

## THE CHARISMATIC GIFTS

Paul refers to a series of gifts of the Spirit, chiefly in Romans 12, and 1 Corinthians 12-14. We are familiar with the word “charismatic” from its usage in popular English, where it is used for a dynamic person, for highly emotional worship, or for claims of special miraculous gifts. *Charisma* is Paul’s word in the original in R 12:6: “*We have charismatic gifts that are different according to the grace that has been given to us.*” There are several tendencies in Christian circles both in the past and ones that are influenced by Pentecostal teaching that we need to beware of.

The word “*charisma*” is related to the word in the original for “grace” (*charis*), as Romans 12:6 also makes clear. Confusion about this goes a long way back, In his translation of the Vulgate, about 400 AD, Jerome used the same Latin word *gratia* (grace) for both *charis* and *charisma*. However, that led to serious theological problems. Paul told Timothy “Stir up the charismatic gift that is in you:” (2 Tm 1:6), But, if the translation reads “Stir up the grace that is in you”, there are serious problems. For God’s grace is the undeserved favour in Him towards lost, sinful, human beings. Grace is not a gift in a human being. It is not infused into a human being, The angel who spoke to Mary did not greet her as “full of grace”, as Jerome translated his words, but as “you who are highly favoured” (Lk 1:28). God’s grace, which remains in God, is extended to sinners, to help and save them. It is not something in them by which they are saved. The Roman view of the sacraments as “imparting grace” or “infusing grace” rests on this confusion,

On the other hand, the use of the word “*charisma*” in the New Testament is wider than “charismatic gift.” Its more general meaning is “gift.” In R 5:15-16 Paul uses it for Jesus’ whole work of salvation, as a synonym for “grace” and “free gift.” In R 6:23 it is the word for “gift” in “But the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

One of the Pentecostal tendencies to avoid is to think that faith in Christ, the forgiveness of sins, peace, joy, and eternal life are not the central and most precious gifts of the Spirit. According to their way of thinking, they have gone past them far back along the road. They think of themselves as having graduated from the struggle between flesh and spirit in R 7 to the victory in R 8. They also think of themselves as having graduated from Jesus to the Spirit, in the sense that the really great and impressive things, which prove it all to be true, are the gifts to perform miraculous signs and wonders, such as healings, prophecy, and speaking in tongues. Some also give considerable attention to “being slain with the Spirit”, which the Bible does not mention anywhere,

There are lists of charismatic gifts in Rm 12:6-8 (prophecy, ministry, teaching, encouraging, contributing, leadership, and showing mercy), 1 Cor 12:4-10 (message of wisdom, message of knowledge, faith that moves mountains, healing, working miracles, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, speaking in tongues, and interpreting tongues); 1 Cor 12:28-30 (apostleship, prophecy, teaching, working miracles, healing, helping others, administration, speaking in tongues and interpreting tongues); 1 Cor 13:1-3, 8-10 (speaking in tongues, prophecy, knowledge, faith that moves mountains, giving), and 1 Pt 4:8-11 (hospitality, speaking the word, and ministering or serving),

Several comments are important. None of these lists claims to be complete, The New Testament writers nowhere encourage individual Christians to compile lists of their charismatic gifts. These lists also include apostleship and prophecy, which the church does not expect any more, especially if prophecy is thought of as including the prediction of future events. There is no suggestion that some of these are essential in all Christians. In fact, we are told clearly that different gifts are given to each believer, and in different proportions. There is no warrant for focussing on a narrow range of the more spectacular gifts, healing, prophecy, and speaking in tongues, as the modern Charismatics do. There is no room for a legalistic insistence that all believers must have certain gifts to qualify as Christians, or mature Christians.

Another important point is that, apart from Paul’s comment that he who speaks in a tongue “edifies himself” (1 Cor 14:4) there is no suggestion that the gifts are meant to be something like a drug that puts an individual on a high for his own benefit. We are told a number of times that their chief use is in service to others, and in building up the body of Christ. In fact, “edifying oneself” (1 Cor 14:4) is not a concept that occurs anywhere else in Scripture. This suggests that Paul’s comment about “edifying oneself” should not be pushed very far. All through 1 C 14, where Paul contrasts prophecy and speaking in tongues, he makes the building up of others the chief criterion between them.

There are comparatively few books in the New Testament that mention speaking in tongues. There are only three references in Acts, and none at all in the writings of John. Speaking in tongues is useless if there is no interpretation. In 1 C 14 Paul limits the number of those who speak in tongues in church gatherings to two or at

the most three (v.27), and then only if there is someone present who has the gift of interpretation. On the three occasions when Acts reports speaking in tongues, it fell on the whole group at once, unexpectedly, and not as individual persons had fulfilled a list of conditions for it. In Acts it was accompanied by other manifestations of the presence of the Spirit, such as the sound of a rushing wind and flames of fire (Pentecost), praise of God (the first Gentile Pentecost, 10:46) and prophecy (the group of Ephesus, Ac 19:6).

Spiritual manifestations do not all come from the Spirit of God. Idol-worshippers were familiar with them in Paul's time (1Cor 12:1-2), and speaking in tongues occurs in non-Christian religions today too. With all the charismatic gifts, including healing, we have to discern the spirits, and discerning the spirits is a gift that Charismatics seem to care very little about. Prophets had to be tested (1 Jn 4: 1; 1 Cor 14:32). We have to maintain that spectacular charismatic gifts would not come from God to confirm false teaching. However, it is important not to generalise, but to examine each case separately. We must avoid the error of the Jews of Jesus' day, who attributed to the devil what was coming from the Spirit of God (Mt 12:24, 32).

This has important consequences. When people explain "being baptised with the Holy Spirit" by the heresy of the separation of the gift of the Spirit from baptism with water, and simply as speaking in tongues, we must discern them as false spirits. Their "gifts" must be coming from the spirit below.

No Christian should say that God has passed him or her by when he bestowed charismatic gifts. If the apostles include encouraging, giving, showing mercy, hospitality, and service in their lists of charismatic gifts, then we should use whatever gifts God has given us, even natural gifts that He consecrates to His service, with thanks, and for the benefit of other members of Christ's body. Above all, we should remember Paul's advice that all of these are nothing at all if they are without love (1 Cor 12:31-13:3; Rm 12:9-10).