

About Spiritual Gifts (Part 1)

Barry O'Dell

First Corinthians 12-14 is a detailed discussion about spiritual gifts in the functioning of the church in Corinth. Paul immediately informed his readers that they did not have to be ignorant in regard to what the gifts were, their purpose, duration, and the order that should have existed when the congregation was assembled and the gifts were employed. In turn, today's reader of these three chapters should not be ignorant either! The first thing addressed was that the gifts were diverse (1 Cor. 12:4-6). Paul enumerates the gifts in verses 8-10 and we will define each so that we will not be ignorant. Also, it should be noticed that each member of the Godhead is referenced in the same context (v. 4-6 - *Spirit...Lord...God*). It should be clear from the very start that the members of the church in Corinth were not left up to their own devices regarding these gifts. Nor were they instructed to "experiment" with different gifts until they found one. They were not told to take a six-week course to "discover" their particular gift. The gifts were distributed by the Holy Spirit "as He will" (1 Cor. 12:11). No classes. No "discovery." No experimentation. No "go talk to your pastor so he can help you discover your gift." These are all methods of "spiritual gift discovery" that I have heard preached and have read in various articles online.

What were the gifts? Paul gives a specific list in First Corinthians 12:8-10. The stated purpose of this "manifestation of the Spirit" was for the profit of everyone (1 Cor. 12:7). The gifts were...

1. Word of wisdom (σοφία) was a gift to an individual of revelation from God in relation to the wisdom of God and the preaching of God's "mystery" (1 Cor. 2:9-16).
2. Word of knowledge (γνῶσις) was a gift involving the ability to know God's will and communicate it to others (Eph. 3:1-8).
3. Faith (πίστις) was not just ordinary belief produced by the word of God (Rom. 10:17). This was a miraculous faith (1 Cor. 13:2).
4. Gifts of healing (ἰαμα) was the ability to heal various sicknesses.
5. Working of miracles (δύναμις) was the power to do other types of miracles, perhaps such as casting out demons.
6. Prophecy (προφητεία) was the ability to both miraculously forth-tell and foretell God's will.
7. Discerning of spirits refers to the miraculous ability to identify different types of teachers/influences that would arise within the church (1 Jn. 4:1-6).
8. Tongues is clearly defined in Acts 2:1-8. The apostles were baptized in power from the Holy Spirit and were able to speak in known human dialects (Acts 2:6-8).
9. Interpretation of tongues is self-explanatory. Those with the ability to speak in tongues were forbidden from speaking if no interpreter was present (1 Cor. 14:27-28).

"The Holy Spirit was not received until apostles were present..."

While it is important to understand what the gifts were, it is also necessary to understand how the gifts were given. Paul stated that he had a desire to visit the Romans that he "may impart unto you some spiritual gift" (Rom. 1:11). Acts 8:14-21 is another important text in this matter. The Samaritans heard, believed, and obeyed the gospel when they heard Philip preaching and "seeing the miracles which he did" (Acts 8:6). It becomes clear that, while Philip could perform miracles, he did not have the ability to give that power to anyone else. That being the case, the apostles in Jerusalem sent Peter and John to Samaria, "that they (the Samaritans) might receive the Holy Spirit" (Acts 8:15). Of note, the text also says, "For as yet He had fallen upon none of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 8:16). The Holy Spirit was not received until apostles were present and even Simon saw "that through the laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Spirit was given" (Acts 8:18). Simon then offered money so that he himself could pass on "the gift of God," i.e., the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is clearly identified as the "same gift" given to Cornelius and Peter and the other apostles as recorded in Acts 2 (Acts 10:44-45; 11:15-18). The ability to pass on the Holy Spirit was only possessed by the apostles. The next edition will address the duration of the spiritual gifts.

Will the Lord come again? No doubt, many have asked this question in some form or another. This is a valid question which deserves an answer. How can we be sure He is coming again? To understand the answer to this question is to understand the very nature of God. The Hebrew writer said, *"That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us"* (Heb. 6:18). God cannot lie; whatever God has promised as it relates to the return of the Lord, is true.

The Word of God makes it forever clear that the Lord will return. At the Lord's ascension, two men (**angels**) testified of the second coming of the Lord. *"And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight. And while they looked stedfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven"* (Acts 1:9-11). They testified the Lord would come back in the same manner He left; that is, He would come from above. This agrees with other passages on the same subject, *"For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord"* (1 Thes. 4:16-17). As the Lord left this world in the clouds, He will return in the clouds. Those in the graves who were faithful will rise to meet Him first, and then, those who are still on earth who have remained faithful, will also rise to meet Him.

The Lord also testified of His coming again. *"Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know"* (John 14:1-4). Throughout His ministry, He often referred to His leaving this world and going back to the Father so that He could set things in order related to the church. This would enable Him to put in order things for His second coming to bring destruction to the wicked world and bring redemption to those who belong to Him.

"The word of God makes it forever clear that the Lord will return."

Not only did the angels and the Lord Himself testify concerning His return, so did the apostles. John wrote much about the second coming of the Lord. He stated at the second coming of the Lord we shall be like Him, *"Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is"* (1 John 3:2). It will be at His second coming that we will be changed, *"Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed"* (1 Cor. 15:51-52).

Peter said the Lord would come as a thief in the night. *"But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up"* (2 Pet. 3:10). Because these things are true, Peter urges us to be steadfast and live in such a manner as to make heaven our home. *"Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless, we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness. Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless"* (2 Pet. 3:11-14). May God help us be ready at every moment in our lives, for even today could be the day the Lord comes again.

The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night.

