

Studies in renewal

Study 6:

The gifts of the Spirit

By Dr Ulf Metzner, Indooroopilly Qld (1987)

Should Christians today expect to receive 'charismatic gifts' from the Holy Spirit?
What are these gifts?
What does the Bible say about them?

MANY GIFTS – ONE SOURCE

As a church we rejoice that, according to his promise, Christ does not forsake his people, but has given us 'another Counsellor', the 'Spirit of truth', who will be with us forever (John 14:16, 17; 14:26; 15:26; 16:7, 8, etc.).

As the Spirit dwells in us, teaching us all things, he equips us to convince the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment. And he also equips us to build up the Body of Christ. This Body is one, but has many members. And these members are not all equipped in the same manner. As Paul says, There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God ...' (1 Cor 12:4–6). Our gifts may vary, but they all have the same source and are all a manifestation of the same Spirit of God.

IMPORTANT AND MORE IMPORTANT GIFTS

Whatever our gifts, the Spirit has given them to us so that we may use them (Rom 12:6). Within the Church, the Body of Christ, all gifts should be used for the common good (1 Cor 12:7). In practical terms the measuring stick for the importance of a gift of the Spirit is its relevance for the common good of the Body of Christ, i.e. its ability to build up that Body. The question is not so much whether I may or may not do a certain thing, but how my action affects others (1 Cor 8:10). In the last instance, the gifts we have and what we do with them should lead to a building up of the Body of Christ (Eph 4:12–16; 1 Cor 8:1).

So while all gifts are equal - since they are all given by the same Spirit of God - some are higher and some are lower gifts according to their potential to do good.

In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul goes to considerable lengths to make this point, particularly with respect to the gift of speaking in tongues. Quite clearly there were those in Corinth who felt that their Spirit-given gift of speaking in tongues was of higher value than other gifts. Such thinking is immature, childish. 'Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; be babes in evil, but in thinking be mature' (1 Cor 14:20). Those speaking in tongues must realise that they are speaking not to men but to God; therefore they edify themselves, not the church (v 2-4). Such self-edification is good in private, Paul says, but in public, 'in church I would rather speak five words with my mind, in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue' (14:19).

Since those gifts that build up the church are higher, 'he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be edified' (14:5). The three gifts with more 'common good potential' than all the others are faith, hope and love (1 Cor 12: 31), and of these love is the greatest gift of the Spirit (1 Cor 13:13). Does this mean that there ought to be no room in the church for speaking in tongues? Certainly not! 'Do not forbid speaking in tongues, but all things should be done decently and in order' (1 Cor 14:39, 40).

For study:

1. Read Corinthians 12:4-6.
What does this passage tell us about the source of the many and varied gifts?
2. Discuss the statement: 'All the gifts of the Spirit are equal, but some are higher or lower gifts according to their ability to build up the Body of Christ.'
3. What is the main purpose of the gift of speaking in tongues? (1 Cor 14:2-4 will help).
4. Which three gifts of the Spirit have the greatest common-good potential?
Read 1 Corinthians 12:31 and 13:13.

ALL CHRISTIANS HAVE CHARISMATIC GIFTS

For Paul all gifts of the Spirit are gifts of grace, *charismata*. Since each Christian receives some gift of grace from the Spirit, we are all, in that original, literal, and Scriptural sense of the word, *charismatics*. It is indeed sad that this biblical term has been narrowed down to characterize not all Christians, but only a group within Christianity. Such a narrow usage smacks of an elitism which is foreign to the New Testament and in flat contradiction to the very work and nature of the Holy Spirit.

The most detailed statements about the gifts of the Spirit may be found in Romans 12:6-9, 1 Corinthians 12-14 (especially vv 8-10 and 28-31 in Chapter 12) and Ephesians 4:11. It should be noted, however, that the apostle nowhere claims that he has given us a complete list of all the gifts of the Spirit. Such a list would surely have to be much more comprehensive.

