

The Gifts of the Spirit

A biblical study prepared by Steve Gregg

I. What is meant by a “gift of the Holy Spirit”?

- A. In the phrase “gifts of the Holy Spirit” in Hebrews 2:4, the word “gift” is the Greek *merismos*, meaning “dividing.”
- B. The term “spiritual gifts” occurs repeatedly in the English translations at 1 Corinthians 12:1; 14:1, 12, but, in those places, the term “gift” is not in the original Greek, which simply contains the adjective “spiritual” (*pneumatikos*) [things].
- C. Nonetheless, in Paul’s discussion of the “spirituals,” we find the Greek word *charisma* (plural: *charismata*) appearing in the phrase, “there are diversities of gifts (*charismata*), but the same Spirit” (1 Cor.12:4)—seemingly justifying the expression “gifts of the Spirit” throughout the discussion.
- D. As in 1 Cor.12:4, there are other passages speaking of the same matters, using the term “charismata” (Rom.12:6; 1 Peter 4:10), which seems to justify the identification of these phenomena as “gifts” in our entire discussion.
- E. *Charisma* comes from the root word *charis*, meaning “grace.” It is more scriptural to speak of these matters as “gifts of grace” than by the term “gifts of the Spirit” (though both terms apply, since the Holy Spirit is the “Spirit of grace”—Heb.10:29). The Holy Spirit bestows grace, and grace “manifests” in our lives in the form of the “gifts,” among other things.
- F. Each “gift” is referred to as a “manifestation of the Spirit” (1 Cor.12:7). According to Paul, the varying gifts differ according to the grace given to each person (Rom.12:6). Paul’s spiritual accomplishments as an apostle are said to be “according to the grace” given to him (1 Cor.3:10,15:10; Eph.3:7). Peter views our proper use of these gifts as the right stewardship of the “manifold grace of God” (1 Peter4:10).
- G. Though they are “gifts of grace,” they are manifested, and distributed among members of the body of Christ, by the Holy Spirit at His own discretion (1 Cor.12:7, 11).
- H. Essentially, a gift is an endowment from the Holy Spirit, a spiritually-empowered ability given to an individual to enable service to be performed by and for the body. An office might be regarded as the position held by the gifted person.

II. How many “gifts” are there?

Paul gives several lists of *charismata* manifesting in the church. No list is comprehensive. He lists 7 gifts in Romans 12:6-8. There are 9 listed in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, of which only one (prophecy) is common to both lists. Five “gifts” (a different Greek word) are mentioned in Ephesians 4:11, though they more properly could refer to “offices,” since the list refers to people (*Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Shepherds, Teachers*), not to abilities. There is another short list, borrowing from items on the three previously mentioned lists, in 1 Cor.12:28-30.

Omitting the “offices” mentioned in Ephesians 4:11, Paul’s lists, in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, contain a total of fifteen separate gifts (though it would be unwarranted to assume that this is the complete number). Those listed can be categorized into five groups of three:

Gifts of Revelation	Gifts of Power	Gifts of Utterance	Gifts of Corporate Ministry	Gifts of individual Ministry
<i>Word of knowledge</i>	<i>Working miracles</i>	<i>Prophecy</i>	<i>Teaching</i>	<i>Giving</i>
<i>Word of wisdom</i>	<i>Healings</i>	<i>Tongues</i>	<i>Exhortation</i>	<i>Service</i>
<i>Discerning spirits</i>	<i>Faith</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>	<i>Leadership</i>	<i>Showing mercy</i>

Peter divides the gifts into two categories: Those that involve speaking and those that involve serving (1 Peter 4:10-11).

Speaking as the oracles of God	Serving as of the ability God gives
<i>Prophecy</i>	<i>Leadership</i>
<i>Discerning of spirits</i>	<i>Giving</i>
<i>Teaching</i>	<i>Service</i>
<i>Exhortation</i>	<i>Showing mercy</i>
<i>Word of Knowledge</i>	(Miracles, Healings and Faith do not neatly fit either of these two categories)
<i>Word of wisdom</i>	
<i>Tongues</i>	
<i>Interpretation of tongues</i>	

Some of the gifts are clearly supernatural abilities bestowed on those who would obviously have no involvement with them outside of the gifting (e.g., *working miracles, prophecy, speaking in tongues*). Others, like *teaching, leadership, service, giving*, may involve the Holy Spirit’s anointing and “vitalizing” an existing natural ability that the person had or would have independently of even being a Christian. In the latter case, it is the anointing of the Spirit that accomplishes the work of God, not the natural talent brought by the individual.

