

1 Corinthians 12:4–10

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal. For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; to another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues. But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will.

One Word Behind Three Translations

An important observation about verses 4, 5, and 6: the words rendered *diversities* in verse 4, *differences* in verse 5, and *diversities* again in verse 6 are all translations of the same Greek word. There is no distinction to be built on the varying English renderings. In each case it means simply: there are distinctions of this thing. Distinctions of gifts. Distinctions of services. Distinctions of operations. The variety is real, but all three point back to one source.

Three Passages on Gifts — Three Perspectives

Gifts are spoken of in three principal passages, each bringing them before us from a different perspective. In Romans 12, gifts are looked at as services to God

— that chapter opens with the call to intelligent service. In Ephesians 4, certain persons are themselves the gifts, given by the ascended Head for the building up of the body. Here in 1 Corinthians 12, the gifts are manifestations of the Spirit — it is the Spirit who is the leading person in the passage. All three perspectives are true; each illuminates a different aspect of the same divine reality.

As Mr. Kelly put it plainly: Christian ministry is the exercise of gift. That is the definition. Ministry is not an office to be held, nor a position to be filled. It is the exercise of something given by the Spirit. And it is the Spirit's work in it that makes it ministry — the gifts manifest the Spirit. That can be abused, as chapter 14 addresses. But that is speaking of how God has arranged the matter in principle.

Gifts Are Constrained by Scripture

The world is full of gifted poets, gifted musicians, gifted playwrights — everyone with a capacity for anything is said to be gifted. But that is not what these verses are speaking of. The lists of gifts in Romans 12, Ephesians 4, and here in 1 Corinthians 12 constrain our thinking rightly. The New Testament does not speak of gifted guitar players as possessing spiritual gifts. There are distinctions of gifts — but those distinctions do not go as far as Christendom goes. These gifts are limited to members of the body of Christ. How good it is to have our minds constrained and defined by the Word of God.

The Body Sets Forth the Head

It has been well said that it requires every member to set forth what Christ is. He is in glory, and the body on earth is looked at as complete — called in Ephesians *the whole body*. Members come and go; Stephen was already martyred when Paul spoke of the whole body, yet it remained the whole body. It requires every member to set forth what the Head is. In the present ruinous condition of the

church, this is not happening as it should — the truth of things is clouded. But the truth itself remains. The body remains. And we are to act on divine principles, insofar as we have spiritual power to do it, in accordance with what God has set up.

The state of Christendom is traced, as Colossians 2:19 diagnoses it, to *not holding the head, from which all the body, by joints and bands, having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increases with the increase of God*. What we see around us is not the increase of God. If the Head is not held, there will be defect in setting forth what the Head is. But the Holy Spirit is engaged in providing the power to hold the Head. He is not confused. Christendom is confused — but the same Spirit, the same Lord, the same God, is as true today as ever. *Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever*. That is our comfort and sustaining in a day of ruin.

Verse 7: Manifestation Given to Each — for Profit

Verse 7 establishes two things: the manifestation of the Spirit is given to *every man*, and it is given *to profit withal*. The Spirit indwells each believer, and the distribution is universal — some gifts more prominent, some less, but every member has something. And the purpose is never to profit oneself. The gift was never given for self-profit. As Christ has others in mind in His services, and the operations of God are for others, so the Spirit in distributing these manifestations has others in mind as the objects of the particular ministry. There may be rewards for faithful exercise of gift at the judgment seat of Christ — but those rewards come then, not now.

A Pentecostal writer was once read who candidly described praying to God to receive this gift and that gift and the other. The man was entirely filled up with himself — he wanted the gifts to set himself off. That is a revealing thing to have committed to print. It shows how completely one can miss the point of verse 7.

The gifts are given to profit others, not oneself.

Verses 4, 5, and 6 — A Unity

Verses 4, 5, and 6 mesh like gears — they are consistent with one another and form a whole. An evangelist may serve to illustrate. If an evangelist preaches the gospel and someone is saved: where did that man receive his ability? That was the gift of the Spirit — verse 4. Who sent him? That was the Lord, to whom he was obedient — verse 5. Who saved the soul? That was the operation of God; it was not the evangelist. He was there in obedience to the Lord, exercising a capacity given to him by the Spirit, and the actual accomplishing of the work — the credit — goes to God who operated all in all — verse 6.

