Belief in miracles lies at the heart of the Christian faith. Without the miracle of the resurrection, Christianity would have long sense passed from the scene. Understanding the role of miracles in the birth and spread of our faith is essential for today’s Christian. Unlike the modern world, the ancient world was not suspicious of miracles. Ancient people not only typically believed that supernatural powers existed, but that they intervened in human affairs; so miracles did not present a problem to the early Church. By definition, a miracle is an action that runs counter to the commonly observed processes of nature. In the Old Testament they are viewed as a direct intervention of God in human affairs. The most significant miracle in the OT is God’s parting of the Red Sea in delivering the children of Israel out of Egypt. This miracle is the centerpiece of Hebrew history and OT religion, and is a demonstration of God’s power and love in action. This emphasis on miracles as the “redemptive activity of God” is continued in the NT, where they are an integral part of the proclamation of the good news that God has acted on man’s behalf, and has entered into human history in the person of Jesus Christ. The central miracle of the Christian faith is the resurrection of Christ three days after His crucifixion. It is presented by Paul as the keystone of the Christian faith (1 Cor 15). The phenomenon of the “Eucharist” (i.e., “Communion”) would be unexplainable without the knowledge of the risen Christ. Without the miracle of the resurrection the early Church would not have come into being. The Bible teaches that miracles are more than mere wonderful works, they are “signs,” but they are only signs to those who have the spiritual discernment to recognize them as such. Without the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, they only appear to be extraordinary “wonders.”

Since Scripture is “divinely inspired & originated with God” (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:21), “no prophecy or teaching of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation” (2 Pet 1:20); in short, there is only one accurate interpretation of Scripture… not two, not three, not four, just one. So if there are two or three opinions on what Scripture says, someone is obviously misinterpreting Scripture — one of them may be right, but all of them cannot be right. The issue comes down to the very nature of “truth” itself — there is only one truth — though each of us may be prejudicially inclined to believe a particular school of thought, our bias should not ultimately determine what is actually “true” in our minds; especially when it comes to Scripture. So a particular text rightly understood, is God’s interpretation, not man’s — those individuals whom God used to write the Scriptures were “moved by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet 1:21), and the every word they penned was “God breathed” (1 Cor 2:13; 2 Tim 3:16). God did not simply give a general outline or some basic ideas to writers, and then let them phrase them as they pleased… so when we interpret what they wrote, we have to show more maturity than to simply let our prejudicial bias determine what Scripture actually says and what it does not say. Remember, there is enough information out there in the world today to “satisfy one’s ignorance on any subject” (be it theology, politics, racism, etc.), so it is important to “carefully examine all of the evidence on some issue” before committing to a particular interpretation. As human beings we all have a tendency to subscribe to that body of knowledge that agrees with our innate bias without doing our homework and insuring the highest degree of integrity possible.
The three main questions with which the theologian occupies himself when dealing with a particular passage are these: 1) What is the “context” of the passage? 2) What does the passage “say”? and 3) What does the passage “mean”? And these three questions must be answered in that order. Regarding the “context,” there is the immediate context of the paragraph in which a particular verse is found; then there is the greater context of the book in which it is found; and ultimately, there is the context of all of Scripture. It should be noted, if one is not certain of the “context” of a particular passage, or what a passage really “says,” then he cannot be certain as to what it “means.” The problem with most Christians is that they don’t take the time to do their homework (including many in ministry), and are inclined to quickly focus on the “meaning” of a passage before doing the tough preliminary work; that is, before examining what the “context” is and determining what the passage actually “says.” The truth of the matter is, once you have answered the first two questions, the third is relatively easy. Lastly, remember, we’re dealing with the inerrant, infallible, written word of God” (not a human document), that was written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, but has now been graciously given to us in the English language through the profoundly difficult task of translation. It should be comforting to know that thousands of theologians have contributed to the incredible text that we now have in our hands today. Before launching into the topic at hand, let me just say that after seventy years of living and more than forty years of studying theology and teaching in churches and colleges, I believe I can offer a fairly learned perspective on the issue of signs, wonders and miracles. My prayer is that you will find the following study an encouragement to your faith.

The Day of Pentecost

On the day of Pentecost nearly 2,000 years ago, the Holy Spirit came to “permanently dwell” in the hearts of all believers and give them “gifts” that they might minister to and enrich other peoples lives (cf. Acts 1:5, 8; 2:1-12; Lk 22:26; Jn 14:23; Rom 8:9; 1 Cor 3:16; 6:19; 12:7-11; 2 Cor 6:16; Col 1:27; 1 Jn 4:13). During the formative years of the Church, all of the believers were essentially “Jewish” (more on this later), and the “gift of tongues” was given to these Jewish believer that day as an evidential manifestation that indeed the Holy Spirit had now taken up residence within them—that was the sign to indicate such. Obviously this new dispensation was not one to which they were accustomed, so they were given unquestionable evidence of the Holy Spirit’s presence in their lives (i.e., the Church, the body of Christ). History records that the miraculous, supernatural gifts that were so prevalent in the early church ceased when all the apostles died. About AD 150, some 50 years after the death of the last living apostle (the apostle John), a heretical preacher named Montanus came on the scene and claimed that the supernatural gifts were renewed in him (carefully note the use of the word “renewed,” because these “sign gifts” no longer existed in the Church at that point). The leaders of the early Church responded by publicly declaring that the “Scriptures were closed”…that the miraculous gifts were never promised to the church as a personal inheritance (why? because no more authentication was needed for the Christian message; more on this later)...and that the work of the Holy Spirit was now primarily one of illuminating the Word of God.” When the need for a “sign” no longer existed, the sign was no longer given—were we still living during a time when apostleship required outward authentication, such signs would still exist…but we no longer look to ordained prophets & apostles, but to the completed, inspired, inerrant Word of God for divine teaching. So the need for such authentication no longer exists, because both Scripture and the Church have now been firmly
established. The Scriptures, under the illumination of the Holy Spirit, is all that is needed (cf. 2 Pet 1:3; Acts 17:11). Again, more on this later.

Though God may still be performing miraculous works at various times and places in the world today (obviously one cannot restrict God or put Him in a box, because He can do as He pleases), such “supernatural, evidential works, that authenticate apostleship are no longer normative.” So the “sign gifts” are no longer needed. Though God may “heal” a particular person of some ailment as a result of prayer, no longer is it necessary that the “healing” be done by someone with the “gift of healing” — because that “gift” no longer exists. The late Kathryn Kuhlman, an evangelist who achieved national notoriety for the “miracle services” she held in the 7,000-seat Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles back in the 60s and 70s, became the central figure in the emerging “charismatic movement.” When she discovered that people were experiencing miraculous healings in her services, she began to make “divine healing” the focus of her ministry; sadly, at that point she no longer continued to make the “gospel message” the main thrust of her ministry. Her flamboyant style (that has since been emulated by many) added to the intrigue of her ministry, and she became a regular guest on radio & television shows. Hundreds of people claimed to be healed in her meetings, including “unbelievers” and “atheists” and people of “other faiths.” In spite of the fact that people were being healed at her meetings, Kuhlman publicly admitted she did not have the “gift of healing,” that it was the Holy Spirit who was doing the healing. Kuhlman’s early history involved marrying a traveling evangelist that she worked with, and who divorced his wife to marry her — she also experienced a very “troubled marriage” with him; it ended in divorce nine years later. Kuhlman had a powerful ministry here in the US until she passed away in 1976 from open-heart surgery at the age of 69. Though God did not choose to “heal her” of her condition, it would be unfair to say that her own lack of healing invalidated her ministry. It should also be pointed out that in spite of the fact that she lived a highly luxurious lifestyle, she was also a very generous person; the Kathryn Kuhlman Foundation she started contributed significant sums of money to several ministries and charities here in the US, as well as a number of mission projects around the world.

With the presence of thousands of “divine healers” all over the world today (they exist in nearly every religion), there is a tendency for many in the Christian community to believe that some of these healers possess “the gift of healing” and are genuinely legitimate. In Great Britain alone there are over 4,000 belonging to the National Federation of Spiritual Healers, through which thousands have claimed to be remarkably healed. It should be noted, at least 85% of all people who come down with an illness will get well anyway; the 15% who do not get well are frequently told by these diviners that “they simply don’t have enough faith.” Because this aspect of the study is so negative, I would rather not expand upon it or spend time denigrating those popular individuals that dominate so much of Christian radio and television in our world today. The main reason I have written this study is to simply clarify “God’s purpose” for signs, wonders and miracles in the Bible — please keep that in mind as you work through this study. It should be noted that Jesus did not heal everyone He came in contact with, and only raised three people from the dead (at least as far as Scripture records); furthermore, Bethesdasa’s porches were filled with the sick, and Jesus only healed one of them (Jn 5:2-8). Yet many divine healers claim the atonement of Christ includes not only all of our sins but all of our illnesses (in this life) as well; yet such a position fails to coincide with what Scripture teaches. The “health & wealth doctrine” that has been so widely preached here in North America for the past hundred years is completely lacking in biblical support. God didn’t save us and leave us on this planet to enjoy great physical
well-being and have an endless supply of nickels in our pockets! God saved us in order to “make us like Christ,” and the central means by which He does that transforming work is by subjecting us to trials, affliction, difficulty and tribulation. You do the math.

