A SURVEY OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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Introduction

The church as the body of Christ is a fellowship of believers. Believers are regarded as individual stones which jointly form a spiritual building, whose foundation is the apostles and prophets, Christ himself being the chief corner stone. The relationship of believers within the body of Christ is not only defined by the commonality of spirit, faith, salvation, Lord and baptism, but also by the unique contribution of each individual believer’s gift(s) to the whole body. The effective working of the body of Christ requires the proper use of each individual’s gift(s). To illustrate this, Paul employed the analogy of the different functions of body organs within the human body, where each organ simultaneously contributes its ability for the good of the whole. This union is so real that when one part of the body suffers the rest suffer with it. In applying this analogy to the church we must bear in mind that the separate body organs are not only representing individual members but also the different gifts (functions) of each individual member.

The gifts of the Holy Spirit are therefore basic to the existence and continuance of the church. Apostolic gifts are foundational to the church’s establishment and the other forms of gifts are for the building up of the body of Christ. Smeaton points this out when he writes that

The rich supply of EXTRAORDINARY GIFTS bestowed at Pentecost was not intended to continue when they had served their purpose in founding the Christian Church. The other GIFTS OF AN ORDINARY CHARACTER were given for the permanent advantage of the Church, and are so essential to her edification, that without them, she would collapse or disappear.

Source of gifts

The work of bestowing gifts on the church is presented in Scripture as belonging basically to the Holy Spirit. Christ promised that ‘another Comforter’ would come to be with believers forever and that he would teach the truth, guide them in all matters, remind them of Christ’s teachings, and empower them for service. Christ commanded his disciples to wait for “the promise of the Father” in Jerusalem. This promise of the Father is a reference to the Holy Spirit. The events of Pentecost day confirm the coming of the Holy Spirit, who

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1 Eph 2:20.
2 Jude 1:3; Eph 4:4-5; Rom 12:4; 1 Cor 12:13.
3 1 Cor 12:1-11.
5 John 14:16.
7 Acts 1:8.
empowered the church to propagate the gospel by supplying them with various gifts to that end. This day was significant in that the Holy Spirit officially took over the administration of the church Christ left. As George Smeaton states, that Pentecost day which was “regarded as the commemoration day of the Sinai Covenant, . . . was a fitting occasion . . . for the removal of the old economy . . . and the espousals day of the Christian church.”9 It is during this occasion that “the Holy Spirit, as the promised Paraclete, took the place of Christ’s corporeal presence.”10

Various Old Testament passages also attribute the conferment of gifts, both common as well as special abilities, to the Holy Spirit of God. Joseph was said to have the Spirit of God in him who enabled Joseph to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams (Gen 41:38). In Exod 31 God testifies that his spirit had given certain abilities to some individuals to help with the construction of the tabernacle.11 The judges were also empowered by the Spirit in order to carry out their duties, for example, Othniel, Gideon, Jephthah, Samson, and others.12 The prophets of the OT spoke as the Holy Spirit taught and enabled them.13 Thus both the OT and the NT testify that the Holy Spirit of God is the one who disseminates gifts to the body of Christ.

It should, however, be borne in mind that the whole Godhead is involved in this work. Just as the work of creation is specially attributed to the Father and as the work of redemption is to the Son, even so is the work of bestowing gifts attributed to the Holy Spirit. As Smeaton points out, “As to divine WORKS, the Father is the source FROM WHICH every operation emanates (ex hou), the Son is the medium THROUGH WHICH (di’ hou) it is performed, and the Holy Ghost is the EXECUTIVE BY WHICH (en hoi) it is carried into effect.”14 Hodge agrees when he says, “Thus, the doctrine of the Trinity underlies the whole scheme of redemption in its execution and application as well as in its conception.”15

