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**WESLEY AND CHARISMA:
AN ANALYSIS OF JOHN WESLEY'S
VIEW OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS**

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Abstract

18th century English reformer, John Wesley is one of the most influential figures in the history of Christianity. As a key theological leader behind the first religious awakening (1730-1760) in England and America, Wesley is often credited for setting the stage for the contemporary Charismatic and Pentecostal ideas. This article's purpose is to clarify John Wesley's attitude towards the doctrine of Spiritual Gifts and especially towards the more dynamic charismas such as the gifts of healing, the gift of prophecy, exorcism of evil spirits and speaking with tongues. Especially important for understanding Wesley's thought is his opposition to Calvin's *cessationism*, and the growing trends of rationalistic Deism, which were prominent in his time. At the same time Wesley emphatically challenged what he considered "fanatical" usage of spiritual gifts and charismas both outside and within the Methodist movement.

Keywords: Martin Luther; John Calvin; Philipp Jacob Spener; John Wesley; Methodists; Methodism; Pietism; spiritual gifts; Holy Spirit; speaking in tongues; prophetic gift; prophecy; exorcism; healings.

Introduction

John Wesley belonged to a small group of extraordinary men and women who dared to dramatically modify the world in which they lived. Born and raised in 1700s in Epworth, a small English village, Wesley studied in London and Oxford. He later became an ardent student of the Bible and subsequently a passionate preacher whose sermons and writings changed the approach to religion in England and further through the entire Protestant world. The Methodist movement, of which Wesley was the main founder, introduced a new feature in the 18th century Protestant Christianity. That feature was an emphasis on personal experience of pardon, love, conversion and sanctifying work of God inside of the individual. Methodist combination of pietism, personal holiness and experiential Christianity, also opened the way for the renewal of a long forgotten doctrine of spiritual gifts.

When we speak of spiritual gifts or charismata, we evoke the words of the Apostle Paul: “Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit ... and to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7). According to the teaching of the New Testament the gifts of the spirit represent special capabilities and actions given to all believers through the work of the Holy Spirit for the edification of the body of Christ – Church.¹

This study intends to investigate the importance English reformer John Wesley placed upon the doctrine of spiritual gifts. What part do the gifts and manifestations of the Spirit play in the process of justification and sanctification for Wesley? In addition, this study is to explore whether John Wesley believed in the perpetuity of more dynamic gifts such as prophecy, tongues, healing and so on, and if he did, what was their significance for the life of a Christian?

Views on Spiritual Gifts during the Reformation

John Wesley lived in a milieu in which each Protestant group viewed the gift of the Spirit in a different light. The following section will examine the approaches and the prevailing Protestant views on the ordinary and supernatural gifts of the Spirit prior and during Wesley’s time.

Reformed, Puritan, and Anglican Churches

John Wesley was born in 18th century England dominated by Puritan and Anglican Christians. The English Puritans highly venerated the writings of French Reformer John Calvin, founder of Reformed Protestantism. John Calvin firmly maintained Augustine’s position of cessation of extraordinary gifts holding that direct divine inspiration declined after the completing of Scriptural Canon.² However, Calvin’s denial of spiritual manifestations was actually less rigid than many of his followers in that he held that in un-evangelized areas, supernatural gifts might recur to confirm the Gospel.³

Reformed Churches followed Calvin’s prerogatives on this issue and developed the concept of radical cessationism, which excluded any contemporary contact between man and God other than the Holy Scriptures. This position was partially motivated by the increased use of Catholic miracle stories in their Anti-Protestant polemics.⁴ The anti-supernaturalist tendencies present in the English

¹See 1 Cor 12; Rom 12; and Eph 4:8-11.

²John Calvin, *Institutes*, book I, 14:17; 18:2, book II, 4:5, book IV, 8:6; 9:4.

³Calvin, *Institutes*, book IV, 3:4.

⁴See John Ruthven, *On the Cessation of the Charismata; the Protestant Polemic on Postbiblical Miracles*, in *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, supplement series 3 (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1993), 36.

Puritanism eventually helped create the growth of deistic rationalism and other ideas of non-involvement of God in contemporary affairs of man.⁵

The official Anglican Church, however, never officially adopted Calvinistic position on cessation of spiritual gifts and many Anglican bishops believed in some scarce continuance of miraculous in modern days. Bishop Butler's answer to deists in *Analogy of Religion* argues that one cannot completely understand the laws of nature and therefore there is always room for miraculous and extraordinary revelations.⁶ He reveals the general belief among Anglican clergy that supernatural actions of God can still be displayed in Christian communities although these are not fully understood and therefore cannot be anticipated. Thus, although Anglicans never officially developed the cessationist position, the extraordinary gifts in Anglican Church were not expected nor particularly encouraged.

By the time John Wesley stepped on the scene of public life in England, the "rational religion" in England began to gain serious steam. Extreme skepticism and rationalism came to shape Protestant Orthodoxy, which boldly asserted that nothing happens beyond one's own experience and preconceptions about the nature.

Lutheran, Pietist and Moravian Views of the Spiritual Gifts

Lutheranism, in its inception, was much more open to the supernatural manifestations of the Spirit than the Reformed tradition. One of the major points of Luther's early theological debates was his emphasis on the ability of laity to participate in religious life, to understand scriptures, and to be equal in spiritual matters with the clerics and magistrates. For Luther, the New Testament concept of "priesthood of all believers,"⁷ meant that all Christians are truly "priests" and they ought to minister to others with the gifts of grace God has bestowed on every converted member.⁸ Luther, hence, concluded that "each justified believer might expect to receive one of several other gifts of the Holy Spirit."⁹

While rebuking the fanatical spirits of Zwickau prophets and extreme Spirit-searching of Karlstadt, Luther never denied the extraordinary working of Spirit in his days. He himself claimed spiritual inspiration. "Dear friend, say what you will about the Spirit, I too have been in the Spirit and have seen the Spirit, perhaps

⁵Ibid., 36-39.

