

# The Gifts of the Holy Spirit

**T**HE TOPIC OF SPIRITUAL gifts often is confusing and sometimes controversial.

Two New Testament words are translated as "spiritual gift." The more common one is *charisma* [CARE-iz-mah], meaning "a gift freely and graciously given, a favor bestowed." (The modern "charismatic movement" took its name from this word.) Sometimes charisma is used in a sense such as 2 Corinthians 1:10, where Paul spoke of God's *gift* of rescuing him from danger. However, the word usually relates to God's special, non-material ability to speak or serve in the church through an individual Christian. The 17 verses where charisma is used in the New Testament are Romans 1:11; 5:15,16; 6:23; 11:29; 12:6; 1 Corinthians 1:7; 7:7; 12:4,9,28,30,31; 2 Corinthians 1:2; 1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6; and 1 Peter 4:10.

The other word the New Testament uses is *pneumatikos* [new-MAH-tee-KAHZ]. This actually is the adjective ordinarily meaning "pertaining to the spirit/Spirit" or "spiritual." Occasionally this adjective was used as a noun meaning "spiritual matter" or "spiritual gift," (Greek, *charisma*) as in 1 Corinthians 12:1; 14:1. In these two instances, *pneumatikos* is a synonym for *charisma*. From the basic usages of these two words, we may discern that a spiritual gift is (1) a free gift that is (2) related to the Holy Spirit (or the inner spirit).

The most extensive passage in the New Testament on this subject is

1 Corinthians 12—14. In this text Paul dealt both with ignorance about gifts and abuse of the gifts among the Corinthian Christians (see 12:1). Here is what Paul said in 1 Corinthians about the purposes for these spiritual gifts:

1. They are for the common good (12:7).
2. They are for the edification of the church (14:5).
3. They are to build up the church (14:12).
4. They are for the strengthening of the church (14:26).

This is straightforward. The great purpose for spiritual gifts is so that Christians can help other Christians. This corresponds with other, related New Testament statements:

So that the body of Christ may be built up (Eph. 4:12).

To serve others (1 Pet. 4:10).

So that in all things God may be praised (1 Pet. 4:11).

These verses point in the same direction: spiritual gifts are for the common good of congregations. When congregations are built up, God will be praised—and the congregations will be more united than ever. (Because of the emphasis on the unity of the body of Christ in these passages, I always am suspicious when I hear about "spiritual gifts" that result in dividing and hurting congregations.)

Paul also taught about the nature of spiritual gifts. First, the gifts of the Spirit are not the same as the fruit of the Spirit. In Galatians 5:22-23 Paul listed nine character qualities called

the Holy Spirit's fruit. Clearly, all Christians are expected to grow in expressing all of these. Further, spiritual fruit is eternal, but gifts are temporary (1 Cor. 13:8,13). Such fruit cannot come either from strong self-achievement or from satanic help. I cannot by my own energies produce love, joy, and peace, and the devil would not!

The gifts of the Spirit are different. No one has them all; no one has any choice about which gifts are received. The Spirit decides (1 Cor. 12:11,29-30). Further, at least the appearance of these gifts can be produced by self-effort or even by demonic help. One of the saddest texts in the Gospels is the one in which Jesus said,

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 perform many miracles?" Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!" (Matt. 7:22-23, NIV).

A good principle to follow in this regard is: the fruit of the Spirit, not a spiritual gift, is the surest indicator of God's presence in a person's life or ministry.

Scripture also indicates that spiritual gifts are not the same as natural talents. Natural talents are innate ap-

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#### Lesson reference:

BBS: 1 Corinthians 12:4; 14:1



**Right:** First Corinthians 12:3-12 contains some of Paul's strongest words on the gifts of the Holy Spirit. After listing several of the spiritual gifts, he reminded his readers that regardless of the gifts, there is but one Lord.

