

God's Program for Gifted People, Part 3
Romans 12:6-8
#50 in a Series on Paul's Letter to the Romans
Faith Community Church – Sunday November 5, 2006

Introduction

Have you ever been in a car behind a really old person. Not just an older person, but a really, really old person. You don't see their head, just the knuckles gripping the steering wheel. People like that have a rule of thumb for driving. They take the speed limit and cut it in half.

If you are behind someone like that it can be pure agony. You look in your rear view mirror and see a line of traffic behind you, but in front of the person driving so slow it seems to be open for miles. I find myself pleading out loud, "please, please drive." I may even declare, "They shouldn't even be on the road." No one outside of the car can hear me of course, but there must be something therapeutic in it. When they finally turn off – it's like the clouds lift, the sun comes out, it's springtime, somewhere an orchestra is playing and you taste . . . freedom.

When it comes to preaching I don't want to be a slow driver. I was agonizing a bit this week because as I was preparing, I realized that what I had hoped to say in one sermon needed to be split in two. So this will be our tenth look at these first 8 verses in Romans 12, and I've got one more after this before we're finished. I asked my small group about the pace the other night and they essentially encouraged me to take my time. In fact, the issue was pretty well settled when someone said, "Look. You're going to be preaching every Sunday for the rest of your life so if you keep preaching from Romans, big deal." After hearing that, I was almost afraid to ever preach from another book of the Bible again!

But seriously, I want you to know that the reason that the pace has slowed is because this is such a significant section. I hope you've grasped a little of that as we've gone through it. And in this particular part of our discussion of Romans 12:1-8, I fear that if I don't take time to explain things carefully, I might end up raising more questions than I answer, and I want our time together to be instructive.

So let's back up to Romans 12:1 and take another look at this passage.

Four Questions About Spiritual Gifts

Spiritual gifts are God's provision of abilities that are to be used for the strengthening of the church. If you are a Christian, God has gifted you in some way that enables you to contribute to the spiritual wellbeing of others in our fellowship. Through this we understand that God's intent is that our experience in church be one of involvement in community, meaningful community. But there are some questions that we often have about spiritual gifts. I'd like to answer four of them:

- What about those unusual gifts?
- Is the gift of prophecy one of the unusual gifts?
- How do I know which gift/gifts I have?
- How am I supposed to use my gifts?

Let's talk about the first two questions this morning. In two weeks when we are back in Romans¹ we'll answer the last two. Then we will probably put Romans on hold until after the holidays.

Question #1 – What about those “unusual” gifts?

In 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, Paul lists some gifts that raise several questions. The most common question that Christians have relates to whether these gifts are to be used today.

One of the difficulties in answering this first question is the fact that we really don't know what some of these things were. There are a lot of books that have been written about spiritual gifts that provide definitions or descriptions of each one, but to be perfectly fair, some of those descriptions have to be “best guesses.” I would put “the utterance of wisdom,” “the utterance of knowledge,” and possibly “faith” in that category. We have no clear example in the New Testament of an instance in which some of these gifts are used or explained. We may surmise what a they were – and we may be right – but there is a degree of uncertainty with regard to some of them.

When it comes to whether or not these unusual gifts are intended for us to use today, there are two basic views. One is called the continuationist view and the other is called the cessationist view.

The continuationist view believes that these gifts do exist for the church today and that churches – like ours – in which they are not being practiced are missing out on something that the Holy Spirit wants to provide. The continuationist would offer several arguments in support of this position: First, there is no clear statement in Scripture that these gifts were temporary or intended for only a certain era.² Second, the more “common” gifts seem to have continued, so why should these also not continue? Third, people claim to be speaking in tongues, etc., so something is happening.