The gifts of the Holy Spirit are gracious in nature. The general term used to designate them, charismata, derives from the root charis which means grace. Thus these gifts cannot be earned or bought;16 rather they are dispensed by the sovereign will of the Spirit of God. Scripture clearly mentions that they are given, not earned.17 Simon the magician was cursed for attempting to buy the power of the Holy Spirit from the apostles. It is a mockery of God, a profaning of holy things and outright blasphemy for anyone to try to induce God to this end or pretend to be gifted in some way he is not. This was a common practice at the time of the

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10 Ibid.
11 Exod 31:1-6, “And Jehovah spoke to Moses, saying, Behold, I, I have called by name Bezaleel, the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. And I have filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all workmanship, to devise designs; to work in gold, and in silver, and in bronze, and in cutting of stones, to set them, and in carving of timber, to work in all workmanship. And behold, I have given to him Aholiab, the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan. And I have put wisdom in the hearts of all the wise-hearted, so that they may make all that I have commanded you.”
16 Act 8:18, “And when Simon saw that the Holy Spirit was given through laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money, saying, Give me this power also, that on whomever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Spirit. But Peter said to him, May your silver perish with you, because you have thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money.”
17 I Cor 12:11; Eph 4:7-8.
Reformation, and it is commonly identified as Simony. Some people who were not qualified for the ministry paid money to be appointed to certain offices by the church hierarchy. Reformers sought to correct this abuse of church ordinances.

Types of Gifts of the Holy Spirit

The church under the administration of the Holy Spirit is supplied with a variety of gifts, ministries, and other general graces to meet all her duties sufficiently and efficiently. There are basically three major passages where these gifts are listed in the NT, all of which are in Paul’s letters: 1 Cor 12:1-11; Eph 4:1-16; and Rom 12:1-8.18 A careful look at the gifts listed in these passages clearly indicates that the lists are not identical. It thus follows that they are not intended as an exact catalog of gifts. An individual may have a combination of several gifts or even a multiplicity of gifts. For instance, Paul could speak in tongues as well as exercise other gifts.19 As one writer points out, “Philip had the gifts of wisdom, showing mercy, evangelism, and perhaps others.”20 These gifts are meant to meet specific needs of the church with some needs being continual while others having been temporary.

In 1 Cor 12:4-6, Paul refers to “varieties of spiritual endowments peculiar to the several members of the Church”21 in three terms. He calls them different gifts (χάρισμα charisma), also different ministries (διακονία diakonia) and different workings (ἐνέργεια energema). It is difficult to prove that Paul is categorizing gifts into three groups because the major lists of gifts in Paul’s writings repeat some of them or even introduce new ones which are of a similar nature. The gifts listed therefore refuse to be rigidly separated. They refuse to be over classified.22 For instance we must assume that one who has the “gift of prophecy” should at the same time be able to “distinguish between spirits”; yet these two are listed as different gifts. It is for this reason that Charles Hodge and other writers agree that Paul was not categorizing the gifts but rather was giving different aspects of the gifts.

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19 1 Cor 14:18, “I thank my God, I speak with tongues more than you all.”
22 “One should be careful not to over define the gifts, because they may resist over-classification,” John MacArthur, 1 Corinthians (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996).
We are not to understand him here as dividing these gifts into three classes, under the heads of gifts, service, and works. He is presenting three different aspects of each and all of them. Viewed in relation to the Spirit, they are gifts; in relation to the Lord, they are acts of service; in relation to God, they are works—that is, effects worked by his power.  

**Gift of Prophecy**

The Spirit of God bestowed this gift at the inception of NT church. This gift involved the ability to tell events that would come to pass in the near future as well as apocalyptic events. Agabus predicted a famine in Jerusalem, leading the church to send relief to believers there. He also predicted Paul’s arrest. The New Testament also contains the Apocalypse in the book of Revelation and portions of Paul’s writings.

