

## Are We Making Music or Noise?

*Pursuing the Incarnation in Our Personal Lives* by Pastor Marty

My Sophomore year in college, there was a guy on my floor who was very committed to his relationship with the Lord. He would read the Bible seriously and pray intensely, and he was active in his church. I do not want to give the impression that he was a work-oriented Christian, however, for that is not the case; he was very committed to living a life of character. In fact, the thing that I remember most about him was his desire to truly love other people. I only recall one time when his flesh got the better of him and broke through the aura of patience, kindness, and he that regularly surrounded him. It was during a conversation he was having with me. You see, I was not secretive about being Charismatic—almost to the point of being Pentecostal. I was also a bit naïve. When people said they wanted all they could get of God, I understood it to mean they wanted anything they did not already have. The one thing that seemed to be missing in his life was power, so with the best of intentions, I asked if he knew about the gifts of the Spirit. I was shocked at how quickly he “lost his cool” over the subject. In a voice that was quickly increasing in volume, he exclaimed that “love is a more excellent way!” I agreed that love was the most important thing, but I asked why it had to be an “either-or” choice. I suggested the gifts of the spirit would just be “another way to love people.” He did not see it that way at all.

*When people say they want all they can get of God, it doesn't always mean “all.”*

Personally, I find the whole doctrine of Cessationism to be confusing. On the one hand, the Church went through several centuries in which miracles happened so rarely that it is understandable why some assumed the gifts of the Spirit no longer happened. In actuality, there was never a time period over the last two millennia when the gifts were not operating somewhere, but they were no longer common among believers. Therefore, the teachers and theologians decided that the main purpose of miracles was to prove the truth of the gospel until the Bible was written, so the age of miracles ended with the apostles. On the other hand, the divine healing movement of the nineteenth century and the Pentecostal movement of the twentieth century provided ample evidence beyond any reasonable doubt that miracles still occur. However, we human beings often see only what we want to see. A doctrine can be a glorious thing, but it can also be a dangerous thing. Doctrines formed and founded on Scripture are safeguards against heresy, but doctrines based on personal experience—no matter how widespread they may be—can be very dangerous things indeed.

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Proponents of Cessationism usually argue that the gifts of the Spirit are no longer a part of the Church. They either do not believe that miracles happen at all or believe they are statistical anomalies, occurring under God's

sovereign activity, independent of any human agency. In essence, a miracle is equivalent to winning a spiritual lottery. However, my friend did not argue that we should love without miracles because miracles do not take place but that we should love instead of miracles because miracles detract from love. We can do miracles, or we can love people; we cannot do both. We have to make a choice. It is “either-or” and not both. We can only give one thing, and because “the greatest of these is love,” we should obviously give love. Alternately, humans can only give 100%, so we have to allocate our resources wisely. We can try giving 50% love and 50% miracle, but if love better, then we clearly would not be giving our very best.

***We can love people, and we can do miracles; can we find a way to do both?***

When we read the Gospels, we find some interesting characters portrayed there. One of the more interesting persons went by the name “Jesus.” This Jesus made some pretty significant claims, such as “I do only the things I see the Father doing,” or “he who has seen me has seen the Father,” or even “I and the Father are one.” If we accept what Jesus said, then we are faced with some substantial ramifications. Jesus not only did miracles but spent more time doing miracles than teaching and preaching. If He only did what He saw the Father doing, then it was also the Father doing miracles. Scripture states that God is love, and if God and Jesus are one, then Jesus must also be love. Therefore, love was doing miracles. Jesus was not being contrary, and he was not loving people halfway. Perfect love healed the sick, raised the dead, cast out demons, and stilled the storm.

***Perfect love cast out demons, healed the sick, raised the dead, & stilled the storm.***

Of course, we recognize that there are some very unique things about Jesus: born of a virgin, creating the cosmos, being one essence with the Father, redeeming all of creation, etc. However, miracles as an expression of love are NOT one of those unique things. We know this because he empowered the disciples to do the same things—and to do them in love. Still, we have to address the issue presented in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. He confirmed in the beginning of the letter that they were not lacking in any of the charismata, the spiritual gifts. Nevertheless, as even a cursory reading reveals, they were not the most loving group of people, and it is at the end of the very chapter on the spiritual gifts that Paul describes “a more excellent way.” As we know, the more excellent way is described as love. Also, it is in this chapter on love that Paul explains that the gifts are only here until the perfect comes. This almost seems to indicate that spiritual gifts are impediments to real love. However, there are a few reasons why this is not the case. First, Paul defines the “perfect coming” as seeing God face-to-face and knowing Him fully. Although God’s Word is certainly perfect, it is not the “perfect” Paul is describing here. Second, he commands us NOT to choose one instead of the other. While the beginning of the love passage denounces the gifts without love, he concludes by the command, “pursue love **yet earnestly desire** spiritual gifts.” In this context, Paul is describing the best way to use the gifts—not what to do instead of the gifts. His command is for a “both-and” instead of an “either-or.”

