

Speaking and Serving Gifts of the Spirit

God equips each of His children with a variety of gifts in order that we might serve Him in the church. In 1 Corinthians 12:7, we see that the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every person, and then in the verses that follow, a number of the spiritual gifts are enumerated. None of us should say that he has no gifts and that he can't do anything that is profitable in the church. On the other hand we should not think too highly of ourselves. Romans 12:3 instructs us not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think, and then enumerates a number of spiritual gifts.

A spiritual gift is a God-given ability to perform a useful service in the body of Christ. We read in 1 Corinthians 12:4 that, "There are diversities of gifts." God has supplied a variety of spiritual gifts for the purpose of perfecting the saints, for the work of ministry, and for building up the body of Christ.

Seven gifts are listed in Romans 12:3-8.

Thirteen gifts are listed in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 28-31.

Five gifts are listed in Ephesians 4:11.

The gifts can readily be divided into three categories. There are eight speaking gifts, six serving gifts, and four sign gifts. (There is some overlapping in the three chapters listed above, and there are other ways of subdividing the gifts.)

1. The Speaking Gifts

Most of God's servants are expected to verbalize the faith. The speaking gifts include apostleship, prophecy, evangelism, pastoring, teaching, exhorting, giving a word of wisdom, and giving a word of knowledge. We will attempt to describe briefly each gift in the same order in which they are listed here.

a) Apostleship

(1 Corinthians 12:28 and Ephesians 4:11)

Apostleship is the gift that enables one to be sent on a spiritual mission, often to a people outside his own immediate group. The word "apostle" occurs about 75 times in the New Testament, and is used in a two-fold sense. It is used in a limited technical sense when referring to "The Twelve" (the disciples whom Jesus chose). It is used in a more general sense when referring to a missionary (one sent out by a local body of believers). Both words ("apostle" and "missionary") mean essentially the same thing. **Apostle** comes from the Greek; **missionary** comes from the Latin. Both refer to one who is sent. In the official sense, there are no apostles today. The Twelve Apostles had no successors except for a replacement for Judas. The Twelve had to be trained by Jesus himself and were to be eyewitnesses of Christ (Acts 1:21-22).

In the more general sense however, there were many "sent ones" in New Testament times. Jesus himself, for example, is called "the Apostle and High Priest of our profession" (Hebrews 3:1), because He

was sent from Heaven to make atonement for our sins. Others, aside from the Twelve, are called “apostles” in the New Testament. A check in Acts 13:3, Galatians 1:19, 1 Thessalonians 1:1, 2:6, and Romans 16:7 will indicate that Barnabas, James, Silas, Timothy, Andronicus, and Junia are called “apostles.” Barnabas was called an “apostle” (or as we would say, a “missionary”) because he was sent by the church at Antioch to other regions. Apostleship, in its general sense, refers to the missionary who preaches Christ in a culture different from his own—one who is sent by his local people.

b) Prophecy

(1 Corinthians 12:28; Romans 12:6; Ephesians 4:11)

Prophecy is the Spirit-given ability to proclaim the Word of God with clarity, and to apply it in such a way that it will edify the church. When we hear the word “prophet” we often think of predicting the future, but the gift of prophecy (as used in the New Testament) speaks of forthtelling the truth of God. Prophecy speaks primarily of the preacher.

The prophet instructs and warns and exhorts and rebukes. When John the Baptist admonished Herod that he should not have taken his brother’s wife, he exercised a prophetic ministry. When the preacher gives forth the message of God, in the wisdom and power of the Holy Spirit, he is exercising the gift of prophecy. The prophet is a spokesman for God, transmitting the Lord’s message to others.

c) Evangelism

(Ephesians 4:11)

Evangelism refers to the gift of announcing the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ, so that people will respond to Christ in conversion and in a life of obedience to the Lord. Some see evangelism as the Sunday evening church service, closing with a few verses of “Just As I Am.” Others see evangelism as a week-long series of revival meetings with a guest preacher. Still others think of evangelism as a class of young people being confirmed at Easter time. Some see evangelism as letting a silent witness by living a good life. None of these activities, in its own right, is evangelism.

