

EVERYONE GETS TO PLAY: INTRODUCING THE GIFTS

Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed."

1 Corinthians 12:1

We have a world to win for Jesus. There is a kingdom to be built and this is not something we can do in our own strength. Jesus encouraged his disciples to wait for "power" to be his witnesses (Acts 1:8). Like the disciples, we are empowered as we are filled with the Holy Spirit and the Spirit gives us gifts that are tools to build the kingdom.

SOMEONE ELSE'S MAIL

Whenever we read one of the letters in the New Testament we are reading one half of a conversation. In the case of 1 Corinthians we are reading what Paul wrote to a church that he founded in Corinth (see Acts 18). We don't have any letters the Corinthians might have written to Paul, but by reading Paul's letter carefully we can see that

he is responding both to questions they have asked him and reports he has heard about them.

In 1 Corinthians 12–14 Paul is talking about community worship and particularly dealing with the spiritual gifts. The Corinthians had been over emphasising the showier gifts and their worship ended up completely chaotic and self-centred. Paul addresses this not by telling them to stop using the gifts but by making clear what the gifts are for.

It's worth reading 1 Corinthians 12:1–11 again:

Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to dumb idols. Therefore I want you to know 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.

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.

Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a 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. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.

GIFTS OF GRACE

Some of the Corinthians seemed to see the gifts as things to boast about; they were using them to show off. In just a few verses Paul pulls the rug out from under their feet.

First, he says, the one certain activity of the Spirit is that he leads people to Jesus: "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit" (v. 3). This means *everyone* who follows Jesus has the Spirit living inside them. People who are using spiritual gifts do not have some sort of "special access"; they aren't superior to anyone else.

Second, in verse 1 Paul uses a Greek word, *pneumatikon*, which is often translated "spiritual gifts" but simply means "spiritual things". Then in verse 4 he switches and uses *charismata* to describe the gifts, a word meaning "gifts of grace". It is the Spirit who *graciously gives* the gifts. If the gifts are freely given and aren't based on our goodness, spirituality or intelligence then we have nothing to be proud about. It is as ridiculous to boast about having the gift of prophecy as it is to boast about having blue eyes.

The gifts are not trophies to show off in a cabinet, or badges to wear but rather tools to be used. They are necessary for strengthening the church and bringing the good news of Jesus to the world.

THE TOOLKIT

There are different lists of spiritual gifts in the New Testament. The other main lists can be found in 1 Corinthians 12:28, Romans 12:6–8 and Ephesians 4:11. You may notice there's some overlap between them. The nine gifts mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:7–10 are not meant to be exclusive; they are examples rather than a comprehensive list of the spiritual gifts. We are going to limit ourselves to the list in 1 Cor. 12:7–10 because there has been a lot of misunderstanding about these seemingly more supernatural gifts. We'll give a very brief overview of these gifts here, and in the following chapters we will go on to look at some of them in more depth.

WORD OR KNOWLEDGE GIFTS

Word of Wisdom

This is when supernatural insight is given to us for a particular issue or person when we have no idea what to do. A word of wisdom is when we operate with God-given perception or astuteness that allows us to direct people towards God's freedom and life. We see an example of this in 1 Kings 3:16–28. Two women were brought to King Solomon, both claiming a baby was their own. How could Solomon judge between them in the days before DNA testing? He ordered that the child should be cut in half and each woman given a share. The true mother then relinquished her claim rather than see the child die.

King Solomon prayed and asked God to give him supernatural wisdom and God gave him the gift. We are told in the letter of

James, "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you" (James 1:5).

Prophecy and Words of Knowledge

The gift of prophecy is God's "now" word to a group or person that strengthens, encourages and comforts them. It is a specific message that is supernaturally given. Sometimes these prophetic insights can come in the form of a talk, a message or even a song. We see this with Simeon, Zechariah and Mary at the birth of Jesus, as well as Peter on the day of Pentecost.

A word of knowledge is similar to prophecy; the distinction would probably be that a word of knowledge would involve a more specific revelation of a person's situation or condition. There are plenty of examples of both Jesus and the early church using these gifts, such as in John 4:17–29, Matthew 17:27 and Acts 9:10–15.

Discerning between Spirits

This is a supernatural revelation that gives us insight into the source or motivation underlying a person's behaviour, or a situation. Of course there is a discernment that is natural but here we are talking about a sense that comes from the Holy Spirit. An example of the gift in practice might be a scenario where, on the surface everything seems okay and there is no natural reason to be concerned, but you develop an uneasy feeling in your spirit. Sometimes when praying for people you have a sense of whether the root of the issue is physical, emotional or spiritual. Jesus was able to supernaturally recognise the good in Nathanael, and the error in Peter's rebuke (see John 1:47

and Matthew 16:23). We need to be cautious, however, that we don't baptise our judgmental attitudes as "discerning between spirits".

