

# 1 Corinthians 12: Spiritual Gifts

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul describes the *provision* of spiritual gifts, emphasising the *personal* responsibility and unity with which they should be exercised for the mutual benefit of all (the body). In 1 Corinthians 13, the *principle* by which they are exercised is love. Finally, in 1 Corinthians 14, Paul outlines the *practice* by which they operate in the local assembly.

The spiritual gift of “tongues” is prominent in these three chapters. In fact, the word *glōssa* occurs 21 times, but nowhere else in the epistle. It is possible some of the Corinthian believers regarded the gift of tongues as the principal evidence of salvation (being indwelt by the Spirit) and spirituality. *“Inevitably, this put everyone under tremendous pressure to obtain and experience this particular gift”* (Horlock). The gift of tongues, and indeed all sign gifts have long since ceased to operate. John Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople, wrote: *“This whole section is very obscure: but the obscurity is produced by our ignorance of the facts referred to – being such as then used to occur but now no longer take place”* (c. 400AD). In this chapter, Paul will show that a person does not need to have the gift of tongues to belong to the church, the body of Christ. And those who do have the gift of tongues are in no-way superior, or more essential than those who do not. All are responsible to labour together in harmony for the mutual profit of every believer (v.7).

## The Declaration of a Spiritual Person [vv.1-3]

**v.1:** “Now concerning” is a phrase used six times in the letter and indicates that Paul is returning to various issues which the Corinthians had raised in their written correspondence. This phrase often introduces a new section of the epistle (cf. 7.1, 25; 8.1; 12.1; 16.1, 12). On this occasion the subject is *pneumatikos* – translated “spiritual gifts” by the AV, though the word ‘gifts’ is supplied by the translators in light of the context that follows. The word literally means ‘spirituals’ and can be either *masculine* (‘people of the Spirit’, cf. 14.37) or *neuter* (‘things of the Spirit’, cf. 14.1). The context suggests the latter and likely describes various manifestations of the Spirit through a believer – in *words* (vv.1-3), *work* (vv.4-6) and *witness* (vv.7-11). They must not be uninformed or “ignorant” in relation to such critical truth.

**v.2:** This verse contrasts the Corinthians’ pagan past with their present experience of the Spirit. It is possible that the different ‘spiritual’ experiences of a pagan Gentile (v.2), a Jew (v.3a) and a Christian (v.3b) are in view. As far as their pre-Christian lives were concerned, they were “Gentiles” (pagans). As such they were under the control of idols and false gods, being “carried (dragged) away” like a prisoner in captivity to the worship of these idols – probably *by and through* the deception of evil spirits. The idols themselves were powerless, being “dumb” – unable to speak and commune with their adherents (cf. Psalm 115.5; Jeremiah 10.5). In “whatever way ye might be led” (JND) could refer to the variety of different idols the pagans worshipped in Corinth, or even the various festival processions when participants paraded on a sacred pilgrimage through the streets, often carrying an idol, before worshipping at its shrine.

**v.3:** Having once been ‘led’ by evil spirits, Paul now explains the proper criterion for the genuine work of the Holy Spirit. The statement is a test to establish whether a person is indwelt by the Spirit of God or not. It was not merely those who spoke in tongues who were ‘spiritual’, but **all** who confessed Jesus as Lord. So, no man “speaking by (under the controlling influence of) the Spirit of God” says “Jesus is anathema” [RV], that is, devoted to God for destruction as under His curse. This was particularly the language of the Jew in relation to Jesus of Nazareth for *“cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree”* (Galatians 3.13). It was likely this very blasphemy Saul of Tarsus compelled Jewish synagogue goers to declare (Acts 26.11). But no-one indwelt by the Spirit could ever make such a statement. Paul is not suggesting that this was happening at Corinth, but merely declaring the contrast between *cursing* Jesus and *confessing* Him as Lord. It is only the inspiration of the Spirit that can cause a person to genuinely say “Jesus is the Lord”. Although anyone can merely say words, Paul is here describing a person speaking with full conviction, complete personal allegiance and heart belief (Romans 10.9). Such a person will soon demonstrate the Lord’s authority (and supremacy) in their life, and act in a way that glorifies Him. Garland says, *“This confession is not some spontaneous, ecstatic utterance that anyone could blurt out. It affirms the majesty of Jesus as the one raised from the dead to become the one universal Lord above all other so-called lords. It declares absolute allegiance to him and accepts his absolute authority over every aspect of life.”* The demon of Mark 1.24 accepted the deity and holiness of Christ but called Him “Jesus of Nazareth”. Recognition of His Lordship, that is, willing submission to His authority was another matter.

