



Varieties, But the Same

*¹Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, **I do not want you to be unaware**....⁴Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. ⁵And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. ⁶There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons. (1 Corinthians 12:1, 4–6)*

The underlying Greek word for which the English is here rendered as “unaware” is “*agnoein*”. Whereas “*gnosis*” in Greek is “knowledge”, “*agnoein*” is not just a **lack** of knowledge but can equally be translated as “ignorance”. This stands out to me because there was a time in my life, when it came to the topic of spiritual gifts, I exhibited a “live and let live” attitude. “We” believe “this” about spiritual gifts, “they” believe “that” about spiritual gifts—we can just agree to disagree; this was considered an issue open to multiple interpretations. This was mainly due to the same error where spiritual gifts themselves are concerned, which has been around since the Early Church, which Paul is trying to correct in Corinth. There are many “*varieties*”, but somehow the emphasis is almost always narrowed down to an undue obsession with the charismatic gifts alone such as tongues, healing and prophesying, so in effect there has always seemed to be agreement when it comes to one part of the list of gifts, but not for the rest. But Paul tells us that when it comes to the working of the Holy Spirit, and the list in its **entirety**, this is one of those foundational doctrines which **every** Christian is supposed to understand, not an acknowledged gray area open to alternative interpretations.

On one end of the spectrum are the Cessationists, those who assert that the gifts ceased to operate with the death of the founding Apostles. (I always assume they mean that only the charismatic gifts faded away as even Cessationists acknowledge there are those who presently possess the gifts of teaching, giving and administration, for instance.) And staking out the opposite extreme are those who claim that every true, regenerate believer must possess one of the charismatic gifts as proof of an authentic faith, and more often than not it is the gift of tongues which they require of everyone.

There are factors contributing to a Cessationist viewpoint which I have to admit I understand and with which at times I am sympathetic. Much of what we see today is not

“Wisdom in the Last Days”, Page 1 of 9

authentic, and the gods of the Internet (and particularly YouTube) have recorded them for us to watch over and over again. Even Pharaoh's magicians could perform signs and wonders, as will the Antichrist and False Prophet, so we have to understand that something supernaturally occurring does not automatically qualify it as being authored by the Holy Spirit. When it fails to live up to the standards of God's Word, we can safely assign the true source of the activity. And I can also understand the argument that because we now have God's Word in the form of His completed canon of Scripture, there is less of a need for supernatural revelation today than in the earliest days of the Church before the New Testament was even written. But ultimately I would argue that just because most of what we see is counterfeit does not mean **everything** is counterfeit; I would lobby for testing each individual case on its **own** merits against the standard of God's Word.

Admittedly I have had a more difficult time understanding the opposite reaction, those who insist "everyone" has to speak in tongues. The very definition of something which is a "gift" means it not automatically assigned to everyone, and Paul is very specific that this is, indeed, the case.

***²⁹All are not** apostles, are they? **All are not** prophets, are they? **All are not** teachers, are they? **All are not** workers of miracles, are they?³⁰**All do not** have gifts of healings, do they? **All do not** speak with tongues, do they? **All do not** interpret, do they? (1 Corinthians 12:29-30)*

Overall, it seems that what everyone over-focuses on is the list of gifts and associated offices rather than the accompanying instructions explaining their purpose. Paul's teaching to the Corinthians actually spans three full chapters from 12-14 and includes a lot of information explaining the "why" rather than limiting it to just the "what", but our narrow attention span seems overly concerned with the lists of the gifts and what we imagine we can do with them rather than seeking to apply them in accordance with the accompanying instructions, both in 1 Corinthians and in supporting passages on the topic as well. From the outset of his teaching, Paul does not withhold the greater purpose:

***⁷But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.** (1 Corinthians 12:7)*

If it is unclear what is meant by "for the common good", Paul elaborates further to the Church in Ephesus:

¹²for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; ¹³until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:12–13)

This is worthy not just of our attention but of thoughtful reflection as to what would visibly comprise the evidence of our spiritual gifts working “*for the common good*” when it comes to this list of defining characteristics:

- “...*equipping the saints for the work of service...*”
- “...*building up the body of Christ...*”
- “...*attain to the unity of faith...*”
- “...*attain...the knowledge of the Son of God...*”

Notice that none of these things are for the exclusive, personal benefit of our self alone, but all have in common an ultimate working in others. Paul describes the **end** of the process as producing “*a mature man*”—facilitating a Church membership which ultimately “*belongs to the fullness of Christ*”. No gift is intended for **self**-edification but for investment in the maturity of **everyone else** in our local fellowship. Spiritual gifts are always outward focused to build up others, never inward-directed solely for our own self-benefit.