III. Are all of these gifts for today?

- A. There are those who argue for the cessation of certain gifts at the close of the apostolic era:
 1. Some argue that the so-called “sign gifts” (their term, not the Bible’s) were necessary for the founding of the church in its initial stage, but that there is no longer any need for them. These include the gift of *the working of miracles, healings*, and anything else that is spectacular.
 2. Similarly, the gifts of revelation (e.g., *word of knowledge, word of wisdom, prophecy, tongues, interpretation of tongues*) were only necessary prior to the completion of the New Testament canon. Now that we have a complete Bible, we need no more prophecies. In fact, they say, any additional such revelations would compromise the completeness of the canon of scripture.
 3. Another related claim is that speaking in tongues was only necessary when the unilingual church had to preach throughout the world in regions whose languages they did not know. All of these arguments suggest that there is no need for any but the most “unsupernatural” gifts (e.g., *teaching, exhortation, giving, helps, leadership, showing mercy*, etc.).
 4. Some believe that Paul is referring to this cessation of the gifts in 1 Corinthians 13:8-13.

- B. However, the scriptures provide no justification for the theory of the cessation of any of the gifts.
1. Paul's first discussion of the gifts (1 Corinthians 12) is given in what is also his first discussion of the church as the body of Christ. He compares differently gifted persons as "members" or "organs" in the Body—e.g., foot, hand, ear and eye (vv.15-16). These members are mentioned in connection to the service each performs (v.17). It is hard to know how the body of Christ could exist or function in the world today without its organic functions!
 2. There is still much work to be done, and the church is no more capable of doing that work without the Holy Spirit's aid than was the case in the early church. Having begun in the Spirit, shall our work be completed in the flesh? (Gal.
 3. The Bible says nothing about a complete canon of scripture. God has been speaking continuously to His people since the first chapter of Genesis. Where do we find any prediction that He would someday lapse into silence, and speak no more to us, other than in writing?
 4. Modern prophecies would not add to the canon of the New Testament for the simple reason that the New Testament is not comprised of prophetic, but of apostolic, writings. The prophets like Agabus, Philip's four daughters and those prophets in Corinth, of whom Paul speaks, did not contribute any material to the canon of scripture.
 5. The gift of tongues was not intended to be used in preaching to foreign lands—nor was it ever so used. The apostles, by speaking Greek, could communicate with everybody they encountered. If tongues were needed for preaching the gospel to foreign cultures, then we would need them now more than ever, since there are thousands of languages of the unevangelized, who were unknown to the church in the first century. Modern missionaries devote decades of their lives to learning and translating into these languages.
 6. The Bible says that all the gifts shall remain in the church until the coming of Christ (1 Cor.1:7).

IV. Defining the individual gifts:

A. Paul's list in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10

1) A Word of Wisdom (v.8)

- A. Meaning: Though we find no other occurrence of this term in the Bible, and Paul does not define it, it would seem natural to understand Paul's meaning as the speaking of words containing divinely revealed wisdom. As opposed to natural wisdom, which all Christians should seek and cultivate, this may refer to occasions when natural wisdom is inadequate, and God's Spirit reveals the wise course of action in counsel.
- B. Exceptional, problem resolving wisdom is manifested in Old Testament characters such as Solomon (e.g., 1 Kings 3:23-28) and Ahithophel (2 Sam.16:23), though the latter's wisdom is not stated to have been a divine gift.

- C. Since we have the mind of Christ (1 Cor.2:16), wisdom such as that which He exhibited can be given to the church through persons receiving this gift. The decision of James, at the Jerusalem Council, may be an example of this (Acts 15:13,19-20, 28-29).

2) *A Word of Knowledge* (v.8)

- A. Meaning: The phrase is used only here in the New Testament. When used in the Old Testament, the terminology seems to only speak of words expressing or imparting knowledge (Prov.19:27; 23:12). Most charismatic teachers equate this with the supernaturally-revealed knowledge of some fact that is otherwise unknown or unknowable to the one receiving it.
- B. There are examples of this phenomenon in the Old Testament, in the ministry of Jesus, and in that of Peter, though not called by this name (e.g., 2 Kings 5:25-27; John 4:17-18; Acts 5:1-5)

3) *Faith* (v.9)

- A. Meaning: Faith has many facets, but that which Paul refers to here seems to be that particular faith that enables one to perform stupendous exploits (cf. 1 Cor.13:2; Heb.11:32-35a).
- B. Faith exploits would include the ability to face down dangers and severe trials—even to be faithful unto death, which is exhibited in certain saints (Job 13:15; Heb.11:35b-39).
- C. There have been many examples of inspiring faith throughout church history. The faith of special men like George Müller and Hudson Taylor may well be another manifestation of this gift.

