

Spiritual Gifts: Lessons from Paul

The concept of spiritual gifts is shrouded in mystery. For many, spiritual gifts are one of the most fundamental parts of their faith.

The charismatic movement, for example, makes the gift of tongues one of the most important signs of salvation and a relationship with Christ. Many say that if you do not speak in tongues, your relationship with Christ isn't fully established.

Spiritual gifts are listed by Paul several times in Scripture, and we will focus on unpacking his writings to the Church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 12-14). Although Paul's first letter to the Corinthians was written 2000 years ago, it is full of relevant lessons for today's Church.

Here we learn important information about the Holy Spirit, the gifts He gives us, and how we are to use them.

Understanding 1 Corinthians

For us to understand the specifics of Paul's letter to the Corinthian Church, we must first carefully interpret its various elements.

Paul's Sources

First Corinthians mentions four documents and testimonies that are all unavailable to the reader, and the information must therefore be gleaned from what is available:

Missing Document	Reference in 1 Corinthians
Paul's first lost letter to the Corinthians	<i>I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators (5:9).</i>
The Corinthians' letter to Paul	<i>Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me (7:1).</i>
Chloe's verbal testimony to Paul about the state of the Church	<i>For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you (1:11).</i>
Quotes from the literature of the time	<i>Meats for the belly, and the belly for meats (6:13, Epicurian saying).</i>

Paul was a well-read intellectual of his day. In 1 Corinthians alone, he quotes from

Greek dramatist Menander (342–291 BC), Greek philosopher Epicurus (341-270 BC), Alexandrian Jewish philosopher Philo (20 BC – 50 AD), and pre-Gnostic thinkers. An example of Paul’s analysis of the thinking of his time is found in 1 Corinthians 15:32-33:

If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus for merely human reasons, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” Do not be misled: “Bad company corrupts good character” (NIV).

Paul’s words only makes sense if we notice the quotes being used—first from Epicurus, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die,” and second from Menander, “Bad company corrupts good character.”ⁱ

Paul’s Arguments

Paul tackles each element of the letter that the Corinthians wrote to Paul. They had been influenced by the thinking and philosophy of their time, and he had to rectify their misconceptions.

The Epicurian dictum noted above is a prime example. Since the philosophers of the time also believed in the immortality of the soul, they argued that the body was merely a vessel for the much more important soul.

They also argued that because of the insignificance of the physical body, it did not matter what they ate or drank or how they misused their bodies. The Corinthians must have written something to this effect in their letter, and Paul, after quoting their dictum, shows his strong disagreement with the sentiments expressed.

Delicate Issues and Misconceptions

In 1 Corinthians, Paul deals with some very delicate issues. The Church had slipped off the rails and some urgent matters had to be rectified. False doctrines and practices had crept in.

Paul wrote this letter of rebuke to voice his displeasure about these activities. Surprisingly many people use this epistle to justify the very doctrine that Paul is condemning. Here are some of the issues that Paul was dissatisfied with, and for which he rebukes the Corinthians:

Division

...there are contentions among you. Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you, but Crispus and Gaius; Lest any should say that I had baptized in mine own name (1 Corinthians 1:11-15).

Fornication and Adultery

It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is

not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife. And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you (1 Corinthians 5:1-2).

Wronging Brethren

But brother goeth to law with brother, and that before the unbelievers. Now therefore there is utterly a fault among you, because ye go to law one with another. Why do ye not rather take wrong? why do ye not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded? Nay, ye do wrong, and defraud, and that your brethren (1 Corinthians 6:6-8).

Drunkenness and Greed

For in eating every one taketh before other his own supper: and one is hungry, and another is drunken. What? have ye not houses to eat and to drink in? or despise ye the church of God, and shame them that have not? what shall I say to you? shall I praise you in this? I praise you not (1 Corinthians 11:21-22).

Misconceptions about Marriage

Now concerning what you wrote to me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband. Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to the husband...

Do not deprive one another, except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer. And come together again so that Satan does not tempt you for your lack of self-control (1 Corinthians 7:1-3,5 NKJV).

