

Spiritual Gifts in 1 Corinthians and the New Testament

The concept of spiritual gifts is present only in the New Testament, especially in the letters of Paul, although the idea of being empowered by the Holy Spirit for particular tasks is by no means alien to the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Judg. 3:10; Num. 11:29).

Various Greek terms are employed for spiritual gifts, but the most notable are *ta pneumatika*, which emphasizes the spiritual origin of the gifts (*pneuma* means “spirit”; see 1 Cor. 14:1), and *ta charismata*, which emphasizes that they are bestowed as an act of divine grace (*charis* means “grace”; see Rom. 12:6).

In distinction from “the fruit of the Spirit,” which all Christians are to manifest without variation (Gal. 5:22–23), the gifts of the Spirit are understood to vary from one believer to another (Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 12:4–11; cf. 1 Pet. 4:10). The undisputed letters of Paul contain four separate listings of the Spirit’s gifts (Rom. 12:6–8; 1 Cor. 12:8–10, 28, 29–30), but since no two of the lists are identical it seems clear that no list is intended to be definitive.

The various gifts may be grouped under three general headings.

Gifts of Utterance

- prophecy (Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 12:10, 29; cf. 1 Cor. 12:8; 14:6)

- the ability to distinguish between true and false prophecy
(1 Cor. 12:10; cf. 1 Cor. 14:29; 1 Thess. 5:19–21)
- instruction (Rom. 12:7; 1 Cor. 12:28; cf. 1 Cor. 14:6)
- speaking in tongues (1 Cor. 12:10, 28; cf. 14:1–19)
- the ability to interpret speaking in tongues (1 Cor. 12:10, 30;
cf. 14:5, 13)

Gifts of Practical Ministry

- caring for the needy (Rom. 12:7–8), forms of assistance
(1 Cor. 12:28)
- leadership (Rom. 12:8; 1 Cor. 12:28)

Gifts of Wonder-Working Faith

- healing (1 Cor. 12:9, 28)
- performing miracles (1 Cor. 12:10, 29)

The gift of apostleship, ranked first in 1 Corinthians 12:28, is active in all three ways: in the ministry of the word (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:17; 4:17), in pastoral care (e.g., Rom. 15:25–29; Philemon), and in the working of miracles (e.g., 2 Cor. 12:12; Gal. 3:5). Additional lists of gifts found in Ephesians 4:11 and 1 Peter 4:10–11 refer only to intelligible utterance and practical ministry, not to speaking in tongues or miracle working.

Responding to disruptions caused by speaking in tongues in his Corinthian congregation, Paul emphasizes that every believer is

graced by some gift and that all gifts are bestowed by “the same Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:4–11). Nevertheless, since their purpose is to serve “the common good” (12:7), Paul concludes that prophecy (intelligible to all) is to be preferred to speaking in tongues (intelligible only to God) unless there is an interpreter (1 Cor. 14:1–5).