

Gifts of Healings

The title of this section reflects the text, for the Bible does not describe a general gift of healing, but rather states, “to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit” (I Cor. 12:9b). The Greek text for “gifts of healing” has both nouns in the plural, *χαρίσματα* □ *αμάτων*. Fee recognizes that the same language recurs in verses twenty-eight and thirty of this chapter. His conclusion establishes a basis for the definition.

Probably this language reflects two things: (a) The use of *charisma* itself suggests that the “manifestation” is given not to the person who is healed, but to the person God uses for the healing of another; (b) the plural *charismata* probably suggests not a permanent “gift,” as it were, but that each occurrence is a “gift” in its own right.¹

Arriving on a definition is crucial, for the cessationists have defined this gift far differently, thus enabling them to challenge the idea of its validity for today.

Unger declares, “a gift implies a settled and continued ability to do something again and again.”² However, such an implication goes beyond the simple definition of *χαρίσματα* as “that which is freely and graciously given.”³ Unger’s view, shared by many cessationists, is more fitting for the secular usage of gift as a “notable capacity or talent.”⁴ Those making such an implication within the definition allow for an argument that if one has the gift of healing, he should be able to exercise it at any moment, for any purpose. MacArthur’s sarcasm is indicative of what is often heard from the cessationist pulpits today.

Think of how thrilling and rewarding it would be to have the gift of healing!
Think of what it would be like to go into a hospital among the sick and the dying and just go up and down the hall touching them, talking to them, and healing them! And wouldn’t it be wonderful to gather together groups of those who claim to have the gift of healing

¹ Fee, 594.

² Unger, 139.

³ BDAG, 1081.

⁴ *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield: Merriam-Webster, 1988), 517.

and fly them into the pockets of disease in the world where they could just go through the crowds healing everybody of cancers, yaws, blackfoot, and countless other ailments.⁵

Through such extreme rhetoric, he then concludes that since the Church does not do this, the idea of the gift for today is nonsense.

Bill Bright offers this definition on the subject of healing.

The gift of healing does not suggest that the recipient of the gift is given supernatural powers over the human body and over disease. Rather, it means that the individual is given the privilege of being the vessel through which God's works of healing are directed.⁶

While Bright makes the exegetical mistake by defining a gift (singular), of healing (singular), rather than gifts of healings in the plural, his definition still fits the proper textual reading. The definition of gifts of healings is best seen as those acts of God, whereby He gives to a Christian the privilege to be a channel of ministry through which God provides a physical healing to another. Implicit in this definition is the realization that God does the healing, not the Christian; the one healed is not the recipient of the gift; and the believer is active in the presence of the healed individual, typically as the one praying for the healing. The use of the plural suggests God offers these gifts to certain individuals on more than an isolated occasion, likely because they are willing to be used by God in such a manner, when He should choose to do so in His sovereignty.

The test of such a definition is to see how it fits with Biblical revelation. The book of Acts describes many miraculous healings of physical ailments, through the ministry of the apostles. The cessationist argues that those who can heal today should be able to empty the hospitals. However, that was not the mission of the apostles. It is true that all were healed who even made contact with Peter's shadow (cf. Acts 5:15-16) or who touched Paul's handkerchiefs

⁵ John MacArthur, *The Charismatics: A Doctrinal Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 134.

⁶ Bill Bright, *The Holy Spirit: The Key to Supernatural Living* (San Bernardino: Here's Life Publishers, 1980), 211-12.

(cf. Acts 19:12). However, in both of these circumstances, the apostle in question did not actively seek these people to heal them. Peter made clear that his priority, as well as the other apostles, was the ministry of the word and prayer (cf. Acts 6:2-4). Since physical healings were never a priority for the apostles exercising this gift, it should not be the standard today.

The Lord Jesus Christ had a different purpose for physical healing than the apostles. When the Lord healed, it was to establish His credentials as the promised Messiah of Israel, in accordance with prophecy such as Isaiah 53:4 (cf. Matt. 8:16-17). No affliction was beyond the Lord's ability to cure, yet even Jesus Himself did not choose to heal every last individual in need within Israel. The proof of this statement is found in connection with the first apostolic healing of the dispensation of grace. Acts three describes the healing of a man through the ministry of Peter and John. The man's description is as being, "lame from his mother's womb...laid daily at the gate of the temple" (Acts 3:2). Therefore, one may properly conclude that Jesus was aware of this man, crippled since birth, and saw him on His own visits to the temple. However, for God's own purposes and glory, Jesus chose not to heal him. The cessationist's elevation of healing as the priority for anyone who can do so was not seen in the life of Christ.

The Scriptures also point out various individuals that were with Paul, and yet were not healed by the apostle. Paul left Trophimus sick in Miletus (cf. II Tim. 4:20). Epaphroditus almost died, being sick with a lengthy illness (cf. Phil. 2:26-27). Paul instructed Timothy with medical advice, rather than to seek a supernatural healing, when it came to his ailments (cf. I Tim. 5:23). Paul himself discussed a "thorn in the flesh," commonly believed to be some sort of physical ailment, that God refused to remove (cf. II Cor. 12:7-10). The cessationist must explain these situations, while insisting on healing as a gift that is always operable for those, like the apostles, who had it.

