

Charismatic Gifts

Because of many erroneous things that are said about charismatic gifts these days, let us consider what the New Testament says about them. In the epistle for today Paul writes (Rm 12:6-8): “We have charismatic gifts that are different according to the grace that has been given to us. If we have prophecy, let us use it in agreement with the faith. If we have ministry, let us use it in our ministering. If anyone is a teacher, let him use it in teaching. If anyone encourages others, let him use it in encouraging. If anyone shares, let him be generous. If anyone is a leader, let him do it diligently. If anyone shows mercy, let him do it cheerfully.”

Some Charismatics like to make lists of charismatic gifts, and get people to rate themselves on which ones they have. They even include in their inventories being apostles and being prophets, without asking whether the office of apostle was unique. Apostles were men specially appointed by Jesus to be witnesses of His resurrection, and they have passed on to us the inspired Word of the New Testament together with those closely associated with them. They were the foundation of the church. It can be strongly argued that in the New Testament prophecy included the prediction of events, that therefore prophecy was more than declaring the Word of God to people of the time, and that, with the death of the apostle John, prophecy ceased in the church.

Some Charismatics apparently also bother to ask whether the lists that Paul gives in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12-14 and 1 Peter 4 are exhaustive. They should also ask whether making such lists for people to rate themselves on is dysfunctional. Such lists focus attention on the possessor rather than on the Giver, and can easily lead to such a loveless application as, “No. I don’t have the charismatic gift of hospitality. If you go three kilometres down the road, a person in the house on the left may be able to help you. He has the gift of hospitality.”

The undue emphasis placed by Charismatics on a narrow range of the charismatic gifts, prophecy, healing, and speaking in tongues, does not do justice to the New Testament witness, and ignores much of what is actually said. One of the chief points to make is that their purpose is not to give individuals a special feeling that the Christian faith is real. They are not to be used as drug-takers take regular shots. They are intended to build up the body of Christ, to edify others. All the way through I Corinthians 14 Paul contrasts prophecy and speaking in tongues, and regularly goes back to the criterion: which of them builds others up? Virtually every time he mentions tongues he goes on to say something better about prophecy. The only passage where Paul says that a person who speaks in tongues “edifies himself” is 1 Cor 14:4, but not too much should be made of that, for two reasons. Nowhere else in the Bible is a person said to edify himself. Edification comes by way of instruction from the Word of God. Secondly, right in that passage Paul adds, “but he who prophesies edifies the church.” Some people have had the experience that, when a charismatic is invited to join in some non-spectacular task, like hospital visiting, they are not keen to be involved. Their selective focus on the Holy Spirit and their selective focus on a few of the more spectacular gifts have at least two dysfunctions. The first is that they obscure the theology of the cross. In 1 Corinthians 1 and 2 Paul sets forth the centre of the faith, the crucified Christ, who, despite appearances to the contrary, is the wisdom of God and the power of God. That is the source of what is spiritual. The sober fact is that even miracles of healing, prophecy and exorcism are not ultimate. Rather, a person who has been involved in them should not place confidence in them for his own salvation. Jesus warns against such self-deception in the Sermon on the Mount: “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father, who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, and in Your name driven out demons, and in Your name performed many miracles?’ Then I shall tell them frankly, ‘I never knew you. Depart from Me, you who do what is evil’” The charismatic gifts are not as important as the enduring gifts of the Holy Spirit, as love, joy, and peace.

It is important to observe that in 1 Corinthians 12:4-6 Paul designates the charismatic gifts as coming from all three persons of the Trinity, not only from the Holy Spirit: “There are different kinds of charismatic gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differing ways of serving, but the same Lord. And there are different kinds of activities, but the same God, who works everything in all of them.”

The second dysfunction is that selective emphasis easily comes across in a legalistic way. The impression is easily given and received that a person who has failed to achieve a miraculous healing, or does not speak in tongues is an inferior kind of Christian, or perhaps not a Christian at all. There should be no false modesty, either, in denying the existence of gifts, the spectacular or the non-spectacular ones, or refusing to use them. The gifts should be used in accordance with the measure of faith that God has given. Judgmental selectivity conflicts with the two principles that appear in I Corinthians 12: that different gifts are bestowed on different individuals

in varying degrees as the Spirit determines, and that many gifts are strongly Word-oriented. In both Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 the word-related gifts comes first. At the end of I Corinthians 12 Paul even lists the word-related gifts “first”, “second” and “third”, for apostles, prophets, and teachers.

A study of the miracles of Jesus and His apostles should also remind us that more than a physical healing was regularly in view. Jesus often used the word “saved” to a person whom He had healed; and it means more than “healed.” While still lame, the man at the gate of the temple would not have been permitted, as a cripple, to enter the court of the Israelites. After he had been healed, he went, leaping, into the temple. The man born blind in John 9 had both his physical sight and also precious sight of Jesus. Jesus’ comments: “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind may see, and that those who see may become blind.”

Modern Charismatics often ignore the plain words in the New Testament about the charismatic gifts. It may surprise some to realise that speaking in tongues is mentioned in only three places in Acts, and in some books of the New Testament not at all. In Acts it regularly came unexpectedly on a whole group of people together. It did not come on people as a reward for effort as they qualified individually. Speaking in tongues had restrictions placed on it in church gatherings. If the restrictions were observed, there should be no speaking in tongues in church gatherings unless it were known beforehand that there was someone present who had the gift of interpreting tongues. If there is no interpreter, a person should keep silent in church, and speak to himself and to God. Besides, even then, there should be only two or at the most three who speak in tongues (1 Cor 14:27-28). Besides, the fact that it is in a language that others do not understand should strictly limit its use, because its purpose is to edify others.

The references that Paul makes in Romans 12 raise the interesting question of precisely what charismatic gifts are. Not all are spectacular, and not all are unrelated to natural abilities. In a miraculous gift of healing, the personal abilities of the healer are of little consequence. It is different with teaching, leadership, being hospitable, and being generous givers. An unspiritual person may be a born teacher, a born leader, good at serving others, hospitable, or generous, and so may a Christian. In the Christians’ case, may we not say that his or her God-given natural talents have an additional endowment by the Holy Spirit in the service of others in the Gospel? But in the exclusively miraculous instance of charismatic healing and in the other less spectacular gifts, the focus should not be on the individual agent, but on God, the gracious giver. By definition, charismatic gifts are gifts of God’s grace. Right in the context of Romans 12 Paul has been saying that no one should think more highly of himself than he ought to, but should use sober judgment, and should keep in mind that he or she is like a member of a human body, serving other members in the one body of Christ.

The “sober judgment” Paul mentions here should make us circumspect. Since the phenomenon of speaking in tongues occurs among non-Christian peoples, it cannot always be coming from the Spirit above. The New Testament principle that the people who claim to be speaking in the name of the Holy Spirit have to be tested (1 Jn 4: 1-3), and that even prophets are subordinate to other prophets (1 Cor 14:32) should also make us sober. Paul’s admonition to use prophecy “in agreement with the faith” presupposes that it can be used wrongly. Being sober should also include being wary of rash generalisations. Each separate claim must be tested by a doctrinal criterion. For example, we do not believe that a person who errs seriously in the doctrine of the nature and benefit, of baptism would have his error confirmed by a miraculous sign from the Spirit above, May God grant us all sober judgment!