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#77 Gifts of the Spirit: How much should we value prophecy and tongues?

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

What does it mean to be filled with the Spirit? Are tongues genuine? Tom answer question on spiritual gifts and offers advice to a group of friends experiencing unexpected prophecy and healing.

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Transcript

[MUSIC] The Ask Nty Anything podcast.

[MUSIC] Hello and welcome along to today's edition of the podcast. Today, your questions on the holy spirit and the gifts of the spirit.

If you ever thought, I'd love to be able to ask a question myself on this podcast. Well, you can by simply registering over at askentwright.com. And we get all of the questions in, of course, we can't ask them all. But you'll be in with a good chance of your question being in the running for a future show.

I'm Justin Briley, your show host. I'm the theology and apologetics editor for Premiere. And the show is brought to you in partnership also with SBCK and NT-RIGHT online.

Just a reminder, we're running a competition on the show at the moment. You could be in with a chance of winning a signed copy of Tom's latest book, Broken Sign Post. It's all about how Christianity makes sense of the world.

It's a really excellent book. And if you'd like to be in with a chance of winning one of those five signed copies we've got from Tom, then do make sure you're registered at askentiright.com. Make sure you've left us your email and your name and so on. You'll get our regular newsletter and you'll have access to ask Tom a question.

But you'll also be in the running to win a copy of that book signed by Tom himself. So do make sure to do that if you possibly can. Thanks to all those who leave ratings and reviews of the show as well.

Lovely comment here from a listener in Canada who described the show as a podcast from heaven saying five styles aren't enough top notch discussions on contemporary and sticky topics with deep thorough and mind respecting manner. Language, audibly clear and theologically sophisticated yet simple. Very well done.

Thank you for sincerely for the time and effort behind it. God bless the work of your hands. God bless you as well.

Thank you. Listen in Canada who left that particular comment. You're welcome to leave a comment and a review and an endorsement of the podcast.

If you'd like to, wherever you're listening to your podcast from. For now, let's get into today's show. Well, we're back again and we're taking your questions today on the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the spirit.

Now, this comes up quite a lot in the questions that come in, Tom. And I think it's often because there has been an explosion really in recent decades in the latter half, at least of the 20th century of charismatic churches, the use of the gifts of the spirit, perhaps in a way that wasn't there previous to that. And I think a lot of people who listen to this podcast probably do come from churches that to some extent could be termed as charismatic churches where they're open to gifts of healing, prophecy, tongues and so on.

And so I'm always surprised at the number of people who want your thoughts on this. Now, I will refer people back to shows earlier in our archive where we've discussed these issues and you've spoken of your own experience actually in this area, which was fascinating to hear. But let's revisit some of this ground with the specifics of our question as Tongi and Jeff, Kerry and Meghan.

Let's start with Tongi and forgive me if I'm mispronouncing your name here, Tongi, but you're in Sydney, Australia. And simply ask, what does it mean to be filled with the spirit and how does one get filled with the spirit, Tom? Great question. As with some of the other questions that we raise on these podcasts, I always want to put out a larger framework because we in Western Christianity very easily think that this whole thing is just about me, about my experience.

What does this mean for me? I want to say, go back to the big picture, which is from Isaiah 11, from Psalm 72, from Numbers 14, from several passages, and indeed from 1 Corinthians 15, where God will be all in all. The ultimate aim of the whole biblical story is for God to come and flood the whole creation with his love and his presence and his joy and his just sheer goodness and delight. The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

And that's how God is going to be with the whole creation. It's very important to say, this doesn't negate the otherness of creation. God made a world that is other than himself, not in order to take it over and say, no, actually, it's all me after all, but in order to relish and delight in the fact that elephants are elephants and they're not God and the trees are trees and they're not God.

And you and me are you and me. And we are not God in that sense. We're not just subsumed, flattened by the Godness, but that we are made to be vessels in which God's love and grace and presence and delight can be poured out so that we become vessels and vehicles of God's creative love in the world in our own right.

And that includes our own imaginations, our own desires, our own thinking out of plans, what to do, et cetera. God doesn't want to overrule that. He wants us to work with the grain of his purposes, but within that larger image.

So we are as a church and then we are as individuals meant to be advanced signs of what God is going to do for the whole of creation. That puts the question about you and me being filled with the spirit into its proper, larger, biblical context. Very interesting, Ephesians, where the command comes to be filled with the spirit.