4) *Gifts of Healings* (v.9)

- A. Meaning: “Healings” is a noun, not a verb. It is not something that is done, but something received.
- B. This is not the ability to supernaturally perform healings (for how would that be distinguished from the previous gift of working miracles?), nor is it the natural art of a physician to treat and cure illness.
- C. Though miraculous healings were performed by the apostles, these involved the gift of working miracles (on the apostles’ part) and gifts of healings (on the part of the recipients).
- D. The healing of all sicknesses is not guaranteed in scripture. A healing is a special “gift” that God gives to some people, curing a sickness which presumably would not have occurred naturally (Paul refers to his deliverance from death as a “gift” [*charisma*] in 2 Corinthians 1:11).
- E. This may be what Paul had in mind when he spoke of the recovery of Epaphroditus (Phil.2:27). It was a gift denied to Paul himself (2 Cor.12:7-10), and, apparently, to Timothy (2 Tim.5:23) and to Trophimus (2 Tim.4:20)
- F. Exorcisms are also in the category of “healings” (Matt.12:22; Acts 10:38).
- G. Prayer for healing is sometimes accompanied by anointing with oil (Mark 6:13; James 5:14)

5) *Working of Miracles* (v.10) Probably connected with the previous gift: healings

- A. Meaning: Miracles are supernatural interventions of God into the natural world so as to supersede or contravene the normal course of events that natural processes would have dictated. God sometimes does these unilaterally, or in answer to prayer, or through a human agent.
- B. Two common words in the Greek New Testament refer to such events, when performed through human instrumentality. The word *dunamis* means “powers” and refers to “works demonstrating God’s power.” The word *semeion* means “signs” and underscores the function of a miracle as that which communicates the presence of God and His endorsement of the messenger (e.g., Mark 16:20; Acts 4:29-30; Heb.2:3-4).
- C. Miracles are not seen as the actions of the human individual, but of Christ continuing His miraculous activities, working through members of His Body on earth (Acts 3:12,16; 9:33-34).
- D. The most common miracles of the New Testament include: Healing all manner of sickness, Exorcism of demons, Raising the dead—alongside the much less-common events such as: striking supernatural judgment on evildoers, multiplication of food, calming storms with a command, walking on water, turning water to wine, etc.
- E. Mostly performed by the apostles (Acts 2:43; 19:11-12; 2 Cor.12:12), and evangelists (Acts 6:8; 8:6-7)

6) Prophecy (v.10)

- A. Meaning: A word from the Lord, often spoken in the 1st person, as from the mouth of Jesus (Rev.19:10)
- B. The Spirit of prophecy in all God’s people (Num.11:24-29; Joel 2:28-29; Acts 2:16-18; 1 Cor.14:1, 39)
- C. The function of prophecy:
 - To edify, exhort and comfort (1 Cor.14:3)
 - To predict the future—especially to forewarn (Amos3:7; Act 11:27; 21:10-11)
 - To give personal direction (Acts 13:1-2; 21:4)
 - To “lay bare” the secrets of the heart of the unbeliever (1 Cor.14:24-25)
- D. Paul’s instructions about prophecy’s use in the church service (1 Cor.14:29-33)
- E. How does one prophesy?
 - Desire to do so (1 Cor.14:1, 39)
 - The impulse (Amos 3:8; Jer.20:9)
 - By faith (Romans 12:6)

7) Discerning of spirits (v.10)

- A. Meaning: Linked to prophecy as “interpretation” is linked to “tongues,” “discerning” (Gr. *diakrisis*) is the noun form of the word to “judge” in 1 Cor.14:29
The “proving” or “testing” of prophecy (Gr.*dokimazo*) is also mentioned (1 Thess.5:21; 1 John 4:1)
Both Greek words speak of distinguishing the genuine from the false
- B. How does one “judge” prophecy?
 1. By revelation (1 Cor.14:29-30)
 2. Agreement with prior revelation (1 Kgs 13:7-9, 15-21; Isa. 8:20) or apostolic teaching (1 Cor.14:37)

3. By its effect:

- Does it glorify Christ? (1 Cor.12:3)
- Does it edify, exhort or comfort the church? (1 Cor.14:3)
- Does it bring confusion? (1 Cor.14:33)
- If it predicts something, does it come true? (Deut.18:22; Acts 11:27-28)

