

SPIRITUAL GIFTS

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Introduction

We begin with a definition: “A spiritual gift is an ability, aptitude, power or position, whether natural or supernatural, graciously given by the Holy Spirit to an individual believer in order to edify the body of the church.”

There are three main passages in the New Testament that speak of spiritual gifts: Romans 12, I Corinthians 12-14 and Ephesians 4. Although in this article we will not offer a detailed exegesis of those chapters, we will touch upon the main points. In addition, the purpose of this article is not polemical—it is not my primary intention to refute Pentecostalism and Charismaticism—but positive, so that we might understand what spiritual gifts are and that we might use our spiritual gifts to the glory of God.

The Bible uses various words to designate spiritual gifts. First, in Romans 12, Paul employs the word *charisma* (and the plural *charismata*): “Having then gifts [*charismata*] differing according to the grace that is given to us” (v. 6). This word emphasizes God’s grace, that the gifts of the Spirit are not earned or merited, but graciously given by God out of His mere goodness and favour. Second, in I Corinthians 12, Paul uses the word *pneumatikos*, which word comes from the word *pneuma* (Spirit): “Now concerning spiritual gifts [*pneumatikoon*; spirituals], brethren, I would not have you ignorant” (v. 1). This word emphasizes that the source of the gift is the Holy Spirit, for the believer does not work the gift in himself. Third, in Ephesians 4, Paul uses the words *dooma* and *doorea*, which words come from the Greek verb “to give.” “But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift [*doorea*] of Christ. Wherefore he saith, when he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts [*dooma*] unto men” (vv. 7-8). These words, too, emphasize that we receive spiritual gifts because God gives them. We do not do anything to receive these gifts.

The Categories of Gifts

It is also possible to place the gifts mentioned in the New Testament into

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three broad categories: natural gifts, gifts of office or position and supernatural or miraculous gifts.

The first category is “natural” gifts. Examples of such natural gifts are found in Romans 12 and I Corinthians 12. The former passage mentions ministry or service, teaching, exhortation, giving, ruling and showing mercy (Rom. 12:7-8). The latter passage mentions helps and governments (I Cor. 12:28). These gifts can be designated “natural” because the Spirit takes the believer’s natural abilities, which he has by God’s providence, and He sanctifies them for use in the church. For example, a person might have the gift of organization, management skills, good financial sense, the ability to set forth truth in a clear, logical fashion, the ability to recognize needs, the wisdom to know how to help the needy, the ability to motivate people, the wisdom to speak the right word at the right time or any number of other abilities and aptitudes.

These gifts are important in the church, but not all people have them, and not all have them in equal measure. Some people are disorganized, tactless, foolish and poor leaders, who simply do not have many of these gifts but they do have at least one gift. Because these gifts are “natural,” an unbeliever might possess some of these abilities but in the unbeliever they are not spiritual gifts. Jesus said, “the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light” (Luke 16:8). Nevertheless, the unbeliever does not have these natural abilities by God’s grace but he possesses them in God’s providence. The Holy Spirit enhances and sanctifies these natural abilities for the benefit and edification of the church. The unbeliever presses such natural gifts into the service of sin.

The second category is gifts of position or office. This is the special emphasis of Ephesians 4, where Paul instructs the church concerning the ascension of Christ. Christ ascended into heaven in order to give gifts to men: “some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers” (v. 11). In I Corinthians 12, Paul mentions these gifts of office again: “And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers,” etc. (v. 28). Timothy, for example, had the gift of being an evangelist (II Tim. 4:5): “Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery” (I Tim. 4:14) and “Wherefore I put thee in remembrance that thou stir up the gift of God, which is in thee by the putting on of my hands” (II Tim. 1:6).

The third category is supernatural or miraculous gifts. These gifts are mentioned in Romans 12 and especially in I Corinthians 12. They are “prophecy” (Rom. 12:6), “the word of wisdom” and “the word of knowledge” (I Cor. 12:8), and (miraculous) faith, healings, miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, tongues and the interpretation of tongues (vv. 9-10). We mention this category of gifts last because they are the least important and the least enduring, although they are the showiest and, therefore, the ones that claim the most attention. In fact, Paul wrote I Corinthians 12-14 exactly because of a misuse of these supernatural or miraculous gifts.

