



THE MIRACLE AND MAJESTY OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS EPHESIANS 4:7-16

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I am constantly amazed by the fact that the one issue that so often divides Christians from one another, the issue that so frequently results in church splits, is the debate over spiritual gifts. It isn't the role of women in the church that puts believers at each other's throats. It isn't the question of the proper subjects of baptism, be they infants or believers. It isn't even eschatology, the debate over the end times that puts otherwise loving and compassionate Christians at odds with one another.

What makes this so sadly ironic is that one of the primary purposes of spiritual gifts is to enable people in a local church to walk together in unity. Sadly, though, spiritual gifts are the cause of so much disunity and division.

Today, we come to yet another of the apostle Paul's discussion of the nature and purpose of spiritual gifts. As you probably know, he describes the gifts of the Spirit in Romans 12:6-8, in 1 Corinthians 12:7-10 and again in 1 Corinthians 12:27-31; and in 1 Corinthians 13. There are a few comments made about the *charismata* in other texts of Paul's writings. The apostle Peter also speaks of gifts of the Spirit in 1 Peter 4:10-11. The one thing that you will notice if you look at each of these lists is that they are never the same. When all is said and done, my conclusion is that there are in total 21 gifts that are explicitly mentioned. Today, we look at a text where five (or perhaps only four) are mentioned.

Paul's Introduction to the Five Gifts of Ephesians 4:11

I think the best place to begin is with the words of John Stott. The last time we were in Ephesians 4 we looked at Paul's emphasis on our *unity* together as God's people. Here is a healthy reminder from Stott. He says that,

"although there is only one body, one faith and one family, this unity is not to be misconstrued as a lifeless or colourless uniformity. We are not to imagine that every Christian is an exact replica of every other, as if we had all been mass-produced in some celestial factory. On the contrary, the unity of the church, far from being boringly monotonous, is exciting in its *diversity*. This is not just because of our different cultures, temperaments and personalities (which, though true, is not Paul's point here), but because of the different gifts which Christ distributes for the enrichment of our common life" (155).

Several things are important to notice in vv. 7-10.

Paul finds support for this ministry of giving gifts in Psalm 68:18, which in its original context describes God's triumphant ascent of Mt. Zion after he had delivered his people. Here he seems to apply it to the triumphal exaltation and ascension of Christ described earlier in Eph. 1:20-23. The "host of captives" whom he led captive refers to the principalities and powers (i.e., demonic spirits) who were placed in subjection to his rule (1:20-22; see also Col. 2:15). The idea that this is a portrayal of Christ's descent into Hades to deliver OT believers and bring them into heaven has no basis in this text or any other.

I won't burden you with the variety of interpretations of vv. 7-10, but simply share what I think is going on here.

The Hebrew text of Psalm 68:18 reads: "You ascended on high, leading a host of captives in your train and receiving gifts among men." But in place of "receiving gifts among men" Paul renders this: "you **gave** gifts to men." What has happened? It would almost seem that Paul has turned the psalm on its head! I don't think the answer is all that difficult.

The prevailing custom in the ancient world was that the victorious person in a war not only received tribute but also distributed it among his own people. In other words, what conquerors took from their captives they then gave away to their own people. "The spoils were divided, the booty was shared" (Stott, 157). Thus, there is an anticipated "giving" *implied* in the Hebrew verb "receiving": **one receives in order to give**. Thus the relation between receiving and giving, i.e., the idea that the latter is implicit in the former, is simply *made explicit by Paul*, similar to what we see in Acts 2:33 – "Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing." To say it again, what was *implicit* in the psalm is now made *explicit* by Paul.

So, let me slow down and walk you through this one more time.

Note, first of all, that every single Christian has at least one spiritual gift, and some of you have several. We see this in Ephesians 4:7 – “grace was given to each one of us.” Peter says the same thing in 1 Peter 4:10 – “as each has received a gift, use it to serve one another.”

