

# **1 Corinthians 12-14: Evidence for the Continuation of the Gifts to the Present Day**

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Unruly. Temperamental. Fleshly. Given the carnal backdrop of the Corinthian fellowship, one might not expect such a group of Christians to be considered abundant in the gifts by an exemplary, preeminent leader of the early church such as Paul. Yet while this fellowship functioned in the gifts, they undoubtedly needed correction to bring order to their meetings, in particular with regard to spiritual gifts (though Paul confronts the believers in many other areas of misalignment). Paul's charge to the Corinthians is to pursue the gifts, but to walk them out in reverence to Christ with decency and order (1 Cor. 14:26, 33, 40). In this exhortation the New Testament church encounters the admonishment, "Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy" (1 Cor. 14:1, English Standard Version). Paul's exhortations in 1 Cor 12-14 paint the spiritual gifts as the primary way God builds the church, the power given to believers for effective ministry both in the congregation and abroad. The evidence from this passage exhibits the broad nature of all spiritual gifts and that each gift has and will continue to exist through the entire life of the New Testament church.

### **Spiritual Gifts for Supernatural Empowerment**

Paul's chief argument in 1 Cor 12 is that spiritual gifts are given to the church for edification (12:11). Later in the discussion, Paul's plain language to the Corinthians is, "earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy" (1 Cor 14:1). Paul's exhortation, coupled with the earlier observations from 1 Cor 12-13, express simple commands to pursue the gifts, and in particular that one prophesy. He repeats the command in vs. 39, which echoes again the charge to pursue spiritual gifts, especially prophecy. Additionally, Paul is correcting the misuse of the gifts through these chapters. He corrects a misunderstanding about claimed prophecy that curses the Lord (12:1-3), the assumption that some gifts are more important than

others (12:14-20), the temptation to disregard other gifts as unnecessary (12:21ff), the elevation of the gifts above love (13:1ff), and the misuse of certain gifts in the corporate gathering (14:1ff).

The assertion that gifts are never to be the pursuit of a Christian is unfounded and diminishes the commands given to seek them out. What Paul is correcting in these verses is not the seeking of the gifts itself, but the seeking of the gifts to the exclusion of love for one another. Erickson notes, “whether the Bible teaches that the Spirit dispenses special gifts today is not an issue of great practical consequence. For even if he does, we are not to set our lives to seeking them...if he chooses to give us a special gift, he will do so regardless of whether we expect it or seek it.”<sup>1</sup> While Erickson is correct that the gifts (in particular miraculous gifts) are distributed according to the will of God as Paul teaches (12:11), there is no prohibition of seeking to be gifted from the Corinthian Correspondence, let alone the whole testimony of Scripture. Conversely, Paul says to seek gifts, but to make sure the exercising of the gifts is done from the heart of love.

Other passages of Scripture support Paul’s teaching to not only seek gifts, but to pursue faithfulness in employing these gifts. Peter says that believers ought to faithfully walk in their spiritual gifts in order to serve one another (1 Pet 4:10-11). Paul says that spiritual gifts were given to the body of Christ so that greater maturity would come to all until the day of Christ (Eph 4:11-16). All of these purposes are divine in nature, spiritually accomplished purposes for the gifts. Furthermore, the Spirit is identified as the source of power for these gifts by Paul. While there are different gifts employed in the church, “it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone” (1 Cor 12:6, ESV). The context indicates that each gift is empowered by God, thus they each have a divine source. One difficulty in the spiritual gifts discussion is the unfortunate

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<sup>1</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 802.

use of terms to describe some gifts such as: “miraculous,” “special,” “revelatory,” and so forth. Some may contend that the labeling is necessary for discussion, Paul does not parse the gifts out in this way. Describing the gifts as “dramatic,” such as Schreiner does<sup>2</sup> certainly paints a two-class divide in the gifts. All of them are supernaturally empowered and divine, thus each gift carries “dramatic” element. The gifts of teaching and administration are no less divine than that of prophecy and healings; yet, the temptation is to categorize based upon the human experience rather than on the expression of Scripture. The context is clear that each gift is supernaturally empowered by the Holy Spirit. The power to walk in these gifts comes from without the man (e.g. Joel 2:28-29; Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8; 2:1-21; 1 Pet 4:11). Spiritual gifts are given by God, and believers ought to walk consistently and faithfully in them according to the supernatural power given by God.

