

TenthNew Members

Spiritual Gifts

Finding Your Gift

By Dr. James M. Boice

One is not a member of the church for long before the diversities within it begin to be noted. Some of these are the results of sin and are entirely unjustified. Others are actually the gift of God to the church and are of great importance for the church's proper functioning in the world.

In Ephesians 4 there are a number of phrases that speak eloquently of our unity: "There is *one* body and *one* Spirit—just as you were called to *one* hope when you were called—*one* Lord, *one* faith, *one* baptism; *one* God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (vv. 4-6). But no sooner has Paul articulated this truth than he goes on to speak of diversity in the area of gifts. "But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. . . . It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up" (vv. 7, 11, 12). In the next verses, he illustrates his point by speaking of a body that, although it is one body, nevertheless has many diverse and differently functioning parts.

We find the same points in 1 Corinthians: "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" (1 Cor. 12:4-6). After listing nine of these gifts the apostle concludes, "All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each man, just as he determines" (v. 11).

These verses teach that a certain kind of unity and a certain kind of diversity are necessary for the health of the church. Without the unity—a unity of relationship to Christ through the work of God's Spirit—there is no church at all. We are still in our sins. On the other hand, without diversity in gifts the church cannot be healthy and will certainly not function properly, any more than a body without arms or legs.

To Each a Gift

Ray C. Stedman, of the Peninsula Bible Church, of Palo Alto, California, defines a spiritual gift as "a capacity for service which is given to every true Christian without exception and which is something each did not possess before he became a Christian."

That definition is worth looking at in detail. First, it rightly defines a spiritual gift as being given to the believer by God, the very thing the words "spiritual gift" imply. In the New Testament the word for this kind of gift is *charisma* or *charismata* (plural). We get our word "charismatic" from it, though the word is far more restricted in its English meaning. The most important thing about the word *charisma* is that it is based upon the very important Greek noun *charis*, meaning "grace." Since grace is God's unmerited favor, the point is that spiritual gifts are dispensed by God according to his will. One Christian will receive one gift, another Christian another. Some will receive more than one gift. Paul emphasizes this in the verse already quoted saying, "All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each man, *just as he determines*" (1 Cor. 12:11).

Another important point emerges from Stedman's definition. For, in saying that a spiritual gift is something the Christian involved did not possess before becoming a Christian, he rightly distinguishes a spiritual gift from what we would call a natural talent. Natural talents are also gifts of God. We are told that "every good and perfect gift is from above," which is true of talents and for Christians and non-Christians alike (Jas. 1:17). It is also true that a Christian may exercise a spiritual gift through a natural talent. Examples would be one who fulfills the gift of "helping" through a talent for carpentry, baking, financial management or similar things, or one who fulfills the gift of "exhortation" through a natural ability to get close to people. Still, spiritual gifts are not talents for the simple reason that they are given for spiritual ends

only, and only to Christians. They are “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Eph. 4:12).

A third point of Stedman’s definition of spiritual gifts is that every Christian has been given at least one. Paul said, “to *each one* the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7). Peter wrote, “Each one should use whatever gift he has received” (1 Pet. 4:10).

These three points about the nature of spiritual gifts show how important they really are. They are important theologically, for they lead us to a fuller understanding of the grace of God. They are important personally and experientially because they have an immediate and direct bearing upon the individual believer’s service to Christ and others within the church. They are important organizationally, for they show how clergy and laity should relate to one another.

What Are the Gifts?

The gifts of the Spirit are listed in four separate chapters of the New Testament and in one of those chapters in two places. So there are five lists in all (Eph. 4:11; 1 Cor. 12:8-10; 1 Cor. 12:28-30; Rom. 12:6-8; and 1 Pet. 4:11). These lists vary in regard to the gifts listed. First Peter 4:11, the shortest, contains only two gifts: speaking and service. The lists in 1 Corinthians 12, the longest, each contain nine, though those nine are not identical. In all there may be nineteen gifts mentioned, but this is not an absolute figure in that different words can conceivably be used to describe the same or nearly identical gifts, and there may be gifts not mentioned.