8) *Different kinds of Tongues* (v.10)

A. Meaning: Spontaneous utterance, by the power of Holy Spirit, in a language unknown by the speaker

B. Differs from Prophecy

- 1) It is addressed to God, whereas, in prophecy, God addresses people (1 Cor.14:2, 14, 16-17)
- 2) It edifies the speaker, but not the church, if not interpreted (1 Cor.14:4, 18-19; Jude 20)

C. "Kinds" of tongues

1) A sign to unbelievers (1 Cor.14:21-22; Acts 2)

- Involves speaking a recognizable language
- Needs no interpretation
- Is not known to be used for evangelism by missionaries to people of foreign lands

2) Ministry to edify the church

- A language not understood by anyone present (1 Cor.14:2)
- Should be restricted to a limited number (1 Cor.14:27)
- Must be done in orderly manner (1 Cor.14:39-40)
- Requires interpretation (1 Cor.14:5, 28)

3) Private and devotional (1 Cor.14:4, 28; Jude 20)

- Praying "in the Spirit" (1 Cor.14:15-16; Eph.6:18)
- Prayers beyond our comprehension (1 Cor.14:14; Rom.8:26-27)
- Is it a language of angels? (1 Cor.13:1)

D. It is under the control of the speaker (1 Cor.14:27-28)

9) *The Interpretation of Tongues* (v.10)

A. Meaning: The supernatural ability through the Holy Spirit to render into a known language the otherwise unintelligible utterance of someone speaking in tongues.

B. This is not the natural ability of a bi-lingual person to translate what someone has said from one language to another.

C. There were, in some churches, those known to have this gift, called "interpreters" (1 Cor.14:28)

D. The speaker in tongues might also give the interpretation (1 Cor.14:13)

A. Additional gifts from Paul's list in Romans 12:6-8

1) *Ministry* (v.7 NKJV) or "service" (NASB, ESV, CSB, NIV)

- A. Meaning: Greek word: *diakonia* means “serviceable labor” or “assistance.” This can refer to any practical help to others that one provides. Unlike ordinary service, but like all the gifts, this work is done “in the name of Jesus Christ” (Col.3:17)—that is, as His representative, acting in His place.
- B. No doubt the same gift that Paul calls “helps” or “helping” in 1 Corinthians 12:28
- C. The work may be something that anyone can do, but when it is done unto the Lord, and anointed by His Spirit, it carries additional blessing to those served by it. The service is done, “with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 4:11).
- D. This gift is associated with those who are called “deacons” and “deaconesses”—meaning “servants.” Such people were early recognized and honored with management of special tasks for the practical needs of the church (see Acts 6:2-3).
- E. The motive for serving should not be tainted by lust for self-promotion, but humble service often prepares one for promotion to even more significant functions —e.g., Joshua, who served Moses and succeeded him to leadership. Likewise Elisha, who succeeded Elijah. Stephen and Philip began in this role and both became effective public speakers—as an apologist and as an evangelist, respectively. Then again, there is Jesus, who took on the form of a servant, and was subsequently highly exalted by God (Phil.2:5-10). See also 1 Timothy 3:13.
- F. Humble servanthood may be the path to greatness, but in another sense humble servanthood is greatness itself (Matt.20:26-28).

2) *Teaching* (v.7), also referred to in the lists of 1 Cor.12:28 and Eph.4:11

- A. Meaning: Greek, *didaskalos*, an “instructor.” Paul seems to place teachers third in importance, after apostles and prophets (1 Cor.12:28). The word correlates with *mathetes*, a “disciple” or “learner.” All Christians are disciples. Some (not all—1 Cor.12:29) also instruct others.
- B. Ultimately, the teacher of every believer is the Holy Spirit (1 John 2:27; John 14:26). This ministry of the Spirit is often carried out through the gift of teaching resident in the body of Christ.
- C. Though, in Paul’s day, a teacher was not necessarily what we might call a “Bible Teacher,” it is nonetheless the church’s commission to make disciples by teaching them to observe what Christ commanded (Matt.28:19-20).
- D. The transmission of the faith from one generation of Christians to the next is the task of teachers (2 Tim.2:2)
- E. The “gift” of teaching does not refer to a natural aptitude, though such an aptitude may exist and be utilized by the Holy Spirit to edify the church spiritually (supernaturally).
- F. Though all should be capable of teaching the basics of the faith to others (Heb.5:12; 2 Tim.2:24), some are specially called and gifted as teachers for the body of Christ.
- G. One should not be over-eager to be a teacher in the body of Christ (James 3:1)
- H. Though not all who teach would be church leaders, it was a special qualification and duty of those called “elders” or “overseers” to be teachers in the church (1 Tim.3:2; Tit.1:5, 9).