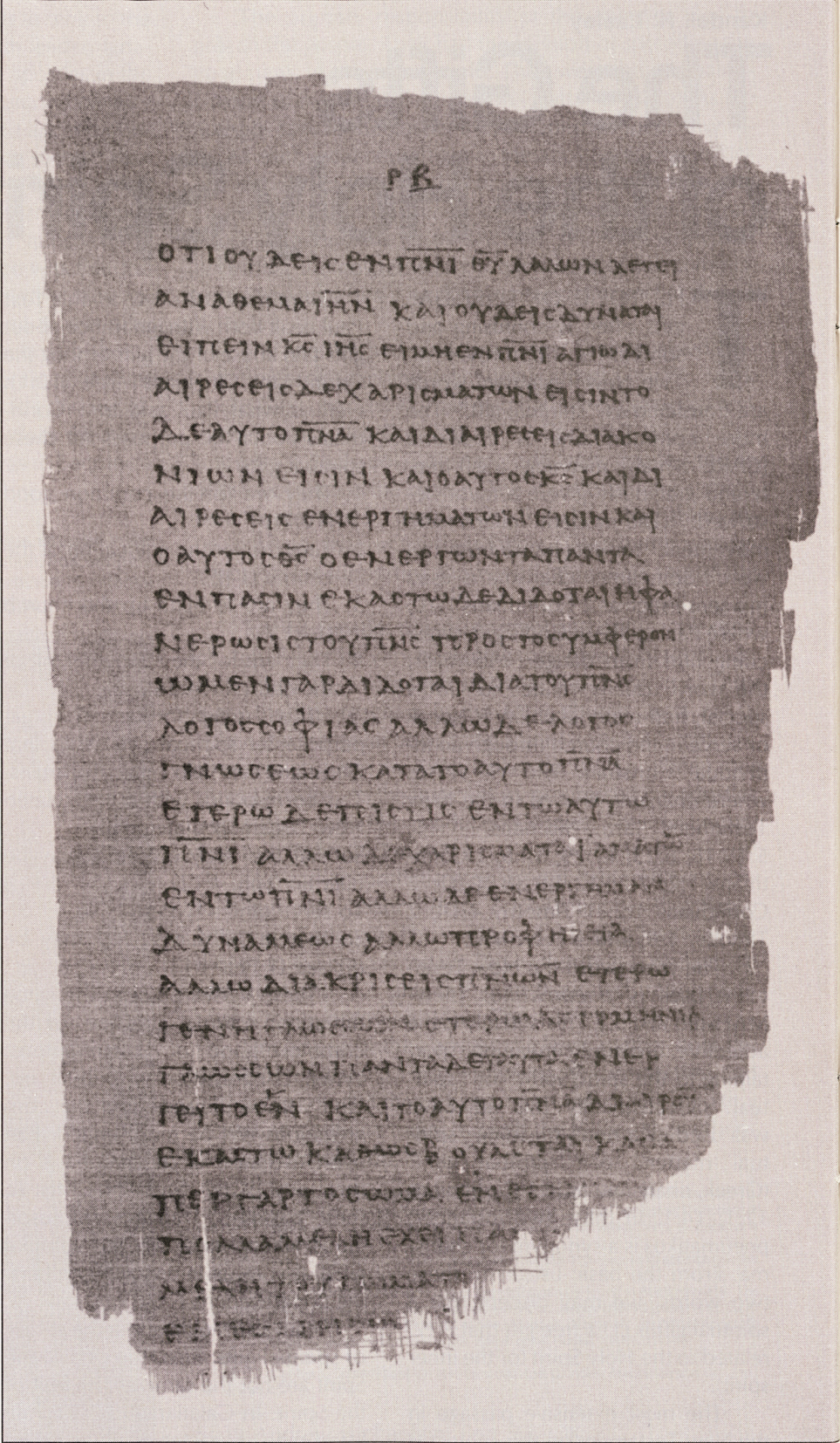
ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/HATCHER LIBRARY OF RARE BOOKS/ UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN (390/11A-12)

titudes. My sister seems to have been born singing. She also is a master of the musical keyboard. Most of us have spent hours watching the athletically gifted—and most of us know that even if we practiced eight hours a day for the rest of our lives we never could catch footballs or swing rackets as the natural athletes do.

Spiritual gifts differ from natural talents in that Christians receive them at the time of conversion, the time of being “born again,” not at the time of human birth. Paul put it this way:

All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one . . . . For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink (1 Cor. 12:11,13, NIV).

Are spiritual gifts to be looked at as something extraordinary or rather as a spiritually heightened ability to use one's own talents? According to Paul, the answer is yes. Both may be at work. Some gifts seem to arrive fully developed, with no way to account for them except as an extraordinary favor God has sent. For example, think of the “speaking in tongues” on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:4), or the extremely effective gift of evangelism Paul displayed as soon as he was converted (Acts 9:20-22). Obviously, also, the miraculous gifts of healing that the apostles displayed were special, supernatural endowments of the Holy Spirit. In fact, Paul went out of his way to tell the Corinthians that the specially miraculous spiritual gifts such as “signs,



wonders and miracles” were “the things that mark an apostle” (2 Cor. 12:12, NIV).

