

PAUL'S THEOLOGY

Lesson 60

Gifts - Part 3

Does the name “Charlie Bucket” mean anything to you? How about Violet Beauregarde or Veruca Salt? Maybe you recall Augustus Gloop? These were children from the mind of Roald Dahl, a British writer from the 20th century. Dahl wrote a book entitled *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, which was later made into two movies, one by the same name, and an earlier version *Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*.

In the story, these children, along with Mike Teavee, win a chance to tour the private chocolate factory of Willie Wonka. Unknown to them at the time, Wonka was looking for a successor to run the factory. Ultimately the choice falls to Charlie because the other children were all more focused about getting what they wanted rather than the actual tour.

Where we focus our attention does not generally affect our opportunities to get a chocolate factory, or even a candy store. But it surely affects our choices in life, our practices and even our beliefs.

If we try to distance ourselves from our daily decisions and refrain from cruising through life long enough to analyze our attitudes, we might find something interesting in this regard. Take church, for example – why do we go to church? We are not looking for the “right” or the “pious” answer; we want the real answer! Try to dig down and ask more specifically, why do we go to church where we do?

Do we go for the “singing” or the “preaching”? If so, dig deeper and ask, “Why?” If we don’t like the singing or preaching, do we up and go somewhere else? As we consider this, we likely find many reasons for why we go to church, some good, some better, and some not so good.

Hopefully our reasons do not focus on *us*. Hopefully the focus is somewhere beyond us. Maybe we go because we think God wants us there (here). Maybe we go because it is a splendid place for our children to grow with the Lord. Maybe we go because we have found a fellowship and friendship with sisters and brothers in Christ. Perhaps we attend because we “fit” and have something to offer the others. We might go because we see God is using this church to great purpose, and we want to be a part of his work.

These examples are reasons that focus on others, rather than the individual. That is good; it is very Pauline! The body of Christ, Paul taught, met together to commemorate/celebrate the risen Lord and to encourage and uplift each other. The real focus for church, and really for life itself, is God.

“We should be about God’s business” we often hear, and properly so. God’s heart and God’s plans are to be ours. He is not simply Savior, but he is Savior and Lord. Once we give ourselves to him, our lives are no longer ours. In the words of Paul, we are God’s slaves, God’s servants. We give him our lives to do his bidding. We are his hands and feet, the body of Christ on earth. We come to church, then, for God’s purposes, not our own. We can understand that God wants us uplifted at church, and I believe it is fair to select a church that aids in our personal learning and growth. But that learning and growth at church comes from others at church seeking to build the body as part of God’s plan. We go there taking what we have and seeking to “put it into play” to be used by God in the enrichment of others. Even if it is simply a warm handshake and personal greeting to make others feel at ease in a gathering.

So when we go, our focus is not on us per se. Our focus is on what God wants. We come into worship seeking his face and his desires – nothing more, and nothing less. We do well to remember this as we bring our study of “gifts” to a conclusion. We are looking at gifts within the church not as a matter for our personal enrichment. We are looking at them as areas where we can better serve God’s plan, God’s agenda, and God’s purposes. They are, after all, God’s gifts!

A QUICK REVIEW FOR CONTEXT

In the prior two classes on “gifts,” we considered the various words Paul used, considering the different nuances.¹ We then delved into depth in Paul’s writing in Romans 12 about charismatic gifts. We have saved for this week Paul’s writing in 1 Corinthians about charismatic gifts.

In the process, we studied Paul’s usage of the Greek *charisma(ta)* as a word not used so much for what we consider the “charismatic gifts” of today, but rather as a concrete expression of God’s giving, as an objective manifestation of God’s grace. In that sense Paul’s *charisma(ta)* certainly included the charismatic, but it included much more.

Having then taken Paul’s passage in Romans 12 and considered the *charisma* gifts he wrote of there, we turn our attention this week to Paul’s writing on the subject in 1 Corinthians.

¹ Both lessons are available for download at www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

WHY?