One of the classic misconceptions regarding Paul is that he was anti-marriage and anti-women. Nothing could be further from the truth. Paul speaks fondly of the women who supported his ministry, such as Phoebe, Priscilla, and Mary.

He never said that it was good for a man not to touch a woman. It was the Corinthians who said it in their letter to Paul ("Now concerning what you wrote to me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman"). This was part of the confusion of philosophies in the Corinthian Church.

On the one hand was the group that believed that it did not matter how they treated their bodies, and on the other hand was the group that believed that dedication to the Lord meant abstinence from sexual relations with women even in marriage.

Both of these ideas stemmed from pagan origins, and a misunderstanding of God's character.

After quoting what the Corinthians wrote in their letter, Paul uses the word "nevertheless" to indicate his disapproval of their statement.

He then continues, "let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband. Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise

also the wife to the husband,” saying exactly the opposite to what their dictum inferred.

About Spiritual Gifts

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I would not have you ignorant. Ye know that ye were Gentiles, carried away unto these dumb idols, even as ye were led (1 Corinthians 12:1-2).

In his first letter to the Church in Corinth, Paul wants the newly converted Christians to understand the function of the gifts of the Spirit. One of the ways the Holy Spirit works in our lives is through giving us His gifts. These are abilities that are used to glorify God and edify others. We can see from Scripture that all who choose to follow God’s way are given spiritual gifts:

But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal (1 Corinthians 12:7).

The Corinthians came from a background of paganism—religion based on rituals and action. In paganism they sought favor from different gods according to the circumstances surrounding the request.

In this context, Paul wants to make it clear that there are different gifts, but that the same Spirit of God gives them all. Moreover, the gifts are distributed to benefit the whole Church, and not everyone receives the same gifts.

Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal.

For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; To another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues.

But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will. For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ (1 Corinthians 12:4-12).

These texts make it clear that God is the one who decides which gifts are for whom. Clearly, the gift of tongues was given to some and not to others. Pentecostal doctrine says that everyone should speak in tongues, making the receiving of the gift of tongues a test of acceptance by God.

However, that doctrine does not fall in line with this passage of Scripture. The body forms a harmonious whole, and no one portion or gift is of greater significance than another. Not everyone has the same gift, and God decides who does what. 1 Corinthians 12:18, 28-30 says this:

But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him...

And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues. Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles? Have all the gifts of healing? do all speak with tongues? do all interpret?

What are Spiritual Gifts?

Spiritual gifts are talents or interests given to a Christian by the Holy Spirit after they join the fellowship of believers or upon baptism.

Just as when Jesus was baptized by John, and the Spirit of God descended upon Him in the form of a dove, so anyone who is baptized by water is to also to receive the Spirit, for only with the presence of the Holy Spirit in a person's life are they able to walk the Christian life.

Christianity is not about our own works, but God "willing and doing" within us His good pleasure.

Spiritual gifts received upon baptism may be specialties that are already built on talents previously developed, or they may even be tendencies only discovered after an individual has given their life to Christ and is walking with Him.

One of the most important testimonies of Christianity is what it does to its adherents. Testimony after testimony exists of lives changed for the better as a result of faith in God and an acceptance of His forgiveness and a new life in Christ.

Baptism is just the beginning. From then on, we are to walk in newness of life day by day with God and practicing a life of submission to God's will. Sometimes that is easier said than done.

On the day we are baptized, we do not usually miraculously suddenly become a different person with different tastes or interests. Anytime we want to, we could walk back to the way we were, and take up our old interests and our old habits.

Why Spiritual Gifts?

Christianity is not a crutch—it is a cross. The apostle Paul tells us that we are to die daily. This is not a literal death, of course, but a daily decision to put our selfish motives and desires away and to ask for the Holy Spirit to dwell in us.

As we do this, our old habits lose their hold on us and our interests change. We develop a love for things we may have never imagined we'd love before, and a distaste for the very things we used to enjoy.

This is part of the Christian's growth, for the Christian life is not stagnant, but is always moving forward ever higher, ever nearer to the God whose character we want to emulate.

Spiritual gifts are talents that develop in our life as we are growing in Christ. Paul talks in Corinthians about the Church as a body with hands, feet, eyes, ears, and a mouth. He shows that a body is not made up of just one feature, but it has many parts with many distinct functions.