1. *Apostles and prophets.* First in the lists found in Ephesians 4:11 and 1 Corinthians 12:28-30 is the gift of apostles and prophets. Some who have written on the gifts have tried to show how apostles and prophets are present today. They point out that the work “apostle” does not mean only the original band of authoritative spokesmen commissioned by Christ; it can also refer to anyone who is sent forth as a witness, particularly to establish churches. Similarly “prophet” does not always mean only one who receives a special inspired word from God; it also refers to anyone who speaks boldly in his name (as in 1 Cor. 14). These points are well taken. But they do not really apply to the use of the words in the two lists mentioned. In these lists both “apostle” and “prophet” must be taken in their most technical sense. Therefore, apostles must refer to those witnesses who were specifically commissioned by Christ to establish the church upon a proper base, and prophets must refer to those who received God’s message (as had the prophets of old) and recorded it in the pages of what we call the New Testament. Prophet may also refer to those specially inspired individuals such as Agabus (Acts 21:10, 11) who functioned while the New Testament was being written.

Neither one of these gifts exists today. We no longer have apostles or prophets in this sense. But we are not deprived of the benefits of these first and highly significant gifts of God to the Christian community, for the apostles did establish the first churches and taught them authoritatively, and those who spoke from God have left us the New Testament.

2. *Evangelists.* The second category of gifts contains just one item. Obviously, the gift of evangelism has not ceased, and sad is the church or period of church history that has but few who are so gifted. An evangelist is one who possesses a special ability in communicating the gospel of salvation from sin through Jesus Christ. This does not mean that others who are not evangelists are excused from the obligation to tell others about Jesus. On the contrary, that is a task we all share. The Great Commission declares it. But it does mean that some are especially gifted in this area.

It should be said that the evangelist does not necessarily have to be a well-educated or highly intelligent person. The next category contains the gift of teaching, and that presumably is at least a bit different. It presupposes a certain amount of knowledge. This is not the case with the evangelist. The evangelist must know his message. He must be able to answer questions about it. But his primary gift is in being able to communicate the basic gospel clearly and well, which more fully educated persons cannot always do. Again, the gift of evangelism is not limited to those who are “professionals,” like Billy Graham. It is more often the gift of lay members. In his own study of spiritual gifts in *The Holy Spirit*, Graham points out that the only person in the entire Bible who is actually called an evangelist is Philip, and he was a deacon.

3. *Pastors, teachers and the gift of encouraging.* These gifts belong in one category because they often go together and may in fact actually be one gift. (In Ephesians 4:11 the words “pastors” and “teachers” seem to be joined together due to the nature of the Greek phrasing in that sentence, so that we could speak of the gift of pastor-teacher.)

“Pastor” refers to one who has a pastoral oversight over others. It is based upon shepherding and looks to the pattern of Jesus, who described himself as “the good shepherd” (John 10:11) and is referred to as “the great” (Heb. 13:20) and “Chief Shepherd” of the sheep (1 Pet. 5:4). As with evangelists, many have this gift who are not ordained. For example, pastoring should be the gift of an elder and also of a deacon if he has duties involving spiritual oversight. It is also a valued gift in Sunday school teachers.

“Teacher” is self-explanatory. It is a most important gift and may be one of the gifts most needed at the present time. We see the importance of this gift when we recognize that it is a key idea in Matthew's version of the Great Commission. There Jesus says, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and [in order to explain how this specifically is to be done] teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19, 20). Clearly, those who are brought to faith in Christ are to be disciplined primarily through teaching.

In Romans 12:8 “encouraging” follows immediately after “teaching.” Rightly so! For having been taught in the Word, the disciple next needs to be encouraged to press on in the things he or she has learned. Again, this is a pastoral responsibility. In fact, when Paul uses this word in Romans he may have pastors in mind particularly, since the word “pastor” does not occur elsewhere in the passage.

