

# A Church Alive: The Greatest Gifts

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*But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all – I Corinthians 12:7*

## Recap

Two weeks ago, we looked at the Corinthian church's activities regarding the gifts of the spirit, and Paul's need to refocus them in the right way. The Corinthians were very comfortable with moving in "a" spirit, and Paul pointed out that their history was based on following the "sound" of idols that, in actuality, had no ability to speak. Because of this, and their focus on self, they were given to operating by, and believing in wrong spirits.

Paul not only recounted what the gifts of the Spirit were, but gave them a way to look at them with the right focus and motivation: Love. Our traditional view of I Corinthians 13, affectionately known as "the love chapter" paints a very different picture from what Paul was trying to communicate: this was a continuation of his discussion on the gifts of the Spirit, not a commercial on the virtues of love. As he continues in chapter 14, we see that love and the gifts of the spirit are two sides of the same coin. In the context of showing the love of God to those around us, we need to be zealous for the gifts of the Spirit to be in operation, for it is this operation that Jesus promised upon His departure.

## Best of the Best

*Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? **But earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way.** – I Corinthians 12:27-31*

The Corinthian church put much of their stock and activity on what Paul referred to as the last of the gifts – tongues. It is easy to see why they might have, as it was the first sign of Pentecost **performed by the disciples**. Even today, many churches view tongues as the one and only evidence of the manifestation of the Spirit in the life of the believer.

Paul puts things in perspective – showing the order and focus God put on what is in the church, and then offered two striking thoughts:

- **Not everyone operates in every gift:** No matter how spiritual you are, how learned, or how important you are to the Body, you are not a "one person show". Those who claim mastery of every gift and every calling are simply people who do not understand the life of the Body or how God operates.

- **We are to earnestly desire the “best” gifts:** While we know we don’t get them all, that shouldn’t stop us from wanting or pursuing the best. We are not to have a fatalistic view regarding the gifts of the Spirit, but rather have a hunger for them, and that hunger should start with the best.

*There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all. – I Corinthians 12:4-7*

It is easy to think of the gifts with personal benefit in mind, and how they contribute to our own uniqueness in the Body of Christ. Spiritual gift assessments categorize people according to their differences to show them what gifts they are likely to have, but if taken just by themselves, do not address the benefit to the entire Body. Therefore we can talk about what **we are** or what **we have**, and use that to compare ourselves and our spiritual well being with others who may not “possess” our particular gift mix.

### What’s and Why’s

But what are the “best gifts”? Is Paul saying that there are some gifts of the Holy Spirit, or some things that God has set in the church that we shouldn’t desire, or that we should not pursue? How does that fit with the fact that earlier, Paul said that it is the same Spirit who operates them all? Paul seems to indicate that it is not the “what” that makes them the best, but the “why”:

*Pursue love, and [be zealous for] spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands him; however in the Spirit he speaks mysteries. But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive the edification. – I Corinthians 14:1-5*

**Stop: Think of all the people you interact with, and how many you would prefer to have a harsh word to say (a boss... a coworker... a teacher... the person who cut you off, etc.). Ask God for something that will edify them the next time you speak to them.**

What we can get from Paul’s statement is this:

- Both tongues and prophecy edify
- Both can be equivalent
- The situation determines what is greater

Paul is talking to the Corinthian church about **Body life**: their interactions with each other and their expectations of God’s moving in their group gatherings. In those situations, speaking in tongues alone is not beneficial because, while it builds up the person engaged in it, it does nothing for the rest of the Body. We can also ascertain from Paul’s statement that we have to be willing and desirous for **God’s purpose** to be manifest in the lives of the people we are interacting with:

*Now it came to pass, when the time had come for Him to be received up, that He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem, and sent messengers before His face. And as they went, they entered a village of the Samaritans, to prepare for Him. But they did not receive Him, because His face was set for the journey to Jerusalem. And when His disciples James and John saw this, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?" But he turned and rebuked them, and said, "**You do not know what manner of spirit you are of.** For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them." And they went to another village. – Luke 9:51-56*

### The Gift of Prophecy

*But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men. – I Corinthians 14:3*

When we think of prophecy we immediately think of people like Elijah and Ezekiel or we associate it with some level of "spiritual fortune telling" – being able to predict the future, or telling people things that only they could know. While prophecy may contain some of those elements, it is not limited to that by any means. According to Paul, prophecy is the act of speaking what the Spirit of God gives. The person prophesying will be **speaking to people** that which will build them up, cause them to act or bring them comfort.

*After that you shall come to the hill of God where the Philistine garrison is. And it will happen, when you have come there to the city, that you will meet a group of prophets coming down from the high place with a stringed instrument, a tambourine, a flute, and a harp before them; and they will be prophesying. Then the Spirit of the Lord will come upon you, and you will prophesy with them and be turned into another man... And it happened, when all who knew him formerly saw that he indeed prophesied among the prophets, that the people said to one another, "What is this that has come upon the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets?" – I Samuel 10:5-6, 11*

Historically, prophecy was limited to those called as prophets. Even this was strange to the people of Israel that Saul would begin to prophesy, causing people to think that Saul had to have become a prophet. God however was showing not only Saul, but also the rest of us one of the things that happens when the Spirit of God comes upon us. What happened to Saul was also prophesied in Joel:

*And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh. Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams; your young men shall see visions. – Joel 2:28*

God was preparing us for a time when we wouldn't have to wait for a certain person in order to hear the directive of the Lord, or to be encouraged by the Spirit of God – just like the wind, we could expect it to come from anywhere or anyone.

## When Does All Mean All?

*To **another** the working of miracles, to **another prophecy**, to **another** discerning of spirits, to **another** different kinds of tongues, to **another** the interpretation of tongues. – I Corinthians 12:10*

*Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? – I Corinthians 12:29*

When we take these verses, we could very well conclude that this might just not be my gift – I might not have the gift of prophecy. That was the same mindset that the people had about Saul... rather than accept what he was doing, they tried to associate the activity with **what they knew about him**. Moses had a similar situation where he gathered the elders around the tabernacle, and God put his spirit upon them:

*Then the Lord came down in the cloud, and spoke to him, and **took of the Spirit that was upon him**, and placed the same upon the seventy elders; and it happened, when the Spirit rested upon them, that they prophesied, although they never did so again. – Numbers 11:25*

Whether they were called into the office or not was not the issue. God wasn't even telling them that he was changing their position or ministry: he was simply moving on them by His Spirit, and the result was that they prophesied.

Remembering that Paul was dealing with situations in the church where people were focused on their status, how they compared with each other, and what their personal benefit was, he had to place things in the context of **differences working together**. Therefore, in the context of Body life, we should expect the full operation of the Spirit of God:

*How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. **Let all things be done for edification**. – I Corinthians 14:26*

In Moses' situation there were two elders who were called but did not go to the tabernacle, yet the Spirit of God still rested upon them, and they prophesied. People told Moses that they tried to stop them because they were not with the rest – basically it wasn't following protocol. Moses' response, however was as follows:

*Then Moses said to him, "Are you zealous for my sake? Oh, that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them!" – Numbers 11:29*

Moses recognized the benefit of one person, or a select few being moved by the Spirit of God... what would happen if all could experience the same thing? Paul recognized the same:

*I wish you **all** spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied... **that the church may receive edification**. I Corinthians 14:5 abridged*

Are all prophets? No, but God can move upon all of us and we can prophesy.