⁶Joseph Butler, *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed* (London: John and Paul Knapton, 1736), 186.

⁷See 1 Pet 2:5-9, Rev 1:5, 6; 5:10.

⁸See for example Luther, "Psalm 110" (1535), in *Luther's Works*, 56 vols., ed. H. Lehmann and J. Pelikan (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 13:294, 295 (later abbreviated as *LW*).

⁹Luther, "Selected Psalms," in *LW*, 12:294; Luther, "A Sermon on Keeping Children in School," in *LW* 46:220, 221.

even more of it than those fellows with all their boasting will see in a year."¹⁰ Luther firmly believed that extraordinary gifts are still available in his days. He held that such gifts as healing,¹¹ speaking and interpreting tongues,¹² expelling of demons¹³ and various miracles and signs would come to very devout and pious people.¹⁴

In spite of Luther's emphasis on the gifts of the Spirit, Lutheranism gradually developed a rationalist theology, which was closely related to Calvin's cessationism. This occurred as Lutheran leaders attempted to counter radical Anabaptist emphasis on extraordinary gifts and Catholic claims of miracles. Many fanatical prophets in Germany made Lutheran churches quickly grow weary of extraordinary gifts and charismas.

The 17th century Pietists responded to this marginalization of gifts in Lutheranism by placing more emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit, re-introducing the concept of various Spiritual ministries in the Church. Johan Arndt and Philipp Jacob Spener, in their attempts to revive churches in Germany, often

¹⁰Luther, "To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools," (1524) in *LW* 45:365.

¹¹See Luther, "A Prelude on the Babylonian Captivity of the Church," (1520) in *Works of Martin Luther*, 6 vols., ed. A. J. Holman (Philadelphia: 1915), 2:288, 289. Luther often prayed for the sick and was recorded to heal Melanchthon on one occasion. See *LW* 50:209, n. 17. For more on the attitude of Protestant Reformers towards healing see Ronald K. Rittgers, *The Reformation of Suffering* (Oxford: University Press, 2012), 329, n. 80.

¹²Luther interpreted the "gift of tongues" as the ability to speak Biblical languages and interpret obscure passages of the Scripture. He links this gift closely to the gift of prophecy, which for him represents the ability to defend the Bible truth and interpret scriptures against the heretics and false teachers. See Luther, "Concerning the Order of Public Worship," (1523) in *LW* 53:12; and Luther, "The Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows," (1521) in *LW* 44:323, 324.

¹³Luther closely connected gift of healing with demons expelling. He stated: "Often has it happened, and still does, that devils have been driven out in the name of Christ; also by calling on His name and prayer, the sick have been healed." In his treatise against the papacy: he asserts that repelling of demons is one of the gifts present in the Church of his time. He even states that some are better or more gifted in this ministry than the others. Martin Luther, "Against the Roman Papacy, an Institution of Devil," (1545) in *LW* 41:358.

¹⁴Luther did not deny the possibility of miracles. He states: "In Acts 15, Apostle Paul demonstrated evangelical freedom [of pagans] by the miracles and wonders God had wrought ... when testimonies of Scriptures give no precedent, we must rely on works [miracles] of God and be guided by them in the absence of scriptural testimony." See Luther, "The Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows," (1521) in *LW* 44:377. See also Luther, "Sermon am Auffahrttage," May 29, 1522, in *WA* (*Weimar Edition*), 10, III, 144, 145. However, Luther was very aware of false miracles. He states that extraordinary gifts are not an indication that one has the true faith. See *WA*, 22:182.

referred to various gifts that can serve for missionary purpose and for the edification of the community.¹⁵

Under the leadership of Spener's student, Nicolaus von Zinzendorf, German Pietism experienced considerable growth and revival, reaching international influence. After many years of earnest prayers, an extraordinary outpouring of the Holy Spirit was recorded in 1727. The revival was followed by prophetic gifts, gifts of healing and gifts of speaking foreign languages. This outpouring launched Moravian missionary endeavors to West Indies, America, India, Eastern Africa and other places.¹⁶ Moravian theology and practices directly influenced Methodist brothers John and Charles Wesley especially in the aspect of experiential religion. The Wesley brothers and the other Oxford Methodists welcomed great number of European religious immigrant and refugees, including the Moravians, French Camisards, and Huguenots.

Wesley's Doctrine of the Spiritual Gifts

Early in his life as an Anglican minister, John Wesley hasn't paid much attention to the idea of revival of the apostolic gifts in the Church. It was the conversations with Peter Bohler and other German Pietist, combined with his readings of the Eastern Fathers that slowly begun to shape Wesley's thoughts on the active role of the Holy Spirit in Christian experience.¹⁷

After accepting doctrine of assurance from the Moravian Pietists, Wesley began preaching for an inward conviction of the conversion and the work of the Holy Spirit in individuals. In his *Journal* entry for August 15, 1750, Wesley expresses his belief why the gifts have diminished through the ages.

The cause of this [decline of spiritual gifts following Constantine] was not, (as has been vulgarly supposed,) 'because there was no more occasion for them,' because all the world was become Christians. This is a miserable mistake; not a twentieth part of it was then nominally Christian. The real cause was, 'the love of many,' almost of all Christians, so called, was 'waxed cold.' The Christians had no more of the Spirit of Christ than the other Heathens. The Son of Man, when he came to examine his Church, could hardly 'find faith upon earth.' This was the real cause why the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Ghost were no longer to be found in the

¹⁵Johann Arndt, *True Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 151, 195-199; Philipp Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 13, 89-95.

¹⁶Joseph E. Hutton, *A History of Moravian Missions* (London: Moravian Publication Office, 1922), 78-120. See also Stanley M. Burgess, "Medieval and Modern Western Churches," in *Initial Evidence*, ed. Gary B. McGee (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), 32.

