

CHAPTER 17

THE GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

*what about sickness and death?
...and how about healing and life!*

Before reading this chapter, how would you answer the question:
How hungry are you for the gifts of the Spirit?

Spiritual gifts are good to have

What is it like to have a spiritual gift? What difference would it make to our lives and how would it affect our relationship with others?

Acts 28:7–10 There was an estate nearby that belonged to Publius, the chief official of the island. He welcomed us to his home and showed us generous hospitality for three days. His father was sick in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery. Paul went in to see him and, after prayer, placed his hands on him and healed him. When this had happened, the rest of the sick on the island came and were cured. They honoured us in many ways; and when we were ready to sail, they furnished us with the supplies we needed. (NIV)

The people of Malta, who received healing through Paul, were clearly overjoyed and thankful. It must have been intensely satisfying for Paul to be able to express his love for them in such a powerful way. No wonder he advises the churches to earnestly desire the best gifts (1 Corinthians 12:31).

What are the gifts of the Spirit?

The gifts of the Holy Spirit are given to the church to enable its people to act in a supernatural way for God. The church, the Baptism of the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Holy Spirit all came about at the same time. When we think of the church we should also think of the Holy Spirit and the gifts.

Ephesians 4:7–8, 11–12 But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: ‘When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people.’

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up (NIV)

Because the Holy Spirit gives the gifts, they are supernatural and not natural in origin. Some of the gifts, such as the working of miracles, are more obviously supernatural than others, such as the ministry gift of pastors.

The gifts validate the gospel message

The gifts validate an individual's message giving evidence that God has sent them.

1 Thessalonians 1:5 For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake. (NKJV)

(See also Acts 4:29–31.)

We should expect to see supernatural power in the church and wherever the gospel is preached.

1 Corinthians 4:20 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. (NIV)

The gifts validated Jesus

Supernatural signs play an important part in the proclamation of the gospel as they persuade people to believe in Jesus.

John 3:1–2 Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.' (NIV)

Nathanael believed in Jesus because Jesus had told him something He could not have known naturally (John 1:45–50). When Peter healed Aeneas, a paralytic confined to bed for eight years, the inhabitants of Lydda and Sharon turned to the Lord (Acts 9:32–35). Many people believed in the Lord when Peter raised Tabitha from the dead (Acts 9:40–42).

Jesus appealed to the gifts following Him in order to validate His ministry. When John the Baptist asked if He was the Messiah, He pointed to the supernatural works as evidence that He was (Matthew 11:4–6). When Philip wanted confirmation about Jesus, He again appealed to His works (John 14:8–12).

Jesus said that supernatural signs accompany the preaching of the gospel (Mark 16:15–18). His disciples confirmed this point.

Mark 16:20 And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs. Amen. (NKJV)

The gifts help build up the church

The gifts of the Holy Spirit also help to establish and build up the church.

1 Corinthians 14:12 So it is with you. Since you are eager for gifts of the Spirit, try to excel in those that build up the church. (NIV)

(See also Ephesians 4:11–16; 1 Corinthians 14:31.)

Every one of us should have a gift and so the gifts should ensure everyone has a meaningful place in the church.

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

The different kinds of gifts

The gifts of the Spirit (some of which are mentioned several times) include: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers (Ephesians 4:11); prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading, mercy (Romans 12:6–8); word of wisdom, word of knowledge, faith, gifts of healings, working of miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, different kinds of tongues, interpretation of tongues (1 Corinthians 12:8–10); and apostles, prophets, teachers,

miracles, gifts of healings, helps, administrations and varieties of tongues (1 Corinthians 12:28).

When we examine these lists we can see they are not meant to be comprehensive or exhaustive. Additionally, some gifts, such as ministry, helps and administrations, are not fully defined. Because of this, we should not rule out the possibility of further gifts.

All these gifts come from the Holy Spirit who gives them out to us individually as He wants to (1 Corinthians 12:11). The many diverse gifts complement each other and are for our good.

1 Corinthians 12:4–6 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. (NKJV)

No one will have all the gifts (1 Corinthians 12:29–30), some will have better gifts than others (1 Corinthians 12:31) and some will have a gift not so obvious to others. These facts should not lead to division in the church because we all need each other (1 Corinthians 12:14–25).

Believing for the gifts

Unbelief will hinder God and prevent the spiritual gifts from operating.

Matthew 13:58 Now He did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief. (NKJV)

For the churches to receive and use the gifts, they need to overcome three particular causes of unbelief.

(i) Unbelief in the supernatural

The first unbelief is in the supernatural itself. In many countries, people have grown up in a culture where scientific and rational thinking dominates and a belief in the miraculous is considered rather primitive. When miracles occur, people immediately seek to find a natural explanation, no matter how implausible it is. If we

have been brought up in such a culture, we may need to modify our thinking to be more open to the possibility of miracles and we may even need God to help us overcome our unbelief (Mark 9:24). Having said this, we can modify our thinking too much and consider something miraculous when it is not. We need to be open but not gullible.

(ii) Believing the gifts are no longer for today

A second unbelief is based on a mistaken assumption that the gifts of the Holy Spirit no longer exist today. Peter said that the promise of the Holy Spirit is for everyone and not just those living in his time (Acts 2:38–39). Additionally, Jesus said that the miracles will increase after His return to the Father, rather than decrease.

