

What Are Spiritual Gifts?

By Pastor David C. Forsyth

Concern and confusion over the topic of spiritual gifts abounds in the Church today. The influence of the Charismatic Movement has heightened the interest in the subject, however, it has not provided much in the way of clear Biblical teaching. Thus if we are to come to a true understanding of this vital topic we must turn to the Word of God.

First Corinthians chapters 12-14 is the Bible's longest treatment of the subject of spiritual gifts, with supplementary information given in Romans 12:3-8, Ephesians 4:1-16, and I Peter 4:7-11. In a nutshell, **spiritual gifts are a divine enabling or ability, given by the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer that equips them to do ministry.** This enabling may be an amplification of an already possessed natural talent, or a completely new ability that the believer never possessed prior to conversion. It is important to note that people have many natural talents such as singing, writing, and sewing, which are not spiritual gifts. This is proven by the unbelievers who also excel at these crafts yet are without the Spirit of God. In addition, the desire or aptitude for ministry with a particular age group is not a spiritual gift, thus in spite of what people may claim, they do not have the "spiritual gift" of working with children or teens.

Sometimes theologians divide spiritual gifts up into "miraculous" and "non-miraculous," with the miraculous gifts being tongues, healing, prophecy, miracles, interpretation, and knowledge. We however prefer to view the gifts under three categories: foundational gifts, non-foundational gifts, and gifted men. In Ephesians 4:11 Paul writes that Christ gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, and teaching-pastors to His church as gifts. According to Eph. 2:20 the apostles and prophets were foundational gifts upon which the church was built, thus when they died they took their function with them. There is a difference of opinion as to whether the gift of evangelism has continued in the life of the church, or whether the only gifted men that remain from Paul's list in Eph. 4:11 are the pastor-teachers.

The **foundational gifts** are the gifts that relate to the giving of divine revelation to guide and instruct the Church during the apostolic age. These gifts, such as tongues, knowledge, prophecy, interpretation etc. are the "miraculous gifts" that were no longer necessary once the Church reached maturity and the Canon of Scripture was closed (I Cor. 13:8-13).

Finally, the **non-foundational gifts** are those gifts that relate to the ongoing health and functioning of the body of Christ. These gifts rarely receive much mention, however, they are extremely important. Examples of these gifts include such things as service, helping, encouraging, giving, administration, faith, etc. (Rom. 12:7, 1 Cor. 12:28).

What Is Their Purpose?

The purpose of spiritual gifts is very simple, **they are for the common good - to build up the Body of Christ and enable it to serve one another (I Cor. 12:7; I Pet. 4:10)**. Thus to use your spiritual gift for your own private benefit is a corruption of what God intended.

Although many people rank spiritual gifts according to some kind of hierarchy in which the flashier ones are considered more valuable, the apostle Paul labored in I Cor. 12:13-27 to demonstrate that all gifts were essential to the body and necessary for its proper functioning.

What Is My Spiritual Gift?

It is important for our understanding of spiritual gifts to recognize that everyone does not have the same gift; in addition, nobody has all the gifts (I Cor. 12:29-30). Also we must assert, based upon I Corinthians 7 & 11, that each believer has a spiritual gift. So, the question is can people have more than one spiritual gift? The answer to that question is given by Paul in I Cor. 12:4, **“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit.”** Paul’s reference in this verse to “varieties” may refer to the fact that he listed eight gifts in the verses that follow (8-10). However, in light of the fact that Paul gave four lists of gifts, in which there is only modest overlap, we conclude that the variety that he is referring to is based upon the various combinations of gifts that the Spirit gives to each believer. We would thus understand the spiritual giftedness of a particular believer to be a combination of two or more of the spiritual gifts listed by Paul in the Roman, Corinthian, or Ephesian epistles. Perhaps these lists can be likened to the colors of a painter’s palette from which he mixes various combinations in order to paint a beautiful picture.

Finally, a word needs to be said about whether a believer can change their spiritual gifts, acquire additional ones, or grow in the gifts that they do possess. With regard to changing or acquiring new gifts, Paul wrote in I Cor. 12:11 that God sovereignly bestows the gifts upon people, and places them in the body according to His will and desire (I Cor. 12:18). Thus the spiritual gifts are just that – gifts over which we exert no influence in their distribution. This means that the notion of praying for a certain spiritual gift is without Biblical precedence.

This position is challenged by some who interpret Paul’s statement in I Cor. 12:31 **“But earnestly desire the greater gifts,”** as a directive to seek after certain spiritual gifts, but that ignores the whole context of the discussion in chapters 12-14. What Paul is saying in verse 31 is that the Corinthians should stop valuing tongues so highly, and instead desire to see the other gifts such as prophecy assume their rightful place of

prominence.¹ We can however, develop our spiritual gift through exercise (Ro. 12:6), or neglect it to the detriment of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:26).

We trust that this short study has been profitable for you and contributes to your obedient walk of faith. *Psalm 119:105*

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For further study we recommend the following:

1. The Holy Spirit – John Walvoord
2. The Holy Spirit – Charles Ryrie
3. Spiritual Gifts (tape series) – John MacArthur
4. Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit – Thomas Edgar

¹ Kistemaker, Simon J., *1 Corinthians*, Baker: Grand Rapids, 1993, pg. 445-46.