¹⁷For the roots of Wesley's theology see Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (London: Abingdon Press, 1994).

Christian Church; because the Christians were turned Heathens again, and had only a dead form left.¹⁸

The implication is that if a revival of true love and genuine piety manifests today, the gifts and works of the Spirit would naturally spring out as in the early days. Although the “more excellent way” is the way of love, Wesley still insisted that we may “covet earnestly” such gifts as evangelism to “sound the unbelieving heart” or the gift of knowledge to understand both the providence and the grace of God, or the gift of faith “which on particular occasions ... goes far beyond the power of natural causes”¹⁹

Wesley’s assertion on the gifts and manifestations of the Spirit was not merely theoretical. His insistence upon the gifts of the Spirit also stemmed out of the early days of Methodist revival (1739-1759) where many individuals in London, Oxford and Bristol reported supernatural healings, visions, dreams, spiritual impressions, power in evangelizing, extraordinary bestowments of wisdom and so on.²⁰ Wesley held that after justification, the Spirit gives one gift or talent but a sanctified man receives five.²¹ The Methodist movement grew rapidly on the wings of sanctification message, which included the bestowment of Holy Love, fruits and gifts of the Spirit.

Wesley and Spiritual Fanaticism

Wesley admitted that genuine spiritual revival seldom happens without outburst of fanaticism. Fanaticism in the Methodist movement had many facets, going on from simple excitement-seeking attitude, which often resulted in uncontrolled and ecstatic behavior, onto the more elaborate theological departures.

Already in 1739, at the earliest stage of the Methodist revival, Wesley was directed to meet some descendants of French Huguenots who spoke ecstatically in unknown tongues without interpretation and calling it “gift of tongues.” At first, Wesley did not want to hinder their enthusiasm but after several of his members lost taste of religion due to extravagancy of these prophets, Wesley concluded that these individuals were not sent by God and earnestly exhorted “all

¹⁸Wesley, “The More Excellent Way,” (1787) in *Works of the Rev. John Wesley*, 12 vols. (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1872), 7:27 [hereafter referred to as *WRJW*]. See Wesley’s early longings for Fruits of the Holy Spirit in his diary entry of August 12, 1738 in *WRJW* 1:120ff; January 4, 1739 in *WRJW* 1:170-72. See also the entire sermon 4, “Scriptural Christianity,” August 24, 1747, in *WRJW* 5:37-52.

¹⁹Wesley, “The More Excellent Way,” in *WRJW* 7:27.

²⁰Wesley’s Diary, June 16, 1739 in *WRJW* 1:204; August 29, 1746 in *WRJW* 2:22-26; *The Life of the Rev. John Wesley*, in *WRJW* 5:53. See also Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 91, 92, 100.

²¹Wesley, Letter 740, “To My dear Betsy,” June 3, 1774 in *WRJW* 13:77.

that followed after holiness to avoid as fire all who do not speak according “to the law and the testimony.”²²

Wesley especially warned Methodists to not replace personal revelations over the Holy Scripture. He said: “No, nor by any dreams, visions, or revelations supposed to be made to their souls, anymore than by their tears or any involuntary effects wrought upon their bodies.” The only certain test for Wesley was the test of “the law and the testimony” a reference to Isaiah 8:20, which he interpreted as a description of God’s Word.²³

Although Wesley was clearly in favor of manifestation of the Spirit, he did not renounce correcting the fanatics within his ranks. Wesley has seen those practices as counterfeit of the true work of God. One of the greatest trials for Wesley was the fanaticism introduced by two prominent Methodist ministers Thomas Maxwell and George Bell. Maxfield and Bell took the doctrine of sanctification to extremes. They claimed that the perfected Christian lived a life of angelic sinlessness on earth. Heitzenrater writes: “Their view led to a dangerous combination of assertive infallibility and blatant antinomianism; people began to imagine that they would not die or that they were immune from temptation. Some, like Bell, also began to practice faith-healing and speaking in tongues.”²⁴ Many other congregations followed them in their extremes. Here is the report Wesley received from the enthusiasts of William Williams:

It is common in the congregations attended by Mr. William Williams and one or two other clergymen, after the preaching is over, for anyone that has a mind to give out a verse of an hymn. This they sing over and over with all their might, perhaps above thirty, yea, forty times. Meanwhile the bodies of two or three, sometimes ten or twelve, are violently agitated, and they leap up and down, in all manner of postures, frequently for hours together.²⁵

This is how Wesley commented on this experience:

I think there needs no great penetration to understand this. They are honest, upright men, who really feel the love of God in their hearts. But they have little experience, either of the ways of God or the devices of Satan. So he serves himself

²²Wesley’s Diary of June 22, 1739 in *WRJW* 1:205, 206.

²³Ibid. On May 9, 1740 Wesley noted in his journal: “I was a little surprised at some who were buffeted of Satan in an unusual manner, by such a spirit of laughter as they could in no wise resist, though it was pain and grief unto them” (*WRJW* 1:271, 272). In his journal entry for May 21, 1740 Wesley again recorded some outburst of uncontrolled laughter, which he clearly connected, with the working of devil. See *WRJW* 1:272. See also October 25, 1739 in *WRJW* 1:236.

²⁴Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 209, 210.