Recently over a supper discussion, a colleague told me of growing up in a Christian family that was charismatic in faith and practice. He had an aunt who developed cancer that, according to her doctors, was incurable. While the aunt was going through the stages that led to her death, my friend's grandmother (the aunt's mother) wanted to sell everything she had to pay for the aunt to travel to Africa where there were stories of charismatic healings of all sorts of diseases. The aunt did not go, and soon died.

Hearing the story touched my heart as a parent of five. I would certainly sell everything for a chance to see one of my children healed of a disease about to take their life. But if God is going to work a miraculous healing, is a journey to where "the Spirit is working" necessary? What shall we say about these things? "Healing" is just one of Paul's *charisma* gifts he writes about in 1 Corinthians. It is a part of what we seek to understand.

If we want to understand *charisma* gifts we must study 1 Corinthians. In chapters 12 -14 we find the "single largest block of Spirit material in the Pauline corpus."² From this section of Scripture have come the building blocks for proponents of the charismatic revival in the 20th century. Similarly, from the very same biblical passages have come the arguments advanced by those challenging the authenticity of the charismatic movement.

Needless to say, a ten-page plus paper is not going to resolve the issues that have galvanized millions for decades on this important aspect of the life of the individual and church. Nor is it going to help a family make a decision about travelling to a location where there seems to be a "break out" of working of the Holy Spirit, whether in Africa or Toronto. But our hope is to put the issues into some frame of context and provide the building blocks for personal study as those who choose to pursue the subject in greater depth on their own.

We should also add here that nothing in this paper should be taken to impugn God and his work of his Spirit in any way. Such can be found in writings on the subject from both sides. God is God. His ways are not ours and we cannot know his thoughts. He has formed the world and it exists as a speck in his hand. Yet

² Fee, Gordon, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Saint Paul* (Hendrickson 1994) at 146. Fee is one of the top scholars on Paul in general, but specifically on 1 Corinthians. His Greek knowledge is strong, and he was selected to write the New International Commentary series book on 1 Corinthians. He has also published several other books covering Corinthian material. *God's Empowering Presence* is strongly recommended reading on this subject. The nearly 1,000 pages thoroughly dissect Paul's writings in a clear and scholastic manner.

even on this speck he has taken huge personal interest in billions and billions of people, knowing not only their names, but also the thoughts of their minds, the words on their lips and the desires of their hearts. We cannot speak for God; we can only seek to understand his self-revelation through Scripture and life in the church.

1 CORINTHIANS 12

Context

Perhaps more so than any passages of Paul we have studied in some time, it is important to put 1 Corinthians chapter 12's writings on the *charisma* gifts into the context and flow of Paul's overall letter. This is partially so because much of 1 Corinthians is not simply Paul writing on issues, but also is Paul responding to letter(s) received from the church. It is further true because Paul's subjects span multiple chapters often with interludes of other thoughts.³

We know Paul is responding to Corinthian correspondence from passages. This is clear from passages like 1 Cor. 7:1, "Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: 'It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.'" Paul is quoting from the Corinthian letter in an effort to clarify or respond to their concern or idea. Paul begins his section on spiritual gifts likely referring to matters subject to the Corinthians' prior letter to him:

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed.⁴

As we consider the passage, we will note places where statements on their face seem very "unPaul." Some scholars resolve these difficulties by suggesting that those are statements where Paul is quoting the Corinthians from their letter. (Much like the statement above in 7:1 "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman" is understood not to be Paul's opinion, but Paul's quoting from the Corinthians' letter to more clearly frame his response.)

³ Paul writing in this way has led some scholars to believe that 1 Corinthians is actually a composite of several of Paul's letters that some early church editor combined into one.

⁴ Paul has a Greek phrase he uses, *peri de* (περι δε) that the English Standard Version translates "Now concerning." Scholars point to this phrase as the one which Paul uses when citing or referring to the letter from the Corinthians. See, for example, 7:25, "Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy." 8:1. "Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." This "knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up."

