

SPIRITUAL GIFTS & APOSTLES

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God's plan is to build His church, and to do this task He gives spiritual gifts to His people to equip them for the task. It is important that we understand what these gifts are, why they are given and how they are to be used.

Because of the privilege and authority God has given me, I give each of you this warning: Don't think you are better than you really are. Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us. Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other. In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So, if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you. If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly. (Romans 12:3-8, NLT)

Definition: 'A spiritual gift is any ability that is empowered by the Holy Spirit and is used in any ministry of the church'. Wayne Grudem.

This is perhaps a wider definition than we are sometimes used to, as when spiritual gifts are mentioned we often think of gifts such as prophecy, miracles, healing and tongues, and it is true that these are all gifts, but this passage includes gifts such as serving others, encouraging, giving, being kind to people. These are qualities that anybody can have to some extent, whether they are in the church or not, so how can they be gifts?

Now you have every spiritual gift you need as you eagerly wait for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 1:7, NLT)

Paul is telling the Corinthian Christians that they have been given these gifts to use whilst they await the return of Jesus at the end times. The Holy Spirit was given at Pentecost (Acts 1:8) to equip the church to preach the gospel to the world, and the spiritual gifts are given to empower the church to do this work. To practically enable this to happen, and to reach all people, a range of gifts are required. There are six passages in scripture which list some of these gifts (Romans 12:6-8, 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 1 Corinthians 12:28, 1 Corinthians 7:7, Ephesians 4:11, 1 Peter 4:11), and they are all slightly different, with some degree of overlap and some changes in order. The gifts, or offices, listed in these passages are apostles, prophets or prophecy, teaching, evangelists, pastors,

serving others, encouragement, miracles, giving, leadership, kindness, healing and tongues.

We can also see from Romans 12:4-5 that we all need each other to bring these gifts into the church, just as all the parts of the body are needed, or the body dies. Also, the body has no parts that are not needed, every part does something for the whole body. For a church to function all of these gifts are required, and no one person is going to possess them all. This is why God chose the church to do His work in the world, and not single people working on their own. If a person is basing their ministry on a single gift, working alone, we should be cautious and aware that they are not using the gift as God intended, in the church. This is perhaps even more relevant in the age of social media and YouTube.

Peter simply says that there are two types of gifts, those of speaking and those of rendering service:

God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another. Do you have the gift of speaking? Then speak as though God himself were speaking through you. Do you have the gift of helping others? Do it with all the strength and energy that God supplies. Then everything you do will bring glory to God through Jesus Christ. All glory and power to him forever and ever! Amen. (1 Peter 4:10-11, NLT)

Peter also makes it plain that all Christians have spiritual gifts, they are not the prerogative of a chosen few in the church. This means that we should all be examining ourselves to see what gifts God has given up for the benefit of the church, as we should expect to have some. These gifts do not always come with a label, we do need to examine ourselves and also seek counsel from others in the church to find out what they are. Sometimes we cannot recognise our gifting ourselves, and this may need to be pointed out to us. If you are a naturally good person at talking to strangers you may take it for granted that everyone is like you and not see that as a special gift, but it will be more apparent to someone who does not share that gift. The best place for this to happen is in church, and church is the place to exercise spiritual gifts.

God gives these gifts to build up the church, not to build up the person. We should also accept that we are not all given all of the gifts we might like or seek: they are gifts, and God gives them as He sees fit. We cannot earn them but we can seek them and ask God for them, as Paul states "So you should earnestly desire the most helpful gifts." 1 Corinthians 12:31. We can do this by praying for them, but we also need to have the right motive for seeking them: God gives them to build up

the church, so He is only likely to give them if that is the purpose for which they will be used. It is possible to seek gifts for the wrong reasons, such as personal gain, be that financial or for other reasons. This was the attitude of Simon the sorcerer in Acts 8:9-20, he was seeking the gift of the Holy Spirit because it would give him power, and Peter had to rebuke him for this.

Gifts also need to be developed. A lot of skills and abilities in life can be improved or strengthened by regular use, and some skills can fade quickly if they are not used. No musician would prepare for a concert by not playing their instrument for a few months, instead they would practice daily. It is the same with spiritual gifts, we should seek to develop and build them up by using them. This may require effort and study on our part, but we would willingly do this so that God can use our gifts more. This might mean attending a Junior Church training day, even if you are a professional teacher, as God may have something to tell you about Junior Church specifically. 'Use it or lose it' can apply in the realm of spiritual gifts.

There is also a difference between the gift and the office. There can be degrees of gifting and we see this with the gift of prophecy in Acts 21. When Paul travelled to Jerusalem he landed at Tyre, and the local believers prophesied, even though they did not have the gift of prophecy: they were able to prophecy in this specific situation through the Holy Spirit (v4). Paul then went to Caesarea, and stayed with Philip, who had four daughters who had the gift of prophecy (v9). Then a man named Agabus came who also had the gift but prophesied to Paul (v11), he had the office of a prophet. Those most qualified in the church usually have the office for those spiritual gifts, such as the pastor, an evangelist, a teacher or a prophet, but that does not mean that others in the church cannot function with those gifts, and indeed it may be that one functions in a gift for a long time before one acquires the actual office. We all love titles, but we should not be exercising our gifts in pursuit of a title, but to serve the church, and thus God Himself. If we are worrying about what title we have in the church then we are almost certainly exhibiting the wrong attitude.

In summary:

- We all have spiritual gifts, and we need to seek out what they are, and the place to do this is in church. We all have a role in the work of the church.
- We should use the gifts God has given us, and aim to develop our gifts, and the place to do this is in church.
- We should use our gifts for the good of the church, and if we seek higher gifts do it for the blessing of the church.
- We should not worry about our titles in the church, but seek to serve.

Apostles

The office of apostle is listed in 1 Corinthians 12:28 and Ephesians 4:11. The term has two main meanings, and we need to distinguish what we mean when we refer to apostles.

- In the New Testament the two qualifications for being an apostle were firstly, having seen Jesus after His resurrection with one's own eyes and secondly, having been specifically commissioned by Christ as his apostle. This means that there were quite a small number of apostles, consisting of the original 12 apostles, Matthias who replaced Judas, Barnabus, James the brother of Jesus, and Paul. These apostles had authority in the early church to write words which became scripture, so this office of apostle has obviously ended, as no person today has the authority to add to scripture.
- The term 'apostle' is also used in the New Testament to refer to a messenger (Gk. Apostolos, 'he who is sent'). The term is today used to mean someone who plants churches or a significant missionary pioneer. In this use the term apostle should refer to the ministry and not a position, we should not confuse the two things.
- It is certainly possible for Christians today to act as apostles in the sense of being church planters who spread the gospel as a messenger. There are people who fulfil the function without assigning to themselves the title of apostle, and this is the way that it should be. *'It is noteworthy that no major leader in the history of the church - not Athanasius or Augustine, not Luther or Calvin, not Wesley or Whitefield - has taken to himself the title of "apostle" or let himself be called an apostle. If any in modern times want to take the title of "apostle" to themselves, they immediately raise the suspicion that they may be motivated by inappropriate pride and desires for self-exaltation, along with excessive ambition and a desire for much more authority in the church than any one person should rightfully have.'* Wayne Grudem.
- The mark of a true apostle, in the sense often used today, is a person who spreads the gospel and plants new churches, but does not seek personal gain or recognition. As will all of the other spiritual gifts or offices, they are given to build up the church and not the individual, and this is the way that they should be used.