

Do Christians still receive spiritual gifts?

0. A few notes about this study

This is a monster of a topic. That's partly because it is simply very broad, but partly also because I had to be very careful in my treatment of tongues—our worldview group includes people from a number of theological backgrounds. As a result, **this study runs very long**. If you're using these notes to run your own group, I'd suggest taking a decent break after section 2.

Even though it runs long, this is still a very introductory study. For example, I barely mention faith-healers, and I don't comment at all on the disturbing relationship between modern speaking in tongues and more extreme phenomena such as being slain in the Spirit, and movements like the Toronto Blessing which feature obviously pagan and demonic manifestations, and certainly nothing Scripture calls a spiritual gift. If you're interested in looking into that further, there's an admittedly amateur mini-doco called "Kundalini Warning" which I thought was a good starting point: <http://youtu.be/2X1HC-3s3uI>.

1. How does the Bible define spiritual gifts?

A. Explicit scriptural definitions

Gifts of the Spirit (Greek: *charismata*) are explicitly listed in four passages:

- Romans 12:6-8
- 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 28-30
- Ephesians 4:11-12
- 1 Peter 4:10-11¹

While there's some possible overlap here, I count 15 gifts which can reasonably be treated as distinct. Here is a basic rundown:

	Rom 12:6-8	1 Cor 12:8-10, 28-30	Eph 4:11-12	1 Pet 4:10-11
Prophecy	*	*	*	*
Teaching	*	*	*	*

¹ Peter mentions only speaking and serving; it's possible he is using these as broader categories of gifts, rather than intending to refer explicitly and only to speaking and service. I have interpreted him as referring to teaching and/or prophecy, and deaconate service, but I don't think it matters either way.

Faith	*	*		
Pastoral service	*		*	
Deaconate service	*			*
Giving	*			
Acts of mercy	*			
Exhortation	*			
Working miracles		*		
Healing		*		
Distinguishing spirits		*		
Speaking in tongues		*		
Interpreting tongues		*		
Evangelism			*	
Apostleship			*	

B. Implicit scriptural definitions

I count four other particularly instructive passages in which spiritual gifts are *implicitly* listed (there are more, like James 1:5, but I think these are the most useful):

- 1 Corinthians 13:1-3** lists the epitomic forms of some charismata as a way of showing how even perfect gifts are nothing without love:
 - Speaking in the tongues of men and angels
 - Prophetic powers
 - Understanding of all mysteries and all knowledge
 - Faith to move mountains
 - Giving away all possessions
 - Martyrdom
- 2 Corinthians 8:1-7** describes gifts of grace given to the churches of Macedonia:
 - Steadfastness and joy in affliction
 - Giving with generosity
 - Acts of mercy

In my opinion, martyrdom constitutes the epitome of steadfastness and joy in affliction; and obviously giving away *all* possessions is the epitome of giving with generosity.

3. **Ephesians 2:4-10** states that **faith** is a gift of God, and plainly links it to grace. Romans 3:24 says similarly that “we are justified by his grace as a gift”, and Romans 5:15-17 & 6:23 reiterate exactly the same thing: righteousness and eternal life are free gifts via faith (v 1).

4. **1 Corinthians 7:5-7** speaks of several gifts:

- Self-control
- Faith
- Speech
- Knowledge
- Earnestness
- Love

C. Are spiritual gifts equivalent to spiritual fruit?

- The passages above increase the scope of spiritual gifts to include things like steadfastness & joy in affliction, self-control, earnestness and love. These are attributes which appear on *another* list Paul gives—in Galatians 5:22:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control

Not only are the gifts of **love** and **self-control** identical to qualities identified as fruit of the Spirit, but steadfastness and joy in affliction are just *instances* of **joy** and **patience**, while faithfulness entails **faith**, and acts of mercy are examples of **kindness** and **goodness**.

- Moreover, immediately after discussing God’s gift of faith in Ephesians 2, Paul goes on to mention **good works** for which God has prepared us. He seems to be continuing a thought; ie, Christians are given faith as their **first gift**, so they can receive **more gifts**—namely good works.
- On a slightly different tack, a particular phrase is repeated in 1 Corinthians 7:7 & 12:7, and 1 Peter 4:10: “**each** has received a gift”. Paul and Peter seem to take for granted that *every* reader had received some gift or other. And Paul later writes a lengthy aside in 1 Corinthians 12 about the body of Christ, starting by talking about how “in one Spirit we were **all** baptized into one body ... and **all** were made to drink of one Spirit” (v 13), and then going on in verse 27ff to speak of how *all* are members of the body, although only some possess the *higher* gifts. So the clear implication throughout is that *all* possess *some* gifts, but a few are blessed more greatly.
- We can infer the same thing from Romans 12:6: “Having gifts that differ

according to the grace given to us”—since we know that *all* Christians receive grace, it follows that all Christians are given gifts (and in fact we know grace is a gift too; Romans 3:24).