Tongues and Interpretation of Tongues

The gift of tongues is the supernatural ability to speak in a language that is unknown to the speaker. It can be an actual foreign language and even the language of angels (1 Cor. 13:1). Interpretation of tongues is when revelation of the meaning of a particular tongue is given to someone else so that it might be shared with the group. There are many instances of believers praying in tongues in Acts and, as we'll see, this was certainly something that was practised in Corinth. For examples in Acts check out Acts 2:4, 10:45–46 and 19:6.

POWER GIFTS

Faith

This gift looks like a particular moment where you suddenly have supernatural expectancy or trust that causes you to step out in a way you wouldn't normally. It also seems to coincide with a supernatural authority to carry out God's plans. You may have a sudden confidence that if you pray for someone they will be healed, or that you should approach a particular person in the street. It isn't something that we work up; it is given in a particular moment. We've noticed that often after the use of this gift we think, "What on earth was I doing? I can't believe I said that!" This gift will frequently operate alongside the other gifts (like healing), but we almost certainly see an example of it when Peter commanded the lame beggar to walk in Acts 3:2–7.

Gifts of Healing

This is when God uses us to supernaturally heal a disease or infirmity. Jesus healed people from all sorts of conditions, so did his followers. For just a few of many examples see Mark 1:30–34, 3:1–5, Acts 5:15–16 and 28:8–9. We'll talk much more about this in a later chapter.

Miraculous Powers

A miracle is a more unusual divine act. It often causes people to wonder, inspires awe and bears witness to God. It is where God's power operates through someone and supernaturally intervenes in the natural order of things. The line between healing and miraculous powers is blurred. In Jesus's ministry he was able not just to heal those who had fallen sick, but create where something had never existed. For example, see the stir caused by him healing a man *born* blind (John 9:1–34), or the resurrection of Lazarus (John 11:38–44; 12:9–11).

Turning water into wine, calming a storm, walking on water and feeding five thousand with a small picnic would also fall into this group! Examples of "miraculous powers" in Acts might be the casting out of demons, the striking of Elymas blind, and the raising of Tabitha from the dead (Acts 16:18, 13:11–12 and 9:40).

ARE THE GIFTS FOR ME?

The gifts of the Spirit are for every believer who wants them. Everyone gets to play! Paul is writing 1 Corinthians 12–14 to address a problem in the gathered community of believers. Their worship services were out of control. People were boasting about their gifts and acting

like “super Christians”. Paul makes it clear that the Spirit gives gifts to *everyone* and that in the gathered meeting no one person gets all the gifts. If we want to participate in the supernatural we shouldn’t be looking to any one person but to the Spirit.

It is the case that sometimes people are so faithful in exercising a particular gift that they develop a ministry in a particular area. This seems to be what Paul’s list in 1 Corinthians 12:27–30 is about. It’s possible for someone to use the gift of prophecy so much that the church begins to look to them to exercise that gift. They have developed a ministry as a prophet. The same might be true of teaching, evangelism, pastoring and so on. It doesn’t follow that because we don’t have the ministry of a prophet we can’t prophesy. We might not be evangelists or pastors, but we are all meant to witness and love each other. All of us are also *actively encouraged* to hear God speak, pray for the sick and speak in tongues. We are all able to play, so never rule yourself out of being able to use these gifts.

Do you want God to use you? Do you long to see God’s power flow through you to set people free? Do you want your words to bring a revelation of Jesus into people’s hearts and minds? The Bible condemns what it calls “selfish ambition”, but there is a good ambition. And we should all be ambitious for God to use us in his kingdom. Ask him to give you lots of “talents”, and then don’t bury them, invest them. This is the one time we’re allowed to be greedy. Why? Because, “the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort” (1 Cor. 14:3). We assume that you, like us, want to strengthen, encourage and comfort other people. Then seek the gift of prophecy. We could say the same for miracles, healings, gifts of discernment and all the above.

Our purpose in the next few chapters is to help us all come to a place where we understand the gifts enough to start using them. Just to underline one last time before we go on: the gifts of the Spirit are not status symbols or rewards for spirituality. They are God’s power freely given to normal, weak people so they can be effective in bringing about his kingdom in this world.