

# OpenTheo

## #216 Dear Tom: What does the Bible say about the Spiritual Gifts?

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### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom discusses the relevance of spiritual gifts like prophecy and speaking in tongues within our modern context, dives into the significance of signs and wonders, and shares his personal encounters with the Holy Spirit. Another intriguing episode delving into the questions from our listeners! Originally Aired: 24 January 2020 • More shows, free eBooks & newsletter: [premierunbelievable.org](http://premierunbelievable.org) • Subscribe to the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast: <https://pod.link/1441656192> • Support

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## Transcript

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And now it's time for today's podcast. Welcome to this replay of Ask N T Right Anything, where we go back into the archives to bring you the best of the thought and theology of Tom Wright. Answering questions submitted by you, the listener.

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premierunbelievable.com. And registering there will unlock access through the newsletter to updates, free bonus videos, and e-books. That's premierunbelievable.com. And now for today's replay of Ask N T Right Anything. The Ask N T Right Anything podcast.

Hello and welcome to the show. I'm Justin Briley, sitting down with Tom Wright once again to ask your questions. And the show is brought to you by premier in partnership with SBCK and N T Right Online.

So today on the podcast, we're going to be talking about the charismatic gifts of the spirit. Quite a few people asking questions about this, Tom. But before we get into that, one thing many people love, especially in the earlier episodes of the podcast has been you pulling out the guitar occasionally to give us a few tunes.

We haven't had as much opportunity recently to do that. You've been in the middle of a very busy change of your life using Tuoxford. And that's meant that being able to bring the guitar out has been a bit more difficult.

But I at least know where my guitar is. It's no longer in a loft in excessiveness. And I had mine restringing just in the house that you would be able to play at this time, Tom.

God willing. I will one day work up another song or two. We'll see.

So for those who are anxiously awaiting the next Tom right unplugged, don't worry. We will eventually get to doing some more. We won't leave you high and dry.

In any case, in a sense, the charismatic movement has, this is a rather tenuous link to talk about guitars. But there has been an extraordinary wave in the West and all over the world really of a kind of charismatic emphasis in Christianity. And whether or not people think of themselves as charismatic, the songs they sing have often been part of that movement.

They've come out of that. Just the fact that many churches now do employ quite a contemporary band-led style of worship and that sort of thing, I would say has its roots to a great degree in the charismatic renewal of the sort of 60s and 70s and so on. And so, before we get into some of the questions on this stuff, what's your general sort of looking back with your experience? What have you seen happen, particularly I suppose, in your own Anglican tradition when it comes to the charismatic expression of the spirits? And even the fact that the Archbishop of Gantry with Justin Welby could be argued and comes from that tradition himself through Holy Trinity Brothers and so on.

Yes, I remember vividly in the late 60s when I was an undergraduate and was part of the Christian Union in Oxford. And I come from a very middly, middly Anglican background, but then through my teens that was strongly overlaid with solid Bible teaching through script union and script union boys camps and so on. And I was very well taught and I was

quite well equipped in that stage through my teens.

But I remember at one point, the book that was sort of a flavor of the month in about 1965, was David Wilkerson, the cross and the switch. And a lot of us read it eagerly and some of the people who were teaching us at the time were saying, well now just be a little bit careful because this guy's a crazy American Pentecostal and all sorts of weird things are happening. Maybe God had to do that in New York where this probably doesn't happen in sort of Newcastle or Oxford or ordinary places like where we live.

You know, please keep this one well under wraps. And then of course it didn't stay under wraps because in the late 60s and early 70s there was an explosion of charismatic phenomena, including in many places that people hadn't expected in good ordinary middle class, but evangelical Anglican circles. And the two David's, David McInnes and David Watson were the great leaders, young leaders of that.

And David Watson went off and became a rector of Vicker, Michael O'Bellfrey in York. And Dave McInnes is in old days. Well, David ended up in St. Paul, it's followed Michael Green.

And Michael Green himself was somebody who had come from that solid old-fashioned evangelical background and had himself... Very definitely experienced charismatic renewal. And he went off and ran St. John's College Nottingham, which then was very much a haven of that. And many of us didn't know quite what to make of that in the early 70s.

But I remember gradually coming to terms with this, including when a member of my own family went off doing something and came back speaking in terms of, oh my goodness, this is getting me near the bone. But I remember some wise teaching from a lovely old theologian, John Wenham, who was in Oxford at the time, who was very open to God doing all sorts of things, but said, let's not imagine that there is just one second blessing that first you get converted, then you get baptized in the Spirit, and that's it. And that was a very kind of mechanical point of view.