The Importance of “Context”

The Bible is “God’s inspired Word to mankind” (2 Tim 3:16) — it is the story of human history and God’s plan of redemption. Here’s a brief overview: It begins with the creation and subsequent fall of man… the diabolical sinfulness and destruction of man by sending a worldwide flood… the reestablishment of man on the earth and God’s choice of a man named Abraham through whom He would ultimately bring salvation to the world… the call of a people for His name’s sake (descendants of Abraham; the nation of Israel) to be a witness of His righteousness and peace… the apostasy of Israel and her failure to follow God… the raising up of prophets to foretell the coming of an Anointed One (the Messiah) to redeem sinful man… the miraculous birth of God’s Anointed One (Jesus Christ)… the proclamation of the Kingdom of Heaven by Jesus and His followers… the rejection of Jesus by the Jewish people, and His subsequent crucifixion… the resurrection of Jesus and the formation of the Church that included Gentiles in the believing community… the development of the Church as the people of God in the world… and the foretelling of the end of the age and the making of a new heaven and a new earth where all of God’s people will dwell forever with Him in eternity future. Throughout certain stages of human history, God chose to “miraculously intervene” and communicate new revelation to the world, that man might turn from his sin (repent) and turn to Him and live a life of righteousness and faith. All four gospels give a “historical account” of the events and teachings of Jesus that occurred during His time on earth — the Greek grammatical constructions the authors used when writing these gospel accounts state things as “unequivocal facts” (not opinions); that’s one of the significant advantages of the Greek language. The supreme purpose of all Scripture, according to the apostle Paul, is to instruct its readers “for salvation” (1 & 2 Timothy).

When Jesus came into this world, He was born into a Jewish family in the Jewish city of Bethlehem, and was raised in the Jewish city of Nazareth. His three year earthly ministry, which began at the age of thirty, was confined to the land of Palestine, and dealt with the “JEWISH PEOPLE” (the nation of Israel). The “GENTILE WORLD” would not become an integral part of God’s work until at least twelve years after the ascension of Jesus into heaven. If you fail to keep this fact in mind (i.e., the context of the earthly life and ministry of Jesus) when reading the gospels, you will stumble over a number of passages and ultimately misunderstand them. The Old Testament and the nation of Israel is the “context” (the foundation) that underlies all of the gospels; so without a basic understanding of God’s work in the world from creation to the birth of Christ, you will seriously limit your understanding and appreciation of much of what Jesus taught in His earthly ministry. Sadly, there are many in the Church today who completely ignore the Old Testament — they treat it as if it no longer has any significant application to the believing community. Brothers and sisters in Christ, the Old Testament is an integral part of your Bible. It should be understood that all the “Scriptural quotes” of Jesus and the apostles are from the Old Testament, and it is only by understanding the “context” in which these quotes were originally given, that one is able to fully understand their New Testament application. The great reformers stated over and over again that “context,” far and away, was the most important principle that needed to faithfully be adhered to when interpreting Scripture.
Being as the missionary work of Paul to the Gentile world did not take place until some twelve years after the ascension of Jesus into heaven… the early church up until that point was essentially JEWISH, and consisted of about 20,000 Jewish believers; many of whom had been scattered and dispersed throughout Judea and Samaria (the diaspora — Acts 8:1,4). Though liberal commentators radically disagree with the number of people who were becoming Christians (they compare the Bible’s claims with other historical movements over the years, as if that is the measuring stick), Scripture gives us a number of indicators that the numbers were vastly higher than are admitted by the liberal antagonists (cf. 1 Cor 15:6; Acts 2:41; 2:47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7). Historians tell us there were about one million Christians in the Roman empire by AD 100 (World Christian Encyclopedia, 1982), and the vast majority of them being Gentiles… by the year AD 300 the number of Christians had increased in the Roman world to over five million. When Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in AD 313, the total number of Christians throughout the empire rose to nearly ten million in just a few years. Back to the topic at hand — the writer Luke tells us that those who had been scattered because of persecution in the early church, “spoke the word to no one except to the Jews” (Acts 11:19). It was only after that that some men began speaking about Christ to the Greeks in the city of Antioch (Acts 11:20-26), and that Barnabas and Paul (Acts 13:9) preached the gospel to them there for about one year — incidentally, it was at Antioch where the followers of Christ were first called “Christians” (Acts 11:26). It should also be noted that Paul and others conducted much of their ministry in the “Jewish synagogues” of each community where they were doing gospel outreach (cf. Acts 13:5; 13:14ff; 13:43; 14:1; 15:21; 17:1,17; 18:4, 19, 26; 19:8; 22:19; 26:11).

In the first chapter of Acts, just prior to His ascension into heaven (Acts 1:9-11), the Lord Jesus said to His disciples, “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and throughout the entire world” (Acts 1:8; cf. Mt 28:19; Mk 16:15; Rom 10:18). And then in Acts chapter eight, we read about the conversion of a number of Gentiles in Samaria (Acts 8:4-13) — “when the Jewish apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria (emphatic) had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John who came down and prayed for them, that they (i.e., the Gentiles) might receive the Holy Spirit; for He had not yet fallen upon them — then they laid hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit” (Acts 8:14-17). It is important at this point to remember that while Jesus was on earth, He exclusively focused His ministry on the Jews, because it was to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” to which the Father sent Him (Mt 15:24); that was the Father’s immediate ministry for His Son. It was only after the resurrection that Jesus commanded His disciples to take the Good News of salvation to the rest of the world (Mt 28:19-20). Prior to the crucifixion when Jesus was ministering with His disciples, He sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of heaven to the Jewish people — He specifically told them, “Do not go into the cities of the Gentiles, or enter into the cities of the Samaritans” (a mixed race of half-breeds, half-Jews and half-Gentile, who were detested by the Jews), rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt 10:5-7). So at this time, the disciples were not to proclaim the kingdom message of salvation to non-Jewish people — that day would come, but not until Jesus completed His ministry among the Jewish people. Keep in mind, the redemption of the whole world has always been in God’s plan (Gen 12:3); remember, His chosen people Israel were called to be “a light to the Gentile nations and bring salvation to the ends of the earth” (cf. Acts 13:47; Is 42:6; 49:6; 60:3; 62:1-2) — the problem was they failed to obey their calling.

Let’s return to the “salvation of the Samaritans” in Acts chapter eight — when the news of the Samaritan revival came to Jerusalem, they sent the Jewish apostles Peter and John to see first hand what had actually occurred. It is interesting to remember, the two brothers James & John
earlier wanted Jesus to “call down fire from heaven to consume a Samaritan village” (Lk 9:54), confirming the extreme hatred that existed between the two people groups… but it is now a new day! When Peter and John arrived and witnessed what had taken place, they prayed for them that they might “receive the Holy Spirit” (Acts 8:15). Here is some important contextual information — the Lord made the solemn promise to Peter and the Apostles that the “Keys of the Kingdom” to open the door of salvation to all mankind would be placed in their hands (cf. Mt 16:18-19; 18:18); this promise was not made to Philip (Acts 8:5ff) or any others… though Stephen and Philip and a few others were commissioned by the apostles personally (they were called apostolic delegates), and were also given the ability to perform miracles (Acts 6:5-8; 8:5-6). As the gospel message proceeded outward in accord with the commission that was given to them (Acts 1:8)… in every instance God had sovereignly used Peter and the Apostles as the instruments through whom the Holy Spirit was introduced to these believers (cf. Acts 2:14ff = Judea; Acts 8:14ff = Samaria; Acts 10:28, 44-48 = Gentiles).

