

Spiritual Gifts: Expectation without Agenda

What are spiritual gifts?

Spiritual gifts are supernatural empowerments given by the Holy Spirit to the followers of Christ so that Jesus can continue His ministry through us. Luke affirms in Acts 1:1–2 that his gospel account of Jesus' life was simply about *all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day when he was taken up to heaven*. His book of Acts goes on to detail how Jesus continued His ministry after the ascension. Luke explains in Acts 2:33, *Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear*. The pouring forth of the Spirit fulfilled Jesus' promise to His disciples that *you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you* (Acts 1:8). The power of the Holy Spirit empowered them to witness to the fact that Jesus was not dead, but alive. He had returned to them as he promised and would now demonstrate His supernatural power through the lives of His followers, the Church.

Peter specifically called attention to this fact when he exercised the gift of healing on behalf of the lame man at the temple in Acts. 3. He tells the wondering crowd that through this miracle God was glorifying Jesus. He reminded them that they had put to death the Prince of Life, but God raised Him from the dead, a fact to which they were witnesses. Peter went on to declare that Jesus was the one who had strengthened the man and restored him to perfect health. Jesus was continuing His ministry through them!

A. B. Simpson emphasized this truth in saying that it was the province of the Holy Spirit “to perpetuate in the Church the very works that Christ performed through Him on earth, the Church being simply the Body of the ascended Saviour, and the channel through which He is to work in the same divine manner; even as the Master said when promising His coming: ‘*The works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father*’” (John 14:12) (*Walking in the Spirit*, p. 68.). Thus, the gifts of the Spirit are simply the supernatural ways in which the Holy Spirit chooses to work through us, empowering us to continue the ministry of Jesus, building up the Body of Christ, that is, the Church, and extending the Kingdom of God throughout the world.

Spiritual gifts are not innate, natural talents, like an ear for music or the ability to draw, but are empowerments that the Holy Spirit gives to a believer to minister to the Body in ways that were not possible by mere human effort apart from the Holy Spirit. In the ministry of the apostles in the Book of Acts, we see that they performed miracles, healed people, boldly proclaimed God's truth, and cast out demons, just as Jesus had done. The apostles were not able to do works of Jesus until they were endued with the power of His Spirit.

Spiritual gifts are empowerments for building up the church and extending the Kingdom of God. In 1 Corinthians 14, the apostle Paul instructs this congregation on the function of spiritual gifts. He repeats several times that they are to strengthen or build up the church.

But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement, and comfort (1 Corinthians 14:3).

. . . try to excel in gifts that build up the church (1 Corinthians 14:12).

. . . All of these things must be done for the strengthening of the church (1 Corinthians 14:26).

This strengthening, however, is not for the self-absorption of the Body, but to empower it to function effectively in carrying on the ministry of Jesus.

It also must be noted that Paul suggests that spiritual gifts can witness to non-believers.

But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!" (1 Corinthians 14:24–25).

Who can have spiritual gifts?

The Holy Spirit is the owner and dispenser of the spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:7,11). He decides what aspects of Jesus' ministry He will do through each of us. As believers, we are only recipients and stewards of the gifts of God (1 Peter 4:10). But every believer can expect the Holy Spirit to minister through him or her with spiritual gifts. *Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.* (1 Corinthians 12:7; emphasis added). This protects us from a static view of spiritual gifts and leads to a more dynamic relationship with the Holy Spirit, where we can expect Him to move through us in multiple ways for the glory of Jesus as He sees fit.

Spiritual gifts can be experienced immediately following conversion but are often received at various moments subsequent to conversion. Paul encourages Timothy, *Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you* (1 Timothy 4:14). It is not clear exactly when this happened in Timothy's spiritual journey, but it was probably when he was commissioned by the church to begin his ministry. This also suggests that gifts can come by impartation from spiritual leadership. This is not some kind of "magical" touch, but the culmination of a relationship of discipleship accountability and submission to authority. In addition, it is clear from Scripture that spiritual gifts can be received when a person is filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4; 10:44–48; 19:6).

How do spiritual gifts work?

As we read the book of Acts, we see that spiritual gifts were very much a part of the ministry of the New Testament church. We also see them in operation in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus did His miraculous deeds in His Spirit empowered humanity (Acts 10:38). He asked His disciples to do the things that He had been doing (Luke 9:1). Since His ministry was a demonstration of spiritual gifts through a fully surrendered man, then he could, with confidence, say to His disciples, "As the Father has sent me, so send I you" (John 20:21). Our founder, A. B. Simpson said,

When Christ healed the sick while he was on the earth, it was not by the Deity that dwelt in his humanity. He said, *If I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is come upon you* (Matthew 12:28). Jesus healed by the Holy Spirit. *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted* (Luke 4:18). The Holy Spirit is the agent, then, by which this great power is wrought. We should especially expect to see his working in these days because they are the days in which it has been prophesied that there shall be signs and wonders (*The Fourfold Gospel*, p. 48).

