

Getting to Know Your Bible:

What are tongues, prophecies, and the other “supernatural” abilities/gifts mentioned in I Corinthians 12:7-11? Are they still in existence today?

Tongues

Spirit-inspired talk directed toward God in prayer where the words somehow pass over one’s mental comprehension; it is a prayer directly from the human spirit (I Cor. 14:2, 14-15). The “talk” or language used is not usually understood by the speaker and hearer (I Cor. 14:14, 14:16), though it could be an actual language (Acts 2:5-11). It can be controlled (14:27-28), and as such should be used in a group setting only when there is an interpreter (1 Cor. 14:1-5, 13-18). This is done so the people who are not Christians will not be turned away from God (14:22-25). This is used for praying, which is a key way to serve and build up the church.

Note on 14:22- That tongues are a “sign” to unbelievers means that tongues are a sign of God’s attitude to unbelievers. This attitude is one of judgment, according to the Old Testament verse Paul has just quoted (14:21). When tongues are used among unbelievers, they will think it’s absurd (14:23), pushing them away from belief in God and toward judgment. This is something Paul (and God) does not want, given that this era is a time of salvation, so Paul advocates no tongues when unbelievers are present (14:23). That prophecy is a “sign” for believers means that prophecies are a sign, again, of God’s attitude toward believers. This attitude is one of favor because it shows that God is truly among them. The evidence of this is seen when an unbeliever sees that God is with them (14:25).

Prophecy

A typically spontaneous message based on the Spirit’s prompting for the encouragement of the church (I Cor 14:3). It does not usually involve predicting the future, though it can (Acts 11:28). Rather, it is usually a message of encouragement that involves truths applied at the right moment, truths that may disclose what people are really going through (I Cor. 14:25). It is different from the prophecy of the Old Testament prophets (whose prophecies were written as Scripture) in that it can be incorrect (note how Agabus’ prophecy in Acts 21:10-11 was not fulfilled exactly in Acts 23:12-35; note how prophecies should be weighed and tested in 1 Cor 14:29, I Thess 5:20-21).

Many leaders who use this gift would note that personal guidance is not a primary function of prophecy, and also that the guidance of the church is to still be overseen by the pastors/elders (who may very well have the gift of prophecy as well). For sure, the gift should be used- note how the

early church had a time during their gatherings where people who received prophecies could share (I Cor. 14:26-33). It should be used, however, with a recognition of possible error: instead of saying “This is what God is saying...” say something like “*I think* this is what God may be saying... what do you think?”

At Ethnos, our open time of sharing on Sundays is a place where this gift can and should be used, along with our smaller gatherings where an open discussion is allowed.

Other gifts mentioned:

Faith- distinct from the faith we are all supposed to have. It is a faith that is a “supernatural conviction that God will reveal his power or mercy in a special way in a specific instance.” (Fee, 593).

Healing should be understood under the category of miracle, defined as a “less common kind of God’s activity in which He arouses people’s awe and wonder and bears witness to Himself” (Grudem, 355). As such, it functions to: a) authenticate the truth God and Jesus (Heb. 2:4), b) show the kingdom of God has come (Mt. 12:28, Mt. 10:7-8), c) help those who are in need (Mt. 20:30, 34), d) remove hindrances to ministry (Acts 9:40-41), e) bring glory to God (Mt. 9:8). Those with this gift have their prayers for people’s healing answered much more frequently than others, though healing is not always guaranteed- we live in an era where God’s work of getting rid of all evil and sickness has begun but is not yet completed (Rev. 21:4).

Are these gifts still in existence today?

The main text that people use to say these gifts have ceased today is 1 Corinthians 13:8-12. There, Paul notes that tongues and prophecies will cease when “the perfect comes,” when we will “see face to face,” and when we will “know fully just as [we] also have been fully known.” Those who think these gifts have ceased today say that these phrases describe a time when the Bible was completed (around A.D. 90), when the church was finally matured (“perfect” can be translated that way in other contexts), or when the Gentiles had been incorporated in the church. However, reading the phrases and the whole passage in proper context points heavily to the understanding that Paul is talking about the time of existence called heaven: we will be perfect, we will see God face to face, and we will fully know Him at that time. As such, the gifts are still in existence today. See texts below for further details.

Sources:

Fee, Gordon D. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* in NICNT. Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987.

Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1994.