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# SPIRITUAL GIFTS

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A STUDY OF GIFTS IN  
1 CORINTHIANS 12-14

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*Spiritual Gifts: A Study of Gifts in 1 Corinthians 12-14*

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## **Spiritual Gifts: A Study of Gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 - 14**

You would not think that expressions of God's grace would cause controversy or division among God's people. However, that certainly happened in the early Christian church at Corinth. God's grace had been poured out upon the Corinthians with gifts He chose to give them. The apostle Paul writes: "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge – even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you – so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:4-7).

The Corinthians had received gifts from God, but they needed significant correction in their use of those gifts. Paul's correction in chapters 12, 13, and 14 of 1 Corinthians provides immensely valuable teaching on the purpose of spiritual gifts, the oneness of Christ's body, and our call to demonstrate love by seeking the welfare of others over our own interests. Paul's instruction to the Corinthians can help us avoid divisions over the use of spiritual gifts today.

Paul begins chapter 12 by noting that Christians should understand spiritual gifts. He writes, "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed" (1 Corinthians 12:1). Paul goes on to name several spiritual gifts, however, he does not define each of the gifts he names, leaving us somewhat uninformed. Fortunately, we have much Scripture that acquaints us with spiritual gifts, and there are other biblical passages that can help us be better informed about the gifts listed in 1 Corinthians 12.

### **Spiritual Gifts Throughout Scripture**

The Greek word often used in passages about spiritual gifts is transliterated as "charisma." It is derived from the word "charis" that is translated as "grace." Therefore, we can understand that spiritual gifts are expressions of God's grace to His people. There are several lists of spiritual gifts in the New Testament that use a form of the word "charisma" for God-given gifts. The list in Romans 12 reveals

seven gifts: prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading, and showing mercy. The list in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 includes the utterance (word) of wisdom, the word of knowledge, faith, gifts of healings (both words are plural in Greek), the working of miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, tongues, and the interpretation of tongues. A list at the end of 1 Corinthians 12 notes additional gifts, some of which might be considered “offices.” This group includes the offices of apostle, prophet, and teacher, and again notes miracles, healing, and tongues. The list also notes a gift of “helping” and one of “administrating.” The apostle Peter notes gifts of speaking and serving (1 Peter 4:10-11).

The list of gifts noted above is not exhaustive. For example, the apostle Paul refers to his singleness as a gift when he writes, “I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift (charisma) from God, one of one kind and one of another” (1 Corinthians 7:7). While Scripture does not specify musical skill as a gift, it would certainly seem that the Lord has gifted certain people to lead others in worship through singing. In the Book of Exodus, we read of Bezalel, whom God filled with the Holy Spirit, “to devise artistic designs” (Exodus 31:1-5). Artistic craftsmanship can be a gift, or enabling, of the Spirit.

The most important thing to note about spiritual gifts is that God gives them to His people to serve His kingdom and benefit others. In every New Testament passage that lists gifts, there is an emphasis on seeking the good of others. The apostle Peter summarizes this principle well when he writes, “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace” (1 Peter 4:10).

## Defining the Gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10

Even though the apostle Paul does not define each of the nine gifts he lists in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, some writers have attempted to do so. In his classic book, Dynamics of Spiritual Life, Dr. Richard Lovelace<sup>1</sup> provides these definitions:

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1 Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1979), 125.

The Word of Wisdom: a momentary insight reflecting the mind of Christ toward a particular problem or situation

The Word of Knowledge: awareness of factual knowledge by direct revelation

Faith: a special inspiration to believe that God will answer a particular prayer or move in a specific way

Gifts of Healings: ability to restore health supernaturally

Working of Miracles: ability to do more extraordinary works such as raising the dead

Prophecy: contemporary revelation of the mind of God

Discerning of Spirits: detection of demonic influence

Tongues: fragmentary utterances in other languages, the meaning of which is unknown to the speaker

Interpretation of Tongues: the ability to reflect the meaning of these utterances, not by translation but by spontaneous revelation

Does Scripture give us examples of these gifts and further insight into what they are? I believe it does.

## The Word of Wisdom

First Kings chapter 3 may provide us with an example of the word of wisdom. King Solomon was presented with a dilemma when two women came before him with a dispute. Each woman had an infant son. The child of one woman had died during the night, and a dispute arose as to whom the living son belonged. Solomon called for a sword and ordered that the living child be divided in half between the two women. The mother of the living child cried out, “Oh, my lord, give her the living child, and by no means put him to death” (1 Kings 3:26). Solomon then knew he had identified the true mother by her care for the life of her son. The people of Israel then perceived that “the wisdom of God” had been given to Solomon.

