

On Spiritual Gifts (1)

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[0 : 00] God, we pray indeed that your power will be at work in us and through us for your glory. Amen. You may like to have open the passage from 1 Corinthians chapter 12, page 933 in the Bibles in front of you.

This sermon is part of a series through the second half of the letter of 1 Corinthians. You may have heard in recent weeks that Michael Willesey has found God.

There's a television program detailing how he'd come to faith in God, in part through the visions and signs and miracles of a few people, especially in South America.

His television program sought to validate the various things that these people claimed had happened, and he was convinced by that. It raises the question for us, is this truly God's work?

Is this truly a spiritual act? What is the definition or how do we determine where true spirituality is found?

[1 : 14] Over the last five years, there's been a movement originating at a church near Toronto Airport in Canada that has become, in some respects, worldwide, although it doesn't seem to have the same prominence these days as it did in about 1994, 95, 96.

And there various people had claimed that a work of God's Spirit resulted in them feeling inner warmth and heat, sometimes falling over, sometimes bursting into uncontrollable laughter or strange sounds or actions.

For many it resulted in them speaking in tongues or strange languages. Is that true, Christian spirituality? Is that a mark of God at work?

Are those who perform those sorts of things truly spiritual people? There's certainly a growing interest in our world in spiritual things.

Certainly that's a corrective from the age of enlightenment where reason and rational thought was predominant. Certainly that change has opened a new door, I think, for the Christian gospel to be heard by people who in times past would not have been at all interested in anything spiritual.

[2 : 44] But the increase of spirituality and spiritual concerns generally raises this same question. Where is true Christian spirituality found?

What makes somebody really spiritual? Where is God at work? The Corinthian Christians of 19 and a half centuries ago were keenly spiritual.

We've already seen in recent weeks that they boasted in their spiritual knowledge and wisdom. In chapter 12 through to chapter 14, as we'll see in the next few weeks, they also boasted in their spiritual activity and prowess and gifts.

Not least in the speaking of tongues. It is those issues that Paul addresses beginning in today's passage, but as we'll see in the next four Sunday mornings as well.

It's a new topic. He's been dealing with issues of worship over the previous two weeks. You may remember what to wear on your head, if anything, and then issues to do with the Lord's Supper.

[3 : 58] But now he starts a new topic, although still within the framework of Christian worship and what happens when Christians gather together. But this topic takes us through three chapters.

The chapter begins, Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed or ignorant. What we have translated in this version as spiritual gifts is literally just spirituals.

It could be masculine or neuter. It could therefore be spiritual people. Or it could be spiritual gifts or spiritual issues or things.

Maybe Paul is actually being deliberately a little bit vague. Because really these chapters are about the people as well as the gifts or the spiritual things. But maybe it's also how the Corinthians described themselves.

Or maybe even boasted that we are spiritual. We are spiritual people. And maybe even he's putting them down a bit. Because he says, Now about these things I do not want you to be ignorant.

[5 : 09] Which implies that in part at least they are ignorant. Now these are people who have been boasting in their knowledge. And it seems boasting in their spiritual prowess.

Paul is saying, Don't boast. He's pricking their pride. I don't want you to be ignorant. Now he reminds them in verse 2 that in the past at least, before they were Christians, when they were pagans, they were very ignorant.

You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. But now, as Christian people, they ought not be ignorant.

In verse 3 he goes on then to contrast, in effect, the ignorance and right knowledge. In effect he's contrasting between the non-Christian spiritual things and what is truly Christian spiritual.

And the test is not whether or not you've had some particular experience. The test is a theological test. It's not about how enthusiastic you are for your religion.

[6 : 18] It's not whether you've experienced a warm inner glow or falling about laughing on the carpet or something. It's not about how sincere you are. It's not about whether you can perform miracles or whether you've had some ecstatic experience where somehow out of your control you're saying things that are not your words so much as some, it seems, divine utterance.

Paul is saying they're not the tests for what is really from God. The test is what is said, the content, not the experience.

It's a theological test. Jesus Christ is Lord. I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says, let Jesus be cursed.

It's hard to imagine a Christian ever saying that in any circumstance. Maybe Paul is being hypothetical or extreme here. But on the other hand, he says, no one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.

Now he's not just talking about idle words here. Anyone can say Jesus is Lord and all of us have just sung it in our first hymn. Paul is speaking here of what is a radical confession.

[7 : 37] He's not just talking about somebody who might just happen to recite the words. The ultimate test for God's Spirit to be at work is found in the person who thoroughly believes, radically believes, that Jesus Christ is the Lord of all.