The gift of the Spirit to the nations is through PETER: God specifically chose him (Acts 15:7-8). It is also important to remember, the Jewish Christian community had a very difficult time “accepting” the fact that GENTILES were coming into the Church (if you just skip over this fact, you are ignoring an extremely important reality of the first century church); that was the Jewish culture of the day. In Acts chapter ten, the Lord actually had to deal with Peter himself regarding this issue (Acts 10:9ff); thus the Lord had to reveal to him in a vision that GENTILES were now no longer unclean or unholy (Acts 10:28) — that in every nation (including Gentiles) the man who fears God and does what is right, is welcome to Him (Acts 10:35). Jesus is now Lord of ALL! (Acts 10:36). The Lord needed to confirm His message through Peter and the Apostles, that they might authenticate this truth; after all, they were the apostolic leaders (Jewish) of the Church. Hence, in Acts chapter ten (Acts 10:44ff), while Peter was speaking to the Gentiles, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message… and all the circumcised Jewish believers were amazed, “because the gift of the Holy Spirit had also been poured out upon the Gentiles!” God was now bringing salvation to the “entire world!” no longer was He now just dealing with the Jews. The “substantiating evidence” was that these new Gentile believers spoke in tongues just like the Jews did at Pentecost! (cf. Acts 2:1ff). Think about it — how else would the Jews have ever really known that the Gentiles had now been indwelled by the Holy Spirit? Speaking in tongues was a critical “sign gift” that was needed when the gospel was first being spread to the Gentile world (Acts 1:8); that was the “corroborating sign” that God gave to the Jewish leaders of the Church as the gospel spread through the then known world — be it Jerusalem (Acts 2:3-4)… Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:14-17)… or the other parts of the world (Acts 10:44-48). You might recall the Acts 15 “Council at Jerusalem” — this council was held to determine whether or not Gentiles needed to “first be circumcised” (become Jews) in order to be saved; i.e., they must first put themselves under the law of Moses and be circumcised. Paul & Barnabas vigorously opposed this teaching by a group of Judaizers, and Peter likewise supported them and witnessed to the fact that God had bestowed the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles just as He had the Jews, making them pure “by grace and faith alone.” The head of the Jerusalem church, James (a brother of Jesus), concurred with the apostles and the issue was permanently resolved (cf. Mk 6:3; Acts 12:17; 15:13ff).

There is another passage that needs to be discussed that is frequently misinterpreted — in Acts 19 when Paul came upon a group of twelve disciples in the city of Ephesus on the Aegean Sea (across from Athens), he said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said to him, “No, we have not even heard whether there is (emphatic!) a Holy Spirit.” And he said, “Into what were you baptized?” And they said, “Into John’s (emphatic) baptism.”
(Acts 19:1-3). Here was a group of disciples who had repented of their sins under the ministry of John the Baptist (Mk 1:4), but word had not yet come to them that “the Christ” had already come and died and been buried, and rose from the dead and ascended back into heaven… and that the “Holy Spirit” had fallen upon all of the believers [in Jerusalem] on the Day of Pentecost… so they had not yet received the Holy Spirit; that is, they were not yet “indwelled by the Holy Spirit.” Remember, they were nearly a thousand miles from Jerusalem, so word of Christ’s coming had not yet reached them. They had been told by John the Baptist to “believe in Him (Jesus) who was coming after him” (Mk 1:7-8), so when the apostle Paul explained about Jesus, “they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul laid hands upon them, the Holy Spirit (emphatic!) came on them, and they began speaking with tongues and prophesying” (Acts 19:4-6). Once again, when people came to faith in Christ in the early Church “they received the Holy Spirit and the corresponding gift of tongues like the others” — thus, the presence of the Holy Spirit was being powerfully manifested in their lives; this was a “supernatural sign” that the Holy Spirit did indeed come upon them… how else would they have known at this juncture in the church? The New Testament had not been written… they were still living during the “time of the apostles.” Though all of us as believers today continue to receive the Holy Spirit at salvation, we no longer receive the corresponding gift of tongues because we no longer live during the apostolic age… furthermore we now have the advantage of having the entire inspired written revelation of God in our hands, through which the Holy Spirit confirms the truth in our hearts (read Acts 16:14; Jn 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7-8, 16:13-14; Rom 8:15-16). Carefully note the “contextual difference” between the two time periods.

The Purpose of Miracles

Jesus performed miracles to “validate His person and message,” conversely, the apostles who were called to proclaim the new teaching of Jesus, were also validated by God with signs and miracles just like Jesus (cf. Acts 2:22; 2:43; 5:12; 14:3). Paul writes, “The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles” (2 Cor 12:12); these miracles validated their leadership, thus qualifying them to “pen the words of Scripture” so that we might confidently come to know the revelation of God (2 Pet 1:21; Lk 1:70). The apostles were men commissioned for a unique role in a particular time period for the Church; they never preached signs and wonders to attract the multitudes, nor did they ever announce a signs and wonders meeting or a healing crusade, and they never allowed signs and wonders to be amplified above their message. The miracles performed by the apostles merely attested to the validity of their apostleship, thus substantiating the truth of their message about Christ. The “preaching of the Gospel” was their commission, not the performing of miracles or healings. The book of Hebrews says that signs were used to “confirm” the word of God (Heb 2:3-4). Keeping the context in mind, Jesus said that these demonstrations in power were “SIGNS” (Mk 16:17-18), and Paul reminds us that signs are for the “JEWS” (1 Cor 1:22). Israel began with signs (Rom 4:11; Ex 4:8, 9, 17, 23, 28, 30; 7:3; 8:23; 10:1-2; 13:9; 31:13, 17; Deut 4:34; 6:22).… Israel lived by signs (Deut 11:18; Josh 4:6; 1 Sam 10:7; 2 Kg 19:29; Is 7:14; 38:7, 22; Ezek 4:3; 20:12, 20)… and Israel demanded signs from Christ (Mt 12:38; 24:3).

In a word, the purpose of signs, wonders and miracles was “authentication” — Jesus demonstrated on numerous occasions that He indeed was the “Anointed of God” (i.e., the Messiah/Christ) by performing signs, wonders and miracles (cf. Acts 2:22). Why else would anyone have believed in Him? Throughout the course of history numerous people have claimed to be the
“Messiah”… but only Jesus Christ demonstrated that He truly was the Messiah, by performing wonders and miracles that only One from God could perform (Jn 10:37-38). Think about it for a moment: “Why would you believe or disbelieve someone who claimed to have a new revelation from God?” Would you simply believe him because you “know him”? or that he appeared to be a “nice person”? or that “others believed him”? Or would you insist on “more evidence than that”? Hopefully, you would insist on more evidence. Well that was the case in the early church; there were numerous voices making all kinds of heretical claims, and it was absolutely critical that these voices be disproved. Therefore Jesus and all of the apostles “demonstrated their authenticity” by performing extraordinary miracles (2 Cor 12:12) — thus “substantiating their message.” Though God continues to hear and answer prayer, and oftentimes responds supernaturally (be it healing or some form of deliverance), there is no need to “authenticate” some particular individual in this age with “supernatural gifts” — God’s revelation to us (i.e., the New Testament) is now complete, and it this body of work that the Holy Spirit confirms in our hearts and minds (as previously stated).

Most theologians believe the “norm” by which God operates today, is the same as it has been since creation, with the exception of three brief periods of human history when God was dealing with His chosen people ISRAEL — during the days of Moses and the giving of the Law (Ex 4:1-9); during the days of Elijah and Elisha in the times of apostasy in Israel (1 Kg 18:36-37); and during the days of Jesus and the Apostles in the introduction of the new dispensation of grace (Matt, Mark, Luke, John, Acts). Outside of these three eras miracles are extremely rare and hardly found; furthermore, even when miracles did occur, they were only done by a very few people — Moses, Elijah, Elisha, Jesus, and the Apostles — so miracles are hardly normative. When God’s revelation was firmly established in each new era, then the miraculous naturally ceased. In addition to that, we now live in “the age of faith,” where the divinely inspired Word of God (via the Holy Spirit) is the revelation that is to guide our lives; furthermore, since “new revelation” is no longer needed (or further prophesied), there is no need to authenticate some new messenger and substantiate his message. Keeping the foregoing in mind, following are a number of passages in the New Testament that help us focus on the “purpose” of those supernatural gifts identified as the “SIGN GIFTS” —

- **Acts 2:22** — Peter raised his voice saying, “Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know.”
- **2 Cor 12:12** — Writes Paul to the church at Corinth: “The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles.”
- **Heb 2:3-4** — “How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it 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.”
- **1 Thes 1:5** — Writes Paul: “Our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit will full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.”
- **Mark 16:20** — “The twelve disciples went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word by the signs that followed.”
1 Cor 2:3-4 — Paul said to the Corinthian church, “I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.”

Matt 11:2 — “When John the Baptist who was in prison heard about the works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples, and said to Him, “Are You the Coming One, or do we look for someone else?”

John 2:11 — “This beginning of His signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory.”

John 4:48 — “Jesus therefore said to him, “Unless you people (remember, He’s talking to Jews here) see signs and wonders, you simply will not believe.”

John 10:25 — Jesus responded to the Jews saying, “I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father’s name, these bear witness of Me.”

John 10:37-38 — Jesus said, “If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works; that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father.”

John 20:30-31 — At the end of his gospel, John writes: “Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.”

