

Spiritual Gifts: Expectation Without Agenda

What are spiritual gifts?

Spiritual gifts are supernatural empowerments given by the Holy Spirit to the followers of Christ so that they can do the work of building up the body of Christ, that is, the church, and extend the Kingdom of God throughout the world.

Spiritual gifts are not innate, natural talents, like an ear for music or the ability to draw, but rather they are empowerments that the Holy Spirit gives to a believer to minister to the body in ways that were not possible by mere natural effort apart from the Holy Spirit. In the ministry of the apostles in the book of Acts, we see that they performed miracles, healed people, preached, and spoke in tongues, which they had not been able to do apart from Christ.

Spiritual gifts are empowerments for building up the church and extending the Kingdom of God. In 1 Corinthians 14, the Apostle Paul instructs this congregation on the function of spiritual gifts. He repeats several times that they are to strengthen or build up the church.

But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement, and comfort (1 Corinthians 14:3).

. . . try to excel in gifts that build up the church (1 Corinthians 14:12).

. . . All of these things must be done for the strengthening of the church (1 Corinthians 14:26).

Of course, it must also be noted that Paul suggests that spiritual gifts can have a witnessing function to non-believers.

But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!" (1 Corinthians 14:24–25).

Who can have spiritual gifts?

The Holy Spirit is the owner and dispenser of the spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:7,11). As believers, we are stewards of the gifts of God (1 Peter 4:10). Every believer can expect the Holy Spirit to minister through him or her with spiritual gifts. *Now **to each one** the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good . . .* (1 Corinthians 12:7; emphasis added). This protects us from a static view of spiritual gifts and leads into a more dynamic relationship with the Holy Spirit where we can expect Him to move through us in multiple ways for His Glory as He sees fit.

Spiritual gifts can be experienced immediately following conversion, but are often received at various moments subsequent to conversion. Paul encourages Timothy, *Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body*

of elders laid their hands on you (1 Timothy 4:14). It is not clear exactly when this happened in Timothy's spiritual journey, but it was probably when he was commissioned by the church to begin his ministry. This also suggests that gifts can come by impartation from spiritual leadership. This is not some kind of "magical" touch, but instead the culmination of a relationship of discipleship accountability and submission to authority. It is also clear from Scripture that spiritual gifts can be received when a person is filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4; 10:44–48; 19:6).

How do spiritual gifts work?

As we read the book of Acts, we see that spiritual gifts were very much a part of the ministry of the New Testament church. We also see them in operation in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus did His miraculous deeds in His Spirit empowered humanity (Acts 10:38). He asked his disciples to do the things that he had been doing (Luke 9:1). Since his ministry was a demonstration of spiritual gifts through a fully surrendered man, then he could with confidence say to his disciples, "As the Father has sent me, so send I you" (John 20:21). Our founder, A. B. Simpson said,

When Christ healed the sick while he was on the earth, it was not by the Deity that dwelt in his humanity. He said, *If I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is come upon you* (Matthew 12:28). Jesus healed by the Holy Spirit. *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted* (Luke 4:18). The Holy Spirit is the agent, then, by which this great power is wrought. We should especially expect to see his working in these days because they are the days in which it has been prophesied that there shall be signs and wonders (*The Fourfold Gospel*, p. 48).

A.W. Tozer recognized this dynamic when he said, "While our Lord Jesus was on earth, he did not accomplish his great deeds of power in the strength of his deity. I believe he did them all in the strength and authority of his Spirit-anointed humanity" (*Jesus, Our Man in Glory*, chapter 6). Though the focus of Acts is on the ministry of the Apostles, we also see that lay people exercised spiritual gifts (Acts 6:8; 8:6–7; 9:17–19; 10:44–46; 19:6–7). Thus, every believer can expect God to work through him or her with spiritual gifts.

Various passages in the New Testament mention a variety of gifts, principally 1 Corinthians 12:8–10, 29–30; Romans 12:4–8; Ephesians 4:11; and 1 Peter 4:10–11. It is not easy to define or describe each of these gifts. Some seem to be quite evident in their nature. The Scriptures do not indicate that the list of spiritual gifts is exhaustive. The number of spiritual gifts is not important, but rather the understanding of what they are and how they are to be used.