Have you ever been faced with a situation in which there seemed to be no clear answer or solution? Perhaps it was a dilemma that could result in significant harm if a wrong decision were made. It is always appropriate to pray for God's wisdom as we are directed to do in James 1:5-6. When an answer comes to mind that we had not previously considered, perhaps we have been given the gift of the word of wisdom.

## The Word of Knowledge

Scripture is filled with examples of what might be considered the word of knowledge. These are situations in which God made known something to someone that could not have been known apart from His revelation. The Old Testament provides numerous examples of prophets speaking of things only God could have revealed to them. For example, the prophet Samuel told Saul that his lost donkeys had been found (1 Samuel 9:20). The New Testament records Jesus knowing the thoughts of the scribes (Matthew 9:4). Jesus knew the Samaritan woman at the well had had five husbands (John 4:18). And, in Acts 5:1-11, Peter knew details about Ananias and Sapphira, who had attempted to deceive the apostles and "lie to the Holy Spirit."

Famous preacher Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) related an incident when he broke off from his sermon, pointed in a certain direction, and said, "Young man, those gloves you are wearing have not been paid for; you have stolen them from your employer." After the service, a troubled young man came to Spurgeon, placed a pair of gloves on a table and confessed to having stolen them!<sup>2</sup>

One of Spurgeon's hearers shared this account: "Mr. Spurgeon looked at me as if he knew me, and in his sermon he pointed to me, and told the congregation that I was a shoemaker, and that I kept my shop open on Sundays; and I did sir. I should not have minded that; but he also said that I took ninepence the Sunday before, and that there was fourpence profit out of it. I did take ninepence that day, and fourpence was just the profit; but how he should know that, I

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2 Charles H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, Vol. 2 (Edinburgh, The Full Harvest, Banner of Truth Trust, 1973), 60.

could not tell. Then it struck me that it was God who had spoken to my soul through him, so I shut up my shop the next Sunday. At first, I was afraid to go again to hear him, lest he should tell the people more about me; but afterwards I went, and the Lord met with me, and saved my soul.” Spurgeon recalled several incidents in his ministry that we might consider examples of the word of knowledge. Concerning these incidents, Spurgeon wrote, “I could tell as many as a *dozen* similar cases in which I pointed at somebody in the hall without having the slightest knowledge of the person, or any idea that what I said was right, except that I believed I was moved by the Spirit to say it.”<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps you have been praying with someone about a particular matter, and you then felt prompted to pray about something completely different. After your prayer, you learned that this other matter was one of great importance. Could it be that God’s gentle prompting to pray about that was a gift of the word of knowledge?

## Faith

What about the gift of faith? When God told Joshua to have his army march around Jericho for seven days and then the wall of the city would fall (Joshua 6), did that require unusual faith on Joshua’s part? I expect it did. When the prophet Elijah challenged 400 prophets of Baal to a test and he believed that God would send fire onto soaking wet wood to vindicate him (1 King 18), that must have required more than human faith.

The gift of faith may be present when we are enabled to trust God for something in a way that exceeds our usual degree of trust. If we are able to believe that He will answer a prayer for something that seems humanly impossible, it may be that we have received a gift of faith.

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3 Sam Storms, *Tough Topics – Biblical Answers to 25 Challenging Questions* (Wheaton, Crossway, 2012), 248.

## Gifts of Healings

Gifts of healings are seen in both Old and New Testaments. In Numbers 12, Moses' sister, Miriam, was healed of leprosy in response to Moses' prayer. In 2 Kings 5, we read of Naaman, a Syrian leper, being healed when he washed in the Jordan river at the word of Elisha. The New Testament records many healings by Christ and others by the apostles. When Philip, a deacon, went to Samaria to preach, "many who were paralyzed or lame were healed" (Acts 8:7).

As noted earlier, 1 Corinthians 12 uses the plural form for both words in presenting "gifts of healings." This implies there may be different types of manifestations of this gift. We often assume that a person through whom God brings healing to another has this gift. But perhaps it is the person who is healed who has received a gift of healing. Either way, we should remember that this gift, like the other gifts in this list, is given as the Spirit wills. When we approach God for healing, whether for ourselves or others, we should put our trust in God alone, and not in a human being.

