

THE PROPER USE OF GIFTS

SERIES: "NOW CONCERNING SPIRITUAL GIFTS..."

by **Ron Ritchie**

The ministering staff of PBC attended the Mount Hermon Pastors Conference last week. It was a wonderful time of listening to some greatly gifted teachers present the word of God to us. And it was a time of community with men and women who were all committed to the same ministry: building up the body of Christ. Each day our staff attended the various meetings and workshops and then gathered in the evening around a warm fire to share what we had learned or appreciated about the people we had met that day. It was also a time for prayer about our own lives and the lives of those in our church family.

On Tuesday evening Pastor Don Green, an African American, and his choir and orchestra from the San Francisco Christian Center treated all of us to a gospel concert. The music was powerful and full of the joy of the Lord. But in the middle of the concert I began to see something even more meaningful. Don Green sat in the audience while on the stage one choir director would lead a song, and then when she was finished she would take her place in the choir and another director would come out from the choir and lead the next song, and then another, and so on. During the presentation of the songs, different soloists would come up to the mike from the choir, sing their song, and step back into the choir. It was a most beautiful demonstration of the unity of the body of Christ and the diversity of spiritual gifts and natural talents.

We need to help each other find our spiritual gifts and then be encouraged to express them by the power of the Holy Spirit, in a proper way, to the common good and to the glory of the Lord. Paul attempted to do just that when he wrote this letter to his beloved Corinthian family.

The leading of the Spirit

1 Corinthians 12:1-3:

Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant. You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.

Let's first look at the context. The apostle Paul had come to the city of Corinth on his second missionary journey in 51 AD. Corinth was a major cosmopolitan seaport city under Roman rule. The city was filled with pagan temples given over to idolatry and sexual immorality. It was also given over to competitive sports activities, causing a variety of divisions among the population. When Paul established a Christian church in this city, it was made up of people from every walk of life, who unfortunately brought many of their fleshy characteristics into the church (see 1 Corinthians 6:9-10). After the church was established, Paul went to Ephesus, Turkey and established another church. While he was in Ephesus (55 AD), he received a letter from the leaders of the Corinthian church asking him how they should deal with a variety of problems they were facing. They had questions about church discipline, divisions, sexual immorality, lawsuits, marriage and divorce, things sacrificed to idols, ungodly conduct at the Lord's supper, and the proper use of spiritual gifts. Paul responded to their many questions with the letter we now call 1 Corinthians.

"Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant." Because of the divisions and competitiveness among the Corinthian believers, Paul found it necessary to review the subject of the body of Christ and the place of spiritually gifted men and women within that body. Instead of building up one another in Christ, some thought they had all the gifts, while others thought they had the greater gifts, giving them a sense of power. So the apostle reminded them of who they were before they became believers: "...You were

influenced and led astray to mute idols." Now they were followers of Jesus Christ, the one and only risen and living Son of God, who had saved them and delivered them from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. But many of those new believers still had some of the fleshy habits, as I have mentioned, that had been developed in their pagan worship services, which then became evident in their Christian worship services. Some Jewish Christians would cry out in a frenzy, "Jesus is accursed!" That meant that he could not be the Son of God, because anyone who hung on a tree was cursed by God according to Deuteronomy 21:23. These people may not have even been believers yet, for they didn't understand that Jesus went to the cross and died there because of our sins, not his (see Galatians 3:13). So Paul was giving them a reality check: The Holy Spirit would never lead a believer to say, "Jesus is accursed." But the Holy Spirit would not only lead a believer to say, "Jesus is Lord," but would then give him the power to live out his new life with Jesus as his sovereign Lord.

There are different kinds of gifts

1 Corinthians 12:4-6:

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men.

Now Paul reminds the Corinthians that within the unity of the mystical church there is diversity of spiritual gifts. He also wants them to remember that behind the whole subject of gifts is God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

First Paul wants the Corinthians to understand that there are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who gives spiritual gifts to men and women once they come into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior (see Romans 10:9-10). Believers are not just gifted by the Holy Spirit, they are perfectly gifted. These grace-gifts or spiritual gifts (surprise gifts) are God-given abilities to serve him, other men and women within the body of Christ, and people in the world around us. And there are many different kinds of spiritual gifts in the body of Christ, just as there are many different kinds of physical parts in our own physical bodies.

