

The Gifts of the Spirit

Material for house group, Peter Kirk, 6th and 13th June 2006

The Gift of the Holy Spirit

On the day of Pentecost Peter finished his sermon with the words *“Repent and be baptised ... And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”* (Acts 2:38 TNIV). This meant that God would give to them the Holy Spirit. Here we have one of the normal Greek words for “gift”, δωρεά *dōrea*. This is not the same thing as “the gifts of the Holy Spirit”, which are the things which the Holy Spirit gives. But it is a prerequisite for them: if we have not received the Holy Spirit, we cannot have the gifts which he gives. In fact we will not even understand what they are all about: *“The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit”* (1 Corinthians 2:14 TNIV).

So first we need to know the power of the Holy Spirit working within us. In principle this is available for all who repent and believe in Christ, and indeed the Spirit is at work in all Christians. But not all who believe have properly experienced the work of the Holy Spirit. For he only works with the person’s permission, and so if someone is not prepared to allow him to work in any particular way he will not work in that way. The Spirit wants us to accept his gifts but will not force them on us. And he will not force us to give up our bitterness, depression and anxiety if we are determined to hold on to them, but he longs to touch our hearts and emotions to give us real love, joy and peace.

Love, joy and peace are three of the nine types of the fruit of the Spirit: *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”* (Galatians 5:22-23 TNIV). And these nine are not too controversial because everyone agrees that they are good things. The real controversy relates to the gifts of the Spirit, which we will come to soon.

But just because we have felt the power of the Holy Spirit working in our lives, that doesn’t mean that we always know it. From its very start the church in Ephesus experienced the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:6). But later Paul wrote to the Ephesians Christians: *“be filled with the Spirit”* (Ephesians 5:18 TNIV). The verb here is in a continuous tense: “keep on being filled with the Spirit”. For we leak!

Let us pray now that we will be filled now with the Holy Spirit. *“Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.’ By this he meant the Spirit”* (John 7:37-39 TNIV). Lord, we are thirsty. We have drunk of your Spirit before, but we need your new infilling. We long for your Spirit to satisfy our thirst and also to flow out from within us to bring new life to the thirsty world around us.

The Gifts of the Holy Spirit

God gave us the Holy Spirit not just to make us feel better, and not just to make us less sinful and more holy, but to give us the power to do the work which he is calling us to do. Just before he ascended, Jesus promised to the disciples, *“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”* (Acts 1:8 TNIV). So the Holy Spirit gives us power for evangelism. He also gives us power for our work in the church: Paul wrote to the Corinthians, *“Since you are eager for the things of the Spirit, try to excel in those that build up the church”* (1 Corinthians 14:12 TNIV modified – there is no word for “gifts” in the Greek here).

This power is not just something general, not just the kind of inner strength which some religions and New Age teachings promise, but is demonstrated in definite ways. These specific manifestations are known as the gifts of the Holy Spirit. *“There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. ... To each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good”* (1 Corinthians 12:4,7 TNIV). The Greek word for these gifts of the Spirit is not one of the normal words for “gift”, but the special word χάρισμα *charisma*, related to χάρις *charis* “grace, favour” and used only of special abilities which God gives us because of his grace or favour towards us. It is from this Greek word that we get the English word “charismatic”, referring to Christians and churches who use these gifts of the Spirit; also the English word “charisma”, but that has come to mean someone’s personal character, whereas it originally meant something which God gives.

The gifts of the Spirit are not just natural abilities. They may build on our natural abilities, but they go beyond what is natural and enable us to do things which we would never have been able to do in our own strength. As such they are supernatural. As we use them and see and hear others using them, we know that God is real and is at work, and our faith is built up for him to work all the more. When unbelievers see and hear the gifts being used, some try to explain away the supernatural aspects, but others recognise the power of God and turn to him in repentance and faith. Evangelism in the Bible is so often accompanied by the gifts of the Spirit, because few people are brought to Christ by rational argument but many will come to him when they see the power of God at work. Even effective evangelistic preaching is not just persuasion but is inspired and guided through spiritual gifts, especially prophecy.

As we have seen, the gifts are distributed by the Holy Spirit to Christian believers for the common good. They are not given for individual development, and certainly not so that anyone can boast about how important or spiritual they are. They are gifts to be used for serving others. It is no accident that Paul's great hymn to love is found in the middle of his discussion of the gifts of the Spirit. *"If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing"* (1 Corinthians 13:2 TNIV).

Paul clarifies that *"The spirits of the prophets are subject to the control of the prophets"* (1 Corinthians 14:32), and this is true of all the gifts of the Holy Spirit. They are not a matter of the Holy Spirit taking control of anyone, but of giving special abilities which the person voluntarily and willingly uses – or can choose not to use, although that may grieve the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30).

These gifts are also gifts in the sense that they are not taken away. When the Holy Spirit gives us the ability to do something, we continue to have it, at least in some sense, even if we lose direct touch with God. There have been sad cases of people who continue to display the gifts even in public while living immoral lives. So don't take spiritual gifts, in yourself or in others, as any kind of proof of holiness or of sound teaching. Rather, they are what God in his grace gives to forgiven sinners.

Specific Gifts

There are various lists of gifts of the Spirit in the New Testament. They vary quite considerably, for the ways in which the Spirit works range widely and cannot be categorised neatly. The fullest lists are those given in 1 Corinthians 12: *"Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines"* (1 Corinthians 12:7-11 TNIV); *"God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues"* (1 Corinthians 12:28 TNIV). This last list is not explicitly of gifts of the Spirit, but from the context it is clear that these are also things which the Spirit distributes.