Paul likens spiritual gifts to these functions, and reminds us that one is not greater than the other. They all play their important in making a whole individual that can function fully. So it is in the Church. Each person is given special gifts for blessing and ministering to others. Not everyone can have the same gift, for then there would be a lack.

Those that say that tongues is the most important gift to be desired—as it indicates whether or not we are truly walking with God—misunderstand the function of spiritual gifts, as we shall see later on in this section.

In fact, Paul says that love is the one thing that should be desired above all other things. Our service to God must be actuated from a spirit of love and sacrifice, not of duty or pride in one's gifts.

Defining the Gifts

Here are some of the gifts Paul lists in his letter to the Corinthians and in his other letters:

Administration

This believer can see the practical steps and resources that the Church needs reach its goals. They organize, strategize, and also guide people into roles that make effective use of their various gifts (Luke 14:28, Titus 1:5).

Apostleship

This believer has a deep burden for soul winning. Their greatest joy is winning people to Jesus (Ephesians 4:11).

Discernment

This believer can quickly detect the false and the true. This person can read a book, hear a sermon, or just be talking with someone and immediately detect error.

Sometimes this person gets on people's nerves because it seems they are always pointing out error (1 Corinthians 12:10).

Exhortation

This believer urges other believers through advice, warning, and admonishment to do what is right in Christ. They encourage others to run the race and continue in Jesus Christ (Romans 12:8).

Faith

This believer knows that God is going to work everything out. They have caught a vision of what God can do and they go for the gusto regardless of what happens around them. When others may despair, this person strongly believes God (1 Corinthians 12:9).

Faith is something every believer needs to have for "without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him" (Hebrews 11:6). Faith is the basis of a Christian's faith.

Generosity

This believer serves by giving monies over and above their tithes, and bestows gifts on others. They earn and handle money well. They don't do this for show, it is just how they are—they may not even recognize that this is one of their gifts (Romans 12:8).

Healing

This believer has a knack for helping the sick. They may be in the medical profession, or they may be a medical missionary—someone that works with natural remedies with the herbs and plants God made for healing.

Helps

This believer serves with their hands in tasks such as building or cooking. In Acts 6 we see a problem arising with the Greek widows being neglected in the daily ministry.

What did the apostles do? They picked out seven honest men who were full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom to take care of this business, so that the apostles could give themselves to prayer and the Word.

The first Christian martyr, Stephen, was one of these men (Romans 12:7, 1 Corinthians 12:28).

Hospitality

This believer enjoys providing meals or lodging in Christian love. Many prepare and take meals to the sick. This is not listed as a specific gift in 1 Corinthians, and can be considered an example of the gift of helps. It is noteworthy that the Bible says that we should all participate in hospitality (Romans 12:13, 1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:8, 1

Peter 4:9).

Knowledge

This believer loves to research, investigate, and study the Scriptures. They are not satisfied with a shallow knowledge of God's Word. Others are blessed by their careful study (1 Corinthians 12:28).

Leadership

This believer serves by planning, directing, delegating, and taking the lead. A good example of this is Vacation Bible School. The Pastor might commission someone to organize the VBS.

That means arranging for dates, materials, snacks, special music, theme, and other logistics. This person would lead other workers by organizing meetings and being the point of contact (Romans 12:8, 1 Corinthians 12:28).

Mercy

This believer exhibits a caring and compassionate attitude, always with a kind word. They show kindness and forbearance towards those who are hurting. They relieve suffering (Romans 12:8).

Miracles

This gift is rarely seen nowadays, even though it was prevalent in Bible times. This believer can pray and have a miracle occur, such as the healing of the paralytic or the raising of Dorcas by Peter. But, because this gift can be duplicated so easily by the Enemy, this gift is no longer used.

Prophecy

This believer receives messages from God. Paul said that the person "that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification (building up), exhortation (encouragement to grow), and comfort (1 Corinthians 14:3, definitions added).

He also said, "desire spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophesy" (1 Corinthians 14:1).