### **Continuing Until Jesus’ Return for the Church**

As Paul further expounds in 1 Corinthians, each part of the spiritual body of Christ is necessary for its complete function (1 Cor 12:14-18). While the Corinthians had abundant zeal for the gifts, even to excess, they certainly were lacking in love toward one another with respect to gifts. This prompted Paul to explain the enduring nature of love in the life of every believer, and that in contrast to spiritual gifts, love is eternal (13:8). He describes how prophecies, tongues, and knowledge will pass away, while love will continue to endure. Paul is emphasizing to the Corinthians, who were placing more emphasis on the temporal things (such as gifts) than the eternal things (such as love), and that they should pursue the gifts in the context of love for one another. The result of a believer exercising any gift without love is disastrous. If love is not

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 7, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 280, ProQuest Ebrary.

the basis for which one walks in the gifts, then what is the purpose? Paul illustrates this concept by saying, “If I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Cor 13:1).

Paul then illustrates this point with the image of a child and a mature adult, and with the picture of one viewing themselves in a mirror as compared to seeing one face-to-face (13:11-12). He established in vs. 8 that spiritual gifts are temporal but says in vs. 9 that the perfect will come, and at this point, spiritual gifts would be done away with. While prophecies, tongues, and knowledge are specifically mentioned, there is nothing in the context that suggests Paul is limiting his view to only these gifts.<sup>3</sup> Paul has in mind the temporal nature of all gifts; however, he uses these three as an example given their improper uses in the Corinthian context. The much-debated issue is the meaning of “perfect” in vs. 9. A popular interpretation is that “perfect” refers to the canonization of Scripture. This has long been an accepted understanding for cessationists as evidence for the discontinuation of miraculous gifts,<sup>4</sup> but the context does not have the completion of Scripture in view. The greater context supports, as Carson suggests, a view to the parousia. In other words, the gifts are expected to continue until believers see Jesus face-to-face (ultimately, until the rapture of the church takes place). Given the Old Testament usages of terms such as “face-to-face” and Paul’s personal expression that he personally will see face-to-face, as Grudem explains, “the expressions...[make] it difficult to view these as references to the time of the completion of Scripture.”<sup>5</sup> There may be other passages that are more sustainable for the cessationist argument; however, 1 Cor 13:8-12 is not a sufficient

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<sup>3</sup> D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2019), 87, 89.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>5</sup> Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 202.

passage to demonstrate the cessation of particular gifts in the life of the church, and it is certainly a poor text in order to establish the doctrine that miraculous gifts have ceased after the writing or canonization of Scripture. Therefore, this passage supports the continuation of all spiritual gifts until the return of Jesus for the church.

### **Earnestly Desire the Gift of Prophecy**

Paul expounds upon the nature of the gift of prophecy, how it should function in the local context, and how the believers should view it in 1 Cor 14. Numerous scholars who affirm that prophecy has ceased establish their framework on this assertion: the apostles and prophets were the foundation of the church; thus the gift of prophecy, which is inextricably linked to the Old Testament and New Testament offices of the prophet, has ceased. While the position is understandable, the conclusions prove unsatisfactory in light of 1 Corinthians 12-14, where Paul explicitly exhorts a local congregation to prophesy. Prophecy is a functioning spiritual gift in the present age of the church and is distinct from the God-breathed revelation of Old and New Testament prophets alike who wrote Scripture.