The work of the evangelist involves telling an unsaved person how he can become rightly related to God. Evangelism is presenting the thrilling report that Jesus Christ died for our sins more than nineteen centuries ago, and that God the Father accepts the sacrifice of Jesus as full satisfaction for our guilt—if we will turn our lives over to His control. Evangelism speaks of soul-winning—winning people to faith in Jesus Christ.

d) Shepherding (Pastoring)

(Ephesians 4:11)

Shepherding refers to the gift which enables one to give direction to those who are floundering in uncertainty, with the goal of leading them to a life of greater victory. The word “pastor” occurs only once in the New Testament (Ephesians 4:11), and there it does not refer to an office (like the “pastor” of

a church). The Greek word “pastor” refers to the gift of shepherding—a diligent effort to help people mature in the Christian life. The primary goals of “shepherding” are to guide, to feed, and to guard. The shepherd leads his sheep to the fields for grazing, protects them from wild animals, and generally cares for their well-being.

The Sunday School teacher has many opportunities to use the shepherding gift. Young people frequently turn to some trusted older person to seek direction. Older Christian women can shepherd younger wives in family matters and domestic problems. Older women are to instruct younger women to be soberminded, to love their husbands, to love their children, and to be discreet and chaste (Titus 2:3-4).

e) Teaching

(1 Corinthians 12:28; Romans 12:7; Ephesians 4:11)

Teaching refers to the Spirit-given ability to explain clearly and to apply effectively the truths of the Word of God. The primary purpose of teaching is to systematically instruct people in the doctrines of the Christian faith, to encourage obedience to the teachings of the Bible, and to enrich character by seeking to instill love and faith and other Christ-like qualities in human hearts. The last verse in the book of Matthew says, “Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (28:20).

We need men who are apt to teach, and who manifest a deep love for sound doctrine. There is a tremendous need in our churches for systematic Bible teaching—for presenting truth in such a way that it instructs the mind and moves the will—and probes the depths of the Scriptures.

f) Exhortation

(Romans 12:8)

Exhortation refers to the Spirit-endowed ability to strengthen the weak, to re-assure the wavering, and to encourage the troubled. One who exhorts is not one who gets up front and waves his arms, and points his finger at the congregation and shouts from the top of his voice. One who exhorts gives words of healing. He points out a few areas that need correction, and then gives some suggestions for improvement. Acts 14:21-22 tells how Paul (on his Second Missionary Journey) retraced his steps at Lystra and Iconium, “confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith.” Exhortation is an ability which is given by the Holy Spirit so that one can strengthen the weak and reassure those who waver.

g) Word of Knowledge

(1 Corinthians 12:8)

The phrase “word of knowledge” refers to the Spirit-imparted ability to comprehend (and then verbalize) the deep truths of God’s Word. Knowledge speaks of the gift which enables a person to read and study and search, and then summarize the teachings of the Bible. Paul prayed (in Colossians 1:9)

that Christians might be filled “with the knowledge of (God’s) will, in all wisdom and spiritual understanding.”

The “word of knowledge” is sometimes described as “the voice of God which comes to us in the form of impressions.” Those impressions are generally the result of much study and research and meditation. The Apostle Paul was one who loved “the books (and) . . . the parchments” (2 Timothy 4:13). Some are gifted with the ability to dig and study and research, and then summarize the results with clear words that are helpful to others.

h) Word of Wisdom

(1 Corinthians 12:8)

The phrase “word of wisdom” refers to the special ability to apply God’s truth to difficult circumstances and to complex problems. It is one thing to grasp the deep truths of God’s Word (to have knowledge), but it is another thing to relate those truths to the needs and problems of life (to have wisdom). For example, you are in a church council meeting, and the group has reached an impasse on the matter being discussed. They hardly know which way to turn; the members seem confused in their knowledge; and then someone stands to his feet, quotes a Scripture principle, and applies it to the situation. Suddenly the answer comes, and most everyone agrees that the proposal is a good solution to the problem. A “word of wisdom” casts light on an otherwise perplexing problem.

When Stephen was called on trial before the Jewish leaders, he spoke with such insight and clarity that the Bible says, “They were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spoke” (Acts 6:10).

These have been speaking gifts. They include apostleship, prophecy, evangelism, shepherding, teaching, exhortation, a word of knowledge, and a word of wisdom.

2. The Serving Gifts

The serving gifts may not be quite as noticeable as the speaking gifts, and certainly not as spectacular as the sign gifts, but they are indeed very important gifts.

a) Helps (Ministry)

(1 Corinthians 12:28; Romans 12:7)

The gift of helps refers to the Spirit-given ability to serve the church in such a way that it releases other workers to more effectively engage in their duties. The deacons in the early church helped with distributing funds and preparing for the observance of the ordinances, so that those who were called to teach and to preach the Word had more time and energy for those activities. Acts 6:2,4 says, “It is not reason that we should leave (preaching) the word of God, and serve tables . . . but we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.”

