

## THE GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

### INTRODUCTION

Have you ever been to a charismatic worship service? Have you ever witnessed Christians speaking in tongues? I can remember being impressed by what I observed at a pentecostal service when I was a young man, and I remember prayer fervently for the gift of tongues so that I could experience the same. The Lord never saw fit to grant that desire, and for a time that troubled me. After all, throughout the book of Acts and throughout Paul's epistles, it seems taken for granted that speaking in tongues is to be expected once one converts to Christianity. Paul even met a group of baptized believers once, but discerned that they had not yet received the Holy Spirit (Acts 19):

While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples <sup>2</sup> and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when<sup>[a]</sup> you believed?"

They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

<sup>3</sup> So Paul asked, "Then what baptism did you receive?"

"John's baptism," they replied.

<sup>4</sup> Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." <sup>5</sup> On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. <sup>6</sup> When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues<sup>[b]</sup> and prophesied. <sup>7</sup> There were about twelve men in all.

Speaking in tongues is what confirmed that these believers had finally received the Holy Spirit. The implication seems to be that there is something missing from a Christian who does not speak in tongues.

Well I didn't want to miss out on anything and so I desperately wanted to speak in tongues as well.

Now, here's what I've come to recognize about my earlier self. In desiring to enter a trance-like state where I utter strange sounds without controlling them, what I was really after was just to experience a neat/weird expression of power. It felt exciting and I didn't want to be left out. It

felt that there was a supernatural power at work and I wanted to taste that power. I confess that I really didn't think much about how speaking in tongues would benefit anyone other than myself, and even for myself the benefit I was seeking was a neat/weird experience. I didn't care much how it would affect my faith, my moral conduct, or my attitude toward others.

I am not actually going to speak much about tongues this morning. My concern is with the spiritual gifts much more broadly. I think it is important for us to have an understanding of the gifts of the spirit, what they are, their overall purpose, and how any of it matters to us today. Of course I don't have clear cut answers to all those questions this morning; my background is in philosophy and I am much better with questions than I am with answers. What I will do is share some thoughts on the topic, under the assumption that, as always, you will exercise your own prayerful and sanctified common sense to test what I have to say.

## 1 COR 12-14

The most extended discussion of the gifts of the Spirit in the Bible is found in chapters 12-14 of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. We've read only the first half of chapter 12 this morning but that is only because I didn't think you'd have the patience to listen to all of chapters 12, 13 and 14. Note, however that 12-14 form a single developed line of thought, and we risk serious misinterpretation when we don't consider that whole line of thought together. Paul begins the section by saying "Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. (12:1)"

Great. This sounds like Paul is going to lay out his understanding of the nature of spiritual gifts and give us all the theology we'll need on the topic. We need to exercise some caution here, because I don't think that is actually what Paul is up to. A bit of background: The church in Corinth was made up of a very diverse group of believers, some of whom were Jews, but many of whom were Gentiles. Among the Gentiles, many would have had experience with pagan spirituality, particularly with 'mystery' cults that worshipped Dionysus the Greek god of wine, or Apollo the Greek god of the Sun. The spiritual practices of these cults very much centered around neat/weird expressions of power. Through beating drums, clanging cymbals, and vigorous dancing they would work themselves into an exciting, ecstatic fervor in an attempt to commune with the divine. Speaking in tongues was not a new phenomenon, at least for the Corinthian believers; they had experienced something at least very similar in pagan ceremonies.

If you keep reading the rest of the section, what you'll find is...

Paul's purpose in the text before us, then, is to correct the Corinthian believers in their experience and expressions of spirituality. He wants to distinguish the true gifts of the Holy Spirit from the forms of spirituality that exist in pagan worship. The first simple test to distinguish

them is that “no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus be cursed,” and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit (v3).

It is important for us to understand that Paul is correcting some ideas about spirituality that his audience is already very familiar with, and not laying out a complete understanding of the spiritual gifts from the ground up. If we today want to understand the gifts of the spirit, we can certainly learn a lot from this passage in 1 Corinthians, but we ought not to treat it as a complete expression of doctrine on the subject.

What we do learn from 1 Cor 12-14 can be summarized: The Holy Spirit has indeed gifted believers in Jesus Christ with spiritual powers. The purpose of those gifts, however, is never as simple as enjoying a neat/weird experience. The gifts are purpose-oriented; they are given with the intention of being used toward a specific goal. What goal is that? Paul tells us: “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good (v7).” It is clear in context that what Paul has in mind here is that the spiritual gifts are given by the Holy Spirit to believers for the common good *of the church*. They are given so that the church might succeed in her own mission, which is nothing other than growing the kingdom of God here on earth. There are a variety of gifts, distributed to believers as the Spirit sees fit, but the common purpose behind all of them is to build unity among the believers and to enable the church to spread the good news about Jesus to the unbelieving world.