We don't see this gift manifested very much nowadays. Many false prophets have arisen, and too many people follow self-imposed prophets without verifying that they are true prophets of God (Romans 12:6, 1 Corinthians 12:10, Ephesians 4:11).

Teaching

This believer has a burden to see others grow and learn through Bible study. They present Bible truths in a logical and systematic way (Romans 12:7, Ephesians 4:11, 1 Corinthians 12:28-29).

Tongues

For a definition and explanation of this spiritual gift, read our article "Dealing with Tongues."

Wisdom

This believer can apply knowledge and determine a solution. This person usually has the answer to a dilemma (1 Corinthians 12:8).

A Lesson in Love

The underlying principle pulsing through everything that God grants His children is love. Love supersedes all, and love is never selfish.

The gifts of God are therefore also not granted for selfish purposes, but are granted to benefit others. Of course, benefiting others is a doubled-edged sword, because if we seek to benefit others, we will be filled ourselves also. This principle of love will lead to humility:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.

And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.

Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil (1 Corinthians 13:1-5 NKJV).

To summarize the principles in 1 Corinthians, we can thus say this:

1. Worship is not mindless (1 Corinthians 12:1-3).
2. There is the principle of usefulness to the whole body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:7).
3. There is unity amidst diversity (1 Corinthians 12:10).
4. God distributes gifts (1 Corinthians 12:11).
5. There is equality and co-dependence (1 Corinthians 12:12-23).
6. The principle of selfless love applies to all gifts (1 Corinthians 13).

We must always remember that the gifts are given for God's work. His power gives us the ability to spread the Gospel (Romans 1:16).

Dealing with Tongues

By the end of 1 Corinthians 13, Paul has addressed the general wrongs within the Corinthian Church, the nature and granting of spiritual gifts, and the need for selfless love in all Christian endeavors.

In chapter 14, Paul addresses the misuse of the gift of tongues among the Corinthians.

We do not have all the details of the questions that Paul is answering from the letter the Corinthians wrote to him. Neither do we know in full detail the assumptions and ideas on which they based their thinking.

We therefore have to deduce from the style and dialogue itself whether Paul agrees or disagrees with the sentiments expressed.

Paul used parallelism to emphasize his arguments: a statement is followed by a contradicting statement. He uses “but” or a similar conjunction to signal that he does not agree with the previous statement.

How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying.

If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two, or at the most by three, and that by course; and let one interpret. But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church; and let him speak to himself, and to God.

This chapter is a recipe for proper church order. Church activities should edify people. For example, in a multilingual meeting speaking in tongues is permissible if conducted in an orderly fashion with proper translation.

Incomprehensible utterances are contrary to the Spirit of God, because God would not exclude some people by giving others a “gift” that is not for the benefit of the Body. It is contrary to His nature of unselfish love. Speaking in tongues may be a worldwide phenomenon, but that fact does not mean that it is in harmony with Scripture.

That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive (Ephesians 4:14).

For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints (1 Corinthians 14:33).

The Organization of 1 Corinthians 14

In chapter 14 of 1 Corinthians, Paul goes into depth about the gift of tongues:

The Organization of 1 Corinthians 14

It is helpful to remember that Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 14 in compare and contrast format. He uses conjunctions such as "but" to signal the change from a statement he disagrees with to truthful statement.