In v. 7 Paul says that the “grace” of a spiritual gift is given “according to the measure of Christ’s gift.” We might more accurately render this, “in proportion to Christ’s allotted giving.” In other words, the nature of your spiritual gift or gifts, the degree to which they operate effectively, is ultimately determined by Christ Jesus himself. He is the one who allots to us both the ability to exercise our spiritual gift(s) and the degree of success that we see as a result of our ministry. In Romans 12:6 Paul said that we have gifts “that differ according to the grace given to us.”

For Paul, Psalm 68:18 is about Jesus ascending on high and **giving** gifts to humanity. But the OT text has God ascending and **receiving** gifts. As I said, there is implicit in the notion of receiving gifts, the giving of gifts. Paul is simply drawing out or expanding on the more complete meaning of the psalm.

Part of the problem people have with Ephesians 4:8 is that they think it has to do with captives being liberated or set free. No. There is no liberation here. There is only **conquest**. Psalm 68 is all about conquest, victory in battle, defeating one’s enemies. A victory parade would be scheduled for the victorious general (much as the OKC Thunder had their victory parade after winning the NBA title). As a sign of his conquest of the enemy, he would lead captives behind him. They were the evidence of his victory. Their submission to the conquering general was clearly evident. They were the spoils or booty of war. But this booty or spoils of war would also be distributed to various people.

Paul’s point is that after Jesus conquered the demonic spirits who were his enemies, he distributed the benefits of his victory to his people, believers like you and me. And those benefits are the spiritual gifts mentioned here: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers.

So, when Paul refers to Christ leading “a host of captives” he’s not talking about liberating them; he’s not talking about setting them free, but of **conquering** them. The “captives” are the demonic spirits, the principalities and powers, who opposed Christ, the ones Paul mentioned in Ephesians 1:19-22 who were placed under the feet of Jesus when he was enthroned on high (see Col. 2:15). ***This verse is all about the victory of Christ over the demonic hosts.***

So, when Paul speaks of Christ Jesus ascending or going up, he’s talking about the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus, at which time God the Father “seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named.” Furthermore, “he [God the Father] put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church” (Eph. 1:20-22).

So, when Paul says that Jesus ascended on high, he’s pointing to his bodily resurrection and enthronement at the right hand of the Father. In his train, as it were, the booty and spoils of his victory were demonic captives. And part of his victory was the right to distribute gifts to others. The “gifts” in v. 8 that he gave to men and women are the spiritual gifts in v. 11.

But before we go there, I want you to understand what Paul is saying in v. 9. What was the “descent” that Paul had in mind and where did the descent take him? Some translations say he descended “into the lower regions of the earth,” that is, to the underworld, to Hades. But I don’t think this is what Paul is saying. The more accurate rendering here is found in the ESV – “into the lower regions, the earth.” The lower regions are not some place beneath the earth. The lower regions **are** the earth.

So, either Paul is referring to the incarnation of Christ, his coming to earth, born of a virgin. Or he is referring to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. On either reading, this passage is all about Christ’s victory over the forces of evil and the blessings he bestows on his people, the church, in the form of spiritual gifts. As for me, I think he has in mind the incarnation of Christ, the very truth that we just celebrated at Christmas.

A long-standing view is that this describes Christ’s descent or journey into *Hades* sometime between his burial and resurrection. But the contrast in the verse is between an ascent to heaven and a descent from heaven, not a descent from earth to the underworld or the realm of the dead. Lincoln also contends that if Paul “had had three levels in mind and meant that Christ descended to the deepest level just as he ascended to the greatest height, he would have been more likely to have used a superlative [lowest] than a comparative [lower]” (245). Also, Paul has

consistently referred to a “two-story” cosmology in Ephesians: heaven and earth; not a “three-story” cosmology: heaven, earth, under the earth. Lincoln asks, how can a descent into Hades be logically deduced from Christ’s ascent to heaven, “which, after all, appears to be the force of the argument here” (245). Finally, this view is usually based on a similar interpretation of 1 Peter 3:18ff. But the latter, in my opinion, describes the triumphant proclamation of Christ to demonic spirits *subsequent to his resurrection*, at the time of his ascension, not prior to his resurrection while his body was yet in the grave.

