

The Holy Spirit and Miraculous Gifts (2)

1 Corinthians 12-14

Much misunderstanding of the Holy Spirit and miraculous gifts comes from a faulty interpretation of 1 Cor. 12-14. In 1:7 Paul said that the Corinthians were “not lacking in any spiritual gift.” However, they were abusing their gifts in much the same way that they were abusing the Lord’s Supper (chapter 11): for their own selfish purposes rather than for building up the body of Christ. What follows is a brief commentary on these three chapters, designed to demonstrate how they are often misinterpreted by those who assume the occurrence of miraculous gifts today. **NOTE:** It is important to read all 3 chapters together, as a unit. All 3 address the same topic, and each has important points to add to our understanding of what was going on at Corinth -- and what shouldn’t have been.

12:1-11. The phrase “now concerning” is an echo of 7:1, “Now concerning the matters about which you wrote.” Apparently this is another question about which the Corinthians had written to ask Paul’s advice. See also 7:25, 8:1, etc. It raises the possibility that some in the Corinthian church were disturbed by the confusion that was characteristic of worship there.

Paul’s general point here is that regardless of the various manifestations of the Spirit, the gifts all have the same source: the Holy Spirit. To demonstrate his point, Paul lists 9 separate gifts, all of which have the same source. The precise definition of some of these gifts is elusive, since Paul does not explain them and they are not discussed elsewhere in Scripture. (This fact alone would argue against the belief that all of the gifts were expected to continue – i.e., we can’t even be certain what some of them were. Also, miraculous gifts are mentioned in only a few places in Scripture, and some of them only here in 1 Corinthians)

- “the utterance of wisdom” – This would seem to be a gift of knowing the best course when some decision must be made. James 1:5 teaches us to pray for wisdom, which does not seem to be the same as this gift, since in James there is no mention of the Spirit, and the wisdom sought in James is not necessarily to be “uttered.”
- “the utterance of knowledge” – Since there is a non-miraculous way to gain knowledge, this would also seem to be a special bestowal of knowledge when required for a given situation (perhaps for church leaders faced with a difficult decision?).
- “faith” – Again, it is hard to know what the “gift of faith” would be as opposed to faith generally. It may also be (as in the case of the gifts of wisdom and knowledge) situational in nature – i.e. special faith for a special circumstance where faith is needed.
- “healing” – No one should question that God can heal whomever He wills whenever He wills. But this seems to be a gift given to certain persons so that they can heal in numerous situations. (However, note that even the apostles could not always heal – Matthew 17:19-21, 2 Timothy 4:20 – suggesting that this was not necessarily a permanent ability.)

- “the working of miracles” – The exact nature of these is not specified, so it is useless to speculate. It would seem to indicate that some were gifted to do a variety of miraculous things.
- “prophecy” – Prophecy, a gift well known from the Old Testament, was also given to some in the early church (e.g. Acts 13:1). It might involve the ability to predict future events (Acts 11:28, 21:10) or to give inspired teachings as needed by the churches.
- “the ability to distinguish between spirits” – Again, the exact nature of this gift is not clear. It may in some way be related to the casting out of demons. However, notice that Paul says nothing specifically about a gift of casting out spirits, either here or elsewhere.
- “various kinds of tongues” -- Further discussion of “tongues” will follow below. For now, it should be noted that since Paul does not identify this as a gift different from the tongues reported in Acts, we should assume that they are the same (i.e. the ability to speak a known language without learning it – Acts 2:6, 8; 11:17) unless there is some indication to the contrary. Some interpreters believe that there is such indication in chapters 12-14, but as we will see below, this is not the case. Later in these chapters it becomes evident that the abuse of tongues was the primary “gifts” problem at Corinth, evidently because some considered it to be one of the more spectacular gifts and were tempted to display it where it did not belong.
- “the interpretation of tongues” – Just as some could miraculously speak other languages, others were empowered to translate them as needed.

12:12-26. This is Paul’s famous “body” analogy (see also Romans 12 where it is applied slightly differently). The thrust of these verses is that since all of the gifts come from one Spirit, and since we are all part of the body, all of the gifts are equally important. Those possessing one particular gift (tongues?) should not think themselves superior to those with different gifts. Likewise, those without the “showier” gifts ought not to think themselves inferior because they lack the gifts that are highly prized. Some very important gifts, like some important parts of the body, remain unseen.