The purpose of a spiritual gift is never simply to express a neat/weird power, or to have an ecstatic experience. This is what was wrong with my desire as a young man to speak in tongues, and it was one of the major problems Paul was trying to correct in the Corinthian church. It is also why Jesus claims, at the end of his Sermon on the Mount, that ““Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ 23 Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’ (Matt 7:21-23)” What a terrifying thought - that it is possible to experience the miraculous, and even to work miracles ourselves, and yet in the end have no place with Jesus in his Kingdom! The warning is that it is possible to use the gifts the Holy Spirit gives us toward the wrong ends, and without a genuine submission to the Lordship of Jesus. Doing that might indeed be exciting and ecstatic, but it will not bring us any closer to the Kingdom.

So in the most detailed passage from scripture about the spiritual gifts we have instruction about their purpose and proper use, and caution about using them for personal edification rather than for furthering the aims of the Church. We also have a list from Paul of at least the most significant spiritual gifts in the early church. They include: messages of wisdom and knowledge (presumably a miraculous ability to know things one cannot know through natural means, or miraculous insight into matters that can't just come from regular experience), faith, miraculous

healing, other miraculous powers (Jesus mentions drinking deadly poisons without being harmed by them - Mark 16:18)), prophecy, distinguishing spirits, speaking in tongues, and interpreting tongues.

#### WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR TODAY?

Among believers today there are at least two popular views about the spiritual gifts. According to one view, call it Charismaticism, the spiritual gifts are just the very ones mentioned by Paul in 1 Cor. 12:8-10, and they are still very much with us today. Most Charismatics believe that the church lost the spiritual gifts shortly after the Apostolic Age, but that they were renewed in the early 20th century. Others would claim that the spiritual gifts have always been available to true believers, but that they lost historical prominence only because of a lack of faith. Either way, the claim is that the Holy Spirit continues today to gift believers in Jesus with the very same spiritual gifts that were gifted to believers in the first days of the Church. Speaking in tongues continues to be viewed by them as a sign of true reception of the Holy Spirit, and along with this there cannot but be a suspicion that there is something wrong or lacking in a Christian who does not speak in tongues.

The second view is known as Cessationism. Cessationists believe that the Holy Spirit gifted believers with supernatural powers in the early days of the church, for the specific purpose of kickstarting and giving it a head start. Once the church began to be established, and once the New Testament canon was complete, there was no longer the same need for miraculous gifting, and those gifts ceased. Cessationists agree with Charismatics that the spiritual gifts are just the gifts mentioned by Paul in 1 Cor. 12:8-10, but they disagree that the Holy Spirit continues to gift believers in the same way. Believers continue to receive the Holy Spirit upon their confession of faith in Jesus Christ, but they are not individually gifted by the Spirit any longer.

#### ANOTHER WAY

I think there is room for a third view in between these two. I don't know if there is a catchy "ism" to go along with it, so I'll just describe what I have in mind. The third view agrees with the Charismatics that the Holy Spirit continues to gift believers for the purpose of building the kingdom, it agrees with the Cessationists that the extraordinary gifts given to believers in the early church are not ordinary for believers anymore, and it disagrees with both of those views in thinking that the specific gifts listed by Paul in 1 Cor. 12:8-10 is not (and never was meant to be) both complete and timeless.

This third view starts from the conviction that our God is not dead. We worship a God who is living and active, who is present with us moment to moment and who is concerned with our current struggles, not just the struggles of His people many years ago. Our God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, yes, but he is also the God of the apostles, the God of St. Aquinas,

the God of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the God of Lynn Gee and Sarah Aasman. Whether God experiences time moment to moment as we do, or whether he is eternal and separate from time altogether, one way or another he is present with His church as it develops through time. This does not mean that God changes in his essential nature. His love for us is steadfast, his promises are rock solid, and his broad-level goals for creation don't shift around. It might mean, however, that he reveals aspects of Himself to one generation that he does not reveal to earlier generations, just as he did not fully reveal himself in Christ until the appointed time.

Next, we recognize that the situation the Church finds herself in today in the 21st century is different in several important respects from the situation she found herself in during the 1st century. Some things remain unchanged; the mission to share the good news is with us now just as much as it was with the first believers, but the context is different. We are not under Roman rule, for example, but rather under a government of elected representatives. This has to mean that the church's relation to the governing authorities is different today than it was in the time of the apostles.

Finally, we recognize along with Paul that the purpose or end of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is, and has always been, to promote unity in the church and to bring the kingdom of God here to earth. The gifts have never been intended merely as neat-weird expressions of power.

