

Gifts of the Spirit

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How wonderful it is to know that every believer has a gift from the Holy Spirit. I can't think of anything more thrilling than to know that God has given you and me a gift to function in this world, and that we are to be partners with Jesus Christ in the tremendous enterprise of making Him known!

But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. (1 Corinthians 12:18)

God is the one who sovereignly gives the gifts, and He gives them as it pleases Him. He is the one to be pleased, you see, and these gifts are in the body so that the body can function.

A man in one of my congregations had an unusual gift. He was not an usher, but he would stand in the back of the church, and if there was any kind of disruption or commotion in the service, he would take care of it. He just had a way of handling people. As I told him, he had a rare gift and one that is needed in the church. You may be surprised that something like that is a gift. Of course it is a gift, and so is cooking or sewing.

My friends, the Spirit of God is sovereign in all this. He is the one who determines what is important and what is not important. If God has called you to bake a cake or to sew a dress, then do it. That is a gift. The Holy Spirit wants us to use our gifts and to bring them under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Gifts Unify

There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. (1 Corinthians 12:4-6)

The Trinity is actually involved in this matter of bringing about the unity. The Holy Spirit is mentioned first: "There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit." The Holy Spirit distributes the gifts. "There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord" – that is the Lord Jesus Christ. The Spirit of God is the one who bestows the gifts, but the Lord Jesus Christ is the one who administers the gifts.

Then notice the work of God the Father: "And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all." The word translated "activities" is in the Greek *energema*, energy. He energizes or gives power for the exercise of the gift. And God never gives a gift but that He also gives the power to exercise that gift, by the way.

So here we have something quite interesting: the *same* Spirit, the *same* Lord, and the *same* God the Father, but there are "diversities" and "differences." The purpose of the Trinity is to bring about the unity in the church, but it is unity in diversity. The Trinity is attempting to attain this unity in your church today.

Now we come to a very important verse in this matter of the unity of the Spirit:

But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all. (1 Corinthians 12:7)

We have three things here. First, the *definition of a gift*. What is a gift? Notice this: "But the manifestation of the Spirit." A gift is the manifestation of the Spirit. Therefore, if I may give you

my own simple definition: a gift is the Holy Spirit using the believer to do something through him. Anything that Vernon McGee does in the flesh is useless to God, and God doesn't want it. Only what the Spirit of God does through us is of value.

This is my reason for warning many folk who have natural gifts – a natural gift of speaking, a natural gift of singing – that they should be dead sure the Holy Spirit is using that gift. Be very sure that you are not just exercising a fleshly gift, but that the Spirit of God is using you. The reason why so many church services fall flat is that we have a demonstration of a natural gift rather than the Spirit of God doing something through an individual.

Secondly, *every believer has a gift*. Notice that “the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one.” Every believer has a gift. You, if you are a child of God, have a gift. The Spirit of God has given you a gift and you are to exercise it.

Thirdly, notice the *purpose of the gift*. It is “given to each one for the profit of all.” Every believer has a gift and is placed in the body of Christ to function. The gift is operational. What is the purpose? Well, the purpose is to profit the body of believers. A gift is to be used in the church to build it up, to help the church. It is never given to help you in your personal spiritual life.

For this reason, I disagree with folk who tell me (and quite a few have told me this), “Dr. McGee, we agree with you – we don't think we ought to speak in tongues in the church. We do it in our own private devotions.” But, friend, that is not the purpose of a gift. It is “given to each one for the profit of all.” “Profit” is the Greek *sumphero*, meaning “to bear together.” No gift was ever given to be used for selfish purposes. Every gift is to be used to build up the body of believers.

Paul developed this point with an illustration of the function of members of the human body. For instance, my eye has no business running off and operating on its own. It has to operate for the benefit of the rest of the body. And that is the only way in the world a gift is to be exercised. Different gifts are given to believers to be exercised for the good of the church; for the profit, for the wealth of, for the building up of the church – “for the profit of all.”

Gifts Vary

Then Paul made a contrast between the ordinary and the spectacular.

For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another different kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. (1 Corinthians 12:8–10)

He mentioned first the word of wisdom, the word of knowledge, and faith; miracles, prophecy, and tongues came later. There is a contrast here between the less exciting gifts and the more exciting gifts. In fact, back in verse 4 where he said, “There are diversities of gifts,” the Greek word for “gifts” is *charisma*. Yet the charismatic movement has been confined to just one gift, tongues.

