

Throughout our studies in 1 Corinthians, we have seen that division existed in the church. Division existed because some were prizing certain teachers over others. Division existed because some were prizing singleness over marriage. Division existed because some would not eat meat offered to idols while others had no problem doing so. Division existed at the Lord’s Table because those who were able to arrive early enough were not waiting for others to arrive for the feast that preceded the Table. Now, in chapter 12, we see that division also existed over the matter of spiritual gifts. Evidently, church members were placing value judgements based on the nature of the gifts God gave to them. The Corinthian obsession with power and status resulted in them overvaluing the contributions of those with the more spectacular gifts and undervaluing those with the more mundane gifts. Paul wrote to correct this. We can highlight three broad areas here that require discussion.

The Gift of Spiritual Gifts

The first thing to notice about spiritual gifts is that they are *gifts*. Spiritual gifts cannot be merited or learned; they are manifestations of grace given by the Spirit of God to the people of God for ministry to the church of God.

In fact, biblical spirituality is not an achievement but an act of grace. This is Paul’s argument in vv. 1–3. The word translated “spiritual gifts” in v. 1 is different from the word translated “gifts” in v. 4. The word in v. 1 can be translated “spiritual things” or even “spiritual persons.” It seems that, before he gets into a discussion concerning spiritual gifts, he first wants to establish that even the spirituality for which the Bible calls is an act of grace. The basic profession that Jesus is Lord is not an act of human achievement but a display of divine grace. We cannot claim the credit for having made an informed, reasoned decision. Certainly, we may engage our minds and ask the right questions, but our profession of Jesus as Lord is an act of grace, not self-achievement.

TO THINK ABOUT

If we understand that the confession of Jesus Christ as Lord is an act of divine grace, how does that affect our evangelism? What about our prayers for those who are unsaved? What role, if any, does apologetic argumentation play in evangelistic efforts? How should we think about using logical or philosophical or scientific or geological argumentation in witnessing to unbelievers?

If the very faith that saves is a gift of grace, so are the spiritual gifts that God’s people exercise in the church. They are “gifts” (vv. 4) that are “given” (vv. 7–8), “empowered” (v. 11) and “apportioned” (v. 11) by the Spirit. We can claim no credit for spiritual gifts.

This is a somewhat foreign concept for us, who are accustomed to receiving gifts as a sign of merit. (“What did I do to *deserve* this?”) Children are given Christmas gifts for being naughty or nice. Graduates are given gifts to mark academic achievement. Weddings, promotions and retirements are often attended by gifts as a sign of cultural advancement. But spiritual gifts are true *gifts* indeed, given by God’s Spirit to God’s people in recognition of nothing, but simply as an act of grace. An achievement mentality is poisonous to God’s people.

Further, spiritual gifts are given to be used. Unlike gifts we receive, they cannot be returned or regifted if they are not appreciated or deemed useless. They are given by the Spirit, who expects us to use them in the church for the benefit of the corporate.

The Reception of Spiritual Gifts

Paul argues that the Spirit “empowers” spiritual gifts “in everyone” (v. 6). A gift is given “to each” (v. 7) by the Spirit, who apportions gifts “to each one” (v. 11). There is a clear emphasis in this chapter that God gives a spiritual gift to every believer. And not only does he “apportion” a gift to each (v. 11), but he also “empowers” the gifts to be used by those to whom he gives gifts (vv. 6, 11).

TO THINK ABOUT

If spiritual gifts are “given” and “empowered” by the Spirit of God, is it fair for the church to expect each of its members to exercise a spiritual gift in the ministry of the church? What can be said to someone who objects that God simply did not give them a spiritual gift? What of someone who refuses to exercise his or her spiritual gift “for the common good” (v. 7) of the body?

Paul lists a wide variety of gifts in this text. It is not necessarily an exhaustive list, but it does display a wide variety of *types* of gifts that are available through the Spirit. Importantly, these gifts should be differentiated from natural talents and abilities. These are supernatural gifts that are given and empowered by God’s Spirit. (There is not time in this particular lesson to explain what each of the gifts listed here is. The discipleship lesson on spiritual gifts offers a helpful overview of the various spiritual gifts listed in the New Testament.)

All human beings have been blessed and given all sorts of talents, competencies, and abilities at the level of creation through God’s common grace. Everyone has been given the opportunity to beautify the world through common grace. But that sort of competency, ability, or talent is not the same as encouraging someone spiritually through a grace gift. Through a grace gift a Christian is essentially asserting the reality that Jesus is Lord over every dimension of life. And not everyone can do that merely with natural, creational competencies and gifts. So grace gifts have been given for a believer to faithfully steward and cultivate the resources of the gift matrix that God has given.

(Stephen T. Um)

Tim Keller suggests that the gifts listed in the New Testament can be placed into one of three categories.

1. **Prophetic gifts** are abilities based on understanding and articulating truth. These include, in our present text, “the utterance of wisdom” (v. 8), “the utterance of knowledge” (v. 8), prophecy, tongues, interpretation of tongues, and distinguishing between spirits (v. 10).
2. **Priestly gifts** are abilities based on understanding and supplying basic needs. In this text, these would include healing (v. 9) and working of miracles (v. 10), but would also include other gifts like encouragement, serving, sharing and mercy (see Romans 12:8).
3. **Kingly gifts** are abilities based on understanding direction and group needs. Here, these would include faith (v. 8) and elsewhere leadership (Romans 12:8) and administration (v. 28).

These specific categories may be debated, but the great variety of gifts (v. 4) is the important point to notice. God’s church needs a variety of ministries to function in a health manner, and the Spirit has provided everything that the church needs for the functioning of a God-honouring body.

TO THINK ABOUT

In our day, there is an increasing movement toward employing skilled, but unbelieving, musicians or administrators, etc. to help the church function in an “excellent” fashion. Given what we have considered in this discussion, how would you critique this practice?

The Giver of Spiritual Gifts

The solution to the Corinthians’ tendency to gift-grab or gift-copout was a fresh encounter with the gift-giver. The gifts are given by “the same Spirit” (v. 4), “the same Lord” (v. 5), and “the same God” (v. 6), a reference to the united Trinity. God’s community should reflect the unified, self-giving nature of the Godhead. There should be no competition or jealousy in the church because there is none in the Godhead.