

Three Types of Spiritual Gifts (1 Corinthians 12:1ff)

Introduction

Take note of Paul's terminology as he wrote in Greek: "varieties of gifts" *charismátōn* gratuities or blessings from God.

This is broadly the whole subject of "spiritual gifts." Paul is introducing the topic for discussion by noting that we can mean different things by using this particular term "spiritual gifts." He goes on to list various types.

1. "administrations" *diakoniōn* ministries or services – Every church should have members in the body who are called to a specific ministry. They should be recognized for this work and, if possible, supported as they may have need.
2. "operations" *energamatōn* effects on the church body – Regardless of any labels, particular talents, or what they actually do, some people in the church seem driven by an inner fire that produces recognizable effects. These are called motivational gifts, or gifts of temperament.
3. "manifestations" *phanerōsis* a visible signal of something invisible – As soon as Paul mentions the manifestation gifts, he proceeds to discuss them at length. They are commonly referred to as "charismatic gifts" because they often appear with some degree of ecstasy in the person. Then, later in this same chapter, Paul goes back to address the first category of ministries. However, the motivational gifts are found in Romans 12:3-8. Nothing in the text itself in either passage makes this obvious, but we can discern from the passage in Romans 12 that Paul is referring to what drives people to Kingdom service.

Some presentations of this teaching will include a fourth category from Ephesians 4:8-16. This refers to "gifts" as concrete objects (*domata*) as gifts of the Spirit, and then goes on to list particular offices in the church body: apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher. It's a case of the right passage, but the wrong approach to understanding it in this context. We will look at Ephesian 4 because it emphasizes something Paul mentions briefly in 1 Corinthians 12.

The most confusing part is that some of the labels in one category show up in other categories. That's how Paul uses them, so it's up to us to seek God's help in keeping this stuff untangled. Nothing binds you to the way they are explained here.

1: Ministries (1 Corinthians 12:27-31)

Paul lists them as apostles, prophets, teachers, miracle workers, healers, support, management and communicators. While Paul enumerates them, it's unlikely this list is closed. Rather, it likely reflects the way things were done in Paul's experience. There's nothing to prevent anyone from carrying on in more than one ministry. These ministries are independent of temperaments or manifestation gifts.

An **apostle** is a visionary, someone who sees where the Kingdom is headed, or at least where it could go if folks were faithful. A related term is **missionary**, someone who is called to bring the power of the gospel to bear in a specific place, or among a specific kind of people (including all the different ways we identify people), or in pursuit of some particular domain of human existence.

The ministry of a **prophet** is fairly obvious. This is someone called to build an instinct about God's moral character and to call out the dangers of deviations from Biblical Law. This person

sees the whole sweep of the revelation and how it is the sole path to redemption. Their work is often a matter of warning about what's ahead.

Teachers are also rather obvious – the mission is to research and teach. These are people adept at organizing doctrine and putting it in reach of others. They would be particularly good at clarifying parables, for example. They understand how Scripture addresses the current context.

The ministry of **miracles** is not well understood in Western culture. That's because Western thinking excludes the very foundation for seeing what miracles are, much less how they happen. In the Bible, miracles are a natural aspect of covenant living; they are wired into Creation itself. It hardly matters whether they come by rituals, specific prayers, or simply the presence of someone whose mission it is to bring them to life. It has nothing to do with what people want or need, and everything to do with God manifesting His glory, often enough for reasons incomprehensible to us. This is someone who can read the moves of the Spirit and discern when God is ready to do something special.

Healers are a special category of miracle worker. This covers the whole gamut of healing body, mind and soul. This is restoring the blessings of *shalom* when someone has somehow gotten into imbalance with Creation. The ministry of healing includes the whole gamut of methods and means to restore things to what God intended.

The ministry of **helps** or **support** is best understood by looking at the Greek term behind it: *antilépsis* – succor or relief. This is easily the broadest and most subtle ministry in the list. The mission is to act or operate in such a way as taking hindrances and burdens from others. It takes a special insight to see and target the one thing that holds someone back from their full potential. The burdens they cannot remove themselves, they'll get someone else to handle.

The ministry of **management** is fairly obvious in terms of effects, but Western culture has a horrible approach to identifying people who should do this work. This is not a promotion from some lower form of service; it's a special calling to help people see how they fit into the body of faith. This is the ministry of guiding people to ministries, and keeping them from interfering with work they don't understand.