But, you see, Paul purposely made a contrast between certain gifts that are spectacular and certain gifts that are ordinary, less glamorous. The gifts of wisdom and knowledge and faith are not spectacular. Wisdom, for instance, is virtually unrecognized. Paul made a contrast by saying

that it doesn't make any difference whether it is quiet wisdom or ecstatic utterances – all are needed. And he would make the comparison to the different members of the body, as we shall see.

As we move along in this chapter, notice something else concerning this matter of unity:

But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills. (1 Corinthians 12:11)

Again we are told that every believer has a gift. God gives to each one a gift that is his “individually” – the Greek word is *idios*, meaning “one’s own.” Each one is given his own peculiar gift. Dorcas, for instance, was so valuable to the early church that Peter restored her to life (see Acts 9:36-43). You may ask, “Do you mean that a woman’s ability as a seamstress is a gift from the Holy Spirit of God?” It was for Dorcas. Her gift of the Holy Spirit was that she could sew.

There are many gifts today, just as there are many members of the body – and there are hundreds of members of the body. I think one of the tragedies of the hour in the modern church is that so many believers feel as if they have no gift at all. If you are a believer, you have been put into the body of Christ and you have been placed there to function in a very definite capacity. Every believer in the church should be doing his or her own “thing.” God has called you to do something.

I tell these young people who run around speaking in tongues, “Look, it’s thrilling to find out what God wants *you* as a believer to do. Then do *that*. And you can do it in the power of the Holy Spirit. No one needs drugs when you can get ‘high’ like that. You can really get ‘turned on’ to that sort of thing!”

Gifts are Given (Not Chosen)

Let me repeat verse 11:

But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills.

“As He wills” means that the gifts are given sovereignly by the Holy Spirit. Paul enforced this point in verse 18 of the same chapter:

But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased.

We do not *choose* the gifts. The Holy Spirit *gives* the gifts, and He is sovereign in this because, you see, the gifts are for the unity of the church. This matter of gifts is not a spiritual smorgasbord where you go to the table and say, “Oh, I don’t want that gift of faith or that gift of wisdom. They’re not romantic. I want this gift of prophecy or this gift of tongues.” It’s not “I want this” or “I want that.” No, that’s not the way it is done. Why not? Because everyone would want the same gifts. It’s sort of like the barber who, while he was shaving a customer, said to him, “I’m sure glad everybody’s not alike. If they were like me, they’d all want my wife.” And

the customer said (although he should not have), “It *is* a good thing we’re not all alike, because if everybody were like me, nobody would have her!”

Fortunately, the gifts of the Spirit are not by our choice. The Spirit of God, in order to achieve unity, makes the choice for us. And I believe that in every local church, if every person were doing that which the Spirit of God wants, we would have every function that is necessary for the ongoing of the church. I think we have too many people wanting to do the same thing – when they have no gift for it. They want to do something that is showy, something that is spectacular, something that has *charisma* to it. This is the reason why speaking in tongues is so popular.

Isn’t it interesting that nobody goes into orbit on these other gifts of wisdom, faith, or helps? Always, it’s on tongues. You see, tongues has a certain charisma about it, and they like that type of thing. But the Holy Spirit is sovereign in this matter; He divides the gifts to us *as He wills*.

Gifts Illustrated by Members of the Body

Then Paul illustrated these gifts by a comparison to the human body.

For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. (1 Corinthians 12:12)

Many members. For what purpose? One body. Although there are many members, you’ll come up with only one body. And that is the way the church is to function. Many members; one body.

How do we get into the body of believers? This is very important to see and is the reason, I believe, that Dr. Luke, when he recorded the happenings on the Day of Pentecost, dared not mention the fact that they were “baptized” with the Holy Spirit. I think they were baptized, but the record says they were *filled*. Why? Because there was a service they performed: they all exercised a gift, speaking in different languages (and there was not an *unknown* tongue there that day; all were understood), and it was the filling of the Spirit that equipped them for that service.

