherent gibberish. A simple reading of the chapter demonstrates that known human languages are under consideration. For example, Paul paralleled tongue-speaking with the use of the trumpet in warfare. If a bugler sounded meaningless noise, the military would be thrown into confusion. It was imperative for the bugler to blow the proper notes and tones, i.e., meaningful musical “language,” so that the army would understand clearly what was being communicated (whether to charge, engage, or retreat). “Sound without sense” fails to achieve the very purpose of tongue-speaking. Paul stated:

So likewise ye, unless ye utter by the tongue speech easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? for ye will be speaking into the air. There are, it may be, so many kinds of languages **in the world**, and no kind is without signification. If then I know not the meaning of the language, I shall be to him that speaketh a barbarian, and he that speaketh will be a barbarian unto me (1 Corinthians 14:9-11, emp. added).

Obviously, Paul was referring to human languages—those that exist “in the world.” He envisioned a scenario where two individuals, who spoke different languages, are attempting to communicate with each other. If one speaks in Spanish and the other in German, as they attempt to speak to one another, each would be a “foreigner” to the other. Neither would be able to understand what the other was attempting to say. Hence the need for tongue-speaking, i.e., the ability to speak human language unknown to the speaker but known to the recipient. Again, an examination of 1 Corinthians 14 yields the result that no contextual justification exists for drawing the conclusion that the Bible refers to, let alone endorses, the notion of “ecstatic” speech.

Fourth, Paul clearly stated that tongue-speaking was a sign to **un**believers—not to believers (14:22). Tongue-speaking was to be done in **their** presence, to convince **them** of the truth being spoken, i.e., to confirm the Word. The tongue-speaking being practiced today is done in the presence of those who **already believe** that tongue-speaking is occurring and, when an unbeliever, who is skeptical of the genuineness of the activity, makes an appearance in such an assembly, the claim often is made that tongue-speaking cannot occur because of the presence of unbelief. Once again, the New Testament teaches the very opposite of those who claim the ability to speak in tongues today.

Fifth, the recipient of a miraculous gift in the New Testament could control himself (14:32). He was not overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit so that he began to babble or flail about. Tongue-speaking today is frequently practiced in a setting where the individuals who claim to be exercising the gift are speaking uncontrollably at the very time that others are either doing the same thing or engaging in some other activity. This overlapping activity is in direct violation of three of Paul’s commands: (1) that each individual take their turn one at a time; (2) that no more than three tongue-speakers speak per service; and (3) that tongue-speakers remain silent if no interpreter is present (14:27-28).

The claim by many today to be able to speak in tongues is simply out of harmony with New Testament teaching. Anyone can babble, make up sounds, and claim that he or she is speaking in tongues. But such conduct is no **sign** today. It is precisely the same phenomenon that various pagan religions have practiced throughout the centuries. During New Testament times, however, no one questioned the authenticity of tongue-speaking. Why? The speaker was speaking **a known human language** that could be understood **by those present** who knew that language and knew that the speaker did not know that language beforehand. As McGarvey observed about Acts 2:

Not only did the apostles speak in foreign languages that were understood by the hearers, some understanding

one and some another, but the fact that this was done by Galileans, who knew only their mother tongue, was the one significant fact that gave to Peter’s speech which followed all of its power over the multitude (1910, p. 318).

If and when self-proclaimed tongue-speakers today demonstrate that genuine New Testament gift, their message could be accepted as being from God. But **no one today has demonstrated that genuine New Testament gift.**

Holy Spirit Baptism

Where, then, does the baptism of the Holy Spirit fit into this discussion? Today’s alleged practitioners typically associate the expression “Holy Spirit baptism” with the phenomenon that enables the believer to speak in tongues, heal someone, or work other miracles. In other words, Holy Spirit baptism is simply a generic reference to miraculous empowerment. Anyone who can speak in a tongue or perform any other miraculous action is said to have been baptized in the Holy Spirit. He is said to be “Spirit filled.” However, it might surprise the reader to learn that the Bible alludes to Holy Spirit baptism in a very narrow, specialized, even technical sense. Just because a person could speak in tongues or work miracles did not necessarily mean he had been baptized in the Holy Spirit.

