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1 Corinthians 12

“Defining Spiritual Gifts”

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In spite of many and varied problems, the people in the church at Corinth were very spiritual people. Paul even started his letter ([1 Corinthians 1:7](#)) by saying they *“did not lack any spiritual gift.”* It may be hard to believe, but these people who had spiritual gifts were at the same time quarreling and prophesying; tolerating sexual sin and having a word of knowledge; getting drunk and speaking in tongues!

How can it be that some of the most carnal, spiritually immature people can be flowing in the gifts of the Spirit? There are two reasons. First, [Romans 11:29](#) indicates, *“God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable.”* So as long as we still have his Spirit we still have his gifts, even when we might act like carnal Christians from time to time. Don’t misunderstand. It’s not the goal to try to figure out how carnal you can be and still be a Christian. In fact, Paul’s entire letter is a corrective rebuke to that sort of mentality.

The second reason they could be so carnal and spiritual at the same time is that some of what they were doing was done out of ignorance.¹ Four times Paul warns about being ignorant of certain things. In [1 Corinthians 12:1](#)² he says he doesn’t want them to be ignorant *“about spiritual gifts.”* In [1 Corinthians 10:1–5](#)³ he says he doesn’t want them to be ignorant about sin from their own history. In [1 Corinthians 15:34](#)⁴ he says he doesn’t want them to be ignorant about ongoing sin. And finally, in [1 Corinthians 14:38](#),⁵ he says that he doesn’t want them to be just plain ignorant!

¹ The Greek words that we get the English word ignorance from appear more times in 1 Corinthians than any other New Testament book.

² *“Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant.”*

³ *“For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert.”*

⁴ *“Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God—I say this to your shame.”*

⁵ *“If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored.”* Note: Some manuscripts – *“If he is ignorant of this, let him be ignorant.”*

So we see that not only were they were spiritually gifted – because God’s gifts are irrevocable – but there’s also a lot of ignorance on display. And where you have ignorance about things – especially the Holy Spirit – you will also have misuses, misunderstandings and mistakes. And in the church today there are more abuses and misuses, confusion and controversy, division and discord concerning the topic of the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts than almost any subject. And why is that? It’s because there is still quite a lot of ignorance in the church today.

Many people approach the subject of the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit through the lens of their own tradition and experience; neither of which is necessarily based on Scripture, which is the only reliable reference point on the subject. Some have a strict Fundamentalist background and their belief is that the gifts are not for today, because the evidence of the gifts ended with the apostles. Others have a strict Pentecostal background, which brings the understanding that the gifts are definitely for our day and that if you don’t speak in tongues, you don’t have the indwelling of the Spirit. Some Pentecostals even go so far as to say that speaking in tongues is *the* evidence of salvation!

It’s necessary that we have a basic understanding of who the Holy Spirit is if there is any hope of sorting out what is truth from error. The Holy Spirit has always existed, being co-eternal and co-existent with God. God is *one* singular God (**Deuteronomy 6:4**), but he reveals himself in three persons: Father, Son (Jesus), and Holy Spirit. The first time the Holy Spirit is mentioned in the Bible is **Genesis 1:2**. The Spirit came upon Moses and the 70 elders (**Numbers 11**), Gideon (Judges 6), Samson (**Judges 14**), Saul (**1 Samuel 10**), David (**1 Samuel 16**) and many others. The Holy Spirit was given by assignment to various people in the Old Testament.

We read about the Holy Spirit for the first time in the New Testament in **Acts 1:4–5**, when he said, “*Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.*” He promised the outpouring of God’s Spirit, not just by assignment as in the Old Testament, but for all believers. Ten days later these words were fulfilled in **Acts 2** when the Holy Spirit came upon all believers gathered in the Upper Room on the day of Pentecost. As the Holy Spirit came upon them, they started worshiping God in languages they had never personally learned, because God gave them utterance. When bystanders heard Galileans worshiping God in a number of different languages, some were perplexed and asked, “*What does this mean?*” (**Acts 2:12**) Others made fun of them and said, “*They’ve had too much wine!*” (**Acts 2:13**)

All of this prompted Peter to stand up and explain what was happening. He said, “*These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.’*” (**Acts 2:15–18**)

What is the role of the Holy Spirit? First, it’s the role of the Holy Spirit to convict the world of sin. (**John 16:8**) It is the Spirit who works in a person’s life to draw them to God. Second, the Spirit is given for salvation, and He indwells and empowers believers for service. (**John 14:17** and **Acts 1:8**) And third, the Holy Spirit brings glory to Jesus, as stated in **John 16:14**: “*He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.*” Jesus also said that the Holy Spirit “*will testify about me.*” (**John 15:26**)

