

THE DIVERSITY OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS

1 Corinthians 12:4-11

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Perhaps you have been in the same theological dilemma I have found myself. You were flipping through the channels on the television late one night and you came across one of those religious programs that, being a good Southern Baptist, makes you more than a little uncomfortable. There stands a Pentecostal preacher, most assuredly not behind a pulpit, stirring up the congregation in what you have been brought up to believe is nothing more than a hyper-emotional frenzy or outright fanaticism. The preacher, or in this case, the prophet, receives a “fresh word from God” about a person who has some sort of physical ailment. He then describes the ailment so vividly that some person in the congregation, believing it to be them, comes to the altar. The preacher then asks for a word of testimony after which he asks the person if they have enough faith to be healed and set free from their temporal bondage. Upon affirmation of their faith, the preacher then lays hands on or in some cases blows a fresh breath of the Spirit upon the person. And the next thing you know, down the person goes in the arms of one waiting to catch them. All the while others in the congregation are speaking in tongues or private prayer language for what they know not because, by their own admission, they do not understand what they are saying. But this does not concern them because, after all, it is God’s language and He understands.

So what is the dilemma? My dilemma was that I knew, or I should say I *felt* that I knew, that these actions were wrong, but I did not know why. After all, doesn’t the Bible speak about things such as this? Further, is it really possible that the millions who believe these events are biblical could be wrong? You see, my dilemma was that while I knew it was wrong, I did not know why. Therefore, in the deep recesses of my heart, I questioned my own convictions because they were based on what I had been told was wrong, but those that who told me it was wrong never backed it up with Scripture.

This dilemma has led to the confusion we see in evangelical circles today concerning the area of spiritual gifts, particularly as it relates to the miraculous gifts. This morning we begin to look at some of these spiritual gifts that have caused this confusion in recent years. What we notice in our text is that *the believer is spiritually gifted by God’s grace for the spiritual benefit of the entire church.*

I. An Affirmation of Diversity (12:4-7, 11)

Paul had shown that not all who exhibit gifts in the church were necessarily spiritual (12:1-3). Those who claimed to be exercising gifts of the spirit should be tested to see if they are in the spirit at all. However, Paul here affirms that there are gifts that the believer is given that are in fact from the Spirit for the church. By way of definition, we must recognize that spiritual gifts are not natural abilities or talents. They are to be understood as special capacities for service graciously bestowed by God on those who are in Christ (Vaughan, *1 Corinthians*, 125 note). This definition speaks fully to what Paul sets forth in this text.

1. The purpose of spiritual gifts (vv. 4-7)

Paul begins with three statements in parallel fashion that help us better understand the purpose of these spiritual gifts. “**Now there are varieties of gifts.**” Paul immediately draws our

attention to the many varieties of these gifts. He will illustrate some of these gifts in vv. 8-10. Other lists of gifts are found in 12:28, Romans 12:6-8, Ephesians 4:11, and 1 Peter 4:11. Attempts to categorize these gifts are seldom satisfactory. Some come closer than others, but none is totally adequate. This is partially due to the fact that these lists are not meant to be exhaustive and further by the fact that of those given, there is often a discrepancy in number. The lists are simply given as a framework to help us in this area of spiritual giftedness. John MacArthur's assessment is, "It seems clear that God did not intend to give His church either a rigid or a precise and exhaustive compilation, but rather general categories" (*1 Corinthians*, 291). I believe his assessment is correct.

There are also "**varieties of ministries.**" The word used here for "**ministries**" comes from the Greek word for *serve, servant, or deacon*. Spiritual gifts, in all of their varieties, are given for spiritual service, for Christian ministry. They are given to an individual believer to serve others. This is important to understand in the context of what was happening at Corinth. Some of these believers were using these gifts for their own benefit. Paul here reminds them that these gifts are never given for self-edification. He will expand on this in chapter 14 in the context of tongues and prophecy. But the principle he lays down here is for all spiritual gifts. That is why the foundation for spiritual gifts is love, which Paul covers in depth as part of his teaching on spiritual gifts in chapter 13. Just as love should not be self-seeking, neither should the use of spiritual gifts.

As one exercises their spiritual gifts in service or ministry to others, there will be "**varieties of effects.**" "**Effects**" here means "what is worked out or energized." In other words, the "**effects**" will be in direct proportion to that which is energizing the gift or the spirit operating it. That is why some translations read "varieties of operations."

So we see that "**gifts**" are given for spiritual "**ministry**" that are produced from and lead to spiritual "**effects.**" These "**gifts**" are given "**to each one,**" that is, to every believer. As we said in closing last week, every believer has at least one spiritual gift, probably more than one, while no one has them all. This is born out in our text in the distribution of these gifts. And Paul says all of this is for one purpose, "**the common good**" (v. 7). Spiritual gifts are to be mutually edifying to the church. This is the nature of the ministry associated with these gifts.

