

The Gifts of the Spirit

When we are born we all have natural gifts. Some may be athletes, others good art, others a singer. For a Christian, because we believe that God created us, it is he who has gifted us and these natural gifts are to be used for his glory. It may take time for these gifts to develop and be recognised. It may well be that we all have these gifts to a degree without being gifted. That is to say, we may be able to run yet not be an athlete or be able to sing yet not be a singer.

When we are born again of the Spirit we are given Spiritual gifts. According to scripture we all have at least one gift.

One and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as he wills. (1 Corinthians 12: 11)

As each one has received the gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. (1 Peter 4: 10)

As with natural gifts, they are to be used for God's glory; they may take time to develop and be recognised; and we may be able to perform similar actions without necessarily be spiritually gifted. Thus we are all called to evangelise but some are particularly gifted as evangelists; we are all called to be generous but some have a spiritual gift of generosity. In particular, every Christian has faith:

No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12: 3)

But some have a special gift faith (1 Corinthians 12: 9). George Müller of Bristol founded his orphanages and ran them totally by faith. We must be careful not to attempt to exercise this special faith if we do not have this gift. Great distress can be caused by

those who try to assure other people that God will definitely heal them when they have no grounds for such certainty.

There are three lists of spiritual gifts in the new Testament: Romans 12: 6-8; 1 Corinthians 12: 8-10; Ephesians 4: 11. The last of these is actually a list of office bearers within the Church which they are gifted to fulfil. These lists are not exhaustive; for instance there is the gift of celibacy:

For I wish that all men were even as I myself. But each one has his own gift from God, one in this manner and another in that. (1 Corinthians 7: 7)

I know of one man who became a Christian and who discovered he had the gift of playing the piano. He couldn't read music but he was able to pick up a tune and play it. He was greatly used in his fellowship, playing hymns and choruses.

With that general introduction let me now turn to the gifts which are mentioned in Scripture, although I will not attempt to deal with every one of them on this occasion.

Words of Knowledge. This is to have a revelation of something which could not be known otherwise. Jesus exercised this gift when he was with the woman to well:

Jesus said to her, "you have well said, 'I have no husband,' for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; in that you spoke truly." (John 4: 17-18)

Incidentally, it is not always right to reveal a word of knowledge which we may be given. That may seem a strange thing to say because what is the point of being given it? Well, consider the case of a counsellor ministering to a person suffering from depression who was abused as a child but who has pushed this

memory deep into his or her unconscious. Very great care will be needed if this area of the person's life is to be opened up, especially if the parent who committed the abuse is still alive. The counsellor may well need to know of the problem but it may be unwise to reveal it immediately.

There is also the possibility that the so-called word of knowledge may come from our own unconscious or imagination. We need to learn to recognise the Holy Spirit. This will come with experience but even then we can make mistakes.

Perhaps I should say something in particular regarding words of knowledge about healing. Such knowledge is not always given in words but it is difficult to explain just how this knowledge is given. John Wimber coined the helpful phrase that 'we know in our knower'. Some people exercising the gifts of healing will feel a sympathetic pain in a particular area of their own body and they are able to call forward someone in the congregation suffering from pain in that particular area and minister to them.

Here let me digress to explain a general point about how the Spirit works in us with words of knowledge. When I was a vicar it was our custom in our evening services to allow a time of silence to wait upon the Spirit to allow him to speak words of knowledge. When first we began to do this the words, given to different members of the congregation, seemed always to relate to various ailments. These would be shared publicly and those suffering from the specific ailments would come forward for ministry. Sunday after Sunday the procedure was repeated until one of our elders shared with me his concern that, whatever the theme of the sermon, the words of knowledge were always about healing. "Surely," he said, "we should expect God to confirm or add to what had been taught in the exposition of the word". I brought the matter before the Lord in my personal prayer time

and I believe he revealed a truth which I would like to share with you.

