

Ecclesiology: The Church

by Greg Herrick

The church is a universal body composed of all true believers in Christ, united in Him by the Spirit, with the purpose of carrying on the work of Christ in proclaiming the gospel and being a light to the world.

Scripture: Matthew 28:19, Acts 2:4, Acts 10:45, Romans 12:4, 1 Corinthians 1:7, 1 Corinthians 11:24, 1 Corinthians 12:12, 1 Corinthians 14:1, Ephesians 4:4, Hebrews 2:3

Topics: "Ecclesiology", "Church Government"

Description

Greg Herrick preaches on the essential nature of the church, emphasizing the importance of understanding the church based on what Scripture teaches rather than societal roles. The term 'ekkle,sia' is predominantly used in the New Testament to refer to the church, drawing from its usage in Classical Greek and the Septuagint. The church is depicted as a universal body of believers in Christ, united by the Spirit, with various geographical expressions. The sermon delves into the metaphors used for the church, its relationship to the kingdom of God, and the complex relationship between the church and Israel, exploring different theological perspectives.

Transcript

The Nature of the Church

There is a great need today to understand the essential nature of the church from what Scripture teaches and not firstly from the role some claim she ought to play in society. We cannot continue to define the church existentially, that is, by the way she interacts with the world and the resultant changes she undergoes. We must begin with the word of God in order to get a sense of the kind of entity she is, and from there we can decide on the kind of tasks she ought to be engaged in.

The term ekkle,sia is used predominantly throughout the New Testament (approx. 114x; not in 1, 2 Peter) to refer to the church. We may look at its use in Classical Greek to understand it, but even more important is its usage in the Septuagint. The term in Classical Greek most often refers to an "assembly" regularly convened for political purposes, such as voting on issues affecting the city in which the people live.

In the Septuagint (the Greek OT) the term ekkle,sia is often used to translate the Hebrew term lh^q* which can refer to meetings for civil affairs (1 Kings 2:3), for war (Num 22:4), of nations (Gen 35:11), and a variety of other gatherings, including, and most importantly, Israel's gatherings for religious purposes (Deut 9:10; 2 Chron 20:5; Joel 2:16).⁴⁴

The term ekkle,sia in the NT can refer to the "church of God" meeting in a home (Rom 16:5), in a particular city (1 Cor 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1), in a region (Acts 9:31) or a larger area such as Asia itself (1 Cor 16:19). When these data are taken together we realize that the church is a universal body composed of all true believers in Christ, united in Him by the Spirit, and that there are particular geographical expressions of it here and there and throughout history. Thus, though there are many local "churches," there is really only one church (Eph 4:4; Heb 12:23).⁴⁵

This leads naturally to the idea that the church is both visible and invisible. It is invisible in that God knows who is truly a Christian and who is not. It is visible in that there are local expressions of it to which Christians commit themselves. Further, it is not necessary to belong to a local church to be a Christian, though, of course, one will want to out of obedience to Christ. And, just because a person goes to church, does not mean they are in fact part of the spiritual body of Christ.

Let us turn now to a discussion of the various metaphors used in reference to the church. This will give us yet more insight into the essential nature of the church. Though the list is long, we will concentrate on only a few.

Metaphorical Expressions in Reference to the Church

The NT writers refer to the church using several rich metaphors. First, in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 she is corporately referred to as the body of Christ, and in Ephesians 1:22-23 she is the body and Christ is the head. Second, she is also referred to as God's family; we are all sons and daughters of the Lord (2 Cor 6:18). Third, her intimate and dependent relationship to her Lord is likened to a vine and its branches (John 15:1-11). Fourth, in her relationship to the world she is referred to as the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim 3:15). Fifth, she is corporately referred to as a building (1 Cor 3:9), a living temple that actually grows (Eph 2:20-21) and a holy temple in which God dwells (1 Cor 3:16). Sixth, in her service before God and in her relationship to him as His People she is referred to as a "holy nation," a "royal priesthood" (1 Pet 2:9) and each member is likened to a living stone, built around the chosen and precious cornerstone of Christ himself. Seventh, she is referred to by the Lord as the salt and light of the world (Matt 5:13-15; Acts 13:47; Col 4:5-6).