2. The Trinitarian nature spiritual gifts (vv. 4-7, 11)

Notice the reference to the Trinity in this triad. "**Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons.**" Paul's purpose here is not to set forth each member of the Godhead as being the *source* of these spiritual gifts. We will plainly see that from this point forward the Holy Spirit alone is the source and distributor of these gifts. What Paul does here is set forth the relational nature of the Godhead as an example of the nature of spiritual gifts. We know the Trinity is the great three-in-one, three persons yet one God. There exists a unity through diversity. This should be the nature of spiritual gifts. While there are many gifts, they all serve one purpose. There is to be unity through diversity. This is the theme that Paul addresses beginning in v. 12. There he turns to the human body to illustrate this unity through diversity.

Further, since these gifts come from the same source, they should not serve as an occasion for rivalry and dissension. Paul says, "**But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills**" (v. 11). When one exercises these spiritual gifts that come from the Spirit, they should look like they are serving God! Nothing is

more disruptive in the body than for a person to want to have what another has, jealously seeking to be something that God has not called them to be. The same is true with spiritual gifts. The believer should be content with the gifts that God grants to him. Otherwise, it will not be spiritual at all.

II. An Illustration of Diversity (12:8-10)

While there exist some fairly nuanced positions in relation to miraculous gifts today, there are two main positions that evangelicals take concerning the issue of miraculous gifts. We will refer to these often in our studies over the next few weeks. The first position is known as *continuationism*, or *restorationism*. This view, with some exceptions, holds that the infallible transmission of special revelation ceased with the closure of the Scripture. In other words, they believe that the Scriptures we have today are the full and final revelation of God to His people. The exceptions would be those who deny this and are not relevant to our discussion. Those that believe that God still speaks today in a revelatory way are simply unbiblical. The evangelical continuationist believes in the final canon as revealed by God but also believes that God continues to speak to his church through the means of miraculous gifts. In other words, this position believes that these special manifestations of the Spirit continue today in the church because no text in Scripture teaches that they have ceased.

The second position is known as *cessationism*. Those holding this position also believe, without exception, that the infallible transmission of special revelation ceased with the closure of the Scripture. However, unlike the continuationist, the cessationist also believes that God has fully and finally spoken in His Word and communicates with his church today *only* through the Scriptures. The Word of God is both *authoritative* and completely *sufficient* for all things. Therefore, the miraculous gifts seen in our text have ceased because they existed only to validate the authority of God's infallible spokespersons, the prophets and the apostles. In other words, these miraculous gifts ceased at the end of the apostolic age.

For our purposes this morning, I prefer to use the term "sign gifts" rather than "miraculous gifts" in approaching these gifts. I believe there is contextual warrant in doing so. Each of the gifts Paul addresses here served to validate the ministries of the prophets and apostles. While many would disagree with me, I believe that each of the gifts in this text have ceased *in the form they were given and displayed in Paul's day*. That does not mean that some of these gifts are not manifest in some form today in a different way than miraculously or for verification. Some continue today in some form and some do not, as we will note as we work our way through these chapters. As John Owen put it, "Although these gifts and operations *ceased* in some respect, some of them absolutely, ... yet so far as the edification of the church was concerned in them, something that is *analogous* unto them was and is continued" [quoted by Sinclair Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, 233].

1. Word of wisdom and word of knowledge (v. 8)

Paul begins with the formula, "For to one is given... and to another" "by" or "through" or "according to" the Spirit, an indication that the Spirit is both the source and distributor of these gifts. The emphasis is on the different ways the Spirit manifests these gifts in different people. I treat the first two of these gifts together because of the difficulty in knowing for certain what Paul is describing. There are as many ideas on this as there are ideas on who will win the NCAA championship in basketball. What we do know is that Paul states that both "**wisdom**"

and “**knowledge**” are spoken or communicated by those who have this gift in Paul’s setting. The gift is not described as “**wisdom**” or “**knowledge**” *itself*, but “**the word**” of each, the Greek term *logos*. Therefore, “**the word of wisdom**” is the gift of speaking or communicating wisdom; and “**the word of knowledge**” is the gift of speaking or communicating knowledge (Hodge, *1 Corinthians*, 245).

That is the easy part. However, I am sure that many of you are probably thinking, and correctly so, that these are gifts of the pastor. I certainly hope this is the case with your pastor. But in sticking with our assertion that Paul is speaking here of an apostolic sign gift that *in this form* ceased at the end of the apostolic age, remember the *analogous* part of this equation. I made the statement last Sunday night that much of the office of apostle has been shifted to the pastor or elder in the church. You remember that the primary function of apostles that we see in Acts 6 was “prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). These ministries are now vested in the pastor. However, the revelatory ministry of the apostle is not.