Spiritual gifts should work together, complementing each other. There is a need for them to be active in the church. Paul exhorts the Corinthian congregation to eagerly desire spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 14:1). This does not mean, however, that gifts should be used to exalt the individual or to feed an immature desire for attention. He repeats in v. 12 that they should *try to excel in gifts that build up the church*. Spiritual gifts must be

used in love (1 Corinthians 13; Romans 12:9; Ephesians 4:15; 1 Peter 4:8). If they are not used in love they will be abused and cause trouble in the body, rather than blessing (1 Corinthians 13:1–3). Love, when used with spiritual gifts is like oil in a machine. It makes all the parts work well together. We must also remember that our “comfort zone” is not the same as spiritual discernment, and at times even a gift manifested in love may make those ignorant of it uncomfortable. Therefore, patient teaching on the gifts and their manifestations is a necessity (1 Corinthians 12:12–27; Romans 12:4, 5; Ephesians 4:12,15,16).

Is one spiritual gift more important than another?

All the gifts are needed in the body of Christ. All the gifts are equally valid. In 1 Corinthians 12:12–26, the Apostle Paul instructs the church that no one should despise his/her own gift by comparing it to the gifts of others. And he also says that no one should despise someone else’s gift as being less than his/her gift. Some gifts are more apparent than others, but each gift is important.

Paul indicates that the gift of prophecy is an important gift, one to be desired (1 Corinthians 14:1). First Corinthians 14:1–25 compares the gift of prophecy and the gift of speaking in tongues in the context of public worship. The clear indication is that the gift of prophecy is more profitable for building up the body of Christ than the gift of speaking in tongues is, unless the tongues are interpreted (1 Corinthians 14:5, 27–28). The context of the ministry is what determines the value of a particular gift. Speaking in tongues is a valid gift for today. However, in the public ministry setting, the gift of tongues must have someone to interpret for it to be profitable for strengthening the body. *If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone **must interpret**. If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and to God* (1 Corinthians 14:27–28, emphasis added). This would indicate that if there is no interpreter present, tongues should be used in a personal prayer to God for which no interpretation is necessary. This, of course, is also of value to the individual believer’s edification and ultimately for the edification of the church and must not be considered a lesser gift.

What is the evidence of being filled with the Holy Spirit?

There are some who believe that the gift of tongues is the “initial, physical evidence” of being filled with the Spirit. Again, we affirm tongues as a valid gift for today. But we do not believe that the Scripture supports tongues as the only evidence of the filling of the Holy Spirit.

Paul, as he writes to the believers in the Ephesian church, commands them to . . . *be filled with the Spirit* (Ephesians 5:18). “Filled with the Spirit” is a frequent expression in the Book of Acts describing the source of the mighty power of God working in believers in Christ. This expression implies being under the control of the Holy Spirit. We believe this is still a valid command for today, and every believer should seek to be filled or controlled by the Holy Spirit. So, what is the evidence of being filled with the Holy Spirit?

Though there is a record of people receiving spiritual gifts when they were filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4; 10:44–48; 19:6), there are other instances of people being filled

with the Holy Spirit where there is no mention of spiritual gifts (Acts 4:8, 31; 8:15–17; 9:17–18; 13:9, 52). Though some may speak in tongues when they are filled with the Holy Spirit, others do not. While rejecting the “initial evidence doctrine” we must be careful to say there “should be” and “will be” evidence that a person has been filled with the Holy Spirit. As Tozer strongly notes, “no one ever received the Holy Spirit’s power without knowing it” (*Keys to the Deeper Life*, p. 57). A creed of power without the experience of power is worthless. One phrase that could describe our posture in this encounter with God is “Expectation without Agenda.” It would seem to be a dangerous thing to try and convince someone they have been filled with the Spirit if there is no manifest evidence in their lives. Our expectancy should be that God will meet His people in a powerful way. However, it would be equally dangerous to demand a specific agenda or manifestation in that moment. Again, we should come to the Lord with great expectation, while seeking to free ourselves from human agendas or motives.

