

Notes on Gifts

This article contains a collection of notes from my study of gifts in the Bible. It is not particularly coherent or conclusive, and it probably raises more questions than it answers, but it might help you to look at some of the issues surrounding gifts in a fresh light. I start with a summary of Biblical teaching on gifts, followed by a more technical word study, and then consider some questions which arise from the passages on gifts.

Summary of NT Teaching on Gifts

There are only 4 passages in the NT which teach specifically about gifts, although there are many other passages which mention the use of gifts in the early church. A brief summary of these main passages follows:

- **1 Pet 4:10-11** Each of us has received a gift from God, which we should use to serve each other and glorify God. Two categories of gifts are mentioned: speaking and serving.
- **Rom 12:3-8** Different people have different gifts, which God has given according to his grace, and which we should use according to our faith.
- **1 Cor 12-14** Each person has some evidence of the presence of God's Spirit in them (12:7), in the form of a gift. Different people have different gifts, and God decides which gift each person gets (12:11,18). The gifts result in different roles in the church, all of which are necessary for the healthy functioning of the church. Prophecy (described as strengthening, encouragement and comfort in 1 Cor 14:3)¹ is the most valuable gift in a church meeting (14:1,39). The use of gifts must be governed by love (13:1-3) and have the goal of edification or building up the church (14:4-5,12,26). This requires clear communication (14:6-20) and orderly meetings (14:40).
- **Eph 4:7-13** After Jesus conquered death, he distributed gifts to his church: apostles,

¹Also, note that prophecy and revelation are listed separately in 1 Cor 14:6, implying that they are not the same.

prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, who train Christians and build up the church in unity and maturity.

OT Background

The worldview of the Bible from its very first pages is that God created the universe and everything in it, including all of mankind. One consequence of this is that everything that we can do, including all skills, abilities, wisdom and knowledge, comes from God or God's Spirit (see for example Is 28:23-29; Pr 2:6; Jam 1:17). It is easy to regard these gifts as "natural" abilities, as opposed to the "supernatural" abilities given to Samson (strength), Solomon (wisdom), Elijah (prophecy and miracles), or others who were chosen and equipped by God for specific tasks. But this distinction between natural and supernatural, or ordinary and extraordinary, comes from a secular worldview. We find a different worldview in the scriptures, that the whole of creation is sustained by God (Col 1:17; Heb 1:3) — the "natural" is actually supernatural; and that God is concerned about and interacts with his people (Ex 3:7-8) — the "supernatural" is in a sense natural. For example Bezalel and his co-workers' ability in arts and crafts (which we probably would not regard as supernatural) is attributed to God's Spirit (Ex 35:30-36:2). Likewise in the NT passages which describe how God equips people to serve him, we see a mixture of "natural" and "supernatural" gifts, for example administration and performing miracles, in the same list (1 Cor 12:28-30).

Terminology and Word Study

There are several Greek words translated *gift* in the NT², just as we have various English words, such as gift, present, donation and offering. The

²The Greek words and number of occurrences are: δῶρον (19), χάρισμα (17), δωρεά (11), δόμα (4), ἐλεημοσύνη (3), χάρις (3), δόσις (2), δώρημα (2). Note that χάρις (grace) occurs very often in the NT, but is only occasionally translated "gift" (Rom 4:4; 1 Cor 16:3; 1 Pet 3:7); likewise ἐλεημοσύνη (acts of mercy); the other 16 occurrences of "gift" (NIV) usually have no corresponding Greek word, or translate words for promise, blessing or generosity.

differences in meaning, if any, are as much dependent on the context as the word used. You might have come across the Greek word *charisma* (plural *charismata*), from which the English word charismatic comes, and which is closely related to the word for grace (*charis*). Note that only in one case is *charisma* translated “spiritual gift” (1 Cor 1:7); its normal translation is “gift” (Rom 1:11; 5:15-16; 6:23; 11:29; 12:6; 1 Cor 7:7; 12:4,9,28,30,31; 1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6; 1 Pet 4:10) and in one case “gracious favour” (2 Cor 1:11).³ Further, *charisma* does not exclusively mean a God-given ability; it is also used for other gifts from God such as eternal life (Rom 5:15-16⁴; 6:23), the election of God’s people (Rom 11:29) and rescue from persecution (2 Cor 1:11).