And that is a marked contrast from paganism where there are lots of gods and it seems that some might even curse Jesus. In pagan religions, in Paul's day, there were some who claimed a divine experience, that somehow they were caught up by the spirits and maybe even led to say perhaps Jesus is cursed or all sorts of other things.

Paul is saying the test of God's work is not the experience but is the theology of what is said. Jesus Christ is Lord.

That's the test in the end of where God is at work. Now in effect, Paul's just laying the foundation for a long argument and discussion about the nature of spiritual activity and gifts.

He goes on in the next few verses of today's passage to make, in a sense, two points. God is the giver of gifts but just because there's one God does not imply the uniformity of how people receive those gifts.

[9 : 01] There's variety or diversity. See how he makes that point in verses 4 to 6, the same point three different times. Now there are varieties of gifts but the same spirit.

There are varieties of services but the same Lord. There are varieties of activities or workings but the same God who works it.

You see he's saying there is great variety in how the spirit of God manifests himself in and through Christian people. Gifts, services, activities.

But it is the same God, spirit, Lord, God that is doing all of this. Just because there's one God does not imply a uniformity of experience.

There's actually diversity and variety. Paul uses broad words, gifts, services and activities to denote that. To the Corinthians it seems that they prided themselves in particular ways in which God worked.

[10 : 12] Not least it seems in what's called speaking in tongues which I'll talk more about in a few minutes. Probably some Corinthians at least suggested that all Christians should speak in tongues and probably they looked down upon or even despised those of their midst who did not speak in tongues.

Probably they despised those who had other spiritual gifts but were perhaps not as obvious or public or perhaps even flamboyant. Paul is saying no.

There is a diversity of ways in which God acts and works in people's lives. There is no one determining factor or way in which God works.

The test is theological not experiential. So God works in many ways. Don't limit him to say that this is the preeminent way in which he works.

Now Paul sums up really what he said in three verses. In verse seven, to each is given the manifestation of the spirit to the common good. That's the issue here. Gifts, services, activities, they're all ways in which the spirit is manifest in Christians' lives.

[11 : 33] To each is given the manifestation of the spirit. That's diversity. To one person this way, to another person another way. that through the diversity is the one and the same God or spirit who is working.

Not only is there a unity of source, that is the one God, but there is a unity of purpose for the common good. Now in verses eight to ten that follow, Paul gives illustrations of the point that he's just made.

God gives his gifts or manifests his spirit in a very diverse way. And here in effect, he says, are some examples. But let me say a couple of things about this list before we look at each item.

It is not a complete list of spiritual gifts or ways in which the spirit manifests himself in Christian people. There are some who thought there are nine gifts of the spirit and here they are.

But there are other lists in the New Testament that list other spiritual gifts. We ought not think this is a complete list. We come unstuck if we think that. Rather, I think Paul is deliberately being selective for the Corinthians' benefit.

[12 : 45] That is, he particularly selects rather unusual, we might think, gifts in order to deal with the actual problems in the Corinthian church. In other circumstances, he would have picked a different list by way of illustrating his point.

The other thing we should be aware of this list is that Paul doesn't define them. Presumably, the Corinthians list is some difficulty for us in some of the issues about exactly what was meant by the name given to it in this list.

But that's not Paul's concern to define them, although I'll try and shed some light on some of them as we go through. Paul's concern is with the diversity of them and the fact that they all come from the same God.

So then, in verses 8 to 10, he lists nine spiritual gifts. The first two in verse 8, to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit.

Notice how both come from the same source and notice that the gift is not wisdom or knowledge but the utterance of wisdom and the utterance of knowledge. That is, they are speaking gifts.

[13 : 58] They're not primarily intellectual gifts but they are about speaking or uttering knowledge and wisdom. Now, I think it's hard to distinguish between these two.

Paul, though, lists them separately but he doesn't clarify what makes something an utterance of wisdom as distinct from an utterance of knowledge. But I'm not sure that he's being too technical here either.

The Corinthians have boasted in both their knowledge and their wisdom and Paul has attacked those issues already in the early chapters of this letter. He's made it clear to them where true wisdom is found, preeminently in the cross of Jesus Christ.

He's also made it clear where their knowledge is faulty. I think what Paul is doing here is picking up the two almost slogan motto type words of the Corinthian boasts, knowledge and wisdom, wisdom and made it clear that real spiritual knowledge and wisdom is a gift of God.