The Church and the Kingdom of God

Another question that must be dealt with in determining the precise nature of the church is her relationship to the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God may be thought of as the reign of God and the church as the realm in which that reign is visibly manifested. But the church is not the kingdom, as some theologians have contested, though the relationship between the two should not be separated. Ladd makes five helpful observations regarding the relationship of the church to the kingdom: (1) the church is not the kingdom; (2) the kingdom creates the church; (3) the church witnesses to the kingdom of God; (4) the church is the instrument of the kingdom, and (5) the church is the custodian of the kingdom.⁴⁶

The Church and Israel

There are many covenant-amillennial theologians who argue that the church has replaced national Israel in God's plan of blessing and has herself inherited the promises to Israel, thus becoming the new Israel. They state that the Davidic covenant is now being fulfilled in the church and will be ultimately fulfilled in the eternal state, and that there is, therefore, no future for national Israel and no special future for ethnic Jews either. On the other hand, there are many Dispensational-premillennial theologians who argue that the

church and Israel are distinct and must not be merged. They claim that the Davidic covenant is not now being fulfilled in the church (since it was made with national Israel), but that it, along with all the other promises God made to Israel, will be fulfilled in the millennium. In this system the two entities of Israel and the church must be kept separate, one fulfilling God's earthly promises and the other his heavenly promises.

There are, however, mediating positions between these poles. Many covenant-premillennial theologians argue that there will be a future restoration of many ethnic Jews as Paul seems to argue in Romans 11, but not the kind of national restitution that the classic or revised dispensationalist holds. On the other hand, there are progressive dispensationalists who argue that the Davidic covenant is being fulfilled in the church, but that present fulfillment does not set aside the fulfillment envisioned in the OT with the nation of Israel. These dispensationalists would argue that there is a soteriological equality among all the people of God (Israel in the OT and the church in the NT), but that there are structural differences, and that these differences will be to some degree maintained in both the future millennial reign of Christ as well as the eternal state.

One can see from this brief overview that the question of the relationship of Israel to the church is a complex one to say the least. It is not likely that the two are to be regarded as completely distinct entities, however, since so much of the language of the OT and its promises are said to be fulfilled in the Messiah and his connection to the church (e.g., Acts 13:33; Gal 3:29). One may reasonably question, on the other hand, whether the church, as is the view of some, can adequately exhaust the height and breadth of some of the OT promise language and whether God could be said to have really fulfilled that which he said he would. This suspicion is further confirmed when the Synoptics, Romans, and Revelation seem to picture a time of consummation in respect to the kingdom--a time which can, with very little difficulty, be brought together with OT hope.

Purpose & Service of the Church

The purpose of the church is to carry on the work of Christ in proclaiming the gospel and being a light to the world (John 14:13-14; Acts 1:8; Acts 13:47). Thus the gospel and its life transforming character stands at the heart of the church and is to be reflected in her members.

The church is to have a God-ward focus in worship, praise and prayer. This involves freely worshipping the Trinitarian God and praying for each other as well as for those in the world, including our political leaders (1 Tim 2:1-3). The church is also commissioned to establish and equip new believers in the faith. This includes teaching concerning the gospel and its ethical concomitants, i.e., obedience to the Lord's commands, love for each other, and responsible and holy living in a fallen world. The church is also to have, as we stated earlier, a consistent ministry to the world in terms of acts of kindness and witnessing to the truth and reality of God and the gospel. Thus a healthy church keeps in focus its upward, inward, and outward calls as really three aspects of one call to know Christ and to make him known. The primary authority in directing these activities is, of course, the Scriptures as interpreted and applied through dependence on the Spirit and the wisdom gained from the church throughout her history.

The Government of the Church

Throughout the history of the church there have been several different, yet basic forms of church government. These include: (1) Episcopalian; (2) Presbyterian; (3) Congregational, and (4) Non-government. We will briefly describe the first three here, but space prohibits any extended discussion.

In the Episcopalian form of church government the archbishop (and there are several) has authority over the bishop who in turn presides over a diocese, i.e., several churches, which are cared for by the rector or vicar. The archbishop, bishop, and rectors are all ordained priests within the Episcopal system of church government. This form of government can be seen in the Methodist, Anglican, and in its most hierarchical form (i.e., many levels of bishops), Catholic church.

Various denominations employ the Presbyterian form of church government where the local church elects certain elders to the "session," (Presbyterian) or "consistory" (Reformed Church), some (or all) of whom are members of a higher governing body called the "presbytery" (Presbyterian) or "classis" (Reformed). Some of the members of the presbytery or classis are chosen by the presbytery (or classis) to form a synod. There is yet a higher governing body in the Presbyterian Church, referred to as the General Assembly which itself is composed of lay and clergy representatives from the presbyteries. The General Assembly may be responsible for churches in a region or country.