## The Working of Miracles

The working of miracles is another gift that is seen in both Old and New Testaments. The prophets Elijah and Elisha were both associated with miraculous displays of God's power. Miracles accompanied Jesus' ministry as He multiplied food to feed thousands and walked on water. The apostles Paul and Peter each raised someone from the dead. And, a deacon named Stephen "was doing great wonders and signs among the people" (Acts 7:8).

Miracles were often used to point people to God as the all-powerful, true and living God. This gift often demonstrated God's power before unbelievers. When Peter raised a woman named Tabitha from death and presented her alive, "many believed in the Lord" (Acts 9:42). The working of miracles can be especially valuable when the gospel is being presented in unreached areas. Countless testimonies from missionaries attest to this.



## Prophecy

It is important to distinguish between the use of prophecy in Old and New Testaments. The difference is extremely important. In the Old Testament, prophets were God's primary spokespersons. Their words were to be the very words of God. As Peter would later write of the prophecies of Scripture: "men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21).

In the New Testament, the apostles were God's primary spokesmen. They conveyed the teachings of Jesus, explained the gospel, and their words established doctrine for the churches. Therefore, the gift of prophecy in the New Testament is very different from Old Testament prophecy. New Testament prophecy is defined for us by the apostle Paul when he writes, "the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation" (1 Corinthians 14:3). Later in the same chapter, Paul says that prophecy must be judged, or weighed (1 Corinthians 14:29). It must be evaluated for truthfulness and consistency with the purposes of edification (upbuilding), encouragement, and consolation (comfort). In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul writes, "Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5: 19-21). In other words, the New Testament gift of prophecy must be judged – weighed, tested, and evaluated.

This leads to perhaps the most important point concerning the evaluation of spiritual gifts: *Scripture is Infallible. The Operation of Spiritual Gifts is Not*. Scholar Wayne Grudem makes this point clearly when he writes, "All other gifts and teachings today are to be subject to the words of Scripture and are to be judged by them. No other gift, teaching, or writing should be allowed to compete with them for absolute priority in our lives."<sup>4</sup>

With this background about the difference between Old and New Testament prophecy, and in light of Paul's statement about the purpose of prophecy in 1 Corinthians 14:3, I think we can define prophecy as Spirit-prompted speech that edifies, encourages, or comforts others. With this understanding, it may be that prophecy is much more common than we realize. Perhaps that is why the apostle

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4 Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Wheaton, Crossway, 1988), 49.

Paul strongly encourages believers to seek this gift: “Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy” (1 Corinthians 14:1).

## **Discerning of Spirits**

It is likely that the gift of discerning of spirits was given to the apostle Paul when he, Silas, and Timothy were in Philippi. As they were going to a prayer meeting, a slave girl who told fortunes began following them, crying out, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation” (Acts 16:17). What the young girl said was true, but Paul discerned that the spirit at work in her was not from God. After several days of this, Paul spoke to the spirit in her and said, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her” (Acts 16:18). The evil spirit left her at Paul’s command. How did Paul know the girl had a demon? It seems clear that the Holy Spirit had revealed that to him.

There may be times when you hear someone saying things that sound right, but you sense that something is wrong. When I was a relatively young Christian, I went to a meeting in which the minister seemed to be telling people things he could have only known by some type of revelation. He seemed to believe and teach Scripture. Yet, I sensed something was not right about him and did not go forward with others to receive prayer from him. I was very thankful that the Lord had protected me when I read years later of his being charged with a crime. The gift of discerning of spirits may help us to distinguish whether the power at work in someone is good or bad.

## **Various Kinds of Tongues and the Interpretation of Tongues**

The gift of tongues and the interpretation of tongues are unique to the New Testament. We are introduced to tongues in Acts 2:1-4 when 120 people were gathered on the Day of Pentecost. A sound “like a mighty rushing wind” filled the house where they were sitting, and “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:2-4). Later, Peter

preaches at the house of Cornelius and the Jewish believers with him were amazed when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon Gentiles. They recognized this because “they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God” (Acts 10:46). When Paul went to Ephesus, he spoke about Jesus to disciples of John the Baptist. After baptizing them in the name of Jesus, Paul laid his hands upon them and “the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying” (Acts 19:6).

