

# GUIDELINES ON GIFTS

by Ray C. Stedman

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In Chapter 12 of First Corinthians, the apostle gives us very clearly the blueprint for the operation of the Body of Christ. Now I know that I am mixing metaphors when I speak of blueprints in connection with bodies (bodies do not have blueprints; buildings do), but I am in good company, because Paul does the same thing in the letter to the Ephesians. He speaks of the church as a "building" which "grows" into a holy habitation for the Lord. Now buildings do not grow; bodies do, but I will join the apostolic company in using the wrong metaphor here because it points up in a marvelous way the miracle of the church.

The church is really a different kind of organization. It is both a building and a body, and the thing that buildings and bodies have in common is that they are places to live in. The glory of the church is that it is both the building in which God lives and the body through which he works. If you want to find God in the world today, his address is "the church." He is at work through his body. And I do not mean only when the church is assembled, as it is here this morning, but wherever members of the body are there you will find the church at work because we are made together to be members of that body by the Spirit. That is the theme of Chapter 12.

Paul began this chapter by showing us how the Body of Christ flows out of the unity and diversity of the Trinity itself, the Triune God at work within his body. The Spirit, he said, gives gifts to every member of the body. These are capacities for service, abilities which we did not have before we became Christians. The Son, the Lord Jesus, assigns ministries for every member of the body. These are opportunities for service, either geographically, where you serve in one particular part of the world as opposed to another, or demographically, with regard to a certain age level -- some work with children, some with older people, some with young married couples, etc. This is the opportunity to serve and use your gift that the Lord Jesus Christ, as Lord and Head of the church, opens for you. If you get that opportunity take it, because he has opened it up for you.

Paul then told us in Verse 6 that there are varieties of workings which are given by the Father, and here he is speaking of power for service. One of the fundamental declarations of all the Scripture is that power belongs to God. God never gives you a package of power and says go ahead and use it for whatever you like. He always holds the reins in his hands. You can use God's power if you use it for his purposes, but if you use it for your own he just shuts it off and you go ahead on what seems to be a source of power but it is really what the Bible calls "the flesh," which is destructive.

Now never forget this: When you are thinking of the church, never think of it as a human organization which is formed largely to run meetings on behalf of its membership. This is what many people think the church is. I am sure if you were a visitor from another planet and you visited churches across this country today you would draw the conclusion that *that* is what the church operates for -- just to run meetings on Sunday morning. Everything is planned toward that; all the energy is put toward that; all the work of the leadership is directed toward that, and, when it is over, it starts all over again. But that is a far cry from God's concept of the church. The church is not an organization brought into being to operate nice meetings. The church consists of all those who have truly been born of the Spirit and are a living body, growing and developing within the world, not apart from it, in order to touch the hurt and the death of the world with the life and the love of God. That is what the church is. It is unique.

No other organization approaches it in purpose, in scope, in power, in abilities. I hope we will keep that clearly in mind when we think of it.

Now, all those born of the Spirit are members of the church (we will see that next Sunday particularly), and, in each one of them, the Spirit of God has come to dwell and to give to each a pattern of gifts that Paul calls "the manifestation of the Spirit."

You can see this now in Verse 7:

**To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. {1 Cor 12:7 RSV}**

There follows a relatively long list of various gifts of the Spirit, and these form the foundation by which the work of the church is to be done in the world. This is always where God starts. He does not start by forming an organization; he starts by equipping his people with gifts. That is basic; that is foundational; and he wants us to begin our thinking at that point.

What is your gift? What has God the Spirit given to you by which you can function within the Body of Christ?

I want you to notice three things that the apostle underlines in this verse for us.

First: "To each" is given a manifestation of the Spirit. You find that again in Verse 11: "All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills." In other words, no one is left out. If you are a Christian you can never say that you were behind the door when the gifts were given out. You have one, at least one, probably more, because so marvelous is this divine blueprint, this divine pattern for the operation of the church, that God has an infinite variety of combinations of gifts to give and he chooses one combination just to suit you, for your personality, and puts you right where he wants you to use it, not only in the church among the other believers, but out in the world as well. That is where you begin to function as a member of the church. That is what the work of the church basically is, and no one is left out.

Paul will go on in this chapter to argue that the least in the church can never be considered insignificant because they are important to the carrying on of the work of the church.