By implication therefore you can't boast in it. It comes from God, not from your own skill. It's given by God's spirit. Now given the argument at the beginning of the letter that wisdom is focused on the cross of Christ, we could well say here that the gift of the utterance of wisdom and the utterance of knowledge is really about explaining the gospel.

[15 : 28] Either in an evangelistic sense to somebody who's not a Christian or even within a Christian context to help Christians understand better what is true godly wisdom and knowledge found in the cross of Christ.

I think that that's part of what this gift is about. There are some who would say that probably what's meant by the utterance of knowledge or the utterance of wisdom is a supernatural knowledge or wisdom about an event where there would be no natural way of knowing what's going on.

For example, in John's gospel, Jesus talks to the woman of Samaria and he says to her, you've got five husbands or you've had five husbands. There's no natural way in a sense that Jesus knew that it seems.

She hadn't told him. No one else seems to have told him. It seems to have been divinely revealed to him. And there are other times when, for example, Jesus responds with acute wisdom when the Jewish leaders are trying to trap him, whether it's about the coins, whether they offer to Caesar what he sees us and so on or on other issues.

We could say there is a sort of supernatural or supranormal wisdom or knowledge. But I don't think the spiritual gifts make that sort of distinction in the end.

[16 : 47] that is between something that is supernatural slash supranormal and something that is perhaps even more natural or normal. I think that distinction is not here.

The point is, however knowledge or wisdom comes to a person, to a Christian, if it comes from God, then it is a spiritual gift to be expressed.

The next part of the list goes to things of doing rather than speaking, before returning to things of speaking at the end.

So verse 9 begins with a third of the list. To another person, the gift is faith. Again, it's by the same spirit. Now all Christians have faith.

You can't be a Christian without faith. So clearly what this is intending is something distinct from everyday Christian faith. Probably what is meant is faith in a particular situation that somehow God convinces or lays a conviction on a Christian's heart that this is a particular course of action to be followed or that God will bless or answer a prayer in a particular way.

[18 : 07] That is, that it's not necessarily in scripture that there is a promise about something, but for a particular situation somehow God lays that conviction on somebody's heart. Now that may well be cases where you have experienced that.

There isn't something in the Bible that tells you that this is the right thing to do or that God's going to answer this particular prayer in this way, but somehow God may have placed that conviction on you that this is the case.

Very famously, last century I think it was, or turn of the century, George Muller set up orphanages in Bristol and it seems that a particular gift of faith to do that project which God blessed was given to him.

Now that's just one of many, many examples in church history I guess. The particular gift of faith here, also take note, is not a sort of happy-go-lucky optimism about life that everything's going to turn out all right in the end.

That's not the gift of faith here. The gift of faith is that God is directing and blessing a particular situational course of events. The fourth in the list is gifts of healings.

[19 : 21] Notice that it's plural. Literally it's gifts, plural, of healings, plural. That seems to suggest that there isn't really the case that one person has a permanent gift of healing so much as that each individual act of healing, whether or not it's miraculous, is given by God and is a gift.

So that the gift of healing is for a particular situation, not a universal gift of healing. Probably the implication of this particular gift is that it's miraculous, but I don't think that necessarily rules out gifts of nursing and doctor care in our own day and age either.

The next in the list mentions miracles, which may in part include acts of healing, but this obviously extends to other sorts of miraculous type of events.

Maybe exorcism of evil spirits, maybe a special power or special strength or fortitude or ability or something else. Then Paul returns to gifts of speaking again.

Towards the end of verse 10, the gift of prophecy. Now that in the New Testament is not exclusively the act of prediction.

[20 : 48] It would be great if somebody here has got the gift of prophecy in the sense of prediction to come up and tell us who's going to win the Melbourne Cup on Tuesday. Well, we'd soon be able to build an extension if we knew that, wouldn't we?

Think of all the money that you could give for God's service if somebody had that gift in our midst. Now, I don't think that's what the gift of prophecy in the New Testament is. The gift of prophecy is the ability to explain the scriptures for a particular situation.

That's what the Old Testament prophets were mainly about. And that, I think, is where the New Testament prophets take their lead as well. The Old Testament prophets, through God's inspiration, were able to read their own early part of the Old Testament scriptures and apply it to their contemporary setting.

Thus, warning people where they're doing wrongly and promising them God's blessings where they're doing well. That, I think, is the gift of prophecy in the New Testament as well as in the Old.

The closest analogy, I suppose, is even in weekly preaching in church. Then comes one that's a little bit more tricky.

[22 : 00] The very end of verse 10, or no, almost to the end of verse 10, the discernment of spirits. Now, Paul doesn't define his term here, of course.