4. *Faith.* This word is one of the most important in the Christian vocabulary. It has several uses. It can refer to “saving faith,” the ability to believe God unto salvation, acquired as the result of regeneration (Eph. 2:8). It can refer to the content of the gospel, as in references to “the word of faith” (Rom. 10:8), “obedience to the faith” (Acts 6:7; Rom. 1:5) or simply “the faith” (Acts 13:8, 14:22). It can mean faithfulness, the essential idea of that faith mentioned as a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). It can refer simply to trust in God in adversity (Eph. 6:16). In the list of gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, faith probably refers to the ability to look ahead to something God has promised and act as if it were already present. Stedman says that faith in this sense is what we today would probably call vision.

The heroes of faith listed in Hebrews 11 had this gift, for in each case their lives demonstrate their surety of what they had hoped for and the certainty of what they did not see (v. 1). Abel had been promised salvation through the seed of the woman who should crush Satan's head, and he testified to his faith in that future reality through obedience in the matter of the blood sacrifice. Enoch believed God and lived a righteous life. Noah accepted God's word regarding a future destruction of the ungodly and acted upon that conviction by building an ark in which he and his family were saved. Abraham exhibited this faith throughout his lifetime. Other examples are Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephtha, David, Samuel. Current examples might include founders of certain mission works or agencies, such as George Mueller, who cared for countless orphans in England over a period of many years, or William Carey, who worked in India, or Hudson Taylor, who founded the China Inland Mission.

5. *Healings and miracles.* These gifts occur at two separate places in 1 Corinthians 12 and are quite obviously related. This is important in regard to interpreting the nature of the gift of healing because, although it is true that the word “healing” (actually “healings,” plural) can refer to various types of cures—emotional as well as bodily ailments and by natural as well as miraculous means—in these verses the word refers to the miraculous.

This raises the question about whether such gifts exist today, a matter on which many Christians are divided. We note, on the one hand, that some gifts (such as the gifts of apostleship and prophecy) no longer occur in their proper biblical sense. The gifts of healings and miracles could be like them. Again, gifts like evangelism, teaching and faith continue to exist and clearly must continue to the end of church history. Healings and miracles could be like them. Again, healings and miracles could exist but occur infrequently.

This last is probably the case. First, miracles and healings are bracketed by other gifts that continue: in the case of 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, by wisdom, knowledge and faith before, and by discerning of spirits afterward; in the case of 1 Corinthians 12:28-30, by teaching before and the gift of helping afterward. Second, the working of miracles is similar to the case of speaking in tongues, which is treated at great length just two chapters later and about which we receive the explicit warning: “Do not forbid speaking in tongues” (1 Cor. 14:39). Third, there are accounts of healings and other miracles from every period of church history, and while it may be true that many of these are myths, mistakes or even deliberate deceptions, it is brash indeed to declare outright that they all are. We dare not put God in a box on this matter, saying that he cannot give the gifts of healings or miracles today. God can. On the other hand, this is not the same thing as saying that we have a right to expect healings (God sometimes works through illness) or that what passes for the miraculous today is in every case authentic.

6. *Ability to distinguish spirits.* This gift is mentioned at only one place in the various lists of gifts, but it is quite important. It is the gift of discernment as it relates to a prophet's or teacher's teaching. Peter exercised this gift when he saw through the deception being perpetrated by Ananias and Sapphira: “Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit. . .? How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord?” (Acts 5:3, 9). Today we know people who are quite easily taken in by any new “Christian” fad, and we know others who are not. These latter have the gift of discernment. The church should recognize such persons and seek their judgments in areas where discernment is needed.