In light of the fact that Paul is answering and addressing matters brought up by the Corinthians in a letter we cannot read, we have a challenge in understanding Paul's letter. It is as if we are hearing only one side of a telephone conversation. Some of what we hear would make a bit more sense if we could hear the other end of the conversation! So with Paul, we will need to keep the context in mind, with confidence that it will help shed light on the occasions that have prompted his letter and instructions.

As noted earlier, context is also important because of apparent interludes. The spiritual gift material spans chapters 12 -14, but stuck in the middle is the famous chapter 13 that speaks of love. How (and if) that fits into Paul's train of thought is the subject of much scholarly debate. Once we make it through chapter 13 Paul zooms in on the issue of the Corinthian abuse of speaking in tongues. Chapter 13 seems to relate to the subject ("If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.") but it goes on a diversionary path to expound the wonders and beauties of God's love.

When Paul reaches the full point and the climax of his discussion in this section, it is about how the Corinthians are abusing tongues, establishing guidelines for their proper use and prohibitions to guard against further improprieties in worship. This is the clear point of chapter 14.

So we can fairly understand chapter 12 as the set up for Paul's discussion of the abuse of tongues in chapter 14, and must place it into that context. In other words, Paul is writing chapter 12 (and 13) to lay the foundation for his conclusions and instructions in chapter 14 on the proper use of speaking in tongues. We need to read the gift section in chapter 12, understanding why it makes sense with Paul's ultimate point on the role of tongues.

Noting then the importance of context, let us place these chapters. Paul started writing about matters of worship in chapter 8. Against the framework of idolatrous worship, Paul explained that the Corinthians should not participate in pagan feasts, eating the foods offered to idols. Paul then wrote of the Corinthians' own worship, specifically the head coverings of women, praying and prophesying, and the Lord's Supper. Paul is still in matters of worship as he begins this discussion of spiritual gifts.

Chapter 12:1-3

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says "Jesus is accursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit.

Almost immediately after bringing up the subject of spiritual gifts we find Paul writing something that scholars struggle to understand. It makes sense that Paul would speak of the mute idols, especially as he prepares to write of speaking in tongues as a gift from a God who speaks. But why does Paul insert into this discussion this seemingly bizarre addition about some saying “Jesus is accursed” and others, “Jesus is Lord”?

The early church commentators saw Paul as laying out a yardstick, a measure of comparing. Recognizing that Paul is about to discuss the proper role of gifts in the church, and then specifically the proper role of tongues, several early church commentators suggest Paul is laying out rules for discerning and measuring proper gifts of the Spirit.

If two yardsticks are compared with each other, their straightness is in agreement. But if a distorted piece of wood is compared with a ruler, the crooked one will be at variance with the straight.⁵

Similarly Origen wrote:

There are so many different kinds of spirit that without the gift of discernment, who can know which is which?⁶

More recent commentators have urged the difficulty in imagining that anyone in Corinth would suggest “Jesus is accursed” and that if they did, Paul’s condemnation would have been harsh, and not simply in passing as it is here. Thiselton lists twelve different explanations for this passage!⁷

Fee points out that, without knowing the full reasons for Paul’s comment, we can determine that simply inspired utterance is not proof that God’s Spirit inspired the utterance. There could be examples of inspired utterances that are clearly against what God’s Spirit might say.⁸

⁵ Quoting Basil (c.330 – 379) in the Ancient Christian Commentary series, Bray, Gerald, ed. *1-2 Corinthians* (IVP 1999) at 188. For more on Basil, see Church History Lesson 23 at www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

⁶ Bray quoting Origen (c.185 – c.254), *ibid.* For more on Origen see Church History Lesson 15 at cite in note 5.

⁷ Thiselton, Anthony, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Eerdmans 2000) at 918ff.

⁸ Fee at 157.

Regardless of what we do with the statement, “Jesus is accursed,” Paul’s thrust must surely be that, “The ultimate criterion of the Spirit’s activity is the exaltation of Jesus as Lord.”⁹

This brings us to the next section.

Chapter 12:4-6

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.

