

The Gifts of the Spirit

(Please note: I will be glad to entertain any questions regarding this piece and I will not list your name if you so desire)

While many issues rise in the Church from time to time, none seem as cyclical or controversial as the gift of tongues. In this short expose, I outline 5 principles that apply to all the gifts, of which the gift of tongues was a part, and these guidelines stand as the non-negotiable plum lines by which a gifts legitimacy and usage must be measured. After all, if knowing Jesus Christ more intimately is our goal, then it behooves us to know the truth about such important matters, and knowing Him more deeply is possible only when we live in accordance with His Word and function as He has graciously gifted us.

I take this topic on with very much care, because like many who will read it, I have many family, friends, and acquaintances involved in the movement. I assure you then, that I do not intend to run through the issue like the proverbial theological bull in a china shop of fragile hearts. I understand the tensions spawned by a view that appears more biblical with each encounter, and I understand the inner conflict that emerges. I know how contentious self-talk forms in the mind with the creation of arguments and counter arguments and how it affects the heart rate each time I begin to lose the debate with the very view against which I had always argued. I know how it is to face contradiction between personal experience and what the Bible, with increasing clarity, actually says. I know these feelings! I would pray, then, that my position on this issue comes across in the love intended, because my intent isn't to impede the believers journey to spiritual maturity but to aid them in that process via a greater understanding of the Word of God.

I also address this topic with the realization that many pastors are silent on it as well. Could it be the controversy associated with it? Could it be the unwillingness to study for fear of landing on one distinct side or another? Or, could it be that some have raised the epistemological white flag? In other words, have they moved this topic into the increasingly growing category of "uncertain things" in modern Christendom? Sadly, we live in an era when doctrinal certitude, the very certitude that the Apostle Paul admonished, is viewed with disdain. Every pastor must remember, though, that while it is popular to claim the inability to know certain things with any degree of certainty in our day, those in the pew are still asking the questions and still need distinct answers to them. Leaving one's people in the dark on such matters leaves the doctrinal door open for the predators of error and spiritual chaos.

This work will briefly address the fact that the gifts, all of them, operate within certain guidelines and these guidelines are as follows: (1) God is the divine distributor, (2) the purpose of every gift is for the edification of the body, (3) no gift is for everyone, (4) every gift is under the control of the believer who possesses it, and finally, (5) every gift is to be used in love. Remember, overstepping any one or more of these warrants a closer look at the gifts intended use, its legitimacy, or both. Again, no exceptions.

Guidelines for the Gifts

1. God: The Divine Distributor

If there is one truth among the ones to be discussed in this work to be remembered, it is this one. Theological in nature, Paul tells the Corinthians that the gifts of God are under divine control and that those same gifts are distributed by God himself. This reality warrants consideration because it lays down the most basic of those standards to be heeded. It highlights the sovereignty of God and His plan for both the body of Christ and the individual believers within its ranks.

According to Paul, God is the sole and unprompted distributor of spiritual gifts and He does so only and solely as “He will.” (1 Corinthians 12:11) and as “it pleases him.” (1 Corinthians 12:18). There is no exception to this reality and, as we shall see, a number of reasons confirm it.

This is vital when discussing spiritual gifts, of which tongues is included, for several reasons. First, because if all the gifts are distributed by God and based on his sovereign and infinite knowledge of the Church’s needs, then there is no biblical basis whatsoever to say that we should seek any particular gift, no matter the reason. That puts the gift of tongues in the same category as all other gifts, even the not so popular ones, and logically prevents its elevation as the epitome of the divine graces. That means that, contrary to much of what goes on with those infatuated with the gift of tongues, the moment we seek any gift, tongues included, then we have trampled the sovereignty of God underfoot. In seeking the gift of tongues, whether to serve as a gift for public worship or as what some now call a “prayer language,” the sovereign wisdom and placement of the individual members of the body within the body of Christ is slighted. Hence, tampering with this guideline tampers with God’s sovereign purpose, the body’s actual need, and its God intended function.

Second, the guideline is consistent with God and his dealings with man throughout Scripture in regard to His people. He is the potter and we are the clay, and again, no exceptions.

Third, this guideline establishes the ontological significance of the church as a whole as well as the value of each member of the body. As Paul noted, in Chapter 12, no part can minimize the place that any other part has in the body, because as divinely distributed, every single one has its God-intended place and purpose. It is indeed *His* body with every Christian possessing the needed gift for the significant benefit of the whole. This, I might add, fits perfectly with Paul’s analogy of the body in 1 Corinthians 12 and his assessment concerning the significance of every minute part.

Fourth, it establishes the means by which each believer will be judged at the “bema seat,” hence, the means by which God establishes specific accountability. It parallels, somewhat, the man who distributed variant talents to be managed by his servants while he was away. The servants did not acquire those talents of their own effort, but rather, acquired them according to the will of the master. Of course, in the end, the master also held the servants accountable for those same talents and the principle in regard to gifts is no different (Matthew 15:14ff). See more specifically,

Romans 14:10 But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.

2 Corinthians 5:10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.

Contrastingly, and let's be honest here, can you really imagine a church in which the believer decided which gift he/she should have? I can, and it would be much like the Corinthian Church with its confusion and carnality.

2. Edify the Body: Every Gift's Purpose

The third non-negotiable relates primarily to the purpose for which every gift was divinely given, and like the first, there are no exceptions. Since God gifts his children as "He wills" and "as it pleases Him," He desires for them use said gift for the edification of the body – Edify, Edify, Edify. Again, no exceptions. The gifts, then, are means to an end. They are the means by which we minister to one another within the body.