Secondly, there are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. Our risen Lord Jesus is the one who motivates us to use our gifts creatively. If you have the gift of mercy, for example, our Lord can empower you to express that gift in a hundred different ways that he opens up over your lifetime.

And finally, there are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. It is God the Father who supplies the power that produces the many different spiritual results whenever a believer takes the opportunity to express their gifts.

Having established the giver, the ministries, and the power behind the spiritual gifts, Paul now reminds the Corinthians of the goal.

Spiritual gifts are for the common good

1 Corinthians 12:7-11:

Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues.

What is the goal of spiritual gifts? "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good." Note again that each born-again Christian has been given spiritual gifts by which to display the Holy

Spirit's working in our lives and the growth of the church. The fruits of this Spirit-filled life are: (1) a personal sense of worth in the sight of God and of fellow believers, (2) a dynamic witness as we minister, (3) a host of creative ministries that most likely we would never have thought of choosing for ourselves, and (4) a growing church filled with the joy of unity, love, and fellowship. Further, our spiritual gifts are given by the Spirit for us to use in his strength "...so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever" (1 Peter 4:11).

Some Bible scholars believe that the spiritual gifts of miracles, healings, and tongues (and some believe even prophecy) were given to the body on a temporary basis, until the church became established and the New Testament was completed in the first century. I can appreciate their viewpoint, but at this time I cannot agree with them for the following reasons: (1) The Scriptures never say that certain gifts are to be temporary. If some gifts were only temporary, it appears that Christ dismembered his own body, which would have rendered it less than functional. (2) This temporary view appears to restrict the work of the Holy Spirit in other parts of the world and in different generations. The Holy Spirit is free to cause all the gifts he has given to the body to be expressed at any time, in any generation, and in any nation. The Holy Spirit is also free to use not a gifted man or woman but a miracle or a vision to awaken a nonbeliever's faith and bring them into the body of Christ. This is especially true in locations where that nonbeliever doesn't have the privilege of reading or hearing the written word of God. Therefore, I would rather be agnostic than dogmatic in these matters.

According to recent reports from North Africa, Campus Crusade leaders say that more and more Muslims are having dreams and visions of Jesus Christ. An imprisoned Muslim political radical said Jesus appeared to her in her cell. The woman is now a Christian and works with Crusade. Another Muslim, when offered a Bible tract from a Christian, tore it up and then threatened to kill the believer. That night as he lay sleeping, he felt two hands waking him up and heard a voice tell him, "You have torn up the truth." Then the voice instructed him to go to the home of the man who had given him the Bible tract and ask for another. He obeyed, read the tract, which invited him to receive Jesus as his Lord and Savior, and did just that (*National and International Religion Report*, Vol. 10, No. 2, Jan. 8, 1996, p. 1).

Now once again the apostle lists some representative spiritual gifts, thirteen out of the twenty we find when we gather them all up from this text, Romans 12:6-8, and Ephesians 4:11. Out of this list of thirteen spiritual gifts, he has mentioned the gifts of apostleship, prophecy, and teaching in passages we have already studied (see Discovery Papers 4476-4478), so we will discuss only the remaining ten in this list that we have not yet defined.

The Spirit gives some the spiritual gift of the word of wisdom (in Greek *sophia*). This is the spiritual ability to perceive life and truth from God's perspective and then apply that wisdom to specific situations within the body of Christ, the family, marriage, the raising of children, our businesses, and the political arena as well as the critical world around us. It is a most necessary gift, for it helps us all work out our problems by the knowledge of the word of God. Wisdom can be discerned by its fruit: "But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere" (James 3:17). James used his spiritual gift of wisdom at the Jerusalem Council (see Acts 15:13-21).

The Spirit gives some the spiritual gift of the word of knowledge (*gnosis*). It is the spiritual ability to communicate spiritual truth acquired through the investigation of God's word. It is a seeking to know God's spiritual truth, the mysteries of his revelations (see Ephesians 3:3), and to set it forth in a systematic way. Stephen, on the day of his death, because of his love for Jesus as his Messiah, was a great example of a man of spiritual wisdom and knowledge when he spoke before the Jewish supreme court and systematically broke open the Scriptures to show them that God doesn't live in temples but has come to set up residence in the hearts of men as their Messiah (see Acts 7:1-53).

