

# **A Balanced Approach to Spiritual Gifts**

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“Christian service as designed and represented in the New Testament is far more orderly and effective than the more or less accidental and disarranged efforts which now receive that name. In the early church, none were released to service who were not thought to be Spirit-filled, and the possession of spiritual gifts was recognized and these gifts were intelligently employed. That all this has now become almost lost to view and foreign to present conditions is evident.”--Lewis Sperry Chafer, 1948

## **How important are spiritual gifts?**

Spiritual gifts must be of some importance, for Paul said that ignorance of them is undesirable (1 Cor 12.1). They are significant enough to merit discussion in four NT epistles. However, we should beware of paying too much attention to them. One of the reasons Paul wrote 1 Corinthians was to correct a misguided and excessive emphasis on spiritual gifts. It is important to note that many themes, such as surrender, holiness, and service, are more central to NT teaching than spiritual gifts.

## **Where does the Bible discuss spiritual gifts?**

The major NT passages that discuss spiritual gifts are listed below:

- Romans 12.3-8
- 1 Corinthians 12-14
- Ephesians 4.7-12
- 1 Peter 4.10-11

## **What are spiritual gifts?**

Spiritual gifts are supernatural endowments for service to Christ and his church. They are granted to believers according to the sovereign disposition of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12.4-11).

## **What is the purpose of spiritual gifts?**

Spiritual gifts are given for the primary purpose of edifying the local church (1 Cor 14.12, 26; Eph 4.12ff). The gifts exist for the benefit of the body, not for the advancement of individual believers (1 Cor 14.2, 4-5).

## What kinds of spiritual gifts exist?

Specific spiritual gifts are mentioned in each of the major passages listed above, identifying about twenty different ministries in the church. Many of the gifts are not defined. No NT text contains an inclusive list of available gifts, nor can it be said with certainty that all available gifts are named in the NT. What we do know is that God gives believers a diversity of enablements for service to and through the church (1 Cor 12.4-7). Following is a list of gifts and/or functions mentioned in the NT:

- prophets/prophecy/speaking (Rom 12.6; 1 Cor 12.10, 28; 13.8; Eph 4.11; 1 Pet 4.11)
- ministry (Rom 12.7; 1 Pet 4.11)
- (pastors and) teachers/teaching/doctrine (Rom 12.7; 1 Cor 12.28; 14.6, 26; Eph 4.11)
- exhortation (Rom 12.8)
- giving (Rom 12.8)
- ruling/governments (Rom 12.8; 1 Cor 12.28)
- mercy-showing (Rom 12.8)
- (word of) wisdom (1 Cor 12.8)
- (word of) knowledge (1 Cor 12.8; 13.2, 8; 14.6)
- faith (1 Cor 12.9; 13.2)
- (gifts of) healing (1 Cor 12.9, 28, 30)
- (workers/working of) miracles (1 Cor 12.10, 28, 29)
- discerning of spirits (1 Cor 12.10)
- kinds/diversities of tongues (1 Cor 12.10, 28; 13.8; 14.26)
- interpretation of tongues (1 Cor 12.10, 30; 14.26)
- apostles (1 Cor 12.28, 29; Eph 4.11)
- helps (1 Cor 12.28)
- revelation (1 Cor 14.6, 26)
- psalm (1 Cor 14.26)
- evangelists (Eph 4.11)

## Are all spiritual gifts available today?

This is a question that divides evangelical Christians today. There are essentially two poles of opinion. *Charismatics* believe that all gifts available in the NT period, including speaking in tongues, prophesying, and healing, are still present among God's people. On the other hand, *cessationists* believe that the sign gifts (those involving miraculous activity of one sort or another) ceased after the apostolic period. Most Baptists hold to the latter view. Arguments for cessationism include the following:

- The sign gifts, revelational and miraculous in character, seem unnecessary following the completion of the canon of Scripture (1 Cor 13.8-13; Heb 2.4).
- Church history clearly indicates that certain gifts--such as serving, teaching, and evangelizing--have been present among God's people since the apostles. This can hardly be said of the sign gifts, which appear to have begun fading away toward the end of the New Testament period.

- The contemporary charismatic movement does not follow biblical prescriptions for the use of the gift of tongues (e.g., 1 Cor 14.23, 27-28) and is therefore at odds with the revealed will of God.
- Charismatic theology relies heavily on a corrective letter--1 Corinthians--and a historical book that describes a transitional period--Acts. These are inadequate foundations for major doctrines.