***Paul commands a “both-and” instead of an “either-or” view of love and the gifts.***

If this premise is true, then love is most complete with the gifts, and the gifts operate best in love. However, we clearly know—from personal experience and from Scripture—it is possible to have one without the other, and of the two, love is the most important. As such, we should strive for love more than we strive for anything else. Nevertheless, we are commanded to eagerly desire spiritual gifts. If love is more important than the gifts, why are we commanded to pursue them? It is because the nature of the gifts is to serve others. When the gifts of healing are in operation, it is for the sake of the person who needs healing—not for the sake of the person doing the healing. When a word of knowledge goes forth, it is to assist the person receiving it—not the one giving it. Of course, our modern Church has significantly messed up in this respect. The people in need of the gifts are too often eclipsed by the people being used by God in the gifts. The amazing thing is that God still uses them because of his great love and mercy. This does not disqualify the gifts any more than, as Paul himself says, a dishonest preacher negates the preaching.

***The gifts are for the people served by them, not for those who are using them.***

However, we all have responsibility for others in the body of Christ who have taken advantage of the gifts. If all Christians were seeking all the gifts in love, then nobody would get special attention for being used by God. For example, in the second century of the Church, which was after the death of the apostles, the supernatural gifts were so common among all

believers that the early Church Fathers were not able to list either the number of miracles or the names of those doing the miracles. What was the result? Numerous scholars have concluded that the primary reason Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire as it did was due to the gifts of healings and exorcism in operation. Even in our present day culture, 80% of believers in Third World churches ascribe their conversion their being healed or someone else being healed. This is not simply because people are impressed by shows of power. On the contrary, it is because spiritual gifts directly manifest the incarnation. The core message of the gospel is that God through incarnation became manifest to flesh and blood because of His great love in order to save His creation from destruction. In the same way, the gifts of the Spirit are recurring instances in which God, by being incarnated in us, becomes temporarily manifest through His body to the temporary needs of other people in order to save them from temporary destruction. The spiritual gifts are manifestations of our eternal salvation.

***The spiritual gifts are the temporary manifestations of our eternal salvation.***

Recognizing human nature, abuses do happen. As we have seen, the primary reason we know what love is—as defined by Paul in his letter to the Corinthians—is because the church at Corinth was largely unloving. If they had been loving each other correctly, there would have been no need for Paul to spell it out to them. Again, this was written to a church “not lacking in any spiritual gift.” However, there are two interesting aspects to this situation. First, Paul told them to eagerly desire spiritual gifts

although they were not lacking in them. This suggests that there is no “ceiling” to the gifts of the Spirit; in other words, no matter how proficient we are in any of the gifts, we are to continue to seek and pursue to become better. Second, no level of proficiency or gifting can make up for a lack of love; we must be seeking love as a priority. If we think about it, it seems intentional that character is identified as the *fruit* of the Spirit while miracles are identified as the *gifts* of the Spirit. I am not sure what we can definitively conclude by the fact that there are nine of each, gifts and fruit, but I can say with certainty that it is the two of them together in us that reflect the life of Jesus.

***It is the gifts and fruit together in us that reflect the life of Jesus through us.***

Both the Bible and personal experience make it clear to us that God uses broken and messed up people. Just as we often may look at others and remark on God’s grace and mercy, we must often recognize in ourselves that it is also grace and mercy that God uses us. This should fill us with great joy and great humility. It is a very dangerous person indeed who feels deserving to be used by God; therein lay pride. Ministries are destroyed when people are used by God and then put themselves or allow others to put them on a pedestal. However, we should rejoice that God is so great that he can supernaturally meet another’s needs through us. If Jesus rejoiced when the disciples did miracles, then we can rejoice in doing them. On the other hand, it is an equally dangerous thing to refuse to be of service to other people when God could be manifest through us; that is also pride. If our recognition of the brokenness in

our lives prevents us from being willing to be used by God, then we are elevating our inability above God’s ability. Just as the Church must stop associating spiritual gifts with value in the one being used, we must not view the gifts as only for the holiest among us. God only needs our willingness; He’ll take care of our holiness.

***God only needs our willingness; He will take care of our holiness.***

Of course, being used by God requires both wisdom and discernment. The first type of discernment we need concerns ourselves. If we already love other people but are weak in the gifts, we are in the best place; we need only to keep asking, keep seeking, and keep knocking, and He will open the door. Although our lack of skill and knowledge may result in mistakes as we learn, the character we have developed in us will greatly serve us: love keeps us sensitive to others while errors further develop humility. The far more difficult situation is for the person strong in gifts but weak in love. That person can harm themselves or others if there is pride or insecurity. In that case, they may temporarily have to put aside “earnestly seeking” the gifts in order to focus on love and humility. Often, however, there are alternatives. For example, a person desiring attention might still operate in the gifts anonymously while another person gets honor, or look for other ways to operate in the gift, or seek to be used in a different, less desirable gift that still serves others. The most important thing to realize is that love is not limited by the gifts, but the gifts are limited by love; in other words, greater focus and energy must be put into love in order to excel in the gifts; that is truly the most excellent way.