

What are spiritual gifts?

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Christian basics › Holy Spirit

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The Bible speaks about gifts that God gives to His children, especially by the Holy Spirit. The Greek word used here is χάρισμα. Let's see what the apostles Paul and Peter write about these gifts.

The gift of eternal life

Romans 6:23 says: "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord". The first part of this verse applies to all humans: "Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned" (Romans 5:12). The free gift of eternal life is available for all people who believe in Jesus (Romans 5:15, John 3:16). He earned salvation by shedding His blood for sinful humans. Therefore, we can receive eternal life for free. As 1 Peter 1:18-19 has it: "You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood

of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot". So, every child of God has received this gift.

Various gifts within the church

Besides the gift of eternal life that all believers receive, there are gifts that differ. Not every individual believer receives the same gifts. The apostle Paul explains:

“As in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.” (Romans 12:4-8)

In 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, he addresses the same subject:

“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. 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.”

These lists are not exclusive. For example, in 1 Corinthians 7:7, Paul also mentions being married or single as gifts from God.

The gifts are meant for the common good

The verses above indicate that the spiritual gifts are not primarily meant for the individual good, but for the church as a whole. Paul explains this further at the end of the chapter:

“ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the higher gifts ” (1 Corinthians 12:27-31).

And in 1 Corinthians 14:12, he says: “Since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.” The apostle Peter basically says the same: “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace” (1 Peter 4:10).

Love as the highest gift

After listing various spiritual gifts, the apostle Paul says: “Earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way” (1 Corinthians 12:31). This “more excellent way” is explained in the next chapter: “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I

am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). So, all spiritual gifts should be accompanied by brotherly love. Loving one another is something every believer should strive to perfect, irrespective of the gifts he does or does not have.

Are all gifts of the Spirit still present?

Paul mentions “apostles” as one group that God has appointed in the church. These apostles were eye witnesses of Jesus’ earthly life, death and resurrection. They preached the coming of God’s Kingdom, which was a new era in God’s salvation plan. Their teachings have been transmitted to us in the New Testament. Nowadays, there are no apostles anymore since all eye witnesses of Jesus’ earthly life have long since died. The apostle Paul seems to say that doing signs and wonders was

especially connected to being an apostle: “The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works” (2 Corinthians 12:12). This could mean that those signs and wonders have decreased after the apostolic era, or mainly occur in situations where the Gospel is first preached.

Let’s take gifts of healing as an example. These were clearly present in the early church, as described in the book of Acts: “And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed” (Acts 5:14-16). Surely, God can still heal people. But this does not happen everywhere on such a massive scale as during Jesus’ earthly life and in the first days of the church, when the disciples “went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them

and confirmed the message by accompanying signs” (Mark 16:20).

The Holy Spirit “apportions to each one individually as He wills” (1 Corinthians 12:11). Moreover, believers can “quench the Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 5:19). This can mean that in some periods or areas, particular gifts of the Spirit are more present than in other times or places.

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