

Spiritual Gifts: Unity in Diversity

****All scripture taken from NKJV unless noted otherwise.*

The topic of spiritual gifts has been one of the most divisive in Church history.

Three times in the New Testament, Paul says, “I do not want you to be ignorant.” One of these is this passage about spiritual gifts. Another is in Romans 11 where he talks about things concerning Israel and the Jewish people. In 1 Thessalonians 4 he exhorts the church to not be ignorant about the events surrounding Jesus’ return. Ironically, these three areas are some of the most disputed in the Church.

***12** Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be ignorant: ² You know that you were Gentiles, carried away to these dumb idols, however you were led. ³ Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed, and no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.*

*⁴ There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. ⁵ There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. ⁶ And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. ⁷ But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all: [not self display or self gratification] ⁸ for to one is given the **word of wisdom** through the Spirit, to another the **word of knowledge** through the same Spirit, ⁹ to another **faith** by the same Spirit, to another gifts of **healings** by the same Spirit, ¹⁰ to another the **working of miracles**, to another **prophecy**, to another **discerning** of spirits, to another **different kinds of tongues**, to another the **interpretation of tongues**. ¹¹ But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills. (1 Corinthians 12:1-11).*

*²⁷ Now you are Christ’s body, and individually members of it. ²⁸ And **God has appointed** in the church, first **apostles**, second **prophets**, third **teachers**, then **miracles**, then gifts of **healings**, **helps**, **administrations**, various **kinds of tongues**. ²⁹ All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they? ³⁰ All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they? ³¹ But earnestly desire the greater gifts. (1 Corinthians 12:27-30a, NASB1995).*

Let’s pray.

This will be a three-chapter study of spiritual gifts. This is a topic that makes a lot of people nervous. Some of these teachings have been severely abused in churches. If you haven’t personally seen it, you can go to Youtube and see some really weird stuff. I think one of the weirdest is a televangelist who walks through the crowd making a hissing noise at sections of the audience. When he does this, people fall out of the chairs onto the floor. Some are seen just wriggling on the floor like they’re having some sort of seizure or fit. I want to say up front that

just because we see misuses of what might be gifts doesn't invalidate them. So, why do people fall over when a so-called man of God waves his hand over them or hisses at them? This is for several reasons. One reason is that people love the supernatural. We live in the mundane world with mundane problems and we long to see the power of God. We want to see something more powerful than us. I'll leave the other reasons to some of you reading this who are trained clinicians or who are trained in psychology.

Other reasons that believers long for seeing the supernatural is that we read about what happened to Israel in the desert, and we know intellectually that it was all true. We know that miracles were wrought, and we long to see those kinds of events that validate our belief in a God who can do that which we cannot do. In the book of Acts we read about the Apostles doing things that are absolutely supernatural. These events amaze us and inspire us. We long to see our friends healed. We long to hear a word of wisdom that can shed light on a problem we might be having that just seems unsolvable. In my own case, I might be trying to figure some problem out and will often ask God to give me insight or knowledge that I just don't have to help me.

The big question that the Church wrestles with is, "do these supernatural giftings still exist today as they did in the Book of Acts?" If so, how are they used? If they exist as they did at the time of the disciples, why don't we see them? Is it because we're in the wrong kind of church, or did something fundamentally change over time? Did something change with God's dispensing of these gifts? What did these terms listed by Paul mean anyway? What do they mean to us today? In the passage that we've just read, we see nine specific spiritual gifts followed by eight more administrative type functions listed.

There are two predominant views concerning whether spiritual gifts still exist. There is the Cessationist viewpoint (like the word 'cease'), and the Continuationist viewpoint (things have "continued"). Let me put definitions to those two schools of thought.

CESSATIONISTS

Cessationism is the view that the "miracle gifts" (sometimes called the 'sign gifts') of tongues and healing have ceased—that the end of the apostolic age brought about a cessation of the miracles associated with that age. Most Cessationists believe that, while God can and still does perform miracles today, the Holy Spirit no longer uses specific individuals to perform miraculous signs.¹

Cessationists believe the gifts were to empower and authenticate the early preaching of the gospel during a period referred to as the Kerygmatic (the time of proclamation) era of the Church. The late well-known and respected theologian, John MacArthur, was a chief Cessationist. The extremist viewpoint of this camp is that when we see these things happening in a church today, we are seeing demons or other dark forces at work. Most Cessationists don't believe that, but some really do, and I have known them. That was

