

What Are Spiritual Gifts?

Basics of the Faith

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Vern S. Poythress



P U B L I S H I N G

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▣ What are spiritual gifts?

The Bible indicates in several places that God equips and empowers people for service within the church, which is the body of Christ. Since God is the source for our abilities, these empowerments may be called “gifts” from God. In the chart on the following page are five lists of types of gifts, taken from different passages. No one of the lists includes all gifts. The list in 1 Peter 4:11 contains only two, speaking and serving. But these two labels can cover a broad spectrum of activities. The more detailed lists give us a sampling of the kinds of service that God brings about among the people in the church.

SOME BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS

First Corinthians 12 gives a more extended discussion of gifts than the other passages. Several points stand out.

- Every person who trusts in Christ for salvation belongs to Christ and so belongs to the church, the body of Christ. (“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” [1 Cor. 12:27].) God does not want Christians to live in isolation, but as part of his special community, the church.

| Romans 12:6-8 | 1 Corin- thians 12:8-10 | 1 Corin- thians 12:28-30 | Ephesians 4:11 | 1 Peter 4:11 |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| | | apostles | apostles | speaking |
| prophecy | prophecy | prophets | prophets | |
| teaching | utterance of wisdom | teachers | teachers* | |
| exhorting | utterance of knowl- edge | | pastors | |
| | | | evangelists | |
| leading | | adminis- trating | | |
| | working miracles | working miracles | | |
| | gifts of healing | gifts of healing | | |
| service | | helping | | servicing |
| doing acts of mercy | | | | |
| contrib- uting (money) | | | | |
| | faith | | | |
| | distin- guishing spirits | | | |
| | speaking in tongues | speaking in tongues | | |
| | interpre- tation of tongues | interpre- tation of tongues | | |

* Some interpreters think that "pastors" and "teachers" are two labels for the same persons, "pastor-teachers."

- Each person in the church is like one member of a human body. God appoints each person to have a function in the body (1 Cor. 12:12).
- Each person has his own function in the body; not all are the same (1 Cor. 12:14–25).
- The Holy Spirit empowers each person to serve according to what God wills (1 Cor. 12:11).
- The whole body, the church, suffers if one member suffers (1 Cor. 12:26). Given the concern in 1 Cor. 12 for the functions of different members, the verse seems to imply that the body may suffer partly because one member is not carrying out its functions, which help the whole body.
- The whole body flourishes when one member is honored (1 Cor. 12:26).

In our modern context, just calling a group a church does not make it so in God's eyes. A true church functions according to God's design, which includes many aspects. Among them are the practice of Christian love (1 Cor. 13), sound doctrine (the church is to be in fellowship with the *apostles*, who were commissioned with Christ's authority), and purity in life (1 Cor. 5:6–8). Sound doctrine implies preaching based on the Bible, and purity implies the exercise of church discipline. But on earth, no church is perfect. It is composed of people who have been redeemed from their sins by Christ, but who still struggle against remaining sin.

THE BASIS FOR GIFTS IN THE TRINITY

The biblical descriptions of spiritual gifts show their close relation to God who gives them. The doctrine of the