²⁵Wesley’s Diary, August 27, 1763 in *WRJW* 3:137.

of their simplicity, in order to wear them out and to bring a discredit on the work of God.²⁶

Even in his older days, Wesley was reminiscent of his dislike of fanaticism he had witnessed all along his ministry. In his Journal on April 3, 1786, he reports several sorts of fanatic behavior he witnessed through his life. Although disagreeing with these practices, Wesley believes the fanatics should not be corrected harshly but with gentleness and love. He writes:

Satan strive to push many to extravagance. This appears in several instances. (1) Frequently three or four, yea, ten or twelve, pray aloud all together. (2) Some of them, perhaps many, scream all together as loud as they possibly can. (3) Some of them use improper, yea, indecent expressions in prayer. (4) Several drop down as dead and are as stiff as a corpse, but in a while they start up and cry, Glory! Glory! perhaps twenty times together. Just so did the French Prophets, and very lately the Jumpers in Wales, bring the real work into contempt. Yet whenever we reprove them, it should be in the most mild and gentle manner possible.²⁷

Wesley and Ordinary Gifts

Despite many obvious outbursts of fanaticism John Wesley has never renounced his faith in genuine work of the Holy Spirit. He firmly maintained that the Spiritual gifts are a natural consequence of genuine holiness and dwelling of God's Spirit in a man. Wesley never placed a special emphasis on any gift in particular. In contrary, he esteemed the ordinary gifts on the same level of importance as more dynamic and supernatural charismas. Consequently, Wesley often mentions the importance of ordinary gifts such as music, preaching, teaching, service, wisdom, counseling and other "common gifts" bestowed on Christians.²⁸

In his notes on 1 Cor. 12 Wesley defines the gift of wisdom as "a power of understanding and explaining the manifold wisdom of God in the grand scheme of gospel salvation" while the gift of knowledge is described by him as "an extraordinary ability to understand and explain the Old Testament types and prophecies". Wesley maintained that the *gift of faith* differs from a general faith

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Wesley's Diary, April 3, 1786 in *WRJW* 3:329. How Wesley treated fanaticism is seen in a letter to his brother Charles, written in 1762: "This week I have begun to speak my mind concerning five or six honest enthusiasts. But I move only a hair's breadth at a time. No sharpness will profit. There is need of a lady's hand, as well as a lion's heart." See Letter 62, January 5, 1762 in *WRJW* 12:122, 123.

²⁸Gift of speech – "The More Excellent Way" in *WRJW* 7:27. Gift of teaching and gift of knowledge – Letter 704, "Letter to Miss Bishop," September 1, 1771, *WRJW* 13:22, 23.

given to all believers. The special gift of faith is as Wesley puts it “an extraordinary trust in God under the most difficult or dangerous circumstances.”²⁹

Although particularly encouraging the use of so called “ordinary gifts”³⁰ and often rebuking fanatics for their charismatic claims and behaviors, Wesley did not minimize the usefulness of more extraordinary gifts and manifestations of the Spirit.

Wesley and Extraordinary Gifts

In his life, Wesley experienced many extraordinary activities of the Spirit that he considered to be genuine. In the earliest days of the revival of Fetter-Lane Society, Wesley records that the revival started with an extraordinary outpouring of the Spirit on the entire congregation. He remembers that it is in that day he had repented from unbelief in manifestations of God’s Spirit. Here are his words:

We met at Fetter-Lane to humble ourselves before God ... we acknowledged our having grieved him ... by blaspheming his work among us, imputing it either to nature, to the force of imagination and animal spirits, or even to the delusions of devil. In that hour we found God with us as at the first. Some fell prostrate upon the ground. Others burst out, as with one consent, into loud praise and thanksgiving.³¹

Since that moment on, Wesley never doubted the extraordinary workings of the Spirit. A letter written to deist scholar Conyers Middleton is Wesley’s most definitive statement on the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Wesley here lists the various extraordinary gifts that he expects to see revived in any age that manifests the true faith and love. These are some extraordinary gifts Wesley considered useful for the evangelizing: “1. Casting out devils; 2. Speaking with new tongues; 3. Escaping dangers, in which otherwise they must have perished; 4. Healing the sick; 5. Prophecy, foretelling things to come; 6. Visions; 7. Divine dreams; and, 8. Discerning of spirits.”³² In the following pages, we shall analyze Wesley’s view of four extraordinary gifts – Prophecy, Tongues, Healing and Exorcism.

Gift of Prophecy, Visions and Dreams

In his ministry Wesley encountered an unusual number of persons who claimed special revelations and visions. Many, according to Wesley were simply over-

²⁹See Wesley’s notes on 1 Cor 12:9 in John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (London: 1757), 457.

³⁰See Sermon 4, “On Christianity” in WRJW 5:37-52; Sermon 89, “The More Excellent Way,” WRJW 7:27.

³¹Wesley’s Diary, June 16, 1739 in WRJW 1:204.

³²Wesley, “A Letter to the Rev. Dr. Conyers Middleton,” January 4, 1749 in WRJW 10:21.

enthusiastic but in some instances Wesley found prophetic revelations and special visions to be genuine and full of holy love. One of the individuals who gained Wesley's confidence as having genuine visions from God was Ann Thorn. This is what Wesley recorded concerning Ann Thorn.

I talked largely with Ann Thorn, and two others who had been several times in trances. What they all agreed in was 1. That when they went away, as they termed it, it was always at the time they were fullest of the love of God; 2. That it came upon them in a moment, without any previous notice, and took away all their senses and strength; 3. That there were some exceptions; but in general, from that moment, they were in another world, knowing nothing of what was done or said, by all that were round about them.³³

In the case of Ann Thorn, Wesley seems to accept her revelations as genuine. Sometimes, Wesley tested the prophets with some physical motions as in the case of Alice Miller. After he was convinced in their genuineness, he would question them what was the content of their visions. Here is one such account:

About five in the afternoon I heard them singing hymns. Soon after Mr. B. came up and told me, Alice Miller (fifteen years old) was fallen into trance. I went down immediately, and found her sitting on a stool and leaning against the wall, with her eyes opened and fixed upward. I made a motion as if going to strike; but they continued immovable. Her face showed an unspeakable mixture of reverence and love ... in about half an hour I observed her countenance change into the form of fear, pity and distress ... and silent tears stole down her cheeks ... about seven her sense returned. I asked: "where have you been?" "I have been with the Savior" ... "Why then did you cry?" "Not for myself, but for the world; for I saw they were on the brink of hell." Whom did you desire to give glory to God?" "Ministers that cry aloud to the world; Else they will be proud; and then God will leave them, and they will lose their own souls."³⁴