7. *Helpers.* The reference to helpers in 1 Corinthians 12:28 is amplified in Romans 12:7, 8 by the gifts of contributing (financially), giving aid, showing mercy and perhaps also rendering service. We could add more things. Some show the gift of helping in doing the work necessary to keep a home, business or church running smoothly. They see what needs to be done and do it. Some care for older people, buying groceries for them when they are unable to go out, or cleaning, shoveling snow, taking them back and forth to medical appointments or to visit friends or church. Some help the poor. Some assist the sick by sending in food or doing the necessary errands until the sick person recovers. All kinds of social work fit in here. What distinguishes this or other kinds of service from the similarly valuable service non-Christians likewise often give is that it is done in the name of Jesus Christ and for his glory. Peter is speaking of this when he encourages those who render service to do it “with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 4:11).

8. *Administrators.* Some versions call this gift “governments,” but it really refers to administrative rule or leadership. A valuable gift it is! Most of us know of situations when there was obviously work to be done and many people available to do it. But the job did not get done because there was no one around to take charge, make assignments and then see that the various responsibilities were carried out. On the other hand, there have been times when the necessary gifts and people did not seem to be present. But someone came along who saw how the work could be done and then did it through those who were available.

Here we must avoid two errors. One is the error of the super-spiritual, who distrust strong administration on the ground that it is of the flesh and that God must therefore work in other ways. People who feel this way or are intimidated by others who do, frequently fail to exert the leadership God has given to them. The other error is in thinking that what is done in the area of strong leadership is always of God or that God is only working when such leadership is present. That is not true either. People who fail in this direction need to recognize the difference between the gift of administration and mere force of personality, willfulness or an aggressive success-oriented mentality. The Lord obviously had all the spiritual gifts. But he did not boss people about, trample on feelings or press on obstinately like a steam roller to accomplish some success-oriented goal.

9. *Tongues and the interpretation of tongues.* None of the gifts mentioned anywhere in the New Testament has been as controversial as the gift of tongues and the accompanying gift, interpretation. Some have insisted that the gift of tongues means being able to speak so that other people hear in their own but different languages. This was the miracle that took place at Pentecost (cf. Acts 2:1-11); but it does not seem to be identical with the gift as it was practiced at Corinth, for at Corinth interpreters were necessary. If interpreters were necessary, the listeners obviously were not hearing in their own language (which was probably the language of the speaker anyway). Others speak of exercise of tongues as being the ability

to speak in “heavenly tongues,” that is, in no known human language. Others deny that either one of these even exists today and maintain that what passes for tongues is either some self-induced psychological phenomena or the work of demons. The only way to proceed is to limit oneself to what is said in the one portion of Scripture that deals with the phenomenon.

That section of Scripture is 1 Corinthians 12 and 14, in which Paul makes the following points. First, *the gift of tongues can be counterfeited*. That is, there is a genuine gift; but there is also a duplication of that gift by other spirits, whether the spirit of Satan or merely the spirit of the individual. This is what Paul is talking about when he reminds the Corinthian Christians that before their conversions they were “led astray to dumb idols” (12:2) and warns them that it is necessary to test the spirits on the basis of their confession or lack of confession of Christ (v. 3).

The second principle is that *there are many different and valuable gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the gift of tongues is just one*. Paul says this in verses 4-11 of chapter 12, stressing that there are different needs in the church and that it is the prerogative of the Holy Spirit to meet those needs by giving the necessary gifts or abilities to the Christians called to work in those areas. Paul's emphasis is on the fact that it is by one and the same Spirit that the gifts are given (vv. 8-11).

The third of Paul's points is that *the gifts of the Spirit are for a purpose and that this, broadly considered, is the edification and unity of the church* (12:12-27). In one sense there are two separate purposes. But Paul treats both through the image of the body to which each part contributes. He stresses that: there are “many members” of the body (v. 12), all “are indispensable” (v. 22), and there should be “no discord” (v. 25). It follows from this that if a particular exercise of the gift of tongues does not promote growth or, worse yet, leads to schism, then either the gift is not of God or it is being exercised in a way contrary to God's purposes for it.