And so once one had got over that hump and God wants to go on blessing you every day in new ways and shouldn't think as just one stage as it were. But likewise, the gift of tongues shouldn't be regarded as the be all and end all, so that either you've had it and you are now one of the elite or you haven't and you're a mere lowly mortal. It's quite clear in 1 Corinthians that Paul does not expect everybody to speak in tongues.

And so on and so on. But these were the things that were terribly buzzy and worrying because it hadn't been part of the normal experience. And indeed, some people said, and I think one of your correspondence has mentioned this, that some people think that the gifts were meant to stop at the end of the apostolic age.

Can we come to that question? That's probably a good place to start because this is still a life debate in many parts of the Church. Absolutely. And Matthew in Taport 5 says, my question is about the Holy Spirit.

I come from a tradition that holds a cessationist position. And for those who aren't familiar, that simply means people who believe that the charismatic gifts of the Spirit ceased with the closure of the New Testament as well. But Matthew says, I'm not entirely convinced that that position is demonstrated in Scripture.

Should we expect to see the Spirit acting as he does in the book of Acts today? Are the gifts of the Spirit for us today? What is the biblical argument for cessationism? Does it stand up to scrutiny? We could do a whole set of shows on this. You could, but I think the biblical argument for cessationism goes back to 1 Corinthians 13, where Paul says whether there be tongues they shall cease. But it doesn't actually say when, and it looks as though in that passage in 1 Corinthians 13, he's actually talking about the ultimate future.

And that in the present, there are all sorts of gifts which won't be necessary in the future. And he's contrasting that. Because we've been known and just as we are fully known.

Exactly. Exactly. He's contrasting that with love, which will be all the more important in God's new creation.

You know, we won't stop loving in God's new creation, but there are all sorts of things that you won't need to do anymore, and speaking in tongues will be one of them. And I see speaking in tongues, and I don't know whether some or all gifts of tongues are purely angelic tongues or purely different kinds of human tongues. I do know people, I have met people who have found themselves strongly led to speaking tongues on a crowded bus, and somebody comes up to them and says, how come you speak fluent Hindustani or whatever it is? And, you know, I have no doubt that that happens.

I have no reason to doubt the people who tell me it's happened, just like I have no reason to doubt the people who describe having been very sick in a particular way. And then through prayer, God has remarkably and unexpectedly and inexplicably has healed them. God does all sorts of odd things, and I think there's a sort of Christian fear and rationalism sometimes.

It doesn't want God to act in that way because it might sort of imply that we're short of something. It's interesting. I mean, Jason asked specifically on this question as well.

He's from Ohio and says, what are your thoughts on the gift of tongues? And again, mentions those who are cessationists with regards to that, but says, yet there seem to be early church writers that mention their continued demonstration among the

monotonists and by orthodox Christians like Tothullian. And what about those who speak in tongues today? And he mentions that I actually had an interview with my namesake Justin Welby, in which he talked about speaking in tongues and using that as a way of praying essentially in his private devotions. And Jason simply wants to know, well, what do you think of that use of God? That's where I am too.

In 1986, I was leaving Montreal and was going to be coming back to Oxford as a college chaplain as well as the university lecturer. And I was quite nervous about that because I had been in academic work for several years and the thought of suddenly being plunged into a vivid little community where there were hundreds of people who would come to me for spiritual counsel and help, and I wouldn't have a clue what to say to them. I remember sharing this with a cousin of mine who was in a quiet way, a charismatic Christian in Canada in Winnipeg.

And she said, well, it may well be that God will give you a gift like the gift of tongues. And she prayed with me. And the next thing I knew, I was praying in tongues.

Very startled. This wasn't supposed to happen. I hadn't known when I was going to stay with this cousin that any such thing was on the agenda at all.

But she was absolutely right that many, many times, that was 1986 or 30 years ago, plus, when I have needed to pray into a particular situation, but have actually no idea of a specific thing that I ought to be praying for. Now, Paul says something like that in Romans 8. We don't know what to pray for, but the spirit prays within us. I'm not sure that in Romans 8 he's talking about praying in tongues.

Though some people have said that. I have a PhD student who's working on that. Very question as we speak.

But be that as it may, I have found on many, many, many occasions that the use of tongues in private prayer, I've never exercised this gift in public. I have no particular desire to, has enabled me to hold people and situations within the love of God in a way which for some reason seems to be different from just saying I pray for so-and-so. And I'm just content with that.

And for those who haven't had that experience, that doesn't make you a more superior prayer to that? Of course not. No, no, no, no. And indeed, some of the most prayerful people I know would be in quite other traditions, like say the Russian Orthodox or whatever, where they seem to be able, through their traditions, to go into a prayer space, which is different again.