- I. Though Paul did not wish for women to be elders (1 Tim.2:12; 3:2), he had no problem with the fact that women may be gifted and called to teach other women (Tit.2:2-5), or children (2 Tim.1:5; 3:15), or men, informally (Acts 18:26)—i.e., not in an authoritarian role over them.

3) Exhortation (v.8)

- A. Meaning: Greek, *parakaleo* means to implore, entreat, encourage, comfort
- B. This is probably what we normally think of as pulpit “preaching” (as opposed to “teaching”)
- C. Of course, the pulpit is not the only venue for the exercise of this ministry (Heb.3:13; 10:25)
- D. This is one of the functions of church leaders (1 Thess.5:14; 2 Tim.4:2; Tit.1:9) and of the gift of prophecy (1 Cor.14:3)

4) Giving (v.8)

- A. Meaning: Supplying material support for the needs of the church’s members (2 Cor.8 & 9), its laborers (1 Cor.9:7-11; 1 Tim.5:17-18; Gal.6:6), and the poor (Mark 10:21; 14:7; Luke 12:33).
- B. Must not be done to be seen or applauded by others (Matt.6:1-4; Rom.12:8).
- C. This is the duty of all believers (Tit.3:14). There is no mention of amounts (e.g., a tithe) in the New Testament.
- D. Those who are wealthy bear particular responsibility to give (Acts 4:34-35; 1 Tim.6:17-19).
- E. One needn’t be poor to bless others in giving. Sometimes there is more significance in the sacrificial gift of one who can barely afford to give (Luke 21:1-4; 2 Cor.8:1-3).

5) Leadership (v.8)

- A. Meaning: Greek, *proistemi*, meaning “to stand before, to preside.” Those who took this role in the early church were referred to as *hegeomai*, meaning “leaders” (Heb.13:7, 17).
- B. This ministry is carried out by men who were alternately called “overseers” (Acts 20:28; Phil.1:1; 1 Tim.3:1, 4-5; Tit.1:7), “elders” (Acts 14:23; 20:17; 1 Tim.5:17; Tit.1:5; 1 Pet.5:1), or “shepherds” (Eph.4:11—“pastors” in most English versions). Husbands have similar leadership responsibility over their families (1 Tim.3:4-5).
- C. This is not a position comparable to politic authority, but a service performed on behalf of others (Matt.20:25-28; 1 Thes.5:12-13).
- D. Leaders are shepherds of God’s flock (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet.5:2). The role of a shepherd is to lead, to feed and to protect the sheep. They must give an account for their sheep (John 17:13; Heb.12:17)
- E. In addition to teaching (feeding) the primary means of biblical leadership is to go ahead of others, setting an example to be followed (John 15:13-15; 1 Cor.11:1; 1 Tim.4:12; 1 Pet.5:3; James 5:10)

- F. Active leadership is not imposed upon healthy or mature individuals. It is primarily for the sake of those who are weak or who tend to stray (Luke 15:4; 1 Thess.5:14)

6) *Showing mercy* (v.8)

- A. Meaning: Involvement in the relief of the miserable and the restoration of the alienated. Hence, showing mercy amounts to assistance to the needy, and extension of forgiveness to, and acceptance of, the fallen.
- B. Evangelism and hospitality would be aspects of this ministry.
- C. Giving comfort and sympathy to the marginalized, and counseling the distressed would also fall into this category.
- D. When imagining the *gift of showing mercy*, picture Mother Theresa of Calcutta

V. Identifying and exercising your gifts

- A. It goes without saying that prerequisite to exercising a spiritual gift is that the believer be filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8; 2:4; 4:8; 6:3; 11:24; 13:9).
- B. As we “walk in the Spirit” the ministry of the Spirit through us will emerge naturally.
- C. It is more important that we walk in the Spirit, and manifest the fruit of the Spirit, which is love (Rom.5:5; Gal.5:22), than that we identify and label our own spiritual gift (1 Cor.12:31).
- D. It is probable that other Christians will recognize your spiritual gift before you do. As you walk in love, and serve the body of Christ in ways that God opens up to you, your gifts will manifest.
- E. Even the greatest of the gifts is of little value unless it is carried out with love as its motive and method (1 Cor.13:1-3)