



## Spiritual Gifts

### Introduction

The Bible affirms all humanity is "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Ps. 139:14). Not only that, but "we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). There is a uniqueness about us as image bearers that is distinct from all that God created. This is true of all humanity. However, there is an even more profound sense of our uniqueness for those who have embraced the gospel. God's Word affirms that not only do we bear the image of God alongside all humanity, but as believers in Jesus, we have also been endowed by the Holy Spirit with what the Bible calls "spiritual gifts."

### What Are Spiritual Gifts?

Before we affirm what spiritual gifts are, it is necessary to clarify what they are not.

Spiritual gifts are differentiated from natural abilities. The ability to play a musical instrument or perform well on an athletic field is no doubt an admirable quality. However, these are natural gifts or abilities that develop over time. Though our natural gifts can and should be used for kingdom purposes, they are not to be confused with spiritual gifts.

Spiritual gifts are also not the fruit of the Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are expressions of the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of every believer walking in obedience.

Instead, "Spiritual gifts are abilities given to individual believers by the Holy Spirit in order to equip God's people for ministry, both for the edification of the church and for God's salvific mission to the world."<sup>1</sup> Spiritual gifts are enabled or given by the Holy Spirit and are therefore present in the New Testament after the outpouring of the Spirit in Acts 2. The gifts, or divine capacities, are for the edification of the body, not the individual (1 Pet. 4:10). As a member of the body of Christ, these gifts are to be used to catalyze the work of the kingdom of God through the local church.

Though a complete list of spiritual gifts is not listed in any one place in the New Testament, several passages address the gifts (1 Cor. 12; Rom. 12; Eph. 4; 1 Pet. 4).

Together, they introduce the following gifts:

*Wisdom (1 Cor. 12:8)*

The unique ability to receive and present direct revelation from God.

Knowledge (1 Cor. 12:8)

The unique ability to understand truths revealed to the apostles and prophets.

*Faith (1 Cor. 12:9)*

The unique ability to trust, even in the face of difficulty. It seems to have strategically strengthened the church, especially during times of persecution and difficulty (Acts 7:54-58).

*Healing (1 Cor. 12:9-10)*

The unique ability to perform supernatural acts of restoration of physical health. Miracles and healings demonstrated God's power. They authenticated the messengers and their messages (Heb. 2:3-4; 1 Cor. 14:21-22).

*Prophecy (1 Cor. 12:10; Rom. 8:6)*

The unique ability to speak the direct revelation of God. Prophecy was a means of communicating the truth of God's Word before the assembling of the Scriptures. (Eph. 2:20; 1 Cor. 13:2, 14:3) It was not simply the foretelling of future events but also the forth-telling of God's true Word and the affirmation of the inspired revelation of God (Is. 45:1-13; Matt. 23:1-36).

*Discernment (1 Cor. 12:10)*

Unlike the natural ability to discern, the spiritual gift of discernment is a supernatural and unique ability to affirm divine revelation. Because the New Testament had not been assembled, those with this gift helped the early church distinguish between what was from God and what was not (1 John 4:1; 1 Thes. 5:20; 1 Cor. 14:29).

*Tongues & Interpretation of Tongues (1 Cor. 12:10, 28)*

The unique ability to speak in other languages previously unknown by the speaker, whereby the hearer understood the speech in their native tongue. It was used to communicate the gospel to various ethnicities, aiding its spread throughout the ancient world (Acts 2:1-12).

*Teaching (Rom. 12:7; Eph. 4:11-14)*

The unique ability to study and communicate God's Word (2 Tim. 2:15; Jeremiah 20:9). Gifted teachers built up the body of Christ through effective communication of the Scriptures in an understandable way.

*Serving (1 Cor. 12:28; Rom. 12:7)*

The unique ability to provide physical assistance to those in need. Those gifted to serve often find great joy in behind-the-scenes opportunities that offer practical help and assistance to those in need. They do not typically crave the spotlight but find deep satisfaction in serving anonymously.