And fine. Hallelujah. They have their problems.

We have our problems. I resist any kind of elitism that says, oh, they're the real deal and the rest of us are just paddling around. So yes, tongues is a great gift.

It's not given to everybody. But I find for certain purposes, it's really... Just to quickly sort of wrap up the cessationist piece as well. I mean, when I've hosted debates on that particular issue, one of the criticisms from the cessationist has been the idea that, well, if prophecy and tongues and so on are for today, then that effectively means we're adding to the canon of what God has said.

It's putting them on a par with the works of Scripture. And that can be done, and that sometimes has been done, and that's very, very dangerous. It's rare in my life that people have had words of prophecy which are specifically and sort of dramatically.

This is what God is saying to you. There have been rare occasions when that has actually been the case, and Maggie and I have had to say, oh my goodness, this looks as though this is a real word from the Lord. But no, I'm not sort of binding that up with Scripture.

I'm saying God is good, and God is gracious, and God can do that. But of course, at every point, we are trying to be scripturally formed Christians who then discern different words that can be said. As we're asked to in Scripture.

As we're asked to in Scripture. And it's perfectly possible, and very interestingly, in the Acts of the Apostles, when Paul is on his way to Jerusalem, various people are saying to him in the Spirit, don't you dare go to Jerusalem. It's going to be bad news, and Paul says, actually, this is what I have to do.

And so, he doesn't say that those people were demon-possessed. He says they were speaking in the Spirit, but they told Paul not to go to Jerusalem, and Paul went into the Spirit. It is something a little bit different about that kind of revelation as opposed to it, as it worthy.

And it is a matter of discernment, and that takes wisdom, it takes often a community, or at least a fellowship of prayer, of people gathering around and praying together. And then a corporate wisdom. The danger with our modern individualism is we think we've got to do it all ourselves.

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A couple of questions on signs and wonders and how that's supposed to be used in the Furtherance of the Kingdom. David in Middleton Manchester says in John 14, Jesus says that those who believe in him will do the things that he did, and even greater things. What do you suppose these greater things might be, and where do we actually see them happening? And Dr. David Bryan in Richmond wants to focus in on a very specific verse.

He says, I'm a big fan of Gordon Feasbuk, Paul the Spirit and the people of God, and in it, he highlights the assumption that Paul would use signs and wonders in his proclamation of the gospel. He references Romans 15 verse 19 to support this. I was very keen to look up Tom's view on this and turn to my copy of Romans for everyone part two, only to find he comments on verse 18 and 20 and not 19.

Would you be so kind to us, Tom, to fill in the end? Let's start with David's question there about Romans 15 verse 19. Perhaps you could give it for us in the translation. Well, here it is from verse 18.

It says, far be it from me, you see, to speak about anything, except what the Messiah has accomplished through me for the obedience of the nations, in word and deed, 19, in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of God's Spirit. I've completed announcing the good news of the Messiah from Jerusalem, round as far as the Lyricum. Yeah, apologies that in that rather short commentary, I wasn't able to comment.

You can't read every verse. But I would link that as well with 1 Corinthians where Paul is talking about God's commission to him to preach the gospel, not in showy words of wisdom, lest the cross of Christ should be emptied of its power. And when he's talking about power, I do think he's talking about the fact that as he's talking about the crucified Messiah and him being now the Lord of the world, this lordship of Jesus is demonstrated in the fact that people get healed and that long-time idolaters burn their books of magic or whatever.

That certainly was going on in Ephesus as well. And likewise in Galatians chapter 3, when Paul says the one who does mighty deeds among you, how does that happen? The one who gives you the Spirit and performs powerful deeds. Does he do this through your performance of Torah or through hearing and believing? So it looks as though Paul is assuming that when the gospel is preached, stuff will happen.

People will get healed. Now, clearly from elsewhere in Paul, this isn't automatic. It doesn't happen all the time when, what's his name comes to, from Philippi to Paul,

bearing gifts, Epatraditis.

He gets sick when he's with Paul. And Paul says, but God had mercy on him and on me as well, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. He doesn't say so naturally I prayed for him and he got healed.

It's as though it remains a mystery for Paul. And likewise, there are many things which remain a mystery. He doesn't have it on tap.

And sometimes, like in his painful visit to Corinth in so far as we can probe into that, it looks as though he came to Corinth expecting to be able to do the usual stuff. And they rejected him and he had to run back to Ephesus with his tail between his legs. And much, much as Jesus also wasn't able to do everything.