Acts 14:3 — “Paul and Barnabas spent a long time in Iconium speaking boldly with reliance upon the Lord, who was bearing witness to the word of His grace, granting that signs and wonders be done by their hands.”

Rom 15:18-19 — Paul writes, “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 Iliricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ.”

2 Thes 2:8-10 — Paul writes, “Then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming; that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.” Satan seeks to emulate Christ that people might follow and believe him instead.

1 Cor 1:22 — Paul writes: “Indeed, Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom.”

1 Cor 14:22 — So then writes Paul, “Tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe, but to unbelievers (Acts 2:11); but prophecy is for a sign not to unbelievers, but to those who believe.”

The implication of these verses suggests that the purpose for the sign gifts (signs, wonders and miracles) was to authenticate the messenger and thus substantiate his message. Obviously, there was a need for God’s spokesmen (prophets and apostles) to be authenticated, and the means by which God authenticated them was through the performance of signs, wonders, miracles and powers. Since the need for substantiation and authentication is no longer needed — because we now possess the full written message, we can then conclude that these special supernatural signs/gifts/manifestations are no longer needed.
It is also ironic to note that Scripture and history demonstrate that signs and wonders “seldom instilled faith” in unbelievers. The three cities in which Christ did miracles “hated Jesus,” so He pronounced judgments on them: “Woe to you Chorazin! Woe to you Bethsaida! ... Woe to you Capernaum!... it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you!” (Mt 11:21-24; also cf. Jn 12:37). Jesus, after performing miracles of a quality and quantity not seen at any point in human history by any prophet, was crucified by the very people He made miraculously well. The masses only followed Him for the temporary benefits they received through His miracles. When Jesus was on the cross, the chief priests, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking Him saying, “He saved others; He cannot save Himself (emphatic!). He is the King of Israel; let Him come down from the cross, and we will believe in Him!” (Mt 27:41-43). The truth of the matter is, if Jesus would have come down off the cross “they still would not have repented of their sins” (that is the underlying issue!); they simply would have believed in God in much the same way that Satan and his minions also believe (not unto salvation!)(cf. Jam 2:19). Believing in GOD and believing you are a SINNER are two completely different things! If you truly believe you’re a sinner in need of mercy and salvation (that’s the essence of the humility that is needed!), “the Holy Spirit will open your heart to believe in the God of salvation!” It all begins with a willingness to see the depravity of your condition and your need of mercy! Conversely, signs and wonders were repeatedly given to Israel’s enemy Egypt, but it never changed Pharaoh’s mind. God provided manna every day for Israel, but she simply tired of His miracle of provision... the children of Israel kept on exhibiting unbelief in spite of the persuasive signs and wonders God had done before their eyes. The question is this, Have we learned from their mistakes? The “flesh” is a stubborn protagonist of evil and unbelief.

Jesus warned that “false Christs” (emphatic!) and “false prophets” (emphatic!) “will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect (emphatic!)” (cf. Mt 24:24; also Mt 7:15; 24:11); that’s a sobering warning... the truth is, even those who perform “miracles” are not necessarily from God, because miracles can be satanic in origin (cf. 2 Th 2:9-10). Likewise the apostle Peter warns that “in the last days false teachers will introduce destructive heresies... and many will follow their sensuality” (emphatic!)... and in their greed will exploit you with false words” (2 Pet 2:1-2; and 1 Cor 11:19; 2 Cor 11:13-14; Phil 3:2; 1 Tim 4:1; 1 Jn 4:1). Think about all the charlatans who are out there today using the Gospel to “live in luxury and put bucks in their pocket!” Just as there are bona fide teachers in the Christian Church, there also false teachers in it as well; they pose as ministers of the gospel (that’s what makes them so incredibly dangerous); they are masters of deception who twist the Scriptures... and pray on those who are not grounded in the Word. As the renowned Irish preacher John Darby said, “The devil is never more satanic than when he carries a Bible!” To deny that there are dangerous false teachers out there in the Christian world today is to be tragically misinformed or highly gullible (Acts 17:11; 2 Tim 4:3).

The Absence of Miracles

Years ago Roy Knuteson wrote an article titled “Are You Waiting for a Miracle?” He began it with these words: “Where are all the miracles today? That’s what Gideon wanted to know. Four thousand years ago he asked, ‘Where are all the miracles of God which our fathers told us about?’ (Judg 6:13). Many Christians are asking the same question today. ‘Why aren’t we seeing the same kind of miracles that we read about in the Bible?’ ‘Why aren’t people being raised
from the dead and the hungry being supernaturally fed?” Some Christians maintain that the only reason some believers don’t see miracles is because of ‘unbelief.’” The truth is, no one is duplicating the miracles of Scripture… no funeral processions are being cancelled… no homes for the blind are being shut down because everyone’s sight is being miraculously restored… and no wheelchair factories are seeing a reduction in business because fewer people now need them. The reality is, “Bible-style miracles” have ceased because they are no longer a necessary “authenticating reality”… there is no longer any need for God to “authenticate” a particular messenger… His Word is now complete, and when it is spoken or read the Holy Spirit will do His work in the souls of those who humbly listen to it. Essentially, the duration of a spiritual gift is determined by its “purpose or function” — i.e., a spiritual gift will only continue to exist until it fulfills its God-intended purpose or function (cf. 1 Cor 13:8).

By the time the New Testament was reaching its final stages of completion, the “sign gifts” had significantly lessened, and the remarkable visible ministry of God’s angels had ceased. The book of Acts closes with the greatest apostle of all, Paul, a political prisoner in Rome… his fellow co-worker in Rome, Epaphroditus, was sick to the point of death, though God ultimately had mercy on him and restored his health (Phil 2:25-30). Before his imprisonment, Paul left Trophimus sick at Miletum (2 Tim 4:20)… and gave Timothy medical advice instead of healing him (1 Tim 5:23)… and Paul himself had his own infirmities from which he could not be healed (2 Cor 11:30; 12:5-10). In addition, no angels visited the prison in Rome or prevented Paul’s execution… likewise John experienced no miraculous deliverance from the island of Patmos… and neither did angels close the mouths of lions in the Roman coliseum; thousands of Christians died on crosses and in Roman arenas without divine intervention. To date, more than 43,000,000 Christians have been martyred for their faith since the first century church — Why didn’t the angels intervene? Why were there so many supernatural interventions at the beginning of the apostolic era, and a near absence of them at its close? For the first clue we need to remember apostolic preaching was first and foremost to the “Jew;” as a matter of fact, the first eight years of post-resurrection ministry was exclusively to the Jewish people; that’s the context that the student of Scripture must keep in mind. Not until Acts chapter 10 did a Gentile respond to the Gospel, and then only one man and his family. It was not until Acts chapter 13, some twelve years after Pentecost, that the first organized mission venture was made into Gentile territory; interestingly enough, the vast majority of miracles occur in the first ten chapters of Acts.

Why is this so? the obvious scriptural answer is that “supernatural signs” are for the Jews — they weren’t meant to simply alleviate pain and suffering in the lives of God’s people (as many in the church today believe) — so “stop denigrating your faith” when God fails to deliver you from some infirmity; and keep in mind, contrary to what some proud pulpiteers might claim — “none of us possess a great faith;” read the Book! It is because of poor preaching that many in the church today are frustrated with their spiritual experience. Back to the topic at hand — remember, “Jesus came to His own (emphatic), and those who were His own (the Jews) did not receive Him (emphatic) (cf. Jn 1:11) — the Jewish people were Jesus’ own chosen people, and when He came into the world He presented Himself to them as “their Messiah” — but they refused to receive Him. Jesus said to His own countrymen: “Unless you people see signs and wonders, you simply will not believe” (Jn 4:48; cf. 1 Cor 1:22). That particular generation of Jews received signs, wonders, and miracles for at least three reasons — First, this was one of God’s historic ways of dealing with the children of Israel… Second, this was God’s means of authenticating
His Messiah and His messengers to His people (Acts 2:22); miracles were God’s chosen method of authenticating His workers (2 Cor 12:12); thus miracles aren’t relevant today as a sign of divine approval, because there is no longer any need for “new revelation” to His people; God’s Word is complete (there’s the OT and the NT and no more Testaments to come). It is also interesting to note that the Antichrist will be accepted by the multitudes because of “his miracle-working power” (Mt 24:24; 2 Th 2:8-12; Rev 13:13-14) — he will do his best to “counterfeit” the method Christ used, and because of the feeblemindedness of people nearly the entire world will follow after him. The Bible warns us to beware of anyone who professes to practice these signs (cf. 2 Cor 12:13-15; Mt 7:15; 24:11; 1 Tim 4:1-2), and the Lord commends the church at Ephesus for testing some professing apostles and finding them to be “false” (Rev 2:2). Remember, many “miracle workers” will be rejected at the final judgment by the Lord Himself (Mt 7:22-23); obviously that is a sobering statement. Who do you think Jesus is referring to? Authentic Christian ministry no longer needs wonders and miracles to prove it is of God — it simply needs to proclaim the message of Scripture (because there are no new revelations!), and let the Holy Spirit “affirm” the truth of that message in the minds of those who humbly listen (Mt 28:19-20; Jn 15:26; 16:8-11; Acts 16:14; Rom 10:17; Jam 4:6)... and Third, supernatural signs were the means God used to reveal Himself (when necessary) to His people. The writer of Hebrews attests: “After it was first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also bearing witness with them by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will” (Heb 2:3-4; 1 Cor 12:11; Eph 1:11). That Jews sought “signs,” read the following verses — they’ll give you a greater appreciation and understanding of their importance:

- **Matt 12:38** — “We want to see a sign (emphatic) from You.”
- **Matt 16:1** — “They asked Jesus to show them a sign from heaven (emphatic).”
- **John 2:11** — “This beginning of His signs, Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory, and His disciples believed in Him.
- **John 2:18** — “What sign do You show us, seeing that You do these things?”
- **John 2:23** — “Many believed in His name, because of the signs which He was doing.”
- **John 3:2** — Nicodemus said to Jesus, “No one can do these signs that You do unless God is with Him.”
- **John 4:48** — Jesus said, “Unless you people see signs and wonders, you simply will not believe.”
- **John 6:14** — “When the people saw the miracle that Jesus performed, they responded, ‘He must truly (emphatic) be the Prophet who coming into the world.”
- **John 6:30** — “What do You do for a sign, that we may see and believe in You?”
- **John 7:31** — The multitude believed in Jesus and said, “When the Christ shall come, He will not perform more signs than those which this man has, will He?”
- **John 9:16** — “How can a man who is a sinner, as the Pharisees claim, and perform such signs?”
- **John 12:37** — “Though Jesus had performed many signs before them, they did not believe in Him.”
- **John 20:30** — “Many other signs (emphatic) Jesus also performed which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.”
- **Acts 5:12-14** — “The apostles were performing many signs and wonders among the people... and multitudes came to believe and were being added to their number.”
- **Acts 7:36** — “Moses had performed wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years.”
• Acts 14:3 — “Paul and Barnabas relied spoke boldly to the people in the Synagogue in Iconium, relying upon the Lord who was bearing witness to the word of grace, and granting that signs and wonders be done by their hands. . . . though many believed, some did not.”
• Rom 15:19 — “Paul preached in the power of signs and wonders and in the power of the Spirit.”
• 1 Cor 14:22 — “Tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe, but to unbelievers; conversely, prophecy is for a sign, not to unbelievers, but to those who believe.”
• Matt 24:24 — “False Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, in order to even lead (if possible) the elect astray.”

The Gift of Tongues

Another subject that needs to be addressed is “the gift of tongues” — some would say that the “spiritual gift of tongues” (1 Cor 12:10) and “the tongues of Pentecost” (Acts 2:1-13) are not the same, but there is no evidence to validate that position. The “gift of tongues” serves in the Book of Acts as a “sign” to signal the shift of God’s favor from the nation of Israel to that of the Church. This perfectly accords with what Paul reasons in his first letter to the Corinthians (14:21-23), where he clearly ties these “two tongues” together. Furthermore, though some advocates believe tongues are proper in private devotional use, no such use exists in the New Testament. Scripture clearly teaches that when tongues were used, they were to benefit the entire body — not the individual (1 Cor 12:7; 14:5). The “tongues” that are spoken today are not the same as those described in the New Testament — Scripture presents the various tongues spoken by believers as existing human languages (Acts 2:8-11)… whereas the tongues spoken today show none of the linguistic patterns of any known human language. The phenomenon that occurred on the Day of Pentecost nearly 2,000 years ago, when the Holy Spirit enabled the apostles to speak in the dialects of the diverse speaking audience who heard them (Acts 2:8), was not some form of ecstatic utterance. On the other hand, the phenomenon in Corinth appears to be a mixed bag — the immature Corinthian Christians had come from paganism with its standard emphasis on frenzied worship and ecstatic utterances; it should be noted, healings and ecstatic utterances are common in many religions today. In First Corinthians 14, the apostle seeks to move them to the legitimate gift of tongues given by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 14:20-22), while limiting their unintelligible and self-induced ecstatic utterances — furthermore, the latter was practiced without interpretation (14:2, 6-13) and did not include the use of the mind (14:14-17)… and those who practiced it rebelled against proper order (14:26-28), and gave undue importance to this gift in the church (14:4-5, 18-19). When Paul listed the various gifts (cf.1 Cor 12:28), he listed “tongues” last, and urged the Corinthian believers to desire the “greater gifts” (1 Cor 12:31) — such as teaching the word because it edifies the church (emphatic!) (cf.1 Cor 14:1-4; 29-31; Acts 17:11). For a description of the gift of tongues read 1 Corinthians 12.

John Chrysostom was the bishop of Constantinople in the latter part of the 4th century, and is regarded by theologians as “the greatest preacher” since the early church — he later became known as “golden mouthed” because of his incredible insights into the Word and his distinguished preaching skills. Because of his straightforwardness, integrity, and earnest position on Christian mores, Chrysostom has enjoyed greater esteem than any of the other Church fathers. When writing his commentary on First Corinthians, he mentioned the fact that there was no evidence at all regarding the activity of “tongues” in his day (AD 400); it was completely unknown to him, so when he came to exegeting and interpreting chapter 14, he simply refrained from commenting. It is also interesting to note that when the writers of the King James Bible
were translating it in 1611 into English, when they got to 1 Corinthians 14, they also didn’t know how to deal with the passage — it was “completely foreign to them;” they had never experienced tongues in any fashion; so to them it was a “totally unknown phenomenon” … therefore when they translated the Greek word glossa, meaning “tongues” in English, they placed in italics the word “unknown” immediately before it, because they simply didn’t know what it was — to them it was completely unknown; they had never seen it or experienced it. To build on this idea, in the mid-1800s several people began to claim that they had the gift of tongues and were speaking in “the unknown languages” referred to in the King James Bible. The irony is, there is no such thing as “unknown languages” in the Greek manuscripts; as stated above, the translators simply added the word “unknown” (in italics) because they were humble and honest enough to admit that they didn’t know anything about it, and didn’t want to venture a guess. Obviously, in hind sight it would have been better if they had never added the word “unknown” in italics; but they had no idea of the turmoil it would cause in the Christian community hundreds of years later. With that said, we now have millions of people in the Christian world today who claim to “speak in unknown tongues” (ecstatic utterances) — again, no such languages exist (cf. 1 Cor 14:10).

It is also important to remember that tongues are a sign to “unbelievers” (not believers), which is completely contrary to its common use in churches. Tongues are a sign specifically to the unbelieving Jewish community (cf. 1 Cor 14:22; Acts 2:1-11; Eph 2:19-20); the gift of tongues was given solely as a sign to “unbelieving Israel.” After shaming and criticizing the Corinthians for their abuse of the gifts, the apostle Paul goes on to explain “the true purpose of tongues” to them. He begins by quoting a passage from the book of Isaiah: some 700 years before the coming of Christ the Lord told Israel, “One day He would speak to them by strange tongues and from the lips of strangers — yet despite this miraculous sign, she would not listen” (keep in mind these words in Isaiah are being quoted here in the “context” of First Corinthians (cf. Is 28:11-12 and 1 Cor 14:22). The miracles of the Old and New Testament served to validate the initiation of a “new revelation” from God; yet the people of God (Israel) would not listen. Regarding the “gift of tongues” in the New Testament, there is no conclusive evidence that tongues were meant to exist past the completion of the writing of Scripture (God’s new revelation), and it is highly doubtful to the most respected theologians of our day that what is practiced today is the same thing as the tongues mentioned in the New Testament. The gift that we see today is never used in the same way in which it was used in Acts chapter two (2:1-11) — it is almost always “ecstatic utterances” of which Scripture knows nothing. Additionally, because Scripture clearly mandates that a message in tongues be “interpreted by a known interpreter;” this procedure is also commonly violated in most churches where tongues are practiced. Since the proper exercise of tongues requires that an “interpreter” be present (cf. 1 Cor 12:10; 14:27-29), it should be relatively easy to determine whether or not there is “integrity” with regard to the message is that is being spoken. Such a message could be substantiated by having “three well-known interpreters present,” who could all simultaneously write down the message that is being spoken in tongues; obviously if they are in full agreement then the message is clearly of God and edifying to all of those present. By following this particular process, the “judgment” that everyone comes to when a message in tongues is being spoken, would insure its authenticity and acceptance (read 1 Cor 14:29; 1 Th 5:20; 1 Jn 4:1). Conversely, if the message is not vindicated by the interpreters, then either the message is not of God, or at least two of the three interpreters lack divine integrity. Since the message being spoken is presumed to be “extra-biblical,” the foregoing process honors what the Bible has to say regarding the substantiation of any new revelation. This is not a matter of “putting God to the test” (as some people might claim), this is a matter of “testing whether or not a human
being’s claim is indeed true and accurate;” after all, they are claiming to speak the word of the Lord. This is not a matter of being unduly harsh… this is a matter of advocating that one substantiate any such claims (as the apostles themselves demand). Anyone of us can “claim” to speak for God (and many do), but that does not validate the claim — the issue is this, there is no reason to believe some “extra-biblical claim” without insisting on some “evidence” that it is indeed from God,” and not just taking another person’s word for it. Such action is not at all heretical — that is precisely what happened in the early church.