Baptism does what? Notice especially the “one ... all” in this verse:

For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body. (1 Corinthians 12:13)

What does the Holy Spirit do? The Spirit of God, the moment you trust the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior, regenerates you. We hear that emphasized a great deal. But He also *indwells* the believer, *seals* the believer, and *baptizes* the believer – whether the believer knows it or not. Not one of these three is an experience. But the important thing is that the Spirit of God baptizes you into the body, which means He identifies you into the body.

Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism [identification] into [His] death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory [power] of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:4)

We are identified with Christ in His death. He died *for* us, but we died *in* Him. If this were not true, then the ordinance of water baptism would have no meaning.

This is one of the reasons I'm convinced that immersion is the proper mode for water baptism, because the believer has been buried with Christ and raised with Christ. And I think that water baptism best sets forth the Spirit baptism. When Christ died all those years ago, not only did *He* die, but *I* died. I died to sin in the person of Jesus Christ when He died for me on a cross outside the walls of Jerusalem. This is the reason I will not come up for judgment. I've already been judged – Christ's judgment on the cross was my judgment. But I have been raised with Him, and I'm joined to a living Christ. Christ is the Head of the body of believers.

But He doesn't put you into the body as only a button on a garment. He puts you in the body as a member to function in the body. This is very important to see. Therefore, as I've said, this matter of getting gifts is not a spiritual smorgasbord. I'm afraid it is treated that way in our churches. Do you need a teacher for a Sunday school class? Well, pray that God will send in the teacher whom the Spirit of God wants to teach that class.

When I was a teenager, a preacher did a very foolish thing. It almost caused me to leave the church. He said to me, a sixteen-year-old boy, "Vernon, you lead the song service." I got up there – and that's when I found out I did not have the gift of music. I want to tell you, friends, it's dangerous in the Lord's work to try to do something that the Spirit of God does not want you to do.

In the following verses, Paul used some ridiculous illustrations to show that in the body there must be many members, and they all must function in order to have unity – one body.

For in fact the body is not one member but many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body?

(1 Corinthians 12:14, 15)

The foot is very important, although it is way down there on the floor covered with a shoe. A doctor in Atlanta, Georgia, once asked me, "When you are delivering a message, do you know what is the most important part of your body?" I said, "Well, I suppose it's my tongue." He said, "No, it's not. The most important part of your body is your big toe. You couldn't stand up there if it were not for your big toe."

Now suppose my big toe should say, "Look, I've been going with you for years, and when you get up there and talk, people see you but they never see me, and the two of us down here are carrying the load." Well, the folk I talk to wouldn't care about seeing my big toe. It's not pretty. But it is important. We sometimes don't appreciate the different members of our body.

Too many people misunderstand what the important gifts in the church are today. Many a preacher knows that in his congregation there are certain members who are keeping that church going. You won't see them on the platform or read their names in the bulletin, but they are the feet that are carrying it along.

Now notice Paul's next illustration:

And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? (1 Corinthians 12:16)

Suppose my ear should say, "Look, I'd like to get around there in front. People see your eyes, but they don't see your ears." Now the eyes are very important, but the body can't be all eye. If my body were all eye, I'd be just a great big overgrown basketball. The eye is a wonderful thing. It is a 3-D camera; it takes pictures and develops them instantly. There is nothing quite like the eye –

but the body can't be all eye, my friend. There must be other members of the body, and this is what Paul was saying here:

If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. (1 Corinthians 12:17, 18)

Then he made this personal:

Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. (1 Corinthians 12:27)

This is something that every one of us should remember. I'm in the body of Christ, but I'm a member individually. I am to do my "own thing" in the body of believers.

Covet the Best Gifts

Paul concluded this chapter with an arresting statement:

But earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way. (1 Corinthians 12:31)

We'll find the "more excellent way" in 1 Corinthians 13, but notice he said to "earnestly desire the best gifts." "Desire" can mean something good, although it generally means something evil. The point here is that the Corinthians wanted the showy gifts, those which they considered to be best; therefore, Paul rebuked them, "You're desiring the showy gifts, and those are not the gifts you should be coveting. Desire the greater gifts!"

Which are the greater gifts? They are not those that make the most show, that are dramatic and exciting, but rather those that do the most good. We are to desire that which will do the most good for the body of believers. What can I do to help the church? This, my friend, is the approach that should be made, because I do believe a Christian can desire the best gifts.

