

I will deal with two questions in this week's Readers' Mailbag. The first has to do with why some conservative Christian theologians insist that the "gifts of the Spirit" (such as speaking in tongues and doing miracles) are no longer available to believers today (doesn't the Bible indicate that they are?), and the second about whether the Gospel of Matthew mistranslates or misunderstands the passage of Scripture that allegedly indicated that the messiah would be born of a woman who was still a virgin.

I need to unpack the first question before giving it, since it may not make sense on first reading. The questioner is asking about the scene in the book of Acts, chapter 2, where, on the day of Pentecost, the Spirit comes upon the apostles allowing them to speak in foreign tongues. Peter explains to the crowds that this is a fulfillment of what had been prophesied in Scripture.

Today conservative theologians are split on the question of whether the Spirit still empowers believers to speak in tongues and do other miraculous deeds. Some say emphatically yes, others emphatically no. The person who asks the following question refers to this as the "cessationist debate" - that is, the debate over whether the gifts of the Spirit have now "ceased" to be given. The questioner doesn't understand how someone would could interpret Acts this way. This is his question:

QUESTION:

Can you elucidate a little on the cessationist debate with respect to Pentecost and Acts 2:39 in particular where "the promise is for you and your children" bit would seem to obviously extend beyond just the very next generation of those present? What does the Greek seem to imply? In your view, why did so much of believing Christian intelligentsia come to sacrifice the continuity of miracle working and accept cessationism? Was it careful reading or just confronting reality?

RESPONSE

I'll give a personal response to this question. When I was seventeen, and just heading off to Bible school, I was involved in a charismatic Christian group where we practiced speaking in tongues, and people prophesied, and healed the sick by the laying on of hands, and did other amazing things because they had the "Spiritual gifts."

When I went to Moody Bible Institute, I was taught that these manifestations of the Spirit were in fact from the Devil, that the gifts were no longer given. Why? Because Paul had said in 1 Corinthians 13:8-10, in a context where he is speaking about such gifts (prophecy, tongues, healing etc.), that "Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away." That was interpreted to mean that the spiritual gifts were given to the church only for a short time, until the perfect revelation of God, that is, the New Testament, was written. Since now we have "what is perfect" (the Bible) then "what was imperfect" (spiritual gifts) are no longer needed or legitimate.

How committed was the faculty and administration of Moody Bible Institute to this view?

On each floor of each dormitory there was a senior student in charge, the “Resident Assistant” or RA. Each RA had, next to the phone in his room, a card indicating what number to call in case of an emergency. The emergencies were listed, with the appropriate phone numbers, and included “fire, medical emergency, and ... charismatic activity.” Really.

QUESTION:

I’ve read somewhere, in some atheist tract, that the original Biblical term for Mary was the Hebrew word “amah,” meaning “young girl.” The author of the tract went on to say that a mistranslation into Greek resulted in the word “virgin.” Any truth to that?

RESPONSE

This is a kind of complicated matter, and what you read was close to being right, but not exactly. I explained the actual issue a long while ago on the blog, and this is what I said then. The context was a discussion of the “fulfillment citations” found in the Gospel of Matthew – that is, passages where Matthew quotes a passage of the Old Testament and claims that the prophecy found there had been fulfilled by Jesus. Matthew uses these fulfillment citations to demonstrate that Jesus really was the messiah. One of them is in Matthew 1:22-23, a quotation of Isaiah 7:14 to show that Jesus must have been the messiah because his mother was a virgin.

There are numerous problems with these fulfillment citations. Of most relevance to the season we are in now is the quotation of Isaiah 7:14. As I mentioned in other posts, from what seems like many years ago (though it was just months), the author of Isaiah does not predict that a future messiah will be born of a virgin. For several reasons.

First, Isaiah is not talking about a future messiah. Read all of Isaiah 7 and you’ll see – the messiah is not mentioned in the passage. That is, the word “messiah” does not occur. And Isaiah is not talking about a future savior of any kind. The context is quite clear. Ahaz the king of Judah is in a bad way because the kings of Syria and Israel have ganged up upon him and laid siege to his capital city of Jerusalem. Ahaz is in a panic and doesn’t know what to do. He calls in Isaiah, who tells him. He has to do nothing. There is a young woman who has become pregnant. Before the child to be born to her is old enough to know right from wrong, he will be eating curds and honey (that is, there will be prosperity in the land) and the two kings who are now threatening will be dispersed. That’s the context of Isaiah 7:14, which in its original context does not say that “a virgin will conceive and bear a son” but instead “a young woman is with child and will bear a son.”

The word Isaiah uses is “ALMA,” a word that means young woman without reference to whether she has ever had sex or not (as opposed to the Hebrew word “BETHULAH” which does mean a woman who has never had sex, a virgin); and he says that the woman is already pregnant, not that she will become pregnant.

Matthew, of course, did not read Isaiah in Hebrew but in Greek, and the Greek translators (of the "Septuagint" - i.e., the Greek version of the Jewish Scriptures) translated ALMA with the Greek word PARTHENOS, which also meant "young maiden" but eventually took on the meaning of "young maiden who has not yet had sex" - i.e., virgin. Matthew read the passage that way, and interpreted it to refer not to something in Isaiah's time but in the distant future, with reference to the messiah.

It's hard to know whether Matthew is simply misinterpreting Isaiah as predicting the messiah would be virgin-born or if - to be more generous to him - he thinks that Jesus "fills the prophet's words full of meaning" in the second sense of "fulfillment" I mentioned above. In that sense, Isaiah may have one thing in mind, but the appearance of Jesus gives that thing fuller meaning, salvation again not from one's political enemies but from the greatest enemy of all, the sin of the world.

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[Problems with Some Bible Translations, including the King James: A Blast from the Past Life in Hades](#)