This leaves the not-so-spectacular gifts, such as serving, teaching, encouraging, and contributing (see Rom. 12:6-8). For Christians with these “spiritual gifts,” one of the following applies:

1. Persons who previously had no natural talent or ability in a particular area may find themselves used after conversion to build up other Christians in that area. For example, my good friend, Patty, obviously has the gift of encouragement. Patty says that before she was converted, she was an introvert and hardly ever had anyone to seek her out. Now, however, people flock to her to get their spirits lifted. She has become especially effective leading a Sunday School class made up of mothers of preschoolers. There she has found a perfect niche for her “gift of encouragement.” Further, stories abound about people born with serious speech impediments who later became extremely effective evangelists or pastors.
2. Some persons may find that an area in which they had some natural inclination simply is heightened as they work at building up the body of Christ. My late father-in-law, Robert Maulden, was a quiet man, a behind-the-scenes person by nature. I am persuaded he had the spiritual gift of serving. He was the one who saw that the heat was turned up in the church building early Sunday morning, that the doors were locked on Sunday night, that a young convert with no money got a Bible, and that the plumber was called to fix a leak in the church kitchen. Nothing gave

**Right:** Parallels to the work of the Holy Spirit existed in some of the mystery religions of the ancient Near East. One of the strongest was the cult of Mithra. In a scene from the Mithraeum in a Dura-Europus sanctuary is the classic bull-slaying act by the god.

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more pleasure to him than simply seeing that things ran well. He had the gift of service, an expression of his natural inclinations, Spirit-shaped and molded to help the congregation grow.

This leads us to consider further the matter of the Giver and the receiver of spiritual gifts. Since pneumatikos is one of the words translated "spiritual gift" we would not be surprised to learn that Paul thought of God's Spirit (*pneuma* [NEW-muh]) as the Giver of spiritual gifts. In 1 Corinthians 12:7-11, Paul stated six times that the Holy Spirit is the Giver of gifts.

Perhaps one way to express this

is as follows: when persons come to Christ in salvation, they are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, God's great gift (Acts 1:4; 2:38; 11:17). The Holy Spirit then imparts a special manifestation of His presence in the lives of these Christians. Paul made it clear that the Spirit determines the gift, not the recipient. They are given "just as he determines" (1 Cor. 12:11, NIV). No matter how much I may want to have the gift of prophecy, it is the Holy Spirit who makes that choice. However, just as athletes may develop their natural talents, so may Christians work at becoming more effective in using their gifts.

How many Christians have a

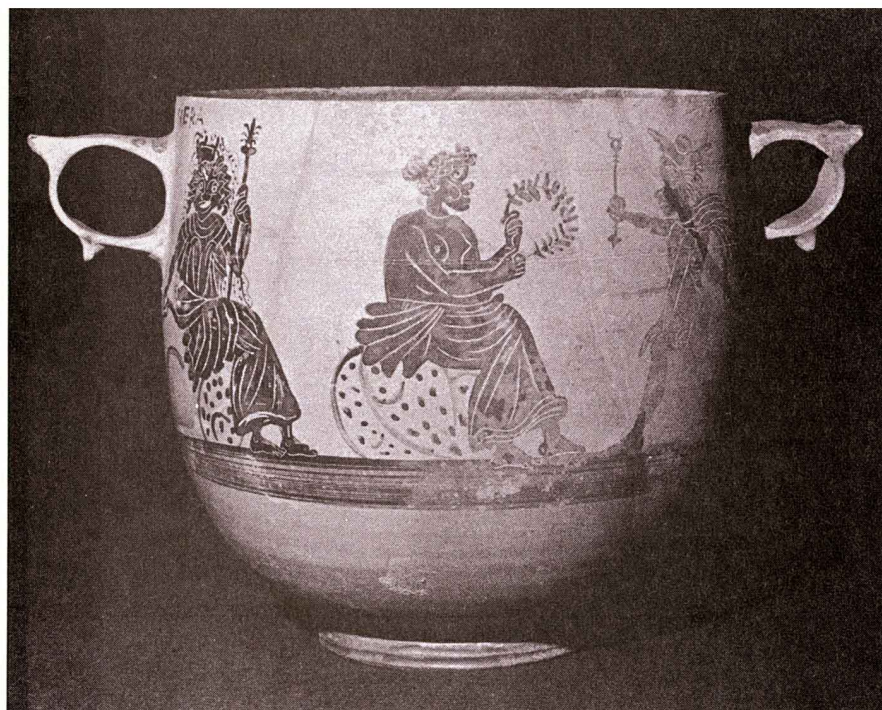


ILLUSTRATION PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS/BOSTON (931/2)