I do not know what you think of when you hear that term, "the work of the church." Most people think of it as coming together and running meetings and perhaps doing a little missionary enterprise and a little help for the poor. Of course, if that is what the work of the church is, then it comes down basically to ushering and singing in the choir, pastoring and teaching Sunday School class, and perhaps heading a few committees and doing some janitorial work. But that is not what God has in mind at all. The work of the church is:

- Healing the broken-hearted,
- Giving deliverance to the poor,
- Opening the doors to the captives,
- Setting free people who are bound in prisons of doubt, fear, anxiety and selfishness, and
- Leading them out into liberty, freedom and power.

That is the work of the church. That is what God has called us to do, and it takes every single one of us to do it. We are all in the ministry; this is what we have been trying to stress here for years and years, and to each is given a gift for that purpose.

Notice, too, that it is called the "manifestation of the Spirit." It is not your normal, natural abilities, it is a supernatural function. We hear today much about the "charismatic movement" as dealing with the gifts of the Spirit, but the problem with that term is that it almost invariably applies to only the gift of tongues, or perhaps healings, or miracles.

Now every single gift mentioned in this list and in other lists of Scripture is a "charisma," a spiritual gift, and it is supernatural; it is beyond normal, natural functioning. Therefore, the gifts of the Spirit are not your abilities, your talents. They do not consist of an ability to sing, or to lead, or to speak, or to paint, or run, or whatever it may be. Most of us have natural abilities. Some of us were behind the door when those were given out, but most of us have them. Some of us have, like myself, marvelous musical ability, and it was given to us at birth! Some of us have athletic ability; some of us have the ability to paint and to draw, and others have ability to lead and excel in various functions of life. Those abilities are given to people all over the world, whether they are believers or not. Like the rain, they come upon the just and the unjust alike. But spiritual gifts are given only to Christians, and they are something you never had before you became a Christian. They are abilities to function

in the realm of the spirit, not the body, so that the health of the spirit is improved and enhanced and strengthened, and it results in what we usually term "blessing." When you are "blessed" by something you feel spiritually healthier, and that is the function of spiritual gifts, to make the human spirit free and strong and whole and sound and able to live and function as it was intended.

You can use them together. Natural abilities and natural gifts, both coming from the same source, blend together nicely. We just heard Vickie Oldenberg singing for us here using a beautiful, natural ability -- a fine voice -- with a spiritual gift which blessed our hearts -- the gift of encouragement, of comfort, of arousing and awakening a sense of worship. That is the blending of the two things together. You sometimes hear singers who do not use a spiritual gift and though their singing is technically excellent it is spiritually profitless, and sometimes we feel the flatness that comes from that.

The third thing the apostle says here is that these spiritual gifts are given for "the common good." They are not for our own enjoyment or blessing, though we will enjoy using them. Spiritual gifts are delightful; they are fulfilling to use, and there is nothing wrong with enjoying the use of a spiritual gift, but its purpose must not be for your enjoyment. It must serve others; that is what it is for. It has no other purpose in being given to you except to build up and edify others. It is for the "common good," and this whole list is included in that, along with other lists in the Scriptures. You are going to need others' spiritual gifts as they are going to need yours.

Now, if you use a spiritual gift for your own purpose, for your own aggrandizement, your own ego satisfaction, what will happen is that the Father, who controls the power, will simply turn off the faucet. What you will do then is use a spiritual gift in the power of the flesh, of selfishness, and what comes out, as a result, is death and the spreading of dissatisfaction, dissension and division in the body of Christ. Spiritual gifts can be used in the power of the flesh, and then they create havoc as they were doing here at Corinth, but spiritual gifts used to benefit others always awaken and make possible the release of the power of God. The result will be life and joy and harmony and the bringing together in a beautiful way of expressions of love. Then the world will see that we are Christians; 'they will know we are Christians by our love.' That is why you find this whole section tied immediately in Chapter 13, to the great love passage of the apostle.

Dr. John R. W. Stott has gathered this all up very well in a quotation I would like to share with you. He says:

Our motive must be concern for the glory of God, not the glory of the church or our own glory.

Our message must be the gospel of God as given by Christ and his apostles, not the traditions of men or our own opinions.

Our manpower must be the whole church of God, every member of it, not a privileged few who want to retain evangelism as their prerogative.

Our dynamic must be the Spirit of God, not the power of human personality, organization, or eloquence. Without these priorities we shall be silent when we ought to be vocal.