MacArthur provides an explanation. His view involves noting that the above situations were later in the ministry of the apostle. He then concludes that the apostolic age had ended, and thus Paul's ability to heal had been removed from him.⁷

The cessationist typically connects the cessation of certain gifts by means of the completion of the canon. Epaphroditus' illness would have occurred before about half of the New Testament books were written.⁸ Paul wrote Second Corinthians from Macedonia, during his third missionary journey, around A.D. 57.⁹ This is the letter where the "thorn in the flesh" is mentioned, and MacArthur grants this to be a physical ailment, yet declares that since this was twenty-five years after the initial healings of the apostolic age, he was incapable to heal.¹⁰

MacArthur then seems to contradict himself by later mentioning Paul's ministry in Malta, where he was shipwrecked while in route to Rome as a prisoner.¹¹ Paul not only healed the father of Publius, but when word of the miracles spread, he healed everyone else on the island with diseases (cf. Acts 28:8-9). Of course, this all took place well after the writing of Second Corinthians. He first argues for an unlimited gift of healing, entrusted to the apostles, but then removed by God before nearly half of the New Testament was completed. He explains all cases of unhealed sickness among Paul's companions as taking place after said removal, but is countered by Scripture showing healing taking place up to the last chapter of Acts.

Therefore, one can conclude that God used the apostles to heal on many occasions, but they did not have unlimited power to heal. This fits the definition perfectly, for they did not have the gift of healing, but instead they received gifts of healings. These healings were for the glory of God, and the authentication of His Word, and both motives are certainly needed today.

⁷ MacArthur, *The Charismatics*, 83.

⁸ Jensen, 20.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 282.

¹⁰ MacArthur, *The Charismatics*, 83.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 148.

Chuck Smith shares an example of a modern healing that took place one Sunday at Calvary Chapel.

Some kids wheeled their grandfather up to the front of the church. He was in a wheelchair, and they asked me to pray for him. I said “sure” and laid my hands on him and began to pray. I had just been reading in Acts 3 where Peter pulled the lame man to his feet, and it came to my mind to do the same. I lifted him up out of his wheelchair and said, “In the name of Jesus, walk!” And the man started walking! His grandkids were so excited they were almost doing cartwheels through the church. Then they told me that their grandpa had a cold, and they wanted me to pray for him to be healed of his cold!

Where did that faith come from? I don’t make a practice of pulling people out of wheelchairs; but at that instant, God gave me the faith to do that, and God gave me that gift of faith and healing at that moment. He does what He wants when He wants, and it is a blessing when He uses us and gives us the gifts that are needed.¹²

Smith also has shared with his congregation that a week later he again prayed for a man confined to a wheelchair. The prayer was rather simple, and he concluded with “God bless you” as they wheeled him away. An elder that had seen the prior miracle asked why Smith did not also pull this man to his feet with the command to walk. Smith simply explained, he did not feel God’s leading to do so.

Since healings still occur, cessationists do believe God still can and occasionally will heal miraculously. Unger, having argued for the temporary nature of certain gifts to only the apostolic age, then writes:

This does not mean that God upon occasion may not, for His highest glory and to meet a human need, grant special faith to some or the power to perform miracles, including miracles of healing... These divine manifestations, however, are not to be regarded as gifts, but simply individual acts of God.¹³

Unger relies on semantics to explain the distinction he suggests, but this resembles a distinction without a difference. God grants the power to perform a miracle healing, but such granting is not

¹² Chuck Smith, *The Word for Today Bible: New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 1510.

¹³ Unger, 139.

a gift. Unger thus accommodates the reality of healings throughout this current dispensation, while maintaining his cessationist viewpoint.

MacArthur also recognizes healings taking place today.

Healings that are happening today can be explained biblically but not according to the Charismatic position. God does heal miraculously in answer to prayer to demonstrate His glory.¹⁴

Of note is the label, “the Charismatic position.” MacArthur describes a Charismatic position, but alternate views exist. His is not *the* (definite) Charismatic position.

It is an error to attribute certain false beliefs as indicative of what one must believe to be a charismatic. Christians, including charismatics, get sick. God does not choose to heal everyone, and one’s personal faith, or lack thereof, is not the sole blame for why one is not healed. Those who argue otherwise err. However, some Bible teachers accept miracle healings, while also challenging those through whom God chose to channel these gifts of healings. If cessationists would alter their views in this regard, there would seemingly be fewer Christians drawn to those teaching doctrinal error. Meanwhile, the influence of those teaching error would diminish within the body of Christ, as doctrinally solid churches taught God’s people on the subject of sickness in this fallen world, and healing in light of the sovereignty of God.

¹⁴ MacArthur, *The Charismatics*, 151.