When Paul lists the spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12, he refers to “various kinds of tongues.” Some have understood this gift to refer to any ability to learn new languages. Others think the gift of tongues always consists of known human languages. However, Paul gives further insight into the gift of tongues in 1 Corinthians 14:2 when he writes “For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit.” It seems clear that the gift of tongues described here is not a reference to human language. This is why Paul goes on to call for tongues to be interpreted in a public assembly. Otherwise, no one will understand what is being said. But when the gift of interpretation is in operation, the effect of the two together – tongues and interpretation – is equivalent to prophecy. Paul writes, “The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up” (1 Corinthians 14:5). The gifts of tongues and the interpretation of tongues must work together in a public assembly for hearers to be edified.

The gift of tongues is probably the most controversial of the nine gifts listed in 1 Corinthians 12. One reason for the controversy is that some have insisted upon the gift as evidence of one’s having been filled with the Holy Spirit. This view is based on the cases in the Book of Acts in which believers were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues. Insistence of tongues as evidence understandably causes a reaction from those who disagree, especially if they do not have the gift. It may also lead to an inordinate emphasis on this gift over others. While Paul himself certainly encourages both tongues and prophecy, he also notes that not all believers will have these gifts. In 1 Corinthians 12:29-30 he writes, “Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?” Paul clearly expects a

“no” answer to his question. His emphasis is on the unity in diversity of the body of Christ.

## How to Seek Spiritual Gifts

While the apostle Paul is not concerned with extensive explanations of spiritual gifts, he is very concerned with how those gifts are used. Most of his emphasis in 1 Corinthians 12-14 is upon the body of Christ and our call to honor others in Christ’s body. In chapter 13, Paul beautifully articulates the preeminence of love over gifts. Love for others must be foremost in our pursuit and use of spiritual gifts. Without love, our gifts are meaningless. But Paul calls us to pursue both love and spiritual gifts. He writes, “Pursue love and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts” (1 Corinthians 14:1). How should we seek spiritual gifts?

First, we should recognize that Paul’s teaching on the gifts emphasizes their benefit for the body of Christ, the church. Paul writes, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7). If we want spiritual gifts, we should seek the building up of others: “So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church” (1 Corinthians 14:12). If we want God to give us spiritual gifts, we should start by praying for the upbuilding of others in our small groups, discipleship meetings, or youth ministries.

Second, we should recognize that spiritual gifts are given in the sovereign wisdom of the Holy Spirit. In 1 Corinthians 12:11 it states, “All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.” We cannot demand a particular gift. We should seek the gifts that He knows will best equip us to bear the most fruit possible for the glory of God.

Third, we should seek, pray for, and earnestly desire spiritual gifts. Despite the problems with the use of gifts by the Corinthians, Paul still strongly commends their use and calls for believers to seek them. He writes, “But earnestly desire the higher gifts” (1 Corinthians 12:31). He begins chapter 14 with the words, “Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy”

(1 Corinthians 14:1). Paul knew that gifts like tongues and prophecy could be controversial in the Corinthian church, yet he encouraged pursuit of the gifts with the understanding that they be used properly. He ends his teaching on spiritual gifts with these words, “So my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But all things should be done decently and in order” (1 Corinthians 14:39-40).

## Evaluating Guidance through Spiritual Gifts

When I was a young adult in my 20's, I had different people give me what they felt was guidance from the Lord. I am sure these Christians were well-intentioned, but if I had treated their personal words as definite messages from God, I would have attended the wrong church and married the wrong person! Even sincere Christians make mistakes when it comes to discerning God's leading, especially when it comes to discerning God's leading for someone else. That is why we need Scripture to provide us with God's unchanging and infallible truth. Any message we receive, whether through a prophecy, a word of knowledge, or interpretation of a tongue, must be evaluated in light of Scripture. If it contradicts Scripture, it should be rejected. We must remember that Scripture is God's settled truth. No message, whether through a preacher or via a spiritual gift, will add to or detract from Scripture.

