

“Now Concerning Spiritual Gifts ...”

“Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I would not have you ignorant. Ye know that when ye were Gentiles ye were led away to those dumb idols, howsoever ye might be led. Wherefore I make known unto you, that no man speaking in the Spirit of God saith, Jesus is anathema; and no man can say, Jesus is Lord, but in the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:1-3).

First Corinthians was written to answer questions the Corinthians had asked about -- and some they had not asked about. This is specifically the third subject of their inquiry and constitutes the longest response to any of the questions they had written Paul about. The subject of “*spiritual gifts*” involves not only this chapter, but the next two as well. This chapter will define the gifts; chapter 13 will discuss the duration of them and chapter 14 will give instructions regarding the regulation of them while they were yet in force.

In the scriptures, mention of made of spiritual gifts and can refer to spiritual blessings which came from the Spirit; or to supernatural gifts given by the Spirit. It is not always certain whether the mentioned “*spiritual gifts*” are miraculous or non-miraculous. An example of this is seen in Paul’s words to the Romans: “*I long to see you that I might impart unto you some spiritual gift*” (Rom. 1:11). Did Paul wish to impart miraculous gifts upon the Romans or did he wish to impart to them instructions that would be a spiritual blessing? He could have done either and arguments for both options could be made. However, there is no question about the nature of the spiritual gifts here in chapter 12 that the Corinthians wanted instructions about, and to which Paul addresses his following comments: these were supernatural gifts and this is apparent by the very nature of some of those which he names: miracles, gifts of healing, tongue speaking, prophecy, discerning of spirits. The context in which the expression is found usually will indicate whether the “*spiritual gifts*” are miraculous or non-miraculous.

Equally significant is the phrase “*the gift of the Spirit.*” The nature of the phrase can mean either: 1) a gift the Spirit gives; or, 2) the Holy Spirit as the gift. One must also remember that a spiritual gift could be either: 1) the gift of the Holy Spirit promised to those who repent and are baptized for remission of sins (Acts 2:38); 2) the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 11:17); or, 3) one of nine gifts named by Paul in this chapter. Because the scriptures DO make such distinctions, one must diligently study the context of a passage to comprehend which of these different usages the writer has in mind.

Vss. 1-3 of this chapter, while announcing the subject intended to be studied, is largely introductory. One might be disposed to inquire, "What connection does the balance of these three verses have to do with the subject of spiritual gifts?" Perhaps the key is the "dumb idols" to which these Corinthians in their former state of idolatry had been led. While man may use the word "dumb" to signify a person who is gullible or easily deceived or one who acts in a foolish, thoughtless way, do not lose sight of the fact that the word describes one who is unable to speak. The powerless nature of idols often was emphasized by the charge that idols were dumb, unable to speak (cf. Psalm 15:5; 135:15). Since idols could never speak nor hear, those who said "Jesus is anathema" were not moved by their gods to so declare -- for they could not speak nor hear! Nor could the idols endorse the Lord saying "Jesus is Lord." That endorsement came from some source other than an idol.

When Jesus "ascended on high, he led captivity captive and gave gifts unto men" (Eph. 4:8). Of those "gifts" which Jesus gave to men (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, 4:11) the man is named for the work he had been empowered to do. Some of these five "gifts" were supernatural in nature; i.e., apostles and prophets. Some of these could do their work without miraculous empowerment such as evangelists, pastors, and teachers. Of course, in the first century, likely many of these later had also had spiritual gifts bestowed upon them but those gifts were not essential to the work those brethren were to do. The gifts Jesus gave when "he ascended on high" were essential to the functioning of the first century church and from a study of 1 Corinthians 12 we gain some insight of the workings of those churches. Like us today, the Corinthian brethren had questions about the gifts and so for their edification (and ours) Paul wrote that they "might not be ignorant."

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