Paul writes these three verses in a special form in the Greek. They are worth noting for the impact it gives, especially within the later theological development of the Trinity. Paul uses the same structure three consecutive times to place these three statements parallel. In Greek word order Paul says:

Varieties of gifts¹⁰ there are – but same Spirit

Varieties of ministries¹¹ there are – but same Lord

Varieties of activities there are – but the same is God

Paul speaks of gifts, ministries and activities as sourced from God as Spirit, Son and Father.¹²

Paul’s direct point is that there are *varieties*, even while the source (and ultimately we will see the goal) is unity. The Corinthians were to understand that God has not put out a litmus gift that all in the church are to have and maintain. God gave them diverse gifts that work together and compliment each other.

Paul does so in a way that sets out God as the same. Certainly there is one God. Paul knew that and repeated it multiple times each day since childhood. All good Jews for over 1,000 years had repeatedly said the *shema*. In fact, even today Jews

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Paul uses *charismata* here.

¹¹ Paul uses *diakonia* here, also translated “service.” It is one of the *charisma* gifts in Paul’s list in Romans 12 discussed in the last lesson.

¹² We should add that the words Paul uses as “Lord” and “God” are the ones he consistently uses in reference to Jesus the Son and God the Father. See Rom. 1:7 (“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”); Rom. 15:6 (“that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”); 1 Cor. 1:3 “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”); 2 Cor. 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort”) etc.

are charged to repeat it in morning and evening prayers. The *shema* was the Deuteronomy 6:4ff passage beginning:

Hear¹³, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.

So with that full knowledge of God's unity deep in the history of his DNA as well as his own practice, Paul writes of the One God as three – Spirit, Lord and God. There is diversity in the source of the charisma gifts, even as there is unity. Likewise then in the gifts, there is diversity in gifts that are united in purpose.

With that we move to the actual *charisma* gifts Paul sets out here.

Chapter 12:7-11

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

Before we consider the gifts individually mentioned, we should consider two things: (1) Is there any significance in the way Paul ordered the gifts? Are they most important to least important, or the other way around? Are they random as they popped into his head? Are they sorted by some categories? Is there some combination of these options? (2) Are these exclusive lists or merely illustrative lists? In other words, do we consider that Paul has listed precisely the limited gifts there are, or is Paul listing exemplars with the idea that God has many gifts, of which these are noteworthy examples?

In response to the first question we would reference the catalogue of ideas set out by Fee.¹⁴ There may be some ordering, but it may be no more than the order which occurred to Paul as he dictated his letter. In other words, he thought of gifts that pertain to speaking (“utterance of knowledge” and “utterance of wisdom”) and then others as they came into consideration. It does seem that Paul saved tongues for last because that is the point he is leading up to. As noted earlier, discussing their use and abuse is an ultimate goal of this section.

¹³ In Hebrew this is the word *shema*, hence the name for the section of Scripture.

¹⁴ Fee at 165.

In response to the second question, it seems rather clear that these gifts are illustrative and not an exclusive listing. Paul will again offer listings of gifts in 12:28-30; 13:1-3, 8; 14:6, 26, as well as in Romans 12 and Ephesians 4:11. The lists vary one from another, and all seem to be representations of ways where God is setting out gifts for the believers to use in their ministry and church life. Ultimately here we agree with James that

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. (James 1:17).

This does raise the question of whether a gift is different from a talent. That will be discussed more fully after we go through the gifts Paul lists here.

Each of these gifts are used for Paul as *charismata* gifts. As we have continued to emphasize, Paul's meaning of his word *charisma(ta)* is not rooted in the idea of a miraculous gift. It is rather a gift that is a concrete expression, an objective tangible gift. Accordingly we can look at all the gifts Paul lists here and see them as concretely visible. These are gifts that one could readily observe in their use.

