

THE OPERATION OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS

“Now about gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed” (1 Corinthians 12:1 NIV). These words of Scripture written by the apostle Paul nearly 2,000 years ago still apply to all believers in this 21st century! No one is exempt. Once the Holy Spirit begins His work in a person’s life each one will receive a spiritual gift at some point. Both the apostles Peter and Paul emphasize this reality. “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others” (1 Peter 4:10). “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7). This emphasizes that spiritual gifts are distributed by the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit. We do not control them, but we are to regularly cooperate with the Spirit. This enables the believer to grow in the exercise of the gift or gifts. We nurture our sensitivity and ministry when the Spirit moves upon us.

Our responsibility is to operate in our spiritual gifts. Consider Horton’s comments about the church at Corinth: “. . . Paul is writing to those who, without due astonishment, were living in an atmosphere charged with the supernatural, where miracles were a daily occurrence, where such manifestations were expected . . .”¹ Donald Gee writes, “The ignorance long ago at Corinth was not experimental, for they ‘came behind in no gift, waiting for the coming of the Lord.’ It was ignorance of the relative values of spiritual gifts, their true nature, and in their right use.”² Adewuya explains, “Because of their idolatrous background, the Corinthians were prone to a misunderstanding of the gifts. So, at the start, Paul lays down a broad principle for discerning matters regarding spiritual gifts: the Corinthians are to judge things by how they relate to Jesus Christ.”³

The intent of this paper is to provide a broad introduction to the reality of spiritual gifts and their operation in the Church, the body of Christ.

As early as January 1914, A.J. Tomlinson, general overseer of the Church of God, wrote two impassioned *Evangel* articles encouraging our members to humbly pray and weep for the gifts to be demonstrated for God's glory.⁴ The next month he wrote asking believers to press on until the gifts of the Spirit "will be manifested in their fullness . . ."⁵

In spite of articles such as those previously noted and experiences in worship services, "it appears safe to say the average Pentecostal believer [has] heard of spiritual gifts, but in reality was ill-informed concerning their breadth, their definition, and their operation."⁶ Regretfully, it seems that now, over 100 years since the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at the Azusa Street Revival, much of the same scenario exists. Yes, the Pentecostal message of Holy Spirit baptism has spread worldwide; however, there has not been an accompanied understanding and emphasis on the totality of spiritual gifts. Not only has this produced spiritual anemia but also it opened the door for a wide variety of spiritual excesses and false doctrines.

The Source of Spiritual Gifts

To begin with, spiritual gifts must not be confused with a person's natural abilities or talents. They stem from one or a combination of four factors—a person's gene pool, environment, experience, and education—which are the major influences.

In contrast are spiritual gifts and their source of origination. Lombard and Daffe explain, "Spiritual gifts are manifestations of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers enabling them to minister in a means beyond their human capacity. Believers receive these gifts as a result of God's grace. They are not intended to bring personal glory."⁷ Usually our attention on spiritual gifts is directed toward the Holy Spirit, but consider 1 Corinthians 12:4-6. These verses indicate

the entire Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—are involved in the origination and operation of spiritual gifts.

It is vitally important to understand that spiritual gifts are not an enhancement of a natural talent or ability; neither are your natural talents to be seen as a spiritual manifestation. Just because you can bake a delicious apple pie or raise a beautiful garden doesn't make those abilities your spiritual gifts.

So the question arises, "How can a person recognize the presence of a spiritual gift in his/her life?"

One indicator is a growing passion and ability which previously did not exist. A second indicator may be a new ability which doesn't stem from practice, education, or copying the patterns of another person. Third, on occasion, a mature believer may observe the rise of a spiritual gift in one's life and encourage careful, prayerful discernment, if this may be true. The community of believers has the distinct responsibility to each other in discerning particular gifts and encouraging their use. Last, consider taking an established spiritual gifts test. However, the trustworthiness of this is based on the length of time one has been a believer, honestly answering what is evident in one's life, current involvement in church ministry, and the ability to separate natural gifts from spiritual gifts.