¹ <https://www.gotquestions.org/cessationism.html>

the paradigm in the Bible church in which I was raised. The pastor of that church wrongly eschewed any kind of emotionalism. I think such teaching denied part of the experience we as believers are meant to have. Our faith is logical and mental, but it is likewise emotional. This is validated scripturally by the two greatest commandments that exhort us to love God with all of our mind, soul, and strength. The mind is the place where the thoughts AND the emotions meet. And the soul, of course, is the seat of our emotions. The main scriptural text supporting the Cessationist viewpoint is found in 1 Corinthians 13 where Paul proclaims, ⁸*Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.* ⁹*For we know in part and we prophesy in part,* ¹⁰*but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.* (1 Corinthians 13:8-10, ESV). In part, Cessationists believe that the “perfect came” when the Bible was completed.

CONTINUATIONISTS

The Continuationists are those who believe that Scripture does not limit the sign gifts to the 1st Century or the Apostles themselves but that they continue on in their entirety today as they did in the time of the book of Acts. Continuationists believe that the sign gifts are available according to how God wants to distribute them and that they never ended. Continuationism is the belief that all the spiritual gifts, including healings, tongues, and miracles, are still fully in operation today, just as they were in the days of the early church. A Continuationist believes that the spiritual gifts have “continued” unabated since the Day of Pentecost and that today’s church has access to all the spiritual gifts mentioned in the Bible. Continuationists maintain that there is no scriptural evidence that any of these spiritual gifts are no longer in operation.² Likewise they interpret the passage in 1 Corinthians 13 as referring to Jesus’ return as when the “perfect will come”. The extreme camp of this group believes that a person who doesn’t exhibit some of these gifts, especially the gift of tongues, is not a true Christian; and that person is not saved.

ECHO or SHADOW POSITION

There is a third position that I’ve never really heard articulated. In fact, I came up with it as I struggled to articulate how I see things. We clearly can observe that the exercise of the gifts as recorded in Acts doesn’t truly exist in ANY church at present. At least it doesn’t appear in any church that I’ve ever seen or heard of. I am a member of an association of pastors. Most of these pastors are leaders of churches that are continuationist. These churches believe that the “sign gifts” are still available to the same degree that they were available in the early church. Yet, those kinds of “sign gifts” don’t happen to that degree

² Ibid

in their churches. I don't see them happening in ANY churches. Perhaps what we're seeing today is a sort of "echo" or "shadow" of what went on in Acts. By that I mean that we still know that God has the power to exercise these gifts in believers, and I think that He does so from time to time. Perhaps if the full-blown gifts were prevalent today, we would somehow mistake that act of God to be due to our gifting. Can you imagine the abuse that would come with that as some claimed the power to be able to heal others or give them specific words of knowledge and wisdom for a particular problem. Yet, we do see God do some of these things from time to time. We still see "echoes" or "shadows" of all of the gifts, but interestingly, it's not enough in my mind to ever think that those occurrences have anything to do with our own capabilities. That time appears to have passed. And yet, they are present enough for us to know that an Almighty God is still at work. We'll flesh this out as we work our way through the gifts as listed.

Let's look at each of these while I make some observations on them. I feel uncomfortable being dogmatic about these as wonderfully informed Christians differ in their beliefs on these things, but I'll be open about what I think Scripture says coupled with what I've seen and experienced in my own life.

- 1 **Word of Wisdom** - This was a supernatural gift in which the speaker, empowered by the Holy Spirit, gave a message to either an individual or to the whole church. And the message was given by a person who had a gifting of a word of wisdom. Many Charismatics or Pentecostals claim to exercise this gift today saying such things as, "I have a word from the Lord for you." In doing so, they claim to be speaking on behalf of God and/or giving a confirmation of this thought or that. That is a pretty bold claim. Frankly it makes me uncomfortable because I have no means by which to test whether the word is from the Lord or not. I would say that a person who gives such a word better be working with more than a thought or an idea if they claim it is coming from God. If they are just giving their own thoughts or ideas, then they are exaggerating and being untruthful about what God has said or not said.

The main problem I have with this is that it comes close to denying the Doctrine of the Sufficiency of Scripture. If there is a need for someone to tell me the will and wisdom of God through special revelation, then how can His Word be sufficient to equip you and me for every good work (2 Timothy 3:17)? We are given everything in Scripture that we need for "life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:3). We don't need additional words of knowledge or wisdom. Notwithstanding the above, occasionally I think we still see a word of wisdom given by someone that extends FAR BEYOND their own wisdom or understanding of some matter. Is that an echo of the gift as described by Paul? It certainly could be. Should such a word be given to a congregation as a whole? I don't think so.