Paul lists more than thirty gifts of the Spirit in the above chapters. Since there is a certain overlap, this number is somewhat reduced in the following listings: prophecy (speaking God's message), service, teaching, exhortation (encouraging others), sharing (what we have), being a leader, practising kindness, messages full of wisdom, messages full of knowledge, gifts of healing, working of miracles, discerning the spirits (ability to tell what comes from God's Spirit and what does not), various kinds of tongues (unknown to the speaker himself),

interpretation of tongues, having faith, hope, love, being an apostle, an evangelist, a helper, an administrator, a pastor.

It is clear that while all Christians receive one or more of these gifts of the Spirit, no Christian receives all of them. As Paul says, 'To one is given... to another...to another ...' (1 Cor 12:8–10). The Body of Christ is made up of many people with their various and differing gifts. And it is certainly incorrect to label some of these gifts 'supernatural manifestation gifts', which only 'born again' believers receive - an assertion sometimes made by members of Pentecostal and charismatic movements. Like the wind, the Spirit blows where he wills (John 3:8) and gives to each a gift of grace for the common good.

Similarly, it is wrong to set up distinct categories into which we then force the various spiritual gifts. It is true that Paul uses several words to describe the gifts of the Spirit in Greek (*charismata*, *diakonia*, *phanerosis*, *energon*). But such terms ought not to be regarded as some kind of labelling system (e.g. that in Rom 12:4–8 we have the 'seven basic "function gifts" in the Church'; in 1 Cor 12:7–11 the 'nine super-natural "manifestation gifts"'; etc.). While some gifts undoubtedly refer to the more basic functions in the church (e.g. serving, encouraging, giving), and others equip for specific ministries (e.g. apostles, prophets, evangelists, administrators), it is significant that some gifts fit into both or neither of these categories. The far more important point, which Paul stresses, is also the one that we should focus on, 'Having gifts that differ according to the grace given us, let us use them' (Rom 12:6).

For study:

5. Discuss this statement: 'All Christians have charismatic gifts, but no Christian receives all the gifts of the Spirit.' (See 1 Cor 12:8–10)

USING OUR SPIRIT-GIVEN GIFTS

The Holy Spirit endows us with certain gifts so that we may use them. It should, therefore, be the most natural of questions for every believer to ask, 'What is my gift? Have I a special ministry or service with my gift?' Undoubtedly, God expects us to regard the administration of the gifts he has given us as a holy and very serious obligation. All too often Christians act as though they have received no gifts and have no contribution to make towards the common good of the Body of Christ. Such neglect of our gifts amounts to neutralization of the Holy Spirit's work in our life. And as the parable of the talents reminds us, our Lord regards such neglect most seriously (Matt 25:14–30).

In using our gifts we are, however, also reminded that they are not in themselves a means of attaining grace, a way of salvation. They can never be a substitute for Word and Sacrament. Nor can special gifts be a guarantee that the Spirit of God is at work or be proof that we have the right faith.

It must also be stressed that Christians need not have some kind of conversion experience in order to be 'eligible' for the gifts of the Spirit.

After all has been said and done, on that last great day God will not ask us for a list of our gifts. Nor will he be particularly impressed by any extraordinary gifts we may be able to call our own. He will simply ask us what we have done with the talents he has given us (Matt 25:14–30). He would remind us that he told us that we would be known by our fruits (Matt 7:16), that these must be in harmony with his Spirit (Gal 5:22), and that, whatever our gifts, he expects that we translate them into actions of love over against all people (Matt 25:31–46). In this way the gifts we receive and the fruit we bear are, in the very last instance, related to the way we treat the Giver of all Gifts (Matt 25:40,45).

For study:

6. Read Romans 12:6 and Matthew 25:14–30.
What is the important connection between these two passages of Scripture?
7. Discuss this statement: 'Christians need not have some kind of conversion experience in order to be eligible for the gifts of the Spirit.'

REMEMBER

- All Christians receive one or more gifts of the Spirit, but no Christian receives all these gifts.
- All the gifts of the Spirit are equal, but love is called the greatest gift, because it has the greatest potential to build up the Body of Christ.
- God expects us to use the gifts of his Spirit, but such gifts are not in themselves a means of grace or a way of salvation.
- The special gifts we have may not be regarded as proof that we have the right faith.