Regardless of the gifts or manifestations a believer may experience, the fruit of the Holy Spirit, as described in Galatians 5:22–23 is the primary evidence of the Spirit-filled life. These qualities are produced by the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. The fruit of the Spirit shows that the Holy Spirit is in control of the believer’s life.

Another strong evidence of being filled with the Holy Spirit is a fruitful ministry. In Acts 1:8 Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would give power to be His witnesses. We often mention the scope of our ministry—Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth, but we also need to focus on the source of power for our ministry—the Holy Spirit, who wants to fill us for a holy life and effective service.

Finally, 1 Corinthians 12 lists a variety of manifestations that occur when the Holy Spirit is ministering. We have no reason to believe this is an all-inclusive list of manifestations or evidences. Weeping, for instance, is not mentioned. Yet many believers have experienced tears as a manifestation of the Spirit’s work and power. Others may experience a manifestation of “joy unspeakable” and God’s love, but never shed a tear. Rather than demanding a single gift or manifestation as the evidence of the filling of the Holy Spirit, we ought to gratefully embrace all the gifts, manifestations and fruit that the Lord desires to bring into our lives.

Have some spiritual gifts ceased to exist?

No. Because spiritual gifts were given to build up the church, the body of Christ, as long as the church is under construction, spiritual gifts are needed. A day will come when spiritual gifts will no longer be needed (1 Corinthians 13:8). However, we do not believe that this day has yet come. It will come *when perfection comes* (1 Corinthians 13:10). Some interpret this “perfection” to be the completion of the canon of Scripture (the Apostolic Age). However, this is not a good rendering of the Greek text. We believe that this refers to the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. When the church, the bride of Christ is complete and perfect, that is when spiritual gifts will no longer be necessary.

How can I discover my spiritual gift(s)?

It is possible for a person to neglect a spiritual gift. Paul warns Timothy not to neglect his gift (1 Timothy 4:14), and he also encourages him to *fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hand* (2 Timothy 1:6). Therefore, it is a biblical necessity that believers discover and move in the arena of spiritual gifts. It has been said that Christians are not primarily natural beings having temporary spiritual experiences. Rather, we are spiritual beings having a temporary natural experience. We live in a spiritual, Kingdom reality.

If the Holy Spirit distributes spiritual gifts, then their discovery must by nature be a spiritual experience. When we walk in obedience, we must trust that the Holy Spirit will respond with the revelation of His gifts in our lives. Having said this, there are some diagnostic instruments that may help us uncover what God has given.

What kind of ministry do you enjoy the most and shows the most fruitfulness? That probably indicates where there are spiritual gifts operating in your life. If you enjoy teaching and find that people are edified through your teaching ministry, it is likely that the Holy Spirit has given you a gift of teaching. If you find that the Lord puts people in your path who are ready to surrender their life to Christ, you probably have a spiritual gift of evangelism. If you enjoy inviting people to your home, either for a meal or to stay, you probably have a gift of hospitality.

There are “tests” available that might indicate your spiritual gifting. However, some of them measure more what a person’s natural talents and preferences are, rather than truly identifying one’s spiritual gifts. These inventories also focus on past experience and are not always a good indicator of what the Holy Spirit might lead us into in our future ministry.

A better way of confirming a person’s spiritual gifting is through the local congregation and its leadership. What do the leaders and the local body think that you do best that contributes to the welfare of the congregation? That is probably your spiritual gift. A person does not need to announce or advertise his/her spiritual gift. The local congregation will recognize and validate genuine spiritual gifts as the gifted person’s ministry contributes to the building up of the local church body. Of course, this requires the individual believer to step out in faith and obedience to God’s Word. The gifts of the Holy Spirit operate through obedient and faith-filled disciples.

Conclusion

We, in The Christian and Missionary Alliance, believe that spiritual gifts are supernatural empowerments given by the Holy Spirit to believers in Christ to build up the church and extend the Kingdom of God. Our standard as we approach God for the release of His empowerment in our lives and the lives of the people to whom we minister should be “Expectation without Agenda.” Jesus is our focus and completing His mission is our mandate. The gifts of the Spirit are to serve His purposes in the church and in our world. With the guidelines we have been given in God’s Word, believers everywhere should embrace the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives and move out to fulfill our Lord’s Commission.