12:27-31. Paul again emphasizes that the presence of various gifts is a divine and not a human decision (“God has appointed”). Here he adds to the “gift list” such abilities as apostleship, teaching, “helping,” administering, along with some of those already mentioned. It should be noted that an ability does not have to be “miraculous” in nature in order to be a “spiritual gift” (i.e., a gift from the Holy Spirit. See Romans 12:4-8, 1 Peter 4:10-11, Ephesians 4:11.)

The list of questions that Paul poses is important: The obvious implied answer to each question is “No.” Therefore, those who claim that every Christian should have the ability to speak in tongues are clearly in violation of this text. *That was never God’s intention, even when the gifts were unquestionably real.*

The more “excellent way” that Paul speaks of is literally “the most excellent way of all.” He is about to introduce the subject of love. All of the Corinthians can exercise that “gift” if they choose, and it far surpasses the gift of tongues in importance. It – not tongues – *is* the one gift that every believer should exercise, and it is the gift that seems to have been lacking at Corinth. Note the irony of this when compared to 1:7.

13:1-3. The thirteenth chapter is so often read, quoted, and needle-pointed in isolation from its context that it is difficult for us to remember what it is actually about: the abuse of the gift of tongues at Corinth. Verse 1 is not simply poetic language – Paul is saying that even if one could do these things but doesn't have love, it doesn't matter at all. The presence of miraculous (or non-miraculous) gifts in the absence of love is worthless. (There was some discussion in ancient Judaism of what language angels speak. Naturally, the rabbis concluded that it was Hebrew.)

13:4-7. Paul here characterizes love both positively and negatively – what it is and what it is not. It is interesting to read these verses in light of the personality of Jesus, and to note that this is a perfect description of Him. Likewise, it is a perfect description of the way that all Christians should live.

13:8-13. Here Paul extols the permanence of love. All the other gifts will pass away, but not love. There will come a time and place where the various gifts have no more function, but love will exist throughout all eternity. Along with love in importance are faith and hope.

Obviously the question is, what does Paul mean by "when the perfect comes" in vs. 10? When will faith, hope, and love continue but not the other gifts?

Probably the most frequently heard answer is, "in heaven." Only then will the gifts no longer be necessary. However, it should be noted that nowhere else in Scripture is heaven called "the perfect," and that Paul says nothing explicitly about heaven in the context of this chapter. Some avoid this difficulty by suggesting that "the perfect" is not heaven *per se*, but "the consummation of all things." This is certainly possible, but it raises another difficulty: in heaven/at the end of this age, will there be a need for faith and hope? Faith is defined in Hebrews 11:1 as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things *not seen*." In heaven faith will be fully realized, for as 1 John 3:2 says, then "we shall see him as he is." Likewise, with hope. In Romans 8:24 Paul says that "hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?" Hope implies anticipation, and in heaven the anticipating will be over; our hope will be fully realized. So, Paul suggests a time when there will still be a need for faith and hope, but not for the spiritual gifts – or at least not the ones that the Corinthians valued so highly.

Another possible explanation is that "the perfect" is a reference to the completion of the biblical canon, the New Testament portion of which was still being written in Paul's time. Remember that the Greek word for "perfect" means whole or complete. Notice that this fits the context very well, as Paul has in vs. 8-9 talked about revelatory gifts which are "incomplete," and in that sense are "imperfect." So the contrast would be between partial revelation and the completion of revelation. From this perspective, Paul would be saying that a completed Scripture would render the revelatory gifts unnecessary: what more could they add? It should be noted, however, that the Scriptures are nowhere called "the perfect" just as heaven is not referred to in this way.

Regardless of what Paul meant by "the perfect," he contrasts the temporal nature of the gifts so highly prized at Corinth with the enduring quality of faith, hope, and love - and every Christian can exhibit these qualities if he/she so desires. We should remember that "love" is likewise part of "the fruit of the Spirit" outlined by Paul in Galatians 5:22. If the Corinthians would only major in love rather than in tongues, many of their problems indicated in this letter would be solved. They need to allow the Spirit to work in them in this way vs. seeking to use their gifts of the Spirit for their own pride.