The very first allusion to Holy Spirit baptism in the New Testament is John’s statement: “I indeed baptize you in water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me **...will baptize you in the Holy Spirit**” (Matthew 3:11, emp. added). From this statement alone, one might assume that Christians in **general** would be baptized in the Holy Spirit. But this assumption would be a premature conclusion. John was not addressing a Christian audience. He was speaking to Jews. Nothing in the context allows the reader to distinguish John’s intended recipients of the promise of Holy Spirit baptism—whether all humans, all Jews, all Christians, or merely some of those in one or more of these categories. The specific recipients of this promise are clarified in later passages.

Just before His ascension, Jesus told the apostles to wait in Jerusalem until they were “clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49). In John chapters 14-16, He made several specific promises to the apostles concerning the coming of the Spirit—the “Comforter/Helper” (*parakletos*)—upon them, to empower them to do the peculiar work of an apostle (i.e., to recall the words Jesus had spoken to them, to speak and write by inspiration, and to launch the Christian re-



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ligion). If these verses apply to all Christians, then all Christians ought to have been personally guided “into all truth” (John 16:13), and thus would have absolutely no need of written Scripture (John 14:26). However, in context, these verses clearly refer to **the apostolic office**.

Jesus further clarified the application of Holy Spirit baptism when He told the apostles that the earlier statement made in Luke 24:49 applied to **them**, and, in fact, would come to pass “not many days hence” (Acts 1:4-5). Jesus also stated that the “power” that they would receive would be from the Holy Spirit, which would enable them to witness to the world what they had experienced by being with Christ (Acts 1:8). Notice carefully that on this occasion, Jesus made an explicit reference to the very statement that John had uttered previously in Matthew 3: “For John indeed baptized with water; but **ye** [apostles—DM] shall be **baptized in the Holy Spirit** not many days hence” (Acts 1:5, emp. added). Jesus explicitly stated that the Holy Spirit baptism He would administer (in keeping with John’s prediction) would occur within a few days, and would be confined to the apostles.

All one need do is turn the page to see the promise of Holy Spirit baptism achieve climactic fulfillment in Acts 2 as the Spirit was poured out only upon the apostles. The antecedent of “they” in Acts 2:4 is “the apostles” in Acts 1:26. The apostles were the ones who spoke in tongues and taught the people. **They** were the recipients of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, as is evident from the following contextual indicators: (1) “are not all these that speak **Galileans**?” (2:7); (2) “Peter, standing up with **the eleven**” (2:14); (3) “they...said unto Peter and the rest of **the apostles**” (2:37); (4) Peter quoted Joel 2:28-32, and applied it to that occasion as proof that **the apostles** were not intoxicated; and (5) the text even states explicitly that the signs and wonders were “done **through the apostles**” (2:43). This pattern continues in the book of Acts: “And by the hands of **the apostles** were many signs and wonders wrought among the people” (5:12); “the Lord, who bare witness unto the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by **their hands**” (14:3); “what signs and wonders God had wrought...through **them**” (15:12).

The next direct reference to Holy Spirit baptism consisted of Peter describing the experience of the Gentiles in Acts 10. Referring to their empowerment to speak in tongues, Peter explicitly identified it as being comparable to the experience of the apostles in Acts 2. Note his explanation:

And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them, even as on **us** [apostles—DM] at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized in the Holy Spirit. If then God gave unto them the like gift as he did also unto **us** [apostles—DM]... (Acts 11:15-17, emp. added).