The suggestion, then, is that the gifts the Holy Spirit grants to believers in any given generation are suitable and appropriate to the challenges that the church of that generation faces. Paul discusses the gifts that were appropriate for his situation, but the gifts given to us here and now might look very different. Let me be clear that I am NOT claiming that this is the biblical teaching about spiritual gifts. It is not. However, I don't think there is a biblical teaching about the forms that the spiritual gifts might take through the ages, other than that they are distributed as the Spirit wills. My suggestion is consistent with much of what we do know from scripture, it isn't ruled out by anything I am aware of in scripture, and it just makes sense all on its own.

If it is even close to being correct, then if we want to understand anything about the gifts of the Holy Spirit for us here today, we need to spend time thinking about the current challenges facing the church. What aspects of our mission require special help from the Lord? What barriers do we encounter in spreading the good news? What does RBC need in order to better grow our community and witness to the rest of the Yukon?

As I said, I am better with questions than with answers, so I think this is something that each of us would do well to reflect on. But let me hazard a couple of guesses.

a.) First, I would venture to say that we do not have the same need for miraculous communication in foreign tongues as did the early church. They had a pressing need to establish themselves not just as a branch of Judaism, but as the Way for all peoples in all lands. They did not have efficient distance ed courses to learn foreign languages, and they certainly

did not have Google Translate to help them out. We do have those things, and our need for special help from the Holy Spirit in that area is simply not as pressing.

b.) Second, I'm also not sure that we have the same need as the early church did for miracles of physical healing. We have modern medicine, which is wildly more effective at healing the sick than the natural resources available to anyone in the 1st century. That does not mean we can cure all ills and it does not mean that ills such as cancer are any less devastating for us as they were for them. At the same time, we should recognize that our battles with disease and early mortality are nothing like what humans experienced in earlier ages.

c.) Third, though we may be as gods among men when it comes to healing physical infirmities (compared to earlier generations), we are like babes among men when it comes to healing mental/spiritual harm. Our society is becoming more and more aware of the rampant evils of mental illness and the shocking number of people that suffer from them. The line between the mental and the spiritual can be very difficult to draw, but it seems to me that at least a significant part of the problems we lump together into the category of "mental health", actually stem from deep, unmet spiritual needs. The Church of the 21st century must effectively address those needs. We need folks with gifts of spiritual discernment and gifts of gentle communication to speak words of hope to the depressed, words of reassurance in the power of God to the anxious, and words of belonging and deep significance to the suicidal.

d.) Fourth, and along similar lines, the Church of the 21st century lives in a world with increasing social isolation, despite all of our fantastic technology for bringing people together even when they are physically remote. We need to reach such people. The Church of today has a pressing need to build a strong and vibrant community and to attract others into participating in it. This doesn't happen all on its own; we need folks with special gifts to make that happen.

e.) Fifth, we live in a digitally connected age, and this leads to faster evolution and development of cultural attitudes than ever before. New ideas can spread rapidly, not just among a circle of friends but across the entire globe. The church of today has a pressing need to stay relevant and to meet people where they are. Today, we need folks who are gifted in the use of technology to keep up with a rapidly changing society.

f.) Sixth, we live in a global society, where cultural backgrounds are no longer tied to a region of planet Earth. The church of today needs folks gifted with cultural awareness and with the building of unity among a group as diverse as RBC is. Not that long ago, RBC was a church made up predominantly of people of European descent, many of whom had a Mennonite cultural background. Today we are a very diverse group with all sorts of traditions and backgrounds, and yet I'm not sure that we are intentional enough about understanding each other and forming a single community, rather than a collection of several sub-communities. We are in need of folks specially gifted at sharing their own cultural background, understanding the

background of others, and at weaving our diversity into a strength that builds community rather than allowing it to keep us separated into sub-groups.

The church of today has some unique challenges and specific needs. If the Holy Spirit continues to gift his people in ways that are suited to meet the current challenges of the day, then we should expect that those gifts might look very different from the gifts given to believers in the 1st century

Let me tie some of this together. I believe that as a follower of Jesus Christ and a member of this church body, you have most certainly been gifted by the Holy Spirit in order to contribute toward the work of the church. Your gifts might be directed toward some of the challenges that I have guessed at, or they might be designed to address different challenges altogether.

*Maybe* some of you have been gifted to miraculously speak in foreign tongues, or even in the tongues of angels, and maybe others of you have been gifted to interpret those tongues. I am not going to stand up here and tell you that those gifts do not exist any longer. Who am I to declare such a thing? Some of you may not like this, but for my part at least, if you have indeed been given the gift of tongues, then I would welcome the use of your gifts for the edification of this church.

However, I WILL stand up here and say that *if you are not gifted in that way*, then that does NOT mean there is anything wrong with you. There are a variety of gifts, all given by the One Spirit of God. Do not take an absence of the gift of tongues to indicate that you are not gifted by the Holy Spirit at all. I am confident that you have other gifts.