2. Do Christians still receive spiritual gifts?

A. Some gifts are *necessarily* given to all Christians

Since the Bible defines the charismata as *any* qualities in us due to being indwelt by the Holy Spirit, it is impossible that any Christian *not* have *some* gifts. The gift of **faith**, for example, is *necessary* to being a Christian at all. And faith is accompanied by certain **knowledge**, as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 2:10, 12-14:

These things God has **revealed to us through the Spirit**. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God ... Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might **understand** the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom **but taught by the Spirit**, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

B. Some “mundane” gifts are given to some Christians

There are many other gifts which obviously continue, and which we regard as “normal”—but they are only given to some Christians, or at some times:

- Although generosity is regarded as a Christian virtue, many Christians are not generous. Some Christians are generous only some of the time, when they feel a particular impetus. And some Christians are routinely generous—they have what many call a generous spirit. This certainly qualifies as a charism according to Paul.
- Some Christians are called to the pastorate, and are blessed with great ability at it. Some *feel* called but are not so blessed. Others don’t feel called, but still find themselves performing pastoral kinds of service in other ways. And some are just not gifted at pastoral stuff at all.
- Some Christians are very gullible and rubbish at discernment (discerning between spirits); some are generally astute; and some are very gifted.

C. What about the “higher” gifts?

And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the higher gifts (1 Corinthians 12:28-31).

It's tempting to think Paul demarcates the "higher gifts" by their supernatural nature. But **teaching** appears on both lists, and helping and administrating appear on the first. So Paul is actually marking out the "higher" gifts by how well they fulfill the *purpose* of the charismata, rather than by how *supernatural* they are. Both he and Peter *repeatedly* emphasize that gifts are given for the **building up of the church** (Romans 1:11-12; 1 Peter 4:10; and an entire diatribe in 1 Corinthians 14:4-19). So higher gifts are those which more overtly build up the church.

D. What about the extraordinary gifts?

By this I mean gifts that many Christians believe have been discontinued: apostleship, prophecy, miracle-working, healing, and tongues (whether speaking or interpreting).

- **Acts 2:14-33 (quoting Joel 2:28-32)** indicates the Spirit will be poured out in the "last days", such that gifts normally reserved for prophets or priests will be given to ordinary people—"sons and daughters" and even slaves. Joel explicitly ties this to the gospel age by the fact that "everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved"—something not found in the Old Covenant (see Ephesians 3:6 for example). Joel presents this outpouring as ongoing.
- **1 Corinthians 13:8-13** indicates that things like tongues, prophecies, knowledge, and even faith will pass away *when* the perfect is revealed (in the age to come). This implies their continuance *until* the perfect is revealed; indeed, they continue *now* precisely for the same reason they will be discontinued *then*: they help us to relate to God while we are not yet in his presence.
- **1 Thessalonians 5:16-24** explicitly instructs not to "quench the Spirit" nor to "despise prophecies". This *may* be advice only for the Thessalonian church, but if so, then seemingly so is the advice to rejoice always, to pray without ceasing, to give thanks in all circumstances, to test everything and hold fast what is good, and to abstain from every form of evil—since it advice appears directly in the middle of these other instructions. So Christians who deny that there are extraordinary gifts in the present day, and who scoff at Christians who thoughtfully believe they have received prophecies of some kind, seem to be acting against Paul's clear instructions. (Cf 1 Corinthians 14:39)
- **Mark 16:17-18** indicates that "these signs will accompany those who believe: in

my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents with their hands; and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.” So we can add **casting out demons** to our list of charismata. Jesus here doesn’t seem to imply any time limit on these gifts.

- However, passages like Hebrews 2:4 and 1 Corinthians 12:11 indicate that extraordinary gifts are given according to the Spirit’s will—they are not “always on”, they are not given to everyone, and they are not necessarily given to *anyone* at any particular time or place. There’s an obvious pattern in Scripture of extraordinary signs being particularly given in extraordinary times, such as the giving of the law, the incarnation, and to inaugurate and accompany the spread of the gospel. That said, they are also given at other times, simply as God pleases to glorify himself. As Jeremiah 32:20 says, “You have shown signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, **and to this day in Israel and among all mankind**, and have made a name for yourself, as at this day.” Moreover, Paul indicates we should “earnestly desire the higher gifts”—which indicates an attitude not just of eagerness toward them, but also a hopeful expectation. **Nowhere in Scripture can I find any indication that extraordinary gifts will not be given to Christians today. If anything, the opposite seems to be true.**

3. Evidence for extraordinary gifts in the present day

1. Apostleship

An apostle is “one commissioned by another to represent him in some way, especially a man sent out by Jesus Christ Himself to preach the Gospel” (Strong, but Thayer agrees). This includes the 12 apostles, and Paul, who was commissioned by Christ in a vision to preach to the gentiles.