The utterance of wisdom

Paul's first listed *charisma* gift is the "utterance of wisdom," literally – *logos sophias* or "a word of wisdom." It is fascinating that Paul sets this out first as it contrasts with an earlier statement Paul made in this letter. In chapters 1 and 2 Paul dismissed the apparently misplaced spiritualism of the Corinthians as they attempted to thrive with "wisdom" which Paul rejected as something God would destroy. Instead, Paul noted the "folly" of the cross. In chapter 1 verse 17 Paul specified that he did not come in "words of wisdom" (*sophias logos*). Yet here he lists the same phrase.

The key here is Paul's further elucidation earlier in the letter. Paul explained that the wisdom of the world was nothing before God. God's wisdom was indeed the cross, which the world deemed foolish. So Paul recaptures a phrase, "words of wisdom", that the Corinthians knew and even abused, and brought it into its correct usage. There is a speaking of wisdom that proceeds forth as a gift of God. But it is not the lofty words that the world might perceive as wisdom. It is a firm confirmation of the cross as the center of message and conviction. It is this wisdom that Paul preached. It is this word that is of the Spirit that confesses continually the Lordship of Jesus. As words lift up Christ crucified, those words are concrete manifestations of God's giving.

The utterance of knowledge

Paul's second gift mentioned is the "utterance of knowledge," literally – *logos gnosis* or "a word of knowledge." Paul has used the same phrase as before, inserting "knowledge" in place of "wisdom."

Paul does well keeping this in line with the gift of wisdom because "knowledge" was another key word the Corinthians were abusing. In chapter 8, Paul had repeatedly challenged the Corinthians' claims to "knowledge." In almost sarcastic fashion, Paul quoted the Corinthians as he set out to correct their arrogance:

Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." This "knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. (1 Cor. 8:1-2).

"Knowledge" is also a gift that Paul will list later in this letter in 13:2, 8-12 and in 14:6. Scholars debate whether there is a real difference between a word of wisdom and a word of knowledge. Some see wisdom as more theoretical while knowledge is more practical. Others see it as simply parallel ways to say that God has given some words to express insights. More of this discussion is found in Thiselton's commentary on the Greek referenced in footnote seven.

Regardless of whether there are fine distinctions between the two, we clearly have Paul rescuing yet another term from its abuse in the Corinthian community. For Paul, a word of real knowledge is going to be a word that is centered in Christ and builds up the community. That is what marks out a word as a *charisma* gift, from some other trivial or even destructive word of "knowledge."

In the exercise of both the gift of uttering wisdom and uttering knowledge, there has been a discussion for centuries over whether Paul is writing about a special utterance given by God over which the person has little or no control, or whether the utterance/words are ones given where the person exercises control in expression. We suggest that Paul does not provide this insight in his letter. It seems that for Paul the key to the gift is the content, not the form or timing. That is surely part of the implication of how Paul set out his discussion giving a measuring stick for determining God's speaking. In contrast to unspeaking dumb idols, God does speak, but through his Spirit and gifts. And the subject that lets one know it is the voice of God is the core message of Jesus as Lord.

Faith

We should begin this discussion by noting that most every scholar is in agreement that Paul is not here talking about *saving faith*. That is not, scholars assert, a diverse charismata gift given only to certain ones in the church! That is something

all Christians share by definition. Paul is here writing of “a special endowment of faith for a special service.”¹⁵ Some link this up to the next set of gifts, arguing that it takes one with a special measure of faith to do healings, etc. Others look to passages like Hebrews 11, which list heroes of the faith as examples of those, whose exemplary faith in the face of tough situations is a gift. Fee states,

It probably refers to a supernatural conviction that God will reveal his power or mercy in a special way in a specific instance.¹⁶

We note this to be a *charisma* gift because it refers to that person who has the God-given manifestation to point in faith to the Lord in situations where many believers might lose sight of God’s hand. This might be seen in a jaw-dropping miracle, but also simply in the confidence to walk on turbulent waters in the darkness of night, seeing Jesus holding out his hand and knowing that all will be okay.

Gifts of healing

Before I began typing this section of this lesson, I signed onto my emails and checked on the state of the world! In my inbox were four separate prayer requests for health issues. Three cancer cases and one head-on collision were the subjects for prayer.