In the Congregational form of church government, both the autonomy of the local church (under Christ, however) and the rights of its members are stressed. The conviction in this system is that there is no evidence in the NT that churches were controlled by other individuals or other churches. In fact, Paul told Titus to establish leaders in the churches from among the people in Crete (Titus 1:5). There is no mention that these leaders were responsible to outsiders for their budget or day-to-day, practical considerations. The priesthood of believers is held in high regard in this system, though in most forms of this government, a leader or leaders are chosen (in extreme cases they are not), but they must in no way replace the ministry and involvement of the members.⁴⁷

The New Testament seems to support most fully the idea of a plurality of elders⁴⁸ at any one location (Acts 14:23; 20:17; 1 Tim 4:14; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 5:1-2), but not the idea of a developed hierarchical structure beyond this. The authority of the apostles is communicated to us via the writings they left to instruct us, but there is no need for "presbyteries" or "general assemblies" to which we are to be accountable. Indeed, it has often been these organizations which have caused local churches to go astray doctrinally. Through free and desirable associations with other Christian fellowships, churches and their leaders can maintain high levels of doctrinal and moral purity, as well as an awareness of what's going on around them and ways they can serve into other situations.

There are certain qualifications that must be met before a person should be considered for the role of elder, including moral qualities (i.e., above reproach), good leadership in the home, and ability to teach, and such a candidate must not be a recent convert (see 1 Tim 3; Titus 1). The principle roles of the elder involve leading, teaching and protecting the church of God.

Just as there were for elders, so there are for deacons, certain qualifications that must be met before a person be considered for this office in God's church. These qualities are listed in 1 Tim 3:8-13 and include moral qualities, as well as good leadership in the home, though nothing is mentioned regarding teaching the faith. It seems that some of their manifold duties would include administration in the church as well as perhaps handling the finances for the church.

Ordinances Given the Church

There are two ordinances⁴⁹ given the church by the Lord. They are baptism and the Lord's supper, or as the latter is commonly referred to, the Eucharist. We will begin our discussion with a summary of baptism, dealing with the command to be baptized, its mode, meaning, and significance, the subjects of baptism,

and the effect of baptism. We will also briefly discuss the Lord's Supper.

The first thing that we note about Christian baptism is that within the overall framework of making disciples, the resurrected Lord commanded it. In Matthew 28:19-20 he told his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations. They were to do this in two ways: (1) baptizing them into the Trinitarian name of God, and (2) teaching them to obey everything that Christ had commanded. Baptizing new believers is not an option for each local expression of the church, though only certain members in any given church may actually do the baptizing (cf. 1 Cor 1:17). The early church understood the importance of baptism and faithfully practiced it in the case of new converts.

The most common meaning of the verb "to baptize," both in Greek literature and the New Testament, is to "immerse," "dip," or "plunge."⁵⁰ It does not mean "to sprinkle." The idea of "immersion" fits well with and best explains the evidence of the New Testament. Several facts indicate this: First, John baptized people in the Jordan river and not on dry ground--a fact which is most easily explained if immersion were the mode rather than sprinkling. This, of course, is the case with Jesus' baptism, who is said to go down into the waters and come up out of the waters.⁵¹ Second, John baptized at Aenon near Salim because there was much water (*hoti hudata polla e,,n ekei*) there. It seems reasonable to suppose that such a great amount of water would not have been needed if sprinkling were the method John used (see John 3:23). Third, there is the case of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8:37-38. If baptism simply involved sprinkling, it seems that they would not have had to wait until the Ethiopian saw a large amount of water. Also, why did both Philip and the Ethiopian go down into the water if only sprinkling were required? The explanation that best suits the meaning of baptizo,, and that makes sense of both Philip and the Eunuch in the water together, is that when Philip baptized the Ethiopian, he submerged him in water and then lifted back out again.⁵² Fourth, the fact that Peter associated baptism with the removal of dirt from the body indicates that he was thinking of something much more than simply sprinkling (cf. 1 Pet 3:21). This is in keeping with the idea of immersion. Finally, Paul uses water baptism in Romans 6:4 to symbolize the idea of "dying and rising" with Christ. The apparent parallel with "dying and rising" is much more easily understood if immersion is the method that Paul had in mind (see also Col 2:12).