The cessationist view believes that the miraculous gifts have stopped being available to the church. The arguments offered by cessationists would include these: First, these gifts seem tied to the work of the apostles and were given to authenticate the preaching of the apostles. They were unique manifestations of God's power through the apostles themselves or at least during the apostolic era of the 1st century. 2 Corinthians 12:12 is of

¹ For people who might be reading this at some point subsequent to the time in which it this sermon was delivered, the week between this sermon and the next one on Romans was used to focus on the subject of the persecuted church.

² Objection to the continuationist position is sometimes based on an interpretation of 1 Corinthians 13:8-10, in which the phrase “the perfect” is taken to refer to the completion of the Bible. While this is convenient, it does not seem to have support even among cessationists.

interest here, because Paul wrote that *“The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works.”* Hebrews 2:3-4 indicates that these different sign gifts were also something connected with the mission and work of the Apostles: *“It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.”*

Second, Church history seems to give evidence that these gifts passed out of use after the Apostles. Two quotes in particular are interesting in this regard.

The first is from John Chrysostom, who was a leader in the church in the late 300’s early 400’s. In a homily on 1 Corinthians 12, he said: *This whole place is very obscure: but the obscurity is produced by our ignorance of the facts referred to and by their cessation, being such as then used to occur but now no longer take place.*³

A second quote of interest is from Augustine, who lived around the same time as Chrysostom. He wrote, *In the earliest times, “the Holy Ghost fell upon them that believed: and they spake with tongues,” which they had not learned, “as the Spirit gave them utterance.” These were signs adapted to the time. For there behooved to be that betokening of the Holy Spirit in all tongues, to shew that the Gospel of God was to run through all tongues over the whole earth. That thing was done for a betokening, and it passed away.*⁴ The point is that within 250-300 years after the close of the first century (and the deaths of the Apostles), these gifts had passed from the use in the church.

A third argument for the cessationist view is that the modern manifestation of so-called charismatic experiences bears little resemblance to the way these gifts were used in the New Testament. That is true in terms of both their nature and practice. For example, the tongues of the NT era seem to be the ability to speak publicly in a known language despite having not learned it. That is clearly what was happening at Pentecost. What Charismatics and Pentecostals today view as the gift of tongues is a something generally practiced in private and has no root in a known language. A case in point is the view that is held by Calvary Chapel. Their founder, Chuck Smith, wrote this: *Since the gift of speaking in tongues builds up the believer who is exercising the gift, and it is preferable that he not exercise the gift in a public assembly and is even forbidden to do so if there is no interpreter, the only place left for the exercise of this gift is in his own personal devotions. Paul said, “Speak unto yourself and unto God,” so that it is proper to exercise this gift for one’s own edification, as Paul did.*⁵

That position is reached, at least in my opinion, by ignoring some of the other things Paul says in the same chapter that have to do with regulating speaking in tongues in the church assembly. So it is not being practiced the way that it was in the NT era.

³Schaff, P. (2000). *The Nicene Fathers* (electronic ed.) (12). Garland, TX: Galaxie Software.

⁴Schaff, P. (2000). *The Nicene Fathers* (electronic ed.) (7). Garland, TX: Galaxie Software.

⁵ <http://xweb1.calvarychapel.com/php/ccmain/library/cvc.php#09>

Another example is the gift of healing. When you read through the biblical account of miracles we are seeing dead people raised to life, withered limbs being restored, deaf people being able to hear, blind people being able to see. There was a “wow!” factor. In addition they were often able to be tested by a crowd. I am not saying that the only healings that took place had this “wow” factor or that every healing was public, but there was at least some of that. When you compare that to the kinds of healings that are alleged to be taking place today, they seem to be on a much lower scale. People are claiming to be healed of migraines and arthritis, but I don’t see anyone – even the TV preachers who would love to be able to do this – bringing a dead person back to life or have a physical deformity be made whole. It’s not the same. And that is important because if we are going to claim that these gifts are still in existence, they need to bear resemblance to the way they were exercised in the New Testament period.