God is always expressing himself; it is part of his self giving nature to do so. Just think of what is going on at this moment in the unseen airwaves around us. There are countless radio and television programmes being beamed out in all directions. In addition to that there are messages relating to the police, ambulance and fire brigade services. Our receivers have to be tune in to specific frequencies if we are to avoid a hopelessly confusing cacophony of messages. God is continuously expressing himself regarding countless situations all over the world. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to search through all these expressions of God and to select and interpret them to each individual or group so that they receive God's word relating to their specific situation. I believe that this is what Paul is explaining when he says:

The Spirit searches all things even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except a man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. (1 Corinthians 3: 10-11)

In our services we were receiving words of knowledge relating to healing because, over the months, that is what we had come to expect. The next Sunday I shared this with the congregation and asked that any who received words about healing should hold on to them to be shared later. But that we should expect to receive words which related to the theme of the service first of all. In other words I was asking them to tune in to a different frequency, so to speak. That is exactly what happened. When we began to expect words of knowledge on the theme of the sermon that is what we got. I believe this illustrates the right cooperation between the Holy Spirit and us. He does not dominate us but draws alongside us. I do not believe that the words came from

our subconscious, they were truly words of knowledge given by God, but we had to exercise our decision or will to tune our spirits to the theme of the sermon so that we might receive what God wanted us to know about that. I will return to this matter of our role in co-operating with the Spirit when I deal with the gift of prophecy.

Words of Wisdom. Whereas a word of knowledge is simply the revelation of a fact, the word of wisdom reveals what action we should take; how to deal with those facts or with individuals. Jesus exercised the gift of wisdom when the Pharisees sought to trap him about Jews paying taxes to a pagan power: -

“Tell us, then, what you think. It is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” That Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s.” (Matthew 22: 17-21)

Let me stress the difference between words of knowledge and words of wisdom. Knowledge is not the same as wisdom. In everyday life, on a particular issue a husband may be right and his wife wrong but if he uses his knowledge to belittle his wife he will be very unwise indeed.

In the Garden of Eden the serpent was able to tempt Eve to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Do you remember her thoughts?

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her and he ate. (Genesis 3: 6)

She gained a knowledge of good and evil all right. Until then she was in a state of innocence; she was good but did not know it because she had nothing with which to compare it. When she ate she knew what good was because she now recognised evil also; but she realised she was now on the side of evil and could not get back. She gained a knowledge of good and evil but that did not give her wisdom the wisdom she had sought. We were never supposed to have our own ideas of right and wrong. God's intention was always that we should have within us his Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth and our task was simply to obey. Scripture is clear that for us who are redeemed the wisdom we need is to be found in Christ.

You are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God.
(1Corinthians 1: 30)

And the more we allow Christ to dwell in us the more wisdom we shall have:-

That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him. (In Ephesians 1: 17)

Prophecy. Prophecy is not primarily about foretelling the future. It is understanding things from God's viewpoint and recognising what he is doing. The prophets of old did not speak in a vacuum; their prophecies always arose out of a current situation. It was the role of the prophet to interpret to the people what God was doing in any particular situation and, because what he was doing was always for a purpose, they often went on to reveal what was to happen in the future; but primarily they were forth-telling the plan of God rather than foretelling. As I have already explained, God is always expressing himself and it was the prophets who were able to tap in to that expression.

Prophets are not confined to the Old Testament, God intends that there should be prophets today.

And he himself gave some to be apostles, and some prophets, some evangelist, and some pastors and teachers. (The Ephesians 4: 11)

It seems to me that our prophets today need to spend time with their newspapers and then with God so that they can understand and interpret to the rest of us what he is doing in the situations facing the nations today.