We can further divide this third category of gifts into revelatory and confirmatory gifts.

A revelatory gift is a gift by which God reveals the hidden mystery of His will to His church through a human mouthpiece. To these revelatory gifts belongs, first, the apostleship, for the apostles are Christ’s highest spokesmen. Second, God gives the gift of prophecy, for a prophet is the direct recipient of the Word of God. Third, God gives words of wisdom and knowledge. Although it is difficult to distinguish these, it is clear that these also constitute direct revelation from God. Paul speaks of these words, for example, in I Corinthians 2:6-7:

Howbeit we speak wisdom among them that are perfect: yet not the wisdom of this world, nor of the princes of this world, that come to nought: But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory (cf. Eph. 3:1-11; II Pet. 3:15).

Fourth, God gives the gift of tongues. A speaker in tongues has the miraculous ability to speak in a language (or languages) that he has never learned. According to Acts 2, these tongues are real human languages (vv. 6-11), and the content of the message is “the wonderful works of God” (v. 11). The revelatory gifts, therefore, do not bring trifles and vanities, but edifying communications from the God of heaven.

A confirmatory gift is a gift by which God confirms the veracity of new revelation through a human mouthpiece. To these gifts belongs, first, faith, which in the context is an extraordinary measure of faith that enables the believer to trust God in exceptional circumstances, for the confirmation of His Word, for the encouragement of other believers and as a testimony to the world.

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Second, God gives the gift of miracles, which is the ability to perform wonders. The apostles performed such miracles in the book of Acts, such as raising the dead or even striking someone blind, in order to confirm the truth: “Long time therefore abode they speaking boldly in the Lord, which gave testimony unto the word of his grace, and granted signs and wonders to be done by their hands” (Acts 14:3).

Third, God gives the gift of healing, which is the power to restore a sick person to health without medical means, again for the confirmation of the gospel. An example is the healing of the lame man in Acts 3.

Fourth, God enables people to discern spirits. This is the ability to discern whether a person claiming to be a prophet is one or not. He either confirms or rejects a proposed revelation along the lines of I John 4:1: “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.”

Fifth, God gives the gift of the interpretation of tongues, which is the ability to translate into the common language what the tongue speaker has said, so that all can understand and benefit from the divine revelation. Clearly, then, both divisions of this third category of gifts (miraculous or supernatural) concern God’s revelation, either bringing it or confirming it.

Let us, therefore, repeat the definition with which we began: “A spiritual gift is an ability, aptitude, power or position, whether natural or supernatural, graciously given by the Holy Spirit to an individual believer in order to edify the body of the church.” And let us be reminded of the three main categories and subcategories of these gifts: (1) Natural gifts, enhanced by the grace of God; (2) gifts of position or office; and (3) supernatural or miraculous gifts, divided into revelatory and confirmatory gifts.

Of these gifts, some are permanent and some are temporary, belonging to the infancy or foundational period of the New Testament church. This aspect of the gifts is probably the most disputed but the issue is rather simple. Those gifts, by which God gave or confirmed new revelation before the New Testament Scriptures were completed, have passed away. The Spirit no longer gives those gifts to the New Testament church because they are no longer necessary. We do not need, and must not seek, new revelation. We do not need, and must

not seek, confirmation of new revelation. In practice, this means that various gifts passed away as soon as the New Testament canon was completed.

First, there is no longer the gift of apostles. John was the last surviving apostle, after whom there are no apostles in the technical sense, for there are no living eye-witnesses of the risen Christ and there is no one living today who has been directly commissioned by the exalted Lord. Second, the gifts of prophecy, words of wisdom and knowledge, the speaking and interpretation of tongues, and the discerning of spirits have passed away. God does not give new revelation, for Paul declares that the church is “built upon the foundation of [the teaching of] the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone” (Eph. 2:20). Now that the foundation is laid, we need no more prophecies or divine communications. Third, miracles, healings and supernatural faith have passed away. Since these confirm the veracity of new revelation, they pass away as soon as the giving of new revelation passes away. This does not mean that *God* does not perform miracles and heal people even in answer to prayer, but it means that God does not give those gifts to men.

