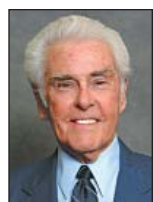


Equipped with God's gifts

Tucked away in Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church are many questions about the beliefs that should guide them in their church



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life and personal behavior. One of the significant questions concerned spiritual gifts. Some in the church were expressing pride in their gifts and were belittling those who possessed what the prideful called "lesser" gifts. As Paul sought to deal with that erroneous attitude, he declared that all believers served the same Lord and all spiritual gifts were distributed by the same Holy Spirit of God as he deemed fit for the accomplishment of God's purposes for the church.

God gives spiritual gifts to all believers (1 Corinthians 12:4-6).

God's bestowal of giftedness began in the Old Testament when God's Spirit was given to selected leaders for specific tasks rather than being bestowed on all the people. Their leaders were given one or more gifts that equipped them to serve God by using their gifts to serve Israel (Exodus 3:2-3; Judges 3:9-12; Micah 3:8).

The New Testament understanding of spiritual gifts began with Jesus. "He was the unique bearer of the Spirit (Mark 1:10). The Spirit directed and empowered Him for His ministry (Luke 4:14-18). Jesus promised His disciples that they, too, would receive the Holy Spirit one day and that the Spirit would guide them (see Mark 3:11; Luke 16:13)" (Fisher Humphreys, "Spiritual Gifts," *Holman Bible Dictionary*, p. 1301).

The source of spiritual gifts became the indwelling Holy Spirit who anointed the believers at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-47). In this experience, all of the individuals who accepted Jesus Christ as Savior received the Spirit and their lives immediately illustrated the reality of their

personal gifts that were unique to each Christian. In Peter's sermon, he made it clear that "the Spirit would continue to be given to all who accepted the Christian gospel" (Acts 2:38, Humphreys, *ibid.*).

In 1 Corinthians, as in other of his writing, Paul points out that this universal gift of God's grace continues to be elemental in equipping Christians to minister to the common good of the church.

God gives a variety of spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:7-10). After Paul introduced the question about spiritual gifts in 2:12-16, he devotes what we describe as three chapters (12-14) to deal with this issue in the church. Since it occupies so much space in his letter, it must have been a major issue for them.

Scholars of the Pauline literature indicate that Paul referred to about twenty different gifts, and the purpose of these gifts was to augment the common good of the church. The gifts were not designed simply to build up personal assets but to enable the church to accomplish its responsibilities in ministry. Therefore, when some members accused others of having "lesser" gifts, they were criticizing what was actually given by God through the Holy Spirit.

Even though Paul does not describe differences between spiritual gifts and normal abilities, in our church life we often seek out persons for different ministries because they possess personal abilities that we believe will meet our needs for the church. When Paul lists the gifts of the Spirit in 12:7-10, it is clear that most of them deal with spiritual matters. However, some of these spiritual gifts could be designed to augment natural abilities that the Spirit uses to fulfill God's calling for them.

In the calling of God for service, it is common for churches to evaluate natural abilities when choosing persons for certain ministries. It

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may be obvious that that we cannot always distinguish between spiritual gifts and natural abilities since ultimately all that we are is the result of God's creating of our new selfhood through faith in Jesus Christ.

As Humphreys explains, Paul's "assumption seems to have been that whatever skills a Christian has are given to him by God and are to be used in God's service. What matters, then, is that Christians discover what their gifts are and then develop them" (*Ibid.*, p. 1301).

Paul's distinction between gifts of wisdom and knowledge are not easy to determine but each one contributes to the intelligible communication of the gospel to the Greek background of the Corinthian Christian. When he describes "faith by the same Spirit," he is not referring to the response of faith through which man accepts salvation as Paul declares in Romans, "through whom (Jesus) we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we stand" (5:2). Instead, it seems to be a gift belonging to some members of the church and not to others, probably a more intense expression of devotion.

God gives spiritual gifts as he determines (1 Corinthians 12:11).

This one verse sums up the last paragraph (vv.4-10) and gives a supportive emphasis to the variety in unity of God's gifts and indicating the sanctity of each gift. The Greek text adds the thought that the Spirit deals with each recipient, individually and appropriately. God is pictured, through the Spirit, as acting in "the distribution upon His choice and judgment, which provides the reason for the giving or withholding; each particular gift" (*Expositor's Greek Testament*, II, p. 889).

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