John 14:12–13 “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father. And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son...” (NKJV)

The testimonies of recent evangelists give further confirmation that miracles happen today. Reinhard Bonnke, who believed in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, attracted huge crowds to his meetings, sometimes exceeding one million people.¹

(iii) Being afraid of the devil

A third unbelief is that the spiritual gifts are being perpetrated by the devil and not by God.

Matthew 12:22–24 Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. All the people were astonished and said, ‘Could this be the Son of David?’ But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, ‘It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons.’ (NIV)

The Bible warns us that in the end times Satan will raise up people who will perform miracles using his power.

Mark 13:22 For false christs and false prophets will rise and show signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.
(NKJV)

(See also Matthew 24:24; 2 Thessalonians 2:9.)

We should expect to see true and false prophets. If we take an overly pessimistic position and assume every supernatural act is from the devil unless proved otherwise, we may, like the Pharisees, end up opposing God. In order to adopt a balanced position, we need to develop a relationship with God whereby we can trust Him to protect us from false ministry and lead us into good ministry (cf Proverbs 3:5–6). If we neglect to build up that trust, we will not benefit from His gifts. It might take time for us to discern between a true and false ministry, but we can still trust God. Paul heard a woman with a spirit of divination speak for many days before he cast the spirit out of her (Acts 16:16–18). This delay implies it took time for him to realise the devil was speaking through her.

We should also recognise someone not walking with God may exercise a spiritual gift from God (Matthew 7:21–23).

Seeking the gifts

Paul advised the Christians in Corinth to greatly desire the spiritual gifts.

1 Corinthians 12:31 But earnestly desire the best gifts...
(NKJV)

This is in spite of the church at that time not being very spiritual. Paul could not teach them deeper things because they were carnal and divisive (1 Corinthians 3:1ff). They permitted sexual immorality to continue among themselves (1 Corinthians 5:1ff) and they were taking each other to court instead of letting someone in the church mediate (1 Corinthians 6:1). We need not wait until our church has reached some level of maturity before seeking the gifts.

We should, however, seek the gifts with a right motive. Simon sought to acquire the Holy Spirit for money because he saw the

power this would give him. Peter rebuked him strongly for doing this (Acts 8:13–24). Spiritual gifts bring much power and can easily lift us up with pride and we may fall as a result. When Jesus received the Holy Spirit, He was tested for forty days so that He would not misuse His power (Matthew 4:1–11).

1 Corinthians 13:2 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. (NKJV)

Paul esteems love as more important than a spiritual gift. Love should be our motive to receiving and exercising a gift. Gifts are not for our own power or glory, but for the benefit of others. Seeking the gifts should be a selfless act.

Using the gifts of the Holy Spirit

When we start to use the gifts, we need to consider whether we or the Holy Spirit should initiate their usage. Do we have to wait for the Holy Spirit to prompt us first or has He given us the power to use the gifts whenever we like? The Holy Spirit gives spiritual gifts to whoever He wants (1 Corinthians 12:11) so clearly He is ultimately in charge. However, Paul advises the church when to use the gifts (1 Corinthians 14:26–33) and we can neglect the gifts we have (1 Timothy 4:14), so we can control them. We need, therefore, to have a good partnership with the Holy Spirit for the gifts to work properly through us.

Speaking in tongues

The gift of speaking in tongues is used mainly for personal edification (1 Corinthians 14:4; Jude 20) or occasionally in ministry to others. When we speak in tongues privately, there are no negative consequences and so we should pray as much as we like. We do not need to wait for the Holy Spirit to encourage us to speak. In fact by praying in the Holy Spirit we make it more likely for Him to use

us in the gifts (2 Timothy 1:6). We can pray for others in tongues especially if we lack the understanding of how to pray for them (Romans 8:26–27). Paul cautions against speaking in tongues in public because it will not help those who hear us (1 Corinthians 14:6). However, when the tongues are interpreted the people can understand and be encouraged (1 Corinthians 14:27–28).

Prophecy

The gift of prophecy is where we let the Holy Spirit speak through us in English. We should exercise caution when we prophesy because prophecy will be understood by those around us, and God might not want to speak to them at that time (1 Samuel 28:6; 2 Kings 3:14). Prophecy should be at His prompting (2 Peter 1:20–21).

In summary, therefore, if we exercise the gifts of the Holy Spirit without His leading, we may use them at inopportune moments and we could hinder God's work. We could end up using the gifts for our own selfish interests. However, the prompting of the Holy Spirit can be very gentle and we may misread it. Because of this, we need to have an atmosphere of grace when the gifts operate. If we deal with mistakes harshly, we may discourage people from using the gifts in future.

1 Corinthians 14:39 Therefore, brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak with tongues. (NKJV)

1 Thessalonians 5:19–20 Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies. (NKJV)

Questions to consider

1. Is it always desirable that supernatural signs follow the preaching of the gospel?
2. What level of proof do we need to accept someone is exercising a gift from God?
3. What difficulties do we have with exercising a spiritual gift, and how can we overcome these difficulties?

4. How serious is it if someone gives a wrong prophecy?
 5. Are some gifts better than others?
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References:

- 1 Reinhard Bonnke, Even Greater, Full Flame GmbH, 2004, p118

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