

Gifts of the Spirit, Part I

To say that this lesson has been difficult to write would be an understatement. There have been weeks where I studied at length and seemed no closer to an understanding of this subject than I had been at the beginning. There were times when a reference seemed to present a cogent view, then suddenly swerved into clearly incorrect ideas. And the apparent lack of the miraculous among those with "correct" doctrines seems to point toward a cessation of gifts after the apostolic era. Finally, the "Third Wave" of the charismatic movement (Greek *charisma*, gift) with its attendant ecstatic and miraculous manifestations caused me no end of difficulty. It seemed so much easier to accept the idea that when all is done properly and in good order (1 Cor 14:40), that is, sedately, God will be pleased. Yet God has given us much instruction and many examples which cannot be swept under the rug with this convenient canard.

Our first stop in this study must be to identify the gifts. Paul presents three separate lists (Q1). The first list in Romans may be loosely described as service gifts. These include Prophecy, Ministry, Teaching, Exhortation, Giving, Leading, and Showing Mercy. The second list in Ephesians is described as ministerial office gifts. They include Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Pastors, and Teachers. None of these seem to be particularly unusual or miraculous on their face, but on closer examination, it can be seen that none of these gifts are truly possible to the unconverted individual. The more direct theological offices have an obvious requirement of the Holy Spirit's participation. Others, such as benevolence, may be possible in some minor way for an atheist, but are not truly possible without the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

The final list is in 1 Cor 12-14. It includes the word of wisdom, word of knowledge, faith, healings, miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, tongues, and the interpretation of tongues. This list includes several clearly miraculous gifts. But we must be careful to not to assume that these lists are exhaustive (Q2). For example, the Holy Spirit is to come as a teacher, and learning is not included in any list. Also, we are promised that we will not be tempted more than we can bear, and the Holy Spirit will provide a way of escape from temptation, another gift not listed. Paul's intent in making these lists is to be representative in answering a specific need. The lists allow him to discuss problems and opportunities which are important at the time.

A gift of the Spirit (Q3) is a manifestation or ability which would not otherwise be present in the individual. They are all given by God for the purpose of equipping the saints for service, thus building up the church. Gifts are given for this sole purpose. It may seem that an individual has been granted a special individual favor, but God, in His divine providence, has determined that that gift will be of ultimate benefit to the work. This is also the key for us to consider when a gift such as a healing is not received. We must be able to accept God's divine wisdom in *not* granting a request.

The gifts (Q4) will be with the church "until the perfect comes." That is, as long as we are in this imperfect world, the gifts of the Spirit will be with us. This only makes sense, because the gifts exist to bring us together toward the coming of the perfection the second coming brings. We must not be sanguine about this. Jesus told his disciples that while he had done many marvelous works, believers would do even *greater* works. He would be with us until the end of the world. Peter, in the day of Pentecost sermon, specifically states that the gifts would continue until "the great and glorious day of the Lord shall come." It cannot be overstated that as believers, we should expect to see the miraculous working of the Holy Spirit as a routine occurrence within the work. And we cannot simply write these down to be the miracle of conversion or healing as a result of medical care. The gifts of the Spirit are truly miraculous, as we shall see, and they were so obviously miraculous as to bring many to conversion. The subtle works are simply not capable of such benefits to the church.

We have already noted that the purpose of the gifts is to build up the church. Paul states this explicitly (Q5) in 1 Cor 12, and notes that they will continue "until we all attain the unity of the faith" in Eph 4, once again pointing out that the gifts will continue until the second coming. It may seem that we are overemphasizing the continuing nature of the gifts, but there are a substantial number of theologians who argue that the gifts ended with the apostolic church. They make this assertion without a shred of scriptural support, and use it to excuse the absence of the miraculous gifts in their ministries. They also point to any ministry where miraculous gifts appear as being fraudulent in the mold of Matt 24:24. In contrast to this approach, Paul tells us that we should "earnestly desire greater gifts," (Q6) again implying the continuing nature of the gifts. He does not do this in the manner of Simon the sorcerer who wished to buy the gifts.

Instead, he tells us that as members of the body of Christ, we should wish for the gifts to strengthen the body, and not for ourselves.

It is not possible in general to pick one's gifts. The Holy Spirit (Q7) gives to each one "as he wills." This is another example of the sovereign providence of God, who knows the best persons to receive an individual gift. But there are some gifts which all Christians receive (Q8). As Paul says, no one can say "Jesus is Lord" unless the Holy Spirit gives him the faith to do so. This does not mean that an atheist cannot say the words, but that no one can truly testify to that fact unless the Holy Spirit indwells him and gives him the certainty. James also tells us that God gives wisdom freely to all who ask. As Jesus told his disciples, this means that God will bring to the mind of his servants the things that they should say. These will be wisely constructed teachings and refutations. We are to prepare by learning the truth (2 Tim 2:15), and God takes care of the rest if we will listen.