## The Diversity of Spiritual Service [vv.4-6]

**v.4:** These three verses introduce a theme which runs through the remainder of the chapter – God loves **diversity**! After all, He has made every snowflake different! We would therefore expect the indwelling Spirit to be manifested in different ways amongst His people. This does not mean there is *disunity* amongst believers. In fact, the opposite is true – there is *unity* in diversity. Though they were all different individuals, God had perfectly blended together (harmonised)

every believer in Corinth that they might operate as one body, in equality and with mutual love (care) for one another. The chapter is full of illustrations of the same: the human body has many different members (diversity), but together they form one person (unity); the Godhead has three distinct persons (diversity), but there is one God (unity); believers are given different spiritual gifts (diversity), but their source is the *same* Spirit of God (unity). So, though a local church comprises many different people (diversity), they are one spiritual body (unity, cf. v.27).

So, all genuine believers are indwelt by the one and same Holy Spirit, but that does not mean there is no diversity amongst them! There are different “gifts” (*charisma*) given to believers but the “same Spirit” who sovereignly gives those gifts. There should not be any overemphasis of the spectacular – this would be to despise other gifts and the Spirit of God who gave them. The word “diversities” means ‘varieties’ or ‘distributions’. The word *charisma* means a free gift of grace and is used of eternal life in Romans 6.23. So spiritual gifts are a mark of grace, not a badge of spirituality. **v.5:** “Administrations” is the simple word for ‘ministry’ or ‘service’. Thus, each believer uses their spiritual gift as a tool to render a particular service, regulated under the direction of the Lordship of Christ. In Luke 10, seventy disciples were sent out two by two in testimony “before his face” (v.1). Every servant should serve as in the presence of Christ. He sent them into the towns and villages after which He would visit and take stock of what they had and hadn’t done! We must also serve with a deep sense of accountability to Him. **v.6:** “Operations” (*energēma*) signifies the divine energy or power that makes the use of such gifts effective. Anything accomplished for God in His service is effected by **His** power. “*Men rely very largely for the work in souls upon eloquence, moving appeals, music, singing, and other methods that appeal to the senses. The Apostle tells us that it is ‘God which works all in all’. It is God who works everything that is divine in everyone in whom there is a work.*” In summary, every believer has the *ability* (v.4) and *responsibility* (v.5) to be *active* in the service of God (v.6).

#### The Distinction of Spiritual Gifts [vv.7-11]

**v.7:** This transitional verse is developed in the remainder of the chapter. First, *every* believer is given spiritual gift or a “manifestation of the Spirit” (expanded in vv.8-11). Second, these gifts are for the common good of *other* believers (expanded in vv.12-30). Peter makes the same point in 1 Peter 4.10: “*Just as each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another*” (NET). The use and exercise of spiritual gift is one way in which the Spirit makes known His presence in the church and individual believers. This “manifestation” is “given”, a *passive* verb which stresses the divine source of spiritual gift – it is not the product of human will, or a display of an individual’s natural ability – it is a divine bestowal. As to the *people*, every believer or “every man” has received spiritual gift (cf. Romans 12.3; Ephesians 4.7). Every member has something to contribute, and is therefore valuable. As to *purpose*, it is to “profit withal” or ‘for the benefit (good) of all’ (NET). Exercise of gift is not for ostentation or self-glorification – not to promote one individual over another, but “unto edifying” (14.26), i.e. for the spiritual *building up* of God’s people.

**v.8:** The next three verses contain *nine* spiritual gifts. The words for “another” in vv.8-10 switch from *allos* (another of the *same* kind) to *heteros* (another of a *different* kind). This divides the gifts into *three* groups in an ABA structure:

A. *Speaking* gifts of wisdom and knowledge. Revelatory in character.

B. Primarily *serving* gifts of faith, healings, miracles, prophecy (a speaking gift), and distinguishing spirits. Confirmatory.

A. *Speaking* gifts of tongues and interpretation of tongues. Revelatory *and* confirmatory.

Later (13.8), Paul will take one representative gift from each group and describe them as “ceasing” or “vanishing away”. As these *nine* gifts are all revelatory or confirmatory, none of them are in use today. The Spirit-given gifts are:

- **Word of wisdom.** The timely application of spiritual insight to meet the needs of a specific situation. In other words, the ability to advise a right course of action in any given circumstance. Likely given by direct revelation from the Spirit. Paul, Apollos and Peter “*as divine mouthpieces... spoke ‘God’s wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom’ (1 Corinthians 2.7). By mentioning wisdom in connection with ‘mystery’ and what is ‘hidden’, this passage points clearly to divine revelation received by these early Christian leaders, which they in turn transformed into words for communicating to others of their generation*” (RL Thomas). It is likely these divinely given words of wisdom only had temporal usefulness for the local circumstances of a particular individual or church. Thus these messages did not become a part of God’s written revelation (cp. James’ word of wisdom in Acts 15.13-21, cf. 2 Peter 3.15).
- **Word of knowledge.** One who had an intelligent apprehension and understanding of divine truth (cf. 13.2). As another revelatory gift (note its position between ‘revelation’ and ‘prophecy’ in 14.6), this is not knowledge acquired through study but given by divine inspiration.
- **Faith (v.9).** Not that which is constantly exercised as a way of life by every believer (2 Corinthians 5.7), but extraordinary faith to perform supernatural wonders and miracles (cf. 13.2; Acts 6.8).

- **Gifts of Healing.** The ability to cure physical illness and disease. The plural words may imply a *variety* of such gifts designed for different kinds of sicknesses, or to operate at specific times. For example, Peter healed a lame man for the purpose of gaining a hearing for the gospel (cf. Acts 3.6-8, 12). Miracles of healing were exceptional in the OT but exploded in frequency in the time of the Lord Jesus and apostles. This was part of the authentication of the Messiah and the gospel (cf. 2 Corinthians 12.12; Hebrews 2.3-4). The healing of physical sickness was even accomplished by Peter's shadow and Paul's handkerchief (Acts 5.15, 19.12). Note. The day of divine healing has not passed, though the day of divine healers has. Healing goes on, but miraculous confirmation of specific individuals as vehicles of divine revelation does not (RL Thomas).
- **Workings of miracles (v.10).** The word *dunamis* signifies 'power', thus a manifestation of supernatural power such as the raising of Dorcas (Acts 9.40), the smiting of Elymas with blindness (Acts 13.8-11) or the raising of Eutychus (Acts 20.9-12). Unlike the Lord Jesus, the apostles are not recorded as performing miracles in the natural sphere (e.g. walking on water) but frequently cast out demons as the Lord gave them power (Luke 10.17; Acts 16.18). Again, these miracles were performed to validate God's messengers and gain a hearing for the gospel (Acts 8.6-7).
- **Prophecy.** The communication of divine revelation direct from God in a spontaneous utterance with a view to comforting and exhorting the saints (cf. 14.3, 29-32). Prophecy is linked with having access to mysteries and knowledge that are not readily accessible (13.2). In this way, the NT prophet was very similar to the OT prophet, declaring an authoritative, infallible message direct from God Himself. NT prophets were second in importance to apostles, but with them formed the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2.20). It seems that the predictive element of 'foretelling' (rather than 'forthtelling') had a much smaller role in NT prophecy (but see Acts 11.27-28; 21.10-11). Clearly, the gift of prophecy has now passed as the book of Revelation closed the canon of Scripture and has forbidden any other prophetic additions (Revelation 22.18).
- **Discerning of spirits.** Closely linked with prophecy for this gift was able to *evaluate* or 'weigh' any prophetic utterance as to whether it originated with the Holy Spirit or some other spirit (cf. 14.29; Acts 16.16-18). This gift could discern between truth and error (1 John 4.1-3) – something that is done by shepherds and teachers today as they measure teaching by the straight edge of the completed revelation of scripture.
- **Tongues.** The ability to speak in foreign languages having never learned them (Acts 2.6, 8, 11). Tongues were a sign, especially to unbelieving Jews (14.21-22) and a divine testimony to the coming judgment of God on Israel (Isaiah 28.11, 13). The tongues of 1 Corinthians are not different in *nature* to those of Acts 2 – it is just that the two *contexts* are different. *"In Acts those present know the languages spoken, but in 1 Corinthians no-one knows the language or the interpretation"* (Schreiner). Note that the gift of tongues is mentioned last in the list (and see v.28) because the Corinthians were prone to exalt this one gift.
- **Interpretation of tongues.** The ability to translate the tongue (foreign language) so others were able to understand. The gift of tongues was not to be used if no-one present could interpret (14.28).

**v.11:** It is the same Spirit that produces "all these" manifestations referred to in vv.8-10. He is the one who has distributed spiritual gift to every individual, according to His own will (choice). The emphasis, again, is the Spirit as the divine *source* and sovereign *distributor* of gift. As each gift is equally a manifestation of the Spirit there is therefore no basis for personal boasting, superiority, discontent or division. *"If we really grasp this, it will eliminate pride on the one hand, because we don't have anything that we didn't receive. And it will eliminate discontent on the other hand, because Infinite Wisdom and Love decided what gift we should have, and His choice is perfect"* (MacDonald).