Much of the conversation centers around the function of prophecy in the Old Testament, its relation to the New Testament expression, and the term “revelation.” With respect to the New Testament prophets, there is discussion as to whether the apostles are the same as the prophets (Eph 2:20). Additionally, many draw their conclusions on the assertion of Old Testament prophecies being intrinsically infallible and authoritative; thus, since the New Testament gift of prophecy functioned exactly as in the Old, New Testament prophecies are, by extension, likewise without error on par with Scripture. Paul’s use of prophecy, however, does not confine the use of the term revelation only to the canon. A distinction between the complete and authoritative Word of God contained in the Scriptures and the exercise of revelation through the gift of prophecy is

congruent with the Word's own attestation because of the way Scripture uses the word "revelation" and variations of it (Matt 16:7; Eph 1:17, 3:14-19; Phil 3:15). Carson employs the example of the Macedonian call (Acts 16:9) to illustrate how even prophecies uttered by authoritative apostles were not exempt from examination.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the concept of revelation as associated with the gift of prophecy does not automatically require a prophetic utterance to be on par with Scripture, such as many cessationists suppose.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the concept that some prophecies in the New Testament era are subject to the authority of the Scriptures and are not necessarily authoritative in the same manner as the Scriptures themselves deserves consideration.

Still more theologians discuss the problem of errant prophecies, supposing the potential for false prophecies as a reason to see the counterfeit nature of continuing prophecy and to discount the continuation of the gift. The distinction between a New Testament spiritual gift and Old Testament prophetic office is often overlooked, and as Farnell argues, the two are hardly separable.<sup>8</sup> Admitting the similarities of Old and New Testament prophecy does not demand the two are identical, however. Both Old and New Testament prophecies were carefully examined to determine their veracity and whether or not they were true messages from God. The primary way these messages were examined was against the written word of the Lord.<sup>9</sup> False prophecies are characterized throughout both testaments as something individuals must be vigilant to discern, and death was required of a false prophet in the Old Testament (Deut 18:20-22; 1 Cor 14:30-32;

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<sup>6</sup>Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 215.

<sup>7</sup>See Thomas R. Schreiner, *Spiritual Gifts: What They Are and Why They Matter* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2018), 68, ProQuest Ebrary. Also John MacArthur, *Strange Fire: The Danger of Offending the Holy Spirit with Counterfeit Worship* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2013), 115-118.

<sup>8</sup>F. David Farnell, "Does the New Testament Teach Two Prophetic Gifts?," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (Jan-Mar 1993): 88, ATLAS.

<sup>9</sup>F. David Farnell, "The Gift of Prophecy in the Old and New Testaments," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (Oct-Dec 1992): 400, ATLAS.



1 John 4:1). Consequently, true prophecies are in alignment with the written revelation from God and are empowered by the same Spirit who authored Scripture. The presence of false prophecies, even in the New Testament, was not a reason to disregard genuine prophecies, but a further reason to be even more diligent. True prophecies are genuinely prompted by the Holy Spirit, and any false prophecy does not come from him (1 Cor 12:3). Discernment of prophecies remains a critical task for the people of God, one continued from even the Old Testament era. Ciampa and Rosner note the thread of Paul's argument, writing, "[s]piritual discernment begins by recognizing that which should and should not be attributed to the Spirit of God."<sup>10</sup> The presence of false prophecies is insufficient evidence to altogether reason that the gift of prophecy is nonexistent in today's church; conversely, it is a reason, as Paul notes, for the New Testament church to meticulously examine the messages of supposed prophets. Believers must examine prophecies to determine their authenticity and confidently confront false prophecies that do not align with inerrant Scripture.

How does one, then, categorize a statement by an individual wherein specific exhortation, comfort, or edification comes personally to their circumstance previously unknown to the speaker? What is the proper classification of a declarative word of God consistent with inerrant Scripture, not directly quoted from within, but spontaneously spoken forth from the spiritual empowering of the Spirit? Prophecies are spoken through the empowering of the Holy Spirit for "their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation" (1 Cor 14:3). The New Testament gift of prophecy functions to bring edification and comfort to the hearers, primarily by declaring Scriptural truths (distinct from quoting Scripture). Grudem mentions that the way this gift functions in the gathering of believers is through the Spirit prompting previously unconsidered

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<sup>10</sup> Roy E. Clampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians, Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), 478, ProQuest Ebrary.

