



STATEMENT DC340

Scripture Vs. the Spiritual Gifts?

by Elliot Miller

Scripture vs. the spiritual gifts? The very idea is self-contradictory, since God is the source of both. And yet, this contradiction has been a lamentable reality in the twentieth-century church. More often than not, the Bible and the “charismata” (gifts of God’s grace) have been set at odds, with one being made the reason for ignoring (if not rejecting) the other.

At the bottom, of this conflict is a crucial issue for the Christian faith — *revelation*. Although the anticharismatics (e.g., many dispensational and reformed believers) would agree that some spiritual gifts are functioning today, they often argue that the more dramatic “sign” gifts (e.g., prophecy, speaking in tongues, healing, miracles — see 1 Cor. 12:8-10) served special authenticating and revelatory functions in the first century only. Basing their position largely on Corinthians 13:8-12, they maintain that once the canon or Scripture (“that which is perfect”) was completed, the sign gifts with their “partial” revelation were no longer needed and so ceased to exist. Thus, the anticharismatics view the modern charismatic movement as being unbiblical and in direct competition with biblical revelation, allowing extrabiblical “messages from God” to supersede Scripture.

A survey of the twentieth-century pentecostal/charismatic movement would seem to vindicate such charges. Although there are notable exceptions (e.g., the Assemblies of God), charismatics seem to have a propensity for novel and controversial doctrines (e.g., “manifest sons of God,” demonization of Christians, “shepherding,” “positive confession,” “kingdom now”). In fact, there *is* a prevailing tendency among charismatics to view the charismata as a source of continuing revelation. Some formally affirm this belief (see, e.g., “The Gospel According to Paulk” on p.21). But even among those who would not consciously embrace it, it is not uncommon to find the sign gifts functioning as revelation in their lives. For examples: doctrines are accepted as biblical mainly because they received a “prophetic” endorsement; church and personal decisions are more often based on prophetic “words” than Scripture; supernatural manifestations are pursued with greater zeal than understanding of Scripture and sound doctrine.

The conflict of “Scripture vs. the spiritual gifts,” then, might be restated as a conflict over whether extrabiblical revelation, in the form of the sign gifts, is biblical. But this brings us right to the root of the problem. *Both* sides of the debate have a mistaken view of the biblical purpose and function of the sign gifts. And worse, the charismatic side has a deficient appreciation of biblical revelation.

In the sense of the term used here, a revelation is God’s authoritative disclosure to man of universally significant truth. God’s revelation in Christ, as recorded in Scripture, is final and complete (Heb. 1:1-2; Jude 3; Eph. 2:20; etc.). As God’s unique and infallible word, Scripture is sufficient for all our doctrine, and is the absolute standard by which we must judge all things (2 Tim. 3:15-17; Isa. 8:20).

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Biblically, the sign gifts serve distinctly different, nonrevelatory purposes. Space will not permit an analysis of each sign gift to prove this point. But if it can be established in regard to *prophecy*, it would seem obvious that the others are nonrevelatory as well.

Because it *does* consist of messages from God to man, prophecy could have *conceivably* substituted for Scripture until the canon was complete. But is that what 1 Corinthians 13 is saying? Historically, the church has understood this passage to mean by "that which is perfect" the Second Coming of Christ. Dispensationalists argue, though, that the Greek word for "perfect" (*Teleion*) is in the neuter gender, indicating the apostle meant Scripture rather than Christ. However, the Greek can as easily mean "mature" or "complete," and it would appear from the context that Paul uses the neuter gender because he is writing about particular *states* or *levels* of maturity (cf. v. 11). In our future, "mature" or "perfect" state, after we are glorified at Christ's second coming, we will no longer need the gifts God has given us to help us get by in our present feeble condition. We will *then* "see face to face" and "know fully" (v. 12; cf. 1 John 3:2).

If the anticharismatics are wrong, and prophecy (understood as messages from, God to man) is meant to continue, does that mean those charismatics who believe in ongoing revelation are right? While prophecy *was* an important means of revelation in biblical times, the "prophecy" referred to as a spiritual gift given to the church in 1 Corinthians is manifestly of a different kind. This is evidenced by Paul's instruction: "For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be exhorted" (14:31). Certainly, *all* of the Corinthians were not capable of transmitting authoritative revelation comparable to that of Paul, Peter, and John!

The charisma of prophecy does not impart some previously undisclosed doctrinal truth, nor does it carry the authority of revelation. Each new manifestation is to be rigorously tested (1 Cor. 14:29; 1 Thess. 5:20-21), suggesting that those who exercise it are not expected to be infallible (as were the Old Testament prophets - Deut. 18:20-22).

What then is its function? While it may occasionally impart nondoctrinal knowledge of local significance (e.g., Acts 11:27-28), it primarily applies the already-revealed truth of Scripture to the church's present situation for purposes of "edification and exhortation and consolation" (1 Cor. 14:3). Like all of the other gifts, it is a means of *ministry*, not revelation.

In this sense, prophecy, tongues, and healing are no different than teaching, mercy-showing, and service (Rom. 12:7-8). Just as the latter gifts *complement* the ministry of the Word, so should the former. They are not meant to compete with Scripture (God's unique revelation) for the central place of authority and guidance in our lives. But, in the context of Christ's body, they *each* provide a special ministry of grace which the believer needs to "grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ" (Eph. 4:15).