Having understood that Scripture alone is infallible, how should we assess guidance or encouragement that seems to come from the Holy Spirit today? First, we should recognize that guidance through a prophecy or other gift will likely confirm what the Lord has already been showing us. In Acts 21, we read of the apostle Paul receiving a personal prophecy through a prophet named Agabus. Agabus predicted that the Jews in Jerusalem would bind Paul and deliver him to the Gentiles. When Paul's friends heard the prophecy, they begged him not to go to Jerusalem. But Paul was determined to go anyway. Unable to persuade Paul not to go, his friends said, “Let the will of the Lord be done” (Acts 21:14). How should we understand Paul's apparent disregard of the warning of a prophet? God had already warned Paul that he would suffer for his sake. As the Lord said to Ananias regarding Paul, “I will show him how much he must suffer

for the sake of my name” (Acts 9:16). Agabus’ prophecy was simply fulfilling God’s prior direction to Paul. Furthermore, Paul knew the Lord had called him to go to Jerusalem for the sake of the gospel. Obedience to God’s previously revealed will took precedence over how Paul’s friends understood a prophecy, even one from a recognized prophet like Agabus.

It certainly is possible that the Lord may give guidance through a prophetic word. That was the case with Timothy. Paul wrote to his young disciple, “Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you” (1 Timothy 4:14). It is worth noting that this prophecy, related to Timothy’s gifting for ministry, came through a mature group of church leaders. We cannot say for certain, but it may be that the prophecy served to confirm what the Lord was already showing Timothy in his heart.

We find another instance of guidance through a spiritual gift in Acts 13. Church leaders, including prophets and teachers, were worshiping and fasting when a message came from the Holy Spirit: “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (Acts 13:1-3). Barnabas and Saul then departed on what would be the first of the great missionary journeys by the one we know as the apostle Paul. Was Paul surprised by the direction given him in this prophecy? Perhaps, but it seems likely that the direction was just confirmation of what the Lord had said to Ananias when Paul was called, “he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel” (Acts 9:15).

What if a person receives guidance from a prophecy and it creates confusion or distress? I would recommend first submitting the message and your thoughts about it to mature and trusted elders and pastors. In his teaching on prophecy in the church, Paul notes that “God is not a God of confusion but of peace” (1 Corinthians 14:33). I think what is said of public prophecies could be said of personal words of guidance as well. In my opinion, you should never make a major life decision based on a prophecy or message from another person, no matter how well-intentioned that person might be. Always check that guidance with Scripture, the counsel of mature believers who know you well, and the sense of peace that God gives you in your heart.

Much meaningful edification, encouragement, and comfort can come through a gift of prophecy. Confirmation of God's guidance may even be given, but only Scripture is infallible.

## Questions and Answers about Spiritual Gifts

### **Why do some people believe that the spiritual gifts of 1 Corinthians 12 ceased with the apostles of the New Testament?**

Those who believe the gifts of 1 Corinthians 12 no longer exist are sometimes called cessationists. Those who believe the gifts continue today are referred to as continuationists. Some cessationists believe that the gifts ceased with the apostles. Others believe the gifts ceased when Scripture was compiled or canonized, which refers to those biblical books that were recognized as God's inspired Word.

Some cessationists point to 1 Corinthians 13:8-10 as evidence that the gifts passed away when the New Testament was compiled. That passage reads, "Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away." The important matter concerns what is meant by "the perfect." Verse 12 of the passage makes it clear: "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12). It seems clear that Paul is talking about the time when Jesus returns. It is then that we will see him face to face. Regarding this time, the apostle John writes, "when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). If the gifts of 1 Corinthians 12 had ceased with the compilation of the New Testament, it seems unreasonable that God would have included two extensive chapters on their proper use in the New Testament.

Many cessationists have high regard for Scripture and fear that belief in gifts like the word of knowledge, prophecy, and the interpretation of tongues may be regarded as equal to Scripture. But as we have seen, spiritual gifts are subordinate to Scripture and must be judged in light of Scripture. Scripture is infallible, but operation of the gifts is not. Scripture provides settled doctrine, but spiritual gifts do not.

And remember, it is Scripture itself that teaches us about the proper use and evaluation of the gifts.

One concern of cessationists has to do with unbiblical practices and abuses by those who claim to be charismatic. This concern is understandable and should be shared by continuationists. Television and the internet have provided platforms for those who seek to profit by what they claim to be displays of spiritual gifts. Self-proclaimed prophets often make predictions that have nothing to do with edifying, encouraging, or comforting God's people. For these reasons, spiritual gifts are best exercised and evaluated in the context of a local church, where Christians can observe the fruit in the lives of those who are gifted.