Now back to “**wisdom**” and “**knowledge**.” These gifts were part of the revelatory gifts that marked the ministry of the apostle. Charles Hodge wrote, “Wisdom is the gospel, the whole system of revealed truth, and the *word* of wisdom is the gift of revealing that system as the object of faith” [Hodge, 245]. If this is true, and I believe it is, then who is it that had “the whole system of revealed truth” given to them? The apostles and prophets. Hodge continued, “This gift in its full measure belonged to the apostles alone; partially, however, also, to the prophets of the New Testament” [245-46]. “**Knowledge**” in this case would then be the supernatural ability to grasp this wisdom, this mystery of the gospel.

Again, context is important here. Both “wisdom” and “knowledge” hearken back to Paul’s discourses in chapters 1, 2 and 8. The wisdom of God and knowledge of Christ were to be distinctive from the foolishness of the world and the claims of knowledge that some at Corinth claimed. Paul has in mind here the knowledge of God in Christ that comes from direct revelation. This “**wisdom**” and “**knowledge**” served as the foundation upon which the church is built.

2. Faith (v. 9a)

In describing faith as a gift of some, we know that Paul is not talking about saving faith. Although saving faith is described by Paul as a gift in Ephesians 2:8, that faith is a gift that is common to all believers. Daily faith, or living faith, is also a gift that is common to all believers. So we know that Paul is not referring to saving faith or living faith.

The faith that Paul describes here, again, in its context, refers to wonder-working faith, that special anointing of the Spirit of God a person has to “remove the mountains” as Paul describes it in 13:2. It was a complete and unshakable trust that God would perform miracles *through* them, whether it be healing the sick or the effecting of miracles, which Paul mentions as the next two gifts. There were times where the apostles lacked this faith. They did not have faith that the crowd could be fed. Peter lacked faith in walking to God on the water. On other occasions, they exhibited this faith in healing and casting out demons.

My point in this again is that this gift, in this context, in Paul’s day, coupled with the gifts of healing and miracles to follow, show that the faith that Paul describes here is the faith that God would do wonder-working miracles *through* them. Believing as I do that the gifts of healing and effecting of miracles should be relegated to the apostolic period, this faith, in this form, should be as well. This does not mean that the gift of faith does not exist today in some form, just not in this sense in relation to healing and miracles.

3. Healing (v. 9b)

Much of what is described today as the gift of healing is not really a gift at all. Many believe they have the gift of healing because of their career field in medicine. Some look at doctors, nurses, pharmacists, etc. as having this gift. However, we must be very careful here. Remember, first of all, that those who have any of these spiritual gifts must be in Christ. There are many in the medical field today that are able to heal a person through medical processes that are not believers. This is not to take away from the benevolent service they render to the community. It also does not discount the truth that God can use even an unsaved medical professional for His purposes. It is just to say that this person cannot manifest the gift of healing since they do not have the Spirit of God.

Further, we must remember that spiritual gifts are supernatural, not natural. A believer who has trained and practiced for years in the medical field has a better knowledge and understanding of diagnosing and healing an illness than those of us who don't. However, though they be naturally gifted in this way and might truly love their job (I would even call it a ministry) does not mean that they have been supernaturally gifted.

There are also those today, such as those in my introduction, who claim to have the gift of healing. However, when we compare these so-called healers today with the apostles in Scripture who truly had this gift, we see some notable differences. Roger Ellsworth notes, "The healings of the apostles were always complete and instantaneous and were never announced beforehand. And the apostles never failed in their attempts to heal. All of this is a far cry from what goes on with those who claim to have the gift of healing today" [*Strengthening Christ's Church*, 207].

So, in this context, the gift of healings refers to the *miraculous* healing of diseases, which was given during the time of apostles as a sign of their apostleship. Therefore, this gift ceased at the end of the apostolic age. This does not mean that the cessationist believes that *God* does not or cannot heal a person supernaturally today. You in the medical field have seen or heard of those that were healed with no reasonable explanation. That is perhaps because God miraculously intervened and healed that person. It was supernatural and unexplainable. James tells us to pray for the sick so that they might be healed (5:13-16). What is it that we pray for in these instances? It is that God would go beyond human limitations and supernaturally heal a person. However, this gift of healing as exhibited in Paul's day has ceased in the church today.

4. Effecting of Miracles (v. 10)

We won't spend as much time here because much of what was said in relation to the gifts of healing holds true here. By definition, a miracle is something that is extraordinary. Some would have us to believe that miracles were a common every day occurrence in Bible times and they should therefore happen with the same frequency today. This is simply not the case. As Ellsworth aptly demonstrates, miracles in the Bible occurred in four clusters: during the time of Israel's deliverance from Egypt, during the ministries of Elijah and Elisha, during the time of Judah's captivity in Babylon, and during the ministries of our Lord and the apostles. He further notes that each of these times was a period *when God was giving new revelation* [206-7]. In other words, miracles were displayed to affirm the validity of new revelation. Since we believe that revelation in this way ceased with the apostles, there is no new revelation, it is only logical to expect the gift of miracles ceased as well.