Neither is *charisma* the only word for a God-given gift: one lexicon⁵ notes that the word *dorea* is “in the NT used only of spiritual and supernatural gifts that are given to believers”. Some passages about gifts that use a word other than *charisma* describe the following gifts from God: the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38; 8:20; 10:45; 11:17; Lk 11:13; cf Mt 7:11; Jn 4:10; cf 7:38-39; Heb 6:4), righteousness (Rom 4:4; 5:17), grace/salvation (2 Cor 9:15; Eph 2:8; 3:7; 1 Pet 3:7), church workers (Eph 4:7-11) and everything that is good and perfect (Jam 1:17). Many of these gifts are spiritual in nature, but the word itself does not mean, nor is it translated, “spiritual gifts”. So we should be careful with how we use the term “spiritual gifts”; apart from it being a questionable translation, it suggests a distinction between the natural and supernatural, or at least that some gifts are from God’s Spirit and some are not, neither of which is true (see the previous section).

Are Gifts the Same As ...?

Gifts are often confused with other biblical concepts, such as miraculous powers, the fruit of the

Spirit and ministry roles. Although all of these are related, gifts are not necessarily anything we would recognise as supernatural (even being able to enjoy your work is a gift from God, Ecc 3:13). Nor are gifts directly related to the fruit of the Spirit, which is the character of Christ being formed in us by the Holy Spirit. When the Bible talks about gifts (in the sense of the passages summarised above), it is referring to particular talents, skills or abilities, given by God, usually (but not necessarily) related to our personality, interests and experiences, which equip us to serve God in particular ways.

Gifts and Ministry

All the passages on gifts emphasise that God equips us to serve Him (i.e. for ministry⁶). Our gift(s) should be very closely related to the way we serve, but they are not identical. In 1 Cor 12:4-6, we learn that there are various gifts (v4), various ministries (v5) and various outcomes (v6), all of which are directed by God. Someone gifted in showing mercy might help people overcome drug addiction, while someone else with the same gift might restore Christians who have turned away from God. The same gift can be used in different ministries. Likewise two people serving in the same ministry, such as writing articles for the church newsletter, could have different gifts, such as teaching and encouraging. Note that in the passages on gifts, sometimes gifts are listed (1 Cor 12:8-10; Rom 12:6-8; 1 Pet 4:10-11), sometimes ministries are listed (Eph 4:11), and sometimes ministries and gifts are mixed (1 Cor 12:28-30).

One Gift or Multiple Gifts?

Most of the passages on gifts seem to imply that God gives each Christian a single gift (1 Pet 4:10; Rom 1:11; 12:6-8; 1 Cor 7:7; 12:7-10,27-30; 14:26; 1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6), but there is no scripture which states this explicitly. Several passages suggest that we might receive more than one gift, e.g. that we can pray for or desire specific gifts (1 Cor 12:31; 14:1,5,13,18,39), although some of these verses can be understood collectively (we as a church should desire the greater gifts to be exercised in our meetings). However, when we consider the bigger picture, that everything comes from God, it is clear that each person has many gifts, talents and abilities.⁷

³It surprised me to notice that the literal expression “spiritual gift” only occurs once in the Greek NT (Rom 1:11). The 3 other occurrences of the expression “spiritual gift” in the NIV (1 Cor 12:1; 14:1,12) are the translators’ interpretation. There is no Greek word for gift in these passages. It would be more accurate to translate “spiritual matters” or “spiritual things” (12:1 and 14:1) and “spirits” (14:12). Likewise “spiritually gifted” (1 Cor 14:37) is just “spiritual” in Greek. This tradition of interpretation can be traced back to the KJV.

⁴Note that 3 different Greek words are used for gift in Rom 5:15-17. In particular *charisma* is used interchangeably with other words for gift.