Because of the “tension” that exists in the Christian world today on this issue, I felt it was important to at least address the matter in such a way that we insure that “divine truth” be our highest objective. Should some individual or some particular church be unwilling to subject themselves to these kinds of tests, then the integrity of their claim obviously comes into question. I can’t imagine Paul or John being upset with a group of believers because they insisted on some kind of authentication (cf. 1 Th 5:21; 1 Jn 4:1). There is no room for “hiding” behind false pretense in the Christian community — everything we do must be done with honesty, openness and integrity. Remember, our God is not a God of confusion, perplexity and secrecy (that’s the trademark of a cult)… rather God’s ways are forthright, pure, reasonable and without hypocrisy (1 Cor 14:33; Jam 3:17). Above all things, as believers we must “desire absolute truth” in all things and at all costs (1 Th 5:19-21; 1 Jn 4:1), and not simply believe something because that’s the way we were raised, or because it is something we just want to believe (Acts 17:11; 2 Tim 4:3). Though “none of us have a monopoly on truth,” that doesn’t mean we can excuse ourselves from responsibly pursuing truth with integrity; we must each do our best to insure that what we believe and claim is indeed true… especially those of us who are “teachers of the Word.” As James a blood brother of Jesus said, “Let not many of you be teachers because you are going to incur a stricter judgment” (Jam 1:3) — when we teach “we stand in an influential position of authority (power),” that must not be taken lightly, because God will hold each of us accountable not only for what we teach, but for the corresponding spiritual damage that we ultimately cause others. By the way, if you happen to be a person who covets the plaudits of men, you will be far more prone to be reckless in what you teach, and just talk to hear yourself talk. I am reminded of the words of Solomon to his sons: “When there are many words transgression is unavoidable” (Prv 10:19); so as teachers we must be men of restraint and discipline. If this paradigm does not fit you, get out of the ministry and get into some line of work where you won’t “mislead or injure people spiritually.” On the other hand, if you are committed to a teaching ministry, “You must be diligent to present yourself approved (emphatic) to GOD as a workman who does not need to be ashamed (emphatic), handling accurately the word of truth)” (2 Tim 2:15). With that said, you must not just be a person who simply reads and preaches what others have written, no matter how famous and respected they may be — they are not God’s anointed in the sense that they are infallible — you have a responsibility to study and confirm everything with Scripture, including what I have written in this study (Acts 17:11).… the Bible is “God’s authority manual” to us.

Back to the subject matter of tongues: if the tongues that were spoken on the Day of Pentecost were as Luke writes (Acts 2:1-11) — he lists sixteen distinct people groups of the Mediterranean world who were present that day (Acts 2:8-11), and goes on to say that “they all heard the message in their mother tongue”… “if all spiritual gifts are still indeed vogue today” (as some claim they are), then why aren’t there missionaries in the world who have been given this extraordinary gift? That is, why do missionaries have to “painsstakingly learn the languages” of the people groups to whom they are called to minister? There are over 5,000 people groups and languages in the world
today, and organizations like Wycliffe Bible Translators and others have had to diligently learn thousands of those languages in order to give these groups the Scriptures in their own languages; clearly God could have given these missionary servants of His “the gift of tongues”… but He has obviously not chosen to do so (which is His divine prerogative). It is also important to note — “this same process regarding the matter of tongues” could be used to substantiate the “claims of supernatural healing by divine faith healers” — avowed faith healers could simply be taken to Christian homes for the blind… the handicapped… the deaf… the retarded and incapacitated… and Intensive Care Units at hospitals, where everyone could watch God do a miraculous work of healing. The entire world would be mesmerized! and millions would come to faith in Christ! (or would they?). We could invite news commentators and reporters from all over the world to attest to the genuineness of these healings, in much the same way as happened 2,000 years ago. Scores of outspoken unbelievers attended Jesus’ outdoor meetings, and even the unbelievers, including numerous Pharisees, believed in the incredible wonders that Jesus was performing (cf. Jn 3:1-2; 5:18; 6:41; 7:3-5; 7:23; 7:40-46; 7:50-52; 9:24-25, 33-34; 10:32-33, 37-38; 11:43-53; 12:19, 42); they simply argued that He was not performing His miracles in accord with their understanding of the Law! and that is why they sought to have Him put to death. Here’s a side note — not a single believer questioned or disbelieved in the miracles that Jesus and the apostles did… yet the vast majority of Christians today are highly suspicious (and rightly so) of the “so-called miracles” that are taking place by popular divine healers today (and don’t try and escape this reality by putting the onus on their back). Again, this is not a matter of “putting GOD to the test;” this is a matter of “putting divine faith healers to the test.” We are not putting GOD on trial here, we are putting MAN on trial! God can call a person forth from the grave after he is but dust! HIS POWER is not in question! It is the claims of men that are in question; claims that attribute something to GOD that may in fact not be of God… if such claims are “not of God,” then these individuals need to be silenced, and the innocent among them protected. Every believer ought to be anxious to demonstrate the integrity of their claims, rather than hide behind some potential false pretense. Furthermore, the Bible clearly warns us to “not trust claims that cannot be substantiated;” it even warns against our doing so (cf. Acts 17:11; 1 Cor 14:29; 1 Th 5:21; 1 Jn 4:1).

I am well aware that there are many “genuine Christians” who believe that the gift of tongues is a valid ministry in the church today (many members of my family have a Pentecostal faith), I am simply encouraging the proper exercise of this gift in churches of such persuasion, as Paul defines it in 1 Corinthians 14, that the body of Christ might truly be edified. In no way am I disparaging someone’s spirituality who genuinely believes in this gift — who am I to judge? their level of spirituality might be far greater than mine (spirituality is not just a matter of having correct doctrine – cf.1 Cor 13:2). Neither do I seek to be argumentative or injure someone simply because we are not in agreement on this subject… my hope and prayer is that this issue would not continue to be “divisive” in the Christian world (as it is in many quarters)… and that we would all prayerfully seek to honor the Lord and one another as fellow believers in Christ… after all we are brothers and sisters in Christ, and will be spending eternity together. As the apostle Paul exhorts: “Examine everything carefully and hold fast to that which is good” (1 Th 5:21). When developing a “theology” on a particular subject, it is important that one consider everything that Scripture has to say about it — and not just build a theology on a single verse. When we simply use one verse to arrive at a theological position, it is extremely easy to make an incorrect assumption. For example, “the name it and claim it doctrine” could easily come from a verse like one found in Matthew: “Ask and it shall be given to you” (Mt 7:7)… or one found in John: “Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do” (Jn 14:13). If you ignore the
The Ministry of the Holy Spirit

It is important to remember, the person of the Holy Spirit was first and foremost sent to us to 
“glorify Christ”… to exhibit Christ… to make Christ known… and to bring people into fellow-
ship with Christ (cf. Jn 15:26; 16:14). The Holy Spirit did not come to glorify Himself or make
Himself the center of attention (as He is in some churches) — when the Holy Spirit becomes
our focus in life rather than Christ, we have a problem. Jesus Christ is not only “our salvation!”
He is “our life!” As the apostle Paul said, “to live is Christ!” (Phil 1:21). Christ is the object of our
worship! (Mt 2:11; 14:33; 28:9, 17; Jn 9:38; Heb 1:6). Christ is the One who chose us! (Jn 15:16). Christ is
the One who is to be our focus! (Heb 12:2). Christ is the One through whom we received grace
and truth (Jn 1:17). Christ is our inspiration for living a life of holiness! (Jn 14:15; 1 Pet 4:1). Christ is
the One through whom we pray! (Jn 14:13-14). Christ is the One we serve! (Mt 25:40). Christ is the
living Word! (Jn 1:1; 1 Jn 1:1). Christ is the Creator of all things! (Col 1:16). Christ is the One who
died on the cross for us! (1 Pet 2:24). Christ is the One with whom we have fellowship! (1 Cor 1:9;
1 Jn 1:3). Christ is the One who continually intercedes on our behalf! (Heb 7:25). Christ is the One
of whom we testify! (Acts 1:8; 1 Jn 5:11). Christ is the bread of life (spiritual manna) for us! (Jn 6:35).
Christ is the One who quenches our spiritual thirst! (Jn 4:14; 6:35). Christ is the light of our life! (Jn
1:4; 8:12). Christ is our Shepherd! (Jn 10:11). It is the word of Christ in which we are to abide! (Jn 8:
31). Christ is the way and the truth! (Jn 14:6). Christ is our resurrection life! (Jn 11:25). Christ is the
One who washes our feet! (Jn 13:5-14). Christ is the One we follow! (Mt 16:24). Christ is the One
with whom we are to cultivate intimacy! (Jn 15:4-5). We anxiously await the return of Christ to
take us to heaven to be with Him forever! (Jn 14:3). We are Christians!