## **How are spiritual gifts to be used?**

The bulk of NT teaching on the gifts has to do with their appropriate use. Following is a list of principles to follow:

- The proper use of the gifts flows out of a life that is surrendered to God and separate from sin (Rom 12. 1-2).
- The purpose of the gifts is to contribute to the spiritual growth of the church (1 Cor 14.12). They should be used to bring glory to Christ rather than to advance human agendas (1 Cor 12.3-6; 1 Pet 4.11). We are to see ourselves as stewards who are accountable for the proper use of the gifts of the Spirit (1 Pet 4.10).
- The gifts should always be used in love. Love is mentioned in the context of each of the four major passages that discuss spiritual gifts (Rom 12.9-10; 1 Cor 13; Eph 4.2, 15-16; 1 Pet 4.8). The message of 1 Corinthians 13 is that spiritual service is necessarily motivated by love.
- The gifts should be exercised in the spirit of dignity, humility, unity, and service (Rom 12.3; 1 Cor 12.12ff; 1 Pet 4.10). The gifts serve corporate ends rather than personal ones, thus the health of the church should always direct their use.
- Spiritual service should be characterized by order, not disorganization or confusion (1 Cor 14.33, 40).

## **How can spiritual gifts be discovered?**

The NT has little, if anything, to say about how to discover spiritual gifts. It assumes that believers will naturally exercise their gifts as they participate in ministry in the local church. Consequently, spiritual gifts tests should be viewed as means of confirming what you know about yourself through involvement in ministry activities. They cannot be expected to identify the gift(s) of an inactive Christian.

“We may not discover all the gifts given at salvation, but I am inclined to believe that we have them all at that time. As we grow, other gifts may come to light to use at different times in our life, but likely we possess them all from conversion. Probably we cannot say what particular combination of gifts we have until we can look back over our lives and see what ones God used through all of our days.”-- Charles C. Ryrie, 1986

There is no reason to believe that Christians are endowed with only one gift, or even that we all receive an equal number of gifts. While some of us may be more or less gifted than others, we can rest assured that God has equipped each of us with all the resources we need to serve him effectively (Rom 12.3; 1 Cor 12.7; Eph 4.7). Each of us has something valuable to contribute to the life of the church body (1 Cor 12.12-27).

### **Do spiritual gifts make Christians more capable than unbelievers?**

At first glance it might seem that by giving us spiritual gifts, God has made Christians more endowed than unbelievers. In one sense this is true, for by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit we who were servants of sin have become servants of the Lord (Rom 6.17-19). In another sense, however, spiritual gifts might be seen as remedies for natural deficiencies. In other words, God might gift us at salvation to compensate for our weaknesses. After all, few believers are wise, strong, or noble according to human standards (1 Cor 1.18-29).

### **How do spiritual gifts relate to Christian service?**

There is no doubt that spiritual gifts are intrinsically connected to Christian service. However, it seems necessary to emphasize that effective ministry is not tied to an awareness of spiritual gifts. Christians may serve faithfully yet not be able to identify their gifts. It is much more important for believers to focus on developing a proper relationship with the Lord, which will naturally bring forth the fruit of ministry. There are at least eight conditions of Christian service; only the last has to do with a person's gifts and skills.

- Experience of salvation (Rom 6.17-22)
- Surrender to God's will (Rom 12.1)
- Pattern of spiritual growth (2 Pet 3.18; Col 2.6-9)
- Commitment to holiness (Rom 12.2)
- Affiliation with a local church (1 Cor 12.4-13, 27-28)
- Service to fellow men (Lk 10.25-37)
- Attitude of volunteerism (2 Cor 8.1-9)
- Understanding of self (Rom 16.1-15, 21-23)

### **Where can I read more about spiritual gifts?**

Carson, D. A. *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14*. Approaches the major passage on spiritual gifts from exegetical, theological, linguistic, and historical perspectives. The author takes somewhat of a middle position between cessationism and the charismatic view.

Chafer, Lewis S. *Pneumatology*. Vol. 6 of *Systematic Theology*. Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948. 215-20. Develops a practical theology of spiritual gifts. Predates the growth of the

charismatic movement during the second half of the twentieth century. Relies heavily on the writing of John F. Walvoord.

Houghton, Myron J. "A Reexamination of 1 Corinthians 13:8-13." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153 (1996): 344-56. Analyzes 1 Corinthians 13:8-13, concluding that the text supports the cessationist view of the sign gifts. The author's arguments are based primarily on his claim that the three gifts in view (prophecy, tongues, and knowledge) are revelational and thus were superseded upon the completion of the canon.

Robertson, O. Palmer. *The Final Word: A Biblical Response to the Case for Tongues and Prophecy Today*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1993. Defends the finality of the NT revelation, denying that prophecy, tongues, and revelation are valid today.

Ryrie, Charles C. *Basic Theology*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1986. 367-74. Provides a brief introduction to the theology and practice of the gifts. Includes descriptions of various gifts.

Spittler, Russell P. "Spiritual Gifts." *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. Ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley. 4th ed. 4 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979-88. Surveys biblical teaching on spiritual gifts, including terminology, varieties, descriptions, and practice.

Thomson, J. G. S. S., and Walter A. Elwell. "Spiritual Gifts." *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Ed. Walter A. Elwell. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984. 1042-46. Defines spiritual gifts in general and describes nearly twenty specific gifts.