

A New Community: “A Gifted People”

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West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

*“And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.”
(Acts 2:43 ESV).*

Signs and Wonders

When the first band of early Christians gathered in Jerusalem following Pentecost, they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching of the gospel, to a life of fellowship with one another, to breaking bread in communion with Christ and in sharing life together, and to constant and intentional prayer. That’s a good list of what the community of Christ was and is known to do. That’s a pretty good snapshot of early Christian worship: teaching, sharing, communion, and prayer. It’s still true today.

But Luke goes on in the next verse to discuss not just what we do in worship, but what we have as a people. We have a sense of awe as we stand before the throne (which we discussed last week). We have a united community—united by the Holy Spirit and given the task to maintain that unity in which we have all things in common (that will be the subject for next week). But between those, Luke says we have gifts from God and assurance that God is at work in this church.. We have gifts from God and assurance that God is at work in His church.

The language Luke uses might sound foreign to many of us. He speaks of signs and wonders worked by the apostles’ in the presence of the community. Luke emphasizes “signs” more than most writers. They are as central, important, and prominent to Luke as are the speeches. Just two chapters later, Peter and John and the whole church pray for it—that God would “stretch out his hand to heal,” and that “signs and wonders” would be performed through the name of Jesus, and that these signs would accompany their speaking the word “with all boldness” (Acts 4:29-30).

But in book after book and church after church, we have studied the speeches backwards and forwards, but have given very little attention to the “signs.” I think that is for a number of reasons.

Displaying God’s Glory, Confirming God’s Message

One major reason is that we just assume the speeches are the main course—central billing—while signs and wonders were like appetizers or the extra goodie bag given out at the end of an event. It was a helpful for confirmation that you could trust the message preached, but it was the message that was always the important thing.

There is actually a lot to that. The long ending of Mark (whether original to Mark or not) says something true and helpful along this line. It says that the apostles “went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by accompanying signs” (Mk 16:20). In fact, Paul tells the Corinthians that when they think of all the ways God has gifted his church—such as the gift of speech and knowledge, to such an extent that they were not lacking in any gift—this was all a way to confirm the testimony about Christ (1 Cor 1:5-7). And then we have 2 Peter 1:19, declaring that the words spoken by the prophets are still with us today, but we have these words “more fully confirmed”—no doubt referring to the resurrection of Jesus Christ (2 Pet 1:19). We see this in the book of Acts. On Pentecost day, Peter says God confirmed or attested that Jesus was who he claimed to be by mighty works and wonders and signs (Acts 2:22). When they came to Iconium, Paul and Barnabas “remained a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands” (Acts 14:3). Or consider the Jerusalem counsel who, in order to be convinced of the message to take the gospel to the Gentiles, listened to Paul and Barnabas as they told of the wonders and signs God had done through them among the Gentiles (Acts 15:12).

All of that is true. But there seems to be two questions worth asking here: (1) is confirmation still needed? And (2) if so, does God confirm in any other ways?

It’s true that “signs” in the book of Acts appear to be synonymous with wondrous miracles. But signs aren’t always that. In Genesis, God puts a rainbow in the sky as a sign of his covenant promise (Gen 9:12-13, 17), and then he commands Jewish males to bear the marks of circumcision as a sign of the covenant between them (Gen 17:11). These powerful signs confirm the message and remind you and others that the testimony is true.

In Romans 15:8, Paul says that God gave promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; these were promises about the gospel, the future of Israel, and the coming Kingdom. And

then Paul says “I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm” those promises (Rom 15:8). This doesn’t seem to me to be entirely about miracles Jesus wrought, as much as his willingness to serve the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Doing so “confirmed” the promises.

Or look over at Philippians 1:7, where Paul-writing from prison-says the church in Philippi are fellow partakers in the same grace. And what grace is that, Paul? Well, you share in my imprisonment, and “in the defense and confirmation of the gospel” (Phil 1:7). Now, maybe he means you work miracles. But it seems broader to me. That the way you live and conduct your life, and the way you suffer for the gospel, all help defend and confirm the gospel truth.

The King James version uses the English word “confirm” in several places to mean “encourage and strengthen” (such as Acts 15:32 & 41). So I ask again—does God give to his church today gifts to encourage and strengthen them, to help defend his message and make it known to those within and without that the gospel of Jesus is true?

I believe the answer is a resounding yes!

God Gifts His Church

The place I’d like to start is in Hebrews 2:1-4. “Therefore,” says the Hebrews writer, “we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it” (v.1). The focus here is the message. What message? The message of salvation, he continues. “The Lord himself was the first to tell about it, and people who heard the message proved to us that it was true.” The Lord told us about salvation—what it is, what it involves, and what it does for you, and the people who heard the message confirmed, attested, or proved that it was true. By miracles? Sure. But is that the only way first century believers attested to the story of salvation? Listen as he continues: “it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles...” [and here is the part I want you to focus in on:] “...and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.”