I would suggest that one of the ways we can quickly perceive the presence of counterfeit demonstrations of the false signs and wonders so often documented on the Internet and neo-Christian television is that these basic goals are never achieved, much less even advocated as such; they instead emphasize the working of a “thing” as being the end-all/be-all achievement of the evening for the individual, whereas the biblically authentic strives for a much more important spiritual result for the group as a whole. In fact, Paul goes on to say in Ephesians that the ultimate result of the bigger picture is that there is a permanent implantation of both truth and love so as to give believers the firmest foundation necessary for the establishing of their faith:

¹⁴As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; ¹⁵but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each

individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love. (Ephesians 4:14–16)

But because of the human tendency to focus on the wrong thing, much of what Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 12-14 is intended to offset this exclusive concern for the charismatic gifts and reasserts their greater purpose to build up the Body of Christ rather than one's self. Notice that the true role and purpose of someone prophesying is not to make a date prediction for a future event, but for the building up of others into Christ the Head:

³But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation. (1 Corinthians 14:3)

People look at me funny when I am asked if I actually believe we have prophets in the Church today because what they are *really* asking is if prophets presently exist in the same manner as in the Old Testament. They're looking for someone who will, in essence, perform a Las Vegas magic act and predict something about to happen or tell a person's future. But in our time and circumstance and according to this standard, if the proof of a prophet is someone who engages in "*edification and exhortation and consolation*", they are candidates for the office of New Testament prophet, and all of these are accomplished without an accompanying Tarot card reading or end-of-the-world prediction of some sort.

In this context, I think there are far more prophets than we realize because the wrong notion is that a prophet is someone who only makes predictions about the future, when in the Church Age we are told specifically that such are in the business of edifying, exhorting and consoling the individual members of the Church with the goal of growing them together into Christ through truth and love. Such do not have to introduce something brand new, but employ God's *existing* Word in order to edify, exhort and/or console. I would even argue that if we go back and even casually study the Old Testament prophets that they had far more to say on the subject of "*edification and exhortation and consolation*" in their pursuit of calling God's backslidden people back to Him than they did in predicting future events to come.

But what is especially amazing to me about this teaching of Paul on spiritual gifts is how easily we artfully extract chapter 13 out of the very middle and treat it independently as a separate, self-contained entity with no relationship to what is coming directly before or after. After all, this is a letter which was never organized into chapters and verses, but a contiguous whole. In the middle of a discussion of spiritual gifts, Paul injects the Bible's

"Wisdom in the Last Days", Page 4 of 9

most well-known and beloved teaching on the definition of love as a slap-to-the-head reminder of the greater purpose of spiritual gifts, affirming the purpose also stated in Ephesians 4:16, “*for the building up of itself in love*”.

One of Satan’s most-used tricks is to simply shift our focus to the “thing” so that its greater spiritual benefits will be nullified.

Instead of “worship”, it becomes about the music. Once a worship team begins spending all their time in rehearsal and jettisons all attempts to inject fellowship, prayer, Bible teaching and all the other gifts which are intended to build them into a mature whole, they have been successfully moved over to the “thing”; better and better music is now the purpose, not the building up of the Body.

This same pattern is repeated in ministries who self-identify as focusing on discernment or prophecy, who begin to view anything and everything exclusively through their perceived abilities of understanding the times or the pending fulfillment of prophetic revelation. In these areas in particular I have observed that repeated errors in the fundamental doctrines of salvation and the Holy Spirit go uncorrected because the “thing” is elevated to the point that it obscures the view of everything else. There is the false notion that they can operate through a single gift alone, not unlike a car that’s down to its last cylinder.

This is what happens in the course of false teachings such as Rick Warren’s “Purpose Driven” series of deceptions. The pursuit of **our** purpose supplants **God’s** purpose and the “thing” which ultimately takes over is **man’s** will in place of **God’s** will. “Purpose” in and of itself is not a bad thing until it is elevated and misplaced to the point it actually undermines God’s purpose.

This is what happens in some circles where the teaching, “Christian women love sex” is so over-emphasized that it nullifies the biblical teaching of what they are to love. Instead of being reminded to love one’s spouse, to love one’s children, to love one’s neighbor, a related “thing”, in this case sex, is given higher precedence, which ultimately leads not to biblical love, but worldly lust. Something in and of itself in the proper context which is good to begin with is unduly highlighted to the point that it becomes misused and leads to the wrong result.

The same thing can take place in the realm of spiritual gifts when one particular gift becomes the all-important focus so that its pursuit comes to be a justification for failing to build up others properly in Christ, and ultimately resulting in placing an unhealthy over-emphasis on self. In fact, I would offer that this actually happens far too often in the pulpit when the pastor's perceived gift of teaching comes to overshadow everything else. One gift overshadows all the other gifts resulting in one person overshadowing everyone else, and ultimately eyes are no longer fixed on Christ but on a person.

While Paul's teaching of the necessity and operation of the gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians and Ephesians are essential foundational starting points, this is by no means the end of the discussion. Our exegetical goal is to always make sure our doctrine is based not just on one obscure or isolated section of Scripture, but incorporates *all* of the relevant supporting passages so as to construct the *whole* teaching. And in this case, the discussion of spiritual gifts cannot end with merely listing them or even highlighting their greater purpose as provided in the accompanying text, but in his letter to the Galatians, Paul drills down even further to detail precisely what defines something as authentically spirit-filled:

²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. (Galatians 5:22-23)

It is interesting to note that in Paul's extensive teaching to the Galatians of how to live a Spirit-filled life, that he does not re-issue another list of the gifts or related offices, but omits referring to them entirely to instead highlight what is the ultimate proof of our personal investment in others through those gifts. The proof of the working of the Spirit is provided in this even more detailed list of behaviors which can only take place in the course of our interaction with others.