On the other hand, it is the Holy Spirit who gives us the grace and the strength to realize and
experience everything that was written above. To make a “crazy comparison” [admittedly]
between the Holy Spirit and Christ, it is like comparing the “power source” (i.e., the extension
cord) of some electrical appliance to the Holy Spirit, and the “appliance itself” to the person of
Christ. Using that analogy, which one becomes the object of your focus? the “power cord” or
the “appliance”? Though the “cord” is vital to the operation of the “appliance,” the appliance
itself is the object with which you are occupied. Let me be careful to add at this point, in no way
whateversoever is it my intent to denigrate the Holy Spirit… because without Him the work of Christ
on the cross would not have become efficacious in my life (Acts 16:14; Mt 28:19; Rom 6:3; Gal 3:27; Titus
3:5); without Him I would still be a creature bound for hell! Perhaps you can think of a better way
to illustrate this truth than the one I have given. Let me further differentiate between the two —
the work of the Holy Spirit is to “glorify Jesus” (Jn 16:14), whereas the work of Christ is to “glorify
the Father” (Jn 17:1, 4; 13:31-32; 7:18)… that doesn’t mean our calling in life is to “glorify the Spirit.”
Think of it this way — if you were to look at the Holy Spirit, you would see Him “pointing to
Christ,” thus redirecting your focus. Should you focus on glorifying the Holy Spirit in life and “His gifts,” rather than the person of Christ because all He has done for you and continues to do for you, you are in danger of “making some spiritual experience” the important thing in your life (rather than Christ). Remember, life isn’t about “you or me or some spiritual experience” — it is about “Christ!” and His eternal love for us! Carefully reflect upon all of the foregoing.

By in large, the ministry of the Holy Spirit throughout history has been as follows — to give men understanding, knowledge and rationality (Ex 28:3; 35:31; 34:9; Job 32:8) ... to instill in them the moral character of God (Ps 143:10; Is 30:1; Neh 9:20) ... to be the lamp that searches their innermost parts, thus keeping their moral sense alive (Prv 20:27; Ps 139:23; 1 Cor 2:11) ... to give the prophets God’s word and declare His will to them (2 Sam 23:2; Mic 3:8; Zech 7:12; 2 Pet 1:21) ... to be the agent of the miraculous conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary (Lk 1:26-35) ... to permanently anoint Jesus Christ and abide in Him and give Him the wisdom and power to accomplish the Father’s mission (Mt 3:1; 12:18; Jn 1:32; Lk 4:1, 14, 18; Acts 10:38) ... to effect the spiritual birth of men by which they are “born again” and enter the kingdom of heaven (Jn 3:3-8; Mt 28:19) ... to be the spring of living waters that transforms and satisfies the believer’s soul and inspires the worship of God (Jn 7:37-39; 4:23; Phil 3:3) ... to be the believer’s protector and sustainer and comforter in times of difficulty (Jn 14:16; Acts 9:31; Rom 8:26; 2 Cor 1:3-4) ... to be the believer’s teacher and guide him into all truth and give him the grace to believe (Jn 14:17; 15:26; 16:13-15; Acts 16:14; 1 Cor 2:10-13; 1 Jn 2:20, 27) ... to slowly transform the believer into the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18) ... to give believers spiritual gifts to minister to and build-up the body of Christ (1 Pet 4:10-11; Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:4-11, 28; Eph 4:11-14) ... to make the believer’s faithful efforts efficacious and fruitful when he abides in Christ (1 Cor 3:6; Jn 15:5, 8; Gal 5:22-23) ... to give grace to the Church that it might be manifested in worship, witnessing, fellowship, obedience, joy and unity (Acts 2:42-47; Eph 4:3, 11-14; Phil 2:1) ... and to exhort believers to “war against the flesh,” and mortify the deeds of the body, and walk according to the Spirit (Rom 6:3-4, 11-14; 8:5-7, 11-13; Gal 5:16-17) — failing to honor Christ in all things grieves the Spirit (Eph 4:30).

One of the great theologians of our day, J. I. Packer, calls the Holy Spirit “a change agent” — He changes us internally first by opening our eyes to reality (the reality of God, of Christ, of our sin and need of forgiveness, of the spiritual realm), and then through uniting us to Christ He changes us at the center of our being, so that the desires and attitudes of Christ that He displayed on this earth are reproduced in us. Our part is to prayerfully walk in holiness and see what God would have us do ... to ask the Lord to enable us to do His will ... and then to get up off our knees every day and go confidently into action — all the while depending upon Him for the grace to serve and love God (cf. Jn 14:15; Mt 25:35-40). The Holy Spirit helps us pray, and brings our prayers before God. He is the one who carries out the will of God in our lives — be it the granting of wisdom or guidance or healing or deliverance — in short, He effectuates the will of God in our lives, all the while “pointing us” to Jesus Christ, and glorifying Him.

Regarding the issue of “healing” — the issue is not whether or not God heals ... He is both the author of life and the author of all healing and every good gift in the world (Jam 1:17). The issue is that some in the Christian community insist that the “gift of healing” is still vogue — it is here, however, where we differ. To insist that the so-called healing that takes place in the “miracle gatherings” today is commensurate with that of the Lord Jesus and the apostles, is sheer foolishness and does a serious disservice to the genuineness of Christ’s healing and His apostles ... because they are not at all alike. The healing that took place by Jesus and the apostles was undeniably real, transparent and substantial, whereas the so-called healing that is taking place
by today’s “divine healers” is unquestionably dubious and deceptively ungentle, because it does not coincide with the teaching of Scripture; additionally, it is counterproductive to spiritual growth. Furthermore, when we insist on corroborating evidence in the Christian life (walking by sight), rather than simply “walking by faith” and trusting God sight unseen, we demonstrate a very weak faith and an unwillingness to submit to the lordship of Christ in our lives, and let God do all things after the counsel of “His will,” rather than ours (cf. 2 Cor 5:7; Mt 6:10; Lk 22:42; Acts 21:14; Rom 8:24-25; Eph 1:11; Heb 11:6). Our problem as Christians is that we all want God to do things our way, and when they don’t go our way we become impatient and frustrated within (that’s simply what it means to be human). We want to be delivered from every problem in life (again, that’s the norm); we’re not into “considering trials joy” (cf. Jam 1:2), because they don’t fit our paradigm for having a happy life; and therein lies the problem — we’re more into experiencing happiness in life than God’s transforming plan for our lives (cf. Is 55:8-9; Mt 16:24; 26:39). Again, that is the norm… we all suffer from this malady because of our unredeemed humanness (flesh). Ultimately, the question is this — Is life about you or is it about God? Just so you know, “the transition from you to God is a life-long process!” that’s just the reality. None of us get a fast track where we go to some meeting and walk the aisle and experience “instant glory!” Dying to self doesn’t come easy… death is always hard (cf. Mt 16:24; 1 Cor 15:31). It is important to remember, God knows how difficult the battle is for us — He sympathizes with our weaknesses (contrary to what many Christians believe), and patiently walks with us through every hardship in life (in spite of our stumbling, grumbling and complaining). He knows trials are painful, but He also knows they are absolutely necessary if He is going to “conform us to the image of His Son” (cf. Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18; Gal 4:19; Phil 1:6; 3:21; Heb 4:15-16; Jam 1:2-4; 4:5-7; 1 Pet 1:6-7; 2:2; 4:1, 12, 13, 18; 5:7,10). The wonderful news is “God is for us!” (Rom 8:31), and is going to see us through all the way to the end! (Rom 8:29-30; Phil 1:6); and isn’t going to lose one of us! (Jn 6:39). The reality is, you have to accept that by faith.

