

# ***1 Corinthians 12-14 – “About Spiritual Gifts”***

## **Questions to Ponder**

How would you recognise a Spirit-filled church? What is the purpose of spiritual gifts?

## **The Corinthian Context**

The first rule of understanding the Bible is to understand the context of the passage – historical, author, recipients, within the book, within the whole Bible. These chapters are not a definitive teaching on either the Holy Spirit or spiritual gifts, and must be understood in context and by comparison with other passages.

### **“Everything is permissible” (10:23)**

This was the catchphrase of the Corinthians – it extended to their attitude in worship too

### **Spontaneous worship**

This is not a bad thing in itself – in fact something we could probably do with more of

### **Many “supernatural” gifts in evidence**

Surely this must be a good thing – the evidence of the power and working of God?

**BUT** although they desired spiritual gifts (14:12), there were some problems:

### **They prioritised certain gifts over others**

In fact they prioritised the wrong gifts. The Corinthians were from a pagan background, and their previous religions had been based on highly emotional ecstatic experiences. As David Prior states, “They had grown accustomed to being moved by some kind of supernatural or demonic force, either into a state of trance or into ecstasy, or into some strange course of action.” This background led them to desire similar experiences in Christianity. They were fascinated with seemingly more spectacular gifts – in particular tongues – but had missed the point that they should actually desire the gifts that will build up the church most (prophecy, teaching - ? list in 12:28-30 in order of pre-eminence or usefulness of gifts?)

### **Disunity & lack of love in body**

Major problem. Their use of gifts had led to disunity – using them to impress others / for their own edification & not considering the needs of others (just as their celebrations of the Lord’s Supper, which did more harm than good – 11:17)

### **Lack of order in worship**

Paul is concerned with this – he teaches that God is a God of order – their disorderly worship is not really worship at all, as God is not honoured by it!

### **Harmful use of certain gifts**

The way the Corinthians used the gift of tongues was harmful both to the life of the church and to their witness to non-believers who came in among them

## **Paul’s Thought Flow**

**Ch 12 – The purpose of Gifts** – Given for the body of Christ

**Ch 13 – The excellent way** – Gifts must be used in love

**Ch 14 – Use of prophecy & tongues** – Principles for order in worship

## **Chapter 12 [read vv1-13, 27-31]**

### **The first evidence of the Holy Spirit is glorifying Christ (v3 – cf. John 16:14)**

The Holy Spirit’s work will always lead to Christ being glorified, and people submitting more to His Lordship. In fact, I suggest that the ideas of being filled with the HS (Ephesians 5:18), being under Christ’s lordship, and honouring the Father are synonymous – see next verse. This verse implies strongly that many of the gifts (or at least counterfeits of them) are also evident in pagan religions that once appealed to the Corinthians. The issue, Paul teaches, is not how spectacular things seem but whether they acknowledge Christ as Lord!

### **The issue of gifts is TRINITARIAN – we need balance (vv4-6)**

Something we don’t always fully appreciate – we tend to divide the actions of the 3 persons in a false way. In fact, there is an aspect to every Christian experience that touches on each of the 3 persons – e.g. prayer to the Father through Christ helped by the HS – here our input into the church life can be seen in 3 ways:

Using gifts given by one Spirit (v4)

Service for one Lord (or Master) (v5)

The actions in us of one God (v6)

### **There is one Holy Spirit who gives various gifts (vv7-11)**

### **The church is a body – interdependent and gifts build up the body (vv12-31)**

The picture of the body is a very powerful one of the church – bonded together by one life force (Spirit) and ordered by one head (Christ) but different parts with different functions. Spiritual gifts represent these functions – and all are to give life to the body (to build it up). In our own body we know that if one part

starts doing other function / not doing its own function there is chaos (in fact some of the worst diseases are autoimmune / cancer).