Probably, I think, one or both of two things is in mind here. Either the testing of miracles or the testing of prophecy. We know that Pharaoh's magicians could perform miracles in the time of Moses, but those weren't miracles from God.

Jesus, likewise, warned his followers that there would be performers of false miracles. Yes, that is, they could do a miracle, but it doesn't come from God. I suspect that, in part at least, the discernment of spirits is a special gift given to somebody to discern whether a miracle worker is of God or not.

Now, in many cases, I think they'd be very obvious, but in some less so. Maybe the gift of discernment of spirits also has something to do with testing a prophet.

That is, whether there are false prophets, about which the New Testament is often warning Christians not to follow, or a true prophet. Now, maybe there are other things in part here to do with the discernment of spirits, but they, I think, are at least part of what is meant here.

[23 : 29] Well, then comes the controversial gift, the eighth in the list, the gift of speaking in tongues. Certainly, it seems, from what Paul says, not only here, but in this, the rest of this chapter and chapter 14 as well, that the gift of speaking in tongues is speaking in a language that is unintelligible to both the hearer and the speaker.

And it also seems that it is language directed to God, not to other people, by and large. Sometimes when I've heard people speak in tongues, and it's been interpreted by them or others, it seems that their language is really addressed to Christians rather than to God.

But in chapter 14 it seems that Paul's understanding of the gift of speaking in tongues is that basically it's about speaking to God. That may well be not unlike what he says in Romans chapter 8 about when we are praying to God, the Spirit in a sense takes our groans and uses language that we don't know to express our thoughts to God.

Some would say that it's an actual language that's being spoken. In Acts chapter 2 on the day of Pentecost, the disciples got up to preach the gospel, having received God's Holy Spirit, and people from all other nations found the disciples speaking in their own language and understood what they were saying, and many were converted.

But I'm not sure that that's exactly what is meant here by the gift of speaking in tongues, because the final gift in the list, number 9, at the end of verse 10, is the gift of interpretation of tongues.

[25 : 15] That seems to imply that the language being spoken is not an intelligible language to some other humans, but rather some other unknown language.

Now the Corinthians, it seems, thought that the language spoken by the gift of tongues was angelic language. The beginning of chapter 13 hints at that, I think, when Paul says, if I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I'm a noisy gong and clanging cymbal.

That is, I think by that he's seeming to say to the Corinthians, you think that when you're speaking in tongues, you're speaking an angelic language, as though somehow you've almost arrived in heaven and it's the language of heaven.

That, I think, is what the Corinthians thought about speaking in tongues. Paul will correct that sort of way of thinking, of course, in chapter 13. Certainly the Corinthians prized this gift probably above all others.

Some of them, as I've suggested, probably thought it was even essential, or certainly at least highly desirable for Christians to have this gift. As though it was the key way in which God's spirit was manifest in Christian people.

[26 : 33] Is Paul perhaps then making a point by putting this on the list as number eight? Is he playing it down? He certainly does that in chapter 14, as we'll see in a few weeks' time.

And I think that's what he's even hinting at here. This is one of many gifts. It's not number one of the list. It's not the top one of the list. In fact, Paul will tell us in chapter 14 that there are actually other gifts that ought to be prized more highly than this.

The final in the list, as I've said, is the interpretation of tongues, where presumably some other person is able to understand what is said by somebody else speaking in some foreign or unknown language.

Don't be put off by the strangeness of this list. I suspect that for many of you, almost this entire list is really quite foreign territory for you.

Some, if not many of you, may never have heard somebody speak in tongues, let alone yourself have that gift. Remember that Paul has drawn a selective list here to deal with the Corinthians' pride in their spirituality.

[27 : 51] His selective list is largely of things that are rather unusual, rather striking, very public. He's seeking to correct their pride.

And of course, we're only just a part of the way through his argument. We've got four more Sunday mornings to finish it. Let me at this point just pause to say, in the light of this list and some of the other things that are said here, how would we define a spiritual gift?

For it would be easy to read such a list of unusual things and define a spiritual gift as being something very unusual and supernatural or supranormal.

But in the other lists in the New Testament, there are other things that are much more everyday and mundane in spiritual lists, in spiritual gifts.

To incorporate both groups, I think that I would define spiritual gifts along these lines. Any ability, talent, skill, whatever, however it is gained, that is used for the building up of Christians and God's glory is a spiritual gift.

[29 : 16] Some of those abilities will come, in a sense, directly from God without any preparation. But others will be things that, humanly speaking, we might even say are natural talents or naturally acquired.

