

# WHAT'S IN A NAME

by Frank Viola

Over the past four decades, a heated controversy has raged in the church over the question of spiritual gifts. It has been my experience that much of the contention among believers regarding the gifts often finds its basis in a conflicting conversational style.

Let me explain. Two believers may actually have similar beliefs and experiences regarding spiritual gifts, but because they do not use the same theological jargon, they mistakenly conclude that their beliefs and experiences are worlds apart. I compare this phenomenon to that of medicine and medicine labels.

Suppose, for example, that your doctor prescribes a certain medicine for a stomach disorder you are suffering from. Through a careless mistake, the medicine is labeled improperly. Instead of being labeled "Senna," as it should, the medicine bottle is mislabeled to read "Sopor." Not knowing the difference, you take the medicine, and it aids in your recovery. Yet, when you tell others about how Sopor has helped you, they cannot understand this, and doubt your account (for Sopor does not relieve stomach problems).

Now, let's shift the scenario. Suppose that your doctor tells you that you need to begin taking Valium. Yet, when you receive the prescription, you are given the wrong medicine-it is actually Ritalin. Regrettably, the label reads "Valium." The consequences would be

disastrous. You would be deceived by the label, thinking you were ingesting a certain medication, when, in fact, you were taking something else.

My analogy regarding the potential problems that can arise over medicine and medicine labels is an apt metaphor for the conversational barriers that often bring confusion in the arena of spiritual gifts. The medicine is analogous to the gifts, while the label is analogous to how we describe and define them.

Oftentimes, believers will actually have tasted the same medicine, but because one is using a Pentecostal label to describe his experience and the other is using a Reformed label, confusion and trivialization over the issues tend to be the result. On the other hand, a person may use Biblical language to describe his experience, but the language itself doesn't insure that the experience is valid. The label can be correct, and the medicine could be wrong.

Let me pose an example to illustrate how this often fleshes out. Suppose that Pete and Roger are carrying on a dialogue about the gift of prophecy. Pete believes the gift of prophecy exists today, and he claims to have it. Given his Pentecostal background, Pete describes his gift with a Pentecostal label. Hence, his explanation of the gift is punctuated with expressions like "revelation," "thus saith the Lord," "God told me," etc.

Roger, on the other hand, comes from a Reformed background. He believes that "divine revelation" is no longer given to the church,

and that the apostolic gift of prophecy ceased with the closing of the canon of Scripture. So, when Pete says that he prophesies to people using the King James aphorism, “thus saith the Lord,” Roger is incredulous.

Further, when Roger presses Pete about the actual content and effect of these prophecies, Pete admits that they were general exhortations in the main, and they have not necessarily produced any real changes in the individuals receiving them. As a result, Roger doubts that God speaks to Pete in this way, and it confirms his belief that genuine prophecy no longer exists in the church.

Although Roger rejects Pentecostal theology, and fails to use standard charismatic jargon to describe his experiences, he does possess a vital relationship with God. In addition, Roger has expressed how he often receives “thoughts” and “burdens” to exhort, challenge, and direct others in their walk with God, and he often senses things about people that go beyond his natural reasoning powers.

In one instance, Roger shared with Pete how he was awakened from sleep one night, feeling constrained to write a letter to a friend who had left his church. After prayerfully writing the letter, he sent it out the next day. When his friend received the letter, he notified Roger and told him that it was exactly what he needed to hear, and was amazed at the accuracy and urgency with which Roger wrote him. As a result, Roger’s friend was greatly convicted, and was restored to the Lord and to the church.

One could rightly argue that Roger was exercising the genuine gift of prophecy through his letter (1 Cor. 14:3, 24, 25). Yet, because Roger's notion of Biblical prophecy is much more dramatic, he doesn't recognize it as such. In addition, because Roger's experience was not accommodated with all of the charismatic accents that mark Pete's description of the gift, it never occurs to Pete that Roger has in fact prophesied by the Spirit of God.

The fact of the matter is that Roger has operated in the gift of prophecy (the Biblical gift of prophecy is simply the speaking forth of a present word from the Holy Spirit). Yet, due to his acceptance of the Reformed notion of the gifts, Roger fails to use the language of Scripture to describe his experience.

On the other hand, although Pete may use the correct label when describing this gift (prophecy), he does not own the true medicine, but appears to have substituted his good intentions, ideas, and zeal with the genuine gift of the Spirit. In a word, Roger has tasted the correct medicine, but has used the wrong label; Pete has tasted the wrong medicine, but has used the right label (prophecy).

This illustration demonstrates how disagreements over the miraculous gifts are often rooted in varying conversational styles and theological explanatory frameworks. In addition, the principle of the medicine and the medicine label, as it were, lies at the root of many other controversies regarding Christian experience.

Such divergent labels that are commonplace along this line are as follows: "the baptism of the Holy Ghost" vs. "the fullness or

empowering of the Spirit"- "illumination" vs. "revelation"- "faith healing" vs. "divine healing"-having "a burden from God" vs. having "a prophetic word"- being "exercised" vs. being "led"-having an "unction" vs. having "an anointing," etc.

No doubt, there are many other directions in which the medicine label metaphor can be applied. Suffice it to say that the common mistake of confusing the label with the medicine ought to urge us to reevaluate the language we use when discussing supernatural phenomena and spiritual experiences.

Rather than hone in on the specific rhetoric that one utilizes, we ought to instead seek to hear and understand the reality of that person's experience, even though they may describe it in a way that is foreign (and sometimes irritating) to us. As we seek to do this, perhaps we can discover together what the true medicine tastes like, as well as how to label it properly.

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Frank Viola is a prolific author. More of his writings can be obtained through his website [www.ptmin.org](http://www.ptmin.org).