

## **Unleashing Spiritual Gifts in Your Congregation Begins With Better Biblical Understanding**

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### **Introduction**

Many believers and Christian leaders agree that regardless of how effective a congregation's worship, evangelism, or general ministry, there is a dearth of the move of God within the church. Why is this so, since Jesus declared to His disciples that anyone who has faith in Him would do what He had been doing—in fact, “even greater things than these” (John 14:12)?<sup>1</sup> The mighty works of God through the Church permeate the book of Acts, leaving contemporary believers to wonder, “Why don't these supernatural things happen among us?”

I believe that fundamentally wrong theology passed down over the years hinders operation of the gifts; it follows, then, that the application of proper theology will increase their manifestation.

### **The Scope of Spiritual Gifts**

Though other lists of gifts occur in the New Testament, only those in the list in 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 are called *spiritual*. Popular teaching, especially from non-Pentecostals, lump all gifts of God together (Rom. 12, Eph. 4), which leads people to think that if they exercise a gift of giving, they don't need to worry about prophecy. This is wrong. Though gifts of mercy and

helps are also important, Paul encourages all believers to exercise the nine in 1 Corinthians 12. These clearly supernatural gifts are the ones less frequently seen in our churches and are the scope of this discussion.

### **The Key Issue**

Are the gifts of the Spirit given to believers in a sense in which the believer can be said to *possess* them? Is it even legitimate to ask: “What is (are) your gift(s)?” The belief that Christians “possess” gifts of the Spirit has led directly to the paucity of these gifts, with some laypeople simply not believing that they possess a supernatural gift and could never therefore operate in that realm. Such a view leaves the operation of gifts to the pastor or the more “spiritual” ones in the church.

### **Impact of Teaching Gifts as Possession**

Gifts of the Spirit as possession is assumed in literature that helps Christians discover their spiritual gift(s). This assumption is due, first, to the misapplication of the body metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12, maintaining that Paul is teaching that no one believer exercises all gifts, because such a person would therefore not need the rest of the body of Christ. In this view, possessing only a

couple gifts at most would cause each member to need the others.

However, in the body metaphor, Paul does not argue for diversity of the *gifts*, rather for diversity of the *members*. 1 Corinthians 12:14 reads, “Now the body is not made up of one part but of many” and defines those parts in verse 27 as people, “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” If gifts are not possessions, believers can return to a more biblical understanding that each one needs the others because of the way that “God has combined the *members* of the body” (v. 24). If *no one* possesses a gift, but each could be used in all gifts, each member of the body still needs the others as only God determines how he will use each one (v. 11).

Second, those who hold to gifts as possession do not recognize the important distinction between gift and ministry and interpret all sections of 1 Corinthians 12-14 as a reference to gifts. Whereas verses 3-11 of 1 Corinthians 12 deal with gifts, verses 12-27 discuss the interdependence of believers in the body. Then, beginning with verse 28, Paul addresses church offices and ministries. Therefore, the rhetorical questions in verses 29-30, “Are all apostles?...Do all work miracles?...Do all speak in tongues?”, need to be understood in the context of the offices and regular ministries of verse 28, not the gifts of verses 3-11.

A doctrine of possession of gifts gives anti-Pentecostals ammunition to attack all Pentecostal doctrines. John McArthur criticized any concept of a modern gift of divine healing by focusing on possession.<sup>2</sup> His logic is: If one *possesses* the gift of

healing, then the gift can be used at will in any circumstance. Since no one can heal every sick person, then no one must have the gift of healing. Pentecostals can overcome arguments like this, but only by abandoning the perspective of possession of gifts and coming to a more biblical understanding.

### **Gifts Are Not a Possession**

The Bible teaches that the nine gifts of the Spirit are not the possession of the believer, but rather the possession of the Holy Spirit to distribute as He determines. Although this position has not been articulated enough in Pentecostal circles, G. Raymond Carlson wrote,

The gifts are gifts of the Spirit. As such, they are resident in the Spirit. They are manifested and *not imparted* [italics added]. They are manifested according to the will of God and not according to our merit....