One of the greatest uses of visions and dreams from God for Wesley was the power to convert both individuals who experience it and the individuals who hear the testimony of this powerful experience. Here are his comments:

I have seen ...very many persons changed in a moment from the spirit of despair to the spirit of love, joy and peace, and from sinful desire, till then reigning over them, to a pure desire of doing the will of God. ... What I have to say touching visions and dreams, is this: I know several persons in whom this great change was wrought in a dream, or during a strong representation to the eye of their mind, of Christ either on the cross, or in glory. This is the fact.³⁵

³³Wesley's Diary, August 6, 1759 in *WRJW* 2:509.

³⁴*Ibid.* See also Wesley's account of the seven-year old child who had many visions "astonishing the neighbours with her innocent, awful manner of declaring them." See Diary, June 14, 1759 in *WRJW* 2:499.

³⁵Wesley's Diary, May 20, 1739 in *WRJW* 1:195.

Another use for prophetic gift is foretelling of future, which is beneficial for the entire community.³⁶ Close to the prophetic spirit, Wesley placed the ability to discern the spirits. In his notes on 1 Corinthians 12, Wesley mentions the “gift of discernment” which according to him represents ability to know “whether men be of an upright spirit or not; whether they have natural or supernatural gifts for offices in the church; and whether they who profess to speak by inspiration speak from a divine, a natural, or a diabolical spirit.”³⁷

Although Wesley never prohibited extraordinary revelations, he did not trust every spirit. On one occasion, Wesley wrote: “Trust not in visions and dreams; in sudden impressions, or strong impulse of any kind. Remember, it is not by these you are to know what is the will of God on any particular occasion; but by applying the plain scripture rule, with the help of experience and reason, and the ordinary assistance of the Spirit of God.”³⁸

In his sermon touching the enthusiasm of Methodists, Wesley admits genuine visions and dreams are not so frequent.³⁹ Wesley was firm that all personal revelations have to be in strict accordance with the Word of God.

Gift of Healing

In response to Middleton's insistence that no “miraculous healing” had ever been proved, Wesley responded:

Sir, I understand you well ... after all this talk about miraculous cures, we are not sure there were ever any in the world. But it will do no harm. For although we grant, that some recover, even in seemingly desperate cases; and, that we do not know, in any case, the precise bounds between nature and miracle; yet it does not follow, therefore, I cannot be assured there ever was a miracle of healing in the world. To explain this by instance: I do not precisely know how far nature may go in healing, that is restoring sight of the blind; yet this I assuredly know, that if a man born blind is restored to sight by a word, this is not nature, but miracle.⁴⁰

Wesley was not claiming the perpetuity of the gift of healing in theory only, he experienced it personally. In his explanatory notes of the Bible, for the passage of Mark 16: 17, Wesley records one of his experiences at the town of Leonberg, where a crippled was healed through the preaching of this text.⁴¹

³⁶See Wesley on 1 Cor 13:2 and 14:6 in *Explanatory Notes*, 459, 461.

³⁷See Wesley on 1 Cor 12:9 in *Explanatory Notes*, 457.

³⁸*Ibid.*, sec. 38.

³⁹“I do not deny that God has of old times, manifested his will in this manner; or that he can do so now; Nay, I believe he does, in some very rare instances.” See Wesley, Sermon 37, “On The Nature of Enthusiasm” in *WRJW* 5:473.

⁴⁰Wesley, “Letter to Middleton “in *WRJW* 10:22.

⁴¹Wesley on Mark 16:17 in *Explanatory Notes*, 138.

In another instance, Wesley shares an experience of extraordinary healing which happened before hundreds of witnesses in Cornwall. John Trebble, a crippled man who for sixteen years was obliged to walk on his hands because his legs were paralyzed, was restored to health through an encounter with an angel in his dream. Wesley writes in a short report: "I took a strict examination in my last visitation. ... he was suddenly so restored to his limbs that I saw him able to walk and get his own maintenance."⁴²

Wesley was a full believer in healing by prayer. He prayed many times for his own recovery and recorded that God healed him from many infirmities in his life. Wesley describes one of his healings in this way: "In the evening, at the chapel, my teeth pained me much. In coming home, Mr. Spear gave me an account of the rupture he had for some years, which, after the most eminent physicians had declared it incurable, was perfectly cured in a moment. I prayed with submission to the will of God. My pain ceased, and returned no more."⁴³

In the early days of Methodist Revival, Wesley records having experienced great power in praying for sick. Almost all of those who were visited by Wesley were restored to health. Some even claimed to experience supernatural healing with nothing but only touching Wesley's clothes.⁴⁴ Wesley reported: "I visited several of the sick. Most of them were ill of the spotted fever; which, they informed me, had been extremely mortal; few persons recovering from it. But God had said: 'Hitherto shalt thou come.' I believe there was not one with whom we were, but recovered."⁴⁵

All throughout his ministry, Wesley experienced countless healings through prayer. In December 25, 1742, Wesley prayed for a man on his deathbed that recovered before the prayer was done.⁴⁶ In October 16, 1778, a woman who was sick for seven months immediately recovered after he visited her and prayed for her.⁴⁷ Wesley found one incident (the miraculous healing of breast cancer) especially intriguing:

December 26, 1761, I made a particular inquiry into the case of Mary Special, a young woman then in Tottenham-Court-Road. She said: 'Four years since I found much pain in my breasts, and afterwards hard lumps. Four months ago my left breast broke, and kept running continually. Growing worse and worse, after some time I was recommended to St. George's hospital. I was let blood many times, and took hemlock thrice a day; But it was no better; the pain and the lumps were the

⁴²Wesley, "An Extraordinary Cure" in *WRJW* 11:511.