In as much as baptism is an outward sign of an inward spiritual reality, and a new union between Christ and believer, it is to be administered to believers only. It does not work *ex opere operato* as the Catholic church teaches (cf. 1 Pet 3:21), but is an ordinance given to those who have personally trusted in Christ, conscious of what they are doing. There are several passages in Acts that make this clear (2:41; 8:12; 10:44-48; 16:14-15). Other passages that seem to speak of the baptism of households (Acts 16:32-33; 1 Cor 1:16), therefore, should not be understood to include infant baptism, or the baptism of unbelieving adults, but rather that everyone (or mostly everyone) in the house responded to the gospel and was, therefore, baptized.

There are also some who argue that baptism is necessary for salvation and they often refer to Acts 2:38 (though not just this passage) in support of their views. Others have responded to this argument by saying that the verse should be translated as: "Peter said to them, 'Repent, and each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ because of (eis) the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'" If this were the proper translation, it would virtually settle the issue against baptism as necessary for salvation. But, in short, the evidence for the translation of *eis* as *because* is very unconvincing. There are other considerations, however.

Since repentance can precede baptism in Acts (cf. 3:19; 26:20) and salvation is given totally by grace in Acts (e.g., 10:43, 47; 13:38-39, 48), baptism, though joined closely in this passage with believing, must not constitute an essential aspect of a saving response to God. It is best to view baptism here as water baptism and to recognize that the early church viewed baptism as incorporating both the spiritual reality and the physical symbol.⁵³

The idea that baptism is not necessary for salvation is further confirmed when we read Paul's comments in 1 Cor 1:17. He says there that Christ did not send him to baptize, but to preach the gospel. But, if baptism were an essential element in a saving response to the gospel, Paul would certainly have never omitted it. But, by his own testimony, he did. In effect, then, he separates the preaching of the gospel from the ministry of baptizing. Thus baptism is not an essential part of the gospel. Peter, too, says as much when he equates baptism with the pledge of a good conscience toward God and not the removal of dirt from the body (1 Pet 3:21). Further, to add baptism, i.e., an external rite to the gospel, is to create insuperable tensions with Romans 4:1-12 and--all protestations to the contrary notwithstanding--to mix faith and works (Eph 2:8-9). It is a different gospel than the one Paul preached and is to be flatly rejected (Gal 1:6-7). Finally, if baptism were essential to saving faith, then the thief on the cross could not really have entertained the hope of heaven as Jesus promised (Luke 23:43).

Baptism, then, symbolizes a believer's union with Christ in his death to sin (and life in Adam) and resurrection to new life. Closely connected with this and expressed in texts like Titus 3:5, is the idea that baptism signifies a "washing" or "cleansing" and that those who are baptized "into the name of Christ"⁵⁴ are regarded as clean and are to live holy lives. In terms of "witness," baptism symbolizes the believer's introduction into Messiah's community, to live in the Lord's body among those who belong to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.

The second ordinance given the church is that of the Lord's Supper. If baptism is an initiatory rite, and symbolizes our definitive break with our old life in Adam and our definitive union with Christ, then the Lord's supper or Eucharist is an ongoing rite, signifying our ongoing communion with Christ and our constant proclamation of the message regarding his death (i.e., for the forgiveness of sins).

There are differences of opinion among genuine Christians as to how often the Lord's Supper should be observed. The synoptics do not record Jesus saying how often it was to be celebrated, but the fact that the Supper relates to the new covenant and symbolizes Jesus' blood being poured out for many, seems to indicate that Jesus viewed it from the beginning as relating to all his potential followers until the time when he will physically sit down with us and drink it anew in his Father's kingdom (Matt 26:29). Luke adds the comment that the disciples are to do this, i.e., partake of the bread, in remembrance of me which also implies that the Lord's Supper would be a continuous event (see 1 Cor 11:24). But, still, there is no text that says that we are to observe it every week, once a month, four times a year, or whatever. It seems from 1 Cor 11:20ff that the Corinthians were practicing it fairly regularly, but exactly how often is uncertain, and this, of course, is not precisely the problem Paul is addressing in 1 Cor 11:17-34. It also seems that given the nature of the Supper as a "reminder," to celebrate it fairly frequently would be a good thing, provided it was done in a way honoring to the Lord and encouraging to all his people present.