In both the OT and NT the gift of prophecy was considered the most important. Prophets were God’s spokesmen, specially inspired by God to infallibly declare his will to the people. They taught the knowledge, worship, and service of God. As such they were given extraordinary gifts to qualify them for that office and make them noticeable. Concerning this authentication Smeaton observes, “These gifts were intended to show men generally, that in receiving their word as a divine message, they were not misled by cunningly devised fables.”

The supernatural gifts, such as the gifts of knowledge, tongue speaking, interpretation of tongues, and working of miracles, were thus apostolic in nature. The gift of knowledge as relates to the apostles was a supernatural endowment whereby one under the supernatural influence of the Spirit “understood fully what they were commissioned to announce . . . beyond the range of the unaided human faculties.” The gifts of tongues speaking and tongue interpretation are closely related to the prophetic gift of the apostles. Tongues proved that the “miracle of inspiration was still present in the church.”

With no apostles today this gift of prophecy, in the apostolic sense, ceased with the completion of the canon. The prophetic office is continued in the preaching of the written Word of God where the truth is infallibly kept for us. The Apostle Peter elevated the Word above his experiences with Christ.

**Gift of Tongues**

The gift of tongues refers to the supernatural gift of speaking in foreign languages which one had not learned before. It is a language gift. The Greek word γλῶσσα glossa

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25 1 Cor 15; 1 Thess (whole epistle).
27 Ibid., 150.
28 2 Pet 1:18-19, “And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with him in the holy mount. We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts.”
means “language.” Another word for language in the New Testament is διάλεκτος diαλεktos, and its English equivalent is “dialect” (Acts 1:19, 2:6, 8; 21:40; 22:2; 26:14). Tongues were intelligible languages, not ecstatic nonsensical utterances. That is why the people present on the day of Pentecost were able to hear and understand what was being said by believers who spoke in tongues (Acts 2:9-11).

This gift was given to be a sign to Jews who considered themselves the privileged people of God. God was signaling to the Jews that Gentiles were also partakers of the redemption of God. The Jews had the misconception that they were “the only people to whom God extended salvation.” The event in the life of the early church in Acts 10 and 11 emphasized that tongues speaking greatly influenced the Jewish believers in the early church to accept Gentile believers as being indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God.29 The miraculous aspect of this gift confirmed to the hearers that God was the author of the new speech30 as they listened to the message uttered.

**Interpretation of Tongues**

This gift was the supernatural ability to understand and interpret the new tongues to the language listeners could understand. It was the ability to explain what was being said. Those with this gift lacked the utterance but possessed the ability to interpret the utterances (1 Cor 14:5). The importance of this gift is emphasized as Paul prioritizes edification of the church. Paul ruled out the use of tongues in the church in the absence of an interpreter.31 It is implausible for God to communicate his revelation to the church and yet leave the church without understanding what he said to them. This aspect is largely ignored in charismatic circles.

**Miraculous Works**

These words refer to the ability to perform deeds that are extraordinary for the purpose of authenticating both the message and the messenger.32 Some of these signs are miraculous healing through prayer, touching, and in some instances by contact with the shadow of an apostle; raising the dead; and not being hurt by poison (as Paul in Acts 28:3-6). These miraculous works, along with the miraculous gift of knowledge, tongues, interpretation of tongues, were given to authenticate the apostolic ministry.

**Church offices**

The Holy Spirit also gave continuing gifts for the church. These we could call ministries as encapsulated in church offices. The officers of the church are divided into ruling elders, teaching elders, and deacons.

30 Acts 2:7, “And they were all amazed and marveled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galileans?”
31 1 Cor 14:5, “I would that ye all spake with tongues, but rather that ye prophesied: for greater is he that prophesieth than he that speaketh, with tongues, except he interpret, that the church may receive edifying.”
**Gift of Governing**

This gift is mentioned in Rom 12:8 as “ruling” and in 1 Cor 12:28 as “governments.” This refers to the special abilities given to some men in the church to administer church affairs. The church as a community requires leadership in decision making in areas such as church ministry, order, and discipline. The word ‘elder’ (presbuteros) refers to maturity, sobriety, and wisdom of men gifted for this office in order to carry out their duty effectively. The term bishop (episkopos) refers to the administrative aspect of their work. Elders are therefore mature believers who superintend the flock of God, being examples to the flock.  