Peter unmistakably linked the baptism of the Holy Spirit predicted by John in Matthew 3:11, and applied by Jesus to the apostles in Acts 1:5, with the unique and exclusive bestowal of the same on the first Gentile candidates of salvation. If the baptism of the Holy Spirit had occurred between Acts 2 and Acts 10, why did Peter compare the Gentiles’ experience with the experience of the **apostles**—rather than comparing it with many other Christians who allegedly would have received it at some point during the intervening years? The answer lies in the fact that the baptism of the Holy Spirit did not occur during those intervening years. Baptism of the Holy Spirit was a unique and infrequent occurrence that came directly from Deity.

This understanding harmonizes with additional facts. The great prophecy of the Old Testament, which made special reference to the coming New Testament era as the dispensation of the Spirit, incorporated a most noteworthy expression. God had declared: “I will pour out my Spirit upon **all flesh**” (Joel 2:28, emp. added). Peter repeated it on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:17). “**All flesh**” was a technical expression used by the Jewish writers of the Bible, who frequently divided humanity into **only two** racial groupings, i.e., Jew and non-Jew (Gentile). The reader is urged to study carefully Isaiah 40:5 (cf. Luke 3:6) and Isaiah 66:23 as well as Paul’s use of “we” vs. “they” and “both,” “all,” “none,” and “no flesh” (Romans 3:9-20). “No flesh” and “all flesh” were technical allusions to the two **categories** of human flesh, i.e., Jew and non-Jew.

Observe, then, that the very first recipients of Holy Spirit baptism were the **Jewish** apostles on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. The second recipients of Holy Spirit baptism were **Gentiles** who were members of the household of Cornelius (Acts 10). The occurrence of that event convinced Jewish Christians that Gentiles were fit prospects for the reception of the Gospel, and thus were valid candidates for entrance into the kingdom (Acts 10:34-35,45; 11:18). Thus, Joel’s remark, that God would pour out His Spirit on “all flesh,” applied to the outpouring on **Jews** in Acts 2 and **Gentiles** in Acts 10. The only other conceivable occurrence of Holy Spirit baptism would have been Paul, who would have received direct

miraculous ability from God as well. His reception obviously was unique because (1) he was not an apostle when the Twelve received the Spirit, and (2) he was “one born out of due time” (1 Corinthians 15:8). Holy Spirit baptism, then, filled two unique and exclusive purposes: (1) to prepare the apostles for their apostolic (not Christian) roles, and (2) to provide divine demonstration that Gentiles could become Christians.

Laying on of Hands

If Acts 2 and 10 are the only instances of Holy Spirit baptism in the New Testament, how, then, do we account for the fact that numerous others in the New Testament performed miracles or were able to speak in tongues? If they, too, were not recipients of Holy Spirit baptism, how did they receive the ability to do what they did? The New Testament dictates only one other way that one could obtain a miraculous capability: **through the laying on of the apostles’ hands**. Only the apostles possessed the ability to transfer miraculous capabilities to others—a phenomenon that was described succinctly by Luke:

Then laid they their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. Now when Simon saw that **through the laying on of the apostles’ hands the Holy Spirit was given**, he offered them money, saying, “Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Spirit.” But Peter said unto him, “Thy silver perish with thee, because thou hast thought to obtain the gift of God with money. Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter” (Acts 8:17-21, emp. added).

This description establishes two important facts: (1) **only the apostles** were able to impart to others the ability to perform miracles; and (2) those other than the apostles who could perform miracles received their ability **indirectly** through the **apostles—not directly from God via Holy Spirit baptism**.

This fascinating feature of the miraculous in the first century makes it possible to understand how other individuals received their supernatural powers. For example, Philip possessed the ability to perform miracles (Acts 8:6,13). Since he was not an apostle, and since he did not receive direct ability from God via baptism of the Holy Spirit, where, then, did he derive his ability? Philip previously had received the laying on of the apostles’ hands (Acts 6:5-6). Likewise, the first Christians in Ephesus were enabled to speak in tongues—when the apostle Paul laid his hands on them (Acts 19:6). Even Timothy received his gift from the laying on of Paul’s hands (2 Timothy 1:6).