Apostles had a special authority—they spoke on behalf of God. This authority seems to now have passed to the Bible alone, since the canon is closed. Admittedly, it is *possible* that Christ could commission a Christian today via direct revelation, but it doesn’t seem to happen. Particularly, there’s no reason to think such a person would be an apostle in the sense of speaking on behalf of God, because there’s no need for this: Scripture is *sufficient* for the man of God (2 Timothy 3:16). Moreover, claiming to be speaking on behalf of God would qualify as prophecy, and the Bible clearly shows that the gift of prophecy is subordinate to Scripture, and is not infallible in the way the revelation given to the apostles was infallible. So if any of the charismata have ceased in the present day, it is this one.

2. Prophecy

This seems the most prominently-mentioned gift, along with teaching—it appears in all the major charism passages. I take prophecy to include things like visions and sudden flashes of otherwise-impossible knowledge. I don't take it to be infallible—even if the knowledge given is true, we may misinterpret or simply fail to understand it (dreams for example may make sense only after the fact). Scripture is clear that we must “not despise prophecies, but test everything” (1 Thessalonians 5:20-21); it *never* indicates that prophecy is a threat to the priority of Scripture—so I find no support for that sadly common Reformed attitude.

Paul has an extremely high view of prophecy—indeed he instructs to “earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, **especially** that you may prophesy” (1 Corinthians 14:1), and says, “I want you all to speak in tongues, but **even more to prophesy.**” (14:5)

I think it is undeniable that prophecy still occurs, and although many of the stories we may encounter are fraudulent or foolish, others are not. Since this isn't something I've studied much before, I'll simply list three examples I already know of from the life of Charles Spurgeon (shamelessly copied from <http://livingtext.wordpress.com/2007/05/19/spurgeon-and-prophecy/>):

Spurgeon spoke of a sermon at Exeter Hall in which he suddenly broke off from his subject, and pointing in a certain direction, said, “Young man, those gloves you are wearing have not been paid for: you have stolen them from your employer.” At the close of the service, a young man, looking very pale and greatly agitated, came to the room, which was used as a vestry, and begged for a private interview with Spurgeon. On being admitted, he placed a pair of gloves upon the table, and tearfully said, “It's the first time I have robbed my master, and I will never do it again. You won't expose me, sir, will you? It would kill my mother if she heard that I had become a thief’.”

On another occasion while he was preaching, Spurgeon said there was a man in the gallery who had a bottle of gin in his pocket. This not only startled the man in the gallery who had the gin, but it also led to his conversion.

Spurgeon gives further examples of his prophetic ministry:

“While preaching in the hall, on one occasion, I deliberately pointed to a man in the midst of the crowd, and said, ‘There is a man sitting there, who is a shoemaker; he keeps his shop open on Sundays, it was open last Sabbath morning, he took nine pence, and there was four pence profit out of it; his soul is sold to Satan for four pence!’”

Having given these examples, let me balance out this section with a final excellent quote from Spurgeon on prophecy (copied from

<http://thinktheology.co.uk/blog/article/spurgeon-thinks-im-stupid>):

Take care never to impute the vain imaginings of your fancy to Him. I have seen the Spirit of God shamefully dishonoured by persons—I hope they were insane—who have said that they have had this and that revealed to them. There has not, for some years, passed over my head a single week in which I have not been pestered with the revelations of hypocrites or maniacs. Semi-lunatics are very fond of coming with messages from the Lord to me and it may save them some trouble if I tell them once and for all that I will have none of their stupid messages. When my Lord and Master has any message to me He knows where I am and He will send it to me direct, and not by mad-caps!

Never dream that events are revealed to you by Heaven, or you may come to be like those idiots who dare impute their blatant follies to the Holy Spirit. If you feel your tongue itch to talk nonsense, trace it to the devil, not to the Spirit of God!

3. Healing & miracles

I think healing is separated out in the Bible because it is a particularly common miracle—a gift given to many people, as opposed to the rarer signs and wonders. But I'm also including in this section the kinds of things Jesus mentions: exorcisms, immunity to poison, etc.

