

WHAT THE NEW COVENANT MEANS ⇒THE GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT⇐

In the last chapter we looked at the “fruit of the Spirit” - those qualities we should seek through the Holy Spirit. In this chapter we look at the “gifts of the Spirit” as Paul calls them in 1 Corinthians 12 to 14, and Ephesians 4. The lists are not identical, but if we put them together, we get the following: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, miracle-workers, a gift of healing, helpers, a gift of administration, gifts of tongues. Paul treats the earlier ones as being in order of rank in 1 Corinthians 12:28. Other gifts are mentioned in various places, so we should not treat the list as complete; but it is adequate as a starting point. We shall look at each in turn as they are explained in the New Testament.

Firstly, apostles. The first appearance of this name in the New Testament was when Jesus gave it to the twelve special disciples he selected. It is of course not an English word in origin. It has been adopted from Greek, in which language it meant a messenger or envoy. So the twelve were Jesus’s messengers. After the death of Judas Iscariot, Matthias was added to the original eleven to restore the number. Later in the New Testament, Paul and Barnabas are both described as apostles by Luke in his book Acts. (Acts 14:4 & 14). A few others were perhaps described as apostles, and in Revelation there is a reference to false apostles (Revelation 2:2). This indicates that the word apostle was used in a wider sense than just the twelve in the New Testament and early church, though of course the twelve had a special role.

I would like to suggest that in the wider sense, the role of the apostle was to found churches in regions where they did not exist. The early historian of the church, Eusebius, says that according to tradition, Thomas went to Parthia, Andrew to Scythia, as well as the regions Peter and Paul were connected to in the New Testament. Wherever they went the apostles in the New Testament exhibited great power in the Holy Spirit in performing miracles and healing people, in addition to their role as preachers of the good news of Christ. Indeed these roles went hand in hand. The apostles were rightly ranked first, as without them no churches would have come into being.

The second ranking gift in the church was that of prophets. The work of the prophets in the Old Testament was well known. They were messengers of God, mostly to Israel. They not only taught general religious truths but applied them to what was happening in their own day. They rebuked wrongdoing and bad people, particularly the leaders. They interpreted history as it took place and predicted what God would do. They usually appear to have understood what they were predicting, but sometimes they spoke of the future in ways that could not come from human understanding alone. They had a special relationship with God, and discussed matters with Him as they received visions of what He was doing.

Prophets in the early church are mentioned in the New Testament a number of times, in fact about twenty times, but there are few details of their work. Two clear examples come from the prophet Agabus, who predicted a famine (Acts 11:27) and later predicted that Paul would be arrested in Jerusalem (Acts 21:10). Prophets had an important role when Christians met together for worship. Paul describes this when writing to the church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 14:29-40). This shows that there were a number of prophets in that single church. Paul encourages the gift of prophesy.

Paul’s ranking of prophets in second place is supported by their role following the Council in Jerusalem described in Acts 15. On that occasion two prophets, Judas and Silas, were chosen as the apostles special representatives to Antioch. A few years earlier it was the prophets and teachers in the church at Antioch who sent Barnabas and Paul on their first missionary journey. So the prophets were the guides of the church into new ventures. Paul

tells an example of this when he says that Timothy received a spiritual gift through the laying on of hands following prophecy (1Tim 4:14). In general, teachers in the church teach the eternal truths, prophets speak of what needs to be done at the present day and say what God is doing.

Now, in the 1990's, there are more and more prophets in the congregations of many churches in Britain of all denominations. They participate in the regular worship. Among them, as in the New Testament, are included both men and women (Acts 21:9 and 1 Corinthians 11:4-5).

So far we have looked especially at the two highest ranking gifts: Apostleship and Prophecy.

Third in rank come the evangelists according to Paul in Ephesians, though he does not mention this particular gift in 1 Corinthians. "Evangelism" is another word borrowed into Christian ideas from Greek. It means "good news". The New Testament tells us of many people preaching the good news of the New Covenant. John the Baptist preached good news, Jesus did so, and the apostles continued. The word "evangelist" is, however, not very common. It is used in the list in Ephesians. It is used in Acts describing Philip (Acts 21:8), and Paul in his second letter to Timothy tells him to do the work of an evangelist (1 Timothy 4:5). Evangelism meant telling people the good news of Jesus and bringing them into His church. So the apostles founded churches, the prophets guided them, the evangelists added to them, and next, fourth in rank, the pastors and teachers cared for the churches' members and taught them.