There are also different views on the nature of the Lord's Supper and the relation of the elements (i.e., bread and wine) to the actual, physical body of the Lord. Roman Catholicism argues a view called transubstantiation where it is claimed that the bread and the wine are mysteriously transformed into the literal body and blood of the Lord so that the Lord's body is literally present as the elements. After all,

Christ did tell the disciples: "this is my body" and "this is my blood." But this interpretation goes beyond the figure of speech employed by the Lord. We may safely assume that the disciples understood the metaphor (which does not mean that there is no literal referent) since Jesus himself was sitting right there. Are we also, then, to regard the "cup" as the "new covenant" itself, for Jesus said "this cup is the new covenant" (Luke 22:20)? On another occasion, when he referred to himself as a "door," they understood the metaphor quite well. They never imagined, and neither should we, that Jesus becomes a literal door every time someone becomes a Christian. Further, this view is based, in large measure, on an unscriptural idea regarding the operation of this sacrament *ex opere operato*. Salvation is by grace through faith and not by receiving sacraments.

In contrast to the Catholic view, Luther argued a view referred to as consubstantiation. He argued that the language: "this is my body," and "this is my blood" requires some special physical, presence of the Lord. In his view, then, the Lord is present "in, with, and under" the elements. But this view rests on the idea of the ubiquitous human nature of the Lord. The problem is that scripture affirms that Jesus ascended to heaven in his earthly, glorified body and in no place affirms a ubiquitous body.

Perhaps the best view is to recognize that Jesus is indeed using a metaphor, as he did on many other occasions, and that the metaphor being used points to his spiritual presence. That is, when we celebrate the Lord's supper, the elements remind us that he died for us, that we have forgiveness through his broken body and blood, and through him we freely participate and enjoy the benefits of the new covenant which he inaugurated. As we reflect on these things, Jesus is present to us spiritually, to strengthen us and glorify himself. Thus, the Supper, when done to the Lord by faith, confers sanctifying grace, not saving grace.

Finally, the Lord's Supper is for believers only, but it is not to be confined to baptized believers only, while others, who for whatever immediate reason have not been baptized, are excluded. Further, a person is to examine her/himself to see if their fellowship with and treatment of other Christians is consistent with their claim to participate in the one body of Christ. The Lord dealt with the Corinthians fairly sternly because of their failure to genuinely love other members of Christ's body. They were arrogantly and selfishly indulging themselves at the Lord's Supper at the expense of those who were in need; in short, they held the church of God with contempt and for that God judged them with sickness and death (1 Cor 11:17-34; cf. v. 30).

Gifts Given the Church

It has been God's single-minded intention from the beginning to create a church--a group of people called out of darkness into the wonderful light of his presence and blessing (Gen 12:3; Lev 26:12; Jer 32:38; Ezek 37:27; 2 Cor 6:16; Rev 21:3-4). He has showered numerous gifts upon us, including the gift of salvation itself. Further, in keeping with this great salvation is the indwelling presence of the Spirit who bestows different spiritual gifts upon each and every member of the body of Christ. What follows is not an exegesis of the various texts wherein the gifts are mentioned, but a general discussion of the gifts followed by a pastoral hermeneutic for dealing with differences on the issue of the sign gifts.

This is the first thing to remember about the spiritual gifts: they are given by God, at his discretion and for the good of the body. Paul makes this abundantly clear in 1 Corinthians 12:7, 11. And given that the Lord is the One who alone organizes his body (1 Cor 12:18), it is not necessary or healthy to pray for a certain gift. In fact, this is undoubtedly one reason why we are never commanded to pray to personally receive spiritual gifts, but only that we may understand and properly use the one(s) sovereignly given to us and

allow others freedom to exercise theirs (1 Cor 14:1). In this way, we avoid the reductionism so prevalent and destructive in the Corinthian church (i.e., the mistake that only one gift really counts). God will give a spiritual gift(s) to each member as He determines (without our consultation or pleading) for he has the big picture regarding the needs of the body.

So the sovereign Lord is the giver of the gifts. The next thing we need to understand is that not everything that happens in the name of Christ and spiritual gifts is actually of God. This fact is evident when we study 1 Corinthians 12-14 (see 12:1-3 which heads off this whole section). We realize that we can hold erroneous views regarding the existence, purpose, and use of the gifts and may, therefore, need correction. Thus, humility is the "order of the day." We must let Scripture teach us about these things, lest we, like the Corinthians, wander off into error. On the other hand, I am not necessarily advocating the common idea among certain churches that every supernatural occurrence "outside the norm" is of the Devil and demonic. Those who live like this might do well to remember Jesus' teaching regarding the blasphemy of the Spirit (Matthew 12). Let's move on.