While many Christians are skeptical of healing and other miracles because of the faith-healer movement—which seems to me simply a very successful scam—Dr Craig Keener, professor of the New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary, has done a great deal of research into miracles. He recently wrote a two-volume book on the topic, called *Miracles* (Baker Academic, 2011). In it, he notes that modern miracle reports are widespread not only in less developed countries, but in the West also (eg, pp 426-507). He cites data showing a majority of doctors claim to have witnessed one or more miracles among their patients (pp 427-428, 721), along with other highly educated witnesses. I have not read the whole book, but here are some notable excerpts relating to healing, courtesy of Jason Engwer

(<http://triablogue.blogspot.co.nz/2012/07/healing-of-amputees.html>):

He refers to cases involving "creation of something like a new uterus" (n. 156 on 334); "rapid generation of bone" (n. 31 on 433); the restoration of an eye blinded by "lacerations from barbed wire" (519); "a woman who had had her fingers partly amputated on one hand was healed of cancer. The fingers grew back after prayer, and 'finger-nails are also forming.'" (705); "a Jansenist who lacked legs, as attested by two surgeons, yet grew them miraculously" (n. 357 on 705); "the gradual re-formation of an adult's bones and leg after amputation beneath

the knee" (n. 358 on 705); "half-inch fingers all grow out to three inches over the course of an hour and a half of prayer" (706); "a partially severed thumb grew out instantly" (706); "a misshapen skull was visibly healed" (706).

Keener discusses many more examples; I'm just citing some of them. Jason has written a series of articles based on his research; see http://triablogue.blogspot.co.nz/2012/11/a-christian-case-for-miracles_2.html for the index.

Note also that James gives explicit instructions to Christians who are sick, *expecting* that they will be healed—so while many Christians seem to live as practical deists with respect to healing and other miracles, the Bible seems to expect a quite different attitude. As with prophecies, it demands we be hopefully expectant:

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. (James 5:14-15)

4. Speaking in tongues (glossolalia)

The one we've all been waiting for. To keep my comments as clear as possible, I'm going to refer to the practice found in Scripture as "speaking in tongues" or "tongue-speaking", and the practice found in Pentecostal churches (and elsewhere) as glossolalia. I am implicitly including *interpretation* here as well.

While I believe speaking in tongues is a continuing gift of the Spirit, I think there is overwhelming evidence that modern Pentecostal phenomenon is *not* a genuine case of this gift. I count at least five distinct lines of evidence:

i. Modern Pentecostal practices do not conform to the biblical model

- The Bible is very specific about the *purpose* of speaking in tongues. Paul devotes nearly *all* of 1 Corinthians 14 to meticulously reasoning through the issue, emphasizing repeatedly that tongues are given for the same reason as *all* the spiritual gifts: that the church be built up. As he says, "I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, **unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.**" (v 5) He likens speaking in tongues without an interpreter to a musical instrument that can't play distinct notes (v 7-8)—"you will be speaking into the air" (v 9). His conclusion: "how can anyone in the position of an outsider say 'Amen' to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying? For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up. I thank God that I speak in tongues more

than all of you. Nevertheless, in church **I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.**" (vv 16-19)

- Equally, the Bible is very specific about the *manner* of speaking in tongues. Paul gives specific instructions:

When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. **But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God.** (1 Corinthians 14:26-28)

Conclusion: These facts show that Pentecostalism conforms neither to orthodoxy nor orthopraxy. On their theology, the purpose of tongues is to show you've received the "baptism of the Spirit". But as we've already seen, this occurs at conversion—it is the gift which enables *all* other gifts. On their practice, *everyone* is encouraged to speak in tongues (instead of two or at most three); people often speak all at once (instead of each in turn), and no one interprets (so by Paul's instruction they should not be speaking at all).

ii. *Glossolalia lacks objective features of genuine language*

- An extensive study by University of Toronto linguistics professor William J Samarin, based on glossolalia recorded in Christian meetings in Italy, the Netherlands, Jamaica, Canada and the USA over the course of five years, concluded that while linguistic features like accent, rhythm, intonation, pauses, syllabic structure etc are used in glossolalia, **the resemblance to language was merely superficial**. The syllable string does not form words, is not internally organized, and there is no systematic relationship between units of speech and concepts (ie, what language *is*). Samarin has come to define glossolalia as "a meaningless but phonologically structured human utterance believed by the speaker to be a real language but **bearing no systematic resemblance to any natural language, living or dead.**"
- In the words of Dr William Welmers of UCLA, "Glossolalic utterances are consistently in important respects **unlike human languages**. They are characterized by a great deal of recurrences of closely similar sequences of syllables and usually employ a restricted number of different sounds." This is easily discerned even by non-linguists such as myself.
- By the same token, many linguists are confident in their ability to distinguish between glossolalia and an *unfamiliar* language in blind tests, precisely

because glossolalia doesn't contain the kinds of consistent syntax and semantics they are trained to pick up on, but instead involves an artificially narrow selection of repeated sounds.