In Tim 3:1-13 Paul gives the qualifications of an elder. Some of the listed qualifications are also gifts of God, for instance, the ability to teach. A combination of several other gifts does accompany those called to be ruling elders.

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**Gift of Teaching**

This gift may be defined as the “ability to explain clearly and apply effectively the truth of the word of God.” Effective communication of the truth, making the truth understandable, and applying the truth effectively are the abilities by which this gift is exercised. A certain level of understanding of the truth is assumed of those who have this gift. We should bear in mind that this is not merely referring to the natural talent of teaching. A talented teacher may not necessarily possess this gift.

Scripture encourages teaching to various groups by various persons. Teaching can be carried out through song; older women can teach younger women and children good things. This gift can be exercised by various members of the church as these verses indicate. However, the office of a teaching elder is specially set apart for the purposes of teaching. Paul left Timothy at Ephesus to ensure that “no other doctrine” was taught. Thus he was in charge of doctrine in the church. The dogmatic power of the church is carried out through the teaching ministry. One of the highest forms in which this gift is exercised is the formulation of creeds and doctrinal standards of the church. Theological institutions and those who teach therein are also a way by which this gift is exercised.

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**General graces**

**Gift of helps** refers to the ability and readiness to lend a hand or assisting. It is listed in I Cor 12:28. It is defined by Flynn as “the Spirit-given ability to serve the church in any

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33 1 Pet 5:1-3, “The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock.”


35 Col 3:16.

36 2 Tim 1:5; 3:14-15; Titus 2:3.

37 1 Tim 5:17, “Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in the word and doctrine.”

38 1 Tim 1:3, “As I besought thee to abide still at Ephesus, when I went into Macedonia, that thou mightest charge some that they teach no other doctrine.”
supporting role, usually temporal, though sometimes spiritual.” 39 It may involve helping believers who are gifted in certain areas with some task in order to free them up to use their other gifts effectively. This gift is akin to the office of a deacon, and all believers can exercise this gift.

*Hospitality* is also commanded in Scripture. 40 The context in which Peter mentions it implies that it is also a gift (1 Pet 4:9-10). It involves caring for believers in need, especially lodging and feeding them.

*Showing mercy* to the suffering is a Christian imperative and another gift of the Holy Spirit (Rom 12:8). It involves sympathizing and empathizing with the suffering, and doing something to alleviate that suffering. In the NT this gift is exemplified by Dorcas 41 and Onesiphorus. 42 Paul commands that showing mercy be done with cheerfulness.

*Giving* is supposed to be done by all believers. Paul exhorts on giving in 2 Cor 9. It should be done with simplicity. Generosity, cheerfulness, and for good purposes are the manner in which this gift is to be exercised.

The gifts listed and described here are not exhaustive. What we learn from them is that gifts of the Holy Spirit define the character of the church both as an organization (offices) and as an organism (life of fellowship). For believers to be equipped for the work of the ministry partly means that all believers should identify, develop, and use the gifts they have.

40 Rom 12:13; Titus 1:8; 1 Tim 3:2; 5:10; Heb 13:2.
41 Act 9:36, “Now there was at Joppa a certain disciple named Tabitha, which by interpretation is called Dorcas: this woman was full of good works and almsdeeds which she did.”
42 2 Tim 1:16-18, “The Lord give mercy unto the house of Onesiphorus; for he oft refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chain: But, when he was in Rome, he sought me out very diligently, and found me. The Lord grant unto him that he may find mercy of the Lord in that day: and in how many things he ministered unto me at Ephesus, thou knowest very well.”