Beginning with Verse 8, the apostle now goes on to list the variety of "manifestations of the Spirit," the spiritual gifts. He gives us a representative list. It is not complete, as there are only nine gifts listed here. There is another group in Romans 12; there is another brief reference in First Peter 4; and there is another brief list in Ephesians 4. Taken altogether, depending upon how you identify certain gifts, there are from 18 to 20 different spiritual gifts.

The apostle begins with two beautiful gifts:

**To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge ... {1 Cor 12:8a RSV}**

Wisdom and knowledge: The Apostle Peter, in First Peter 4, suggested the gifts are divided into two major divisions: speaking gifts and serving gifts -- those that involve the speaking and teaching and proclamation of the Word, and those that involve helping and ministering to and serving people. Those two divisions are very helpful in understanding gifts. Now here are two speaking gifts, "the utterance of knowledge," and "the

utterance of wisdom," literally the "word" of knowledge and the "word" of wisdom; *logos* is the term.

What does this refer to? Well, remember these are supernatural abilities; they are given by the Spirit of God. They do not flash and make a lot of noise or call attention to themselves; they operate very quietly, but they are beyond natural powers. The utterance of knowledge is the ability, given to many, to go through the Word of God and to see what is there and to set forth in a systematic way the knowledge of what God wants man to know.

I was listening just this morning to several of our teachers in the Sunday School hour and I was struck by the way they all exhibit the gift of knowledge, the wonderful ability to take a passage of Scripture and point out in one-two-three order what it is talking about so that people can see what is being said. That is the gift of knowledge, the utterance of knowledge.

"Wisdom" is the application of that knowledge to specific problems. That too is a spiritual gift: The ability to take that revelation of the way things really are, and apply it to something you are wrestling with right now -- in your home, in your marriage, in the church, in business, in the general concerns of the world at large -- and to have insight into the way problems can be solved by the knowledge of Scripture. That is a marvelous gift. We have all been in meetings, perhaps, where we were wrestling with a problem, and nobody could see the way out. Then suddenly someone stands up and says, "Well, it seems to me that this word, or this passage, applies here, and if we will do this and this and this, it will all work out." And everybody says, "Of course! Why didn't we see that?" That is the utterance of wisdom.

Then the apostle gives another one of the serving gifts:

**... to another faith by the same Spirit, {1 Cor 12:9a RSV}**

A gift of faith? Well, are not all Christians to have faith? Of course. You cannot live without faith. Faith is believing God, believing he means what he says and acting on it. But this is always characteristic of all the gifts of the Spirit: They really are an increased expression in an unusual way of what everybody is expected to do. We are all to have faith, but there is a gift of faith. We all can help each other, but there is a gift of helps. We all can give money, but there is a gift of giving as well. We all are to teach each other, but there is a gift of teaching.

It is very much like a baseball team where you have people playing various positions. They are especially chosen because of the need for special skills in the positions they play, and yet they all take their turn at bat. Now everyone knows that pitchers cannot bat, but they are always put up to bat because that is part of the game.

Anybody can help; anybody can give; anybody can have faith; but there is a special skill above and beyond the ordinary that represents the gift of the Spirit. This gift of faith is what I would call *vision*. It is seeing "him who is invisible" {Heb 11:27}, and acting on the basis of his invisible resources supplied to us.

There are people in our congregation who have the gift of vision. Start talking about some problem and soon they will come up and say, "Well, I believe God wants us to do so and so," and they are ready to do it.

In the church at large I think of Cameron Townsend, that remarkable man, founder of Wycliffe Translators, who has a marvelous gift of faith. Do you know what he is doing now? He is over in Russia. A few years ago he got the idea that there are many tribes in Russia that have never had the Bible in their language, so why not go and do it? Everybody else said, "Oh! You can't do that. Russia is closed. You can't get in there and get permission to translate the Scriptures into their language." But he has the gift of faith, so he went over there and did it. Right now he has half a dozen Russian atheist linguists translating the Gospel of John! They are translating it because he has the gift of faith.

Then there is the "gift of healings":

**to another gifts of healings [it should be in the plural] by the one Spirit, {1 Cor 12:9b}**

**RSV}**

What is the "gift of healings?" Well, I believe this is the gift of being able to restore to health, and it is in the plural because there are three levels of life where we need to be restored -- physically, socially or psychologically, and spiritually, and this gift can be given at any of those levels. In the early church it was frequently given at the level of the physical. The apostles seem to have had the gift of healing, the ability to lay hands on people who were made well instantly. I do not know anyone today who has the gift of healing, but I believe that healings still occur.