We now see that God not only gives grace to people. He also gives people to people who are “graced” with the ability to edify one another. We will examine these five gifts in the next message in Ephesians: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers.

Why Did He Do It?

So, the question must be asked: **Why did he do it?** Why did God decide to create the *charismata* (this is the word from which we get “charismatic”)? He obviously must have had some grand purpose in view. Knowing as he undoubtedly did that this battle I’ve been describing was inevitable, he must also have known that it was well worth the time and energy that we continuationists have invested in defending the biblical doctrine of the contemporary validity and operation of all spiritual gifts.

What I do know is that spiritual gifts were God’s idea. It wasn’t as if the apostle Paul or Peter or Luke or any other first-century figure sat down one day and concocted this idea of spiritual gifts. The only reason Paul and Peter and Luke and others talk so much about the gifts of the Spirit is because God wanted it that way. So, let’s get one thing straight right from the start. As I said, the *charismata*, the gifts of the Spirit were, are, and always will be God’s idea. He invented them. He shapes them in accordance with his will. If you are offended with spiritual gifts, you are offended with God.

What the Purpose of Spiritual Gifts is NOT

But before I do, let’s spend a moment in time talking about what gifts were **not** designed by God to accomplish. In other words, there are several things God never had in mind when he created spiritual gifts for his people.

(1) Spiritual gifts were not fashioned by God to establish or validate our identity in Christ. Don’t ever evaluate what gift or gifts God may have given you as a way of reinforcing your confidence that you belong to Christ Jesus. This is an especially dangerous and destructive misuse of spiritual gifts. The idea that *I am what gift* I have received is bad theology. You are first and fundamentally a child of God and a brother or sister of Christ by virtue of his sacrifice on the cross and bodily resurrection. In other words, be careful that you do not embrace the view that your personality or interpersonal relational style is directly tied to or shaped by your spiritual gift(s).

(2) The purpose of spiritual gifts is not to validate your calling. They may well serve to enable you to fulfill your calling, but your sense of personal value and purpose is rooted in God’s love and grace and mercy as seen in what he did for us in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

(3) Spiritual gifts were not designed by God to indicate levels of spiritual maturity. This is one of Paul’s primary points in 1 Corinthians 12-14. The believers in Corinth were “in every way enriched” in Christ Jesus, “so that they are not lacking in any gift” (1 Cor. 1:5, 7). And yet they were remarkably immature. They shouldn’t have been, but they had selfishly made use of the gifts to reinforce their egos. The prophetically gifted person or the person who speaks in tongues is not for that reason more godly or more mature or more spiritual than the person who has the gift of service or mercy.

(4) God did not create spiritual gifts as a way for us to expand our influence and authority in the local church. A person with only one, non-spectacular and less overtly miraculous gift may well exert great influence and be promoted in the church, while another with several gifts such as healing and prophecy and word of knowledge labors in relative obscurity.

(5) Spiritual gifts were never intended by God to shield us from the routine suffering that all Christians can expect to experience. In fact, it is often in the exercise of our gifts that we provoke others to persecute and oppose us. Consider the case of Stephen in Acts 6-7. He was “full of grace and power [and] was doing great wonders and signs among the people” (Acts 6:8). This served only to arouse the opposition of the religious elite (see Acts 6:9-15). And Stephen was then stoned to death!

(6) Spiritual gifts were not created to tell us how much God loves us as compared with how much he loves others. We must never point to some gift that we have received as if it is an indication that God loves me more than you, or you more than me.

(7) Spiritual gifts are not the reward of obedience or good works. We see this in the NT word for spiritual gifts: *charismata*, which you can easily see is built on the Greek word for "grace" (*charis*). Thus, gifts are given in accordance with the Spirit's gracious will and never because of a debt that God owes any of us. As Paul says in Romans 12:6, "having gifts that differ according to the *grace* given to us, let us use them." The point is that if all gifts are expressions of divine grace, there should be no competitive spirit or envy that someone might have a gift that you want, or vice versa.