Therefore, to express this positively, most of the gifts listed in Romans 12 still operate in the church today—ministry (or service), teaching, exhortation, giving, ruling and showing mercy. In addition, the helps and governments of I Corinthians 12:28, and the pastors and teachers of Ephesians 4:11, operate in the church.

The Function of Gifts

Having determined what spiritual gifts *are*, we are ready to examine how these gifts function in the church.

First, the Holy Spirit sovereignly determines the distribution of the gifts: “according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith” (Rom. 12:3); “Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us” (v. 6); “Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit” (I Cor. 12:4); “But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will” (v. 11); “But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him” (v. 18); “And God hath set some in the church” (v. 28). Man does not determine the recipients of the gifts.

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Second, the Holy Spirit gives at least one gift to every member of the church. In Romans 12 and I Corinthians 12, the apostle writes repeatedly of “every man” (Rom. 12:3; I Cor. 12:7, 11).

Third, the Holy Spirit creates diversity. The church is not a collection of clones or carbon copies. Paul uses the illustration of the human body. The body is a living organism, which is one unified whole made up of diverse parts, which all share one life. The ear is as vital to the well-being of the body as the eye; the head is necessary and so also is the foot. Not all parts have the same function or position but all are necessary if the body is to flourish.

In this connection, Paul warns against two sins. The first sin is pride. Certain members are puffed up with a sense of their own importance. They imagine that they can function without the other members: “I have no need of thee” (v. 21). Such proud members refuse to live as members, and reject the counsel and help of others because of a feeling of superiority. The second sin is envy. Certain members of the body do not like their position. They crave a more prominent role and refuse to function in their proper place, so they interfere with the position and/or gifts of others.

The opposite of these sins of envy and pride is love. In Ephesians 4, Paul beautifully describes the love by which the body of Christ flourishes and grows. That body is “fitly joined together” (v. 16), that is, it is not haphazardly or randomly thrown together, but it is designed in such a way that “every joint” supplies something necessary to the body (v. 16). If you respond that you do not supply anything to the body, re-read verse 16, which states “*every* joint supplieth.” If you are in the body, you supply something, something that no other member can supply.

The body grows and increases by love, for Paul writes of “the edifying of the body of Christ” (v. 12), which refers to the growth, nourishment and strengthening of the body: “unto the edifying of itself in love” (v. 16). This means that, as the members love one another, the body itself grows: “forbearing one another in love” (v. 2); “speaking the truth in love” (v. 15); “the edifying of itself in love” (v. 16). Nothing stunts the spiritual growth of the congregation like a lack of love among the members.

The love of the members is, first, a mutual delight in one another as precious and dear; second, a mutual seeking the good of one another for the

sake of Christ; and, third, a mutual seeking of fellowship with one another as members of Christ. Paul calls this “Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (v. 3). The Spirit has created the unity and the bond of peace. Our calling is to endeavour or to strive by putting forth strenuous, spiritual effort, to keep, preserve or maintain that unity and peace. The peace of the church can be disrupted by our sins. Our selfishness, our indifference, our lack of zeal, our pride and our coldness harm the precious peace of the church (vv. 31-32).

The Purpose of Gifts

Notice, finally, the purpose of the Spirit in giving spiritual gifts to the church. The main purpose is edification or the building up of the body of the church. God does not give gifts for us to squander selfishly on ourselves; nor does He give gifts so that we can boast; nor does He give gifts so that we can gratify ourselves. The gifts are to be used in the church for the good of the whole body: “But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to *profit* withal” (I Cor. 12:7); “For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12). The ascended Christ gives pastors and teachers to perfect the saints so that they, in turn, can minister to, or serve, each other and build up the body of Christ. That is why secret whisperings are not gifts to the church, unless they are prophecies.