Ephesians is all about God, ultimately bringing all things in heaven and earth together in Christ. And then Ephesians two, you get the church as the temple where God himself lives by the spirit. So as individuals, we are supposed to be individuals of that larger whole.

Okay, having said that, being filled with the spirit seems to me one of those things which we don't necessarily, we don't control. John three says the spirit, Jesus says the spirit blows where it wants. And you hear the sound of it.

You don't know where it's coming from and going to the word for spirit and the word for wind and the word for breath are the same word, but you know, in Greek. So the wind comes and goes. And as in Ezekiel 37, we are told prophesied to the breath or Ezekiel is told prophesied to the wind, the breath, the spirit.

So we are told to pray for the spirit. Lord, fill me with your spirit. Enable me, equip me for to be the person you want me to be, to be part of your royal priesthood so that my life, my words, my imagining may in themselves in some small ways be signposts towards

that greater filling of the whole creation, which you have in mind.

As we do that, we ought to expect sometimes gradually, sometimes more dramatically to be suddenly aware of, actually, I ought to be doing this or actually this task, which I didn't think I could do. Maybe I can have a shot at it or this person who I find so difficult to forgive, maybe actually I can reach out in love and forgive them. In other words, there are signs that this filling is happening.

There are ways in which we can be aware sometimes, often unexpectedly, that actually I seem to be able to do things now, which I didn't think I could yesterday or whenever. These are signs of being filled with the spirit, but it's elusive. We never control it.

It's not our possession. The spirit is sovereign and we have to remain humble and teachable and ready to learn and ready to realize we made a mistake that time or whatever it is. A friend of mine in Canada was being interviewed by a parish where he was ordained, where he was hoping to go as rector.

And somebody on the committee said, "Are you filled with the spirit?" And he said, "Yes, but I leak." And I think a great answer. In other words, yes, daily I pray for the filling of the spirit, but my goodness, I know that sometimes goes horribly wrong. And the other image, which I read this just the other day, is very helpful.

If you have a small balloon and you blow it up, it can be absolutely full of air. If you have a large balloon, you blow it up. It can be full of air.

Are they the same size? No. So is a child able to be filled with the spirit? Absolutely. That child may not have all the things that would mean that an adult filled with the spirit would have.

We are all different. And when God fills us with his spirit, we are gloriously different because that's how God wants his world to be wonderfully full of diversity all coming together to his glory. So I find that helpful, but it is a daily thing, a daily thing, and a matter of humble prayer, Lord, fill me so that I can be used in your larger service.

It's not for my own sake. It's not so that I can have a nice feeling about it, though I may. I may not.

And was Jesus filled with the spirit when he was praying in Gethsemane? I think he was. And it was agony. Yeah.

We have to be careful about it. It's not constant joy and sort of elation. But I mean, when it comes to a specific gift, like tongues, now, that's often by some churches has been supposedly an evidence of ones being filled with the spirit.

And even, you know, they would say you haven't been filled with fear until you have

experienced that gift. But obviously experience varies dramatically on that. And I've got a couple of people who have just got questions on this gift of speaking in tongues.

Firstly, Jeff in Atlanta wants to know what does Paul mean by speaking in tongues in 1 Corinthians 14 specifically? And we can come to that. But Kerry in Armidale in New South Wales, Australia says, please could you talk about speaking in tongues? I was raised in a Pentecostal church. I loved it.

I honor and appreciate it. And I'm really grateful that my parents prioritized being in church every week. But if I'm completely honest, I've never seen the gift of tongues used in a way that I felt was genuine.

I don't think God is weird. I think people can make him seem that way, especially by misunderstanding spiritual gifts. Could you please address this? Talk about what you perceive to be the gift of tongues that Paul talks about and also tongues spoken at Pentecost.

So a lot of stuff about speaking in tongues there, Tom. But maybe, yeah, some commentary on Kerry's sort of experience. And is it weird and do people misappropriate this? And what are these different ways in which Paul talks about tongues? You know, 1 Corinthians 14 being one example.

Yes, yes, no great questions. And I've seen these questions grow up over my lifetime. I mean, when I was much younger in say the 1960s, this wasn't a big deal in most Christian churches around the world, including most evangelical churches.