Let me repeat something I mentioned to you last time I spoke in church, because I continue to think that it is very important. I am going to tell you the secret of happiness. You don't need to climb mountain in Tibet to ask a sage about it, and you don't need to send me three equal payments of \$29.99. I'm just going to tell you for free. Happiness (indeed, deep and significant joy) comes from using what you are good at to help others in need. Each part of that is essential. You can help others in need by doing something that you are not particularly good at. It will be good for that person and it will hopefully give you some degree of satisfaction, but you won't find joy in it that same way as if you were doing something you are better suited for. Many volunteers find this out quickly when they are willing to work towards a worthy goal, but end up being tasked with things that they are just poorly suited for. You can use what you are good at in order to help someone that is not in need; for example if you are good at predicting stock market changes you could use that to help the filthy rich become even more filthy rich. You might get a nice financial bonus for doing that, but I do not think it will bring you the sort of deep joy that I am talking about. The best activity we can do in this life is to use what we are good at to help someone else in need.

Along with this, I think that the greater the need you are able to address, the greater the joy you end up getting out of it as well. Now spiritual needs are greater than any other needs, because they are eternal in significance and not merely temporary. And it is the work of the church to address spiritual needs. It follows, I think, that when you exercise your God-given gifts to participate in the work of the church, it is good for those you immediately help, it is good for the church as a whole, and it is VERY good for you yourself. If you can find what it is God has gifted you to do, and if you decide to apply that gift in the service of the church, you will find a joy and satisfaction that isn't matched anywhere else in life. If you don't believe me, put it to the test.

It is a good time to do so. We are currently down a full time pastor and we have not yet been able to bring an intern in until we can hire a new one. Opportunities currently abound for you to exercise your gifts within this fellowship. No one wants to twist your arm into doing something undesirable just out of a sense of obligation to the community, and I will not try to do this now. Please understand that opportunities for service in this community are actually invitations for you to find an expression for your own spiritual gifts, not just because the work needs to get done one way or another, but because YOU need to do it in order to lead a fulfilling life as a Christian.

## CONCLUSION

One final thought, and I want to confess that I have been personally challenged by this; this message is indeed just as much for myself as it is for any of you.

The thought is this: it is a mistake to just assume that spiritual gifts always correspond to natural talents. (It is likely also a mistake to assume that they never do; gifts are distributed "as the Spirit sees fit"). If you are a naturally good administrator in your professional life, it does not automatically mean that the Holy Spirit has gifted you with gifts of administrative excellence in order to serve with the Church's administration. If you are a naturally talented musician, we should not automatically assume that your spiritual gifts lie with leading the church in worship through song. The entire point of a *spiritual* gift is that God uses us in our weaknesses, not in our strengths, in order to demonstrate his own power in the church. Consider what Paul says of his own ministry to the Corinthians:

"For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel--not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. (1:17)

"And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God.<sup>[a]</sup> 2 For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except

Jesus Christ and him crucified. <sup>3</sup> I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. <sup>4</sup> My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, <sup>5</sup> so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power. (2:1-5)

Paul came to the Corinthians in weakness, fear, and trembling, not in strength, and he did this intentionally so that no one could say he converted them through his own natural talents. At the end of the day, no one can look at the conversion of the Corinthians to Christianity and explain it as the result of Paul, the exceptionally talented speaker.

Consider also Moses, whom God chose to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses was a terrible public speaker, so much so that in the end he refused God's plan and they had to go with Plan B - get Aaron to speak on Moses' behalf. God chose Moses specifically because of this, so at the end of the day no one could explain the exodus of the Israelite nation as product of an exceptionally clever and convincing man, Moses.

To bring this thought home to us, suppose that I were to lead worship one Sunday and suppose that it turned out to be a powerful and moving experience for all of us. You would leave that service thinking, "Wow, God was really present with us this morning." Why would you think that? Well just look at the horrendous musician that was trying to lead our songs - it certainly wasn't due to him!

This thought frightens me because it suggests that maybe I ought to be willing to serve in some capacity that I really do not feel comfortable with. I'm not really suggesting that we put together a group of our worst musicians to lead worship one Sunday just to see what happens, but I DO think that each one of us should be listening to the Holy Spirit with open ears and a willing heart, and that we should give serious consideration to service opportunities that lie well outside of our natural competencies. Though we are weak, God is strong. The Holy Spirit just might be waiting to bestow gifts on you that you never would have expected, and perhaps we need to trust him more when such opportunities arise.

BENEDICTION

1 Cor. 1:4-9

I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. <sup>5</sup> For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge— <sup>6</sup> God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. <sup>7</sup> Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. <sup>8</sup> He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus

Christ. 9 God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son,  
Jesus Christ our Lord.