The gift of helps carries with it the idea of “lending a hand.” The person who arranges the chairs in the Sunday School room, brings in a tape recorder, hands out work sheets, takes a preacher to the airport,

provides meals for a visiting speaker, visits shut-ins, cuts wood for a more feeble member of the congregation, and says, "I'll see that your grass is mowed" to someone who is sick—all these activities are an exercise of the gift of helps.

b) Giving

(Romans 12:8)

The gift of giving is the honest ability to earn money and then to use it wisely to supply relief for those in need. All Christians—whether or not we have a special gift—are commanded to evangelize (witness to the unsaved), and strive to increase in Bible knowledge, and give financially to the Lord's work—but some have a special God—given gift for turning almost everything they attempt into financial profit. When such people live moderately, and give generously, they are exercising the gift of giving. The passage in Romans 12 says that our giving should be done with "simplicity;" that is, without show and fanfare.

c) Ruling (Governments)

(Romans 12:8; 1 Corinthians 12:28)

The gift of ruling is the ability to moderate a meeting so that things are organized, and people are not confused, and business is done decently and in order. The gift of ruling refers to able administration. The Apostle Paul saw to it that each church had elders (Acts 14:23) whose duty it was to oversee the work of the local congregation. Later, he said that the elder who "rules well" should be counted worthy of double honor (1 Timothy 5:17).

The Greek word for "ruling" (Romans 12:8) means literally "to lead" or "to preside over." The Greek word for "governments" (1 Corinthians 12:28) means "to be a captain or a pilot." The leader who is able to steer the church through the problems which it encounters, holding it to the heavenly assignment, is exercising the gift of ruling.

d) Showing Mercy

(Romans 12:8)

Showing mercy is the Spirit-endowed gift that enables one to bring brightness and cheerfulness into the sick room. The Greek word means "sick visitor." It is the special gift of being able to comfort the sick and to suffer alongside those who are distressed and bereaved.

A little girl came home from school and told her mother about her girlfriend at school whose mother had recently died. The semi-orphaned girl understandably was very sad when she came back to school for the first time after the funeral. The mother said to her daughter (who was a friend of the bereaved girl), "And what did you say to Jenny today?" The child replied, "I didn't say anything. I just went over to her desk, sat down by her side, and cried with her." To show mercy is to sympathize with another, and to bring comfort during a time of trial.

e) Faith

(1 Corinthians 12:9)

The gift of faith is a unique and special trust in God, believing His power to supply a specific need. There are three uses of the word “faith” in Scripture. There is “natural” faith—a mental assent (James 2:19); a “saving” faith—committing our souls to Christ (2 Timothy 1:12); and a “gift” of faith—laying hold of God’s promises (Hebrews 11:17-19). The gift of faith is illustrated by David, when he overcame Goliath—by faith; and by Gideon, when he drove out great armies with a mere 300 men; and by Peter, when he walked on the water; and in more recent times by George Müller, who sustained his orphanage in Bristol, England for more than a generation without ever asking any human being for food, or clothing, or finances.

George Müller cared for 10,000 orphan children during his lifetime, and received over five million in financial gifts to keep the work going, but it was all accomplished day by day—by faith. Müller in his later years testified that several hundred times, he was without food and without funds—but not once did God fail to provide—often only at the last moment. The **gift** of faith is a special trust which enables one to see things that God wants done, and then has the confidence to believe that God will do them in spite of obstacles along the way.

f) Discernment

(1 Corinthians 12:10)

The gift of discernment is a special ability to distinguish between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. A person with this gift has the ability to detect false teachings. He can read a religious book and soon detect error. He can hear a sermon and put his finger on a lack of truth. Paul warned that in the latter times “some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils” (1 Timothy 4:1). We need people with the gift of discernment in order to tell the genuine apart from the false.

It is a privilege to know that by God’s grace each of us can be of some particular service in the church. Even the most unlearned person, and the youngest convert, is endowed with a Spirit-given ability intended to strengthen the testimony of the local congregation. Some Christian people seem to think that if they are not called upon to speak in public, that then there is nothing left for them to do. But most of the serving gifts do not involve public speaking at all. Yet the church would be sickly without those who are blessed with the serving gifts. As we have seen, there are many other gifts besides the gifts of preaching and teaching.

-Harold S. Martin