(8) A major misconception embraced by many is that the primary (if not the exclusive) purpose of spiritual gifts was to authenticate or supply evidentiary proof of the genuineness of the apostles and their ministry in the first century. This is an argument that cessationists use to deny the validity of gifts today. If the purpose of the many gifts was to confirm or bear witness to the apostles as trustworthy teachers of doctrine, once the original company of apostles died, so too did the gifts that bore witness to them. ***But there isn't a single NT text that says this.*** Directly related to this is the argument that miraculous gifts, signs and wonders, were "signs" of the apostles. Again, once the apostles died, so too did the gifts of the Spirit that identified or marked them. But, of course, that is not what 2 Corinthians 12:12 says.

The Purpose of Spiritual Gifts

(1) The primary, overarching purpose of spiritual gifts is ***to glorify God***. We see this in 1 Peter 4:10-11.

"As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies – in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."

If at any time the Spirit empowers you to teach someone some truth of Scripture, never fail to praise and honor God for what he has done through you. If at any time you are enabled to encourage another believer, never fail to acknowledge that God is ultimately responsible for it and that God, therefore, is to be exalted for what he has done through you.

We could apply this truth to every single spiritual gift. Whether tongues or teaching, prophecy or mercy, giving or evangelism, all spiritual gifts when used according to Scripture are designed to magnify the goodness and grace and power of God. Gifts were designed by God to make certain that when wonderful things are accomplished, we do not take credit but give all glory and praise to God.

(2) Here in 1 Peter 4 we also see that another purpose of spiritual gifts is ***to "serve one another."*** Gifts are never self-referential. Spiritual gifts are other-oriented. That doesn't mean it is wrong or sinful if you in some way profit spiritually from the exercise of your gift (see, for example, what Paul says about tongues in 1 Cor. 14:4). Just don't forget that such self-edification is not the primary purpose for why God has blessed you with a particular gift. I am blessed and encouraged and built up every time I teach God's word. But that is always a secondary effect of the use of my gift. The primary goal is to serve other believers.

(3) Let's stay for a while in 1 Peter 4:10-11. Here Peter says that we are stewards of whatever gift or gifts we have received. That is to say, God has entrusted to us his power in order ***to put on display the "varied grace" of God***. The word translated "varied" is *poikilēs*. It could be translated "manifold" or "variegated" or "many-colored" (cf. Eph. 3:10). God's grace is not some bland, uniform, abstract principle. Divine grace is multi-faceted and diverse and comes to expression in a wide variety of ways when Christians, as those entrusted with it, avail themselves of God's grace in the exercise of whatever gift is theirs. Clearly, then, our use of spiritual gifts is not a "work" that puts God in our debt. Gifts are designed by God ***to glorify his grace!***

Spiritual gifts thus enable us to recognize and honor the vast differences, as well as the underlying unity, of all God's people. Consider the variety of colors in a Renoir painting. If he had used only blue paint or only red paint it would not have the same effect on us as when he uses multiple hues or colors and weaves them into a composite picture.

We marvel at the painting because of its variety and unity. And we marvel at God for the way he takes variety among Christians and through their spiritual gifts brings about unity in the body.

(4) Spiritual gifts are designed *to put God's "strength" on display for all to see*. Here in 1 Peter 4:11 the apostle says that using one's gift is always and only by means of the "strength" that God supplies. Spiritual gifts were not bestowed to make us feel better or to demonstrate to others how talented we are. Apart from the infusion of God's strength and power our gifts would be fleshly and ineffective. Since the *charismata* are exercised only in the strength that God supplies, it seems evident that their purpose is to enable us to exceed the limits of our finite existence to display the infinite power of God's.

This is clearly stated in 1 Corinthians 12:6 where Paul says that although there are "varieties of activities" it "is the same God who empowers them all in everyone."