It's important to see that Jesus is preeminent and anything about the Holy Spirit or the gifts of the Spirit should exalt Jesus. The lack of bringing glory to Jesus is a cause for concern, considering the troubling evidence found today in the modern charismatic movement. Unfortunately, there is a tendency on the part of some pastors, people, and churches to point people to people, as well as point people to power, without doing the Scriptural thing of pointing people to Jesus! And if that's not happening, then it's not really a legitimate work of the Holy Spirit, because the Spirit is not in competition with Jesus; the Spirit is at work to glorify Jesus.

It's this same Spirit who is upon the church at Corinth, so Paul helps them understand what some of the gifts of the Spirit are, and how they are to function in a proper and orderly fashion. Paul mentions 13 gifts in **1 Corinthians 12** (nine are mentioned in v. 7–11 and four are listed in v. 28).

Message Of Wisdom

1. An inspired insight or answer to a problem or question.
2. Examples include: Solomon and the two women (**1 Kings 3:16–28**), and Jesus and taxes (**Matthew 22:15–22**).

Message Of Knowledge

3. Inspired information about a matter or a person.
4. One example would be Peter's remarks to Ananias and Sapphira regarding lying to God. (**Acts 5:1–11**)

Faith

5. A special ability to trust and rest in the promises or possibilities of God for a given situation, which is different from saving faith.

Healing

6. The supernatural ability of God working through a person to cure illnesses or restore health apart from natural means.
7. Examples include: Peter and the crippled beggar (**Acts 3:1–10**), and Paul healing the sick on the island of Malta (**Acts 28:7–10**).

Miraculous Powers

8. The working of God's powers through a person for his glory.
9. Examples include: Jesus turning the water into wine ([John 2:1-11](#)) and Peter raising Dorcas from the dead ([Acts 9:32-43](#)).

Prophecy

10. The inspired foretelling or forth telling of God's Word for the strengthening, encouragement and comfort of people.
11. It's less about foretelling the future and more about forth telling, exhorting and proclaiming the Word of God. (Philip's daughters were all prophetesses – [Acts 2:8-9](#))

Distinguishing Of Spirits

12. The ability to discern between what is divine, human or evil about a person or matter.
13. Examples include: Paul and Elymas in Cyprus ([Acts 13:4-12](#)).

Tongues

14. An inspired language, unknown to the person speaking, for prayer and praise to God.
15. Examples include: [Acts 2:4](#) and [1 Corinthians 12 and 14](#).

Interpretation Of Tongues

16. The companion gift to tongues for the purpose of edifying the speaker or hearers ([1 Corinthians 14:13](#)).

Apostleship

17. A visionary gift of helping to plant and oversee ministries, maintaining doctrinal purity.

Teaching

18. The inspired ability to communicate God's truth with clarity so that the church may learn and grow in their faith.

Helps

19. The special ability to serve or assist others in practical, meaningful ways.

Administration

20. The inspired ability to devise and execute plans and objectives within the body of Christ.

Discussion Questions

1. Review the introduction to the study guide with your group to provide the appropriate background.
2. Read **1 Corinthians 12:1-11, 27-30** to provide an overview for this study.
 - a. Make sure you allow time to explain the person, role and work of the Holy Spirit.
3. Spend time reading and discussing the spiritual gifts outlined above.
4. Are the gifts of the Spirit still available today?
5. If so, what are the purposes of Spiritual Gifts?
6. Do you desire a certain spiritual gift that you don't have?
7. Do you envy someone else's spiritual gifting?
 - a. Don't envy people because they have a certain spiritual gift, because their lives just might be more messed up than you can know!
8. Spend time talking about some of the misuses, misunderstandings and mistakes regarding the gifts of the Spirit.
 - a. Allow the people in your group to share examples of confusion, controversy and division in churches/denominations regarding spiritual gifts, their use, etc.
9. Spend time talking about the various church/denominational traditions regarding spiritual gifts.
10. Why is there so much emphasis on speaking in tongues?

11. Close your time by allowing everyone in your group to: thank the Lord for his Word that brings truth and life to all who would read and follow it; thank God for the ministry of the Holy Spirit who worked in their life to draw them to salvation and into a living relationship; thank God for the indwelling and empowering work of the Holy Spirit available to all believers; ask for a fresh infilling of the Holy Spirit, so that they would demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit in their lives. (**Galatians 5:22–23** – *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”*)