## **What we learn about the Spirit**

- He is divine (Spirit of God – 12:3)
- He is in harmony with the Father & Son (trinity – 12:4-6)
- He is personal (called “He” and has a will – 12:11)

Therefore we do not need “more of” the Spirit, we need to give Him more of us – He is to be related to.

- He gives different gifts to each believer (12:7-11)
- He brings us into the body of Christ, uniting all Christians (12:13)

The baptism of the Holy Spirit (or in HS) is controversial, but I believe it refers to one aspect of the process of conversion. It is only mentioned in 3 contexts in Scripture:

1. *John the Baptist said Jesus would do it* (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33),
2. *In Acts 1:5 Jesus told the disciples they would receive it in a few days* – this was fulfilled at Pentecost in Acts 2 (and presumably on the other groups in Acts 10 & 19)
3. *Here in 12:13 it is used to describe the experience of every believer in Corinth.* Since this was not a very mature or spiritual church (see 3:1-3) it is implied that this is an experience synonymous with conversion [again Trinitarian understanding – saved by Jesus, born again by Spirit (baptised), become son of the Father]. This would appear to be backed up by the only other 2 possible references to baptism in Spirit – Ephesians 4:5 (one baptism – this cannot refer to water as not all believers had been baptised and all of the other 6 great unities are spiritual realities – if this baptism in the Spirit unites all believers it cannot be subsequent to conversion) & Galatians 3:27 (it is unclear here whether Paul is referring to water or Spirit baptism, but the context would appear to point to the latter).

My contention, then is that the believer receives the HS in fullness at conversion (see also Romans 8:9), but that the filling of the Spirit is an ongoing experience that empowers and enables the believer for Christ-like living (see Ephesians 5:18 – “keep on being filled with the Spirit).

- We are in Him and He is in us (12:13)

The idea of being immersed in the Spirit AND drinking the Spirit means that we are in Him (in Him we live) and He is in us (He lives in us). The Holy Spirit is indispensable to the Christian life. Without Him it is absolutely impossible to live a life pleasing to God.

## **What we learn about gifts**

The Greek word is *Charisma* – literally a result (or gift) of grace

**They are given by the Spirit according to His will (12:11) but used subject to ours (14:32)**

This is important. Paul does not suggest that any gift can or should be used in a trance or ecstatic mood of high emotion where the believer is unaware of his or her own actions. The use of gifts should be with the mind, and is subject to the mind of the individual. It is possible to use gifts given by the Spirit in the wrong way – see Romans 12:6-8: we must use our gifts in proportion to our faith and in the right way. The presence and use of gifts in itself is NOT evidence of the Holy Spirit filling a church or an individual. In the same way that a gifted teacher may teach with the wrong attitude or motivation, a person may speak in tongues with the wrong attitude or motivation! The use of gifts is meant to engage the mind and will, not just the emotions (14:32&33). God does NOT *possess* people the way we think of demons possessing them – rather He works alongside their own spirit bringing wholeness to the person (emotions, mind and will working in unity)! Any preacher who tells people to “empty their minds”, to “stop thinking about it” and just to receive what God is giving them etc. is teaching falsely and very dangerously.

**They are given for the “common good” (12:7)**

**No one gift is for all Christians (12:27-31)**

This is also important, as some people have judged whether or not a person has the Spirit or is filled with the Spirit by whether or not he has shown a certain gift (most often tongues). This is NOT biblical, and is based on a misunderstanding of Acts, where we see 3 occurrences of tongues, each at a time when a new group of people (the Jews in Ch2, Gentiles in Ch10, and disciples of John the Baptist in Ch19) received the Holy Spirit for the first time. Tongues on these occasions seem to have been a sign for everyone to see that these 3 groups were all included in the Kingdom. We cannot base a claim on these 3 unique examples that all people should speak in tongues when they receive the Holy Spirit – in fact there are conversions in Acts where there is no mention of tongues, and this verse would teach against the claim anyway.