14:1-5. These verses are a reminder that Paul is not against the exercise of the spiritual gifts, but that they should be used at the right time and in the right place in order to fulfill their God-intended purpose. Paul begins here to introduce the theme of the right use of all of our gifts from the Spirit: the building up of the church. **If this purpose is not being accomplished, then the gifts are being misused.**

Several verses require specific comment:

- Vs. 1-4. Paul states the superiority of the gift of prophecy over that of tongues by a series of contrasts, and it is vital to pay attention to his point here. First is the fact the tongue-speaker "speaks not to men but to God." This is usually taken by advocates of the modern gift of tongues to indicate a highly spiritual use of the gift. But notice that Paul's point is that "in church" (vs. 19), speaking to God and not men is not a good thing, because there is no edification of those present. Likewise, the tongue-speaker "edifies himself." That may sound like a good thing, but in the context of Christian worship, it is not. The goal is not to edify ourselves, but to edify one another. In other words, this gift can be (and was being) used for selfish purposes rather than for edification, which is never selfish. See Hebrews 10:24-25 for "coming together" to build one another up.
- Vs. 5 must be understood hypothetically, since Paul has already indicated that not everyone has the gifts of either tongues or prophecy (12:29-30). Paul probably has in mind here Numbers 11:29, where Moses responds to a report of "unauthorized" prophets by saying, "Would that all the Lord's people would prophesy." However, this does not suggest that all would, or that Paul expected everyone at Corinth to do so.

14:6-12. In these verses Paul shows even more pointedly the inadequacy of the gift of tongues as a means of Christian worship. The problem is simply that tongues, if they are not interpreted, are not understood, and if they are not understood, they have no place in Christian worship. We should contrast this with the function of the tongues of Acts 2. There the tongues occurred in order that everyone present could hear "in our own tongues the mighty works of God" (Acts 2:11). The phenomenon was repeated at the house of Cornelius in order to show that the Gentiles had received "the Holy Spirit just as we (i.e. Jews) have" (Acts 11:17). Had the gift been any different, the Jewish Christians could have maintained that Gentiles were not on their same level spiritually. So even though there was not a "practical" need for tongues at Cornelius' house, there was a theological need. But in a Christian worship assembly, to speak in a variety of languages that no one understands would be pointless. So in vs. 12 Paul reiterates: "since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church."

14:13-19. Paul now makes explicit what he has been implying all along: in Christian worship, tongues are a gift that cannot stand alone. They must be interpreted, either by the tongue-speaker or by someone with the gift of interpretation. Otherwise, edification does not occur, and that renders the use of any gift inadequate at best. Praying and singing with both mind and spirit is not so much about the enthusiasm with which we worship as it is about understanding (the mind) what both we and others are saying. Paul acknowledges that he himself had the gift of tongues, yet preferred in church to be understood rather than to be impressive.

14:20-25. These verses have been the occasion of much confusion, especially since Paul states that “tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers.” Yet it is obviously a genuine gift of God’s Spirit. So what is his point?

The key to understanding these verses is to pay attention to the quotation from Isaiah 28:11-12 which occurs in verse 21. In context these verses are about God’s judgment on the Northern Kingdom (Israel) which will come because they have consistently been insensitive to the message of the prophets. They are like drunkards who understand nothing. So the Lord says that He will speak to them “by men of strange lips and with an alien tongue.” i.e. For many years they will wake up every morning hearing the Assyrian language as a reminder of their unwillingness to hear the word of the Lord. It is in this sense that Paul says that “tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers,” and that prophecy is “not for unbelievers but for believers.” He is drawing an analogy based on the Isaiah quotation. The “sign” which is for unbelievers is a sign of judgment. Again, his point is that tongues in Christian worship are out of place. When used to convey God’s message to unbelievers, they are a wonderful gift. But to use them in worship is to misuse them, unless they are interpreted; but if interpreted, what would be the point of using tongues in the first place?

Paul’s application of the Isaiah quotation occurs in vs. 23-25. If unbelievers enter and hear a mix of not-understood languages, they will think the Christians are insane. But if they hear intelligible words of prophecy (inspired teaching in their own language), they will perhaps be led to become believers themselves and recognize the genuine presence of God among the Christians. Ironically, this is exactly the reverse of the strategy of modern-day tongue-speakers, who usually think that their gift of tongues will demonstrate to non-believers the presence of God among them. Again, Paul’s point is simply that tongues without interpretation are out of place in the assembly because they neither edify the church nor persuade non-believers.