A. W. Tozer recognized this dynamic when he said, “While our Lord Jesus was on earth, He did not accomplish His great deeds of power in the strength of His Deity. I believe he did them all in the strength and authority of His Spirit-anointed humanity” (*Jesus, Our Man in Glory*, chapter 6). Though the focus of Acts is on the ministry of the apostles, we also see that laypeople exercised spiritual gifts (Acts 6:8; 8:6–7; 9:17–19; 10:44–46; 19:6–7). Thus, every believer can expect God to work through him or her with spiritual gifts.

We must never forget, however, that spiritual gifts are not some independent power that we get to use. Rather, they are the manifestations of the Person who indwells us. We do not use Him; He uses us. As we appropriate His working by faith, He continues the ministry of Jesus through us.

Various passages in the New Testament mention a variety of gifts, or ways the Holy Spirit uses us, principally 1 Corinthians 12:8–10, 29–30; Romans 12:4–8; Ephesians 4:11; and 1 Peter 4:10–11. It is not easy to define or describe each of these gifts. Some seem to be evident in their nature, while others are less transparent. The Scriptures do not indicate that the list of spiritual gifts is exhaustive. The number of spiritual gifts is not important, but rather the understanding of what they are and how they are to be used.

Spiritual gifts should work together, complementing each other. The Holy Spirit distributes the gifts throughout the Body (1 Corinthians 12:11) so that it takes the entire Body working together to present the full ministry of Christ to the world.

Because there is a need for all of them to be active in the church, Paul exhorts the Corinthian congregation to eagerly desire spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 14:1). This does not mean, however, that gifts should be used to exalt the individual or to feed an immature desire for attention. He repeats in verse 12 that they should *try to excel in gifts that build up the church*. Spiritual gifts must be used in love (1 Corinthians 13; Romans 12:9; Ephesians 4:15; 1 Peter 4:8). If they are not used in love, they will be abused and cause trouble in the Body rather than blessing (1 Corinthians 13:1–3). Love, when used in harmony with spiritual gifts, is like oil in a machine. It makes all the parts work well together. We must remember that our “comfort zone” is not the same as spiritual discernment, and at times even a gift manifested in love may make those ignorant of it uncomfortable. Therefore, patient teaching on the gifts and their manifestations is necessary (1 Corinthians 12:12–27; Romans 12:4, 5; Ephesians 4:12, 15, 16).

Is one spiritual gift more important than another?

All the gifts are needed in the Body of Christ. All are equally valid. In 1 Corinthians 12:12–26, the apostle Paul instructs the church that no one should despise his/her own gift by comparing it to the gifts of others. And he also says that no one should despise someone else's gift as being less than his/her gift. Some are more apparent than others, but each is important.

Paul indicates that the gift of prophecy is one to be desired (1 Corinthians 14:1). First Corinthians 14:1–25 compares the gift of prophecy and that of speaking in tongues in the context of public worship. The clear indication is that the gift of prophecy is more profitable for building up the Body of Christ than the gift of speaking in tongues, unless the tongues are interpreted (1 Corinthians 14:5, 27–28). The context of the ministry is what determines the value of a particular gift. Speaking in tongues is a valid gift for today. However, in the public ministry setting, the gift of tongues must have someone to interpret for it to be profitable for strengthening the Body. *If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and to God* (1 Corinthians 14:27–28, emphasis added). This would indicate that if there is no interpreter present, tongues should be used in a personal prayer to God for which no interpretation is necessary. Used in this manner, this spiritual gift may reflect that aspect of Jesus' ministry seen in His heart communion with the Father and His intercession for others. Such a ministry, of course, is also of value to the individual believer's edification and ultimately for that of the church and must not be considered a lesser gift.

What is the evidence of being filled with the Holy Spirit?

There are some who believe that the gift of tongues is the "initial, physical evidence" of being filled with the Spirit. Again, we affirm tongues as a valid gift for today. But we do not believe that the Scripture supports tongues as the only evidence of the filling of the Holy Spirit.

Paul, as he writes to the believers in the Ephesian church, commands them to . . . *be filled with the Spirit* (Ephesians 5:18). "Filled with the Spirit" is a frequent expression in the Book of Acts describing the source of the mighty power of God working in believers. This expression implies being under the control of the Holy Spirit. We affirm Paul's command. So, what is the evidence of being filled with the Holy Spirit?

Though there is a record of people receiving spiritual gifts when they were filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4; 10:44–48; 19:6), there are other instances of people being filled where there is no mention of spiritual gifts (Acts 4:8, 31; 8:15–17; 9:17–18; 13:9, 52). Though some may speak in tongues when they are filled with the Holy Spirit, others do not. While rejecting the "initial evidence doctrine," we must be careful to say there should be and will be evidence that a person has been filled with the Holy Spirit. As Tozer strongly notes, "no one ever received the Holy Spirit's power without knowing it" (*Keys to the Deeper Life*, p. 57). A creed of power without the experience of power is worthless. One phrase that could describe our posture in this encounter with God is "expectation without agenda." It would seem to be a dangerous thing to try to convince believers they have been filled with the Spirit if there is no evidence in their lives. We

should expect God to meet His people in a powerful way. However, it would be equally dangerous to demand a specific manifestation at any given moment. We should come to the Lord with great expectation while seeking to free ourselves from human agendas or motives.