Gifts are not an absolute possession. The Lord is the administrator and gifts are in the Spirit who indwells the believer. The consistent manifestation of God wills that we are to be filled with the Holy Spirit. When we are, we have the potential to be used by God to minister to any need that may arise in the church. Only as the Holy Spirit supplies the gift at a particular moment for a particular situation will the ministry of a member of the Body be effective.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, some believers could be used in all of the gifts. Throughout Acts and the Pauline

Epistles, Paul evidences all the gifts, except interpretation of tongues. Further, Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 14:13, “For this reason anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says.” If the gift of interpretation were only given as a possession to some, then his statement would be meaningless. Paul encouraged the Corinthians to seek to interpret, to speak in tongues (v. 5), and to prophesy (vv. 1, 5). Therefore, all gifts are available to all believers as the Spirit wills them to be exercised. Christians all have many ministries to perform, and the gifts of the Spirit help fulfill those ministries.

### **Moving from Gifts to Ministry**

In practice, however, it seems as if some believers are used often in a particular gift. In this case, these individuals are filling a ministry position (e.g., apostle or interpreter). Though the person will exercise other gifts, he or she may exercise one gift more frequently. Even here, this person should not be the only one expected to use that gift in the church. Stanley Horton echoes this concept:

I believe 1 Corinthians 12:11 means the Holy Spirit distributes each *manifestation* [italics added] of a gift as He wills. The gifts are in His possession, not ours. 12:31 and 14:1 indicate every believer can be used by the Spirit in any of the gifts as the Spirit determines, but the Spirit may use certain individuals regularly in certain gifts.<sup>4</sup>

David Clark of Vanguard University states, “Rather than say someone ‘has’ a spiritual gift, I prefer to say/teach that the Spirit

*manifests* himself in certain ways in a regular or characteristic manner through people, rather than to say people ‘have’ a gift which might be misunderstood in the sense of a natural talent.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Theological Conclusion**

The gifts of the Spirit are not the absolute possession of a believer. The Holy Spirit manifests the gifts of the Spirit through individuals as He chooses. All believers who have received the Holy Spirit can and should function in any one of the nine gifts; some could potentially operate in all of the gifts of the Spirit. Certain believers may exercise one particular gift with regularity, such as tongues, interpretation, prophecy, or healing, which can develop into a ministry.

The incorrect teaching that gifts are possessions has shortchanged believers and deprived the local church of the exercise of the gifts. An accurate understanding among pastors and lay people of the nature of the gifts of the Spirit could bring to fruition Paul’s desire for everyone to be involved in the exercise of the gifts, resulting in greater ministry and glory to God.

### **Application**

What do we do with this understanding of gifts of the Spirit? First, pastors should teach these truths and tear down the traditions of popular piety. Second, this biblical teaching should replace the use of spiritual gifts surveys. Third, pastors must place a greater emphasis on believers being filled and re-filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. Fourth, believers and leaders alike should commit to being used in the gifts of the Spirit. Fifth, leaders should lead by example

and by bringing potential leaders alongside to learn by experience. Sixth, when gifts of the Spirit are manifested among the members of the congregation, these experiences should be recounted to the entire church as an exhortation to others.

When spiritual leaders acquire correct theology, teach it to the church, and raise expectation levels for application, believers can come to a point where they indeed do “greater works than these,” as they minister to a hurting and needy world

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<sup>1</sup>All Scripture quotations are taken from the NIV.

<sup>2</sup> John F. McArthur Jr., *The Charismatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), 134-5.

<sup>3</sup> G. Raymond Carlson, *Our Faith and Fellowship* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1977), 64-65.

<sup>4</sup>Stanley M. Horton, private correspondence with author, May 27, 1994.

<sup>5</sup>David C. Clark, private correspondence with author, December 8, 1993.