Conclusion: If there is no semantic content or consistent syntax present in glossolalia, it is not a *language* of any kind. Therefore, glossolalia cannot be biblical tongue-speaking, which explicitly involves speaking a foreign (or possibly divine) language which can be understood and interpreted.

iii. Glossolalia only features sounds the speaker is already familiar with

- Eugene A Nida, Secretary of Translations for the American Bible Society and a world-renowned linguist, concluded from his studies of glossolalia that its utterances are closely associated with the language background of the speaker.
- In the words of Samarin (cf Felicitas Goodman), glossolalia “consists of ... **sounds taken from all those that the speaker knows [but none he does not]**, put together more or less haphazardly...”
- James Jaquith from Washington University agrees—having studied English-speaking Pentecostals he concluded that “there is no evidence that these glossolalic utterances have been generated by constituent subcodes of any natural language other than English.” This is widely attested elsewhere.

Conclusion: If glossolalia were a genuine language of the Spirit, we should expect it to involve other sounds than are used in the speaker's native language—at least some of the time. Since it does not, we should conclude that glossolalia is not genuine tongue-speaking, but rather is a pretense of language fabricated from previously-learned sounds.

iv. Glossolalia features discernible learned styles

- People who learned to speak in tongues from a particular leader will usually speak in a style discernibly similar to his.
- Marjoe Gortner, after exposing his previous false ministry in Pentecostalism, acknowledged that “**Tongues is something you learn** ... you become convinced that it is the ultimate expression of the Spirit flowing through you. The first time maybe you'll just go dut-dut-dut-dut, and that's about all that will get out. Then you'll hear other people and next night you may go dut-dut-dut-UM-dut-DEET-dut-dut, and it gets a little better. The next thing you know, it's ela-hando-satelay-eeek-condele-mosandrey-aseya ... and it's a new language you've got down.”

- This is corroborated by a 1986 study in the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, which involved 60 undergraduates. **20% succeeded in replicating glossolalia after merely listening to a 60-second sample, and 70% succeeded after training**, leading to their conclusion that “glossolalia can be easily learned through direct instruction”.

Conclusion: If glossolalia were genuine tongue-speaking it would conform to the style of the language(s) being spoken, and not to the style of the glossolalist from whom it was learned. Moreover, we wouldn't expect most people to easily mimic glossolalia in a way indistinguishable from the “real thing” if it were something only produced through the Holy Spirit. Therefore, it is a learned behavior and not a genuine language, and so does not correspond to biblical tongue-speaking.

v. Glossolalia is not confined to Christianity

- Identical forms feature prominently in other (especially mediumistic) religions: Inuit, the Saami (Lapps), in Japanese seances, the shamans in Ethiopia, and various spirits in Haitian Voodoo. L. Carlyle May shows that glossolalia in non-Christian religions is present in Malaysia, Indonesia, Siberia, Arctic regions, China, Japan, Korea, Arabia, and Burma, among other places. It is also present extensively in African tribal religions.
- Felicitas Goodman studied a number of Pentecostal English, Spanish and Mayan speaking communities in the United States, Caribbean and Mexico. She compared their glossolalia with recordings of non-Christian rituals from Africa, Borneo, Indonesia and Japan, accounting for both the segmental structure (such as sounds, syllables, phrases) and the supra-segmental elements (rhythm, accent, intonation). Her conclusion: there is **no linguistic distinction between what was practiced by the Pentecostal Protestants and the followers of other religions**.
- Glossolalia is not even confined to *religion* in general; it occurs in non-religious contexts also. In “The Psychology of Speaking in Tongues”, John P. Kildahl concludes that “from a linguistic point of view, religiously inspired glossolalic utterances have the same general characteristics as those that are not religiously inspired.”

Conclusion: If glossolalia is indeed speaking in the Holy Spirit, we would not expect it to feature in non-Christian religions; or, if it did we'd expect it to be a counterfeit version (as with other miraculous events which tend to be qualitatively inferior to Christian miracles). But non-Christian glossolalia is not qualitatively different from modern “speaking in tongues”. Moreover, historically it is a recent innovation in Christianity, only appearing from around 1900—whereas it has been present in pagan religions for much longer.

This suggests it is a pagan practice introduced to Christianity, and that all glossolalia is a manifestation of the same basic, non-biblical phenomenon.