⁴³Wesley's Diary, November 12, 1746 in *WRJW* 2: 34. See also Wesley's self-healing on March 21, 1741 in *WRJW* 1:304.

⁴⁴Wesley's Diary, May 31, 1785 in *WRJW* 4:20.

⁴⁵Wesley's Diary, November 16, 1740 in *WRJW* 1:291.

⁴⁶Wesley's Diary, December 20, 25, 1742 in *WRJW* 1:405, 406.

⁴⁷Wesley's Diary, October 16, 1778 in *WRJW* 4:139.

same, and both of my breasts were quite hard and black as soot; when yesterday se'n-night, I went to Mr. Owen's, where there was a meeting for prayer. Mr. Bell saw me and asked "Have you faith to be healed? I said 'Yes'. He prayed for me and in a moment all my pain was gone. But the next day I felt a little pain again. I clapped my hands on my breasts and cried out 'Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me whole.' It was gone and from that hour I have had no pain, no soreness, no lumps or swelling, but both my breasts were perfectly well, and have been ever since.⁴⁸

Wesley then gives his conclusion: "Now here are plain facts. 1. She was ill: 2. She is well: 3. She became so in a moment. Which of these can with any modesty be denied?"⁴⁹

It is important to note that Wesley did not articulate the belief that one person has perpetual ability to heal under any circumstance. It is the compassion and faith expressed through prayer and supplication that will allow God to heal. Healing happens only if God considers it beneficial to restore someone. Wesley doesn't explore whether one can have a special charisma of "miraculous healing". For Wesley, healing seems to be an occasional blessing. All we may employ is our love for a person and faith in power of God and let God do the rest.⁵⁰

Casting out Devils

In his sermon, "A Caution Against Bigotry", Wesley attempted to set the biblical and theological stage for "casting out devils." He writes, "In order to have the clearest view of this, we should remember, that (according to the scriptural account) as God dwells and works in the children of light so the devil dwells and works in the children of darkness. As the Holy Spirit possesses the souls of good men, so the evil spirit possesses the souls of the wicked."⁵¹

As with the gift of healing, regarding the expelling and casting of demonic forces, Wesley makes reference both to Scripture and experience. As he does with regard to all of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, Wesley responds to Middleton on the subject of "deliverance" openly and plainly: "The testimonies concerning this are out of number, and as plain as words can make them. To show, therefore, that all these signify nothing, and that there were never any devils cast out at all, neither

⁴⁸Wesley's Diary, December 26, 1761 in *WRJW* 3:352, 353.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 553.

⁵⁰Wesley did not neglect the need for natural healing through the medical knowledge available to man. In his notes on 1 Cor 12 he comments: "The gift of healing need not be wholly confined to the healing diseases with a word or a touch. It may exert itself also, though in a lower degree, where natural remedies are applied; and it may often be this, not superior skill, which makes some physicians more successful than others. And thus it may be with regard to other gifts likewise." See Wesley on 1 Cor 12: 9 in *Explanatory Notes*, 457.

⁵¹Sermon 38, "A Caution Against Bigotry," (1746) in *WRJW* 5.

by the Apostles, nor since the Apostles, (for the argument proves both or neither,) is a task worthy of you”⁵²

Middleton’s argument was that “those who were said to be possessed of the devil, may have been ill of the falling sickness ... the ordinary symptoms of an epilepsy.” As for the “evidence of devils speaking and answering to all questions,” Middleton simply shrugs. He accounts for these “by the arts of imposture, and contrivance between the persons concerned in the act.” Wesley’s reply is straightforward: “is not this something extraordinary, that men in epileptic fits should be capable of so much art and contrivance?”⁵³

Wesleyan scholar Daniel Jennings counts sixteen cases of demoniac possession recorded in Wesley’s literary opus.⁵⁴ During one of his first contacts with the demoniac possession, which happened in the fall of 1739 at Bristol, Wesley admitted to be afraid and not willing to confront the possessed girl but prayed from distance. After a while, it was reported to him that a demon has left.⁵⁵ Two days later, as Wesley was called to pray for one unusual sick in Kingswood, he showed little more faith and courage. The account follows:

I was sent for to Kingswood again, to one of those who had been so ill before... When I was come, I was quite cold and dead, and fitter for sleep than prayer. She burst out into a horrid laughter, and said, “No power, no power; no faith, no faith. She is mine; her soul is mine. I have her, and will not let her go.” We begged of God to increase our faith. Meanwhile her pangs increased more and more; so that one would have imagined, by the violence of the throes, her body must have been shattered to pieces. One who was clearly convinced this was no natural disorder, said, “I think Satan is let loose. I fear he will not stop here.” And added, “I command thee, in the name of the Lord Jesus, to tell if thou hast commission to torment any other soul?” It was immediately answered, “I have. L—y C—r, and S—h J—s.” (Two who lived at some distance, and were then in perfect health.) We betook ourselves to prayer again; and ceased not, till she began, about six o’clock, with a clear voice, and composed, cheerful look, — Praise God, from whom all blessings flow.⁵⁶

In *An Answer to A Report*, dated September 12, 1782, Wesley states that he was fully persuaded, that all the circumstances of demonic possession he related were literally and punctually true.⁵⁷ All the way throughout his ministry, Wesley

⁵²Wesley, “Letter to Middleton,” (1759) in *WRJW* 10:41.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 31, 32.

⁵⁴See Daniel R. Jennings, *The Supernatural Occurrences of John Wesley* (Oklahoma City: Sean Multimedia, 2005), 8-37.

⁵⁵See the entire account in Wesley’s Diary, October 25, 1739 in *WRJW* 1:236. Wesley’s very first encounter of demoniac possession happened two weeks earlier in October 12, 1739, where after prayer a mad woman poured out sounds of praise to God.