*Administration (1 Cor. 12:28; Rom. 12:8)*

Although sometimes combined into one gift with leadership, the Greek word κυβερνησις (kybernesis) is often translated as "administrator" or "leader." The word means "to stand

before” or “steer a ship.”<sup>2</sup> Distinct from the gift of leadership, the gift of administration is characterized by the unique ability to gather information, organize and delegate to others.

#### *Leadership (1 Cor. 12:28; Rom. 12:8)*

Closely related to the gift of administration, it differs in that the gift of leadership evidences itself in the ability to lead people toward a preferred future by providing clarity and direction. Whereas the gift of administration is often done behind the scenes, the gift of leadership is generally more up front & public.

#### *Exhortation (Rom. 12:8)*

The unique ability to come alongside another person, stimulating them to act.<sup>3</sup> Similar to the basic concept of encouragement, exhortation ignites the will of an individual and stirs the conscience. It is often coupled with the gift of teaching, combining content and motivation (1 Tim. 4:13, 6:2).<sup>4</sup>

#### *Giving (Rom. 12:8)*

The unique ability to steward resources for the sake of the kingdom. It refers to the open-handed and open-hearted perspective regarding personal stewardship. People with the gift of giving are moved by generosity (1 Tim. 6:17-19; Phil. 4:10-16; 2 Cor. 9:7).  
Mercy (Rom. 12:8)

Those with this gift are uniquely gifted to feel the pain and discomfort of others and provide care and support when needed.

Apostle (1 Cor. 12:28,5 Eph. 4:11)

Though there is debate on whether this is an office or spiritual gift (Eph. 4:11; Acts 1:21-22), an apostle was one who had been with the Lord from the beginning, a witness to His resurrection and miracles (2 Cor. 12:12). In a technical sense, an apostle is one sent. The Greek word ἀπόστολος (apostolos) refers to a messenger or one who has been sent. Therefore, the title apostle seems limited to the original disciples and the Apostle Paul (Lk. 6:13; Eph. 2:20; Gal. 1:1). Some broaden the meaning to include the ability to pioneer gospel initiatives and plant churches throughout the world, but this does not seem to be consistent with the language used in the Scriptures.

Evangelism (Eph. 4:11)

Like apostles, there is debate on whether this is an office or a spiritual gift. Evangelism is the unique ability to share the gospel with those who have yet to embrace the gospel. Though evangelism is an invitation and expectation for every believer (1 Pet. 3:15), there are some uniquely gifted to proclaim the gospel. This gift is often evidenced by a substantial burden for the lost and a delight in seeing people come to faith in Jesus.  
Shepherd (Eph. 4:11)

Similar to the debate over apostles and evangelism, there is debate on whether this is an office or a spiritual gift. The gift of pastor, or pastor/shepherd, is the unique ability to care for members of the body of Christ and help move them toward spiritual maturity. Shepherds care for, guard, and protect the flock.<sup>6</sup>

Hospitality (Rom. 12:13; 1 Pet. 4:9)

The unique ability to make people feel welcome. Those with the gift of hospitality possess a unique ability to create environments where people can feel comfortable and cared for. They are mindful of the aesthetics, feel, and provisions of an event or gathering. They are mindful of the guests and help people enjoy a warm and welcoming environment.

### **Summary Statements Regarding Spiritual Gifts:**

Spiritual gifts are divine enablements given or energized by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:4-7)

Spiritual gifts are given, or enlivened, at the moment of salvation (1 Pet. 4:10-11; Eph. 1:13-14).

Yet, spiritual gifts require personal cultivation and are often discovered over time (1 Cor. 12:1; 1 Tim. 4:14-15).

Every believer has at least one spiritual gift (1 Cor. 12:4, 11).

No one gift is given to every person (1 Cor. 12:29-30).

No one person has every gift (1 Cor. 12:18-20).

Spiritual gifts are not worked for or earned (Gal. 3:2; Eph. 4:7).