There are five passages that explicitly mention the gifts: (1) Romans 12:4-8; (2) 1 Corinthians 1:7; 12-14 (Acts 21:9); (3) Ephesians 4:11-12; (4) Hebrews 2:3-4, and (5) 1 Peter 4:10-11. Several observations can be drawn from these texts. First, no two lists of gifts agree. Therefore, it is likely that the number of gifts mentioned in the New Testament is not exhaustive. In keeping with this observation is the fact that Paul refers to the various manifestations of the Spirit as "gifts of..." implying that there is more than one gift of, say, administration," "helps," etc. Also, the terms themselves, "i.e., "administration," "helps," etc. are vague and can accommodate any number of scenarios. Finally, see Paul's discussion in 1 Corinthians 12:4-6 where he refers to a "variety" (diaireseis) of gifts. He says that one and the same Spirit sponsors many different "gifts" (charismato,n); the Lord, a variety of "services" (diakonio,n); and God many different "workings" (energe,,mato,n). These are all referred to as "manifestations of the Spirit" (phanero,,sis).⁵⁵ Thus, the apostle gives the impression that he could never list all the gifts, but what he is doing is giving the Corinthians a theological and practical paradigm in which to think about these Spirit-inspired manifestations. He is definitely not, in any text, giving them an exhaustive list of the gifts themselves.

So then, variegated Spirit-inspired gifts are given to the body of Christ for the common good, but we can sometimes misunderstand them. That love is to be the ambience in which they're practiced and that they are not the defining line, separating who is spiritual from who's not, is clear enough in Scripture. It therefore matters little what our experience is; if we do not use our gifts in love, we are outside the will of God and offer no real strengthening to his church. So it goes without saying that the presence of the fruit of the Spirit provides the necessary context for the proper exercise of His gifts (cf. Gal 5:22-23).

There are also difficult questions surrounding the precise meaning of certain gifts. Some of the gifts such as "teaching," "exhorting," "serving," "giving," and "administering" are in one sense not that difficult to understand and there are good scriptural examples to help flesh out what they mean. But gifts such as the "message of wisdom" and the "message of knowledge" are difficult to be certain about. It is probable that the "message of wisdom" relates to God's wisdom in Christ, i.e., the message of the cross and a concomitant ethic. Therefore, someone who had this gift might have the ability to understand in significant ways how the apostolic teaching of the cross relates to the present life of their church; the Spirit teaches them this for the benefit of the church and they are able under his guidance to utter its content. On the other hand, the "message of knowledge" may refer to speaking forth knowledge gained by direct revelation of the Spirit or to spiritually insightful teaching and exposition of God's truth. But it is difficult to be certain on this issue. It is equally difficult to be certain why it is referred to as "knowledge" (gno,,sis) and

precisely how it differs from the gift of "the message of wisdom."

So there are some ambiguities in determining the meaning of certain terms used to describe certain gifts. There is also the question of whether certain gifts are still given by the Spirit. This, of course, involves the issue of the cessation or continuance of the sign gifts and perhaps the gift of apostle. Are gifts such as miraculous powers, healing, tongues, and the interpretation of tongues still being given to the church?

There are several things that need to be said by way of preface regarding the cessation/noncessation discussion. First, among the informed and less pejorative people on this issue, there is a clear realization that this is not a debate about whether God still performs healings and miracles. According to the best testimony he does and all informed Christians, on all sides, recognize and celebrate this fact. Nor is this debate--as I have often heard it claimed--about whether there are spiritual gifts today or not. No informed Christian on any side debates that issue. Of course, God still gives spiritual gifts to his church. The question, then, is whether God still gives the sign gifts to individuals in the church. Some say "yes" and some say "no" and of course, there are gradations of opinions within each "camp."

Further, there is apparent tension in the NT itself on this issue. It seems that 1 Corinthians 1:4-9 anticipates the existence of the sign gifts throughout the church age while it is strange that the second generation writer of Hebrews does not appeal to miracles current in his experience, but instead to the miracles done by the Lord and his apostles (Heb 2:3-4). Also, does the fact that miracles had an obvious function of confirming the apostles' doctrine necessarily entail the idea that no such confirmation is needed today (cf. Acts 14:3; Heb 2:3-4). In other words, was the confirmation tied to the men solely or to their message, or to both? If we preach the same message as they do, why should we not expect similar divine confirmation? How do we account for the relative absence of the miraculous gifts in the history of the church? And, when they do appear, they seem to be qualitatively less than what is evidenced in the New Testament? Thus there are questions about the New Testament's teaching on this subject and our experience of these gifts today.