And then during the 60s, the charismatic movement, which is different from the traditional Pentecostal churches, but there's a kind of a confluence of experience there, that started to come up. And many people were really quite worried about it, what is going on here, particularly when people said precisely, as you quoted from somebody, that unless you've spoken in tongues, you're not genuinely filled with the spirit or baptized in the spirit, whatever. And I want to say over the course of the last 50 years or so, I have seen all kinds of things and the great movement of the spirit in Holy Trinity, Church in Brompton in London, which has gone worldwide with the alpha course, where the gifts of the spirit are very much part of the scene.

But that has become part of a particular Anglican low church style of worship, which many people then, maybe after a few years, have found isn't actually ministering to them as deeply as they hoped it would. And though they wouldn't deny that it was a real thing, they would say, well, that's part of what God has done and is doing, but we don't want to make it the be all and end all. And there are several different things which we'd have to say there, which one wants to be quite cautious about saying, because these extraordinary experiences of not just speaking in tongues, but of some of the things like the so-called Toronto blessing from many years ago, takes whole groups of people into a

form of ecstasy, which is delightful and sometimes leaves people permanently on a kind of a new level of spirit to you.

Well, maybe they needed that and maybe God can do whatever God wants. I was like, thank goodness, I'm not God. So I think we've seen it.

It interestingly goes with the culture. This is part of a whole cultural revolution we've had in the Western world over the last many years. Likewise, just as Kerry said about growing up in a Pentecostal church, my wife grew up in a church like that.

And she too had that same thing of, are these tongues speakers really? Is this genuine? Is this the word of God in these few syllables that this person always shouts out on a Sunday morning, et cetera, et cetera? So I know about those questions. I also know about and I've met people who have suddenly maybe on a bus had a sense that God was calling them to speak in tongues and they spoke in a language they didn't understand, but somebody else on the bus said, how come you can speak fluent Swahili or whatever it was? And they had a message from God for that person. I have no doubt that those things are real.

That's like what happened on the day of Pentecost when the disciples were enabled to speak the message in all these different languages. That's quite different from what Paul is talking about in 1 Corinthians 14, where it seems as though the people speaking in tongues are not expected to be understood, which is why somebody else has to interpret and say what this means is such and such. And there's many, there's lots of room for many a slip in that process, both in the tongues and in the interpretation and in the receiving by the congregation.

But I believe God loves to surprise us. And those of us who tend to be living out of our heads all the time and rational, this is how it's got to be. I think God loves to come round the edge and say, ha, you couldn't have predicted this, could you? A word of prophecy.

Maggie and I had a word of prophecy a couple of years ago. A friend sent us a message out of the blue without the slightest idea of what we were thinking about and what our plans were. And it was right on target for a question that we were wrestling with at the time.

And I emailed him and said, how did you know? He said, I didn't. I just had this strong sense. I had to say this to you now.

So, I mean, this sort of thing does happen and healing happens. Sometimes we pray for healing. We do everything right.

And yet the person does not get better. Maggie and I are wrestling with a dear friend who's very sick at the moment. And we prayed with her and for her the other day, etc.

Other times, extraordinary healing happens. And the person goes back to the doctor who says, I cannot explain this. So I've no doubt that God can do all sorts of extraordinary things and that the Pentecostal churches and the charismatic movement means in his grace of alerting the rest of us to that fact that he is sovereign and he does all kinds of stuff.

How it works, why some people have it and not others. I think we probably shouldn't go too far down that road. Again, it's the humble readiness to be and do whatever we are called to be and do in God's purposes.

That that's the crucial thing. Let's finish with Megan in Denton, Texas. Megan's got a really interesting story here.

She says in college, a group of friends and myself started serving the poor together as a response to what we saw in the gospels. This same group would gather weekly to worship and take communion. We were friends from various churches, but none of us from charismatic churches or with that type of background.

Well, after a couple of years, we began to experience the supernatural spiritual gifts during times of worship, prayer and ministry to each other. Prophecy words of knowledge, healing, discernment and tongues. Like what we read about in scripture, it was a variety of gifts that worked together for our building up because we had no prior experience, expectations or baggage, and because we were friends that trusted each other, we had no reason to doubt the validity of it or be suspicious of one another.

Well, it's 11 years later, and God has continued to show up and surprise us in spiritual ways. And when we seek him with other believers, we've seen transformative and lasting fruit over the years. Many pastors and churches affirm the continuation of these gifts, but not many churches, at least in our circles, seem to place much value on the practice of them.