- 2 **Word of Knowledge.** – I feel like I’ve covered this in great part by what I’ve said above in gift number one. We see this gift in Acts when Peter unmistakably knows that Ananias and Sapphira have lied about their gift. He has no way to know this outside of the revelation of the Holy Spirit. Today we might see the “echo” of this when we hear of someone who has an incredibly clear suggestion from within to do this or that resulting in a changed circumstance. Sandy and I have a Christian acquaintance that was in Ireland during the troubles. He was in a record shop looking around when he was overcome with the impression that he had to leave the shop immediately. He raced for the door and hurried down the street and within about 60 seconds a bomb went off that destroyed the shop killing all inside. Was this a word of knowledge? It certainly could have been. Maybe that’s what we might call an “echo” or “shadow” of what went on in Acts. Personally, I believe the Holy Spirit just moved him to get out. I do believe that God still sometimes gives us knowledge beyond something we ever learned. I don’t think that is the same as the spiritual gift of a Word of Knowledge.
- 3 **Faith** – This most likely refers to someone of extraordinary faith in challenging circumstances. This might have been the gift being exercised by Paul and the others raising people from the dead, etc. in Acts. The gift of faith may be defined as the special gift whereby the Spirit provides Christians with extraordinary confidence in God’s promises, power, and presence so they can take amazing heroic stands for Christ. The spiritual gift of faith is exhibited by one with a strong and unshakeable confidence in God, His Word, and His promises. I imagine it to be reflected in the attitude and actions of people such as Cory Ten Boon or Dietrich Bonhoeffer who maintained their Christian faith joyfully while spending time in Nazi concentration camps. This could be us seeing an “echo” of the gift of faith, or perhaps it’s just a more developed ability to trust God. Cory survived the ordeal. Bonhoeffer was hung 29 days before Hitler’s Third Reich ended. But, both had an extraordinary faith.
- 4 **Healings** - “Gifts” of healing in the plural, may indicate that there are or were different gifts of healing. The gifts of healing could mean a very wide range of skills or abilities. This could be from the power to do miraculous or dramatic healings, like making the lame walk, or the use or understanding of medicine. It could even be the ability to empathize and show love to others to the point of healing an emotional wound.

There has been much debate about the usage of the spiritual gift of healing among Christians. Some believe the gift of healing and some other sign gifts are no longer operative today, while others believe the miraculous gifts are still in use today. Of course, the power to heal was never in the gifted person himself/herself. The power to heal is from God and God alone. Although God does still heal today, I believe His healing through the gift of healing belonged primarily to the apostles of the first-century church to affirm that their message was from God (Acts 2:22; 14:3).

God still performs miracles. God still heals people. There is nothing preventing God from healing one person through the ministry of another person. Sandy and I laid hands on a friend with stage 4 lymphoma, we prayed, and she was healed. However, we've prayed for many others who went on to be with the Lord.

Yet, the miraculous gift of healing given to a specific person as seen in the book of Acts does not seem to be functioning today. Many have claimed it and later been uncovered as frauds. If it were in existence to the same degree today, we would see God-appointed gifted people walking through hospital wards orchestrating the healing of multitudes of people. God can certainly intervene in whatever manner He sees fit, whether in "normal conventional" fashion or through a miracle. Our salvation itself is miracle. We were dead in sin, but God entered our lives and made us new creatures (2 Corinthians 5:17). I believe that to be the greatest healing of all.

- 5 **Workings of Miracles** – The NIV calls this the gift of "miraculous powers." This is obviously referring to something other than physical healings because it comes listed after that. I think this includes such powers as not being killed by a lethal snake bite (Paul on Malta), casting out demons, raising people like Tabitha from the dead (Acts 9), and striking Elymas blind (Acts 13). I have never heard credible evidence of a person raising another person from the dead or striking a person blind. Likewise, I've heard of well-meaning Christians handling snakes and dying from rattle snake bites. However, there are many credible accounts of faith-filled people involved in exorcisms; which refers to calling out and/or casting out demons in the name of Jesus. Do they have a special gift to do this? I cannot say for certain, but I don't really think so. But I can say that some feel called to participate in the liberation of persons possessed or oppressed by demonic forces. I see that to be valid, and it is a task for which all believers are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

It is not something I've ever seen or participated in, but I have spoken to people who have been involved in this. I think this power is probably available to each and every believer because Scripture clearly tells us that, "He that is in us is greater than he that is in the world." Some believers understand this, and embrace it with the powers associated with it. Although, I don't think it's wrong to do so, I myself, don't ever speak directly to Satan or demons, but I ask the Lord to do my battling for me. The evil forces have roamed the earth for thousands of years, and they are well-seasoned warriors. I just ask Jesus to come to the battle front for me, and to do such warfare for me. I ask Him to send angels to fight in my behalf. I am secure in that.

