

Spiritual Gifts - Lesson 3

I Corinthians 12:1, 4-11

“Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be ignorant. . . . There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all: for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another different kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills” (I Corinthians 12:1, 4-11).

I Corinthians 12 speaks of “gifts” as miraculous endowments that operate by the power of the Holy Spirit. Let us look at the character of these supernatural spiritual gifts.

The Supernatural Character of the Gifts

Specifically, these gifts are supernatural. This passage describes them as “works” of God and as the “manifestation of the Spirit.” A manifestation is a demonstration or display; the verb “manifest” means to reveal or show plainly.

Thus it is a mistake to define these gifts in terms of natural human abilities as some commentators, who do not believe in miracles today. For instance, they define the word of wisdom as having good judgment and counseling ability, the gifts of healing as the ability to be a good doctor or nurse. But according to such definitions, someone who has never felt God’s presence, much less received God’s Spirit, could exercise these gifts as effectively as believers.

Hebrews 2:3-4 underscores the supernatural character of the “gifts of the Holy Spirit”: “How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him, God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will?”

Given According to the Will of God

Understanding the supernatural origin and character of these gifts is vital to identify them accurately and exercise them properly. For instance, a charismatic group advertised that it was conducting a school on prophecy. It promised to teach every student how to prophesy and further promised that every student would receive a personal prophecy before the end of the seminar.

If the gifts operate according to God’s administration, however, how can humans guarantee who will exercise specific gifts and when they will do so? There is great value in learning about the spiritual gifts and learning to yield to God’s Spirit so that we are prepared for God to use us. We can teach people how to be available for God’s Spirit to work through them, but we must always recognize that God is the one who bestows and enables the gifts according to His sovereign purpose. (I Corinthians 12:11; Hebrews 2:4.)

Since the spiritual gifts are from God, we should draw attention to what God is doing, not what humans are doing. It is troubling when the primary emphasis is on “John Doe Ministries” or the exercise of particular gifts. For instance, the gifts of healing are often quite effective in building faith and sparking a revival that leads many people to salvation. (Acts 3:1-11; 4:4.) But if a meeting or a ministry focuses on healing while neglecting the message of salvation, then God’s purpose in granting healing is not fully accomplished.

DIVERSITY OF GIFTS

As with Romans 12, it does not appear that the list of gifts in I Corinthians 12 is meant to be exhaustive. Scripture does not assert that all God’s

miraculous workings in our lives must fall under exactly one of the nine categories of I Corinthians 12:8-10. The chapter presents this list to illustrate how God works supernaturally in different ways using different members of the body.

It also seems that there can be some overlap in the exercise of the gifts. For instance, if God grants someone a word of knowledge and the person then discloses it to someone else; we could describe his utterance as a prophecy. If God gives someone faith in a time of crisis, we may also see the working of miracles as the person exercises his faith.

“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you. . . . But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me. . . . And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment. . . . When He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you” (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:8, 13-14). “But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all” (I Corinthians 12:7). “But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men” (I Corinthians 14:3).

Ultimate Purpose

Jesus taught that after His ascension the Holy Spirit would come to dwell within the hearts of believers. (Luke 24:49; John 7:37-39; 14:16-18; 16:7; Acts 1:4-5.) The Holy Spirit is the “Helper” or “Comforter” (KJV). In the original Greek this title is *parakletos*, which literally means “one called alongside to help,” that is, a helper, consoler, or advocate.

Above all, the Spirit testifies of Jesus and glorifies Jesus. He confirms the identity and work of Jesus Christ; proclaims the reality of the Incarnation and the Atonement; demonstrates the saving, delivering, transforming

power of the gospel of Jesus Christ; promotes worship of Jesus Christ as Lord and God; and guides believers into the future, preparing them for the return of Jesus for His church.

John 14-16 describes the work of the Holy Spirit in the church today, which, while far broader than the nine gifts of I Corinthians 12, certainly encompasses these gifts. Therefore, we can conclude that *the ultimate purpose of the spiritual gifts is to exalt the Lord Jesus Christ*.

This purpose provides the basis for an important test of spiritual manifestations: “No one speaking by the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed, and no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit” (I Corinthians 12:3).

Immediate Purpose

Immediately before listing the nine spiritual gifts, I Corinthians 12 says they are manifested to individuals for the benefit of the entire church: “But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all” (verse 7). Immediately after listing the nine spiritual gifts, I Corinthians 12 proceeds to describe the church as the body of Christ.