Edification seems a primary concern in Paul's writings, as the below verses remind us, and any gift that fails to build-up the body operates outside this boundary and does so contrary to the divine prescription for it. The below passages remind us of this distinct purpose.

1 Cor. 14:5,12,26

5 I would that ye all spake with tongues, but rather that ye prophesied: for greater is he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues, except he interpret, *that the church may receive edifying.*

12 Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, *seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church.*

26 ¶ How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. *Let all things be done unto edifying.*

II Cor. 12:19

19 Again, think ye that we excuse ourselves unto you? we speak before God in Christ: but we do all things, dearly beloved, *for your edifying.*

Eph 4:11-12, 16, 29

11 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; 12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:

16 From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the *body unto the edifying* of itself in love.

29 Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is *good to the use of edifying*, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.

1 Tim 1:4

4 Neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than *godly edifying* which is in faith: so do.

While the above verses represent various contexts and issues to which Paul spoke, the underlying purpose is singular. The primary purpose for the gifts, or Paul's work, or whatever it may be, is the edification of the Body. This means that no gift is given for self-edification nor for the benefit of the individual who possesses it. This is one reason that Paul instructed the Corinthians to keep silent without an interpreter because without an interpreter, the gift could not fulfill its intended purpose; namely, to edify the body. *Essentially, without an interpreter, no one would understand them. Their use of tongues without said interpreter was equivalent to "speaking into the air"* in public worship. Said Paul specifically, "So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? for ye shall speak into the air" (1 Corinthians 14:9).

That is why Paul puts it this way in 1 Corinthians 14:28, "But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church; and let him speak to himself, and to God." While some have interpreted this verse to mean that Paul endorsed some kind of prayer language, do not overlook the fact, here, at least, that the context is public worship. In fact, Paul wasn't referring to prayer at all. He was referring to the limitations of the gift's operation apart from an interpreter in public worship, even saying that the only other options in the absence of an interpreter is to speak to oneself and to God in that service. This admonition, then, *is not* an admonition to "pray in tongues," but to speak quietly to oneself and God in and during public worship. Note, however, that while Paul did mention prayer in chapter 14, his obvious preference in approaching the throne of grace with understanding emerges. "What is it then?" said Paul, I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the *understanding* also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also (1 Corinthians 14:15).

Remember the gifts are for the edification of the body, for service, for ministry to one another, and if no interpreter is present the body cannot be edified as intended. Conclusion, be quiet, speak to yourself and to God, because the benefit of tongues was inseparably inked to the interpretation in order that edification of the body might be accomplished!

3. Diversity: No Gift is for everyone (not even tongues)

If any truth is relevant concerning the modern tongues movement, this one should stop the movement in its tracks. The claim is that the "prayer language" is for everyone, but if that its the case, then it violates the idea supported by Paul that no gift, no matter what it is, is for everyone. Again, the Corinthian church had her problems, and one such problem included the propensity to seek what they considered the "best" gifts. Hence, Paul reminds them that no gift, including tongues, is for every believer.

1 Corinthians 12:29-30

29 Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles?

30 Have all the gifts of healing? do all speak with tongues? do all interpret?

Interestingly, all of the above questions require a "No" answer.

Paul also addressed the Corinthian's misguided perception that tongues was somehow superior as a sign gift, and in doing so placed it at the bottom of the proverbial totem pole. While a gift with a particular purpose (sign to those who believe not / warning of coming judgment for Jewish nation), for a particular time (before 70 AD), and for a particular people (for Jews primarily), it ranked lowest among other gifts. Prophecy, for example, was more preferable than tongues, said Paul,

1 Corinthians 14:5 I would that ye all spake with tongues, but *rather* that ye prophesied: for greater is he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues, except he interpret, that the church may receive edifying.

4. Self-Control: Every gift is under the control of the believer:

Perhaps to the chagrin of modern Charismatics is the fact that Paul puts the gifts under the control of each believer and his words concerning tongues is a case in point. Of course this fits perfectly with the idea of the believer's accountability at the Judgment Seat, because if you had no control over the gift then God couldn't fairly hold you accountability for its use.

Hence, the gift of tongues, was spoken at will, because Paul admonished those with the gift to keep quiet if no interpreter was present. It edified the body, the very reason for all the gifts, only if an interpreter was present.

5. Love: The gifts usage

Love leads the believer to use the gift, any gift, as divinely intended, for the edification of the body.

Despite the oversimplification here, the last verse of 1 Corinthians 12 jumps from a very oft misunderstood verse that that appears to be Paul admonishing the Corinthians to "...covet earnestly the best gifts" (1 Corinthians 12:31) to the necessity of love in the use of the gifts.

The problem with taking 1 Corinthians 12:31 as an admonition to seek the best gifts is that it stands in direct contradiction to the foundational fact that Paul had previously mentioned, namely, that God distributes the gifts as He wills (point 1 above). If he is commanding the Corinthians to seek the best gifts, an inherent contradiction arises, because he had just told his readers in chapter 12 that God distributes the gifts as he wills. Of course, we know that since the Word of God does not contradict itself, another interpretation must fit.

The 1 Corinthians 12:31 passage, then, is best understood as a statement of fact, the indicative mood rather than the imperative, hence, the recapitulation of the problem already addressed in Chapter 12 with Paul setting the record straight as to each gifts source, significance, and purpose. He then encapsulates the problem by noting that the Corinthians were actually running against the grain of the will of God by "earnestly desiring the best gifts," the reason he had to correct them and then proceed to the necessity of love in the body as the "better way." Said Paul specifically, "and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way," and that is where he moves into chapter 13 in order to show the superiority of love.