1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10

Ephesians 2:3 is a favorite text of those who teach that humans inherit the guilt of Adam’s sin. For example, John Piper, a popular Calvinist, appeals to this text to support the idea of inherited sin. He says: “*There is a phrase in verse 3 that shows the seriousness of deadness. At the end it says, ‘We were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.’ In other words the things we have done to bring the wrath of God upon us we have done by nature. We need a Savior not just because we have sinned, but because we have sinned by nature. We are by nature sinners*” (emphasis added). In a verbal shell game, Piper shifts the text so Paul **appears** to say: “We are by nature sinners.”

Did Paul mean “BY BIRTH?” In his otherwise helpful commentary on Ephesians, Clinton E. Arnold writes: “*When Paul says that ‘by nature’ (fu/sei) we were destined for wrath, he probably intends to convey that we inherited this status and condition at birth*” (134; emphasis added). Similarly, Frank Thielman asserts: “*This destiny, moreover was theirs fu/sei (physei, by nature). This term referred to the condition into which someone was born*” (127). Reading statements like these, one might assume “by nature” must mean by birth—as if no other view exists. However, other writers deny that the definition “by birth” is clear-cut. T. K. Abbott wrote that “[‘by nature’] *does not necessarily mean ‘by birth.’*” (45). Lynn H. Cohick said: “*This noun [‘by nature’] does not in itself suggest wickedness, and there is no reason to assume that Paul [in Eph. 2:3] hints at Adam’s sin*” (148). Some say “by nature” means by birth. Others contend that it does not. How can we learn what this word means in Ephesians 2:3? To answer this question, we must remind ourselves that word meanings are not determined by commentators, but by usage. How first-century native authors used a term is the ultimate source for word meanings. So let’s go to the source. How did the apostle Paul use the term?

Paul’s Use of “By Nature.” Paul used the term “by nature” in different passages with the basic meaning of **that which is natural**. Here are some examples. What grows from a tree naturally? The apostle referred to an olive tree’s natural branches as opposed to grafted wild branches (Rom 11:24). Paul wrote in Galatians 4:8: “*However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods.*” Paul used “by nature” to describe the truth about false gods. He was not referring to their birth. Those fictitious gods were **by the nature of the case** not divine. Similarly, Paul wrote in Romans 2:14: “*For when Gentiles who do not have the law do by nature the things of the law, they are a law to themselves although they do not have the law.*” Though the Gentiles did not have the written law, they naturally followed it. How could this be? They were created by God as **moral beings**. They had a law “*written in their hearts*” (v. 15). A sense of moral obligation was natural because of how God created human nature, not because of the physical genetics passed down by their Gentile parents. In Galatians 2:15, Paul said that “we are Jews by nature.” The word “Jew” constrains our understanding of what is “by nature” in this context. A Jew is **naturally a descendant of Abraham**. “By nature” is like the law of cause and effect. This word does not define the cause. The context determines the cause of the natural state for whatever is being discussed. Natural branches grow from a tree. God created human beings to have moral feelings naturally. Jews, by the nature of the case, are descendants of Abraham. In my view, Rudolf Schnackenburg summed up the meaning: “The phrase [i.e., “children of wrath by nature”] does not allow any protological speculations (divine punishment because of original sin) or anthropological reflections (on the natural disposition of such people). However, it refers to the natural state in which such people [i.e., sinners] found or still find themselves” (93). Like olives naturally grow on olive trees, sinners naturally deserve God’s wrath.

“The consequence for sinners is the point of Ephesians 2:3.”

What Paul Did NOT Say. Let’s go back to Ephesians 2:3. In addition to understanding the general meaning of “by nature,” we must emphasize what Paul did not say. He never said we are by nature sinners. He said “we” are by nature children of wrath. But who is included in the pronoun “we?” *We* has already been **defined in the context** (vv. 1–3a). “We” includes those dead in their sins, living as sons of disobedience. Every mention of sin in verses 1–3 relates to **personal sins** and **individual disobedience**. By reading the main verbs of verse 3, we get the sense of what Paul declared. “We lived” and “we were.” “Children of wrath” in Ephesians 2:3 is simply another way of stating the law of sowing and reaping (Gal. 6:7). When we sow sins, we naturally reap wrath. Paul makes the same point in Romans 6:23: “*The wages of sin is death.*” The “consequence” for sinners is the point of Ephesians 2:3. We lived a certain way, thus naturally deserved God’s wrath. Without God’s grace, sinners are heading for God’s wrath because of the nature of the case. The cause: our sins. The effect: wrath. Sins are what we choose, not what we inherit. Sons of disobedience are naturally worthy of wrath. Thankfully, our deserving of God’s wrath by our disobedience is not the end of the story. Paul goes on to explain: “*But God being rich in mercy*” (vv. 4–7)! What a Savior!

Sources

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- Name of Christ (Rom. 16:16)
- Began in Jerusalem (Isa. 2:2-3; Acts 2:1-4)
- Established by Jesus (Matt. 16:18)
- Purchased with Jesus' blood (Acts 20:28)
- Married to Christ (Rom. 7:4)
- Established in the 1st century (Acts 2:47)
- Jesus the Head of the One Body (Eph. 1:22-23; 4:4; 5:23)
- Added to the church by God (Acts 2:41, 47)

Salvation

- Saved by grace, through faith (Eph. 2:8-9)
- Not by faith alone (Jas. 2:14-26)
- Not by grace alone (Matt. 7:21)
- Belief and baptism (Mk. 16:16)
- Repentance and baptism (Acts 2:37-38)
- Belief, confession, and baptism (Acts 8:37-38)
- Heard, believed, baptized (Acts 18:8)
- Baptized into Christ's death - raised to a new life (Rom. 6:3-4)
- Baptism - faith in God's working/operation (Col. 2:12)
- Faith and baptism (Gal. 3:26-27)
- Baptism does save us (1 Pet. 3:21)

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