Scriptural thoughts to an individual's mind in order to be shared corporately, perhaps even through prayer.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the gift of prophecy can function through the exhortations of a worship leader or pastor. While the revelations are not “new” and are under the authority of the Scriptures, they would function like declarative Psalms, declaring character and nature of God. Reminding individuals of the character of God and of their need for Him in a specifically applied manner (especially when a prophetic word is directly applicable to an individual without the speaker's knowledge of details) is one primary way this gift would function in the body of Christ. Given the context and the purpose of the gift of prophecy, there is no indication in the Corinthian text that this gift has ceased in the life of the church. All scholars agree that there was such a gift of New Testament prophecy that has functioned to some extent in the history of the church. The question is primarily what is this gift's purpose and how long is its existence in the New Testament era? As previously established, 1 Cor 13:8-12 is not a suitable enough text to establish the cessation of prophecy, let alone any spiritual gift mentioned in 1 Corinthians by Paul.

### **Prophecy and Tongues: What is Their Purpose?**

Spiritual gifts are given for the edification of the church according to Paul in 1 Cor 12:7. While each gift inherently has its own function, the general purpose for each gift is specifically for the benefit of the collective body of believers. Paul presents additional purposes for gifts, specifically the gifts of tongues and prophecy, in 1 Cor 14:2-5, 22. Many commentators assert that a divine sign is the primary purpose of the gifts of tongues and prophecy. While 1 Cor 14:22 does establish that tongues function as a sign for unbelievers, it does not establish prophecy in

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<sup>11</sup> Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy*, 219.

the same manner. Furthermore, while this concept is demonstrated in the history of the New Testament church (Acts 2:1-3, 1 Cor 14:22), other passages express that purpose of the gift, and the function of tongues is larger in scope. The purpose of tongues is for “the common good” (1 Cor 12:7, ESV), not exclusively as a sign for unbelievers.<sup>12</sup> If tongues were a universal sign of the genuineness of God’s work in salvation as many suppose it would not be without reason to expect such a gift to be present in other accounts where individuals encounter the gospel truth throughout the New Testament.

Additionally, Paul needed no such sign for his conversion to authenticate his encounter with Jesus. One could expect that the greatest critic and skeptic of the church would need such a sign; however, Paul and many others did not have the gift of tongues validating the reality of the gospel as it was revealed to them. The gift of tongues and prophecy were not simply sign gifts to establish a new dispensation. Though the gifts are revealed to have this purpose, the overarching context is that these gifts function in the life of the church, irrespective of the surrounding audience. Thus, while there may be unbelievers in attendance (such as at Pentecost in Acts 2), they do function as a sign to non-believers, but not exclusively so. These gifts, along with all the other gifts mentioned, function to build up the body of Christ and additionally serve as a witness to unbelievers. The primary witnesses to the unbelieving world of the work of Christ are the love believers have for one another (John 13:35) and the transformational testimony of the believer will be the apt witness the world needs to attest to the message of Christ (Matt 5:16; 1 Pet 2:12). The gifts are but one way among several that the world knows the validity of the gospel, and the Word of God itself is powerful enough to convince and convict one to believe, without any intervention of spiritual gifts (Acts 9; 2 Tim 3:15-16; Heb 4:12).

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<sup>12</sup> Mark Taylor, *I Corinthians*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, vol. 28, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 287.