Regardless of the manifestations a believer may experience, the fruit of the Holy Spirit, as described in Galatians 5:22–23, is the primary evidence of the Spirit-filled life. As the gifts of the Spirit are nothing less than the power of Jesus flowing through us, the fruit of the Spirit is nothing less than the personality of Jesus being reproduced by the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. The fruit of the Spirit shows that the Holy Spirit is in control of the believer's life as He was in the life of Jesus. No single gift is said to be given to all who are filled with the Spirit, but all who are filled should experience the fruit of the Spirit.

Another strong evidence of being filled with the Holy Spirit is a fruitful ministry. In Acts 1:8 Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would give power to be His witnesses. We often mention the scope of our ministry—Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth—but we also need to focus on the source of power for our ministry—the Holy Spirit, who wants to fill us for a holy life and effective service.

Finally, 1 Corinthians 12 lists a variety of manifestations that occur when the Holy Spirit is ministering. We have no reason to believe this is an all-inclusive list. Weeping, for instance, is not mentioned. Yet many believers have experienced tears as a manifestation of the Spirit's work and power. Others may experience "joy unspeakable" but never shed a tear. Rather than demanding a single gift or manifestation as the evidence of the filling of the Holy Spirit, we ought to embrace all the gifts and fruit that the Lord desires to bring into our lives.

Have some spiritual gifts ceased to exist?

No. Because spiritual gifts were given to empower the Church, the Body of Christ, to carry on the ministry of Jesus until He physically returns, spiritual gifts are needed. A day will come when spiritual gifts will no longer be needed (1 Corinthians 13:8). However, we do not believe that this day has yet come. It will come *when perfection comes* (1 Corinthians 13:10). Some interpret this "perfection" to be the completion of the canon of Scripture (the Apostolic Age). However, this is not a good rendering of the Greek text. We believe that this refers to the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. When the Church, the Bride of Christ is made perfect, and Jesus' ministry to the world through it is completed, spiritual gifts will no longer be necessary.

How can I discover my spiritual gift(s)?

It is possible for a person to neglect a spiritual gift. Paul warns Timothy not to neglect his gift (1 Timothy 4:14), and he encourages him to *fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands*" (2 Timothy 1:6). Therefore, it is a biblical necessity that believers discover and move in the arena of spiritual gifts. It has been said that Christians are not primarily natural beings having temporary spiritual experiences. Rather, we are spiritual beings having a temporary natural experience. We live in a spiritual, Kingdom reality.

If the Holy Spirit distributes spiritual gifts, then their discovery must by nature be a spiritual experience. When we walk in obedience, we must trust that the Holy Spirit will respond with the revelation of His gifts in our lives. Having said this, there are some diagnostic instruments that may help us uncover the specific ways in which the Holy Spirit wants to do the ministry of Jesus through us.

What kind of ministry do you enjoy the most and shows the most fruitfulness? That probably indicates where there are spiritual gifts operating in your life. If you enjoy teaching and find that people are edified through your teaching ministry, it is likely that the Holy Spirit has given you a gift of teaching. If you find that the Lord puts people in your path who are ready to surrender their lives to Christ, you probably have a spiritual gift of evangelism. If you enjoy inviting people to your home, either for a meal or to stay, you probably have a gift of hospitality.

There are “tests” available that might indicate your spiritual gifting. However, some of them identify a person’s natural talents and preferences, rather than one’s spiritual gifts. These inventories also focus on past experience and are not always a good indicator of what the Holy Spirit might lead us into in our future ministry.

A better way of confirming a person’s spiritual gifting is through the local congregation and its leadership. What do the leaders and the local Body think you do best that contributes to the welfare of the congregation? That is probably your spiritual gift. A person does not need to announce or advertise his/her spiritual gift. The local congregation will recognize and validate genuine spiritual gifts as the gifted person’s ministry contributes to the building up of the local church Body. Of course, this requires the individual believer to step out in faith and obedience to God’s Word. The gifts of the Holy Spirit operate through obedient and faith-filled disciples.

Conclusion

We, in The Christian and Missionary Alliance, believe that spiritual gifts are supernatural empowerments given by the Holy Spirit to believers in Christ to enable us to continue the ministry of Jesus, building up the church and extending the Kingdom of God. As we approach God for the release of His empowerment in our lives and the lives of the people to whom we minister, our attitude should be “expectation without agenda.” We should continually ask, “Holy Spirit, how do You want to manifest the presence of Jesus through me?” Jesus is our focus, and completing His mission is our mandate. The gifts of the Spirit are to serve His purposes in the church and in our world. With the guidelines we have been given in God’s Word, believers everywhere should embrace the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives and move out to continue His ministry and fulfill our Lord’s Commission.