Some have challenged the exclusivity of the role of the apostles in their unique ability to impart the miraculous element by drawing attention to the admonition given by Paul to Timothy: “Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands **of the presbytery**” (1 Timothy 4:14, emp. added). How does one explain the fact that Paul stated that Timothy’s gift had come through the presbytery (i.e., the eldership) as well? Once again, the grammar of the text provides the definitive answer. In 2 Timothy 1:6, where Paul claimed **sole** credit for imparting the gift to Timothy, he employed the Greek preposition *dia* with the genitive, which means “through” or “by means of” (Machen, 1923, p. 41; Dana and Mantey, 1927, p. 101). However, in 1 Timothy 4:14, where Paul included the eldership in the action of impartation, he employed a completely different Greek preposition—*meta*. The root meaning of *meta* is “in the midst of” (Dana and Mantey, p. 107). It refers to the **attendant circumstances** of an event that takes place—the **accompanying** phenomena (Arndt and Gingrich, 1957, pp. 510-511). It means “in association with” or “accompanied by” (Moule, 1959, p. 61; Thayer, 1901, p. 404; cf. Robertson, 1934, p. 611). In other words, Paul—as an apostle—imparted the miraculous gift to Timothy. It came from God **through** Paul. However, on that occasion, the local eldership of the church was present and participated **with** Paul in the event, lending their simultaneous support and accompanying commendation. After examining the grammatical data on the matter, Nicoll concluded: “[I]t was the imposition of hands by St. Paul that was the instrument used by God in the communication of the *charisma* to Timothy” (1900, 4:127; cf. Jamieson, et al., n.d., 2:414; Williams 1960, p. 956). Consequently, 1 Timothy 4:14 offers no proof that miraculous capability could be received through other means in addition to apostolic imposition of hands and/or the two clear instances of Holy Spirit baptism.

CONCLUSION

In light of the biblical data set forth in this study, certain conclusions become quite evident. Since there are no apostles living today, and since Holy Spirit baptism was unique to the apostles (Acts 2) and the first Gentile converts (Acts 10), there is no Holy Spirit baptism today, there is no miraculous healing today, and there can be no tongue-speaking. The miraculous element in the Christian religion was terminated by God near the close of the first century. Once the last apostle died, the means by which miraculous capabilities were made

available was dissolved. With the completion of God’s revelation to humanity (now available in the Bible), people living today have all that is needed to be complete and to enjoy the fullness of Christian existence (2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:3).

The alleged miracles and tongue-speaking of today simply do not measure up to the Bible’s description of the miraculous. They are unverifiable, ambiguous, and counterfeit. Today’s “divine healing” consists of vague, unseen, non-quantifiable aches and pains like arthritis, headaches, and the like. In the New Testament, however, people were raised from the dead—even days after death (e.g., John 11:17). Severed body parts were restored instantaneously (e.g., Luke 22:50-51). People who had been **born blind** had their sight restored (e.g., John 9:1). Those **lame from birth** were empowered to walk (Acts 3:2). First-century miracles were not limited only to certain ailments and psychosomatic illnesses that could be cured through natural means, or by “mental adjustments” on the part of the infirm. Jesus healed “**all** kinds of sickness and **all** kinds of disease” (Matthew 4:23, emp. added). No disease or sickness was exempt in the New Testament (cf. Acts 28:8-9). Where are these types of occurrences today? When has anyone restored a severed limb lost in an accident? When has a self-proclaimed “faith-healer” raised anyone from the dead? Where are the miracle workers who are healing the blind, the crippled, and those whose infirmities have been documented as having existed for many years (John 5:3,5)? Where are the televangelists who will go into children’s hospitals and rectify birth defects, cancer, and childhood diseases? Where are the modern-day miracle workers who have ingested poison or been bitten by a venomous snake—yet remained unharmed (Mark 16:18; Acts 28:3-5)? An honest searcher for the truth is inevitably forced to conclude that the miraculous age has passed.