I mused over the timing that the emails provided. Knowing I was about to type a portion of the lesson on healing, I was asked to pray for these in need of that very thing. The biblical passages flooded my mind. Jesus healed with words and touch. Jesus gave his apostles authority over disease, sometimes it worked, other times they struggled without success. Paul healed, although he admittedly had trouble with his own thorn in the flesh. Peter healed. Paul wrote of a gift of healing. I know that all believers have access to God through Jesus, and that God wishes all his children to pray for all their needs.

So I paused and prayed for those before writing this lesson. But is there a special gift beyond common prayer of believers? Are there those that have a special dispensation of faith enabling healing beyond what a common Christian might seek in prayer? Is Paul writing of a gift that exceeds that which an ordinary believer might have? Are there those that can send the Holy Spirit and his healing into someone’s body through a touch, a breath, or a shout?

Paul does speak of a gift of healing as a *charisma* gift. The fact that it is *charisma* means that it is a concrete expression of God’s giving. Yet this gift was spoken of

¹⁵ Bruce, F.F., *1 and 2 Corinthians* (Oliphants 1971).

¹⁶ Fee at 168.

in an age where doctors were not the practitioners of science we have today. While there were rudimentary treatments, medical science itself was not really very accurate. Were God to heal someone in Paul's day, it most certainly would have involved something directly intervening in what we consider a supernatural way.

Today God is certainly not limited in his power. He can certainly intervene supernaturally any time in any way he chooses. He is, after all, God! Today we also have science that has come a long way. Science itself, a Christian understands, is a gift from God. This world, its resources, its laws and principles, are all gifts and emanations from God himself. I would suggest that a doctor's administered treatment is no less a cure from God than divine intervention.

Now that is not to say that God does not treat and cure from prayer without doctors. But it is naïve and not fair to fail to give God credit for the cures brought about by medicine and modern science. For those are God's cures too! That Paul does not bring this into perspective does not mean it is not so. It simply means that Paul did not live in an age where God was working through medicine as he does now.

So where is this gift today? Wherever God places it. But I would suggest that we see a *charisma* gift, a concrete expression of God's giving in the healings of medicine as well. I would suggest that among those with a *charisma* gift of healing are those doctors who treat, through medicine and prayer, giving glory to God for the tools, the medicines, and the victories. As Jesus is lifted as Lord, the expression and the healing is a *charisma* healing of God.

Miracles

There are times where there seems to be no explanation for an event in the eyes of the world. There are also things that happen that the world might deem a coincidence, but the event or occurrence is almost bizarrely just the right thing at the right time. Is that what Paul is referring to in this part of his list?

The phrase Paul uses for "miracle" is *energumata dunameon*, meaning "workings of power, strength, ability, or energy." Some scholars see here the ability to exorcise demons. Some see this as an inclusive gift of healing and other supernatural matters. Fee notes,

The present context suggests that it covers a broad range of supernatural events that ordinary parlance would call miraculous.¹⁷

¹⁷ Fee at 169.

Regardless of how we understand this gift, we must see that many people work to the glory of God out of a power that is not their own. There are those who have an ability to tap into God's power to bring forth manifestations of him that glorify Christ. As such, we would be remiss to relegate this as simply a human product. Certainly any manifestation of God's power in the life of an individual that brings about works magnifying Christ as Lord is manifesting a concrete expression of God's giving. It is a *charisma* gift!

Prophecy

Rather than repeat the content of last week's notes on prophecy, we simply refer the reader back to them. Like all lessons, they can be accessed through the class website: www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

The ability to distinguish between spirits

This is an area where scholars disagree over what exactly Paul was referring to. In 1 John 4:1, for example, we read, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world." Is Paul writing about testing spirits in that sense? Or is Paul referencing the "weigh what is said" idea he sets out later in 1 Corinthians 14:29?