Did you all notice that? The message given to us by Christ was confirmed to be true by those who heard it. We got this confirmation through miracles and signs and wonders—sure—but also by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

Every Christian since Pentecost has received the gift of God’s Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). And this is something we in our tradition have long understood. As Everett Ferguson writes in his book *The Church of Christ*,

“The Spirit is the life of the church. If the church is the body of Christ, the Spirit of Christ is the life of the body. Just as the body without the spirit is dead, so without the Holy Spirit there would be no church, no community at all. Possession of the Spirit indicates membership in the people of God, and participation in the Spirit is the basis of the corporate life...

The Spirit is not like a contractor who builds a house and leaves it for new owners...The Spirit continues to give life to the church, and that life is the life of Christ. The church is the community of the Spirit.”¹

This is why the gift of the Spirit is the Spirit himself. The church is the community of the spirit. The Spirit comes into our lives in baptism (Acts 2:38), rests upon his people (1 Pet 4:14), fills us (Eph 5:18), and leads us (Rom 8:14). In fact, says Paul, anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him (Rom 8:9-11). So what does it mean for the church to be the community of the spirit, and for individual Christians to have and participate in the life of the Spirit? Oh, lots of things! But one thing it certainly includes is to have spiritual gifts.

Paul talks about “spirit gifts” extensively in three places: Romans 12, Ephesians 4, and 1 Corinthians 12. And Peter talks about them in 1 Peter 4. That’s 4 places in the New Testament where we have some sustained discussion of gifts of the Spirit. Would you like to know in how many of those texts the things mentioned are what you might call “miraculous”? Only 1: 1 Corinthians 12. But for that reason, it might be helpful to start there.

Gifts In Everyday Life

It saddens me that we read our Bibles so differently than the first readers. We divide up the “gift” of the spirit and “gifts” of the Spirit; we then divide up gifts into “miraculous” and “non-miraculous.” But a first century reader would see all of this and say one thing: that’s God at work in my life. That’s God at work in the world. That’s God’s at work in his church.

Even in the first century, even in a place like Corinth where the church as a whole possessed every spiritual gift you could name (1 Cor 1:7), Paul didn’t expect every *individual* member to have all those gifts or even the *same* ones. “I wish all of you were like me,” says Paul in 1 Corinthians 7, “but God has given different gifts to each of us” (1 Cor 7:7 CEV). Different gifts—yes; but they were *all gifts*, nonetheless. “There are different kinds of spiritual gifts,” writes Paul in chapter 12, “but they all come from the same Spirit” (1 Cor 12:4 CEV). He continues, “And there are varieties of service, but

¹ Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology*, pp. 107-08.

the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who *empowers them all in everyone*” (1 Cor 12:4-6 ESV). So when he goes on to list things like speaking in tongues, faith healing, and mighty miracles, that’s not surprising. What is surprising is that he lists them separately as gifts given “to one” and not “to all.” And then he concludes his list by saying “But it is the same Spirit who does all this and decides which gifts to give to each of us” (1 Cor 12:11).

With that backdrop, consider what all those other texts about spiritual gifts have to say. They each begin the same way: “God has given each of us different gifts to use” say Paul in Romans (Rom 12:6 CEV). “Each of you has been blessed with one of God’s many wonderful gifts to be used in service to others,” writes Peter; “so use your gift well” (1 Peter 4:10-11). He gave gifts!, says Paul in Ephesians 4; “Christ has generously divided out his gifts to us...he gave gifts to people” and he did this (as the ESV reads) “to equip the saints for the work of ministry and for the building up of the body of Christ;” or as the CEV puts it: “so his people would learn to serve and his body would grow strong” (Eph 4:7, 8, 12).

And then Paul and Peter begin to list the spiritual gifts God has given to his church to attest to the gospel, to build up the body, and to help his people ring the message out. And here is the list:

He gave evangelists (Eph 4:11), preachers (Rom 12:7), and speakers (1 Pet 4:11)
 He gave shepherds (Eph 4:11)
 He gave teachers (Eph 4:11; Rom 12:7)
 The gift of helpful service to others (Rom 12:7; 1 Peter 4:11)
 The gift of encouragement (Rom 12:8)
 The gift of generous giving (Rom 12:8)
 The gift of leadership (Rom 12:8)
 The gift of mercy & “cheerful good deed doers” (Rom 12:8)
 The gift of hospitality (1 Peter 4:9)

A list like this makes me go back to 1 Corinthians and reconsider some in that list as well:

The gift of wisdom (1 Cor 12:8)
 The gift of knowledge (1 Cor 12:8)
 The gift of great faith (1 Cor 12:9)

I’ve seen these gifts. Haven’t you? And they not only have helped strengthen my resolve, they have confirmed that the story to which I have given my life is true. In that sense, these gifts given to others have become signs for me.

