

## **Spiritual Gifts at Work**

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on 1 Corinthians

The use of what have come to be called “spiritual gifts” seems to have caused much contention in the church of Corinth. It seems that the gift of tongues in particular was being used to accentuate status differences in the church. To counter the claim that those who experienced Spirit-led ecstatic utterances were more spiritual than those who didn’t, Paul articulates a broad understanding of the gifts of God’s Spirit. This chapter has major applications to our work today.

The first thing to observe is that the term “spiritual gifts” is too narrow to describe what Paul is talking about in 1 Corinthians. Gifts are “spiritual” in the broad sense of originating from God’s Spirit, not in the narrow sense of being disembodied or paranormal. And “gift” is only one of a number of terms Paul uses for the phenomenon he has in mind. In 1 Corinthians chapter 12 alone, he calls the various gifts “services,” “activities,” “manifestations,” “deeds,” “forms,” and “kinds.” The exclusive use of the term “spiritual gift” to refer to what Paul also calls “manifestation of God’s spirit for the common good” tends to skew our thinking into three false assumptions: 1) that God’s Spirit supersedes or ignores the “natural” skills and abilities God has given us, 2) that the recipient of the “gift” is its intended beneficiary, and 3) that worship, rather than service, is the primary purpose of the Spirit’s working. In fact, the opposite of all these

assumptions is true. The Holy Spirit does not dispense with our bodily abilities, but honors and employs them. It's not merely the individual who benefits, but the community or organization. And the purpose of spiritual gifts is to build up the community and serve outsiders, not merely to improve the quality of worship. For these reasons, the word "Giftings" might be more helpful than the widely used term "spiritual gifts."

In Paul's list of possible giftings, the variety is striking. Some are what we would call super-natural, such as speaking in unknown languages, while others seem to be natural abilities such as leadership or even personality traits like mercy. The differences between the lists of giftings in Romans 12:6–8, Ephesians 4:11, and 1 Peter 4:10–11, suggests that these lists are illustrative rather than exhaustive. There is no standard list of gifts or even a standard way of referring to the various ways the gifts are given. Rather, Paul tells us to "do everything for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31), and here he lists a few of the amazing things God will give us the ability to do.

Paul has the church in mind here, and some Christians suppose this passage to mean that the Spirit gives gifts only for use inside the church. However, Paul gives no reason to suppose that these gifts are limited to the confines of a religious institution. God's kingdom encompasses the whole world. Believers can and should exercise their giftings in every setting, including the workplace. Many of the giftings named here—such as leadership, service, and discernment—will be of immediate benefit in the

workplace. Others will no doubt be given to us as needed to serve God's purposes in whatever work we do. We should by all means develop the giftings we have been given and use them for the common good in every sphere of life.

In fact, the most important question is not who, where, what, or how we exercise the giftings of God's Spirit. The most important question is why we employ the gifts. The answer is for love. Paul explains in 1 Corinthians chapter 13 that if he exercises every wondrous gifting of God's Spirit, but does not have love, then he is nothing. This chapter is often read at weddings, but it is actually a perfect manifesto for the workplace.

“Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” (1 Corinthians 13:4–7)

If Christians would exhibit these kinds of love in our places of work, how much more productive and enriching would work be for everyone?