But a spiritual gift is not really dependent on how it's acquired. Its origin, whether it's natural or supernatural, comes from God.

But it is used for the building up of Christians and the glory of God. So music that is played for God's glory and the encouragement of Christians.

Whether or not there's been years and years and years and years of practice or not, is in, I think, my terms and I think in the New Testament's terms, a spiritual gift. Well, Paul makes a number of points in this passage and I want to summarise, I think, the key points by way of concluding.

There are seven of them. Firstly, God is the giver of gifts. However a Christian comes to have a particular gift, God is its source.

[30 : 28] It is God who's working in Christians through his spirit, giving gifts. And the importance for the Corinthians was to remember that God is sovereign here. God gives what he wants to whom he wants.

Paul makes that point clear at the end of verse 11. All these are activated by one and the same spirit who allots to each one individually, just as the spirit chooses. God is sovereign.

We don't control what's going on here. That's the first point. The second one is to say that the word for gifts used in verse 4 onwards is a word charisma or in plural charismata.

And the word for grace from which this word derives is the word charis in Greek. Grace is clearly undeserved.

That is, the person to whom God extends his grace does not deserve it. It's not payment for what they do. It is free undeserved gift. The same connotation spills over into the word for gift or gift.

[31 : 33] That is, they are given undeserved. The fact that somebody therefore has a particular spiritual gift is no cause for boasting or pride.

It's not an achievement that we have achieved. It is God's free gift. So therefore the person with a spiritual gift or gifts is no more superior to someone else with some other spiritual gift or none.

The fact that somebody has a spiritual gift does not in any way make them more mature than somebody else. Or more godly. And so for the Corinthians in particular, the fact that somebody did not speak in tongues made them no less important or mature or godly.

They weren't inferior because they lacked that particular spiritual gift. That's where Paul's heading in this argument here. The third point is that there is enormous variety in the spiritual gifts.

As I've said, this list is incomplete. These things are by and large rather striking. And as I've said, other lists in the New Testament are maybe a little bit more mundane, we might say.

[32 : 44] The gifts of hospitality or generosity or administration. The gift of helping somebody in pastoral care. The gift of encouragement. But Paul also says that marriage is a spiritual gift.

And he says the same about celibacy as well. Ministry is a spiritual gift. As is leadership. And we could probably add a whole lot of other things.

Music. Welcoming. Etc. Etc. The list is vast. And I think even if you listed everything that the New Testament mentions, you still wouldn't get a complete list of spiritual gifts.

We'll see more of that next week. The fourth point is that spiritual gifts are not a cause for division. They are an expression of unity.

They come from the same spirit, the same Lord, the same God. Paul's made that very, very clear here. We cannot fail but to see the emphasis he places on the one source for whatever gift.

[33 : 50] It is the same God, the same spirit. So the use of spiritual gifts should never be a cause for division. Diversity, yes.

But division, no. Unity, yes. But not uniformity. The fifth point is that the gifts are for the common good.

If God gives you a spiritual gift, it's not to put on your mantelpiece and sort of smile at and admire day by day. It's not to put away in your wardrobe and bring out on a particular day.

Gifts are for the common good. They're not personal possessions. They're actually a possession of the church, Paul makes clear in other places in the New Testament. And we'll see more of that next week with the issue of the gifts being used for the building up of the church.

The sixth point is use your gifts. Building on what I've just said that they're for the common good. Don't hide them. Use them.

[34 : 57] If God's given you the gift of speaking in tongues, use it. If God's given you the gift of hospitality, use it. If God's given you the gift of music, use it. If God's given you the gift of prophecy, use it.

For the common good of other Christian people. One of the key areas in which church life has changed in the last 40 years is that we've come to remember and recognize that every member has a role or a function or a gift or a ministry to play in the life of the church.

That is, church life is not just about the minister doing the ministry and everybody sitting and enjoying it. But it's about everyone being involved in ministry and using their gifts to the full.

For God's glory and for the common good. And the final point is expect God's spirit to work.

If the trap or the failure of the Corinthians was that they looked for God to work in an exotic sort of way, I think the failure of modern Western Christians is that we don't look for God's spirit to work at all.

[36 : 08] We've been so conditioned by rational thinking that we often block out where God may be acting in ways we do not expect.

But God is in the business of working in us and through us, building up the church for his glory. So be alert to his work in you and through you and others and be willing to use the gifts he gives so that he may accomplish his purposes in us and for us and through us.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.