(5) We might also recognize in spiritual gifts *God's way of reminding us of our inherent weakness apart from him*. In this way, gifts are also designed *to reinforce and emphasize our complete dependence on God*. When we exercise any gift of the Spirit, the anticipated response of those watching should never be: "Wow! Did you see what Michael did? Did you see what Sarah did?" Rather, the response should always be: "Wow! Did you see what God did through Michael/Sarah?"

(6) Spiritual gifts were designed by God *to enable us to join in partnership with him as he accomplishes his goal in redemptive history*. Although there are many things that God does independently, apart from us, his preferred manner of working in the world is through or by means of or in partnership with his people. God could drop encouragement into human souls like manna from heaven, but he prefers that we be the intermediaries of his encouragement of his children. The same could be said of all gifts. God could directly save souls without our evangelistic efforts, but he prefers to make use of us in the exercise of the gift of evangelism. The same can easily be said about healing. One primary purpose for gifts of healings (both words are plural in 1 Cor. 12) is to demonstrate that God much prefers to restore the sick in response to the faith and prayers of his people, rather than to heal by divine fiat.

(7) Second only to gifts having been designed to glorify God is the purpose articulated by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12-14, namely, *to build up and edify the body of Christ*. We see this in 1 Cor. 12:7 where gifts are given "for the common good" of Christians in any and every local church. 1 Corinthians 14 is littered with the language of edification or the building up of believers. We see this in vv. 3, 4, 5, 12, 17, 19, 26, and 31. Thus, no fewer than 9 times in 1 Cor. 12-14 we see the emphasis on gifts having been given in order to build up or edify or strengthen believers.

(8) Let's stay with 1 Corinthians 12 and observe that in v. 7 Paul not only defines what a spiritual gift is but in doing so tells us what all gifts are designed to do. *Gifts are "the manifestation of the Spirit."* Gifts are the Spirit going public through the many ways he empowers God's people. Gifts are bestowed in order that we might all see the Holy Spirit in concrete ways. The Spirit manifests or discloses himself by means of the gifts he imparts.

In John 3, Jesus says that when it comes to the new birth or regeneration, the Holy Spirit is virtually undetectable. He is like the wind which no one knows "where it comes from or where it goes" (v. 8). But in 1 Cor. 12:7 the *charismata* are given precisely so that we might see and marvel at who the Spirit is and what he does. *The Spirit who secretly and silently causes us to be born again is openly and loudly made manifest when we exercise our gifts.*

(9) Let's stay in 1 Corinthians 12-14 to see additional reasons why God concocted this notion of spiritual gifts. We see in 1 Cor. 14:23-25 that the spiritual gift of prophecy, in particular, is given in order to disclose the secret sins of unbelievers, and in doing so to enable them to know that God is real. In other words, when gifts are properly exercised they serve *to awaken us to God's powerful presence in our midst*.

(10) Several texts of Scripture say much the same thing. We see the early church exercise spiritual gifts in order *to lead people to repentance* (Acts 8:6; 9:35,42). Along with preaching and prayer, the gifts of the Spirit can be utilized by the Spirit in bringing lost souls to recognize their sin and repent of it.

(11) God has created and imparted a variety of different gifts *to facilitate unity among the many members of the church*. In 1 Cor 12:14ff. we read that each gift has been distributed to people who, in the exercise of those gifts, enable the body to give expression to their interdependence. They are the Spirit's way of highlighting the essential role that all believers play in the life of the local church. This is why Paul makes use of the analogy of the human body to make his point. Some in the church are a foot, while others are an eye. Some are an ear while others are a

mouth. "If all were a single member," says Paul, "where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body" (12:19-20).

I can't think of another spiritual reality that so beautifully highlights both our differences from one another and our fundamental and underlying unity. Only spiritual gifts can do this.

(12) I believe God conceived the idea and exercise of spiritual gifts **to communicate and impart to us the love of God for his people** (1 Cor. 13; 14:1). As Jack Deere put it: "Spiritual Gifts are the Tools of Empowered Love" (Deere, *Why I am Still Surprised by the Power of the Spirit*, 222). We see this all through 1 Corinthians 13. Gifts that are energized by selfish, personal gain are worse than useless. But gifts that are motivated and energized by God's love are transformative.