**Some are “greater” than others (12:31)**

What does Paul mean by the “greater” gifts? NOT that some people are greater than others because of the gifts they have (the giving of various gifts is an issue of grace alone, and not of earning them – see Romans 12:6), but that some gifts are greater in terms of their effect in the life of the church (or their benefit for the body). The list of gifts in 12:28-30 **may** well give an order of the usefulness of the gifts, however, we definitely know that prophecy is a greater gift than tongues, and it seems from the overall

tone of Paul's writing, the fact that he puts tongues last in his list, and his comment in 14:39 that tongues are possibly one of the least useful gifts.

**They are not an "end in themselves" (Ch12)**

Gifts are never an end in themselves, but are always intended to build up the body – to lead to growth of individuals and the church. Therefore, we should never see the use of any particular gift as a sign of an individual or church reaching a certain level of maturity.

**They must be used in love (Ch13)**

This Chapter is one of the most beautiful in the whole Bible, and has been read at countless marriages and funerals. The context, however, is about how gifts are used. The real mark of spirituality is how the gift is used. The fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22) is firstly love – and the development of Christ-like character is the ONLY Biblical test for whether the Spirit is really working in the life of an individual or church. Love is the most excellent way, and the kind of love described in Ch13 should govern everything we do and say, especially in the context of serving in the church.

The chapter has 3 main sections:

- vv 1-3** The emptiness of gifts used without love
- vv 4-7** Love defined
- vv 8-13** The temporary nature of gifts (until Christ returns), but the enduring nature of love!

**What are tongues?**

The Greek word (*glossa*) means literally "language" or "dialect"

**In Acts 2, 10 & 19 different groups spoke in other languages upon receiving the Holy Spirit**

**Debate about whether it could also include a language not ordinarily spoken by humans [when singular "a tongue" – 14:2,3,13,14,19,26,27], possibly the tongues of angels of 13:1**

Particularly 14:2 seems to point to this possibility ("indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit"). Many commentators agree that in Corinth there was the use of "ecstatic utterances" (meaning utterances in a language not spoken by any human nation); perhaps similar to those seen in modern times in many Charismatic churches (often called *glossolalia*).

**BUT 13:1 is hypothetical, and there are no other Scriptural references, so it is difficult to be dogmatic about this**

The statements 13:1-3 are clearly hypothetical (i.e. "Even if I could ..."), as no person is able to "fathom all mysteries and all knowledge" (13:2). However, this does not prove that people cannot talk in the tongues of angels. It would be tenuous, however, to conclude from this verse alone that they can, and the decision must also be based upon ones experience and observations. It is worth noting that similar (in fact, probably identical) phenomena to *glossolalia* are seen in various pagan cults and cultures of today, raising the question of whether they are actually a psychological phenomenon (associated with a high emotion state) or a genuine spiritual gift that can be counterfeited by demonic influence. Whichever is true, it is obvious that *glossolalia* in themselves are not conclusive evidence of the Holy Spirit at work and they must be tested (as must every spiritual gift) according to Paul's teaching in these chapters.

**Paul's concern here is with their use in church!**

Paul is not really concerned here with defining what tongues are or aren't, and whether or not they can be an angelic language – his concern is with how they are being used in the church.

**Tongues & Prophecy (Ch14) [read vv1-5, 36-40]**

TONGUES	PROPHECY
<b>Not for all Christians (12:29)</b>	
<b>Revealed by God BUT not infallible (14:30 cf. 29 &amp; 36-38)</b>	
<p>This is important. Prophecy and tongues can be revealed by the Spirit of God to the heart or mind of the speaker, but they are not infallible. There is no such thing as a person who ALWAYS speaks truth directly from God, but the rest of the church must always weigh what is said. Prophecy is to speak directly the word of God to a group of people (this was also the meaning of prophecy in the Old Testament). This gift, as with every other, must be used wisely, according to the faith of the person and for the overall good of the church. We must not treat prophecies with contempt, but must test them and hold on to what is good (I Thessalonians 5:20&amp;21). I believe that Bible teaching can be prophetic when it is applied into the lives of the people with a direct relevance to the current issues and a revelation from the Spirit of the issues pertinent to the group.</p>	
<p><b>Uninterpreted tongues – only edifies the speaker &amp; should not be used in the church (14:4-19)</b></p>	<p><b>Edifies the church (14:4 – see also 14:3, 31)</b> This means to instruct (14:31), strengthen, encourage, and comfort (14:3).</p>