⁵⁶Wesley’s Diary, October 27, 1739 in *WRJW* 1:236, 237.

⁵⁷Wesley, *An Answer to A Report*, September 12, 1782 in *WRJW* 11:503.

experienced that through faith and a full measure of the Holy Spirit, demons usually flee from their victims who on their turn experience a miraculous change of character, praising and worshiping God who provided the deliverance.

Speaking in Tongues

Although there is no record that Wesley himself ever spoke in tongues, there is evidence that he believed that this gift of the Holy Spirit was a legitimate gift for the Church of any age. I offer but two quotations from his letter to Middleton. In response to Middleton, Wesley writes:

Since the Reformation, you say, "This gift has never once been heard of. . . Sir, your memory fails you again: It has undoubtedly been pretended to, and that at no great distance either from our time or country. It has been heard of more than once, no farther off than the valleys of Dauphiny. Nor is it yet fifty years ago since the Protestant inhabitants of those valleys so loudly pretended to this and other miraculous powers, as to give much disturbance to Paris itself. And how did the King of France confute that pretense, and prevent its being heard any more? Not by the pen of his scholars, but by (a truly heathen way) the swords and bayonets of his dragoons."⁵⁸

In the area of the Cevennes, the French Protestants, called "Camisards," claimed direct inspiration by the Holy Spirit. Their religious "enthusiasm" as well as their political resistance made them special targets of the king's wrath.⁵⁹ The "small prophets of Cevenne Mountains" as they were called, spoke and preached miraculously in foreign and unknown languages. Wesley used the example of Camisards to prove the point that the supernatural gifts can still be bestowed in this day and age.

Camisards believed in the perpetuity of spiritual gifts, quoting the prophecy of "latter rain" in Joel (3: 1), which they anticipated to be accomplished in their days.⁶⁰ Under the severe persecution, Camisards fled to England, where their charismatic practices soon came under the suspicion of their conservative

⁵⁸Wesley, "Letter to Conveys Middleton" in *WRJW* 10:55, 56.

⁵⁹Constituted mostly of peasants, Camisards resisted the attempts of Louis XIV to convert them to Roman Catholicism. Many were imprisoned, tortured, and martyred. See Gehrard von Polenz, "Camisards," in *Religious Encyclopedia*, ed. by Philipp Schaff, 4 vols. (New York: Funk & Wagnall's Co., 1891), 1:375, 376.

⁶⁰Camisards found historical roots by developing an interesting view of church history, tracing their movement back to Waldensians. See John Lacy, *A Cry from the Desert* (London: n.p., 1708), v, vi. Another phenomenon which occurred frequently among the Camisards was the ability of infants who could not yet speak to deliver discourses in perfect, fluent French. See *ibid.*, 15, 137; Catherine Randall, *Camisards and Huguenots* (Athens: University of Georgia, 2011), 58.

Anglican neighbors. Upon their arrival to England, they entered in connection with Wesleyan Methodist movement.⁶¹

Wesley rejected the prophetic inspiration of some descendants of the French Camisards that immigrated to England. However, he believed that the original Camisards, persecuted for their faith in South of France in 1670s did experience authentic Spirit of prophecy and spoke in tongues they never learned. Wesley also mentions the account of early Church Father Irenaeus of Lyons who mentions many Christians in his time “speaking with all kinds of tongues, and expounding the mysteries of God.”⁶²

It is reported that Wesley’s and Whitefield’s powerful sermons were occasionally followed by speaking in tongues.⁶³ This practice was most commonly experienced among American Methodists. Although, Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), one of the main instigators of the First Great Awakening in America, was very hesitant to accept many of these ecstatic practices,⁶⁴ the awakening reunions abounded with exuberant exhibitions, such as spiritual prostration, visions, rolling, shouting, and occasional manifestations of speaking with unknown tongues.⁶⁵

Opponents of the Awakening compared the spiritual manifestations among American revivalists with those of the French Prophets.⁶⁶ However, neither infidelity from within nor great opposition from without was to turn Methodism away from this emphasis. Neither Fletcher nor Wesley esteemed that Speaking with Tongues is an equivalent to the baptism of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁷ Wesley agrees with Paul that this gift may be given but to some rare believers quoting 1 Corinthians 12: 30 “Were all workers of miracles? Had all the gifts of healing? Did all speak with tongues?”⁶⁸

⁶¹Polenz, “Camisards,” 376.

⁶²“Letter to Middleton,” *WRJW* 10:60; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.6.1 in *ANF* 1:771.

⁶³Lynn Bridgers, *American Religious Experience: A Concise History* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 8.

⁶⁴Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affection* (1746), re-edited by James Crissy (Philadelphia: 1821), 175, 431, 432.

⁶⁵Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton: University Press, 1999), 13-44.

⁶⁶See, for example, Charles Chauncy’s tract *A Faithful Account of the French Prophets, Their Agitations, Extasies and Inspiration* (Glasgow: 1742).

⁶⁷Methodist leader in United States, John Fletcher (1729-1785) reported of cases of individuals moved by the Holy Spirit “speaking tongues of man and angels.” For Fletcher believers were often not rooted in faith. See John Fletcher, *Works*, 2 vols. (London: Thomas Alman, 1836), 1:127. For Fletcher, tongues are not a proof of conversion. See *ibid.*, 1:593.

⁶⁸Wesley, Sermon 4, “On Scriptural Christianity” in *WRJW* 5:38.

Wesley did not elaborate quite a lot on the issue of xenolalia and glossolalia. His notes on 1 Corinthians 14, however seem to indicate that he did not expect believers to speak in unintelligible or angelic languages. Commenting on Paul's words "though I speak with the languages of man and angels", Wesley commented that Paul is talking about speaking languages "which are upon earth, and with the eloquence of an angel."⁶⁹ Further Wesley adds: "I will not act so absurdly, as to utter in a congregation what can edify none but myself."⁷⁰ Briefly, for Wesley, if the Spirit would impress a person to speak in an unknown tongue, this should always be an earthly language, which would need an interpretation in order for congregation to understand.