If spiritual gifts are both biblical and normal, to what extent should we value them within our church bodies and what emphasis should be placed on practicing them? Great questions. And I find that a lovely story because here is this group of people. And as Meghan says, serving the poor together and takes me straight to Matthew 25, in as much as you did it to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.

And it seems to me, Meghan, what you were doing with your friends was precisely ministering to Jesus, that Jesus was there in the faces of these poor people. And if you're meeting Jesus on a regular basis and humbly serving him in the poor people that you're meeting, it doesn't surprise me if his spirit starts to work in whole new ways. Your story is very similar to one that I heard many years ago with the pastor of a church here in Oxford.

I wasn't the church that I went to, but I met him once at some kind of meeting. And he said that on Sunday nights, he was like, he was a Baptist church. He and his wife would sit down after supper and open the Bibles and just discuss prayerfully what had happened in the services during the day.

And then one day they found themselves praying in a whole new way that they weren't expecting and they're a bit worried about it. And basically they hadn't asked for the gift of tongues or any such thing, but it quietly came upon them and gradually that church was shifted into a new mode as a result. And God is sovereign.

God can do all sorts of stuff. So the question then is, yes, I think that's a wonderful tale. What is God now going to do with that? What new dimensions is God adding to the service in that place? And how does that, I would want to say, how does that relate to what other churches are doing within the same area? Because this church, you can't just be an isolated church with no relations to the people down the road.

And if I know anything about different parts of Texas, there's probably big churches on every other street corner. And it would be interesting to know whether this is a gift of something that this group can share with other churches in the area, not to go and say, you should be speaking in tongues, but to say, as we've been serving the poor, we have found Jesus showing up and doing new things with us. Can we get together and work on some other projects where we are looking for the face of Jesus in the faces of the poor and so on? I would put it that way round rather than saying, oh, we've discovered spiritual gifts.

They must be now preached and practiced to in all churches. It seems to me we live in a much more confusing time, a time much more like a garden that is starting to grow and may need weeding sooner or later. But at the moment, we're just enjoying the different plants that are coming up.

And I would say, hallelujah, that's great. Go with it. And you can't predict what emphasis there would be.

And also watch out for the spiritual pride that can come in. Oh, I have this gift or we have these gifts and you don't. That can so easily creep in.

And the sign that it is genuine to the spirit will be the fruit of the spirit as in Galatians 5, love, joy, peace and all the rest, including self control, which comes at the end of that list. And sometimes alas, people get so wildly enthusiastic about the charismatic phenomena that some of the fruit of the spirit just doesn't seem to be appearing. And so we do need a larger balance here.

But I would say thank God for that. Thank God, particularly for that impulse to serve the poor. And that when we do that, actually, Jesus is showing up.

And I was going to say something very similar that I feel like it is very significant that this happened within that context of serving others. And that, of course, the danger always with the charismatic gifts is that there is that danger of chasing after it for itself as though, you know, because we want the high and the joy and everything else. But it always has to be ultimately with the aim of being enabled to serve others.

Yes. And I would say as well, beware, because I know people who maybe in their teens, whatever, have been at a meeting or a camp or something and have spoken in tongues. And I would say quite genuinely spoken in tongues.

But who then seemed to think, well, that's it. I'm kind of on that level now and have then really not bothered about going on reading their Bible and saying their prayers or even go to church. And so just as the danger is, if somebody says a prayer in a meeting at the age of 12 and then are told, well, that's it, you're saved.

You're going to heaven. So nothing you can do can alter that. And then off they drift and have a disastrous life in the same way, just because somebody has genuinely spoken in tongues, that doesn't mean that they can't then make complete mess of the next chunk of their lives.

So it's a call to be then to be further faithful, as it were, rather than, oh, well, you're now on this new level. Therefore, you're OK. Well, I hope that's helped in some way, Megan.

God bless you as you continue in that work you're doing. And as you join with your friends in pursuing God. Thank you, Tom, for your wisdom as well on today's show and look forward to sharing another one with you soon.

Thank you.

[MUSIC] Hope you enjoyed Tom's answers on today's programme. Next time we're tackling your questions on the historicity of the New Testament and even the early church, what goes beyond the New Testament.

So that's our subject next time. Don't forget you can find more from the show at askentiright.com. And you can be in with the chance of winning one of five signed copies of Tom's most recent book, Broken Sign Posts. And all you have to do is make sure you are signed up.

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