It is probably clear to you which view I hold. I approached my study of this subject over the last few weeks with what I hope was an open mind, but I’ve found no reason to change my own view, which is the view that our church has historically held, namely that these miraculous gifts have ceased to be operative today. I would affirm that position with a couple of clarifications. First, if God chooses to allow these gifts to function in a primitive missions setting (as I understand has happened), I’m going to let him do that. ☺ Second, while I would reject the emphases and practices of popular Pentecostalism and the charismatic movement, I am willing to learn from those men who allow Scripture to define their experience rather than let experience define Scripture.

To be fair, there are two kinds of continuationists. There are those who – like what you see on some “Christian” television programs – are just way out there. Their practices of what they consider to be the miraculous gifts bear little nor no similarity to what the New Testament describes. But on the other hand there are men for whom I have great respect who hold to a continuationist view, and they seek to be sure that when these things take place that they are closely regulated by the instructions in Scripture. I am referring to men like Dr. Wayne Grudem, CJ Mahaney (who is the founder of the Sovereign Grace fellowship of churches) and (a name who is probably more familiar to you) Dr. John Piper. I suspect, though, that even if you could sit these three men down, you would find that there were some areas of disagreement on what was involved in the practice of these gifts.

Question 2 – What about the gift of prophecy?

Why make prophecy a special case? It is mentioned in the list of the sign gifts in 1 Corinthians 12, so what makes this different? As I studied, I felt the need to treat this differently because of a couple of reasons. First, I think there is prophecy and then there is prophecy. I’ll talk about that in a moment. Second, it is mentioned along with the non-sign gifts in Romans 12. Third, as I have been reading, I am wondering if my own understanding of the nature of the gift of prophecy needs to be modified. So let me try to explain where I am on this.

When we read through the Bible and see the work of the prophet, we see two aspects to prophetic ministry. Prophets sometimes foretold the future. Speaking under the power of God, they revealed something that would come to pass at some future time. It is important to note that God held the prophet highly accountable. See Deuteronomy 18:15-22.

But there was a second role of the prophet, and that was to speak on behalf of God. In this role the prophet encouraged, brought comfort, rebuked and corrected people – we see that in numerous places in the Old Testament – based on what God had previously revealed. For example, Jeremiah 44:1ff is a description of the work of prophets who sought to bring the law of God to the attention of the people who would not listen. Another example is found in Hosea 4.

This particular gift is placed both on the list of “unconventional” gifts, and on a list of apparently “conventional” gifts. I’m trying to understand the significance of that. Where I am at this point is that if we are talking about prophecy in terms of predicting the future, I am inclined to believe that such activity no longer takes place. But if we are talking about prophecy in terms of someone’s application of God’s word to a specific circumstance as a means of reminding, warning or provoking people toward greater obedience, I have no problem with viewing this gift as still being in existence today.

Let me state that again in different words. Does God give people the ability to predict details about the future today? As I see it, the answer is no. But can God direct someone to bring a portion of Scripture to bear on a specific circumstance? Yes, I think that can happen.

Pausing . . . and Applying

I need to push the pause button again! We’ll take up the final two questions – which relate to the way in which spiritual gifts are discovered and used – in two weeks. But let me suggest a few implications of what we have looked at today.

1. We need to be careful that in rejecting claims of supernatural abilities by human beings, we don’t reject God’s supernatural power. The fact that people don’t perform miracles in the NT sense does not mean that God cannot do something miraculous.
2. Our understanding of what we think the Bible says needs to be continually submitted to what the Bible actually says. I’m not suggesting that the Bible is generally ambiguous. The Bible is crystal-clear on most of what it affirms. However, there are some times when a thorough and proper study of Scripture may result in Christians reaching different conclusions. There are aspects of this discussion that fit that situation. When that happens, we need to be willing to modify our opinions if Scripture convinces us otherwise.

3. Despite the fact that the gifts in Romans 12 are not spectacular in nature, when we use the gifts that God has given us we have the ability to profoundly affect each other for good and for the glory of God.