To put the issue of “divine healing” in a proper light is to “let God be GOD” and understand that our ways are not His ways (Is 55:8-9)… that He rains on the just and the unjust (Mt 5:44-45)… that He heals both believers and unbelievers alike… that He does as pleases Him (Is 14:24; 46:10; Prv 19:21)… that He does all things after the counsel of His will (Is 48:10-11; 55:11; Eph 1:11)… that He reigns supreme in the universe (1 Tim 6:15; Ps 99:1-3; Is 40:17; Rev 5:12) — that He alone is GOD! (Is 45:5-7, 22). Furthermore, much to our consternation, God usually does things in a very slow manner (at least from our perspective); we all want a God who acts instantaneously! but our God is incredibly patient (2 Pet 3:9)… He’s never in a hurry… He almost always even “heals us slowly,” thus causing some of us to wonder if He had anything to do with it at all. We naturally like to think that “our privileged position,” merits some kind speedy action from Him… but it seldom does — that’s the norm, and it’s our misunderstandings of God and His ways that cause us to question His love for us. The Lord seldom delivers us quickly from the “problems” that beset us, because they “teach us things” we would not otherwise learn. Probably the number one frustration for us as believers is that “God is not at our beckon call all day long!” doing this or that when we ask Him to do it; as if He exists for our sake, rather than we exist for His sake (Rom 11:36). Waiting patiently and letting God do things His way are virtues that take years to develop. As the famous pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer said to a group of believers prior to his execution in Nazi Germany near the end of WWII — “We wait for change in political and economic conditions, for better employment, for new morality, for a more effective religion; whatever we wait for we wait anxiously [and impatiently].” The question that begs asking is this: “Can you let God be GOD in your life, and not insist on Him doing things your way?”
To expand upon this concept — let’s assume that you are going through some kind of difficult problem (be it a physical illness or some debilitating circumstance), from which you “keep asking God to deliver you”… and let’s assume that God is not delivering you from it. Now you can either conclude that your faith is inadequate, that you don’t deserve deliverance (at least from God’s point of view), that God is justifiably upset with you, or that God has a higher purpose for the problem that you simply don’t have the ability to understand. What will your response be? If you conclude that “you” are the negative reason why God is not delivering you, and no matter what action you take (pray, confess and do numerous acts of penance), He refuses to change His mind — What do you do? Beat yourself up? Have a pity party? Continue working as hard as you can to ultimately merit deliverance from God? Try with everything you can to trust God for deliverance (surely it must be your “lack of faith” that is the reason for God’s silence?)? Become disappointed with God or yourself and your relationship with Him? Or are you going to let God be GOD in your life? and recognize that He loves you with an everlasting love, and that your circumstances simply have an eternal purpose that are beyond your understanding… that He sympathizes greatly with your weaknesses (which we all have)... and that He is not “throwing you under the bus” because of your weak faith — contrary to the opinion of some, none of us have a gargantuan faith! Think of it this way, how do you respond to your little child when he poops in his pants or screams and throw a little fit? Do you put your arms around him and hug him and comfort him? Or do you get angry with him and put him in a dark closet and shut the door on him? Though you may be inclined to take such action from time to time, that is not how God responds to us when we spiritually poop in our pants. He is not into “performance religion” where we must merit everything He does for us in some way — the truth is, none of us ever come close to meriting anything in life! None of us have a “great faith!” (that is not to be our focus); we simply have faith in a “great God!” Get your eyes off of you and your faith, and put them on Christ and His incredible love for you! The Christian life is one of grace from beginning to end — because of our unredeemed humanness (flesh) that is a very difficult spiritual truth for all of us as Christians to learn. Study the Scriptures and learn how God’s love always trumps His being vengeful and angry toward us, and how incredibly deserving He is of our trust, love, worship & service (cf. Ps 136:1-26; 139:1-24; Jer 29:11; Heb 4:15-16; 1 Jn 4:18-19).

God gives the Holy Spirit to “every believer” the moment they accept Christ as their Savior (Rom 8:9, 11; Gal 4:6) — He is not bestowed upon us because we are spiritually mature, or promise to be “good” from now on, or because we humbly agonize in prayer… God bestows the Holy Spirit upon us as spiritual babies” in Christ, who probably have never have even heard about the Holy Spirit; remember, the Holy Spirit is not the “theme” of the Gospel message, JESUS is! With all of that said, an understanding of the “ministry of the Holy Spirit” is basic to Christian living — a spiritual Christian is one who displays Christ throughout his life, and this is done by the power of the Holy Spirit who has taken up residence in him. The manifestation of spiritual power is not the miraculous or the spectacular, but the consistent exhibition of the Lord in our lives — i.e., love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, and self-control (Gal 5:22-23). By way of reminder, the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the world today essentially is that of restraining lawlessness and sin in the world… convicting sinners of the sin of not believing in the Savior… convicting sinners of God’s justifying righteousness through His Son, Jesus Christ… convicting sinners of divine judgment upon all those who reject Christ’s atonement… regenerating the believing sinner… baptizing the believing sinner into vital union with Christ and all other believers… indwelling the believing sinner… and filling the believing
sinner with power for service — as the following passages teach: cf. 2 Th 2:7; Jn 16:8-22; Jn 3:5; Titus 3:5; 1 Cor 12:13; Rom 6:3-4; 1 Cor 6:19; Rom 5:5; 8:9; 2 Cor 1:22; Eph 1:13; 5:18; Col 3:16; Gal 5:16-17, 22-25.

The Purpose of Spiritual Gifts

The nineteen “spiritual gifts” recorded in Scripture were given to the Church for the purpose of ministering to others… edifying one another… and building one another up in the faith (Eph 4:11-12; Rom 12:3-8; 1 Cor 12:6-10, 28-30; 1 Pet 4:9-11). They were not given for selfish purposes; such an understanding is completely contrary to what Scripture teaches. Though many believe the catalogue of gifts that are mentioned in Scripture is incomplete (there is no mention of ministry through music, etc.), others believe the list represents the main general areas under which all gifts can be classified. Whatever your position it’s important to understand that “God has given every believer (emphatic!) the manifestation of the Spirit (spiritual gifts) for the common good,” i.e., for the purpose of serving others (1 Cor 12:7; 1 Pet 4:10. These gifts are not earned but are given to every individual believer “as God wills” (1 Cor 12:11). The late Ray Stedman of Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto, California, defined a spiritual gift as — “a capacity for service which is given to every true Christian without exception and which was something each did not possess before he became a Christian” (Body Life, Regal Books, 1972, p. 39). The important thing to keep in mind when thinking about “spiritual gifts,” is that they are given to accomplish “a spiritual work in other peoples lives” — obviously if you do not exercise or use your gift (or gifts, whatever the case may be), “God’s ministry through you to others will not occur;” as such you would not be “doing your part” in contributing to the building up of the body of Christ. As you exercise your gift – be it a speaking gift or a serving gift (1 Pet 4:11) – the Holy Spirit will then minister “through you” to others. Whatever your gift or gifts may be, let God use your life to help minister to and build-up the body of Christ… and whatever you do, “do it as unto the Lord” (1 Cor 10:31). With that said, let me close this study by recounting two poems on “serving others” that have widely been used within the church to encourage believers to be active participants in ministry. First, there is a poem written by a mother titled, “A Martha” — in it she articulates her desire to serve others and be used by God in even the most menial of ways:

“A MARTHA”

Lord of all pots and pans and things;
Since I’ve no time to be
A saint by doing lovely things,
Or watching late with Thee,
Or dreaming in the dawn light,
Or storming heaven’s gates,
Make me a saint by getting meals,
And washing up the plates.

Although I must have Martha’s hands,
I have a Mary mind;
And when I black the boots and shoes,
Thy sandals, Lord, I find.
I think of how they trod the earth,
What time I scrub the floor;

21
Accept this meditation, Lord,  
I haven’t time for more.

Warm all the kitchen with They love,  
And light it with They peace;  
Forgive me all my worrying,  
And make all grumbling cease.  
Thou who dist love to give men food,  
In room, or by the sea,  
Accept this service that I do —  
I do it unto Thee.

The second poem is one that I have often used when teaching on spiritual gifts. It’s message is profoundly clear and is titled, “Somebody Else.” If the shoe fits, wear it! 😊

**“SOMEBODY ELSE”**

There’s a clever young fellow named “Somebody Else” —  
There’s nothing this fellow can’t do.  
He’s busy from morning ‘til way late at night  
Just substituting for you.

When asked to do this or asked to do that  
So often you’re set to reply:  
“Get Somebody Else, Mr. Chairman —  
He’ll do it much better than I.”

There’s so much to do in our parish;  
So much, and the workers are few.  
And Somebody Else gets weary and worn  
Just substituting for you.

So next time you’re asked to do something worthwhile  
Come up with this honest reply:  
If Somebody Else can give time and support,  
It’s obviously true, so can I.

**CLOSING ADMONITION...**

“If you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is....  
Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.  
For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.  
When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.”  
– Colossians 3:1-4