14:26-39. Paul now gets very specific and very practical in an effort to correct the abuse of spiritual gifts at Corinth. He lays out a variety of “rules” for an orderly assembly:

First (vs. 26), a variety of gifts may be used in the assembly, but only with the stipulation that “all things be done for edification.” If the use of a gift doesn’t build up the entire assembly, it ought not to be used.

Second (vs. 28-29), tongues may be used only if interpreted, and not more than 3 speakers at most. If there is no one to interpret, the tongue-speaker should “speak to himself and to God” – i.e. not speak aloud. Likewise, the speakers must speak in turn, not all at once (as often happens today). These stipulations give the impression that there must have been considerable confusion in the Corinthian assemblies, with many individuals trying to demonstrate their gifts. While some modern advocates of tongues would look on this as a “Spirit-filled” assembly, Paul deplores the confusion which results. Verse 28 is sometimes cited as a rationale for the continuation of the gift of tongues: to provide the believer with a “prayer language” for speaking to the Lord. But notice that there is nothing in the context to suggest this, and to speak only to God in the assembly without edifying others is a violation of its purpose. Besides, why must we pray to God in a language other than our own? Doesn’t He understand all languages?

Third, the same rules apply to prophets: they must speak in turn, with not more than 3 speaking. While prophecy is being spoken, others should listen carefully in order to learn and be edified. Notice Paul’s insistence that “the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets”; i.e. the gift of prophecy is not an “ecstatic” gift that must be exercised without the control of the speaker. Rather, judgment must (and can) be used about when to speak. Notice that Paul’s rules imply the same about tongues: the claim that tongues are beyond the control of the speaker violates what Paul says and renders it meaningless. Order must be kept in the

assembly in order to reflect the nature of God Himself, since He is “not a God of confusion but of peace” (vs. 33). (It should be observed that the King James Version supplies the word “unknown” to modify the word “tongue,” although it does not occur in the Greek. The implication is that the tongues were ecstatic in nature rather than being normal human languages. Likewise, the New English Bible uses the expressions “ecstatic utterance” and “language of ecstasy” to paraphrase Paul’s simple term “tongues,” an error fortunately avoided by its successor, The Revised English Bible.)

Fourth, women are not to participate in teaching in the assembly, either by way of tongues or prophecy. This prohibition raises several questions and possibilities. It seems to assume that women had gifts as well as men, but were not to use them in public worship (notice that the concern continues to be what is done “in church.”) If women had such gifts, then where and when did they use them? We are not told; it is clear only that they were not to use them in worship. Paul’s words also cause us to wonder if women posed a particular problem in the assemblies at Corinth, that perhaps they were the chief offenders in abusing the gifts. This may or may not be the case but doesn’t seem to alter the way that we should understand Paul. Some suggest that Paul’s prohibition against women’s use of their gifts was strictly situational in nature, and should not be taken as a general prohibition, but 1 Timothy 2:8-12 suggests otherwise. These verses also raise questions in regard to the claim that if a woman has a gift today (preaching, etc.) that is a sign that she should use it in the assembly. This does not follow based on what Paul says.

Paul concludes in vs. 37-39 by emphasizing that a genuinely Spirit-endowed person will recognize the truth of what he is saying, rather than claiming that giftedness creates an exemption from the requirements of Scripture.

In the final reference to tongues (vs. 38), notice that Paul encourages prophecy but only allows tongue-speaking, again indicating that the abuse of tongues was the primary problem at Corinth. But, as Paul reiterates, whatever is done must be done “decently and in order.” Christian worship is not a place for chaos and confusion. It is certainly a time and place for the working of God’s Spirit to be acknowledged and expressed, but it must be done in a way that helps all to understand God’s mighty acts and builds up and encourages everyone in their faith.

When properly understood, these important chapters help us to appreciate the variety of ways that God’s Spirit worked in the church in the past, and to anticipate that the Spirit will still be among us and working in the present. However, they do not encourage us to believe that we should expect all of the Spirit’s gifts to continue in the church now. The apportioning of gifts is according to the Spirit’s will (Hebrews 2:4), and it is not for us to “demand” that we be given the same gifts as others, whether past or present. Likewise, Paul’s strict regulations for the use of gifts (especially tongues) in chapter 14 are often violated by those claiming these gifts today. Is this the work of God’s Spirit, or is it a work of the flesh?

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