In fact, we had the joy of seeing the Lord touch one of our membership here just a couple of weeks ago in answer to the prayer of the elders as they laid hands on her. God does heal, but that is not the exercise of the gift of healing. That is something beyond. It may be given today. I would not say it is not, but I have not seen it. Nevertheless it is a marvelous gift.

And it can be given at the level of emotional healing also. I think perhaps there are some in our congregation who have had that -- the ability to really know how to talk to people to restore them to emotional and spiritual health.

Then there is the "gift of miracles":

**to another the working of miracles," [literally "the energizing of powers"] {1 Cor 12:10a RSV}**

That means the ability to release the power of God in a unique and supernatural way such as Jesus did when he turned the water into wine, or walked on the water, or raised Lazarus from the dead. That is the release of unique power. Now it is rarely given today, although there have been claims in our day, as there have been in every generation of the past, that people have had this gift. It may be true. I believe any of these gifts can be given at any age, any time as the Spirit sees purpose for it, but I do not know of anyone who I would say has the gift of working miracles today.

The next gift, however, is a very common and a very important one. In fact, it is the most important of all the gifts, and Paul devotes a whole chapter to it in Chapter 14: It is the gift of prophesying. Now do not associate that with predicting the future. Somehow or other that is always identified with being able to tell what is going to happen. Here we are, facing a New Year, and everybody wonders, "What's going to happen in 1979? Where will I be at this time next year? What is going to happen to my plans, my dreams, my hopes?" Because of that expectation, every year about this time the pulp newspapers start appearing on the stands with the predictions of all the seers who are supposed to tell the future. That is not the gift of prophesying. In the Bible, the gift of prophesying is the ability to speak the mind of God. It does include at times an element of prediction, but it is the ability to see what God is doing in the world, to spot it from the Scriptures, to understand the movement of God in history and set it forth in such a clear way that people understand where and how God is working today. That is the gift of prophesying, and what a helpful gift it is in these troubled days.

Then there is the "gift of discerning between spirits":

**to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, {1 Cor 12:10c RSV}**

That is the ability to spot a phony, to detect false doctrine. If someone in the People's Temple had been exercising the gift of discernment he would have spotted the phoniness of Jim Jones long before the whole world could see it. In fact, I think some did, and raised a warning about that. This is the ability to sense that behind the orthodox words and the orthodox actions is a phony, fleshly, demonic spirit, and the ability to say so before everybody else can see it from the results. If you think you have the gift of discerning spirits, I suggest you practice on the television ads. If you can watch these ads and see a man talking to a pat of margarine which insists that it is really butter and not sense that something phony is going on you are lacking severely in the area of discernment! Something like that can occur within the church as well.

Now the last gift mentioned here is a double gift:

**to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. {1 Cor 12:10d RSV}**

Here we come to a matter of great controversy in the church today. I am not going to say a lot about it this morning because we are going to cover it very thoroughly when we come to Chapter 14, where Paul compares this with the value of the gift of prophesying. But basically, Biblically, the gift of tongues is the ability to speak a language that you never have learned. It is not the ability to learn a language quickly. Some people who are not Christians at all have that. This is the ability to speak a language you never have learned, or, in the case of interpretation, to interpret a language that you have never learned.

This, of course, is the gift that is made much of in our day. Despite its prominence, it is helpful to remember that it is never mentioned in the Gospels at all. This foundational section of our New Testament never mentions the gift of tongues except in the closing section of Mark's gospel, which is under great debate as to whether it is authentic or not. It is only mentioned three times in the book of Acts, in three historic occasions when it was used, and the only other mention in the whole of the epistles of the New Testament is what we have right here in First Corinthians. It is only discussed once, therefore, it did not occupy, in the early church, anywhere near the prominence being given to it today. We will get into that more as we come into the 14th chapter.

It is helpful, though, to understand right from the beginning that the Biblical gift of tongues never occurs in private. Like all the gifts of the Spirit, it is designed for the common good. It is a public gift, and every instance of its appearance in the Bible is a public occasion where others are present. It is not a private gift and it is not exercised anywhere in the New Testament in private.

Now, there are some who challenge that. We will examine some of these claims when we come to Chapter 14, but it is clearly established that it is a public gift, as all the gifts are, to be exercised for the benefit of others. It occurred first on the Day of Pentecost, where you have a clear example of the nature of the gift. It is speaking various languages -- 16 of them are mentioned there -- that were widely known and widely understood and spoken not very far away from where these people were gathered. They were languages spoken in the world of that day, very commonly around, and yet they had never been learned by the apostles.