In Nazareth, when Jesus went back home, he couldn't do much there because of their unbelief. There was a hardness of heart. And it's as though the signs and wonders seem to depend upon particular receptivity in the circumstances.

Now, it's a very dangerous thing to say because I have been with Christians who've said, we prayed for so and so to get well and they didn't. So what hindered our prayers? What secret sin are you hoarding or am I? And the answer is no, it's not that easy. And we all try to, because we all have a bit of guilt sloshing around in our background, we all try to think, maybe there's something wrong in me and if I could only put that right, maybe this would work.

Or indeed, the person who's being prayed for thinking, oh, I obviously don't have enough faith. Exactly. And you have known, and I have known, of dear, good Christian people, faithful people who've got sick and people are prayed for them and they've died and their families are prayed for them and they've still died.

And there is, so the danger with all of this is that we try to use what you might call charismatic phenomena of one sort or another as a way of making life more simple and reducing the complexity of life to, oh, we've now got the supernatural agency, Zap, that's it. And it doesn't work as well. Paul, while he saw many miracles, but also suffered shipwrecks, beatings, adventures, martyrdom.

Absolutely. It's not the ticket to an easy life. No, exactly.

And, you know, I've often said to people, think of James and John in the Acts of the Apostles, the sons of thunder and so on. In Acts chapter 12, it begins with James, the brother of John, being killed with the sword, because Herod thinks it's time to start locking some heads off here. And then Peter gets put in jail and then the church is praying for Peter and he gets a get out of jail free ticket.

Now, if I was James' mother, I wouldn't like Acts 12. You know, excuse me, why didn't



God do that for my son? I was praying for him. And I think one of the many things that Acts 12 teaches us is that it remains a mystery.

You know, I think of people that I've known who are wonderful people, fine Christians. It was just the other day. There's that lovely Christian couple who ran a Russia in France that killed in a red axe in South Africa.

And I have a nephew who, with his wife, worked very closely with them in France. And they're devastated. Why? We have no means of knowing.

So, yes, God does do extraordinary things. But yes, life remains mysterious. And we shouldn't use the fact that God sometimes really does do extraordinary miracles of healing as a way of beating each other up about faith or lack thereof.

We've got more questions here on some of these issues. Lincoln is in Adelaide, Australia. And says, what does listening to the Holy Spirit look like practically? Should a Christian seek to hear the voice of the Spirit apart from scripture at all? I grew up in a Pentecostal church and now attend a more conservative Baptist church.

And I've never quite been able to resolve what listening to the Holy Spirit really is. I don't want to rely too much on my feelings. But I believe there is room for more than simply relying on the written text if the Spirit lives within us.

What do you think? Yeah, yeah. I think it's taken for granted or should be taken for granted that serious Christians are seriously soaked in scripture and that that's where we start. But that doesn't necessarily mean that on particular occasions God doesn't want to say to us scripture soaked people.

Actually, there's something rather curious. I want to get through here and here's how it goes. I think every day in our praying we ought to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit while being scripture soaked people.

And I understand that somebody faced with crazy charismatic excesses where the Bible is left behind because we're waiting for the new word from the Lord. Somebody would react to that by saying, no, no, no, the Bible is the Bible is the Bible. Because in the history of the church there have been many times when people have quietly pushed the Bible to one side and maybe not immediately but maybe in six months or six years or 25 years or whatever, somebody from within that movement says that the Spirit is now leading me to abandon my marriage and go off and do something else or whatever.

In other words, to do something which quite clearly is not in line with scripture. But if you've cut loose from scripture, you open yourself to that. It happened with the so-called holiness movement a hundred, hundred and twenty years ago.

One of the reasons why the intervarsity movement in Britain became very wary of

charismatic phenomena because the old Kesic movement in the 19th century did go into a phase of opening ourselves to the spirit and then whatever seems to be God seems to be telling us. And frankly, the human capacity for self-deception runs very, very deep. And once you cut loose from scripture, it's always possible to hear, quote unquote, Jesus or the Spirit say, of course I now want you to do this, which is something that the scripture would absolutely forbid.

And so I understand that reaction. But let's then bring it back to a balance. And I'll never find that there is that sort of dichotomy very often in the church.

So you've got your evangelical charismatic on one side and you've got your conservative evangelicals on the other and it's a shame when one party sort of says no, you can't have any of that stuff, the other party sort of. I totally agree. I mean, in the late 60s and early 70s, when I was on the graduate, we had Christian unions in the great universities in this country, which were in today's terms a broad church and that you had the more conservatives and the Baptists and the Anglicans and the Charismatics under this and that.