The Gifts and Love

What is this excellent way spoken of in 1 Corinthians 12:31? Well, this excellent way is the fruit of the Spirit. Now, we've already examined the fruit of the Spirit and learned that actually there is only one fruit: love. From it come all the others – joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. That wonderful bunch of delicious fruit is produced by the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer; none of these qualities can you and I produce by human effort.

The interesting thing to note here is that a gift without love is nothing, regardless of what the gift is.

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. (1 Corinthians 13:1)

I might have the gift of tongues in such a way that I could speak like the angel Gabriel, but without love, I am just a little jangling bell. The gift of speaking is to be exercised in love. This is something the “tongues folk” ought to consider very carefully. I don’t care if you talk in tongues, but *how* do you talk in tongues? Are you doing it in love? If your gift of speaking is without love, it has no more value than the sound of a gong or a tinkling bell. For this reason we ought to be careful what we say.

Paul went on to mention other gifts:

And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:2)

I believe prophecy here means “to preach,” and I consider it to be one of the glamour gifts, by the way. “Understand all mysteries and all knowledge” are the gifts of wisdom and knowledge.

Then we come to this: “And though I have all faith” – faith is a wonderful gift. I’m part Scot and part German, and I am told that it is impossible to get more pessimism inside one skin than comes with these two nationalities. I’m a natural-born pessimist. But the Lord has always been good to me in every church I have served by putting in my congregations folk who have the gift of faith. A problem would arise in the church – my, it all looked black to me – but some brother would come up, put his arm around me, and say, “Pastor, don’t you worry about this. The Lord has already shown me that this thing is going to work out.” And it always did. It’s a marvelous, wonderful gift. Though it’s a wonderful gift, it’s not a glamour gift, like speaking in tongues. It’s a very quiet gift, and folk who have it are largely unknown.

Not only did Paul mention faith, but it’s “faith, so that I could remove mountains.” That, my friend, is a gift we could use in California, but I haven’t seen many mountains moved out here, I can assure you. That’s a gift very few are using today.

Then notice that Paul did a problem in arithmetic. By saying, “But have not love, I am nothing,” he put a zero on the board. That’s what any gift is – 000000. Those half-dozen zeros are not any more than one zero. But once you put a number in front of them, then you have something. You see, a gift *with* love is something; without love it is nothing. No gift is worth anything, regardless of what it is, unless it’s exercised in love. This is the reason why we ought to see the manifestation of love in the church today.

Exercise of the Gifts

Like our Lord, Paul was a master teacher. As you know, the mark of a good teacher is the ability to take people from where they are and move them up to where they ought to be. I think that is the business of a preacher also, by the way. Paul began with the Corinthians where they were. He attempted to bring those baby Christians from their immature level up to where they should be.

Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. (1 Corinthians 14:1)

In other words, “Desire spiritualities, but the important thing is that you might prophesy.”

Remember that to prophesy means to preach. In our day, preaching is being discounted. Many churches are even getting rid of preaching, so it's interesting that Paul put it first. I consider preaching and teaching the Word of God to be the all-important business of the church. Getting out the Word of God is *the* business of the church, and, my friend, if a church is not in that business, it would be better if the door were nailed shut. Giving out the gospel, the Word that reveals Jesus Christ, the Word that builds up believers, should be the big business of the church.

For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands him; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries. But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men. (1 Corinthians 14:2, 3)

This is the purpose of the Word of God today, and every gift given by the Spirit and used in the church should move toward that. God does not give the gift of preaching to everybody, but there are a hundred different ways in which you could help your preacher so that he could give more time to the Word of God. Everything should move to the one end of getting out the gospel. If the church is functioning like a body, whatever gift you've got will move toward the accomplishment of three things: to edify, to exhort, and to comfort.

A Word on Tongues

He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. (1 Corinthians 14:4)

Tongues were used for a very definite purpose, which we will see in a moment. But first, Paul presented three arguments showing the reasons why they should not speak in tongues in Corinth. The three arguments are these:

I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless he interprets, that the church may receive edification. (1 Corinthians 14:5)

Even if tongues were in the church, there must be an interpretation in order that there might be edifying of the church.