Whether Paul means either (or likely both) we still reach the same point. One's insight into what is from God, is itself a manifestation of God's gift. It is only through the working of God in our hearts and minds that one can discern what is from him and what is not. God has given to some more than others this *charisma* gift of discernment. It is manifested in those that correctly perceive and recognize the message of God, whether in a prophecy (1 Cor. 14:29; see also 1 Thess. 5:20-21) or in a situation.

Tongues and interpretations of tongues

Here Paul finally reaches the controversial gift that is his point for correction in chapter 14. A full understanding of Paul's position on this requires further study in detail of chapters 13 and especially 14. At this point we can simply note the implications of the passage here. God has given to some the manifestation of his giving in a concrete way as these people are able to speak in a language or interpret a language that is not natively their own. Sometimes this seems to be an unknown language, as Paul details in chapter 14; sometimes it is a known language as we read about in Acts 2. Either way, it is a manifestation of God's *charisma* gift.

What would Paul have us do with it? That is the question he handles in 14, but the roots of his answers have already been provided here in chapter 12. Paul is concerned about the body of Christ, the church. Paul points out in 1 Corinthians,

just as he did in Romans, that God is giving these gifts because God wants Jesus glorified. It is not a question of who is more important, who has the better gift, whose toy is shinier, newer or brighter. It is a question of how God has divided up the body into various parts among the members of the church to see that the church brings all together into God and his purpose.

To return to our Willie Wonka example, man is not the center of this dialogue. The concern is not about what we want, what we do, or about us at all. The heart of the matter is the Lord Jesus. God gives concrete manifestations of his giving to build up the church and to bring the unbelievers into the church. The focus is on his kingdom, his will. That is our focus even as he taught us to pray, “thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth.”

So these are *charisma* gifts not because they are spectacular in appearance, but because they are God’s spectacular giving manifested in concrete ways for the church and world.

CONCLUSIONS

So is a gift the same as a talent? I would suggest yes and no. Consider “yes” first. A talent is an ability that is inherent in an individual. Some, no doubt, are genetic in origin, others maybe environmental in development. Either way, God, the author of life is the giver of the talent and, as such, the talent is a gift. Again as mentioned earlier, James rightly teaches that all good gifts come from God.

Yet a talent is not necessarily a *charisma* gift. Here the key is *charisma* – a **concrete expression** of God’s giving. When a talent *used* by God is seen in the life of the believer in this use, the talent is a *charisma* gift. It is God’s manifest working in an obvious, objective and concrete way that lifts and glorifies the Lord. This is true regardless of the “gift.”

So we glorify God. We seek to use his gifts to his glory as we encourage and work in his church and among the world. We use his gifts in all forms and fashions with joy in our hearts, thankfulness on our breath, and confidence in our actions. Until he comes again!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be *uninformed*” (1 Cor. 12:1).

God gives the church not only gifts, but directions for using those gifts. Paul gives these instructions to the Corinthians, and through the work of the Spirit alive in the church, God has given these instructions through

Scripture to us today. Let us commit to study of God's word, seeking to be "informed" on this and many other matters!

2. *"There are varieties... to one is given... to another..."* (1 Cor. 12:4-6).

It seems a bit ironic that as Paul lists the gifts one to one and another to another, they were all gifts that he exhibited and displayed in his personal life. Paul spoke in wisdom and knowledge; he exhibited great faith even unto death. He worked healings and exorcisms. He prophesied and distinguished between spirits. He spoke in tongues. Yet in the midst of it all, Paul had one resolution and one purpose. He had one message. There was one thing alone that drove Paul: "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified". (1 Cor. 2:2). Whatever gifts we have, let us never limit God at work in our life. Find the abilities and talents you have and bring them to work for his kingdom. But never hesitate to know that God can use you in any way he chooses. Never fail to look for more chances to serve and praise him, in your life and the lives of others.

3. *"All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills"* (1 Cor. 12:11).

God has not left the church bereft of what it needs in order to do God's will. The church is not our project; it is his! Our role is to live as he teaches and empowers. As we do this, we will see his love and his will expressed in powerful ways, as his body grows in fullness daily.