### **Practical Considerations for the Debate and the Continuation of All the Gifts**

Thomas Schreiner notes one of the pitfalls of the Charismatic Movement as the overemphasis on experience rather than the authority of Scripture. He says, “[e]xperience is subordinate to Scripture so that experiences do not become the arbiter of what is permitted. Instead, Scripture is the final authority and experiences are only to be accepted if they accord with Scripture.”<sup>13</sup> Schreiner’s statement is characteristically true of sections of the Charismatic Movement, but they do not represent the population of continuationists who are as adamant about the authority of Scripture as he and others with him of the same persuasion concerning the gifts. In the same way, cessationists must take care in not allowing experience to dictate doctrine. While the excesses in spiritual gifts must be exposed and confronted, the sum of charismatic expression in agreement with Scripture must not be indiscriminately discounted. John MacArthur frequently employs a broad brush when rebuking the errors in pockets of the Charismatic Movement, allowing the overindulgences and experiences of others to be the pretext for wholesale dismissal of the gifts instead of Scripture being the baseline.<sup>14</sup> While charismatics have notoriously been fleshly in attempting to discount the cessationist point of view, works like *Strange Fire* serve only to further deepen the chasm between legitimate discussion concerning the continuation (or the discontinuation) of certain spiritual gifts.<sup>15</sup> Even when exegetical

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<sup>13</sup> Schreiner, *Spiritual Gifts*, 22.

<sup>14</sup> MacArthur, *Strange Fire*, 130.

<sup>15</sup> MacArthur is an excellent scholar and worthy of audience given his dedication to sound exposition and to the training up of the next generation of ministers in the church. However, many comments such as those in *Strange Fire* only bring more inflammation to the historically tense debate surrounding this issue. As an example, in reference to prophecy, MacArthur states, “Charismatics fail to seriously consider what brazen dishonor they do to God and to His Word when they claim revelation from Him when He has not really spoken—declaring words of prophecy that are full of error and corruption”, Ibid. Unfortunately, in this section, MacArthur does not seriously engage with the responsibility of the New Testament church to evaluate the prophetic words. Charismatics committed to the authority of the Word agree with MacArthur that no new revelation on par with Scripture is expected or welcomed, as established earlier in this paper. Additionally, there is room scripturally from 1 Cor 14 that suggests revelation through the gift of prophecy given to the church at large is not authoritative in the way the apostolic doctrine is.

credibility is established for the case of the continuationist doctrine, many writers cast doubt on the legitimacy of those who continue to walk in such conviction.<sup>16</sup> Carson identifies this pattern as the trend by many is to reduce the whole of the Charismatic Movement to emotionalism based only in the authority of one's experience rather than Scripture.<sup>17</sup> Reality demands Scripture to be the authority on these issues, not theological constructs, nor personalities. Charismatics, too, must recognize the that in certain circles there are exercises that most certainly cannot be attributed to the Spirit ("drunk in the spirit," "falling out"), and even the exercise of genuine gifts out of line with the boundaries established in this text (order and decency marks the gifts, not chaos). If both charismatics and cessationists would heed 1 Cor 13:4-7, many more profitable discussions will come.

### **Conclusion**

Paul's treatise on the spiritual gifts through 1 Cor 12-14 presents the continuation of all spiritual gifts as a reality for the New Testament church. The gifts should be sought out in the local congregation in agreement with Paul's commands to seek the gifts and the overall teaching of the New Testament that portrays gifts as a regular part of the church. The presence or expression of particular gifts is not an indication that certain groups of believers are more spiritual than others, especially since spiritual gifts are just one aspect of the believer's life and the experience of the local church. Each believer must be faithful to exercise gifts and talents the Lord entrusts to them, and to walk in love while doing so. Love is the key, both in the expression of spiritual gifts and in the discussion of the same. A lack of love in the debates and in the

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<sup>16</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 801. He states, "In my judgment it is not possible to determine with any certainty whether the contemporary charismatic phenomena are indeed gifts of the Holy Spirit." In an attempt to examine situations where demonstrations of tongues or prophecy, he all but states that these occurrences are counterfeit under the banner of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>17</sup> Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 11-12.

congregation is breeding ground for division and derision, these things for which Jesus died to remove in establishing the church.

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