

The Gifts of the Spirit

Carrigaline Christian Fellowship

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Introduction

Peter uses a quote from Joel when he explains the manifestations of the spirit experienced in Acts.

(28) Then afterwards I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.

(29) Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.

(Joel 2, NRSV)

Historically prophets were chosen individuals with a specific message from God. What Peter is saying is surprising for the Jews, now God is pouring out his spirit across a wide range of people. Both Jews and pagans would have been surprised to know anyone with these gifts let alone many people. From the Joel quote we understand God will not distinguish between young and old, male or female, slaves or free - doesn't this sound like Galatians? In this new age God will speak directly to his people through the holy spirit and that may mean through a young girl, an old man or even a slave!

We see this worked out later in Acts.

(8) The next day we left and came to Caesarea; and we went into the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the seven, and stayed with him.

(9) He had four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy.

(Acts 21, NRSV)

Philip's daughters were probably teenagers and they were delivering the word of God direct to the local fellowship. Not something you see much in the Church today!

What exactly is a gift of the spirit?

Gifts of the spirit - the Greek word is Charisma. It means a "grace endowment", the operation of grace to benefit the Church. Its Charisma and not Charis - the "ma" at the end of the word shifts the focus of the meaning from the gift itself to the end result - the benefit of the Church. This is expanded in detail by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12-14, the longest and most detailed writing on the gifts of the spirit. However it was

written to address specific issues, not a general treatise on the gifts, so we have to be careful when we read it.

Some history

Paul stayed in Corinth for about eighteen months around AD50. His ministry appears to have revolved around setting up small assemblies which were really house churches around the area. Phoebe, who took Paul's letter to the Romans, is believed to have been the leader of the group in Cenchrae, a small port community near Corinth.

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to a Church with problems and divisions. Corinth was a Roman city. The original Greek Corinth was destroyed by Rome in 146BC, its men were killed and the women and children sold into slavery. The Corinth Paul new was founded in 44BC as a Roman colony. Corinth was largely populated by freed Roman slaves (50%) and displaced Roman urban poor. Although Corinth was established as a Roman city it slowly became hellenized and by Paul's time there was a strong Greek influence. However the cult of the emperor was the predominant religion.

Corinthian culture was quite distinctive: individualistic, status obsessed and competitive. There was a huge divide between rich and poor and even greater social divisions than in Rome. The Corinthians had taken their status obsession into the Church and some were claiming a form of spiritual hierarchy in which some people were "more spiritual" than others.

A second problem seems to have been the excessive and wrong use

of tongues within the community. The Jewish philosopher Philo said that when God spoke through people they lost all rational capability. This was probably how the Corinthians were acting and Paul wants to correct this practice.

These are the issues Paul is tackling in 1 Corinthians.

Some key sections from 1 Corinthians:

(1) Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed.

(2) You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak.

(3) Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says "Let Jesus be cursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit.

(1 Corinthians 12, NRSV)

Why is Paul reminding them of their pagan past? Because they were used to ecstatic experiences from their pagan times. What Paul is saying here is that now any prophecy or utterances must be Christ centred. Ecstasy itself is not proof of God working. The words themselves are not special as some people claim, its the Christ centredness that matters.

(4) Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;

(5) and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord;

(6) and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God

who activates all of them in everyone.

(7) *To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*

(8) *To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit,*

(9) *to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit,*

(10) *to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.*

(11) *All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.*

(12) *For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.*

(1 *Corinthians 12, NRSV*)

Paul now expands his message to include gifts, services and activities. What Paul is saying is that the spirit distributes gifts, services and activities across his Church to all members. One important point is that all of these manifestations are derived from the same spirit, the spirit distributes them as he sees fit. Secondly Paul makes the point that the gifts are for the common good.

List of gifts:

- utterance of wisdom

- utterance of knowledge
- faith
- gifts of healing
- working of miracles
- prophecy
- discernment of spirits
- tongues
- interpretation of tongues

Note however there is no suggestion that this list is comprehensive or complete, quite the opposite, Paul is mentioning all of these manifestations not to give a comprehensive list but to emphasise that within the body of Christ there are many functions - a unity in diversity. The order is also important because the first two were over emphasised by the Corinthian Church. Wisdom (sophos) and knowledge (gnosis) were important concepts in Greek culture. Paul is saying other gifts are also important, wisdom and knowledge does not mark you out as better than those with other gifts. The obsession with knowledge and wisdom would eventually develop into the gnostic heresy.

(27) *Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.*

(28) *And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues.*

(29) *Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles?*

(30) Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?