The Spirit gives some the spiritual gift of faith (*pistis*). It is the spiritual ability to see what isn't yet visible, believe it to be, and trust God to do it in his way and his time. It is a gift of vision, seeing the invisible and acting on the basis that God's resources will be supplied where we step out. This is the faith that moves mountains (see Matthew 17:20; 1 Corinthians 13:2). The apostle Paul demonstrated this faith when the Lord called him in a vision to leave Turkey and move into Europe with the gospel (see Acts 16:6-10).

The Spirit gives some the spiritual gifts of healing (iaomai). This is the spiritual ability to heal one who is sick. Note that Paul called it the gifts (plural) of healing (in the Greek it's "healings," also plural), which may mean that this gifted person could make whole someone who is sick physically, emotionally, or spiritually. When the Scriptures speak of physical healings, they are always a symbol of how God wants to heal all of us spiritually. In the Jewish culture healing was used as a "sign gift" by the Holy Spirit to attract men and women of the Jewish population, because they believed that one day the Messiah would come and heal his people (see 1 Corinthians 1:22; Isaiah 61:1-2). Their Messiah has come, and his name is Jesus (see Luke 4:16-21). Peter and John used this gift of healing to make the lame man whole at the gate of the temple (see Acts 3:1-8). Others with this gift use their knowledge from the field of medicine to bring physical and emotional healing.

Paul was emotionally healed in Asia when he came to the realization that he was to no longer trust in himself but in God who raises the dead (2 Corinthians 1:8-10). Men and women are healed spiritually when they are given a word of encouragement, exhortation, and comfort from other brothers and sisters (Galatians 6:1-2).

I have noticed that in the Scriptures God is not obligated to heal everyone who desires to be healed, regardless of whether the sickness is physical, emotional, or spiritual. Paul and Timothy on certain occasions were not healed, although others in the early church were. Physical, emotional, and spiritual healing must be fully left in the hands of God. Our responsibility is to place our faith in him so that his perfect will can be accomplished through our sicknesses and at times through our recovery.

The Spirit gives some the spiritual gift of miraculous powers (dunamis). It is the spiritual ability to do works of supernatural origin and character, such as could not be produced by natural agents and means. Jesus turned water into wine, and the apostle John recorded, "This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him" (John 2:11). Jesus also performed a miraculous sign when he raised his beloved friend Lazarus from the grave. Philip was able to do miracles among the Samaritans (see Acts 8:13), and Paul employed this gift on the island of Cyprus, causing a false prophet named Bar-Jesus to become blind for a season because he opposed the apostle when he sought to present the gospel to Paulus the governor (see Acts 13:9-12). This was another "sign gift" that would attract men and women of the Jewish population, because such signs were characteristic of the coming Messiah, so that they would see that Jesus was the Messiah (see John 3:1-2; 20:30-31).

The Spirit gives some the spiritual gift of discerning spirits (diakrisis). It is the spiritual ability to discern from God's word between the spirit of evil and the Spirit of God, between flesh and spirit, between error and truth, before the fruit is evident. This spiritual gift is a most important one given to guard the church from false doctrine, false apostles, and false prophets. Paul used this gift to help the Corinthians understand that they needed to be aware that false apostles were going around preaching another gospel, another Jesus, and another spirit (2 Corinthians 11:1-4; 13-15). Peter used this spiritual gift of discernment to unmask the evil heart of a magician named Simeon who wanted to buy the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:20-23).

The Spirit gives some the spiritual gift of tongues (glossa). It is the spiritual ability to speak a foreign language without learning it beforehand. The gift of tongues (plural) is to be used publicly to bring praise to God (1 Corinthians 14:2) and to edify the body of believers (1 Corinthians 14:5); and God will use it as a sign of judgment against unbelieving Jews (1 Corinthians 14:21-22). It is not a gift that is to be used privately but always for the common good. It is not a private heavenly language but an earthly foreign language. It is not to be used to prophesy the future but to praise God. We will look at this gift in more detail when we study 1 Corinthians 14. One hundred twenty Jews spoke in tongues on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:5-11). The Gentile centurion Cornelius spoke in tongues at the time of his conversion (Acts 10:44-46), and the disciples of John the Baptist spoke in tongues at the time of their confession of Jesus as their Messiah (Acts 19:4-6). Paul said he spoke in tongues more than any of the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 14:18), who at the time were confused about this gift.