Each believer is called to know and use their spiritual gifts (Eph. 2:10; 1 Cor. 12:1, 14:1; 1 Tim. 4:14-15).

The gifts given by the Holy Spirit are permanent (Rom. 11:29).

Spiritual gifts are given for the edification of the body, not the individual (1 Cor. 12:7; Gal. 5:22-23).

Believers will give an account to the Lord for how they used their gifts (1 Pet. 4:10).

**Which Spiritual Gifts Are Operational Today?**

There is much historical debate within the church regarding which gifts are active today. Theologians generally fall into two camps regarding this issue: Continuationism or Cessationism.

Continuationists, as the name suggests, believe all gifts mentioned in the New Testament are still active today. Cessationists, on the other hand, believe that certain gifts were unique to the time of the apostles and formation of the early church and, as such, are no longer active today.<sup>7</sup> The debate primarily revolves around a selection of gifts referred to as “sign gifts.”

### **What Are the Sign Gifts?**

The sign gifts are the more ecstatic gifts associated with miracles and direct revelation. They include tongues, interpretation of tongues, healing, and miracles. Though there is ongoing and respectful debate within the family of God, we believe these were temporary gifts God used for a specific purpose in the formation of the early church and are no longer operational today.

**Historically, the most debated sign gift is the gift of tongues. What does the Bible say about this gift?**

Tongues were a known language. In Acts 2, 10, and 19, “tongues” are actual languages previously unknown to the speaker but understood by the recipient. The Greek word γλῶσσα (Glossa), used for tongues, means a known language. Those speaking in tongues in the book of Acts were not speaking gibberish but rather existing languages understood by the audience. This would suggest that tongues were not private prayer languages known only to God. Their purpose was not to edify oneself or to be used in private prayer.<sup>8</sup>

Tongues were evangelistic. The purpose of tongues was to allow the gospel to be heard and understood by Gentiles. Because of the language barrier between Jews and Gentiles, God made a way for a predominantly Jewish group of believers to communicate the gospel to Gentiles in their native tongue (Acts 2:1-13). Tongues were a rebuke to the nation of Israel. Every time we see tongues mentioned in the book of Acts, Jews are present to see the gospel going to the Gentile world. When Gentiles heard and embraced the gospel, they spoke in tongues to confirm they had received the same Holy Spirit as the Jews. Tongues are a rebuke to the Jews for rejecting their promised Messiah and a demonstration of God’s heart for all nations (Acts 2:9-11; Isaiah 28:11-13).

Tongues authenticated the messenger, and therefore, their message. Much like the gifts of healing and miracles, tongues were a part of the miraculous era of Christ and the apostles and were present to authenticate the messengers (2 Cor. 12:11-12; 1 Cor. 14:21-22).

However, a few passages need further clarification. Some suggest that Rom. 8:26 refers to tongues as a private prayer language too deep for words, and that 1 Cor. 14:2 supports an angelic language distinct from a human language. However, tongues, as seen clearly in other Scriptures, are always referred to as an understood language. This is affirmed by Dr. John MacArthur when he writes:

The Bible records no instance of believers speaking to God in anything but normal, intelligible language. Even in Jesus’ great high priestly prayer (Jn. 17), in which the Son poured out His heart to the Father, when deity communed with deity, the language is remarkably simple and clear. Jesus in fact warned against using “meaningless repetition, as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words” (Matt. 6:7). His reference included the repetitious and unintelligible gibberish of pagan tongues-speaking, in which certain meaningless sounds were repeated over and over again.<sup>9</sup>

This affirms that tongues are not a private prayer language. Instead, tongues were the speaking of the mighty deeds of God in a language previously unknown by the speaker (Acts 2:8-11). Unfortunately, the church in Corinth had an obsession with the ecstatic gifts over the “greater” gifts. This division within the body led Paul to write a letter of rebuke to the church in Corinth for their misuse of the spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 11:17).