In any case, those who say "yes" to the presence of the sign gifts generally point to their experience and then Scripture to confirm their case. They sometimes claim to have witnessed a miracle done by somebody or to have spoken in tongues themselves. Then they tend to read the Scriptural texts in question in that light. And this is not necessarily a bad thing as much as it is a natural and necessary thing to do. We all read the Bible in light of our experience; we have no choice. We cannot extricate ourselves from our historical setting, including background, culture (e.g., church associations), spiritual experience, patterns of thought, and so on.

But all this does not lead to the conclusion that one's interpretation of the Bible and their experience is necessarily correct. For example, even those "spiritual" Corinthians badly misunderstood Paul on the issue of Christian--non-Christian relationships (see 1 Cor 5:9-13). Therefore, while we cannot "attain a view from nowhere," so to speak, with increased awareness and sensitivity to our preunderstandings, we can have our views changed by more responsible readings of Scripture (cf. the process in 2 Tim 3:16-17). This, of course, is true for every Christian, irrespective of the issue in question. But it has pointed application to those who have a tendency to read Scripture myopically in light of their own experience, i.e., they tend not to ask historically sensitive exegetical questions and they often brush aside texts which seem, at least on the surface, to be potentially hazardous to their view.

On the other hand, those who say "no" to the question of "sign-gifts" generally start with Scripture and attempt to demonstrate that the Bible does not teach the continuance of these gifts. Their method, they claim, is based on the correct premise that Scripture is the final authority in matters of faith and practice. Thus, with these people, Scripture seems like the best place to start, and perhaps they're right, but it is not logically necessary to start there, even with the premise of sola scriptura. Thus the "scripture principle" does not logically or necessarily give rise to one approach over the other. All that matters is that the Bible have the final, authoritative voice on the matter. We could just as well begin with our experience and we often do when we approach Scripture.

Therefore, the starting point in both situations is not logically problematic at all; what is problematic is that most people never get beyond their starting point to a serious and thoughtful consideration of the other locus in this theological discussion, namely, Scripture, in the case of the "Continuist" and experience in the case of the "Cessationist." Both must be seriously examined and key points of tension allowed to remain until genuine syntheses emerge.

In short, I am not saying that those who begin with experience never go to Scripture, but it has been my experience that many in this camp do not get around to a serious consideration of Scripture, including reading the exegeses of their responsible detractors. If they did that they would better understand the strengths and weaknesses of all positions, perhaps be more inclined to live humbly before God on this issue, and be prepared to contribute among those with whom they disagree. In some cases, views may be changed and Christian integrity developed. On the other side, those who begin with Scripture, consistently argue as if their experience played no role in shaping their views (which is simply naïve) and many of them do not ever get around to seriously considering (1) the experience of others and (2) Biblical texts which seem to weaken their view. In the end, the advice given to the person who argues for the gifts' continuance is the same advice given to the cessationist. If we approach the issue in this way we may be able to better appreciate the spiritual gifts in general and their relative importance for the Christian life; we may actually discern the Spirit's pathway through this problem.

Finally, we need to say a word about the gift of tongues. First, it was a Spirit-inspired gift given to the church and there is not a hint in Paul's language to the Corinthians, that, properly understood, it was demonic or anything of the like. Second, when properly exercised it contributed to the good of the body. Third, whatever you believe in this area, you are not at liberty to cause division in the body of Christ over it. If you believe that the gift exists, great! Then, please follow Paul's advice in 1 Corinthians 12-14 regarding its proper use and do not require others to speak in tongues. Not all speak in tongues, as Paul says (1 Cor 12:30). Use it for the betterment of the body and only when there are interpreters present. And, do not make the fatal mistake of judging another's spirituality based on this gift. That is a serious grievance against the Holy Spirit (cf. Eph 4:30). If, on the other hand, you believe this gift does not exist today, great! Be patient with those who contend that it does and encourage them to continue to seek God's will for their lives. Do not become proud, but love your brothers and sisters and learn from their experience. Be careful not to play down peoples' spiritual experience to the point where you have basically caught and tamed the Holy Spirit. You may find him more like wind than you thought (John 3:3-5).

No Christian should define or order their spirituality around this gift, or any other gift for that matter. For Christian spirituality is primarily taken up not with psychological experience, but ethical (holiness), and Biblical living centered on fellowship with Christ and Spirit-inspired confession of Him as Lord (1 Cor 12:1-3). Therefore, the presence or absence of this gift is not a determiner for the presence or absence of the Spirit! This Paul makes clear in 1 Corinthians 12-14, see esp. 12:1-3, 30. Now, having said this, we

must say a word about the narratives in Acts.