The Spirit gives his gifts *"just as he determines"* (1 Corinthians 12:11 TNIV). So we can't each expect to have all the gifts. Some receive the gift of being an apostle, a prophet or a teacher. Others may feel that they have received lesser gifts like "helping". Of course even what seems a small service is great in God's eyes and so we should not demean it. But we are also told to *"eagerly desire the greater gifts"* (1 Corinthians 12:31 TNIV), as long as we do so in love. So this is not just a matter of passive acceptance of what the Spirit chooses to give us. We should press on for higher things, so that we are better equipped to serve God in better ways. We should be like the servants in the Parable of the Talents, who were *"faithful with a few things"* in the hope that their master would *"put [them] in charge of many things"* (Matthew 25:21 TNIV).

What gifts have you received? How do you feel about them – are they small gifts or the greater ones? What gifts would you like to have?

Message of Wisdom

The first gift listed in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 is the *"message of wisdom"*, or *"word of wisdom"*. No one knows exactly what this means, but it is generally presumed to refer to something like the wise decision which Solomon was able to make in the case of the baby claimed by two women (1 Kings 3:16-28). Christians, especially church leaders, need this kind of wisdom when difficult decisions have to be made.

Message of Knowledge

The second gift is the “*message of knowledge*” or “*word of knowledge*”. Again no one knows quite what Paul meant by this, but it is usually understood as when the Holy Spirit supernaturally reveals some information about a situation, so that the person who receives this information can use it to serve God. This would include the kind of “word of knowledge” often shared in the context of prayer for healing, when God reveals that there is someone present with a particular health or other problem which he wants to deal with.

Faith

“*Faith*” seems to be an odd inclusion in the list of gifts of the Spirit. It surely does not refer to saving faith in Jesus, for this is required of all who come to Christ, and before they can receive any gifts from the Spirit. Probably this refers to the faith required for special situations, that God will act even when things seem hopeless. As such it is related to the gifts of healing and of miracles.

Gifts of Healing

The “*gifts of healing*” are among the best known of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. These are usually given to people who are called to move in a special healing ministry, so that they can lay hands on the sick and see them miraculously healed, in the same way that Jesus did.

Miraculous Powers

It is uncertain exactly what the gift of “*miraculous powers*” or “*working of miracles*” refers to. It is probably rather similar to the gifts of healing, which consist of working of miracles of a particular type. This gift would then be for the working of other kinds of miracles, perhaps including “nature miracles” as when Elijah kept the widow of Zarephath’s jar of flour and jug of oil full (*1 Kings 17:10-16*).

Prophecy

The gift of “*prophecy*” is often misunderstood. Even in the Old Testament the prophets did not primarily foretell the future. Rather, they were people who heard God speaking to them and spoke out the message which they were given, which sometimes involved the future. Similarly, the gift of prophecy today is about hearing messages from God and speaking them out, or writing them down. Sometimes these messages involve an element of prediction, but by no means always. Today they will not of course be additions to Scripture, but they will need to be tested to see whether they accord with Scripture. Good preaching certainly includes a prophetic element, for a sermon should not be just human thoughts or a general exposition of the Bible, but God’s message for a specific congregation. But prophecy is not restricted to preaching; it is something which all Christians can do and all should desire to do (*1 Corinthians 14:1,5,31*), although most will start with short messages in small group settings rather than full length sermons to full congregations. Paul seems to have considered prophecy to be the highest of the gifts, apparently because of its vital role in building up the church (*1 Corinthians 14:3-4*).

Distinguishing Between Spirits

The gift of “*distinguishing between spirits*” is important because evil spirits are able to mimic the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and some apparent uses of the gifts can come from human effort rather than from the Holy Spirit – whether as deliberate deception or from excessive enthusiasm. The person exercising this gift is able to recognise when a work or word is not from the Holy Spirit, but from an evil spirit or just a human spirit.

Speaking in Different Kinds of Tongues

The gift of “*speaking in different kinds of tongues*” is perhaps the most controversial of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. This is partly because in some churches it has been made into a test of spirituality: all believers are expected to have this gift, and those who do not are presumed to be unspiritual or sinful. This elevation of the importance of tongues goes against Paul’s assessment of the gift of tongues as a lesser gift than prophecy. Nevertheless, Paul did expect every believer to speak in tongues – and, more importantly, to prophesy (*1 Corinthians 14:5*). So this is a good gift and it is right to ask the Holy Spirit to give it to any believer.

But what does this gift consist of? There is some confusion here. On the Day of Pentecost the disciples were given the supernatural ability to speak foreign languages which were understood by the hearers (*Acts 2:6-8*). Something similar seems to have happened in Ephesus (*Acts 19:6*). But the gift which was being abused at Corinth, and which is widely practised by charismatic Christians today, seems to be rather different, not an

actual human language; at least, with rare exceptions, no one present actually understands the words. Paul more or less forbids speaking in tongues in the church unless an interpretation can be given (*1 Corinthians 14:28*). For this gift is unlike the others in that it primarily builds up the speaker rather than others; but as it is also prayer guided by the Holy Spirit, when the prayer is answered the church is built up. Thus many Christians find it very helpful for their prayer life. Indeed this may be what Paul had in mind when he wrote that “*We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans*” (*Romans 8:26*).

Interpretation of Tongues

The final gift in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 is “*the interpretation of tongues*”. This is when someone hears a message in tongues and the Holy Spirit supernaturally reveals to them the meaning of that message, so that they can speak that meaning out to the church. Paul seems to imply that a message in tongues followed by its interpretation is equivalent to a prophetic message (*1 Corinthians 14:5*).