There is nothing in these verses suggesting that any one of the three things — gifts, services, operations — is to be played off against another. Verse 5 says nothing about ignoring gifts in order to get the Lord's work done. Verse 6 says nothing about disobeying the Lord in order that the operations might proceed. The three verses are a unified whole.

The Word of Wisdom

The list of gifts in verses 8–10 does not open with the most dramatic. If this were advertising, the gifts of miracles or tongues would be in flashing lights at the front. But the list opens quietly with the word of wisdom. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. That is not loud. But if any discussion of spiritual manifestations begins there — with the word of wisdom, with a reverence for the Lord Jesus put first — it will have a very different content than if one goes looking in Christendom for whatever is being called a manifestation of the Spirit.

The word of wisdom and the word of knowledge appear to be gifts of communicating — the capacity to communicate wisdom, and to communicate

knowledge. These are not the same as simply possessing wisdom or knowledge. Two people may have equal stores of knowledge; one has the gift of communicating it publicly, and another may have none of that gift but privately is able to instruct even more deeply on an individual basis. Both have the word of knowledge — but in different expressions.

Faith — A Gift Beyond Common Faith

To another is given faith by the same Spirit. This is not the faith common to all Christians — the faith by which we believe the Word of God. This is a distinct manifestation of the Spirit working in a person, something extraordinary. There is an account of a brother in Connecticut who sat down with his family and gave thanks to the Lord for the food — when all the plates were empty. Even as he prayed, there was a knock at the door and provision arrived. He had given thanks for food that was not yet visible. That is not common faith. That is a working of the Spirit in power, in an uncommon way.

The Lord Jesus spoke of faith the size of a grain of mustard seed being able to move mountains. There is something measurable about this gift of faith — something given in a particular degree or capacity at a particular time, for a particular service. It may be coupled with other gifts in the circumstances where the Lord places the person.

Gifts of Healing — Miracles — Prophecy

Mr. Kelly observes that *gifts of healing* is plural — both the word *gifts* and the implied variety. There must be various kinds of healings that the Lord has in mind. It is worth noting that while we read of apostles, prophets, pastors, and teachers as persons who are those things, there is no person in Scripture called a healer. That may place the gift of healing in a somewhat different category from those others.

The working of miracles — *operations of powers*, as Kelly renders it — is distinct from gifts of healing, though related. This passage is not arranged like advertising; the more spectacular gifts are not placed at the front. It is likely that neither of these things is found in the church today in the sense intended here. Those who deny the ruin of the church find themselves in a difficulty: if the church is in order, why are these things not being seen? The denial of ruin puts pressure on people to produce what they cannot actually produce.

Prophecy in the revelatory sense — the direct communication of the mind of God, as we see in Acts with Agabus foretelling the famine — has passed, along with the other things that have passed. What remains is the prophetic ministry in its fundamental sense: speaking for God, being His mouthpiece. When Moses said he could not speak before Pharaoh, God answered that Aaron would be his prophet — his spokesman. That is the root meaning of the word. The Spirit still raises up those who speak for God, and that is a present and abiding thing.

Discerning of Spirits — Kinds of Tongues — Interpretation

Discerning of spirits is a special capacity to distinguish between what proceeds from the Spirit of God and what proceeds from the one who comes as an angel of light with his ministers as ministers of righteousness. It is a gift for the protection of the saints — the ability to make that distinction and help the assembly accordingly.

To another, divers kinds of tongues. Note the word *kinds* — there is variety even within this gift. The glossolalia found in some quarters of Christendom, if it is not something entirely different from what is described here, must itself have kinds, as the text says. Language scholars have studied recordings of such utterances and found no identifiable language structure. Whatever is happening in those cases, it is not what this passage speaks of.

To another, the interpretation of tongues. Chapter 14 shows that it is desirable — though not always possible — for the same person who speaks in a tongue to have the gift of interpreting it. But it is not necessarily so. If there is no interpreter present in the assembly, the tongue-speaker is to remain silent. This presupposes that certain persons were known to have this gift — it was marked in them. That is why chapter 14 can speak of the tongue-speaker as knowing whether an interpreter is present.

A former Baptist clergyman once said he could never bring himself to preach on this chapter — until a visiting brother came and spoke, and he found he had to act on it. He found that chapter 12 was inconsistent with his position as a clergyman. The Lord blessed the man and delivered him from that. Within measure, he could give allowance for what the Lord brought before him.

— *Study ends* —