But this gift had a definite sign character to it on the Day of Pentecost, which Paul says, in Chapter 14, is the primary purpose of this gift. It is to be a sign to unbelievers. It can occur today but it must always be compared with the Biblical standard, and the question we need to ask today when we are exposed to any manifestation that is called the gift of tongues is: "Is this the same thing as what went on in the Bible?" And the only answer to that is that it must have the same characteristics that the Bible says it had. Now I find much confusion has arisen in the church today by the failure to ask that question, and answer it. Most people assume that anything they hear today is the Biblical gift of tongues, but it is not. There is a lot of fraudulent tongue-speaking going around, and therefore it is important not to merely naively assume, uncritically, that a gift is the Biblical gift, but to ask yourself the question, "Does it measure up to the Biblical standard?"

Now, in Verse 11, once again we see the trademark of God, diversity arising out of unity:

**All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. {1 Cor 12:11 RSV}**

Many gifts, many varieties of gifts, many different approaches to service and speaking -- not all the same by any means -- but, behind it, the same Spirit, Paul says. That is what has kept the church from breaking up into millions of splinter groups all claiming to have their unique manifestation of the Spirit. No, Paul says, no matter what the nature of the gift or the way it varies from others, behind it is the same Spirit if it is the true gift of the Spirit.

Do not get out your pencil now and start making a list of the gifts you would like to have because the apostle tells us it is the Spirit who chooses what gifts you get, "who apportions to each one individually as he wills."

Many people are asking today, "Why don't we have miracles like they did in the New Testament? Why don't we have great healings, tremendous demonstrations of the power of God?" Well, the answer is: The Spirit has not given those gifts. It is not because the church is carnal. It is carnal, but so was Corinth. The most carnal church in the New Testament had these gifts abounding. This is no sign. The true answer is: The Spirit has not chosen to give those gifts today. If he had, he would give them quite regardless of how spiritual or carnal we are, as he did at Corinth. These are given by the Spirit, "as he wills."

We are going to say a lot more about this as we go on into this passage in subsequent studies, but I hope we can see from this that this is not a matter to take lightly. The Spirit of God has distributed gifts to every member of his body, and to take a unique supernatural ability that God has given you and to function under the leadership and authority of the Lord Jesus, filling the opportunities that come to you and doing so by the power supplied to you by God himself, resurrection power that does not make a big noise or open display, but quietly, persistently and resistlessly does its work -- I tell you that opens a door of possibilities of excitement that you never dreamed of. When you get the whole church, everyone in it, functioning that way, can you imagine what will happen to the community around? When you find people really beginning to demonstrate the life of God in family groups, in small backyard meetings, in homes, at work, in carpools, whatever, that is where the work of the church goes on and that is how God expects the church to change the world.

One of the most incredible things to me is how we have set aside this amazing program of God as though it were useless, and, instead, begun to dredge up all the old and tired ways of doing things that have never worked in government, or business, or anywhere else, and think that is an improvement on what God has said. If 1979 holds any promise for us as a church it will be to the degree that we return to the simple, basic fundamentals of how the church is to function, and everyone of us begins to discover the gift that God has given us, and put it to work.

Let me just say this: You are not responsible to the leadership of this church to exercise your gift. We did not give it to you, and we are not going to call you into account for it. You do not have to ask us about what to do to exercise your gift. You are free in the Lord to exercise your gift as God opens the opportunity to you, and we encourage you to do it. We are here to help; we are here to support you and to give you all the understanding that we can. We are here to warn you if you start getting into dangerous areas with it, but we are not here to bring about a situation that is going to allow you to do this, or force you to do it. Everyone is responsible to God himself as to the exercise of his gift.

Therefore, my word to you on this last Sunday of 1978, is the same as the Apostle Paul's word to Timothy, his young son in the faith: "Stir up the gift of God, which is in you," {cf, 2 Tim 1:6 KJV}. Stir up the gift which was given to you by the Holy Spirit, and then you will see God at work in 1979.

## **Prayer**

Lord, we thank you for this amazing provision of spiritual gifts, and we are excited to begin to explore the possibilities of what will happen when we choose to work along your terms instead of ours. Thank you, Lord, that you have called us into this. Help us to see this as the major purpose of our existence, to discover in 1979 what you want to do with us in terms of the situation you have put us in. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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