



Faith Pulpit

Spiritual Gifts: Essential, Expedient or Extra-Biblical?

American Christianity today is characterized by an undue emphasis on spiritual gifts on the one hand and a great misunderstanding of these gifts on the other hand. All of us are dismayed by the sad spectacle of evangelicalism in disarray in matters of spiritual gifts.

I. The Controversy Concerning The Gifts

A. Position #1

The Pentecostal viewpoint is that all gifts are still bestowed today. To claim that some gifts have ceased with the Apostles, say our Pentecostal friends, is tantamount to denying miracles. One might “as well say that salvation ceased with them” (Harold Horton, *The Gifts of the Spirit*, p. 30).

B. Position #2

Some individuals contend that all gifts have ceased, not just the so-called sign gifts. One friend writes, “It is the writer’s belief that the present preoccupation with ‘finding your gift’ is an erroneous and dangerous trend, which if brought to its logical conclusion denies the sufficiency and authority of the Scriptures. There is no justification for the claim that every believer receives a gift at salvation or that gifts may be divided into the temporary and permanent” (“Seeing Gifts in Their Context,” *Baptist Bulletin*, February 1984, p.7).

Is it really erroneous and dangerous to attempt to discover one’s spiritual gift?

Gene Getz has popularized the concept that there are no spiritual gifts for today. He regrets having taught for years “that Christians must search for and try to discover their spiritual gifts in order to function in the body of Christ.” His suggestion is that all spiritual gifts in the primary sense have

ceased (*Building Up One Another*, p.9, italics in the original).

C. Position #3

Some evangelical friends teach that every Christian has one and only one spiritual gift. Over against this view, we would maintain that the Scriptures seem to teach that each believer has at least one gift but the Word of God does thereby not preclude the plurality of gifts for certain individuals. The Apostle Paul definitely evidenced a wide spectrum of gifts including that of apostleship (Rom. 1:1), healing (Acts 19:11,12), tongues (1 Cor. 14:18), various miracles (2 Cor. 12:12), evangelism (Acts 14:21ff.), prophecy (Eph. 3:5ff.), as well as several other gifts.

D. Position #4

Many theologians differentiate between temporary and permanent gifts. Certain temporary gifts were for the establishment of the church, others gave evidence of the truthfulness of the apostolic message. Permanent gifts are seen for the edification of the church today. Merrill Unger observes: "Such miraculous sign-gifts were the special endowment of the apostles, as the God-ordained founders of Christianity. To the Corinthians Paul declared, 'The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles (2 Cor. 12:12, NASB)'" (*The Baptism and Gifts of the Holy Spirit*, p. 138).

E. Position #5

Some leading evangelicals adopt a neutral stand toward sign gifts. These gifts are possible today but one should not make too much of them. For example, Billy Graham writes with ambivalence about the gifts of healings, miracles, and tongues: "If God chooses to give these gifts to some today we should always pray that they will be used 'for the common good' (1 Cor. 12:7) and the furtherance of the kingdom of God" (*The Holy Spirit*, p.179).

In a similar vein, Harold Lindsell urges evangelicals to "stress the infrequency of the sign gifts, while acknowledging that they do appear here and there from time-to-time" (*The Holy Spirit in the Latter Days*, p. 193). Which of these five positions is right? Are all? Are none?

II. The Cessation of Some Gifts

While Pentecostals would take issue with us at this point, it is not difficult to demonstrate that certain gifts have ceased. It is true that not any one text states that there are permanent and temporary gifts. However, the principle of temporary gifts can be inferred from the following biblical features.

A. The qualifications of an Apostle in Acts 1:21–27:

When a successor was chosen to Judas, the qualifications of an apostle were clearly stated. He had to be an individual who had been with Christ from His baptism, accompanied Him for three years, witnessed His resurrection and as apostle (“One sent”), been personally commissioned by the Lord. Which Mormon apostle claims to have been around since the baptism of our Lord in A.D. 29?

B. The observation of the writer to the Hebrews:

In Hebrews 2:3–4 the writer reflects on the apostles who as first generation Christians had their message authenticated by special sign gifts: “God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will.” Very possibly the ability to speak in tongues and the gift of healing were among these gifts. All these authenticating gifts had ceased when Hebrews was written before A.D. 70.

C. The transitory character of gifts in 1 Corinthians 13:8:

Paul wrote that certain gifts would cease: “Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they shall be rendered inoperative; if there are tongues, they shall cease on their own account; if there is knowledge, it shall be rendered inoperative” (literal translation). The strong inference of the verse is that at the time when someone causes prophecy and knowledge to pass away (the same passive verb is used for both gifts) at the time the use of tongues will have ceased. The time is the foundation of the church, which is built on apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20). With the conclusion of the New Testament canon in approximately A.D. 96, no further prophetic revelations were given (Rev. 22:18).

Though Pentecostals consider us a “harmful class of ‘unbelievers’”. . . who “dispensationalize or spiritualize or naturalize” the gifts (Horton, p. 196), biblical testimony bears out our position on temporary gifts.

III. The Continuation of Some Gifts

Does every believer today have at least one gift? Based on the following considerations, this conclusion cannot be avoided.

A. The indications from Scripture:

- *But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal (1 Cor. 12:7)*
- *But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ (Eph. 4:7).*
- *But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will (1 Cor. 12:11).*
- *As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God (1 Pet. 4:10).*

B. The implications of the baptism of the Spirit:

In the immediate context of the bestowal of spiritual gifts we find reference to the baptism of the Spirit. Every believer is baptized by the Spirit into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13), and the same Spirit bestows on every believer a gift (1 Cor. 12:11). Every baptized believer is gifted. If baptism by the Spirit is for today, then so are the gifts from the Spirit. At the moment of salvation, the Spirit immerses the believer into the body, He implants him into a special place in the body, He imparts to him a gift (or gifts), and He impels him by His power to be active as a part of that body.

C. The inference from the metaphor of the body:

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul describes the church as a physical body. The Holy Spirit gives each new believer a special place in the body and a special faculty to function in that body. For the body to function efficiently, gifted individuals are essential. Without spiritual gifts, spiritual growth in the body is impossible (Eph. 4:12,16). Without gifts the body is unfunctioning, uncooperative and unproductive. Without gifts there is no concord, care and concern (1 Cor. 12:25,26).

Those who argue that all gifts have ceased emphasize that maturity is what counts. It is true enough that the Scriptures speak of personal maturity (2 Tim. 3:17). It is also true that they emphasize the maturity of the body brought about by the exercise of gifts (Eph. 4:12ff.). In A.D. 63 the Holy Spirit still pleads through Peter that everyone use his spiritual gift, that speaking or serving, to minister to others and to magnify the Lord (1 Pet. 4:10–12). In obedience to our ascended Lord may we employ our gifts to edify the saints and exalt our Savior.

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