⁵Friberg, Friberg and Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, Baker Books, 2000

⁶Ministry is just another word for service, and does not need to imply an official role or function in a church organisation.

⁷The question remains whether the NT passages on gifts

Can We Ask For Gifts?

Every passage on gifts emphasises God, who is sovereign and the giver of gifts. In other words, it is God who chooses what gifts we get (1 Cor 12, especially verses 11 and 18; 1 Pet 4:10-11; Rom 12:3,6; Heb 2:4). But as noted in the previous question, some verses mention desiring or praying for gifts (1 Cor 12:31; 14:1,13,39). To be consistent with both sets of verses, we must allow that if we ask for a specific gift, God could deny our request.⁸ Further, if you ask for a gift, it should be for edification of the church (1 Cor 14, especially verses 12 and 26) and God's glory (1 Pet 4:11), not out of selfish motives (see also Mt 10:8; 1 Cor 4:7).

Who Receives Gifts?

God gives some gifts to Christians and non-Christians alike (Mt 5:45; Jam 1:17), while other gifts are reserved for his own people (Ps 29:11; Eph 1:3). In particular, where gifts are described as manifestations (evidence) of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:7), it is difficult to see how this would include non-Christians. But many of us have experienced for example "gifted" teachers who are not Christians. So is there a difference between their gift and the gift of teaching described as a "manifestation of the Spirit" in 1 Cor 12? Or am I reading too much into the expression?

Some teachers argue that the difference is in the way we use our gifts, whether for ourselves or for God and his kingdom. While it may be true that Christians use their gifts differently, I am not convinced that it does justice to 1 Cor 12-14. The whole point of these chapters is that the Corinthian Christians were not using their gifts as God intended, but Paul does not say that the manifestation of the Spirit *will be* given to them if they start using the gifts correctly. It has already been given to them.

So it appears more consistent with the whole of Biblical revelation to understand these gifts as part of God's grace towards all mankind (which theologians call "common grace"). The emphasis of Paul's teaching is *why* the gifts have been given — for benefit (NIV: the common good).

When Are Gifts Given?

This is a related question, since if a particular gift is *only* given to Christians, we would expect it oc-

cur at or after conversion⁹. And if *all* Christians have at least one gift, it would have to be given at (or before) conversion, or else there would be Christians without any gift. But the Bible doesn't explicitly state when we receive the gifts, so I don't think we are justified in discounting gifts that we had before conversion (as if they didn't come from God!) when we try to understand what gifts God has given us.

Paul mentions that Timothy received a gift when the elders laid hands on him (1 Tim 4:14) and when Paul laid hands on him (2 Tim 1:6). Unless we understand both of these passages to be talking about the one event of Timothy's baptism, it appears that Paul is talking about an experience after conversion, and thus something that is not the universal experience of Christians. It is probably the same as the passing on of gifts by the apostles in Acts 8:14-19, but various other interpretations, such as appointment (ordination?) for a specific ministry, have been suggested. In any case, it is a different situation than what is described in the other gifts passages, which say that each Christian has received a gift.

Is the Lack of a Gift an Excuse?

Some people (church leaders?) worry that if people focus on their gifts, there will be no one left to look after the kids or do the ushering (neither of which are explicitly mentioned in any of the lists of gifts in the Bible¹⁰). But the whole point of God's gifts are to equip us to serve Him, so it would be perverse to use teaching on gifts as an excuse to avoid serving. Serving God is not optional. However if we are faced with a choice between different areas of service, we would do well to follow the Bible's instruction and serve according to our gifts (Rom 12:6-8). Note that Peter refused to get involved in one particular ministry because it would have taken time from the one for which God had equipped him (Acts 6:2). There are many good works that we could choose to do; perhaps not all of them are those God has prepared in advance for us (Eph 2:10). This can be quite a difficult choice to make, especially when areas of gifts overlap general instructions which apply to all Christians (e.g. having faith, giving and showing mercy).

As a side point, our church has a history of urg-

⁹Without getting into a discussion of predestination, God *could* (in his foreknowledge) give gifts before conversion.