(31) But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

(1 Corinthians 12, NRSV)

Paul goes back to his main point, he says “you are the body” emphasising that every individual is part of the body of Christ. He then lists his own hierarchical order which is based on the needs of the Church as a whole:

1. Apostles,
2. Prophets
3. Teachers.
4. Deeds of power
5. Gifts of healing
6. Forms of assistance.
7. Leadership
8. Tongues

Interestingly leadership is seventh on Paul’s list. Considering we know that old and young, male and female, slave and free will all prophesy, including Philip’s daughters, it casts an interesting perspective on the qualifications for leadership. In Paul’s list apostleship (missionaries), prophecy and teaching are the most important. Prophecy is high up the list and even above teaching because it is the direct word of God.

Romans has a similar list:

(5) so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

(6) We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith;

(7) ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching;

(8) the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

(Romans 12, NRSV)

After chapter 12 Paul spends the whole of chapter 13 talking about the gift of love. In Chapter 14 he reverts back to talking about the other gifts. This is deliberate, the gift of love must be the centre of our understanding of the gifts.

(1) Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy.

(2) For those who speak in a tongue do not speak to other people but to God; for nobody understands them, since they are speaking mysteries in the Spirit.

(3) On the other hand, those who prophesy speak to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.

(4) Those who speak in a tongue build up themselves, but those who prophesy build up the church.

(5) Now I would like all of you to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. One who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.

(1 Corinthians 14, NRSV)

Paul encourages the Corinthians to both prophecy and tongues. Paul reinforces that the gifts are for building up the Church:

(12) So with yourselves; since you are eager for spiritual gifts, strive to excel in them for building up the church.

(13) Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret.

(1 Corinthians 14, NRSV)

The implication here is that tongues are good for individual use but with interpretation become useful for the whole Church.

Peter also talks about serving one and other with the gifts.

(10) Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.

(1 Peter 4, NRSV)

Verses 26 onwards are all about orderly worship.

(26) What should be done then, my friends? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.

(27) If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn; and let one interpret.

(28) But if there is no one to interpret, let them be silent in church and speak to themselves and to God.

(29) Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.

(30) If a revelation is made to someone else sitting nearby, let the first person be silent.

(31) For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged.

(32) And the spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets,

(33) for God is a God not of disorder but of peace.

(1 Corinthians 14, NRSV)

We have to remember this was written to a Church with problems related to order. Note Paul says everyone should come to the meeting with an expectation of contributing. Paul does not speak against tongues but only that things are conducted in an orderly manner. Note also that prophesy should be “weighed” - discernment is a critical gift that should be exercised. The Quaker perspective is interesting.

Discernment is the key discipline to accompany the claim that God’s guidance is available to us all individually, the responsibility that accompanies the gift of grace. It is something we work on and develop our skills in. We need to test what is given to us, and through our own spiritual experience but also in and through the spiritual experience of others in our community.

Living the Quaker way - Ben Pink Dandelion.

Using the gifts brings responsibilities to handle them correctly. As a

Church we need to be strong on discernment and we need to be mature in handling the gifts, its a difficult issue; won't people be upset if the Church decides their prophecy is not from God?

It is interesting to compare what Paul expects from a meeting and what we expect today. Today the vast majority of services follow the same order: a lot of songs interspersed with prayers and notices followed by teaching based solely on the bible; all planned by one or two senior people. Paul talks about a meeting that is not organised by people but is run by the Church sensing the movement of the spirit, everyone brings a contribution, everyone is involved. Those contributions may be prophecy, tongues, lessons, revelations or some other contribution.

(39) So, my friends, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues;

(40) but all things should be done decently and in order.

(1 Corinthians 14, NRSV)

Finally Paul encourages the Corinthians to be eager to prophesy. He also specifically says not to forbid tongues; just as long as everything is done in an orderly manner.

The early Church was spirit led, there was an expectation that God would communicate directly with his people through prophecy and tongues. Remember God poured out his spirit on all his people. Why have we lost that exciting early focus?

A word about cessation

Cessation is a view held by many conservative Baptists and reformed

Churches. Their views are either based on the principle that once the new testament was complete gifts were no longer required or, more pragmatically, the fact that they were hardly ever mentioned by the early church fathers and therefore must have died out. However the view has inherent problems:

- There is no suggestion or hint in the new testament that cessation is true.
- There is no hint that there was a specific apostolic age that would end, we are still living in that age.
- Paul does not distinguish between gifts such as prophecy or tongues and leadership and teaching. Why should some of the gifts of God expire and others not?

The whole point of the gospel is that we now have direct communication with the spirit of God, to deny that is to miss the whole point of the gospel. To say we have the bible and no longer need the gifts also makes no sense, the spirit may chose to use the bible to speak to you but we are wrong to say it is the only way.

Conclusion

The Church ignores many of the gifts God has given to his people to the detriment of the Church. By concentrating on teaching and excluding prophecy and revelation we have made the Church into a school that teaches biblical history rather than a dynamic sharing of God's direct message for his people today.