The manner of the giving of the gift in Acts 2, 10, and 19 (it is not mentioned in Acts 8 in the case of the Samaritans) was to confirm the reception of the same Spirit among different ethnic groups and thus to prevent division in the early church, that is, between Jew and Gentile. The apostles reasoned that if Gentile men, i.e., Cornelius and others spoke in tongues just as they [i.e., the apostles] did when they received the Spirit at Pentecost, then surely these Gentiles had received the same Spirit in the same way (see Acts 10:45-46; 11:1-18, esp. vv. 1-3 and 17-18). Thus the Spirit evidenced his coming by the gift of tongues. The giving of the gift of tongues, then, was not because these Gentiles were saved, per se, and not as some second work, but rather as a telltale sign that the same Spirit had now come to live in Gentiles too. Thus, they too were members of God's church and there was to be no division between Jew and Gentile. The same God is Lord of both and the apostles were beginning to grasp this!

Even though the gift of tongues is not mentioned in Acts 8, the coming of the Spirit upon the Samaritans is also portrayed in such a way as to highlight the theme of unity. The fact that the apostles Peter and John left Jerusalem to go and investigate the report about the Samaritans indicates that there were questions in their minds about the validity of the Samaritans' conversion (Acts 8:14-17). But when they saw that these people had received the word of the Lord, they laid their hands on them and the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit. Once again, his coming later, after receiving the word of the Lord is not to give future Christians a pattern (see Ephesians 1:13-14), but rather to accentuate the unity that was to exist now between Jews and Samaritans--two groups who typically hated each other (see John 4:9). The laying on of hands by the apostles, though not necessary for salvation (as 3000 converted on the day of Pentecost confirms), confirms their agreement with and stamp of authenticity on the Samaritans' conversion.

Therefore, the giving of the gift of tongues and the coming of the Spirit in the book of Acts, establishes Luke's overriding concern to show the Spirit's desire that there be no divisions in the church. The Spirit is not teaching us in Acts that he comes in stages of any kind (this is antithetical to the point of the Acts narratives), but rather that he comes equally upon all who believe the gospel so that all may live in unity under the Lordship of Christ. This is true also of the disciples of John the Baptist. They too received the same Spirit when Paul laid hands on them. The Spirit delayed his coming for the very reason that these men be united with others in the church.

There is much more that can be said about the spiritual gifts, but space prohibits. Let everything be done for the good of the body and do not give unnecessary offense in these matters. May God give his church wisdom, power, and love in the development and exercise of the gifts He has given.

44 There is another term in the Hebrew OT, namely, *hd'u@*, and it often refers to Israel as a "ceremonial community" centered in the cult or the Law. It is, however, never translated with *ekkle„sia*. See Jack P. Lewis, "qahal," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 789-90; Lothar Coenen, "Church," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 1:291-95.

45 Cf. BAGD, 240-41.

46 For his defense of these points see, George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., ed. Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 109-117.

47 For further discussion of these three representative forms of church government, see Erickson, Christian Theology, 1069-83; Leon Morris, "Church Government," in Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 238-41; D. MacLeod, "Church Government," in New Dictionary of Theology, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 143-46.

48 "Elders" are also known as "pastors," "overseers," and "bishops" in the NT. See Grudem, Systematic Theology, 913-14. Though this position is by no means certain, it does seem quite tenable.

49 These are sometimes referred to as "sacraments." To some, the term "sacrament" suggests the idea that either participation in these rites is necessary for salvation or that they actually work in and of themselves, apart from the faith of the participant. Indeed, this is often how they are conceived in the Catholic church.

50 See BAGD, s.v., baptizo,. See also A. Oepke, "baptizo," in TDNT, 1:529-46.

51 Matthew uses the expression anebe,, apo tou hudatos (Matt 3:16) and Mark says anabaino,,n ek tou hudatos (Mark 1:10). Both indicate that Jesus and John were in the water, not just beside it.

52 The same language that's used of Jesus coming out of the water is used of the Eunuch as well (i.e., (avebe,,san ek tou hudatos).

53 See Wallace, Exegetical Syntax, 369-71.

54 This, or one of its variants, is the most common way Acts refers to people being baptized.

55 It is exegetically indefensible to assign some gifts to the Son, others to the Father, and still others to the Spirit. Though this is common in certain churches, it is neither helpful for understanding the gifts nor the unity of operations of the Trinity. Further, it is based on a misinterpretation and harmony of the texts in question. It is a classic case of the fallacy of the excluded middle.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/greg-herrick/ecclesiology-the-church/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net