A lot of readers are confused by Paul's use of the term **tongues** in this context. It's not a reference to glossolalia. It's the mission of **communicating** to people where they can receive the message. It can include glossolalia and the gift of interpretation as a method, but it's much broader than that. It's the ministry of making sure people can understand from their own context. It can include parables, art, music, poetry, etc. Not just producing those things, but this is a ministry of procuring them from others, as well. It tends to be a clearing-house operation in many cases.

2. Motivations (Romans 12:3-17)

This is another open list, but we can't discern any additions until we understand well enough what Paul delineates here. The list of temperaments could be translated as prophetic, servant, teacher, encourager, giver, elder, and caregiver. Again, these are temperaments, not specific gifts in the typical sense. They tell us what kind of personality we are dealing with. Of particular note is that some of these can be discerned rather well by observing reverse traits when these same people are not spiritually developed. In other words, these temperaments have signature attributes when the person is living in sin, traits that can come back to haunt them in particular temptations.

The **prophetic** temperament tends to see problems before they blossom fully. They can predict where things are headed. But they see what they see; they can ignore things outside their sense of calling. If they happen to miss some important aspects of what they are looking at, their prophecies can miss in specific details, but not in general trends. They need to work hard on seeing the forest and not the trees, but can be quite good at it. They tend to sound obsessive if their warnings are ignored; they can come across as insane. They can be brutal in pointing out the moral flaws of others. In sin, they tend to be depressed and whine a lot, possessed of strong emotions. They can make the most radical shifts for no apparent reason, and suicide takes an awful lot of them.

A temperament poorly received in Western society is the **servant**. These are people who will give of themselves, striving to accommodate the needs of others. They will overload themselves because they hate saying "no." If they aren't protected, they will work themselves into an early grave. Oddly, it's not a question of caring about the people they serve, but of caring about answering that drive to fulfill human need. In sin, they tend to accommodate without any discernment, wide open to manipulation. All it takes is someone who will appreciate them, and they will carry the world on their shoulders.

The **teacher** temperament is focused on the truth, on reality. This person is always looking to discover and verify, and can easily get lost in the knowledge itself. They have an instinct to find or assert structure over pools of data. This one includes a shadow temperament of **researcher** who simply gathers and structures information, but doesn't actually share it. However, this person tends to make truth accessible one way or another. They can easily obsess over what interests them, and forget why such knowledge matters. They tend to be satisfied only that it's accurate insofar as it goes. They really need the fellowship of others who will broaden their perspective; they can easily forget how to care about people and become crotchety experts who pontificate too much. They tend to take themselves too seriously.

An **encourager** is the feel-good guy or gal. They have a pragmatic solution to just about everything. They can break it down into concrete steps; they love lists. It genuinely bothers them to see people feeling down and struggling. They can be very good at listening, but tend to forget that often that's enough by itself. It's reflexive for them to come up with solutions. It's also easy for them to forget that being sorrowful can have a purpose in itself. In sin, they tend to be lazy because their instinct is to provide glib answers why they don't do some things. Everything is easy, even when they can't be bothered to do it themselves. They do like to celebrate, though. They benefit from the company of those who don't forget what the mission is.

There are some people who have a natural talent for resources: the **giver**. This isn't necessarily someone who has wealth – typically not – but who knows how to gain access material goods and services for the sake of the mission. It's not about gathering and hoarding; they aren't greedy because they can always get what they need. But their focus is connecting supply and need. They can catalog where different resources are found; just ask them. It's how their mind operates. If left in sin, they make dreary accountants and bean counters. When faith awakens, they can take a lot of heat for failing to satisfy silly demands. These people benefit from a strong prayer fellowship, and make the best fellowship hosts.

Elders are the quintessential shepherds. They tend to be solitary because almost no one else can see what they see. They seldom make any genuine close friends, despite longing for it. For this reason, they tend to make a lot of people unhappy with their decisions, yet they are usually right. But it's very easy for them to become isolated from those they serve. They tend to be reticent because of the hostility they often face. When faithful, they are sensitive to

building trust within the group, and watchful for those with predatory instincts. They suffer very real pain when someone in their care is humiliated. In sin, they may be heartless and cold, simply because it's the only way they can protect themselves. As much as they hate it, they will abandon those who resist too much. They blossom spiritually when they can learn to love their flock as their own and exercise fatherly patience.