But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you unless I speak to you either by revelation, by knowledge, by prophesying [preaching], or by teaching? (1 Corinthians 14:6)

Paul was using himself for an example. He was saying, "I'm an apostle, and I'm not going around speaking in tongues. I speak by revelation, knowledge, prophesying, and teaching."

Then he used an illustration:

Even things without life, whether flute or harp, when they make a sound, unless they make a distinction in the sounds, how will it be known what is piped or played? (1 Corinthians 14:7)

It would make just as much sense for me to speak in tongues as to go to a piano and bang on it – and that’s all I could do. It would help no one to hear me banging on a piano, but let an accomplished pianist sit down there, and we would have music. Just as you have to make sense with music, you also must make sense with your tongue.

Now I want you to notice how the tongues were used in the early church.

In the law it is written: “With men of other tongues and other lips I will speak to this people; and yet, for all that, they will not hear Me,” says the Lord. (1 Corinthians 14:21)

Who are “this people”? It’s Israel. Here is a quotation from Isaiah, written about seven hundred years before Christ came to earth. God said, concerning His people Israel, that He had sent them prophets, He had given them the Word of God, He had chastised them, He had tried to speak to them in every way possible to bring them back to Himself, but they would not hear Him. Then He said He would give them at some future time a sign:

For with stammering lips and another tongue He will speak to this people, to whom He said, “This is the rest with which you may cause the weary to rest,” and, “This is the refreshing”; yet they would not hear. (Isaiah 28:11, 12)

In other words, God told them that there was a day coming when He would speak to them with other tongues – not *unknown* tongues, but *other* tongues. More than seven hundred years later, in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, the apostles of our Lord spoke in many different tongues. All the people who heard them were Israelites and had come to Jerusalem from various parts of the Roman Empire. There wasn’t a Gentile in the crowd that day. And these instructed Jews were reminded of Isaiah’s prophecy.

A number of years later Paul was in Corinth and began his ministry at the great synagogue (as recorded in Acts 18). That is where he preached the gospel until the unbelieving Jews finally put him out. Those who believed formed a little church made up of both Jews and Gentiles, largely Gentiles. And these new believers spoke in tongues (see 1 Corinthians 14). What did it mean? It meant this: these proud unbelieving Jews were walking around saying, “That little crowd of Gentiles over there say *they* are God’s chosen people. Don’t they know *we* are God’s people? *We* are the chosen people. We’re *it*.” Then they heard that little group speak in tongues, and the instructed Israelites said, “Wait a minute. Is God giving us His final word? Is this His final message to us? He said in Isaiah that He would try every means to speak to us, and we would not hear.” And some of the Jews turned to Christ. Most of them did not. But it was God’s final word to the nation.

In Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, he reminded them of the purpose of tongues:

Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophesying is not for unbelievers but for those who believe. (1 Corinthians 14:22)

To those unbelieving Jews, it was a sign.

Now as far as I know, there is not a group in existence today using tongues as God intended them to be used. If they are using them to speak to the nation Israel, I'll buy it. Tongues were meant to be a sign to the nation Israel. That is the reason why thousands turned to Christ on the Day of Pentecost and during the days that followed. It was God sending out His last call to His people.

Therefore if the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those who are uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all. (1 Corinthians 14:23, 24)

We do not want a stranger to step into the church and think he has entered into a group of people who have gone mad. If there is one thing we need today, it is the logical, meaningful presentation of the Word of God. People in this world are intelligent, they are scientific, they are sophisticated. They want a logical message that can be understood. The Word of God needs to be presented so it can be understood.

Therefore, brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy. (1 Corinthians 14:39)

As I have said, prophecy is a gift we should want in order to get the Word of God out. To me, the most thrilling thing in the world is to see people who want to hear the Word of God. Oh, that God would give His church a desire to get the Word of God out today!

How can it be done? Believers in the church have gifts – gifts of administration, of giving, all kinds of gifts – that God uses to get out the Word. What is your gift? You can do something to get the Word of God out in these days.

Let's each apply this to our own lives. If you are a believer, a Christian, it is because you have trusted Christ. And when you trusted Christ, the Holy Spirit not only regenerated you, He also baptized you, which means He put you in the body of believers. Now the body is made up of many members, and He gave you and each member of the body a gift and a place to function. My question is: are you exercising your gift? Are you doing your "thing" in the church? Are you building up the body of believers? This should be the purpose and desire of every Christian today.