The body has many members, and each of them has a different function, but they are all designed to work together for the benefit of the entire body. “For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. . . . And the eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’; nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. . . . But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it, that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another” (I Corinthians 12:12, 21-22, 24-25).

From this explanation, it is clear that God does not bestow the spiritual gifts primarily to benefit individuals but to benefit the body as a whole. While the gifts do bless individuals, the focus is on what these individuals can then contribute to the church. Moreover, God does not intend for the gifts

to work in isolation but to operate together in order to achieve the desired objective.

In discussing the proper use of the vocal gifts, Paul explained, “**But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men**” (I Corinthians 14:3). While this verse refers specifically to the gift of prophecy, there is a broader principle: The exercise of spiritual gifts should be governed by a consideration of how they benefit others.

This principle extends to a consideration of unbelievers as well as believers. The church is in the process of reaching out to sinners and transforming them into saints. Therefore, in exercising spiritual gifts, we must also take into account the impact upon potential believers. For instance, tongues serves as a valuable sign for the unbeliever, while prophecy helps to convince and convict someone who comes as an unbeliever but then begins to believe because of the miraculous demonstration he observes. (I Corinthians 14:22-25.) We must recall that part of the work of the Holy Spirit is to “convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment” (John 16:8).

Thus, in furthering the ultimate purpose of glorifying Jesus as Lord, *the immediate purpose of the supernatural gifts is to edify, or build up, the church*. By building up the church, they glorify Christ, because the church is the body of Christ on earth. This building process occurs both by *adding new believers and strengthening existing believers*.

NOT PURPOSES

From this discussion and a study of the New Testament as a whole, we can also draw several conclusions about what the supernatural gifts are *not* meant to do.

The supernatural gifts do not replace the written Word of God. They do not supersede the authority of the Bible; they cannot alter its message.

The Bible is our authority for instruction in salvation and Christian living. It is both necessary and sufficient for that purpose. “The Holy Scriptures . .

are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (II Timothy 3:15-17).

Clearly, then, the purpose of the spiritual gifts is not to teach doctrine. Their function is not to reveal the plan of salvation or principles of Christian living, although they can provide powerful confirmation of what the Bible teaches.

Consequently, we should beware when someone tries to use spiritual gifts as authority for doctrine or instruction in how a person should live. According to John 16:13, the manifested Spirit, or the Spirit within believers, does not grant independent authority to them but illuminates what God has already revealed and what Jesus taught on earth.

The supernatural gifts do not replace spiritual leadership in the church. Specifically, they do not supersede the authority of the pastor. God has given the fivefold ministry to the church for the equipping of the saints, and He has given pastors to lead, feed, and oversee the flock. God would not undermine the leaders He has appointed by prompting someone to challenge their authority.

The supernatural gifts do not replace the daily guidance from God that we receive through prayer and submission of heart, mind, and will to Him. Each Christian must learn to walk by faith, to grow in spiritual wisdom and knowledge, and to develop an understanding of God's will. (Colossians 1:9-11; 4:12.) Supernatural experiences do not provide a shortcut to spiritual maturity. We should not expect the supernatural gifts to be the primary means of determining God's will for our lives or the lives of others apart from prayer, the Word of God, and spiritual counsel.

Summary

God bestows the supernatural gifts of the Spirit *to glorify Jesus Christ, to draw unbelievers to Him, and to strengthen and encourage believers*. They edify (build up) the body of Christ, His church. God does not give them to individuals as the means of teaching doctrine, superseding the fivefold ministry, or dictating His will for others' lives.

Those who attempt to exercise a spiritual gift outside these scriptural purposes are in error. So are those who claim special authority because of a spiritual gift. The gift may be genuine but misunderstood or misused. Or the manifestation may be counterfeit—of the flesh or of the devil. Some of those who try to exercise spiritual gifts inappropriately may simply be ignorant, while others are carnal or even demonic. Some may manipulate for selfish motives; some may be deceitful or malicious.

In such cases, it is not imperative to offer a complete explanation of the underlying causes and motives of a certain manifestation. We can simply recognize that it is not in accordance with the Word of God and refuse to follow it. We can avoid the danger of false manifestations and improper uses by emphasizing the true purpose of the spiritual gifts. We are safe when we realize that God does not give them as a new source of authority in our lives, but for our edification, exhortation, and comfort.