¹⁰Note that these are roles, not gifts. The corresponding gifts are serving (Rom 12:7; 1 Pet 4:11) and helping (1 Cor 12:28).

are referring to something more specific than this.

⁸Modern Pentecostal teaching often misses this point.

ing members to “excel in everything” (with a special emphasis on evangelism) instead of focussing on the areas in which God has equipped them. This produces an unnecessary guilt instead of joy and gratefulness that other people in the church are doing the things that we are not good at. We should look at the big picture of the body rather than the individual, and remember that the gospel is good news and God’s commands are not burdensome (1 Jn 5:3). Further, our security should come from Christ, not from our own achievements or (imagined) excellence.

What If I’m Not Good at Anything?

You are mistaken! Each Christian has been given something to contribute to the church (1 Cor 12:7; 1 Pet 4:10; Rom 12:6), and we should give as freely as we have received (Mt 10:8). In fact, the non-obvious gifts are essential to the health of the church (1 Cor 12:14-25). If you can’t see your own gift, try asking Christians who know you if they notice anything in particular.

Are All Gifts Always Available?

It is interesting to note that no scripture promises that all gifts will always be present in the church. Even if we interpret the body metaphor as implying that God made the church complete, so that all parts are present, at what level of church would this be true? Would this mean, for example, that there will always be someone who can teach in every small group of Christians? Or in every local congregation? Or in every city? Or in each denomination where there are Christians? The Bible does not answer this question. The only indication I find is Paul’s teaching about church meetings where he forbids people speaking in a foreign language if there is no one who can interpret what is being said (1 Cor 14:28). It seems reasonable to assume that interpretation is not the only gift which could possibly be absent at any particular time and place. Likewise the fact that apostles have not continued down to our age is agreed by the majority of people on both sides of the argument about the continuation of “miraculous” gifts.

What we can be sure of from the metaphor of the body (Rom 12; 1 Cor 12) is that we should work together, putting our own gifts into practice, and valuing each other’s gifts. If we are lacking in some area, we might want to look beyond our own four walls to share in the benefit of someone else’s gift¹¹.

¹¹For example, a Christian wanting to read more widely

What About Miracles Today?

Closely related to the previous question is the more specific question about the continuation or cessation of miraculous gifts. By this we are not questioning whether God still works miraculously, which all Christians would agree, but whether he does so through the gifts which are described primarily in 1 Cor 12 and 14. Volumes have been written on the existence or non-existence of miraculous gifts in the church today, and I can’t address all the issues in this article. The question I will address is whether all, some or none of the gifts mentioned in the Bible are still applicable today? Most people (even in the modern Pentecostal and charismatic movements) would argue against all gifts still existing; for example, there is reasonably widespread agreement that there are no apostles alive today. Likewise, the view that all gifts have passed away finds little support in the scriptures or in the church today.¹² The majority view, however, is not without its problems. Where does the Bible explicitly state that gifts will cease, and where does it distinguish between the gifts that remain and the gifts that pass away?¹³ I don’t find sufficient evidence in the scriptures to support a dogmatic view.¹⁴ One thing however is clear: God is sovereign — he works how and when he pleases.

Conclusion

God has blessed us with all types of spiritual gifts: eternal life, righteousness, his indwelling Spirit, and the ability to serve him effectively within the church. Let us use whatever gifts we have received from him to bring him the glory he deserves.

– SD, May’09

than the Bible would be severely disadvantaged by being restricted to the books of any single denomination.

¹²The argument for cessation of all gifts is tied in with a different interpretation of prophecies, particularly those concerning Jesus’ coming.

¹³1 Cor 13:8-13 is often used in this context, but it is a less than convincing argument. Even if it predicted the end of tongues, prophecy and knowledge, it does not address the question of the continuation of other gifts. Scholars who argue for cessation of miraculous gifts tend to agree that this verse says nothing in support of their view, and base their view on other passages.

¹⁴Good arguments for various views can be found in S. Gundry and W. Grudem (eds), *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views*, Zondervan 1996.