This is the focus of I Corinthians 14. Paul prioritized prophecy over tongues, even in the age of new revelation, because his goal was the edification of the church: “he that prophesieth edifieth the church” (v. 4); “that the church may receive edifying” (v. 5); “seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church” (v. 12); “For thou verily givest thanks well, but the other is not edified” (v. 17); “that all may learn, and all may be comforted” (v. 31). The Corinthians did not use their spiritual gifts in love, but selfishly, ostentatiously and in an unseemly, inappropriate, offensive and obnoxious manner. Paul wrote I Corinthians 13 in order to rebuke the Corinthians for this sinful behaviour.

Given what spiritual gifts are and given what the Spirit’s purpose with these gifts is, we can see how we must use our spiritual gifts.

First, we must use our spiritual gifts *in the church*. The proper sphere for the exercise of gifts is ecclesiastical. Therefore, if you are not a church mem-

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ber and are resolved not to join a faithful congregation, it is idle for you to think about spiritual gifts (*Westminster Confession* 25:2-3; 26:1-2). It is no accident that the *Heidelberg Catechism* treats the Christian church and the communion of the saints in the same Lord's Day (Lord's Day 21).

Q. What do you understand by “the communion of saints”?

A. First, that all and every one who believes, being members of Christ, are, in common, partakers of Him and of all His riches and gifts; secondly, that every one must know it to be his duty, readily and cheerfully to employ his gifts, for the advantage and salvation of other members (Q. & A. 55).

Second, we must aim to live for the benefit of the other members. Even if we do not have (or do not think that we have) a particular gift, we have the calling to minister to the other members. If you do not have the “showier” gifts so that you can stand up in front of people and teach, you certainly have the gift to perform lowly tasks for the other members. Do not covet the “limelight,” while refusing to wash your fellow disciples’ feet. In our modern context, even something as simple as offering a lift to the worship services could be the way in which you serve the other members. If you are able to do that but refuse to inconvenience yourself, why should God entrust you with greater gifts?

When the Lord sends affliction into the life of a member, we should see that as an opportunity to serve. Our question should be, “What can I do to help? May I make you a meal? May I clean or look after the children?” We must not see affliction as a nuisance or as an inconvenience but as an opportunity to love.

Although not all the members are called to be office-bearers, each member does serve. Mothers teach their children in the home; the members are called to exhort one another (the word means to encourage, to motivate, to comfort, and even to warn or to rebuke); the saints are able to give (as God prospers them, with simplicity, that is, sincerely and without ulterior motives); and believers are able to show mercy with cheerfulness, not grudgingly or reluctantly but gladly.

In addition, when we are afflicted, we serve the body by allowing the other members to serve us. Consider your affliction in this light: Christ gave me this affliction as a member of His body and it is my calling to share this affliction

with the other members so that they can minister to me. They are eager to weep with me as I weep, and I must be willing to allow them into my life and heart. When I do not humbly, readily and cheerfully receive the help of the other saints, I rob them of an important opportunity for sanctification and mutual edification in love. If I keep my affliction to myself and proudly reject the ministry of the saints, the flow of love through the members of the body is hindered and the body's spiritual growth is stunted.

Third, as we live in the church with the desire to help, we will discover that God has given us skill in certain areas. The other members will confirm this, so we should listen to their evaluation. We will also discover that we lack skill in other areas, such as teaching, ruling or other tasks. We do what we are able to do. We seek to improve by developing the gifts that we have. At the same time, we consent to be ministered unto, and we do not envy the gifts and the position of others.

Above all, we remember that we possess gifts because we have the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit, no man can possess any spiritual gifts. We have the Holy Spirit because Jesus died for us and rose again, and from heaven He gives good gifts to His church. Without the ascension of our crucified Saviour, spiritual gifts are impossible (Eph. 4:8-13).

Remember the definition: "A spiritual gift is an ability, aptitude, power or position, whether natural or supernatural, graciously given by the Holy Spirit to an individual believer in order to edify the body of the church."

We use our gifts for the good of the saints, and we offer ourselves body and soul as living sacrifices of thanksgiving to Him (Rom. 12:1)!