Fourth, Paul indicates that *if the gifts are to be listed in the order of importance, tongues will always come relatively low on the list* (12:28-14:12). This is most marked in 12:28, where Paul actually numbers the gifts: “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.” In this list the gift of tongues falls in category five, and even in that category it is listed after healings, helps and governments. Another way Paul makes this point is by his extensive emphasis upon the importance of love (chap. 13). Finally, he concludes that if any gift is to be sought after, it is the gift of prophecy, by which in this passage he means the ability to preach and teach the Word clearly (14:1).

Paul's fifth principle is that *the gift of tongues is fraught with particular dangers and must therefore be exercised with safeguards*. He discusses these in 14:13-38.

The first danger is the danger of disorder. Paul does not want this, for he seems to regard it as a disgrace or at least an unprofitable thing for God's work to be done in a disruptive way. Here he lays down guidelines. First, do not allow anyone to speak in church at the same time another person is speaking; people should speak one at a time. Second, do not allow everyone to speak, but at the most two or three. Third, do not permit even these to speak in tongues unless there is someone there who can interpret. The Holy Spirit cannot be heard if everyone is shouting and crying out at the same time under his supposed influence.

The second danger is the danger of a contentless Christianity, which Paul counters by insisting on interpretation. Then, as now, Christianity was threatened by an outlook that made experience central and content without much importance. In this approach the emotional “high” was everything. But Paul will not allow it. True, he does not want to suppress any valid emotional response to the truth of Christianity. There is and should be emotion within Christianity. But this cannot be allowed to become the basis of the Christian faith. The objective revelation of God in history and in the Scriptures is the basis. If experience is trusted, it will undoubtedly lead to a distortion of true Christianity and to excesses.

Finding Your Gift

At this point someone may be saying, “I recognize the importance of spiritual gifts and am aware now of what they are. Still I am puzzled because I do not know where I fit into the picture. How can I discover what my gifts are?”

First, you can *begin by studying what the Bible has to say about spiritual gifts*. The Bible is God’s primary provision for spiritual growth and sanctification. It is in the Bible that God speaks to us. Without a knowledge of what God’s Word explicitly teaches in this area we can easily be led to desire experiences which are not his will for us or even begin to think of the spiritual gifts in secular terms. As we study the Bible’s teaching we must be careful to discern what God’s purpose in giving spiritual gifts is. It is for the growth of the body and not merely for personal growth or satisfaction. “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Eph. 4:11, 12).

Second, *we must pray*. This is not a matter to be taken lightly or one in which we may feel free to trust our own judgment. We do not know our hearts. We may find ourselves wanting a gift that exalts our sense of self-importance, but that God does not have in mind for us. We may find ourselves resisting the gift he actually has in mind. The only way we will get by this hurdle is to lay the entire matter before the Lord in serious, soul-searching prayer and ask him, as he speaks through his Word, to show us the gift he actually has given us.

Third, *we will be helped by making a sober assessment of our own spiritual strengths and abilities*. If we do not do this on the basis of a careful study of the Word of God and through prayer, we will be misled. But if we have first sought the wisdom and mind of God, we can then go back and look at ourselves through spiritual eyes. We can ask: What do I like to do? What am I good at? What are my talents? As we saw earlier, spiritual gifts are not talents. But they are often related, and we are seldom wrong if we try to exercise our talents spiritually and for spiritual ends.

The fourth and final thing you can do is *seek the wisdom of other Christians*. The church does not always function as it should. But where it functions properly one of the things that should happen is that others with the gift of insight or wisdom should be able to sense what your gifts are and point them out in relation to the needs of the particular Christian congregation. Others are almost always more objective about ourselves than we are. We must cultivate the ability to listen to these other members of the family of God and follow their guidance as far as we are able. If others tell us of our gifts, we are at least freed from the presumption of assuming we have gifts that actually we do not have.