How it Should Be	
<i>Follow after charity, and desire spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophesy (1 Corinthians 14:1).</i>	Love dictates preaching the Gospel. Not all are prophets who receive visions from God. Rather, the word "prophesy" here means preaching or proclaiming the Gospel.
How it Should Not Be	
<i>For he that speaketh in an unknown tongue speaketh not unto men, but unto God: for no man understandeth him; howbeit in the spirit he speaketh mysteries (1 Corinthians 14:2).</i>	Here, Paul is quoting a saying from the Corinthians. Paul does not agree with this position as is clear from his subsequent use of the conjunction "but" in verse 3. The Bible's only definition of tongues is in Acts 2, where it is defined as a gift of languages.
How it Should Be	
<i>But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort (1 Corinthians 14:3).</i>	If we don't understand what we are saying, then our speaking is of no value to others. Instead of speaking strange tongues, prophesy and preach the Gospel, so that others may be encouraged and comforted.
How it Should Not Be	
<i>He that speaketh in an unknown tongue edifieth himself (1 Corinthians 14:4a).</i>	Those that speak in tongues for themselves violate the principle of selfless love. Paul does not approve, as is seen again by the use of the conjunction "but" later in this verse.
How it Should Be	
<i>but he that prophesieth edifieth the church. (1 Corinthians 14:4b).</i>	Obviously, we should not all speak in tongues. Paul had already explained that God distributes the gifts as He wills and not as we will. Preaching the Gospel builds up the Church, and should be practiced.
How it Should Not Be	
<i>I would that ye all spake with tongues (1 Corinthians 14:5a).</i>	If God gives the gifts, and all do not receive the same gifts, why would Paul want everyone to speak in tongues? Paul is not saying that we all must speak in tongues. He is saying that he does not prohibit the true gift of tongues. If God does give us the gift, we should use it! Paul however, does not agree with this statement as the Corinthians want it. This can again be seen by the use of the conjunction "but" that follows.

The Organization of 1 Corinthians 14 Part 2

How it Should Be

but rather that ye prophesied: for greater is he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues, except he interpret, that the church may receive edifying (1 Corinthians 14:5b).

No gift is greater than another (1 Corinthians 12:4-26), and the purpose of the gifts is to further the Gospel. The word "interpret" can have two meanings in Scripture. The first is to translate, and the second is to explain. Also note in this verse that the individual who speaks in tongues must also interpret.

How it Should Not Be

Now, brethren, if I come unto you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you (1 Corinthians 14:6a).

Paul is saying that it would be of no value to speak in tongues if no one else would benefit from it, and his following statement is thus again followed by a negative conjunction.

How it Should Be

except I shall speak to you either by revelation, or by knowledge, or by prophesying, or by doctrine... Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church. Wherefore let him that speaketh in an unknown tongue pray that he may interpret (1 Corinthians 14:6b, 12-13).

Useful, uplifting information is needed, and someone should first impart information in a language, then interpret. There must have been two problems regarding tongues in the Corinthian Church: first the incorrect use of the correct gift, and second the use of incoherent utterances that could not edify others and were of no benefit to the Church.

How it Should Not Be

For if I pray in an unknown tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful (1 Corinthians 14:14).

Paul does not agree with this statement as can again be seen by his following statement, and he is thus here quoting from the philosophies of the time.

How it Should Be

What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also. Else when thou shalt bless with the spirit, how shall he that occupieth the room of the unlearned say Amen at thy giving of thanks, seeing he understandeth not what thou sayest (1 Corinthians 14:15-16).

The phrase "What is it then" shows Paul's disagreement with the previous statement. Verse 15 is his opinion, verse 16 elaborates.

The Organization of 1 Corinthians 14

How it Should Not Be

For thou verily givest thanks well, but the other is not edified (1 Corinthians 14:17). If no one else is built up, all the thanksgiving in other languages benefits no one.

How it Should Be

I thank my God, I speak with tongues more than ye all: Yet in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue (1 Corinthians 14:18-19). Paul is grateful for his own gift of tongues, but he does not wish to abuse it.

How it Should Not Be

Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be men (1 Corinthians 14:20). Paul is reminding them of his words in the previous chapter:
When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things (1 Corinthians 13:11).

How it Should Be

In the law it is written, With men of other tongues and other lips will I speak unto this people; and yet for all that will they not hear me, saith the Lord. Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not: but prophesying serveth not for them that believe not, but for them which believe (1 Corinthians 14:21-22). The ability to speak in other languages is a gift to reach unbelievers of other nations. Prophecy is of value to those who believe.

How it Should Not Be

If therefore the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad (1 Corinthians 14:20)? A confusion of tongues of any nature would be detrimental to the Gospel. It would deter unbelievers, rather than winning them to the truth. Incoherent utterances are of no value to anyone. The negative conjunction "but" again emphasizes the correct manner of worship.

How it Should Be

But if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all: And thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth (1 Corinthians 14:18-19). Real words of truth will convict souls and lead to real conversions.