Finally, it is worth noting that the gift of tongues is only mentioned in two books of the New Testament. The first is in the book of Acts. It is important to remember that the book of Acts is a historical narrative. It was written to describe what occurred, not to prescribe what should occur. Therefore, firmly adopting a theological position from the book of Acts alone is ill-advised. The second book containing the gift of tongues is 1 Corinthians. It is essential to note that the book was not written to encourage them for their faithfulness but rather to reprove them regarding various aspects of doctrinal concern. Paul does not write to affirm their usage of the gift of tongues but rather to correct their error. Therefore, building a theological doctrine based on his reproof is also ill-advised.

### **What About the Other Sign Gifts?**

Miracles and healings were both sporadic and rare throughout the biblical story. They occurred in three primary periods: during the time of Moses and Joshua, with the prophets Elijah and Elisha, and, finally, with Jesus and the apostles. Miracles and healings are not normative in the Bible; instead, they appear in just three periods spanning a 1,500-year period of time. In each occurrence, the purpose was the same: to verify the message and messenger. Miracles occurred to confirm that the messenger spoke on behalf of God, and the message was to be heeded as such.

It's worth noting that Cessationists have been unfairly criticized through the years. Because they question the ongoing operation of the sign gifts in general, they are also accused of denying God's ongoing ability to perform miracles today. However, these are very different issues. One can hold to a cessationist view of the sign gifts while fully affirming God's ability to perform miracles in our day. Of course, our God can do whatever He wishes and is not limited in any way (Is. 55:8-9). However, this does not require the ongoing operation of miraculous and revelatory gifts today.

### **What About the Revelatory Gifts?**

This also suggests that the revelatory gifts have ceased. Ephesians 2:20 tells us that the church was "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets..." We no longer have apostles like John or Paul today. The very definition of an apostle is "one sent by God," and, as has been stated previously, an apostle had seen the risen Jesus. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:8 that he is the final apostle. The apostle's teaching was authoritative, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and written in the New Testament to guide the church today. The fact that Paul identifies both the apostles and prophets with the foundations informs us that their completed work gave way to the evangelists, pastors, and teachers described in Ephesians 4:11-12. To believe that the gift of apostle is still in operation today requires a redefinition of the biblical term into something else entirely.

The same can be said for the gift of prophecy. A prophet, in both the Old and New Testaments, received inspired words from God. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos, for example, spoke the literal Word of God given to them. The term is never redefined in the New Testament, so the technical definition of a prophet is the same throughout the entirety of the text. Therefore, to embrace the ongoing prophetic role today would undermine the finality and sufficiency of the Scriptures.

Similarly, the gifts of discernment, wisdom, and knowledge also appear to be temporary gifts that God used before the establishment of the New Testament. Each of these gifts, as seen in the Scriptures, was revelatory in nature. Before the foundation of the New Testament, these gifts were critical in helping the early church verify what was the authoritative Word of God. Since we have a completed Bible, we do not believe these gifts are operational today.

This does not suggest that these qualities are no longer present within the church. Many individuals have been shaped by God's Word and are, therefore, full of wisdom, discernment, and knowledge. However, these are qualities of a Spirit-led life shaped by the Scriptures and are not the result of a spiritual gift.

### **How Do We Pursue Unity at Emmaus?**

While we recognize room for honest, biblical disagreement on this issue, we have chosen to exclude the sign gifts (healing, tongues, and interpretation of tongues) and the revelatory gifts (apostle, wisdom, knowledge, prophecy, and discernment). Our desire in doing so is to create clarity and unity within the body. We understand and respect those from other faith traditions who hold to a continuationist view of the sign gifts; however, we have chosen a more conservative approach to the gifts. We hold this issue with an open hand and do not see the gifts as issues worth dividing over. Instead, we share the heart of the Apostle Paul, who invited the church into a "still more excellent way," the way of love (1 Cor. 12:31-13:13). This position simplifies the gifts in continued operation and can be easily categorized as speaking and serving gifts (1 Pet. 4:10-11).