### **How can I know if I have a spiritual gift?**

It may be that the manifestation of a gift like the word of knowledge, the word of wisdom, or prophecy may be much less dramatic than you have thought. A gift might be in operation if you find the Lord puts a particular concern for someone on your heart. This does not mean you need to rush out and tell anyone of your concern. The Lord may simply want you to begin praying for that person.

Sometimes others will recognize the presence of a gift in your life. Someone may say, "You always seem to have the right word at the right time to encourage me in my faith." If the Lord gives you the gift of the word of wisdom on occasion, someone might recognize that you have an unusual ability to bring insights into difficult dilemmas. A gift can be recognized by the fruit that results.

It is likely that the use of a spiritual gift will require faith. It certainly takes faith to pray and trust for someone to be healed. It takes faith to begin teaching if you have a gift of teaching. Regarding prophecy, the apostle Paul wrote, "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them; if prophecy, in proportion to our faith" (Romans 12:6). The use of our gifts to serve others will almost certainly call for a step of faith.

### **What about praying in tongues?**

As we have seen, the apostle Paul taught that any message in tongues given in a public gathering should be interpreted to benefit others. But in discussing the public use of tongues, Paul also speaks of a use of tongues in prayer. He uses himself as an example in



1 Corinthians 14:14-19 when he writes:

*For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also. Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say 'Amen' to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying? For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up. I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.*

Paul is stressing the importance of tongues being interpreted in the public assembly so that others are edified. But in doing so, he points to the private use of tongues for prayer, praise, and giving thanks. He even gives thanks that “I speak in tongues more than all of you” (1 Corinthians 14:18), but notes that he is careful to speak in an understandable language in church. It seems evident that Paul frequently prayed and worshiped God in tongues in his personal devotional life. Regarding this passage, D.A. Carson writes, “We have already seen that Paul envisages praying with the spirit as a form of valid prayer and praise; what he will not permit is unintelligibility in the church. The only possible conclusion is that Paul exercised his remarkable tongues gift in private.”<sup>5</sup>

Later in chapter 14, Paul addresses others with the gift of tongues and reminds them that a message must be interpreted in any meeting of the church. He writes, “But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in the church and speak to himself and to God” (1 Corinthians 14:28). Notice that Paul does not say “let them keep silent in church and not speak at all.” He points to a private, devotional use of tongues for those who have this gift.

What is the benefit of praying in tongues? The verses in 1 Corinthians 14:14-16 point to the use of tongues for prayer, praise, and thanksgiving. In verse 4, Paul points to the benefit of personal spiritual edification saying, “The one who speaks in a tongue builds

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5 D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit – A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 1987), 105.

up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church” (1 Corinthians 14:4). Paul is again pointing to the priority of prophecy (or interpreted tongues) so that the church may be edified. But is it not also good for the individual to be edified? Yes, just not at the cost of edification for the church. The value of building up or edifying oneself in prayer is noted in Jude verses 20-21, “But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God.” Jude makes the point that building ourselves up in prayer is not wrong, but beneficial.

### **What is meant by 1 Corinthians 14:22 which reads, “tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers?”**

In chapter 14 of 1 Corinthians, verses 21-23 are certainly the most challenging to understand. Verse 21 reads, “In the Law it is written, ‘By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord.’” This verse is a quote from Isaiah 28:11, a verse that points to judgment on those who would not hear God’s message. It seems that the apostle Paul is using this verse to indicate that uninterpreted tongues in a church assembly does not benefit the hearers. However, interpreted tongues, like prophecy, can be used to bring conviction to unbelievers and become a positive “sign” to them. This may result in their turning to God and acknowledging “that God is really among you” (verse 25). Regarding this passage, Sam Storms writes, “When God speaks to people in a language they cannot understand, it is a form of punishment for unbelief... So, do not permit uninterpreted tongues speech in church, for in so doing, you run the risk of communicating a negative sign to people that will only drive them away.”<sup>6</sup>

This understanding of verses 21-23 fits the larger context of chapter 14. Throughout the chapter, Paul has been making the point that tongues must be interpreted in the church. In verse 16 he wrote, “Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit (Paul uses praying with ‘your spirit’ to refer to praying in tongues) how can anyone in the position of any outsider say ‘Amen’ to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying?” Paul is not merely concerned with believers who are present, but also with unbelievers,

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6 Sam Storms, *The Beginners Guide to Spiritual Gifts* (Ventura, Regal, 2012), 169-170.

or “outsiders.” He wants believers and unbelievers alike to understand what is said in church.