Craig Keener is a fantastic New Testament scholar who also happens to be Pentecostal. Knowing that makes this quote all the more remarkable. Keener writes:

[T]he point of “signs” in the biblical tradition...is not their manifestly “supernatural” character. [Even in Luke’s writings] “signs” tend to be compelling confirmations of divine activity...but their primary function is to attest God’s activity, not a “supernatural” worldview...Like the emphasis on the Spirit or faith, signs emphasize dependence on the Lord who is their obvious and only source.²

Signs and wonders and miracles and gifts of the spirit have one thing in common: they all—regardless of their type—testify that God is alive and well and at work in his church.

In the book of Acts, Luke tells us that Jesus was anointed by the Spirit with power. So he went around healing and “doing good,” for God was with him (Acts 10:38). And so Paul, when he speaks of gifts of the spirit, speaks of healing and he speaks of “doing good;” he calls them different gifts, and says both declare that God is with us.

Go back to the list on the screen. all of these are listed right alongside the gift of Apostles (Eph 4:11), prophets (Eph 4:11) and prophecy (1 Cor 12:10). Power to heal the sick (1 Cor 12:9), to work mighty miracles (1 Cor 12:10) or speak and interpret tongues (1 Cor 12:11).

I don’t know what your views are concerning those last ones. I imagine in a room this large there might be a variety of nuanced positions that would make a good discussion. But I beg you, don’t let your view of some gifts given to some people deny the power of all these other gifts given by God to his body. For even after listing all these gifts, Paul ends 1 Corinthians 12 with this admonition: “I want you to desire the best gifts, so I will show you a much better way” (1 Cor 12:31). And then he speaks of the greatest gift, the greatest confirmation of the gospel known to man: the gift of love.

Gifts To West Side

You may recall those two chapters in Revelation where we are told over and over again to listen up for what the Spirit says to the churches. In each one, what the Spirit says to the churches includes what Christ gives to the churches.

² Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary, Vol 1: Introduction and 1:1-2:47* (Baker Academic, 2012), section 15.6 “The function of signs.”

On the stage here, you may have noticed this pile of gifts. They were waiting on me when I arrived, and each has a note attached. Would you allow me to read one or two?

This one says “to the church at West Side, from the Holy Spirit: I have given you the gift of leadership.” I see that gift. A gift given to Mickey and Mitch, to Mike and Mike, to Steve and Steve, to John and Dennis, to Robert and Tommy. Through our prayers and their willing submission to Christ, God gives wisdom and knowledge to these good men, whom Christ has appointed to shepherd this flock that the Holy Spirit has placed in their care. These men are God’s gift to us, his people, at West Side. Do we see them as God’s gift to us?

This one says “to the church at West Side, from the Holy Spirit: I have given you the gift of faith.” When I hear the story of faith told about the Andersons, it doesn’t surprise me one bit to see James serving his wife so faithfully in difficult circumstances. It doesn’t surprise me. But it humbles me. When I see a single mom working long hours to put food on the table for her young children, and still...at the end of a long day at work, then all the chores at home, finding the strength and courage to bring those kids with her to church week after week after week, it humbles me. When I see a former addict quietly reading his Bible, and eagerly using his gifts for ministry, it humbles me. When we congratulate so many couples in this congregation for celebrating 40 years, 50 years, 60 years, or 70 years of marital fidelity, in a world full of people who have never known a faithful friend, it humbles me. And when I am weak, or my soul is full of sorrow. When I feel the weight of the world and doubts and fears rise to the surface, I think of the Andersons. I think of that young mother. I think of those elderly couples. And I see what faith and faithfulness looks like. That is God’s gift to West Side.

This one says “to the church at West Side, from the Holy Spirit: I have given you the gift of service.” The list is too long. You know the people who put in 80-hour weeks of service to this church, from cleaning the floors, to decorating rooms, to organizing the financial papers, the list is long. But then there’s names on here that don’t usually get mentioned. Because the gift of service is not measured by how many hours one works. It is measured only by one’s willingness to let their life be a blessing. I’m thinking of a member who has trouble getting around, but every Tuesday he prays for this church...he prays for you. Or the brand new first-time mother who heard there was a teacher shortage, and signed up with great trepidation to teach a class of our children for 45 minutes every week—and is doing a phenomenal job. I think of a sweet couple who never announce it, but they visit people in prison just to tell them that God loves them more than they could possibly imagine. Look around, says the Spirit. Look around. I have given West Side the gift of service.

And to you...the Lord has gifted West Side by giving us with you. You came wrapped in the love of God, with a bow tied by the Father himself. And the tag around your neck was inscribed with a message from God's holy spirit. And it read "this is my gift to West Side. Open and see what I have in store.

We are truly a gifted people. And every gift confirms that the story is true. Jesus is risen from the dead; I know this, for the spirit of Jesus is alive and well in this place. I have seen his body. How could such love exist among us if it wasn't true?