5. Prophecy (v. 10)

We come now to the gift that has perhaps caused the greatest discrepancy on spiritual gifts among what I consider to be solid exegetical evangelicals. Some define “**prophecy**” more generally as “to speak forth or to proclaim.” Others more particularly define “**prophecy**” in relation to the role of the prophet who always spoke, “Thus saith the Lord.” These would hold that the prophet in prophesying was under the direct inspiration of the Lord. As you can probably guess, those that define the term in a general way believe that the gift continues today; those that define it in relation to the prophet believe the gift has ceased. Again there are very fine scholars and pastors on both sides.

We will look at the gift of prophecy further in chapter 14. I am of the persuasion that the gift of prophecy should be tied to the office of prophet and apostle. They were to speak “Thus saith the Lord” under the direct influence of the Holy Spirit. What they have spoken and written under the influence of the Spirit has been fully and finally given to us in the Scripture. Prophecy, and the gift of prophecy, have both ceased as well as the offices of prophet and apostle as we will see later in this chapter. This is not to say that men today do not “speak forth or proclaim” what the Spirit has illumined to their hearts and minds *from* the Scripture. I trust this happens every time I stand behind this pulpit. However, there exists today a blurring of the lines between prophecy, which is revelatory, and the illuminating work of the Spirit. We will return to this in a few weeks.

6. Distinguishing of spirits (v. 10)

The gift of distinguishing spirits was given to distinguish between real prophecy and false prophecy. If the gift of prophecy has ceased, then again it is logical to expect that the gift of distinguishing spirits has ceased as well. Ellsworth notes, “The discerning of spirits doesn’t require much comment. When the prophets declared the revelations they had received from God, the gift of discernment enabled those who had it to determine whether a prophet had truly spoken the word of God. When the gift of prophecy ceased, there was no need for the gift of discernment to continue” [206].

7. Tongues and interpretation of tongues (v. 10)

Paul has much more to say on these gifts later in chapter 14, and, as with prophecy, we will cover it more deeply when we come to that text. For our purpose this morning I want us to understand what the gift of tongues refers to.

Many believe that “**tongues**” refers to some ecstatic utterance unlike anything known to man. It manifests itself in various ways: unknown tongues, ramblings, even barking and howling. However, there is simply no evidence in Scripture to suggest that “**tongues**” refers to anything other than an actual language. In Acts 2, when the Spirit came upon those at Pentecost, the Scripture is clear that they began to speak “in other tongues.” But these “tongues” were recognized because “each was hearing them speak in their own language” (Acts 2:4, 6). The Greek word *glōssa*, translated “tongues,” almost always means an actual language in Scripture. The difference in Pentecost and Corinth lies in the fact that those at Pentecost were able to interpret the tongues that were spoken (Acts 2:6, 8, 11). Therefore, no translation was required. At Corinth, the situation was different. It was necessary for an interpreter to translate what was said into the native tongue. However, there is no reason to believe the nature of the tongues as an actual language was different from that at Pentecost.

Another consideration is that “**tongues**” is only given in four contexts in Scripture: (1) at the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), (2) at the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:46), by the disciples at Ephesus who had received the baptism of John (Acts 19:6), and (4) in 1 Corinthians chapters 12 and 14. In the first three instances, tongues were a verification of an unusual work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. Tongues marked the initial pouring out of the Spirit on the church in Acts 2, on the Gentiles in the story of Cornelius, and the extraordinary experience of twelve men at Ephesus who had been baptized by John but not in the Spirit because they had not yet heard of the Holy Spirit. Should this not peek our interest as it relates to the use of tongues in Scripture? It would appear that the gift of tongues, and therefore interpreters of tongues, existed only in the years of the early church to mark some remarkable occurrence. History bears this out. There is little evidence of tongues in the church between the early church and the twentieth century. It is only with the rebirth of these miraculous gifts in recent years that this has become an issue.

Conclusion

I believe that each of the gifts in this text have ceased *in the form they were given and displayed in Paul's day*. That does not mean that some of these gifts are not manifest in some form today in a different way, something that is *analogous* to them. The first three gifts mentioned, the word of wisdom, the word of knowledge, and faith remain today, but not in a revelatory or miraculous sense. However, the remaining gifts were either to affirm new revelation as received by the apostles and prophets or to validate their ministries. Therefore, with the end of revelation and the offices of apostle and prophet came the end of these miraculous sign gifts.

What about the millions who believe these things to be true? Test the spirits according to the Word of God! Further, examine their lives in other areas of the Christian life. Are they seeking to live according to the Word of God. You will typically find that their excesses in this area severely hinder their walk in other areas.