The **caregiver** lives for mercy. They are instinctive empaths. You cannot deceive them about something bothering you. They tend to overdo self-denial, though, because the suffering of others looms so large to them. In sin, they tend to lose track of who they are, and just live vicariously on the feelings of others. Moral maturity for them is realizing their limits and being more selective about whom they try to help. They are suckers for a basket case; being needed feels like love to them. They benefit from a strong hand that keeps them on task and away from manipulators who simply want attention.

This passage also contains a batch of admonitions. You'll find that different parts of that batch hit various temperaments differently. Some are hard-wired into the motivations, while others are a good counter to bad tendencies. Some people teach that you can likely discern in the passage how the temperaments in order are being admonished about their weaknesses in the same order, though that may be stretching it a bit.

It is quite possible that these motivational gifts can differ with the seasons in your life. As the Spirit carries you through different stages and contexts, one temperament can merge into another. It's possible some may be for a time a hybrid of two. However, the underlying principles of understanding remain: The Lord grants as a gift some motivational force to drive us in serving Him.

The best way to use this information is to discern the single strongest motivation you have during a particular season in you life. It should seem highly improbable that this list covers the full gamut of personality types God has made. Chances are good a few readers will not see themselves in this list. Rather, Paul points out what he saw during his apostolic ministry.

We aren't looking to lock someone into a single motivational gift for life. That may well be the case, but it's much more important to understand this as the empowering divine Presence in your life at any give time. It's not a question of *what* you are, but *who* you are in Christ. This is the foundation for building a model of personality types answering the demands of revelation far better than the silly models proposed by human thinkers who don't bow the knee to Christ.

3. Manifestations

These gifts are: word of wisdom, word of knowledge, word of faith, healing, miracles, word of prophecy, word of discernment, glossolalia, and interpretation of tongues. These are ecstatic utterances of the mouth accompanying various miraculous effects in others. I note in passing that some who are deaf/mute and use sign language have experienced these gifts, as well.

We need to take a moment to debunk a pernicious heresy. These gifts are not somehow proof that one is "spirit-filled," as if it were something separate and secondary to being spiritually born. Manifestation gifts are not a graduate degree of faith, as it were. It makes the mythology of "getting saved" even worse. The whole image is wild nonsense that has done great damage to Christian religion. The expression "spirit filled" in the Bible is best understood in the context where it occurs.

The following list of gifts are contextual manifestations of God showing His power among His people to bless His people. We become conduits of mercy and grace to each other. The Spirit

of God provokes you to communicate and achieve an effect you cannot normally do, bypassing your human limitations. Each is a miracle in itself. The occurrence may be a one-time event, an occasional repeat, or a common exercise for the person experiencing it. In all cases, the believer remains in control in the sense of doing it or not. It is not squelching the Spirit to withhold the exercise of this gift; it's yours to use for His glory. You are expected to follow all the same customs and habits of being polite and orderly in the fellowship. However, you have no control over the content, which is the whole point.

Because this is a rather pure expression of the Holy Spirit, it tends to create ecstasy in the believer. It can be addictive in that sense. It can also be abused, and a great many people do so in actual practice. It can become an excuse to draw attention to the self, which is an insult to God, since the whole point is drawing attention to Him. Even without the mass fakery that takes place, we can safely say it is more often abused than not. This was the case with the Corinthian church to which Paul addressed this teaching.

Word of Wisdom is when the Spirit gives you an insight beyond your normal capabilities. It is seldom the words precisely, but something you are provoked to put into words. It comes as a flash of inspiration that, to you, is obviously beyond your understanding. It serves to help someone else discern what path they should take.

The **word of knowledge** is revelation of a fact you cannot otherwise know. In current practice this is often confused with a word of healing or miracle. This gift offers precise factual information that is needed, but would be virtually impossible for you to find out in a timely manner, or is beyond your intellectual capacity at the moment. It offers a clue so someone can act appropriately.

When someone receives a **word of faith**, it's supposed to pull someone up from a weak position. This is a little harder to explain in that God alone knows what the recipient needs to provoke a stronger faith, so a word of faith could be any number of things about which the speaker has no clue. However, in some contexts, it can also be something they do understand, and they are pressed to affirm that God will answer a shared prayer request in one manner or another.

A **word of healing** is just what it sounds like. One person receives an impression from the Holy Spirit to affirm something can or will be healed. This business of random pronouncements that "someone is being healed from this or that" is quite likely fake, because this is not what Paul describes. It's more personal in nature, and the target is seldom unknown.