In other words, pick a gift...any gift...and whichever one of the many "*varieties*" which are present in the Body of Christ, each one is responsible to ultimately achieve the same result: *all* of them, regardless of their activity or category, are supposed to visibly produce "*love, joy, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*". One of the most expedient ways we can discern when someone is over-realizing the "thing" so as to nullify the greater spiritual goals in an unhealthy way is when they assert, in the name of their gift or ministry, that they are somehow exempt from one or more of these behaviors toward others. They have become deceived into believing that their office or

responsibility has become more important than the biblical quality of their personal relationships in the Body of Christ.

In his teaching to the Galatians, Paul first establishes that love is the fulfillment of the Law—the very Word of God, and thus shows yet another example of where a “thing” (in this case the Law) is misused when it obfuscates personal relationships:

¹³For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. ¹⁴For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.” (Galatians 5:13–14)

Paul defines placing the Law above others as “*an opportunity for the flesh*” which keeps it from achieving the greater spiritual goal, “*through love serve one another*”. Just as this “thing” can rise to replace the greater result of love, so he continues to show that the same is true for the fruit of the Spirit. In fact, in the course of his admonition to “*walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh*” (Gal. 5:16), Paul provides an even longer list of behaviors which specifically identify when we are falling short of the goal of our gifts and ministry:

¹⁹Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, ²¹envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Galatians 5:19–21)

Just as the list defining the fruit of the Spirit betrays the true intention that such are defined in our behavior toward others, even more so is this even longer list of the visible evidence of our misbehavior.

And just in case we get to thinking that possession of only part of the list of that which is assigned to the fruit of the Spirit is enough, it is important to note that when it comes to this phrase, “*fruit of the Spirit*”, the word “*fruit*” (“*karpos*”) is singular as opposed to other times when there is a plural reference to “*fruits*” (“*karpous*”) for other teachings in Scripture. In other words, these seven items are **ALL** supposed to be equally and collectively proven present, not just **some** of them. In fact, I would argue that there is a dual requirement that not only must all seven items comprising the fruit of the Spirit be **present**, but all fifteen aspects of the “*deeds of the flesh*” must be **absent**. Something

authentically biblical does not offset **some** of the “*deeds of the flesh*” by producing only **some** of the “*fruit of the Spirit*”—this is one of those no-compromise situations demanding all-or-nothing.

Going back to our original discussion of how to prove that someone’s spiritual gift or ministry is authentic, it will ultimately be proven or disproven so by the **absence** of the “*deeds of the flesh*” as specifically detailed here, and the **abundance** of the “*fruit of the Spirit*” likewise so listed.

*³³“Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit.
(Matthew 12:33)*

Beware of someone who attempts to justify an exemption on their part for one or more of these fleshly behaviors, or a deficiency when it comes to one or more of the aspects of spiritual fruit, or both. In such instances, what they are usually trying to justify is their ill-behavior toward others, often in the name of a perceived greater service to God, which they believe exempts them from these basic requirements. Putting the whole of Paul’s teaching together from 1 Corinthians, Galatians and Ephesians and paraphrasing it, “Don’t be ignorant where spiritual gifts are concerned; the authentic will never authorize the mistreatment of others, and in fact the authentic will be proven by their biblical treatment of same. Don’t confuse ‘the deeds of the flesh’ with ‘the fruit of the Spirit’.”

Think about this the next time you’re visiting a Christian online forum discussing eschatology and the name-calling and accusations start flying over the topic of the timing of the Rapture; think about this when a Facebook posting calls for God’s judgment on someone or something rather than displaying a burden for their repentance and salvation; think about this when someone’s assertions, regardless of the background or “gifting” to which they lay claim tries to make a case of exemption from the right, biblical treatment of others. This is what verifies the authentic and exposes the counterfeit or, at the very least, that which was at one time authentic but has now been rendered spiritually ineffective.

We should not be arguing about whether or not the gifts of the Spirit **exist**, but rather the resultant proof by the visible presence of the fruit of the Spirit **regardless** of which gift is at work, and whether it is attaining to the unity of the Body of Christ. The proof of authentic service and love of God is always proven by our service to and love of others.

^{31b}And I show you **a still more excellent way.**

¹If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, **but do not have love,** I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

²If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, **but do not have love,** I am nothing. ³And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, **but do not have love,** it profits me nothing.

⁴Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, ⁵does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, ⁶does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; ⁷**bears** all things, **believes** all things, **hopes** all things, **endures** all things.

⁸Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. ⁹For we know in part and we prophesy in part; ¹⁰**but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.** ¹¹When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. ¹²For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known. ¹³But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 12:31b–13:13)

In Him,

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