The parallels are many between some of the mystery religions of the ancient world and Christianity, especially regarding spirits and their communication with and direction of human's lives. Like much of the art produced by the early church, mystery religions developed varied methods of expression. One was artwork on drinking cups and other utilitarian vessels. This boeotian two-handle cup displays a caricature of the Judgment of Paris.

spiritual gift? According to both Paul and Peter, all do. Paul noted that they are given "to each one" (1 Cor. 12:11). Peter said, "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others" (1 Pet. 4:10). If all Christians have at least one spiritual gift, then why do so few know what their gifts are? Several reasons for this may be offered. First, many Christians are ignorant. Tragically, many pastors never have preached on the subject. What a waste, we would think, if a woman talented enough to become the world's best swimmer lived her life in the desert, not knowing what it is to have enough water in which to swim. Similarly, many Christians never have learned what the spiritual gifts are so that they may seek to develop their own gift(s).

Second, some Christians are afraid. They have heard of gifts that are abused, so they avoid ever thinking about the proper use of gifts. This does not make any more sense than avoiding singing because a few extreme musicians abuse music by using filthy lyrics. What would we think about someone who never used automobiles because they sometimes break down?

This brings up another important matter. How many gifts are there? If we are to develop and use spiritual gifts, what are they? The New Testament does not give a definitive list. In four passages Paul makes lists of spiritual gifts. None of the lists is alike. The following is a comprehensive list presented in the order Paul wrote, beginning with the nine from 1 Corinthians 12:8-10.

1. Message of wisdom
2. Message of knowledge
3. Faith
4. Gifts of healing
5. Miraculous powers
6. Prophecy
7. Distinguishing between spirits
8. Different kinds of tongues
9. Interpretation of tongues

In 1 Corinthians 12:28-30 is a list of eight gifts. The four new ones not repeated from the earlier list are:

10. Apostleship
  11. Teaching
  12. Ability to help (serving)
  13. Gifts of administration
- In Romans 12:6-8, seven gifts are listed, with the following four new ones:
14. Encouraging
  15. Contributing
  16. Leadership
  17. Showing mercy

Finally, in Ephesians 4:11, out of the five gifts named, two are distinct from previous lists:

18. Evangelism
19. Pastoral gifts

All the lists are different. If Paul had made another list, he might have included a few more. However, what we have is complete enough. In general, these gifts are of two kinds. About half are gifts of action or "service gifts," as Peter indicated, and are to be used "with the strength God provides" (1 Pet. 4:11). The others are gifts of speech or "word gifts" and are to be exercised as though "speaking the very words of God."

The "common denominator" gift is prophecy, appearing in all four lists. In fact, Paul devoted much of 1 Corinthians 14 to the gift of prophecy, concluding with an encouragement to "be eager to prophesy" (1 Cor. 14:39). Two points should be noted here. First, Baptists usually have understood prophecy in the sense of "inspired preaching"; second, whatever the gift of prophecy was or is, the Word of God is complete for our day. There will not be any more additions to Scripture. When the Lord returns He then can add whatever words He wishes!

Are all these 19 or so gifts of the Spirit present today? Sincere Christians continue to disagree sharply on this issue. Two observations help keep this question in perspective.

First, the Holy Spirit is too grand and glorious to be limited to our categories. He is sovereign in distributing gifts. When He wants, He can work miracles, healings, tongues, and prophecies, at any time, in any way, through any human agent He chooses. I always suspect an argument that begins, "Well, God cannot do this today, because . . ."

Second, as we have seen, Paul believed that spectacular, supernatural gifts were special marks for the apostles (2 Cor. 12:12). The writer to the Hebrews indicated that "signs, wonders and various miracles" belonged in particular to original eyewitnesses of Christ (Heb. 2:4). Thus, on the whole, we should not expect today to have massive expressions of spectacular gifts. We are not in the first generation of Christianity, and the apostles long since have died. On the other hand, because spiritual gifts are gracious evidence of the Spirit's goodness, we cannot reject out of hand evidence of miracles done today.

Every Christian has at least one spiritual gift. For most of us, this will be something as "ordinary" as teaching, encouraging, or serving. However, whatever we do, it will be done with the power of the Spirit to build up the body of believers. Tragically, for multitudes of believers, their spiritual gifts still are a mystery. If Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians has anything to say to modern believers, it is that we all have the responsibility to discover, develop, and use the spiritual gift(s) we already have. To do anything less is to offer an insult to the great Giver of gifts—and to deprive other believers of the benefit of something only we can offer for their edification. ○

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