Human beings always are looking for something new, exciting, and flashy. They want something that makes them **feel** religious and secure—without having to face up to personal responsibilities. Hence, there will always be those who will simply disengage their minds, their spiritual sense, and their intention to assess “the words of truth and reason” (Acts 26:25).

Genuine Christianity today consists of simply taking the written Word of God, and studying it carefully in order to learn what God expects of us—no brass band, no circus theatrics, no flash of light, no dream or vision, no sudden rush attributable to the Holy Spirit. There simply are no short cuts to spirituality. **The miraculous is no answer.**

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- [EDITOR’S NOTE: The printed version of this article in this month’s issue of *Reason & Revelation* is the **abbreviated** form of a much more comprehensive study of this topic. The entire document is available on our Web site at: <http://www.ApologeticsPress.org/rr/rr2003/rr0303b.htm>.]



NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

WELCOME TO THE NEW APOLOGETICS PRESS WEB SITE

In my “Note from the Editor” in the September 1997 issue of *Reason & Revelation*, I introduced readers to our then-new Web site. Then, in the February 1999 issue of *R&R*, I announced a “front-to-back/top-to-bottom” revision of the entire site—producing the beautiful, functional site that has been in use since that time. Among my February 1999 comments were these: “Resting on our laurels never has been something with which we at Apologetics Press felt comfortable. It therefore gives me a great deal of pleasure to announce the availability of the new edition of ‘A.P. on the Web.’”

Perhaps you’ve heard the old saying, “That was then; this is now.” It certainly is appropriate here, as I proudly announce the unveiling of our entirely new Web site.

Around eight months ago, I asked my staff to begin working with me on a complete revision of our entire Web site—**again!** As with the 1999 revision, our goals were straightforward. First, we wanted every single aspect of the site’s appearance—from the newly designed home page to every page thereafter—to be as crisp, clean, and professional as possible. Second, we wanted the site to be even more user-friendly than it already is. Third, we wanted it to be flexible enough so that, when “current events” demand it (like, for example, the current brouhaha over human cloning), we can post information immediately, and in an easy-to-locate fashion, for the benefit of those who visit our site. And, fourth, of course, we wanted the site as a whole to continue to be as rich as possible in its **free** information content.

During the lengthy revision process, we sought assistance from several professional Web designers. While we were cautious in how we spent the funds necessary to produce the new site—so as to get

the “most bang for our buck”—we spared no expense in securing the latest Web-based technology to ensure that the site is as current, convenient, and “comfortable” as possible. We did not want—to employ an old adage—“a dollar waiting on a dime.”

Those “netizens” who visit our site will be the ones who ultimately determine if we have succeeded in our quest. But from our perspective, we are absolutely thrilled with the end result. The new site, in our estimation, is a “wonder to behold.” As we began the revamping procedure, we visited numerous other sites to make a list of features we liked, and features we didn’t. We purchased software that was designed to streamline the site. We worked with artists who submitted samples of proposed changes to the graphics on our site. We solicited input from those who use our site on a regular basis, to see what constructive criticism they wanted to offer. In short, we did what we at A.P. do best—we researched our subject. Then we acted.

We invite you to visit the new site at your convenience. I think you will be thrilled at what you see.

The home page is new. The menus are new. The design of all the pages is new. In short, **everything** is new! And, as you will notice when you visit the site for the first time, the information on the home page will change every Monday morning, in order to accommodate new, updated material on a weekly basis.

As always—with practically everything we do here at Apologetics Press—your input will be appreciated. Ideas, suggestions, and yes, even criticisms, are welcome. To paraphrase that old song, “Everything we do, we do for you.” Please feel free to call on us if we may be of any assistance. We are here to serve.

Bert Thompson