The Spirit gives some the spiritual gift of interpretation (hermeneia). It is the spiritual ability to translate a foreign language being spoken by one with the gift of language to an audience. The one who does the translating is able by the Spirit to do so without learning the language beforehand (see 1 Corinthians 14:27). This is the root for our English word hermeneutics, used of explaining the meaning of words in a different

language.

All these gifts are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one just as he determines (see 1 Corinthians 12:11). In the midst of the wonderful unity of being one in the Spirit, there is this wonderful and awesome diversity within the body of Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, which (along with 12:14-26) we will not be able to cover, the apostle demonstrates the spiritual realities that the body of Christ is a unity made up of many parts that include Jews and Gentiles, slaves and freemen, but all are given one Holy Spirit. In verses 14-26 the apostle illustrates from the human body how interdependent the members of the body of Christ are. The bottom line is that we need each other, regardless of what gifts we have and what gifts others have. All are of equal worth in the body of Christ; therefore, there should be no division or competition. Rather, keep in mind that "if one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it."

Now you are the body of Christ

1 Corinthians 12:27-31:

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way.

Out of this list we will again discuss only the spiritual gifts we have not already covered. These final two are the last of the twenty.

The Spirit gives some the spiritual gift of helps (antilepsis or antilempsis). It is the spiritual ability to come alongside others and support them and their ministry in physical ways. This gift of helps can be seen in the lives of many of Paul's fellow workers when he lists them in Colossians 4:7-17. "Greet ...Nympha and the church that is in her house." The gift of helps can also be found in the greetings he sends to friends in the letter to the Romans: "Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you...Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord...Greet...Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord..." (16:6, 12).

The Spirit gives some the spiritual gift of administration (kubernesis). This is the spiritual ability to give guidance, to pilot or steer, to be a helmsman for a local church, helping direct its life and order. It is the ability to deal with people, as opposed to paper. It carries the idea of governing as seen in the ministry of Stephanas (1 Corinthians 16:15-18).

In conclusion, "...eagerly desire the greater gifts." The apostle Paul addresses the Corinthian church's strength and weaknesses. Their strength in this immediate context was that they lacked none of the spiritual gifts necessary to keep a local church spiritually healthy (1 Corinthians 1:7). They were trying to live out this new spiritual reality called the body of Christ with its diversity within unity. Their weaknesses were seen in the leadership that not only did not lead God's people into spiritual maturity, but allowed sexual immorality to invade their church and an ungodly manner to characterize their approach to the Lord's Supper. Their worship services were improper and disorderly, leaving the door wide open for people's religious flesh to become competitive, which in turn caused great division among the saints (see 1 Corinthians 1:10-17). So after explaining the proper expression of spiritual gifts within the body of Christ, the apostle exhorts the leadership in the Corinthian church to "eagerly desire the greater gifts," one of which in this context, as we will see in chapter 14, is the spiritual gift of prophecy, which had been pushed aside.

But before moving on to the confusion in their worship services, he will build a foundation on which to place their expression of their spiritual gifts. Paul will remind his dear spiritual family that even if they had all the

gifts functioning within a local church, it would still be worthless without a heart filled with agape love. Agape love is that unselfish and self-sacrificial love that flows like a river out of the heart of God. To the world and to the church this love contrasts greatly with the expression of spiritual gifts in the flesh, which is like so much noise, a clanging symbol. "And now I will show you the most excellent way"---one filled with love, harmony, and contentment in the Spirit.

Two weeks ago many of our women attended our annual women's retreat at Mount Hermon, and our high school group also went on a retreat. Last Saturday night our own junior high students and 350 others met in our church building for a time of joy and spiritual challenge in a program called The Wild Truth Tour. Last week our ministry staff spent four days at the Mount Hermon Pastors Conference, and this weekend some six hundred men from PBC North and PBC Cupertino are enjoying fellowship and spiritual challenges from a team of spiritually gifted men at the men's retreat. You can't have all that joy, fellowship, love, unity, and spiritual challenge without the proper understanding and use of many spiritual gifts, functioning by the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God and to the common good of the members of the body of Christ. These are evil days, but not every day is evil. At the moment we are being blessed by our risen Lord as we seek to walk in obedience to him. Let's thank our wonderful Lord of the church, our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, for the many blessings we have received and are receiving even this very moment.

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