However, there is a more general gift of prophecy to be used within the worshipping community when it gathers together. Paul rates this very highly:-

Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. (1 Corinthians 14: 1)

and he implies that everyone may do this:-

For you can all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all may be encouraged. (1 Corinthians 14: 31)

Because God is always expressing himself, through the operation of the Holy Spirit we can pick up that expression in our spirit and then in our mind. Usually within a congregation the prophecies are not particularly world shaking – “My children I love you” etc. Such prophecies may be good and true (God is continually expressing love towards his people) but they are usually of a very general nature. And so Paul directs:-

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge. (1 Corinthians 14: 29)

Incidentally, who are “the others”? Is it the congregation as a whole or, more likely, the other prophets? i.e. those with greater experience of prophecy. Paul continues:-

But if anything is revealed to another who sits by, let the first keep silent. (1 Corinthians 14: 30)

I suggest that what Paul is saying is this. If a member of the congregation is in the middle of delivering a very general prophecy such as, “you are my children and I delight in you”, and someone else receives a prophecy of a more direct nature giving a more specific revelation, then the first is to give way. It is rather like the announcement you used to hear on a news bulletin, “we are interrupting this programme to give the following SOS message”.

Paul then makes an interesting comment:-

And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints. (1 Corinthians 14: 32-33)

We are not to have a free-for-all in our services; they are to be conducted in an orderly manner. Just because a word or a prophecy is inspired by the Holy Spirit that does not mean that the recipient loses his or her self-control. It would be quite wrong for someone to claim, “I could not help myself; the Holy Spirit compelled me to speak out”. It may very well be appropriate for the person receiving the prophecy to speak to the leader (perhaps during a hymn or chorus), tell them of the prophecy and ask if it is right to share it with the congregation as a whole.

Very often a prophecy will be given while we are ministering to someone.

This charge I commit to you, son Timothy, according to the prophecies previously made concerning you. (1 Timothy 1: 18)

In 1994 I visited the airport church in Toronto. The woman who was ministering to me suddenly said, "I see the Lord sitting down with you going through your appointment book." I explained that I was retired and it was hardly likely that I was going to be in much demand. She said to me, "I can't help that, I can tell you only what the Lord is revealing." I must admit that over the years since then I have found myself ministering in many different congregations and groups and I am rarely in my home church (the one to which I belong since retirement) on a Sunday morning. She continued, "I also see the Lord placing epaulets of authority on your shoulders." It is not really for me to comment on that because a person's authority has to be recognised by others. However, perhaps I may share that I find my advice and counsel has been sought more frequently since that prophecy was pronounced over me than before.

As we come to the end of this session I would mention two things. Words of knowledge, words of wisdom and prophecy are received from the Holy Spirit into our spirit and thence into our mind. Once they are there they are *our* thoughts. Because of this some people who receive them believe that they cannot really be from God; they assume that they are simply their thoughts. Well of course they are; we are thinking them. The important question is what is their source? Are they from our own unconscious and imagination or are they from our spirit inspired by the Holy Spirit?

I remember discussing this with a member of our church who had been sent by his employer on a business training course. One of the seminars was designed to encourage lateral thinking. The leader began a simple story about a person wandering into a

wood and coming upon a clearing in which he discovered... They were all asked to close their eyes and imagine what happened next. After some minutes each of the participants was asked to share their experiences. Of course, each had a different story to tell.

My friend was concerned because the total experience was so very similar to what was happening in our services when people shared the prophecies and visions they believed the Holy Spirit was giving them. He was troubled that the whole thing might be self-delusion. I explained to him this matter of distinguishing the source; was it our own imagination or the inspiration of the Holy Spirit? And also that this is why Paul had included the instruction, "Let the others judge".

Secondly, do not set too much store by these gifts. By saying that I am in no way denigrating the gifts of the Holy Spirit. On a previous occasion I spoke of the difference between the fruit of the Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit, and I said that the latter do not affect us; they do not change our character; we are simply messengers or carriers of the gifts. God wants us to grow up; to develop our minds. We are not to be Peter Pans; we are to mature in Christ.

If anyone wants to do his will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on my own authority. (John 7: 17)

By this I understand that John is saying, "If we are walking in the way of the Lord the Holy Spirit will lead us to discern the truth". Paul encouraged the use of all the gifts of the Spirit, but he taught also that the Spirit is given to help us *understand* what God has freely given us (1 Corinthians 2: 12) and he proclaimed:-

We have the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2: 16)