This brings me to 1 Corinthians 14:1. I have often spoken on the fact that in this text Paul issues a command that all of us are to "earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that" we "may prophesy." This isn't an option. Paul isn't giving us good advice. It is an imperative, a command, a mandate that God places on all Christians.

But I often fail to mention the first half of 14:1. There Paul says, "**pursue love.**" This is his way of applying the truth of 1 Corinthians 13 to all of chapter 14. Before you pray for a particular gift of the Spirit and before you prophesy to the people for their encouragement and edification, pursue love! Make certain that the underlying motivation in all spiritual gifts is the expression of Christ's love for his people, manifested through our use of the gifts.

(13) Spiritual gifts were conceived by God so that we who trust in Christ might **be strengthened for the battle**. In Romans 1:11-12, Paul says, "I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you – that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine."

I would also argue that we see this same point of emphasis in Ephesians 4:8-9. Spiritual gifts are what the risen Christ has given to us to continue the defeat of the demonic that began with his enthronement and exaltation to the right hand of God. Our authority over the enemy is first grounded in Christ's victory over death and then expressed, secondly, in the many gifts of the Holy Spirit that he has bestowed. **Spiritual gifts are the tools of spiritual warfare!**

(14) In a related vein, Paul clearly tells Timothy that the prophetic words he received are designed by God **to provide him with strength for the battle against the world, flesh, and the devil**.

"This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience" (1 Tim. 1:18-19a).

I don't think Paul is saying that prophecy is the only spiritual gift that serves this purpose. But he highlights it here because of the way it served Timothy in his battle with sin and temptation. We could just as easily reflect on other spiritual gifts that either we or someone else exercised so as to be empowered in our war with Satan. Simply put, all spiritual gifts are the means or instruments by which we are progressively sanctified or grow in our conformity to Christ.

(15) It's important that we prioritize the fruit of the Spirit above the gifts of the Spirit. But this does not mean that the gifts are unimportant. Far from it. Spiritual gifts, among other things, are what **enable us to live out the fruit of the Spirit**. Or to say the same thing in other words, spiritual gifts are the means while spiritual fruit is the goal.

(16) Gifts of the Spirit, especially healing, are designed **to display God's compassion for the hurting and broken**.

(17) God's aim or purpose in the impartation of spiritual gifts is **"to equip the saints for the work of ministry"** (Eph. 4:12). The word "ministry" is not limited in this text to some specific task. All ministry, whether serving or speaking or giving or prophesying or encouraging, is the reason why God has granted us the gifts of his Spirit.

(18) We also learn from Ephesians 4:13 that spiritual gifts are imparted **to facilitate and accelerate "the unity of the faith" among Christians**. Whatever divisions our sin has caused, whatever mistrust some believers experience in their relationship with others, spiritual gifts can operate in such a way as to build and intensify the joy of unity among us all.

(19) Again, Ephesians 4:14 tells us that yet another reason why God has given spiritual gifts is so that we might not be “tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes” (4:14).

In other words, the proper use of spiritual gifts is designed by God *to produce what might be called spiritual and theological stability*. Several gifts of the Spirit are uniquely designed to help us discern when “human cunning” rather than divine wisdom is in our midst. How might we come to recognize “craftiness in deceitful schemes?” Paul’s answer is the proper, multifaceted, Holy Spirit empowered exercise of the many gifts granted to us by the Spirit.

(20) Finally, God has created and imparted spiritual gifts in order *to equip us with the endurance, patience, and perseverance we need to remain faithful as we await the second coming of Christ Jesus*. We know this from what Paul wrote to the Corinthians in chapter one of his first letter:

“I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and knowledge – even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you – so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor. 1:4-9).

This text seems to suggest that one of the primary ways in which God intends to keep us faithful and sustain us to the end is by means of the exercise of those many gifts he has bestowed.

In our next lesson in Ephesians we will examine 4:11-16.