The parallelism between some natural gifts and spiritual gifts may cause some confusion. Teaching and hospitality are two examples. Some individuals are skilled teachers because of divine gifting (see Romans 12:7). Others become skilled teachers because of their education and ongoing experience. Those raised in a home where hospitality was regularly offered to persons needing food and lodging may assume they have the gift. When in reality, their actions and attitudes have been learned from family.

The Purpose of Spiritual Gifts

The operation of spiritual gifts is for the edification of the people of God before and after Pentecost. Arrington writes, “Instances can be cited from Scripture where many if not all of the spiritual gifts operated in one form or another before the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost.”⁸ Of special interest in the Old Testament are Bezalel and Oholiab. In order to fulfill the guidelines for the construction of the tabernacle at Mt. Sinai, the Spirit gifted them with skill, ability, knowledge, and the ability to teach (Exodus 31:3; 35:30-35).

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul shares how spiritual gifts are to edify the church. 1 Corinthians 14 provides directions (orderliness) by which edification can be accomplished and confusion avoided. Spiritual gifts need to be edifying believers both inside and outside of the church sanctuary. They were never intended to be relegated to a side room or discouraged from occurring within the main body of the congregation. Indeed, great care needs to be taken to control those who would disrupt or offer their own ideas. This is when the leader must of necessity discern whether or not this is a genuine spiritual gift operating.

Not to be overlooked is how speaking in tongues is to be a distinct sign to unbelievers. However, this appears to be when just one individual speaks in tongues. If many speak in tongues simultaneously unbelievers will see it as chaos and not being mentally balanced (see 1 Corinthians 14:22, 23)

Prior to leaving this section, it should be noted that the baptism of the Holy Spirit makes us more open to all the gifts. In the Book of Acts, we see the believers being more sensitive to the gifts working in ministry (Acts 3:1-10; 4:30; 5:12; 6:8; 8:6,7; 11:28; 13:11; 14:10; 19:11,12).

The Recipients of Spiritual Gifts

Having previously established that all believers will at some point receive a spiritual gift due to the Holy Spirit's work in salvation, it is important to insert several guidelines. First, the gift one receives does not categorize one of greater or lesser importance. The apostle Paul clearly speaks to this in 1 Corinthians 12:12-24, using the analogy of the human body. Some gifts are more visible and frequently seen as more important. Others are more hidden (backstage so to speak) but just as vital to the body.

Second, the operation of a spiritual gift in a person's life isn't a sign of spirituality or a life of unconfessed sin. Paul describes the members at Corinth as being carnal or worldly (1 Corinthians 3:1), and yet they were blessed with spiritual gifts. Lombard and Daffe write, "God doesn't automatically 'shut off' our giftedness. They are gifts of God's grace, not gifts of our perfection".⁹ The life of Samson is a perfect example. He flirted with and indulged in fleshly desires. But, there is a point of his (and our) crossing the line. Judges 16:20 is definitely one of the saddest descriptions in Scripture. Samson wakes up assuming he would go out in the strength of the Spirit totally unaware the Lord has left him. This reminds us that no one should risk harboring unconfessed sin with the known potential of the Spirit's removing His empowerment.

Third, the operation of a spiritual gift in a person's life isn't a confirmation of their theology or methodology. According to Lombard and Daffe, "Techniques and procedures never are validated by the end result."¹⁰ For example, some individuals are healed in spite of being hit or their crutches and glasses being broken. Personal violence and bizarre activities are not the pattern of the operation of spiritual giftedness.

The Extent of Spiritual Gifts

Is there a specific number of spiritual gifts?

The initial response is to reference 1 Corinthians 12:8-10; 12:28-30; Romans 12:6-8; Ephesians 4:11 and 1 Peter 4:10, 11. A quick review indicates some gifts are repeated in more than one listing. There is a hesitancy to list an exact number, since there may be the possibility of several gifts being the same though listed under different wording. Another reason stems from there being instances of other miraculous giftings being provided to enable ministering and to remain active for the rest of a person's life.