<p><b>Originally a sign to unbelievers, but may be counterproductive (14:22&amp;23)</b>                  In Acts 2 tongues were clearly a sign to the unbelievers that God was at work in a new way, but in the life of the church they are more likely to confuse people and lead them to believe that the Christians are mad!</p>	<p><b>For believers but also of benefit in witness to unbelievers (14:24&amp;25)</b>                  Prophecy is for the benefit of believers – to communicate God’s word to them – but will also speak powerfully to the non-believer. I do not believe that 14:25 means revealing personal information about the person publicly, but exposing the secrets of his own heart before himself and God.</p>
<p><b>May be used privately (14:28)</b>                  This seems to be allowed for by Paul here and also in 14:13-19. In v18 Paul even seems to suggest that he regularly uses tongues in private prayer. This use of tongues should not be discouraged, and may be very helpful to the individual in their devotional life.</p>	<p><b>Cannot be used privately</b>                  Although this is not stated as such, I believe it is clear that prophecy must be spoken to the group of people to whom it is directed.</p>
<p><b>Not to be forbidden (14:39)</b>                  Tongues are not to be forbidden. Is Paul, perhaps, even suggesting that they are dispensable in the public worship of the church? That a church could function perfectly well without the public use of tongues?</p>	<p><b>To be eagerly desired (12:31, 14:1, 12, 39)</b>                  It is important to compare this 4-fold statement about desiring the “greater” gifts including prophecy with Paul’s comments about tongues. The inference is that tongues should not be desired. Any person who teaches that it should is not faithful to Paul’s teaching here. The problem with the church in Corinth was that they were seeking the more supernatural gifts.</p>

**Rules for Tongues & Prophecy in public worship (14:26-40)**

1. Only 2 or 3 should speak (vv27&29)
2. Speakers must take turns (v27&30)
3. Tongues must be interpreted (vv27&28)
4. Prophecy must be weighed carefully (v29)
5. The role of women (vv33-35)  
 A topic for another day!!!
6. Desire prophecy, permit tongues (v39)
7. Everything must be fitting & orderly (v40)

*Paul's chief aim in these verses is not to lay out an exhaustive list of necessary ingredients in corporate worship, but to insist that the unleashed power of the Holy Spirit characteristic of this new age must be exercised in a framework of order, intelligibility, appropriateness, seamliness, dignity, peace. For that is the nature of the God whom we worship*

(DA Carson in *Showing the Spirit*)

**Conclusions**

- We are pre-occupied with gifts, God is pre-occupied with growth  
 The true evidence of the Spirit at work is increasing Christ-likeness (love) and glorification of Christ!
- We should desire the “greater” gifts (which include prophecy), but no one gift is for all believers
- Use of gifts in the church should be orderly (not chaotic), thoughtful (not ecstatic, but with mind engaged) & edifying (not for selfish ends, but for the good of the body)
- Gifts must be used in love – the most excellent way!

*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.*

(Ch 13vv4-8a)

**For Further Study**

**Other passages on the Holy Spirit:**

John 3:5; 14:15-31; 16:5-16; Acts 1:4-8; Acts 2:1-47; Romans 8:1-27; II Corinthians 3:17&18; Galatians 5:16-26; Ephesians 1:13&14; 5:15-20; I Thessalonians 5:19&20; II Timothy 1:7

**Other passages on Spiritual Gifts:**

Acts 2:1-13; 10:44-48; 19:1-7; Romans 12:1-8; Ephesians 4:1-16