And we all basically muddled along together. I was sad when my children went to university to find that they basically had to choose which are you going to be a conservative conservative? Are you going to be a charismatic? We shouldn't have to make those choices. I think inevitably in the pews, there's a lot of people who are somewhere in between.

It's just that one distinct intensity preached from the front. Absolutely. And I want to say precisely because I take the Bible extremely seriously and precisely because I think the Holy Spirit extremely seriously, we need a richer, a lot of this comes down to personalities and I know we all laugh about these different things, whether it's the Enneagram or the Myers-Briggs or whatever and they can be abused, of course.

However, knowing that I have a particular kind of personality that naturally inclines me to be this way around is really helpful when I recognize that lots of people don't have that personality and it's back to the heart, mind, soul, strength people. When I was a bishop of Durham, one of the things that I used as a way of getting to know parishes was to explore with them. Now loving God, heart, mind, soul and strength, where do you think you are on that? Because the really interesting churches are the ones that are trying to do at least three of those and possibly even four.

But it's actually quite difficult and people will gravitate towards a church which is more heart and soul and so on and leaving the mind behind and we leave the social action to those liberals or the politicians. Other churches are very much mind and strength. We've thought this thing through, this is what the Kingdom of God means in this parish and don't give us that fluffy stuff where you're sitting around lighting candles and saying arm all the time.

It's just not into that. And I want to say for goodness sake, recognize one another and learn from one another and grow together into a more mature totality of Christian expression in life. One final one and I don't know how familiar you'll be with this movement but Michael in Harrogate in North Yorkshire, it says, as someone who's mostly been influenced by the charismatic stream of Christianity, I notice a lot of common ground between your teaching and the emphasis of the charismatic church.

Particularly in your emphasis on God's primary method of bringing about change, being through the hands of his people compared with, for example, the teaching of on earth as in heaven from Bill Johnson at Bethel. Is there a synergy there as your audience receives your message gladly but from a different demographic now? I don't know if the names Bill Johnson and Bethel mean anything to you. I'm not afraid of knowing that.

Can you know anything on that? Bethel Church is based in Reading in California, Northern California and Bill Johnson sort of heads that up and they've been very influential. It's a very charismatic church and it's especially at San Francisco on signs and wonders and what Michael goes on in this question to mention, which he says sometimes they've been accused of having an over-realized eschatology, i.e. the idea that we can see all of our problems or physical ailments and so on brought by Jesus to some kind of completion and a lot of people think this is wonderful and this is the future of the Church and others are very wary of this idea that it can all be made better in the here and now. I'm probably not doing justice to either Bill Johnson or Bethel as a whole but let me just say that it's a movement within the charismatic church which has divided people.

Right. I mean I would always want to stress a now and not yet and in many churches I would want to stress you need some more of them now. Thank you very much.

In others I would say hang on, hang on, there is a not yet. God does extraordinary things. I've heard true stories from people I know and respect and love which I won't even try to repeat here because people will say Tom Wright's really lost it now because that sort of thing doesn't happen.

All sorts of extraordinary things do happen. However death happens, suffering happens, road accidents happen to good Christian people etc. We are still in the not yet and we have to hold those two together.

Otherwise we are going to make shipwreck one way or another. People are going to be deceived into thinking that nothing bad will ever happen to them and and real life consists, real Christian life consists in holding on to those things in the presence of God. And here's something which I have been thinking about a lot recently really since I did the Gifford lectures which plays exactly into this.

That in I mentioned it in an earlier podcast in Genesis 6 the evil wickedness of people in the days of Noah grieved God to his heart. The idea of God grieving is very interesting. It

seems to me that one of the things that's going on when God calls Abraham and his family and when in the story of Israel God inspires the Psalter is that God dwelling in the midst of his people, God is not just seeking to remedy the evils of the world but God is grieving at the heart of the world's pain.

And that goes all the way into Romans 8 where the spirit groans within us. This is God's grief and we in the church are not called to be triumphalistic and to have left grief behind. Our laments by the spirit are ways in which the grief of God, the sorrow of the spirit, is living within the world.

I find that really profound and important and I would want to say to anyone who is emphasizing the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, what are you doing about the grief and the sorrow because that is part of what the Holy Spirit's present ministry is all about. So it's not just we rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. As we do that in the spirit God is rejoicing with them and God is weeping along with them.

And unless our view of God is big enough for that then maybe we are in danger of creating an idol. Great stuff. Thank you very much.

The time always flies by and it has on this occasion too. But I'm sure we'll come back to all sorts of these issues in the future. But for the moment, thank you very much, Tom.

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