Word of miracle is similar to healing, but covers all the other miraculous provisions people might need. Scripture is loaded with examples, so there is little need to try to explain. People pray together for all sorts of things, and a word of miracle is one possible way God answers. A much bigger problem is learning how to define what a miracle is, because the definition includes the element of plausible deniability – any actual witness can still choose to explain it away. It requires faith to receive any miraculous gift.

A **word of prophecy** is a manifestation that doesn't necessarily require a prophet, but is consistent with prophetic ministry. It's more about the testimony of God's authority than it is about the people involved. Since most Western Christians have a poor grasp of how prophecy works, current practice tends to miss the point. At its root, it's an insight into how God does things. It typically leads to a prediction of how things will go based on that insight into God's moral character. Most prophesies are conditional in that sense.

If discernment is recognizing the evidence of moral influences good or evil, then a **word of discernment** is a spontaneous message from God about some particular thing over which

people are praying and seeking God's face. We should expect such a manifestation will defy common sense; otherwise it's not much of a miracle. This is particularly useful when you simply don't know how to pray about some issue. Sometimes there's a fine line between one thing and another within a complex issue.

The gift of **tongues** is the most controversial, simply because Pentecostals of all stripes insist this is the gateway, the proof of your graduate degree of faith. This is a lie of Satan that comes from abusing the gift itself. While glossolalia can include a private prayer language, that is hardly the main purpose. The whole point is being able to express divine revelation to someone in a language the hearer understands naturally, but the speaker does not. It bridges the gap between someone with a mission to share, who faces a language barrier with their audience. One might naturally expect this gift to see significant use in Corinth, a town where sailors from all over the world might visit.

Sometimes it helps the rest of the congregation when a message in tongues is translated, and that can also require a **word of interpretation**. However, most of the time this gift is simply moving things back the other direction from glossolalia. Someone who doesn't speak the common language of the church body needs to say something they should hear, so the gift of interpretation can work that way. If God needs people to communicate and there's no natural interpreter, these two gifts can solve the problem.

This is most certainly not a closed list, but it covers things Paul experienced in his apostolic ministry. Would it surprise you that something similar can happen while someone is writing, and not just speaking? The normative use of these gifts is when believers are seeking God for something, even if they don't quite know what. Less often we could expect them to manifest when the need isn't known to the whole group. They aren't for putting on a show; they aren't meant to bring attention to the person who expresses the gift. They aren't an excuse for throwing off all sensible restraints in public behavior, but some gifts are sure to provoke offense with people who aren't used to how God works.

4. For Building Up the Body

Several times in 1 Corinthians 12 Paul stresses that the purpose of spiritual gifts is to bless the whole community of faith as a single body. In Ephesians 4, the chapter begins with an even stronger reminder of this – "one Lord, one faith." He draws the image of Jesus as a martial victor riding through the crowd in victory parade and tossing out bits of plunder to the people. The plunder includes apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, etc. These people are gifts to the church body. Their primary work is enriching the body, causing the body of believers to pull together, maturing so that each member provides the full blessing of their own individual calling.

Restated, the whole purpose of the church is to live together like a family. There are no objectives; growth in numbers and budget is not mentioned anywhere. Instead, it's all about helping the people tolerate each other better and worship the Lord together. The whole purpose of the church is becoming closer to each other. That's it; that's the whole thing. Nothing else matters.

The second half of that chapter talks about changing the individual. This is precisely the opposite of trying to change the world. The world is going to hell. The one and only hope they have is if we live the life of people who have parachuted out of that long dive. The body exists to grow each member in maturity, which in turn means demonstrating maturity by working

toward *shalom* – the stability of the church body. We claim all these miraculous gifts by getting with the divine program, making our lives consistent with God's revelation.

The hardest part of all this is the nasty reflexive individualism and materialism woven into the entire fabric of Western Civilization. It's not that you sacrifice your sense of identity and individual calling to the dictatorship of the organized church. Instead, you seek to find your true identity in the company of fellow believers, because you cannot possibly go very far without them. Who you are depends on your calling within the context of the fellowship. God insists that the full measure of His revelation comes to you only in communion with His children. Until you see how His gifts drive you and enable you to bless the whole family, you cannot begin to understand.

Thus, unless your focus is the moral health of the church body as a whole, you are still lost and wandering in the moral wilderness. All spiritual gifts are given by the Holy Spirit to enrich the treasure, which treasure is the people.

Ed Hurst

[Kiln of the Soul online parish](#)