Prophecy - The Greek word translated "prophesying" or "prophecy" in both this passage and Romans 12:6 properly means to "speak forth" or declare the divine will, to interpret the purposes of God, or to make known in any way the truth of God which is designed to influence people.

Many people misunderstand the gift of prophecy to be the ability to predict the future. While knowing something about the future may sometimes have been an aspect of the gift of prophecy, it was primarily a gift of proclamation (“forth-telling”), not prediction (“fore-telling”). I am very wary of people who claim to have the gift of prophecy. I remember being back in college at A&M and hearing people going to this meeting or that meeting to hear a word of prophecy from the Lord. I actually remember some people writing down these things that were said and reviewing them in their notebooks as though they were scripture. My belief is counter to this.

I do not believe there are any new prophets. I do not believe there are any new Apostles. The last apostle was John and he died on the Island of Patmos. Everyone seems to want to have some special knowledge or some special word from the Lord. It is a way to fill church pews and enroll viewers of a Youtube or television program. Let me assure you that there is no special or esoteric knowledge being dispensed to anyone. Everything that you and I need is found in Scriptures. It is found in the complete and perfect Word of God. In the sense that prophecy is the proper preaching of the Word, then yes, it still exists. However, if you run up on someone who says that they are a prophet with some extra-biblical knowledge or telling of the future, the best thing to do is run away. Everything that we need is found in His word. It is totally sufficient.

Discernment - The gift of discerning spirits, or “distinguishing” spirits, is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit described in this passage. Like all these gifts, the gift of discerning spirits is given by the Holy Spirit, who disperses these gifts to believers for service in the body of Christ as He wills. When it comes to the gift of discerning spirits, every born-again believer has a certain amount of discernment, which increases as the believer matures in the Spirit and is sensitive to His direction and moving.

In Hebrews 5:13-14 we read that a believer who has matured beyond using the milk of the Word as a babe in Christ is “able to discern both good and evil”. The mature believer is empowered by the Spirit of God through the Scriptures to tell the difference between good and evil, and, beyond that, he can also distinguish between what is good and what is better. In other words, any born-again believer who chooses to focus on the Word of God is spiritually discerning.

However, I believe that some in the body of Christ are more gifted and sensitive in this area of discernment. They spot issues that the rest of us might not pick up. There can be subtle problems with a new doctrine we are exposed to. They pick it up and others miss it. If you hear something, and it seems a little off, it is what we lawyers call “not passing the smell test.” Something is wrong with it, but sometimes we just can’t quite figure out what it is. Whether this is supernaturally given or it is an acquired bit of knowledge with the corresponding applied wisdom, I am not sure. I also think it can extend into having insight about people. I’m talking about picking up what I might call a weird vibe about someone else. It could be just life experience, but

sometimes I believe it can be God given specific knowledge. I have the tendency to trust all people so perhaps I'm weak in this area. I am not sure. I believe it could be an intuition about human behavior, or it might be something coming from the Lord.

- 6 Speaking of Tongues & Interpretation – I will postpone this controversial topic until next week as I don't have time here to work our way through it.

In summary, today we've taken a bold look at eight of the spiritual gifts that Paul introduces here in Chapter 13. We have talked about eight of the nine that are listed. We've looked at two schools of thought: Cessationists and Continuationists. We've talked about some of the abuses we've seen in the exercise of these gifts. In summary, I've set forth my biblical beliefs and what my life experience has shown me about these gifts. The empirical evidences suggests the Cessationist viewpoint is more of a reality than the Continuationist viewpoint. However, God still moves and we might call this the shadow or echo position. What we see today is an echo of what went on at the time of the disciples, but hints of each of these seems present today. The leading of the Holy Spirit is available to each and every believer in a quiet and personal way. To experience all that God has for us comes through a private and intimate relationship with Him.

A Big Idea for today is that WHATEVER these spiritual gifts might be, they are to be exercised for the good of the body of Christ and not to be used selfishly. As Paul has repeated again and again to this sensuous formerly pagan group of people, we are to do all things that we do for the good of the church and for the glory of God.

Let us pray.

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