### **If the gifts of the Holy Spirit are available to the church today, why don't we see healings and miracles more often?**

Perhaps the best response to that question is that the Lord is sovereign in bestowing gifts upon His church. As Paul wrote regarding the gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:11, “All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.” The Holy Spirit not only gives gifts to whom He wills, but He gives them when and where He wills. There may be long periods of time in church history when gifts are not seen. Whether due to the lack of Christians seeking the gifts, as Paul calls us to do, or to God's sovereign plan, we cannot be sure. I once heard a minister who was discounting the present - day validity of gifts exclaim, “Show me a miracle and I'll believe in miracles!” He failed to understand that we cannot demand miracles or other gifts from God. They are given in His own time and way. Gifts are given by the Holy Spirit as He wills.

While healings and other gifts cannot be treated as rights to be demanded, Scripture should encourage us to pray for them. That is what the early Christians did when forbidden to preach the gospel. They prayed for God to give them boldness, “while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus” (Acts 4:30).

Just because we do not see dramatic healings and miracles in our experiences does not mean that God is not doing those things in other places. There are countless testimonies by missionaries of people coming to faith through healings in various parts of the world. There are thousands of reports of Muslims coming to faith in Jesus today after having become open to the gospel through a dream or vision. To deny the reality of God's miraculous works today would be to deny the numerous accounts provided by faithful missionaries around the globe.

### **Should we be concerned about counterfeit gifts?**

Believers should be aware that Satan is a counterfeiter. Just as we must be aware of false teachings, we must also be aware of deceivers who claim special powers in order to lead people astray from the gospel.

Jesus warned that such things would occur before His return, “For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect” (Matthew 24:24). This is one reason the gift of discerning of spirits may be especially valuable today.

But more important than any gift is a clear understanding of the gospel and a firm commitment to the authority of God’s Word. The believer who is walking with Jesus Christ, being guided by the Holy Spirit, need not fear falling prey to Satan’s deceptions.

The reality of counterfeit spiritual manifestations should not keep believers from pursuing God’s powerful works. Just as the existence of false teaching does not keep us from pursuing right teaching, so the existence of counterfeit gifts should not keep us from seeking genuine gifts. As Jesus taught us, when believers ask their heavenly Father for good gifts, He does not give them bad things (Luke 11:11-13).

## Conclusion

In his first letter to the Corinthians, there are several practices that the apostle Paul forbids: divisiveness in the church (chapters 1 and 3), sexual immorality (chapter 5), lawsuits against fellow-believers (chapter 6), and eating in an idol’s temple (chapter 8). There are other practices that Paul corrects so that Christians will undertake them properly and receive the benefits God intends from them. This is the case with the Lord’s Supper (chapter 11). Though some Corinthians were abusing this holy sacrament by disregarding others, Paul does not forbid the sacrament. Instead, he corrects their behavior so that they observe it properly.

Paul takes the same approach with spiritual gifts. He corrects abuses but does not disallow the gifts. To the contrary, he strongly encourages their pursuit. Paul uses the words “earnestly desire” three times regarding the pursuit of spiritual gifts in: 1 Corinthians 12:31, 14:1, and 14:39. These are not mere suggestions, but commands for believers to seek the grace gifts that God has given for the upbuilding of His church. To disregard gifts that God intends for His people may lead to quenching the Holy Spirit. Paul strongly warns against this

in his letter to the Thessalonians where he says, “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21).

The important issue is not whether we have a particular gift. The gifts are given as the Holy Spirit wills. What is important is that we are seeking all God has for us. We should daily seek His empowering presence to fill us, guide us, and use us in ministering to others. We should seek those gifts that He knows will make us more effective in doing the work of His kingdom. And we should always be looking for opportunities to love and build up other believers.

May the Lord make us people who are not lacking in any gifts, and who are using those gifts to give Him the greatest possible glory!

## Prayer

“Father, I come to You in the name of my Lord Jesus Christ, and I ask You to guide me in seeking those gifts You want me to have. Please give me a greater desire to build up and encourage others. May Your Holy Spirit so fill me with Your love that I will seek the good of others and never draw attention to myself. I pray that I will be a good steward of Your grace by using the gifts You give me. May I speak and serve in Your strength. May You be glorified in me through Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen.”

*As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies – in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever.*

*Amen.*

*1 Peter 4:10-11*



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