Pastors need spiritual insight into the problems of the members of the churches. They need to encourage their spiritual development. As teachers they need to use effective teaching methods to ensure that the members of their churches learn and go on learning. School teachers test their pupils' progress by giving them exams which become progressively harder as, year by year, their pupils learn more and more. I often wonder how serious teachers and pupils in our churches are. Is there effective teaching? Do people progress? Could they pass progressively more difficult exams in Christianity? Do we not meet people who have spent 40 years and more as members of churches whose knowledge of Christianity would scarcely match that of a ten year old in their school subjects?

Perhaps we need to look at our teaching aims and methods. Are our targets too low? Are our methods appropriate? What do you, my readers, think? Reliance in so many churches is placed on a weekly ten to fifteen minute sermon. But did you know that lectures are rated as the least effective method of teaching by the teaching profession? That is why pupils have exercise books, so that they can reproduce what they have been taught. In this way they learn. Lessons permit the asking of questions, so that points of uncertainty can be further explained, and children are asked to contribute their own ideas - a process that not only allows errors to be corrected but also gives the pupils confidence so that they in turn may go on to greater learning. Did you know that in the New Testament there is not a single example of a sermon in a congregation except one by a visiting preacher (Paul at Troas, Acts 20:6-12)? Sermons were for those outside the churches, for the purposes of evangelism, not inside the churches for the purposes of teaching. A church with no prophets is like a ship with no rudder; a church with no proper teaching is like a ship with no fuel.

Next in Paul's list are miracle-workers and healing. We can look at these together because many miracles were in the field of healing. The first miracle following the coming of the Holy Spirit to the church at Pentecost was the healing of a man who had been a cripple from birth and was sitting at the entrance to the temple. Peter and John were together and Peter said to the man, who was begging, "I have no silver or gold; but what I have I give you: in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk". (See Acts 3:1-10). What church

would say “We do not need people with God’s gift of healing” or “We do not want people with God’s gift of healing”? Sadly, there are many. When was a prayer last heard in your church for God to give the gift of healing to one or more of its members? Yet there are many churches today with members who have a gift of healing. At a recent meeting of Christians within a few minutes drive of my home two elderly ladies described how they had been healed of arthritis by prayer alone.

Of course, I am not suggesting that a person with a cut and bleeding arm should not bind it up or that someone with pneumonia should reject an antibiotic. But who would reject the chance of healing where medicine has failed? Yet you say: “not everyone we pray for is healed”. True. But some are. So let us ask for God to give the gift of healing to more people.

Jesus’s half-brother, James, wrote of healing from the viewpoint of the sick person. He wrote: “Is one of you ill? He should send for the elders of the congregation to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer offered in faith will save the sick man, the Lord will raise him from his bed, and any sins he has committed will be forgiven.” (James 5:14-15). Perhaps churches where there is no specific gift of healing could start here.

Healing is sometimes taken as a sign of the power of the Spirit, leading people to faith, and so it is, according to the apostle John. But it is also an expression of God’s love, removing from us unnecessary suffering. We should accept it as such.

It is difficult to decide exactly what Paul meant by the next gift, “helpers”, because the word is not used anywhere else in the New Testament. So we will go on to “administrators”. This too is used only once in the New Testament, but the meaning is perhaps easier to understand.

Finally Paul mentions various gifts relating to speaking in tongues. These first appeared on the day the church was founded; on the day of Pentecost when the apostles and others started to speak in languages which they did not know. These were languages known to the people who heard them (Acts 2:1-13). Later on in the church at the time when Paul was writing, some of the languages may not have been human languages, because Paul refers to the languages of angels (1 Corinthians 13:1). Paul encourages speaking in tongues but lays down rules for its use in church meetings. In particular he says that only two or three should speak in tongues in a meeting and that what they say should be interpreted (1 Corinthians 14:27-28). A meeting in which several people talk at once, whether in tongues or in the normal human language of the meeting is not to be welcomed.

Paul wrote much more than there is space to repeat here. He summarised his attitude to these spiritual gifts when he wrote (1 Corinthians 14:1): “Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.” The gifts of the Holy Spirit are essentially for the benefit of the whole church. They build it up. Let us each pray that God will give our own congregations these gifts, especially prophecy.