Eph 4 (Q9) states that "God gave" some to become various officers in the church. This raises a very profound question for the church. Periodically we "ordain" elders and other officers. Is this an act the church can actually do? If these officers are ordained by God, what right do we have to say that we ordain? In the OT, the word translated "ordain" can mean to consecrate. Men can consecrate themselves to service. But in the NT, the word used means to select, which implies that God selects men for service. Certainly the apostles did not choose themselves. They consented to the selection, but God did the selecting, exactly as Paul implies in Eph 4. For the church to presume to select officers for God's service is therefore blasphemous. All that the church can legitimately do is to discern and publicly recognize God's ordination.

Paul explores spiritual wisdom in some length in the opening of his first epistle to Corinth (Q10). There he contrasts the wisdom of men with the wisdom of God, using OT quotes. He notes that Jews looked for attesting miracles, and Greeks for wisdom, pointing out their equally useless methods of determining the truth. Instead, Jesus has come as both power and wisdom from God. Since we find Paul dealing the problem of human wisdom early in the letter (Q11), it is proper to see his answer later in the letter. The "word of wisdom" is not, as some propose, a supernatural portion of divine insight for guidance, but is rather directed clearly at this problem in the Corinthian church (Q12). Those who sought their own way, when converted to Christianity, were granted the wise understanding of the gospel so that they were no longer in need of the former search for human wisdom. This is as it always should be. We need to look to God for wisdom. The Greeks are those to whom this particular gift seems directed. When in tune with God, they will be truly wise, even if the world thought them foolish.

The word of knowledge is a similar situation. Paul begins his epistle (Q13) by saying that the church was enriched in all knowledge of Jesus. He is unconcerned with science, politics, or any other area of information. However, the church at Corinth has a similar problem with men seeking out their own "knowledge" about Christ. While it is not explicitly stated, it is likely that Gnosticism, with its "secret" knowledge was rearing its head as it did in other places. The true knowledge of Jesus was being corrupted with false ideas introduced by those who were not willing to be fully led. Put simply, men thought they were smarter than God. Again, since Paul is addressing problems here and answering them later, it becomes clear that the word of knowledge is almost the same as the word of wisdom. It is not (Q15) a portion of previously unrevealed divine knowledge. That sort of revelation would be prophecy, which we will cover later. Instead, it is the knowledge of Jesus Christ which the Holy Spirit gives to those who are willing to truly submit themselves to him.

It is curious that Paul includes faith in the list of gifts (Q16). After all, everyone who is saved has faith, since we are saved by faith. The same author we have cited before defines this faith as "the supernatural ability to trust God, or to inspire trust in God, for a particular need or circumstance." It is hard to argue with this take on Paul's statement. After all, since all have faith for salvation that is a general gift, not a specific one. But in Jesus' ministry, we find several places where the disciples had faith in Jesus, but still were afraid of specific circumstances. Jesus showed them how greater faith was needed for the sea to be still and so on. In fact, Paul uses this same idea in 1 Cor 3 where he uses the metaphor of "babes in faith" to describe those who have only begun to trust in God. Those persons are indeed saints, having been saved by their faith in the cross of Christ, but lack the faith to tackle the more difficult situations where they may be of particular benefit to the body of Christ.

At this point, it is worth reconsidering the use of the word "some." Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit gives knowledge, wisdom and faith to "some," using the same language as where he says that prophecy, tongues and so on are given to "some." It would be very easy to say that not all gain these gifts. Yet that is not a necessary conclusion from the text. It can legitimately be argued that these gifts are freely available

to all, simply by the exercise of the will to submit. When Paul lists gifts that "not all" have later in 1 Cor 12, he does not list these three. The specific offices and miraculous manifestations are clearly limited in their distribution. But with no such specific indication of exclusivity for knowledge, wisdom and faith, we may consider them properly to be widely, if not universally distributed.

The miraculous gifts are clearly of a different order from the gifts we have just studied. Paul explicitly tells us that these are limited in distribution. But much more important, these gifts are not new. We find miracles recorded throughout history (Q17), from the ram in the thorns at the sacrifice of Isaac on to the times of the apostles. God's covenant (Ex 34:10) with Israel is specifically stated to be one where God will perform miracles for Israel. This he did on numerous occasions, including the manna, water from the stone, and the victory over Jericho. This pattern was a continuing demonstration of God's power for the faithless Jews. David wrote of God being the "God who works wonders" (Psa 77). And in Acts 2 we not only see the apostles working wonders, they speak of Jesus being attested by miracles, wonders, and signs. In fact (Q18), the absence of miraculous signs is taken as evidence that God has withdrawn his blessing from Israel.

The contrast between the Biblical record and our experience today cannot be greater. We have much theoretical knowledge of God, but little practical knowledge. The faithful Jews, on the other hand, had little theoretical knowledge, but instead relied on the God who had led them out of Egypt, destroyed Sennacherib's army and so on. Certainly the bulk of Israel apostasized, but the faithful remnant received not only the promise of eventual salvation, but the present help of the power of God. This power (Q19) is referred to in a host of NT passages. God did not expect the NT church to do without the same miraculous evidences of his power. God provided numerous "demonstrations ... of power." These were of both positive and negative form. Ananias and Sapphira died for lying to God. At the same time many were healed.