

Understanding Theology in 15 Minutes A Day for 40 Days

Day 25

What Are the Gifts of the Spirit?

In addition to his ministries surveyed in chapter 24, the Holy Spirit also gives “spiritual gifts.” The Greek term *charisma* comes from the family of words related to *grace* and therefore means something like “grace gift” or “free gift.” This term is used of the gift of salvation in general (**e.g., Romans 6:23**), but in other contexts it is used in a more specific sense of an ability given through the Holy Spirit to serve the body of Christ (the church).

For example, “*God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues*” (**1 Corinthians 12:28 NASB**). This verse is part of the major New Testament spiritual-gifts section: **1 Corinthians 12–14**. The other main texts that address this concept are **Romans 12:3–8**; **Ephesians 4:4–13**; and **1 Peter 4:10–11**. And it seems these lists are best understood as representative, not exhaustive. (In other words, there are probably spiritual gifts that do not appear in them.)

These are defined as abilities given *to serve the body of Christ* because of very clear purpose statements, such as **1 Corinthians 12:7**: “*To each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good,*” and **14:12**: “*Since you are eager for gifts of the Spirit, try to excel in those that build up the church*” (see also **14:26**; **Ephesians 4:15–16**). The main point is that these gifts are not given for our own individual benefit and enjoyment but rather for the benefit of others corporately, namely, our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Another clearly stated truth about spiritual gifts is that God sovereignly distributes them according to his will (**1 Corinthians 12:11, 18**). This means God has given each and every Christian a role and responsibility in the body of Christ and the supernatural ability, in the form of a spiritual gift or gifts, to fulfill it. He knows best how to orchestrate this, and we should be content with the gifts he chooses for us.

One Matter of Debate

A significant controversy in this area has divided Christians, and especially in the last century or so. Here is the question: Does God still give certain miraculous spiritual gifts (like working miracles, healing, prophecy [relaying directly given divine revelation], and speaking in tongues

[languages neither learned natively nor formally]], or were these given exclusively during the early days of the church? There are two camps in this discussion.

Cessationists believe that God ceased giving these particular gifts after the first century. As such, they were a part of what he was doing early on to authenticate the work and authority of the apostles (**Hebrews 2:4–6**) and through them to establish the church on its “foundation” (**Ephesians 2:20–22**); they are no longer necessary.

Continuationists believe that God has continued bestowing these gifts since the first century. One of their main points is that no biblical texts clearly state that these spiritual gifts were temporary and not for all the church throughout history.

A primary controversial passage is **1 Corinthians 13:8–10**:

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears.

Here Paul affirms that prophecy, tongues, and knowledge (supernaturally given) will indeed cease at some point. The question is when? More specifically, what does “when completeness comes” mean?

Cessationists say this phrase either means (1) when the New Testament canon is completed and we have God’s complete written revelation, or (2) when the church comes to a relative degree of “maturity” (which the Greek word translated *completeness* or *perfection* can mean), as opposed to its first-century infancy (v. 11 contrasts being a child and being a man). The Bible is complete; the church is no longer in its infancy, so these gifts are no longer needed.

Continuationists say this phrase refers to Christ’s second coming. This is what Paul means in saying, “*Now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known*” (**v. 12**). These gifts will cease only after Christ’s return (**compare 1 Corinthians 1:7**).

Cessationists also say these miraculous gifts essentially disappeared from history soon after the first century, and that this is evidence that God ceased to give them. **Continuationists**, while acknowledging that these gifts did seem to become less evident from the second century on, say this does not mean they ceased altogether. There seems to be at least limited evidence of

these gifts during various times of revival. Also, perhaps the relative laxity of the church explains the relative scarcity of such spiritual gifts.

Cessationists also have argued that when phenomena like speaking in tongues, miracles, and healing are documented in non-Christian religions, *these* certainly cannot be thought of as gifts of God. **Continuationists** counter that Satan's ability to counterfeit God's work and cause miracles does not mean *all* miraculous occurrences are counterfeits.

What Should Be Our Focus?

First, we should acknowledge that Scripture is not as clear regarding this issue as we might like it to be. For some reason, God did not see fit to answer all of our questions regarding miraculous spiritual gifts.

Second, we should realize that in the main biblical discussion of spiritual gifts—**1 Corinthians 12–14**—Paul is “troubleshooting,” writing to correct abuses in the Corinthian church. Even spiritual gifts can be abused; for example, they can be used or exercised out of pride or for one's own glory (Romans 12:3). We are to exercise spiritual gifts in keeping with their plainly stated purpose: to build up the church as a whole, not our own reputation or ego.

Third, as in all that believers do, our motive is as important as the act itself. This is why, at the very heart of this discussion, Paul gave us the great “love chapter” (**1 Corinthians 13**). The point is that if *any* spiritual gifts are motivated by *anything* other than love, they amount to *nothing* (**vv. 2–3**).

Fourth, though Paul does not say all we might like him to say on this topic, he gives unambiguous guidelines regarding the exercise of miraculous gifts in the gathering of Christ's body (**1 Corinthians 14:27–32**). Churches that do practice these gifts must carefully follow this biblical guidance.

Ironically, the manner in which this controversy about the miraculous spiritual gifts has been handled—by both sides—has often been divisive, contrary to the Spirit's own work to bring unity to the church (**Ephesians 4:3**). Everyone needs to (and most do) acknowledge that this issue is of secondary importance. For the sake of unity, we are to be gracious in holding our convictions while accepting and loving anyone with whom we may disagree.

INTERESTING FACT

There is no command to know one's spiritual gift(s). We may or we may not; either way it shouldn't bother us. Rather, we are to be willing to serve the body of Christ in some way. God will certainly direct us to a venue of service that coincides with the spiritual gift(s) he, through his Spirit, has given us.