Consider the following examples. A pastor friend wants to minister to shut-in members of his congregation. He sings but cannot play a musical instrument. After several weeks of prayer, the Holy Spirit enables him to play the piano in two keys—with no lessons and he cannot read a note.

This author knows of two individuals who were given the gift of languages, one Spanish and the other Bulgarian. They speak fluently but cannot explain the grammar. In each case, the ability enabled immediate ministry without language training and continues even now.

“It would be easy to simply pass off these instances as miracles. However, they do not meet the definition or description of a miracle, which is altering the ordinary course of nature. They are truly giftings for the edification and ministry of the Church. Accepting the possibility of there being other spiritual gifts which may be divinely conferred places a tremendous responsibility on us.”¹¹ Being highly skilled in an area is not the test for spiritual gifting. It is vital to differentiate between natural gifts and spiritual gifts as previously defined.

The Orderliness of Spiritual Gifts

“But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (1 Corinthians 14:40).

This verse provides the foundational principle for the orderly operation of all spiritual gifts. Its application must, of necessity, be evident in both small group meetings and corporate church services. There is no setting in which chaos, unsubstantiated claims, or questionable integrity are to be present! Anyone who claims the Holy Spirit commandeered their body does not understand that He works through us as we are in submission to His will and timing. Bizarre actions and claims frequently are the result of well-intentioned individuals who definitely “get in the flesh” or have good, but unsubstantiated intentions for others.

First Corinthians 14:27-33 provides very specific instructions concerning speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues, and prophecies. These include the order, number of speakers, and submitting to others when presenting their giftedness. Verse 33 reminds us that God himself is a God of order and peace.

In Deuteronomy, there are guidelines for those who operate as a prophet or in the gift of prophecy. In chapter 13, we see that the prophet’s message must harmonize and be in complete agreement with the Scripture. Another check is the person himself. Does the person’s lifestyle reflect Christian morality and integrity?

Deuteronomy 18:21, 22 emphasizes the need for fulfillment. Lombard and Daffe say, “Unless prophecies are fulfilled within their context (person, location, and time period) the person is not a prophet.”¹² These same principles apply to any person or statements made as part of indicating the operation of the gift of prophecy.

In summary, Arrington says, “The mere presence of spiritual gifts in the Church does not ensure the accomplishment of their ultimate purpose. Gifts only achieve their goal when they are

exercised for some useful purpose. The manner in which gifts are used (operated) is crucial to the building up of the church”¹³ and finishing the Great Commission.

¹ Harold Horton, *The Gifts of the Spirit* (Assemblies of God Publishing House, 1968) 28.

² Donald Gee, *Spiritual Gifts in the Work of Ministry Today* (Springfield: Gospel Publishing House, 1963) 2.

³ J. Ayodeji Adewuya, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians* (London: SPCK, 2009) 83.

⁴ A. J. Tomlinson, “Pray! Pray! Pray. *The Church of God Evangel*. 24 Jan. 1914. 1.

⁵ A. J. Tomlinson, “Pray! Pray! Pray. *The Church of God Evangel*. 21 Feb. 1914. 4.

⁶ John Lombard Jr. and Jerald Daffe, *Spiritual Gifts for Today? For Me?* (Cleveland: Pathway Press, 2008) 25.

⁷ Lombard and Daffe, *Spiritual Gifts for Today? For Me?* 50

⁸ French Arrington, *Encountering the Holy Spirit* (Cleveland: Pathway Press, 2003) 213.

⁹ Lombard and Daffe, *Spiritual Gifts for Today? For Me?* 191.

¹⁰ Ibid. 196.

¹¹ Ibid. 205.

¹² Ibid. 94,95

¹³ Arrington, *Encountering the Holy Spirit* 247.