Although he never claimed this charisma; John Wesley argued that the gift of tongues can be displayed in his day and he, for his part, believed that it had authentic existence in other post-Apostolic centuries. He, however, warned against the "false enthusiast", imposing the test of Scripture and good fruits on all who claim divine inspiration.⁷¹

Summary and Conclusion

The gifts of the Spirit combined with the doctrine of priesthood of all believers were one of the main axioms of early Reformation. However, later writings of the Lutheran and Reformed traditions neglected both the idea of the priesthood of all believers and of the perpetuity of Spiritual gifts, thus minimizing experiential aspects of the Christian religion.

Wesley's break with *cessationism* is variously interpreted today. Some claim that Wesley set the stage for the practices of the modern Charismatic movement. Others argue that Wesley's emphasis on Spiritual gifts and implication of laity in the spiritual affairs was just a marginal note in his theology of holy life. As usual, the truth is somewhere in the middle.

Wesley saw the gifts of the Spirit as a natural part of Christian experience connecting it with the doctrine of sanctification. For him, the lack or rarity of manifestations of the Spirit during long centuries of Christian dispensation was due to the declining spiritual life of the Church. In essence, the love of many "grew cold". Wesley's focal desire was to restore the piety and love of early Christians through indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. Experience of spiritual assurance, fruits of the Spirit, gifts and even supernatural manifestations of the Spirit were for Wesley, a natural consequence of God's power among true Christians, working for the edification of the saints and the spreading of the Gospel.

⁶⁹Wesley on 1 Cor 13:1 in *Explanatory Notes*, 459.

⁷⁰Wesley on 1 Cor 14:15 in *Explanatory Notes*, 461.

⁷¹Taves, *Fits, Trances and Visions*, 19.

It is important to note that although Wesley saw extraordinary gifts as a legitimate Christian experience, his treatment of gifts was different in regards to the blessing of assurance and the fruits of the Spirit. While he *actively* sought for spiritual assurance and for the fruits of Spirit (love, peace, meekness and so on), Wesley was more *passive* in expecting the manifestations of gifts of the Spirit. His main argument in regards to the gifts was that “they are available for Christians today” but he never made it a matter of doctrine to receive them, as it was the case with fruits of the Spirit or the assurance of the justification.

Because of the efforts of Wesley and other Methodist leaders, a great number of contemporary Christians today are convinced that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are just as relevant today as they were in the days of the apostles. However, many modern *perpetualists* have departed from Wesley in their belief that one is to *pursue* particular gifts of the Spirit. In many post-Wesleyan churches of “holiness tradition,” the gifts are often not merely humbly awaited but aggressively pursued. Some congregations even relegate Christians without apparent extraordinary gift to the category of “secondary believers.”

On the other side of the spectrum, some churches are increasingly hesitant to accept any supernatural manifestations – such as healings or prophecies – as genuine. Though Wesley opposed counterfeit gifts and fanatical manifestations, he never departed from his belief that God bestows gifts in his day and age. For Wesley, rejecting all the gifts (assuming some are not genuine) would lead to loosing special blessings of God.

Unfortunately, as Wesley noted, people often tend to fall into either one of two camps when it comes to the miraculous. They will either “regard extraordinary circumstances too much...as if these were essential to the inward work” or they will “regard them too little, to condemn them altogether”⁷²

In conclusion, it is clear that Wesley believed in continuance of gifts, charismas and special revelations. They are useful for edifying the church, impressing and converting souls to Christ and for foretelling future events. However, these do not serve the purpose of establishing the faith and doctrine. For Wesley, the basis of faith and doctrine is the sure Word of God; personal experience is on the second level only. The over-zealousness regarding spiritual charismas and extraordinary manifestations of the Spirit is not just a modern phenomenon. Wesley and other Methodists also experienced a number of over-enthusiastic and fanatical groups who took the spiritual gifts and the doctrine of sanctification too far altogether.

Today, just as in Wesley’s time, prophetic revelations, miraculous healings, unknown tongues, and other miracles are either over-zealously sought for or, on the other side, suspiciously shunned and avoided. Adventism is not immune from these two extremes. Ellen White, co-founder of the Seventh-day Adventist movement, herself a former Methodist, argued that one of the main goals of the devil is to create fanaticism so that he can make believers afraid of the Holy Spirit

⁷²Wesley’s Diary, November 25, 1759 in *WRJW* 2:519.

and reject the Spiritual gifts altogether.⁷³ She wrote: “In every age, seasons of spiritual revival and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit have been followed by spiritual darkness and prevailing corruptions”.⁷⁴

Let us, therefore, as Paul and Wesley, remain on the firm ground of the Holy Scriptures. While we seek godly lives, “perfecting our holiness” (1 Cor 7:1) let us not “quench the Spirit” (1 Thess 5:20) but test all the gifts and experiences through the lenses of the Word of God with fervent prayer. We are promised that an emphasis on studying the Scripture, prayer and earnest (non-legalistic) personal piety will shortly clear the way for genuine “latter rain” when “all flesh shall prophecy” (Joel 2:28) and the gospel shall be preached to “all tongues, peoples and nations” and then shall the end come (Matt 24:14).

⁷³She wrote: “If Satan sees that the Lord is blessing His people and preparing them to discern his delusions, he will work with his master power to bring in fanaticism on the one hand and cold formalism on the other, that he may gather in a harvest of souls.” See Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 3 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1958, 1980), 2:19; cf. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 9 vols. (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1948), 1:230.

⁷⁴Ellen G. White, Manuscript 45, 1893, printed in *Selected Messages*, 1:129, 130.