#### ***The speaking gifts:***

- Evangelism
- Teaching
- Leadership
- Administration
- Exhortation

#### ***The serving gifts:***

- Service
- Giving
- Mercy
- Faith
- Shepherding
- Hospitality

### **How Do I Discover My Spiritual Gift(s)?**

Regarding our spiritual gifts, Paul cautions us not to be uninformed (1 Cor. 12:1). If you have embraced the gospel, you have been given at least one spiritual gift to be used for the edification of the body of Christ (1 Pet. 4:10; 1 Cor. 12:11). The Bible reminds us that we are unique, and we are fearfully and wonderfully made (Gen. 1:26; Psalm 139:14). Ephesians 2:10 says, "...we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good

works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them” (NASB1995). The Greek word ποίημα (poiema) means that which is made. It conveys the idea of being handmade, one-of-a-kind, or a masterpiece. Regarding spiritual gifts, Paul tells Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:15 to “Take pains with these things [his spiritual gifts]; be absorbed in them, so that your progress will be evident to all” (NASB1995).

As you embark on this journey, begin with prayer. Sit with the Lord and ask Him to reveal how He’s made you and how to best serve the body of Christ. Practically speaking, make a list of the gifts and see which ones resonate with you. Then find places within your local church to explore those gifts.

Working in areas that align with your spiritual gifts should feel fun, invigorating, and natural. Working in areas outside your gifting will often feel laborious and unnatural, like throwing a ball with your non-dominant hand. Often, it takes trying many different areas of ministry to discern how God has gifted you. You may also find it helpful to process this in community with others who know you well. It can be difficult for some to recognize their own gifts. However, trusted individuals in our lives may see things in us that we do not see in ourselves.

By process of elimination, seeking affirmation in community, and putting potential spiritual gifts into practice, we begin to narrow down the list. If it comes easily, feels natural, and you are proficient, it may be a gift. If it is hard, you struggle, and are never asked to serve in that capacity again, it’s probably not a gift. The goal is to narrow it down to a gift or a gift mix so you can begin serving where you are gifted.

Once you have identified your gifts, prayerfully invest them in the life of the local church (1 Pet. 4:10). The church is at her best when the leaders lead, the servants serve, the exhorters exhort, etc. As we invest our gifts into the life of the local church together, the church flourishes and becomes even more effective at “helping people connect to God and to each other in every neighborhood.”

## Footnotes

[1] Calhoun, Susanne, “Spiritual Gifts in the Church,” in Lexham Survey of Theology, ed. Mark Ward et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018)

[2] Enns, Paul P. The Moody Handbook of Theology. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1989.

[3] Pentecost, J. Dwight. The Divine Comforter: The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1997.

[4] The word exhort comes from παρακαλέω (parakaleo). It’s the same word used to describe the work of the Holy Spirit.

[5] The prioritized list seems to give an indication of what was most helpful to the early church. Apostles and Prophets helped clarify what was the true Word from God. The teachers taught the Scriptures (Old Testament and Epistles being circulated). Miracles and healings were performed to authenticate the messengers. Then helping, administration and leading, and finally various tongues.

[6] It is worth noting that this is the only biblical passage that translates the Greek word ποιμήν (Poimen) as pastor. The Bible gives more emphasis on the function of shepherding than the title of pastor.

[7] Though in draft form at the time of writing, cessationism.org provides a widely held statement of belief on cessationism

[8] It’s notable that Acts and 1 Cor. seem to deal the most with the abuses of the sign gifts. Tongues, for example, are not mentioned anywhere else in the NT. This seems to indicate that tongues were a unique issue being explained in Acts (historical narrative: descriptive and not prescriptive) and abused in Corinth. Paul is not encouraging them for their use of the sign gifts. He is rebuking them for their abuse. The biblical support for the ceasing of the sign gifts is the limited mention in the text outside of Acts & 1 Cor..

[9] MacArthur, John F., Jr. 1 Cor.. MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Chicago: Moody Press, 1984

[10] MacArthur, John F., Jr. Eph.. MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Chicago: Moody Press, 1986.